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### ŠERŠENEVIČ, KUL'BIN AND MARINETTI

Notes on Russian and Italian Futurism <sup>1</sup>

When Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, the founder and incontestable leader of Italian futurism, visited Moscow and St. Petersburg in January-February 1914, the Russian futurists stood divided in their attitude towards their celebrated colleague. Chlebnikov and Larionov were violently opposed to the visit, Larionov even suggesting that Marinetti be greeted with "rotten eggs" <sup>2</sup>; the other extreme was represented by Vadim Šeršenevič and Konstantin Bol'šakov, who gave the Italian futurist a warm welcome at the railroad station in Moscow on January 26.

#### 1. Šeršenevič – Marinetti

It was no accident that Vadim Šeršenevič (1893-1942) was among those to give Marinetti an official welcome. Šeršenevič was, in fact, the Russian poet most influenced by Marinetti <sup>3</sup>. He was the author of the first book in Russia on futurism ("Futurizm bez maski", M. 1913) <sup>4</sup> and he translated and edited "Manifesty ital'janskogo futurizma" (M. 1914), containing five of Marinetti's manifestoes and seven other futurist manifestoes. He also translated two books by Marinetti, "La bataille de Tripoli" (Bitva u Tripoli, M. 1915 <sup>5</sup>, 1916) and "Mafarka le futuriste" (Futurist Mafarka, M. 1916). In connection with Marinetti's visit to Moscow, Šeršenevič published two articles about him and a translation of Marinetti's latest manifesto, "A bas le tango et Parsifal!", dated January 11, 1914 <sup>6</sup>.

In addition to Šeršenevič and Bol'šakov, the reception committee at the railroad station consisted of Genrich Tasteven (Russian delegate of the Parisian "Société des grandes conférences"; it was he who had invited Marinetti to Russia), Count Aleksej Tolstoj (who, in connection with Marinetti's visit, unexpectedly proclaimed himself a "futurist" <sup>7</sup>), and the little known "futurist" Toporkov <sup>8</sup>. Tasteven in his speech of welcome hailed Marinetti as "the head of Western European Futurism", stressing that he was happy to do so "on Russian soil, where futurism has developed strongly in recent time" <sup>9</sup>. Šeršenevič also greeted Marinetti and gave him a copy of his translation of Italian futurist manifestoes <sup>10</sup>.

When Larionov suggested that Marinetti be greeted with rotten eggs, Šeršenevič protested against this expression of "nekul'turnost'" <sup>11</sup>, and together with Bol'šakov and Majakovskij he took exception to an anti-Marinetti declaration published in the newspaper "Nov'" <sup>12</sup>.

The fact that both Šeršenevič and Bol'šakov, former leaders of the "Mezonin poézii" group, joined hands with the Hylaeian Majakovskij was just another confirmation of the rapprochement between the two poets and the cubo-futurists that had taken place in recent months. Shortly, both Šeršenevič and Bol'šakov were to publish their poems and articles in the Hylaeian almanacs "Pervyj žurnal russkich futuristov"

and "Dochlaja luna" (2nd edition), which came out in the spring of 1914.

"Pervyj žurnal russkich futuristov" was planned as a bimonthly literary journal, was touring the Russian provinces together with Majakovskij and Kamenskij, and therefore entrusted Šeršenevič with the editing, a confidence which the latter used unscrupulously to his own advantage: he printed his own poetry on the first pages, immediately after Majakovskij's, and filled the critical section with articles praising himself. After the publication of "Pervyj žurnal" and "Dochlaja luna" Burljuk, upset by Šeršenevič's editorial work, wrote to Benedikt Livšic: "It's a great pity that you don't live in Moscow. I had to entrust the printing to Shershenevich and — such infantile pride! — No. 1/2 of the journal is rubbish! . . ." <sup>13</sup>

Before the first issue of the journal was published, Šeršenevič began collecting material for No. 3. According to V. Markov, one of the lists of prospective contributors contained the name of Marinetti <sup>14</sup>. The following letter from Šeršenevič to Marinetti confirms that the editors (or was it only Šeršenevič?) planned to give a broad presentation of Italian futurism on the pages of their journal. Since the journal never came out again, these plans did not materialize.

Cher poète! <sup>15</sup>

Veillez venir en aide à une entreprise, qui a le but de propager notre cause.

Je suppose de réunir dans une brochure des interviews et des articles concernant la question "Qu'est ce que c'est que le futurisme".

Si vous consentez à participer dans la réalisation de ce plan, je vous prie de m'envoyer quelques articles de vous et de vos collègues (c'est à dire: m m. U. Boccioni, C.D. Carrà, L. Russolo, Balla, P. Buzzi, Pallazzeschi, Cavacchioli, Govoni, Folgore, Altomare, M. Bètuda, Severini, Pratella, Valentine de Saint-Point) <sup>16</sup>, traitant ladite question.

Chaque article peut avoir 100-150 lignes.

Veillez ajouter aussi des portraits et des notices biographiques, qui précéderont chaque article et pourront faire connaître au public russe nos idées et ses poètes.

Agréez, cher poète, l'assurance de mes meilleurs sentiments

Tout à vous

Wadim Cherchenewitz

Moscou. 19.III.1914.

Москва, Воздвиженка, Крестовоздвиженский, д. 2, кв. 10.

Wosdwijenska, Crestowosdwijensky, 2, 1[ogement] 10.

P.S. Dans quelques jours apparaîtra le N 1-2 du "Premier journal des futuristes russes". Il vous sera envoyé immédiatement. La rédaction a l'honneur de vous prier d'envoyer vos pièces pour le N 3 ou N 4.

Wadim Cherchenewitz

## 2. *Kul'bin – Marinetti*

After three appearances in Moscow, on January 27, 28, and 30, Marinetti left for St. Petersburg, accompanied by his impresario Tasteven<sup>17</sup>. On February 1, he arrived in the capital, where he was given an official welcome by Nikolaj Kul'bin and some of the futurists, probably Kručnych, Ol'ga Rozanova, Nikolaj Burljuk, the composer Artur Lur'e, and others<sup>18</sup>. Nikolaj Kul'bin had invited Marinetti to St. Petersburg and served as his host during the eight-day stay in the capital<sup>19</sup>.

Nikolaj Kul'bin (1868-1917) was a professor (privat-docent) at the Military Academy and a General Staff physician, professions which he combined with those of lecturer on modern art and modernist painter. Kul'bin was in fact one of the main propagators of new art at this time. In 1910 he published the literary almanac "Studija impressionistov", which came out two months before "Sadok sudej" (I) and contained two excellent poems by Chlebnikov, "Byli napolneny zvukom truščoby ..." and "Zakljatie smečhom". He was also the organizer of several exhibitions of new art in St. Petersburg in 1908-1910<sup>20</sup>. Later he cooperated with Aleksej Kručnych, whom he helped publish the leaflet "Slovo kak takovoe" (1913)<sup>21</sup>; he also illustrated Kručnych's books "Vzorval'" (1913) and "Të li lë" (1914). Kul'bin himself did not belong to any special artistic grouping, but he played an important role in the development of Russian avant-garde art as an organizer and popularizer. In 1912, he was honoured with a small book, "Kul'bin" (izd. Obščestva Intimnogo Teatra, St. P.), containing reproductions of his works and articles by Sudejkin, Evreinov, and Gorodeckij.

Being responsible for Marinetti's stay in St. Petersburg, Kul'bin was extremely anxious that the Italian guest be received in the best possible manner, and that he would have the opportunity to meet with his Russian futurist colleagues (with Majakovskij, Burljuk, and Kamenskij absent, Moscow had appeared rather "passéist" to him). The day before Marinetti's arrival in the capital, therefore, Kul'bin published a "Letter to the editor" defending the Italian poet against accusations in the press that he had expressed "negative or funny remarks about Russian antiquity"<sup>22</sup>. The same evening he called "a sort of conference" in his flat, in an attempt to persuade the St. Petersburg futurists to give Marinetti a different reception from the one in Moscow<sup>23</sup>. However, Kul'bin's efforts were unsuccessful, and Marinetti's first lecture in the capital led to a serious conflict between Chlebnikov and Kul'bin (and some of Chlebnikov's cubo-futurist friends). Chlebnikov had printed a leaflet in which he took exception to Italian futurism, criticizing "inye tuzemcy" (i.e. Kul'bin and others) for betraying the cause of Russian art by inviting Marinetti<sup>24</sup>. Kul'bin was chairman at the recital and tried to stop Chlebnikov from handing out the leaflets to the audience. It almost came to a fist fight, and the furious Chlebnikov challenged Kul'bin to a duel<sup>25</sup>.

After this incident, which took place the evening of Marinetti's first day in St. Petersburg, the Italian poet was celebrated at the Brodjačaja sobaka (The Stray Dog)<sup>26</sup>, and the following day Kul'bin gave a supper in his honour<sup>27</sup>. After a second lecture in the capital (on February 4), Marinetti returned to Moscow on February 9<sup>28</sup>. There-

fore, he could not attend the debate "Naš otvet Marinetti" (Our response to Marinetti), arranged on February 12 by Kul'bin, Benedikt Livšič, and Artur Lur'e with the aim of clarifying the similarities and divergences between Italian and Russian futurism<sup>29</sup>.

Nikolaj Kul'bin's warm and cordial letter to Marinetti was written two days after this debate. It was obviously sent to Moscow, where Marinetti stayed until February 17<sup>30</sup>.

The most interesting part of the letter concerns "l'imbécile lettre de Moscou". This refers to a "letter to the editor" published on February 5 in the Moscow newspaper "Nov'" and stressing Russian futurism's independence of Italian futurism. The letter, or "declaration", also contained some contemptuous words about Italian futurist painting and poetry. It was not signed but ended with the following phrase: "The main thought in the letter has more than once been signed by the names (see 'A Trap for Judges' II): the Burljuks, V. Kamenskij, Majakovskij, Matjušin, Kručnych, Livšič, Nizen, Velimir Chlebnikov". Who actually wrote the letter is not clear.

The "Nov'" letter provoked protests from seven of the ten futurists whose names were used as "signatures". The first protest came from Benedikt Livšič, Aleksej Kručnych, Michail Matjušin, and Nikolaj Burljuk, who in another "letter to the editor" ("Den'", 13 February) took exception to the declaration, which they found "insulting" to Marinetti, and claimed that it had been published without their knowledge and consent. In a "supplement" (dopolnenie) to this letter, Kul'bin asserts that "Nikolaj Burljuk certifies that his brothers David and Vladimir, too, neither signed the letter in 'Nov'', nor participated in the writing of it"<sup>31</sup>. Kul'bin was very upset by the "Nov'" declaration, and at the debate "Our response to Marinetti" on February 12 he talked about the "extremely tactless letter, which, moreover, proved to be forged"<sup>32</sup>. The second official protest against the declaration was signed by Bol'sakov, Majakovskij, and Šeršenevič ("Nov'", 15 February), who maintain that it was written by David Burljuk and Vasilij Kamenskij<sup>33</sup>.

Kul'bin, in his letter to Marinetti, claims that the author was Chlebnikov. Obviously, either Kul'bin or Majakovskij et al. were misinformed – or else David Burljuk played a (typically futurist) trick on his brother Nikolaj, disclaiming responsibility for a declaration of which he was himself the author.

Three factors point against Chlebnikov as the author of the declaration. First of all, it begins with the phrase: "During our tour of the countryside . . .", referring to the futurists' tour of provincial Russia at this time – Chlebnikov did not participate in this tour, but Burljuk and Kamenskij did; stylistically, it has little in common with Chlebnikov's other anti-Marinetti declarations<sup>34</sup>, whereas it fits rather well into the rhetorical poetics of Burljuk and Kamenskij; furthermore, Chlebnikov temporarily broke with his fellow Hylaeans in connection with Marinetti's visit<sup>35</sup>, and it is therefore less likely that he would have used their names as signatures. Considering these factors, it is reasonable to argue that Kul'bin, not knowing who wrote the declaration, chose to put the blame on Chlebnikov, whose standpoint was familiar to Marinetti.

However uncertain the authorship may be, the polemics around Marinetti and the contradictory information about the "Nov'" letter from some of the leading futurists

bear clear evidence of the confusion within the Russian futurist movement, brought about by the Italian futurist's visit to Russia. There is good reason to believe that the attitude towards Marinetti was more diversified than has hitherto been presumed.

Cher ami, tout va bien.

Хорошо жить на свете! (Khorochko git na svietie)

Avez vous reçu nos télégrammes? La première, que nous avons envoyée de la gare quelques minutes après votre départ <sup>36</sup> et l'autre — le même soir — de la cave du "chien errant" <sup>37</sup>. Les vrais futuristes russes sont toujours avec vous.

Les suscriptions de l'imbécile lettre de Moscou sont fausses. Khlebnikoff l'a écrite tout seul. Bénédict Livchitz, A.Kroutchenych, Nicolas Bourliouk, Davide Bourliouk, Voldemar Bourliouk, M.Matiouchine ont déclaré par une lettre qui a déjà apparu dans le journal "Dien" ("Le Jour"), qu'ils n'avaient rien de commun avec la lettre susnommée et qu'ils n'avaient pas donné leurs signatures <sup>38</sup>. Avant hier a eu lieu notre conférence "La réponse à Marinetti" <sup>39</sup> (vous savez déjà tout ce qui y a été dit) <sup>40</sup> et certifié notre profond respect à nos confrères italiens [sic].

Le soir de votre départ j'étais tout à fait découragé par ce malentendu. Nous sommes venus au buffet de la gare à 10 heures 35 et nous vous attendions là jusque à [sic] onze heures moins 15.

Après ça nous sommes sortis sur le perron et à ce moment là votre train s'ébranla.

Cher confrère, cher frère,  
dormajolo carissimo <sup>41</sup>,  
au revoir.

Nos saluts à Boccioni et à tous les futuristes de l'Italie. Revenez donc au printemps pour voir nos nuits blanches. Le chien errant vous salue

bien à vous

N. K.

Mon adresse

St.Pétersbourg, Maximilianovski pereoulok, 16, log[ement] 6. Nicolas Koulbine.

Je vous envoie, cher confrère, avec la présente lettre le journal "Dien", dans lequel a été publié la démentie [sic] des futuristes ainsi que mes oeuvres entre autres les portraits imprimés (par autographie) <sup>42</sup>.

StPb 14(27) févr. 1914.

## NOTES

1. The letters from Šeršenevič and Kul'bin are from the Marinetti collection at the Yale University, and are published with the kind permission of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.
2. N. Chardžiev, "'Veselyj god' Majakovskogo", in Bengt Jangfeldt/Nils Åke Nilsson (eds.), Vladimir Majakovskij. Memoirs and Essays, Stockholm 1975, p. 125.
3. Marinetti's influence on Šeršenevič has been analyzed convincingly and in detail by Anna Lawton in her book Vadim Shershenovich: From Futurism to Imaginism, Ann Arbor 1981.
4. According to Anna Lawton, Šeršenevič relied heavily on second-hand sources when writing this book; he seems to have borrowed particularly much from M. Osorgin's book Očerki sovremennoj Italii, M. 1913 (op.cit., p. 51-53).
5. The 1915 edition is certified by Chardžiev, op.cit., p. 148.
6. "Novyj manifest Marinetti", Nov', 28.I.1914.
7. Birževye vedomosti, več. vyp., 10.II.1914.
8. Nov', 28.I.1914.
9. Ibidem.
10. Nov', 28.I.1914. Tasteven's book Futurizm (na puti k novomu simvolizmu) came out the same day Marinetti arrived in Moscow. It contains five lectures on futurism and five Italian futurist manifestoes; the copy given to Marinetti has been preserved in the collection of Marinetti's daughter. The dedication, which I quote here with the kind permission of Mrs. Luce Marinetti-Barbi, reads as follows: "Au vaillant chef du futurisme, à l'apôtre de la beauté de la vitesse j'offre ce livre paru le jour de son arrivée à Moscou, comme faible témoignage de ma sincère admiration et de ma sympathie dévouée. Henri Tasteven".
11. See Vladimir Markov, Russian Futurism: A History, Berkeley/Los Angeles 1968, p. 150.
12. The anti-Marinetti declaration was published in Nov' on February 5, and the Bol'sakov-Majakovskij-Šeršenevič repudiation in the same newspaper on February 15. See p. 161.
13. Benedict Livshits, The One and a Half-Eyed Archer, Newtonville, Mass., p. 171. (Tr. John E. Bowl.)
14. Markov, op.cit., p. 173.
15. A couple of misspellings have been corrected, and the French *accents aigus* and *graves* have been put in their proper places. Otherwise, the letter is reproduced exactly after the original; the same goes for Kul'bin's letter quoted below.
16. Šeršenevič's list contains all the major names of Italian futurism: the painters Umberto Boccioni (1882-1916), Carlo Carrà (1881-1966), Luigi Russolo (1885-1947), Giacomo Balla (1871-1958), and Gino Severini (1883-1966); the poets Paolo Buzzi (1874-1956), Aldo Palazzeschi (1885-1974), Enrico Cavacchioli (1885-1954), Corrado Govoni (1884-1965), Luciano Folgore (real name:

Omero Vecchi; 1888-1966), Libero Altomare (real name: Remo Mannoni; 1883-1962), and Mario Bètuda; the musician Francesco Balilla Pratella (1880-1955); and the "futurist woman" Valentine de Saint-Point (1875-1953), author of "Manifesto della donna futurista" and "Manifesto futurista della lussuria" (the first one included in Tasteven's and Šeršenevič's books).

17. Birževye vedomosti, več. vyp., 1.II.1914.
18. Chardžiev, op.cit., p. 129.
19. In a lecture on November 30, 1913, Kul'bin announced that he had invited to St. Petersburg "Marinetti himself with his theater, paintings and music [...]" (Den', 1.XII.1913).
20. Chardžiev, op.cit., p. 129.
21. Chardžiev, ibid.
22. Markov, op.cit., p. 149.
23. Livshits, op.cit., p. 183.
24. The text of the leaflet is found in V. Chlebnikov, *Sobranie sočinenij*, V, L. 1933, p. 250. It was signed by Benedikt Livšic as well, but he later took a more lenient attitude towards Marinetti.
25. Chardžiev, ibid., p. 131.
26. Den', 3.II.1914. Marinetti gave the following account of the Brodjačaja sobaka: "The downstairs of the Sabacha [sic] is made up of seven rooms painted and draped with a variety of materials velvets and purple brocades and many portraits of me done by Kulbin and Larionov [...]" (Marinetti, *Selected Writings*, edited and with an introduction by R.W. Flint, N.Y. 1972, p. 358). According to Livšic, Marinetti spent several nights at the Brodjačaja sobaka (op.cit., p. 194).
27. Livšic gives a vivid account of this supper and his conversation with Marinetti (op.cit., pp. 188ff.).
28. Chardžiev, op.cit., p. 134.
29. According to the poster (reproduced in Livshits, op.cit., p. 206), the debate was announced for February 11, but according to Kul'bin's letter (see below) and the newspaper Den' (13.II.1914) it took place on February 12.
30. Chardžiev, op.cit., p. 139.
31. N. Chardžiev, in his article on Marinetti's visit to Russia, does not mention this "supplement" (op.cit., p. 133). In an earlier version of the article, he does not mention Benedikt Livšic either, but this exclusion obviously had political reasons; Livšic had perished in a prison camp in 1939 and was a "non-person" ("Turne kubo-futuristov 1913-1914 gg.", Majakovskij. *Materialy i issledovanija*, M. 1940, p. 420). The reason why the Soviet scholar choses to neglect Kul'bin's information is quite clear: this "supplement" shows that the anti-Marinetti front among the Russian futurists was far from united, and Chardžiev's research has always been devoted to trying to prove "the complete autonomy of Russian cubo-futurism, hostile to Italian futurism" (quotation from the commentary to V. Chlebnikov, *Neizdannye proizvedenija*, M. 1940, p. 476).
32. Den', 13.II.1914.

33. See V. Majakovskij, PSS, I, M. 1955, p. 369.
34. See Chlebnikov, Sobranie sočinenij, V, L. 1933, p. 250, Neizdannye proizvedenija, pp. 368-369, and Chardžiev, op.cit., p. 131.
35. See Chlebnikov's letter to Nikolaj Burljuk, Neizdannye proizvedenija, pp. 368-369. However, the exact date of this letter is uncertain.
36. I.e. February 9.
37. I.e. the Brodjačaja sobaka (see note 26).
38. See p. 161
39. See p. 160-161
40. Kul'bin probably refers to the presence at the debate of "representatives of the Italian colony in Petersburg, from which Marinetti will learn what and how the Russian futurists responded to him" (Den', 13.II.1914).
41. Kul'bin invents the word "dormajolo" (dormaiolo), meaning somebody who loves to sleep a lot. This is no doubt a humorous allusion to the "several nights in a row" spent at the Brodjačaja sobaka (Livshits, op.cit., p. 194).
42. Kul'bin drew quite a few portraits of Russian writers – Chlebnikov, David Burljuk, Michail Kuzmin, Nikolaj Evreinov, and others (some of them are reproduced in Livshits, op.cit.). The portrait of Marinetti was drawn during the supper at Kulbin's on February 2, while Marinetti was reciting extracts from Zang-Tumb-Tumb (Livshits, op.cit., p. 189). According to a newspaper report, Kul'bin showed the portrait at Marinetti's second appearance in St. Petersburg, at the Kalašnikov Exchange on February 4 (Birževye vedomosti, 5.II.1914). An almost identical version of the portrait was later published in the ~~calendar~~ *Strelec* (I), Petrograd 1915. *almanac*