

## Craig Dworkin

To destroy language

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*One must not forget that the patience of language is not unlimited.*  
(Nikolai Trubetzkoi)

*We talk about the tyranny of words, but we tyrannise over them too.*  
(Charles Dickens)

In the second decade of the twentieth century, Aleksei Kruchenykh and the Hylæa group of Russian Cubo-Futurists did their best to destroy language. They not only engineered a poetry composed primarily of nonce words, but they also eliminated the grammatical substrate of that neologistic verse, abstracting language to a far greater degree than even the most radical texts of Gertrude Stein or James Joyce. The extremity of the Futurists' writing highlights a series of slippery boundaries: between word and morpheme, sense and nonsense, reference and its impediment. Manifesting the tension between the formal, non-representational arrangements of letters and the competing pull of signs motivated by conceptual associations, these texts mark the tenuous line of contest between the material substance of written language and its deployment in a signifying system of reference and representation. They demonstrate the degree to which even the most radically fractured language can in fact be read, as well as the necessary limits to the production of such readings, and they challenge us to question the very models by which we understand the operations of language. Ultimately, these works are poems about the fundamental potentials and prelimits of a poem to 'be about'.

The most extreme documents of the Futurists' programme are the result of their explorations into *zaumni yazyuk* [a zaum-like language]. The neologism was coined by Aleksei Kruchenykh, who combined the prepositional prefix *za* [across; beyond; to the other side of] with *um* [mind; intellect; head] to describe the language of the new poetry as 'transrational' or 'beyondsense'. Realizing that 'the word is larger than its meaning', the Futurists' made what Ludwig Wittgenstein would term 'a

radical break with the idea that language always functions in one way, always serves the same purpose: to convey thoughts'.<sup>1</sup> With a range of formal experiments that would make any *ouvrier de littérature potentielle* envious, the Russian Futurists deployed anagrams, hypograms, lipograms, palindromes, mathematical formulae – and no doubt other, as yet unrecognized, techniques – to test the ways in which language could function in the service of purposes other than the conveyance of thoughts. In order to construct a lineage in which they could intelligibly situate and authorize the resultant *zaum'*, the Futurists and their Formalist counterparts drew on occasional literary precedents (such as the delirious phrases in Knut Hamsun's astonishing novel *Sult* [*Hunger*]), folkloric studies of children's songs and nonsense rhymes, medical research into the symptomatic language of schizophrenics, and above all on the tradition of religious glossolalia (as recorded in the Bald Mountain poems, medieval flagellant ecstasies, and anthropological research).<sup>2</sup> Not coincidentally, pentecostal enthusiasm carries the same connotations for Wittgenstein, as evinced by the (awkwardly translated) parenthetical which follows his own speculation on a version of *zaumni yazuik*: 'It would be possible to imagine people who had something not quite unlike a language: a play of sounds, without vocabulary or grammar. ('Speaking with tongues'.)<sup>3</sup>

While Kruchenykh and Velimir Khlebnikov are by far the best-known practitioners of *zaum'*, explorations of the new writing were also conducted by Nikolai Aseev and Vasily Kamenskii; Ilya Zdanevich incorporated nonsense speeches in both his *dra* theatre and the typographical experiments of his artist's books, and Elena Guro applied her sociological studies of folk rhymes to create 'a transrational language based on children's speech'.<sup>4</sup> Other *zaumniki* included figures as familiar as Roman Jakobson, Kazimir Malevich, Olga Rozanova, Varvara Stepanova, Ivan Klyun and Pavel Filonov – as well as lesser known names like Vladimir Morgunov and Vasilisk Gnedov, among others. Contemporaneous with this production, *zaum'* was being theorized by scholars from the St Petersburg-based OPOYAZ (*Obshchestvo Izucheniya Poztichekovo Yazuika* [Society for the Study of Poetic Language]) and the Moscow Linguistic Circle, including Jakobson, Viktor Shklovskii, Leo Yakubinskii and Korney Chukovskii. One would not want to level the work of so many diverse writers, and the term *zaum'* quickly came to cover a wide range of activities, including the onomatopocia familiar to readers of Italian Futurism, lettristic and sound poems with affinities to later avant-garde practices, and even works as far afield as the use of dialect, Igor Terentiev's absurdism, and the outrageous and vulgar proto-surrealist similes with which David Burlik and Vladimir Mayakovskii hoped to *épater le bourgeois*. While keeping this range in mind, the discussion which follows will be limited to considering *zaum'* only in its more linguistically radical forms, as exemplified by the work of

Kruchenykh, which even the Futurists themselves were perhaps too quick to pass over in favour of Khlebnikov's internally declined neologisms and theurgical etymologies.

In contrast with Khlebnikov's attempts to fix meaning with such intensity and precision that he could recover a universally intelligible *Ursprach*, Kruchenykh's *zaum'* poems were instead an attempt to increase the play of reference and achieve an ever greater indeterminacy. The first *zaum'* poems are introduced by Kruchenykh with the gloss that '*slovo ego ne imeyut/ opredilenago* (sic) *znacheniya* [the words of these poems do not have a definite meaning]'. Accordingly, the first point presented in his 1921 'Declaration of the Word as Such' affirms *zaum'* as 'a language which does not have any definite meaning (not frozen) [*nezastivshim*], and indeterminacy came to be a defining aspect of his poetry'.<sup>5</sup> Kruchenykh further characterized a primary category of *zaum'* creation in terms that might also describe the poetics of indeterminacy developed by later writers such as John Cage and Jackson Mac Low:

the random (alogical, accidental, creative break-through, mechanical word combination: slips of the tongue, misprints, blunders: partially belonging to this category are phonetic and semantic shifts, ethnic accents, stuttering, lisping, etc.).<sup>6</sup>

Employing these techniques to pursue a poetics that 'does not narrow art, but rather opens new horizons', Kruchenykh might have claimed, like Malevich, to 'have destroyed the ring of the horizon and escaped from out of the circle of [referential] things'.<sup>7</sup> To slip out from that referential noose, Kruchenykh created that 'something not unlike a language' that Wittgenstein had imagined: a writing 'without vocabulary or grammar' which not only employed 'complete neologisms', but also '*new modes of combining them*' so that the irregular structuring of a sentence, in terms of logic and word formation, would generate new understandings.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the very first point of the collective and untitled 1913 manifesto which appeared in *Sadok Sudei* [*A Trap for the Judges*] proclaims: 'We ceased to regard word formation and word pronunciation according to grammatical rules . . . we *loosened up* syntax',<sup>9</sup> Kruchenykh, a signatory of the manifesto, would continue to repeat that claim verbatim over the following decade.<sup>10</sup>

At its darkest extremes, Kruchenykh's poetry hints at the possibility that grammatical syntax, as such, does not in fact exist. We create at most the illusion of a grammatical syntax only through a retrospective analysis of utterances in which we impose artificial *slovorazdeli* [word boundaries] that cannot actually be heard in spoken language and that disappear even in writing through graphic *sdvigi* [shifts], which writers and readers can either exploit or attempt to ignore. We are so accustomed to thinking of

language in terms of the unit of the word – the structure of the dictionary, for just one instance, is predicated on the word as a basic unit even as it displays alphabetic, syllabic and morphemic articulations – that this position may seem counter intuitive, especially in terms of written language. The point is not, obviously, that we do not recognize, use and arrange words, but rather that language does not, a priori, require words. Or to put this another way: the word, unlike the phoneme or grapheme, is a second-order linguistic structure, not immediately given in language but established through reflexive analysis and prior codification. The degree-zero of linguistic structure, that is, does not encode the protocol for reading word-by-word. This is not the place to enact a full argument against the necessity of the word, but a historical reminder may prove useful. While spacing may be an integral part of the alphabet, the current convention of spacing to indicate word division is clearly ancillary, as the medieval practice of *scriptura continua* demonstrates; in the history of Western writing, the ‘principle of word-division was [only] slowly recognized’.<sup>11</sup> Whatever the ultimate ontological status of the word as a positive, atomistic unit, when work like the Futurists’ *zaum*’ or the procedural diastics of John Cage and Jackson Mac Low detaches strings of letters without regard to conventional word boundaries, it introduces a new unit of linguistic spacing which takes precedent over that of the word.

Theoretical positions aside, Futurist poetic praxis was in fact often strikingly similar to the practices of the many more recent poets who ‘write through’ source texts. Two of Kruchenykh’s most famous *zaum*’ poems are composed, as Vladimir Markov discovered, by writing-through texts in the Orthodox liturgy. Kruchenykh takes the ‘Credo’ and the ‘Pater Noster’ as source texts, eliminating the consonants and recording the vowels which remain spaced across the page.<sup>12</sup> The operation is obvious when the first five lines from *Sumbol Veri* [the Credo] are juxtaposed with those from Kruchenykh’s poem ‘*Vystoty (uselenskii yazuik)* [The Heights (Universal Language)]’:

veruyo	e u yo
v yedinogo	i a o
boga	o a
otza vsederschitelya	o a e e i e ya
tvortza	o a
nebu i zemli	e u i e i

For a less programmatic example, consider the way in which Khlebnikov composes a *zaum*’ poem by contracting the text of a long military reportage into a Marinetti-like dispatch, leaving fragments of words interspersed with

larger extracts for an effect much like Mac Low's *Words and Ends From Ez* or John Cage's *Empty Words*. Khlebnikov reduces the following paragraph

The hordes of Huns and Goths, having joined together and gathered around Atila, full of enthusiasm for battle, moved onward together, but having been met and defeated by Aetius, the protector of Rome, they disperse into many bands, halted and settled peacefully on their land, after spreading out into the steppes, filling up their emptiness

to read:

Sha + so Huns and Goths, ve Atila, cha po, so do but bo + so  
Aetius, kho Rome, so mo ve + ka so, lo sha steppes + cha.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, Kruchenykh 'demonstrates from several verses of a contemporary poet how one can, by the use of a variety of methods for "materializing" a word, "zaumnify" a poem written in conventional Russian'.<sup>14</sup> As an example, Kruchenykh takes the following passage from his contemporary, Aleksandr Tchatchikov:

zakusila gubku na vostoke  
etot znak govorit: 'Ya, hochu, moi krazivii'

[Between her teeth she bites her lip; in the east  
the sign reads: 'I want you, my handsome one'].<sup>15</sup>

He then dissolves and reconstructs the couplet, employing elision and anagrammatization to render the verse, 'zaumnified', as:

zaksi guk buna ke to  
yasa kaksi etot  
gotiro chukh  
chumir

Kruchenykh's rewriting, in this instance, presumably follows a sonic, rather than a referential, logic; save for the demonstrative pronouns *to* and *etot*, none of these fragments are recognizable Russian words, although provocative echoes do – inevitably – come through. *Chukh*, for instance, can scarcely fail to evoke the beginnings of words like *chukhonz* and *chukhonskii* [Finn and Finnish], and it neatly effects an onomatopœic pronunciation of a sneezed *chikh* [sneeze]. The neologism *kaksii* fuses a common Russian conjunction and archaic demonstrative pronoun (*kak* and *sii*); and *gotiro*, in Russian, is as close as 'gotiro' is to something like

'got iron' in English. Perhaps the strongest echo chimes in *chumir*, which makes a portmanteau of *chum* and *mir*: 'tentearth' – a word that might have come straight from one of the late poems of Paul Celan. Like so much of the work that would follow, the poetry of the Futurists, as Baudouin de Courtenay wrote dismissively, was partial to 'subdivided words, half-words, and their whimsical clever combinations'. Certain *zaum'* poems, in fact, continue the Futurist style that John White has termed a 'telegraphic lyricism' to such an extreme degree of condensation that their language collapses into itself, so that words appear to occupy the same palimpsestic space on the page.<sup>16</sup> 'Dichtung = Dichten', as Pound would put it.

Since *zaum'*, if mentioned at all, is commonly cited by proponents and critics alike as meaningless nonsense, and since the most infamous example of *zaum'* is often put on display without further comment, I want to continue this illustration of the dynamic between semantic and asemantic arrangements of letters by taking the time to look more closely at that notorious example. It comes from the hand-lettered, 1913 book *Pomada* [*Pomade*], where it appears in a suite of three *zaum'* poems that purport to be Kruchenykh's first compositions in the new style. Transliterated, the poem reads:

#1  
 dir bul shchuył  
 ubeshschur  
 skum  
 vy so bu  
 r l yez.

Although he would later publish his poems '*na yaponskom ispanskom i evreyskom yazikakh (sic)* [in Japanese, Spanish, and Hebrew]', having '*mignovenno ovladył v sovershenstvy vsymi yazuikami* [instantaneously mastered every language with perfect fluency]', Kruchenykh declared with an equal bravado that these five lines contain 'more of the Russian spirit than Pushkin's entire *œuvre*'.<sup>17</sup> Accordingly, several critics have read the poem in terms of national languages. Markov, for instance, hears the opening line as a series of 'energetic monosyllables, some of which slightly resemble Russian or Ukrainian' and he reads the closing combination *yez* as 'a queer, non-Russian sounding syllable'.<sup>18</sup> Nils Nilsson, in one of the most extensive discussions of the poem, suggests Japanese prosodic models and then proposes that the phonemes evoke 'several Turkish languages, including Tartar', or even perhaps the Scythian history of Russia's 'Asiatic heritage'.<sup>19</sup> Although these readings are largely impressionistic, they point to what may well be the most pressing theoretical question raised by *zaum'*: does it present an instance of Russian written without lexical and grammatical competence (in the technical sense of the word), or does it constitute a different semiotic system

that merely shares the same alphabet (in the way that both calendars and the ISBN system share the same numerals)?

The aesthetic qualities of the poem's sounds have been interpreted like their national qualities. Some of the earliest responses to the poem – such as V. Ya. Brysov's pronouncement that its sounds were 'extremely unpleasant to the ear' and G. Tasteven's references to its 'gloomy dissonances' – may have been ironically cited by Kruchenykh when he characterized the new *zaum'* work as presenting 'dissonances ... unpleasant to the ear'.<sup>20</sup> Corroborated by Kruchenykh's threat to invert the sonorities of the 'harmonieux symbolistes', other critics have tended to follow Kruchenykh's own gloss with neither acknowledgement nor scepticism and to see his poem as a challenge to 'the Symbolists' favouring of word-music'.<sup>21</sup> Although the *melopoeia* of the poem has preoccupied critics, with one scholar claiming that the poem's 'visual effect ... is of little import', Marjorie Perloff has made an important argument for the significance of the poem's visual prosody and the way in which its calligraphic context – situated at the midpoint between Kruchenykh's explanatory note and a rayonist drawing by Mikhail Larionov – announces itself as an instantiation of intertextual *écriture*.<sup>22</sup>

In terms of semantics, the most productive response may come from Boris Arvatov's 1923 *Lef* essay on 'Poetic language and language creation'. Arguing against the possibility of a purely abstract, absolutely 'transrational' speech registered in conventional language systems, he mentions, *en passant*, that the language in Kruchenykh's legendary poem is 'perceived as a series of stems, prefixes, etc. with a specific sphere of semantic characteristics (*bulyschnik* [cobble-stone], *bulava* [mace], *bulka* [roll], *bulytykh* [plop], *dyra* [hole], etc.)'.<sup>23</sup> Lest his reading seem unwarranted or unsubstantiated, recall that Kruchenykh's own critical methods authorize almost any degree of textual manipulation. After coming across a copy of Freud's *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, for instance, he devoted an entire book to rereading conventional literature in terms of *sdvigi* [shifts], which would inevitably recover scatological or sexual meanings from even the most staid classical poetry. In fact, Kruchenykh habitually read poetry paragrammatically, employing hypograms and palindromes, and adding or subtracting letters at will. Not surprisingly, these techniques work especially well when applied to his own texts, where the careful spatialization of words over the page in his calligraphic poems suggests that such paragrammatic readings might proceed vertically as well as horizontally. The third *zaum'* poem from the *Pomada* triptych provides a particularly obvious example of Kruchenykh's anagrammatic play:

#3

ta sa maye  
kha ra bau

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sayem siyo dub  
radub mola  
al'

The recombination of letters in the poem takes on a mathematical precision:  $sa + maye = sayem$ ;  $ra + dub = radub$ ;  $mola - mol = al'$ . With an equally overt display of palindromic writing, the poem's fourth line records the *udar* [blow] which seems to *lomit'* [to break, to fracture] the words of the poem into fragments of linguistic *lom* [detritus]: '*radub mola'*. Similarly, the previous line makes a witty presentation of what comes next – that is, the future [*budii'*] – by recording it as a backwards encryption of what has come before: '*... iyo dub'*: the perfect emblem of Kruchenykh's backward-looking primitive futurism. As he puts it in 'New ways of the word', with an allusion to the artists' book *Mirskontza* [*Worldbackwards*], which had been published six months earlier: 'We learned to view the world backwards, and this retrograde motion pleased us (regarding the word, we noticed that it can be read backwards, and that it thus gains even deeper meaning).'

With Kruchenykh's example in mind, I want to go back to the first poem of the suite and continue Arvatov's provocative aside, considering the specific registers of those *zaum'* words more closely. To begin with, although many accounts describe the poem as being made up entirely of nonsense syllables, one should note the surprisingly unremarked *vui* which stands out so starkly in the centre of the page's linguistic challenges and interpellates the reader with a moment of striking clarity and recognition; not only a common verbal prefix (as is the neighboring *so*), *vui* is a familiar and immediately recognizable word in its own right: the second-person singular pronoun.<sup>24</sup> The poem is thus at least partially referential, and in part about reference: the status of the word as what Roman Jakobson would call a 'shifter' (or what Nicolas Ruwet would term *un embrayeur*) underscores the degree of engagement of the discursive positions imagined and created by the poem. Other recognizable words, moreover, emerge as letters are attracted and connected across lines. The grains of *sol'* [salt], for instance, scatter down the centre of the final two lines; reversing this reading and continuing up the page, the scrap of a shredded *losku[t]* [scrap, shred] appears, rhyming with the *dya* [hole, gap], *schel'* [crack, fissure], and *vyrez* [cut, notch] that the text suggests – both literally and figuratively – as each *zub* [cog] in this linguistic machine meshes and separates to form new combinations. Taken as the fragmented initial syllables of Russian words, the particles of Kruchenykh's poem obviously suggest a much larger number of words than Arvatov lists, while other, less certain readings proliferate as well.<sup>25</sup> Part of the impression of awkward ugliness attributed to the *sound* of the poem, for instance, may come instead from the series of negative words the text intimates. The poem opens with an ignorantly pronounced



suggestion of a fool [*dura*], a register reinforced by reading downward, like a blockhead [*dub*], or upward like some depraved person [*urod*]. Moreover, *urod* also denotes an ugly, or even monstrously deformed person, and the poem's letters and phonemes hint vaguely at words like *buza* [rubbish], *bul'varnii* [trashy], *bezukuznii* [tasteless], *budnii* [humdrum], *budka* [kennel], and so on.

Some possibilities, however, are far more resonant. Perhaps a sound poem, the work is a pandemonium of noises gesturing towards inarticulate utterances; *bul*, for instance, gives a gurgled interruption of *bul'kan'ye* [gurgling], just as *skum* might be taken as a whimpered conjugation of *skulit'* [to whine, to whimper]; a *shum* [din] emerges as one reads down amid the noise of the poem's central syllables, and the second line hypogramatically records the echoes of the twitter and chirp of *schebet* [twitter, chirp]. In addition, reading the first line backwards renders Kruchenykh's words quite literally as 'gibberish' [*bred*]. As this last example illustrates, several of the words seem to be self-reflexive enactments of their denotations: *bul*, for instance, is in fact 'on the point of being' *bylo* [nearly, just barely]. Conversely, the penultimate line ends *bu*, as if *budet* [that's enough; time to stop] had suddenly acquired self-consciousness and performed itself by stopping at the first syllable – simply letting itself be (*budet* also being the conjugation 'it is'). *Bu* moreover, gestures equally toward *bukva* [letter], announcing the disintegration of the poem's language into individual letters in the following line.<sup>26</sup> With similar self-reflexiveness, *schur* is indeed a tightened and narrowed version of *schurit'* [to narrow; to screw up], just as *skum* is a mixed-up version of *miks* [mix].

Such overcharged signs inhabit the other two poems from *Pomada* as well. Consider the opening line of the second of those *zaum'* poems: '*frot fon uit*' creates its neologisms by ingeniously reversing figure and ground to have the background [*fon*] burrow [*puit*] lettristically into the front [*front*], and the third poem makes a similarly witty transformation as it scatters the letters of 'here and there' [*mestami*] here and there through the single first line, '*ta sa maye*', to become *ta samaya* [that very one]. The poem continues this theme of broadcast semiotics in the jam and scramble of the penultimate line – '*radub mola*' – which is an exact anagram of *radiola* [radiogram] and *bum* [beam], with the *i* from the line above fitting perfectly into the space between the words.

Explication could continue, but that is precisely the point. The hermeneutic challenge posed by the *zaum'* poems is not how to generate readings, but how to limit them, and they highlight the nebulous, subjective, and emotional nature of what we understand to qualify as a 'legitimate' reading practice.<sup>27</sup> The potential profusion of associations, in fact, should make clear that none of my readings ought to be taken as definitive, or as the key which has cracked Kruchenykh's master code. At the same time,

the intrusion of conventional words into a reading of *zaum'* poems should not be seen as necessarily missing the point, or as betraying their attempt to create a new and abstract language of diminished referentiality. Even the most abstract, asemantic and non-representational text is legible because it is articulated in a system of recombination and formal difference. For instance, even without any sense of a conventionally referential meaning or available definition, we register *frot* as both different from and related to *fron*. The two point to one another, although neither denotes any associated concept or bears any content. But that system of formal reference and difference, in which any term simultaneously evokes and cancels a chain of other terms, leads inevitably to words which operate in signifying systems of *both* formal deferral and semantic arrest: *front*, *from*, *frantic*, *affront*, *et cetera*. Indeed, the more rigorously one takes an abstract text on its own formal and material terms, the more it is haunted by representational forms. As Lyn Hejinian puts it: 'words . . . simply can't help but give onto meaning.'<sup>28</sup>

But we should also keep in mind Wittgenstein's caution: 'Do not forget that a poem, even though it is composed in the language of information, is not used in the language-game of giving information.'<sup>29</sup> If the *zaum'* poems demonstrate that any language can be brought within a coherent semantic horizon by a particular reading practice or the appropriate context (even if only the context of the nonsensical), they also hint at the inadequacy of a linguistic model based on communication, and they should remind us that linguistic material always possesses its own formal properties, which can be read without regard to conventional hermeneutic concerns of reference and representation. Even in a smoothly functioning text used 'in the language-game of giving information', the signifiers continue to point to one another and pursue their independent, parallel games. Indeed, part of the importance of *zaum'* is its illumination of that dynamic relationship between the formal properties of language and their remotivation within a communicative context. Those extremes of language – the decontextualized material and the socially contextualized – are often seen as polarized dichotomies, but they endlessly erupt within one another. Kruchenykh's writing manifests that flux of language, illuminating its motion not only inside a particular system, but between systems as well.

The charged particles of his new language lace connections across the resonant fields of the *zaum'* text, suggesting thematic networks but never allowing those associations to become '*zastyushim* [fixed, frozen, set]'. This perpetual restlessness, in part, grounds the utopian optimism of Kruchenykh's revolution of the word. Ultimately, as Jean-Francois Lyotard has remarked, 'to arrest, once and for all, the meaning of words – that is what Terror wants'.<sup>30</sup> Kruchenykh resists that Terror while courting a none

the less terrifying understanding of language's formal dynamic and the excesses of its operation, which proceeds beyond our control, irrespective of our desires or intentions, and without our consent. With that perpetual restlessness, *zaum'* effectively blocks conventional reading strategies, while simultaneously inviting – and rewarding – the range of alternative reading strategies to which readers are then forced to turn. Taking these detours of the word, 'we see the straight highway before us, but of course we cannot use it, because it is permanently closed'.<sup>31</sup> To read *zaum'*, or to read the related experiments in American poetry from the 1960s and 1970s, is to experience both the utopian possibilities, and also the terrors, of negotiating those side-roads without a map. Or, in the terms of Kruchenykh's first *zaum'* poem, without a *ruľ* [steering wheel], a word that the initial units of both the first and last lines seems to summon and a subject rhyme with *rel's* [rails] also perfectly hypogrammed into the final line – what, in other words, has happened as the language slips off its tracks, grammar shunted, engine idling and wheels spinning. As David Melnick, one of Kruchenykh's greatest heirs, asks of his own *zaum'* poetry, with equal measures of aggression and desperation:

What can such poems do for you? You are a spider strangling in your own web, suffocated by meaning. You ask to be freed by these poems from the intolerable burden of trying to understand. The world of meaning: is it too large for you? too small? It doesn't fit. Too bad. It's no contest. You keep on trying. So do I.<sup>32</sup>

So do we all.

'No terror,' as Jackson Mac Low has written, 'is as total as the jargon of its illusions.'<sup>33</sup>

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### Notes

- 1 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations: The English Text of the Third Edition*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: MacMillan, n.d.), p. 304.

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- 2 Aleksei Kruchenykh, 'Novye Puti Slova' [New ways of the word], in *Troia* [*The Three*] (Moscow, 1913), n.p., translated in Lawton, p. 69 (see n. 4); Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, p. 528.
- 3 For Wittgenstein, the question is not whether something is nonsense, but how nonsense can operate ('Even a nonsense-poem is not nonsense in the same way as the babbling of a child' [*Investigations* §282]). One might also note that both he and Kruchenykh were interested in private language; the founding *zaum'* poem, which I discuss at the close of this essay, is preceded by the comment: '3 stkihotvoreniya napisaniya na sobstvenom [sic] yazik ot dr. otlichayetsya!' [3 poems written in one's own language different from others]'.<sup>3</sup>
- 4 Anne Lawton (ed.), *Russian Futurism Through Its Manifestos: 1912–1928* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 14.
- 5 Lawton, *Manifestos*, p. 67. The first point presented in the manifesto is intentionally mis-numbered '4'. On indeterminacy as the hallmark of *zaum'*, see Boris Arvatov, 'Rechvorchestvo [Language creation]', in *Lef*, 2 (1923), pp. 79–91. English translation as 'Language creation (On "transrational" Poetry)' in Lawton, *Manifestos*, p. 223; and Susan B. Compton, *The World Backwards: Russian Futurist Books 1912–16* (London: The British Library, 1978), p. 103.
- 6 Lawton, *Manifestos*, p. 183. The brothers Burluk and Igor Terentiev would celebrate and disparage *zaum'* on the same point, the former declaring that 'all that is beautiful is random (see the philosophy of chance)' and the latter lamenting: 'one finds the highest degree of chance in *zaum'*'.
- 7 Lawton, *Manifestos*, p. 68; Kazimir Malevich, *From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting*, in *Essays on Art 1915–1933*, vol. I, ed. Troels Anderson, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1968), p. 19.
- 8 Kruchenykh, 'New ways', n.p.
- 9 Lawton, *Manifestos*, p. 53; emphasis supplied.
- 10 The phrase appears later that year in Kruchenykh's own 'New ways of the word', again in 1921 in the opening to the 'Declaration of transrational language', and once more that summer in 'Declaration of the word as such'.
- 11 Bernhard Bischoff, *Latin Paleography: Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, trans. Dáibhí Ó Cróinín and David Ganz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 173.
- 12 *Russian Futurism: A History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), p. 121. The former is quoted from the 1914 book *Doblaya Luna* [*The Croaked Moon*], and the similar version of the *pater noster* was reprinted in Kruchenykh's manifesto 'The declaration of the word as such'. Janacek suggests that Kruchenykh used this 'writing-through' technique in other poems as well (pp. 85–6).
- 13 Quoted in John White, *Literary Futurism: Aspects of the First Avant-Garde* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 175n.
- 14 Agnès Sola, *Le futurisme russe* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1989), p. 137.
- 15 This example and Kruchenykh's writing-through are quoted by Sola (p. 173); the orthographic adaptations and translations are my own.
- 16 Baudoin de Courtenay, quoted by Gerald Janacek in *Zaum: The Transrational Poetry of Russian Futurism* (Calexi: San Diego State University Press, 1997), p. 89.
- 17 Kruchenykh makes the claim for linguistic proficiency in *Vzorval'*. The claim for the Russian spirit is quoted, in a modified translation, from Lawton,

*Manifestos*, p. 60. Elsewhere, Kruchenykh located national character in the consonants of a language (hence the 'universal' nature of his vowel-only poems) (quoted in Nilsson, p. 140; see n. 19). A comparison of the changes Kruchenykh made to the poem reveals his tendency to keep the consonants constant and shuffle their vowels; as should be clear, this fluidity of vowel values has influenced my explication of the poem. For a more searching survey of responses to the national character of the poem in relation to Kruchenykh's quip concerning Pushkin, see Nilsson, pp. 141–2. Janecek notes the poem's affinities to Ukrainian (Janecek, *Zaum*, p. 57). In the end, one might locate *zaum's* national character not in its phonology but in its techniques; Slavic languages are particularly well disposed to manipulations such as palindromes, and it is unlikely that Khlebnikov could have composed entire books of palindromic verse had he been writing in English.

- 18 Markov, *Russian Futurism*, p. 44.
- 19 Nils Nilsson, 'Krucenykh's Poem "Dyr bul scyl"', in *Scando-Slavica-Tomus*, p. 24, p. 147.
- 20 Quoted in Janecek, *Zaum*, p. 55, p. 56; Lawton, *Manifestos*, p. 68.
- 21 Kruchenykh, quoted in Sola, *Futurisme*, p. 86; Willem Gerardus Weststeijn, *Velimir Chlebnikov and the Development of Poetical Language in Russian Symbolism and Futurism*, Studies in Slavic Literature and Poetics #4 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1983), p. 14.
- 22 White, *Futurism*, p. 251; Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 123.
- 23 Lawton, *Manifestos*, p. 221. Herbert Eagle echoes Arvatov in the former's 'Afterword' to Lawton's invaluable collection, p. 289.
- 24 The third poem of Kruchenykh's inaugural suite also contains perfectly conventional words: *mola* [mole; pier], *dub* [oak].
- 25 Janecek expands Arvatov's catalogue considerably (Janecek, *Zaum*, pp. 57–8).
- 26 Vasilii Gnedov continued the reduction of language from words to single letters (his infamous 'yo' poem, for instance) and from there to the (blank) page itself ('Poem of the End' [smert' iskustvu]).
- 27 With respect to what he terms an 'avant-garde hermeneutics', François Rastier sees this as 'the fundamental problem of pertinence . . . it is less difficult to find anagrams than to succeed in reducing their number by formulating plausibility criteria'. *Sens et textualité* (Paris: Hachette, 1989), translated by Frank Collins and Paul Perron as *Meaning and Textuality* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), pp. 12 *passim*.
- 28 *Walls* (New York: A Hundred Posters, 1979).
- 29 *Zettel*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), p. 28.
- 30 *Rudiments Patiens: genre dissertatif* (NP: Union générale d'éditions, 1977), p. 158.
- 31 Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, p. 426.
- 32 David Melnick, 'A short word on my work', in  $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$  I (February, 1978), p. 1.
- 33 'That music', *Caterpillar*, 13 (1970), p. 59.