

Selected works of Velimir Khlebnikov, Russia's outstanding modernist writer, and a notoriously difficult one to translate, have at long last appeared in English, thanks to the editorial efforts of Gary Kern, aided by Vladimir Markov. In *Snake Train*, Kern has included his own and others' annotated renditions of long and short poems, experiments, dramatic works, prose fiction, and visions and theories ("pieces of wayward character," as Markov once referred to them). That the prose and drama work better in English than the poetry is understandable. Yet one feels that the spirit of the poetry could have been better conveyed if Kern had given either strictly linear translations or freely poetic renderings, rather than choosing a fatal compromise between the two.

Three appendixes provide a chronology of Khlebnikov's life, a memoir by his Futurist friend Dmitrii Petrovskii, and Russian texts of some of the poems. Translations of the shortest ones appear together with the translations. This unreasonable inconsistency constitutes one of the major shortcomings of the book. As is often the case with works published by Ardis, the intentions are laudable, but the execution unsatisfactory. For example, it is puzzling to find the translation of a single short poem ("I went, a youth, alone") at the end of the last section, "Visions and Theories," but its original in the middle of the Russian texts, apparently in place. The notes are quite valuable, but occasionally are not as helpful as they might be. In the case of excerpts from longer poems, it would be useful to have some description of the entire poem. One would also welcome a select bibliography of secondary material available in English.

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K ISTORII RUSSKOGO AVANGARDA (THE RUSSIAN AVANT-GARDE).

By Nikolai Khardzhiev, Kazimir Malevich, and Mikhail Matiushin. Edited by Nikolai Khardzhiev. Postscript by Roman Jakobson. Stockholm: Hylaea Prints, 1976. 189 pp. + 40 pp. plates. Sw.kr. 165. Distributed by Almqvist & Wiksell International, Stockholm.

This book appears twenty years too late. Nikolai Khardzhiev must be praised for many achievements, but, because he has long been in possession of the documents presented here, he should be criticized harshly for his reticence, inertia, and silence on subjects that are of universal significance to all historians of twentieth-century art. Khardzhiev frequently emphasizes that recent studies of the Russian avant-garde by Soviet and Western scholars have been marred by inaccuracies and misattributions and have fallen victim to unfounded speculations. Many researchers in this area, such as Andersen, Bowlt, Karshan, Kovtun, and the Marcadés, are brought to task and cautioned by Khardzhiev in this volume. As his laconic comments and emendations demonstrate, Khardzhiev possesses vast published and unpublished resources pertaining to the Russian avant-garde; had he made these accessible even ten years ago, he would have facilitated the task of historical documentation and helped scholars to avoid many pitfalls. But it is highly questionable whether Khardzhiev, a friend of Mayakovsky, Malevich, and Matiushin, can rescue the "truth" from the dense mythology that now surrounds the Russian avant-garde. In any case, much of the information that Khardzhiev has guarded so jealously and that he now presents has already become available from the current research of other Soviet scholars.

The book is divided into four main sections: a version of Khardzhiev's successful study of Mayakovsky and the visual arts (which first appeared in *Maiakovskii: Materialy i issledovaniia*, Moscow, 1940; revised and republished in Khardzhiev and Trenin, *Poeticheskaia kul'tura Maiakovskogo*, Moscow, 1970); a partial autobiography by Kazimir Malevich; a fuller autobiography by Mikhail Matiushin; and Matiushin's

essay "Opyt khudozhnika novoi mery." These texts are complemented by Khardzhiev's detailed introduction, prefaces, and footnotes, and by a short postscript by Roman Jakobson. The book is illustrated with one color and numerous black-and-white reproductions, many appearing here for the first time.

Khardzhiev's article on Mayakovsky is the least innovative of the four contributions simply because it has long been accessible. But a rereading of this piece reveals once again the thoroughness of Khardzhiev's scholarship here, and its juxtaposition with the Malevich and Matiushin texts gives it a new, comparative value. What is immediately clear from the article is that the poets and painters of the Russian avant-garde moved in very close proximity and that their ethical and aesthetic systems had much in common. Khardzhiev reminds us of this by drawing attention to the literary interests of Malevich and Rozanova and to the artistic interests of Guro, Kamenskii, Khlebnikov, Kruchenykh, and others. Thus, the fact that Mayakovsky started his career as a painter is symptomatic of the "synthetic" inclination of the Cubo-Futurists. Khardzhiev's careful delineation of Mayakovsky's work as a painter and *lubok* designer (during the First World War), of his relations with David Burliuk, Larionov, and others, and of his participation in the various avant-garde exhibitions helps further our understanding of this dynamic interchange of literary and artistic ideas just before and after the revolution.

The topic of the second section, the Malevich autobiography, promises much of interest, but, in fact, the text deals largely with Malevich's childhood and adolescence and not with his mature, professional years. Of course, it is interesting to read of Malevich's youth in the village of Parkhomovka in the Ukraine, of his admiration for the Ukrainian peasants, of the beet factory where his father worked, and of his impressions of Kiev, Kursk, and "*ikonnaia Moskva*" (p. 117). Still, central questions remain unanswered; for example, we learn nothing of the cultural level of Malevich's family and still do not know if his parents were educated or even literate. On the other hand, thanks to Khardzhiev's precise annotations, we now have a firm chronology of Malevich's early life, and this can replace the rhapsodical versions provided in previous publications. Malevich's memoir does not proceed beyond his Impressionist stage; consequently, the urgent need for information on his assimilation and development of Cubism and Futurism or on his formulation of Suprematism is not fulfilled. The same is true of Malevich's subsequent activities in Vitebsk and Leningrad. In fact, if it were not for Khardzhiev's preface and notes, the Malevich autobiography would have very little relevance to the theme of the book. At the same time, one wonders why, exactly, Khardzhiev decided to publish this particular passage and to what degree he edited and truncated it. For all Khardzhiev's emphasis on historical accuracy, we would do well to heed Nadezhda Mandelstam's warning that Khardzhiev, "incapable of semantic analysis," is not averse to redating, distorting, and destroying archival materials (*Vtoraia kniga* [Paris: YMCA-Press, 1972], pp. 534 and 536).

The Matiushin autobiography is more exciting both because of its detailed survey of the early phase of the avant-garde and because of its lucid style. Moreover, Matiushin the artist is less familiar to us than Malevich, although, as his texts demonstrate, his ideas were as provocative as Malevich's. Once again, an indisputable value of this section, together with Khardzhiev's preface and comments, is the establishment of an accurate record of the events, persons, and personalities that affected the lives of Matiushin and his wife, Elena Guro. Frequent reference is made to the Union of Youth group, to the production of *Victory Over the Sun*, to the "cellar" *The Stray Dog*, and to painters, poets, and aesthetes, such as Filonov, Malevich, Khlebnikov, Kruchenykh, Kul'bin, and Puni. The supplementary essay on Matiushin's spatial theory sheds light on his formulation and development of the system known as "Zorved" (literally, "See-Know"), according to which he endeavored to expand the optical radius to 360 degrees. But despite (or perhaps because of) the autobiography

and the essay, it is still difficult to recognize where, in Matiushin's philosophy, alchemy and astrology ended, and where chemistry and astronomy began. How did Matiushin's "impressionism" differ from Kul'bin's? Why does Khardzhiev regard Matiushin as a "venerable representative of the international 'avant-garde' of the twentieth century" (p. 131), but Kul'bin as a "dilettante" (p. 124)? Such issues remain enigmatic.

On the whole, Khardzhiev's bittersweet footnotes form a positive and much needed directory to names and dates relating to the Russian avant-garde. On occasion, however, Khardzhiev's attempts to inflict his authoritarian views are both vexing and questionable. When many members of the avant-garde such as Chekrygin, Punin, and Tatlin were discussing the ideas of Nikolai Fedorov, why assume that Malevich "was never interested in him" (p. 89)? When, in his diaries and letters of the 1920s, Punin described Malevich's experiments at the Leningrad Institute of Artistic Culture and drew parallels between the work of Malevich, Matiushin, and himself, why dismiss this obvious connection as "fiction" (p. 124) but then refer to the collaboration of Malevich and Matiushin at the same institute a few pages later (p. 132)? When Kul'bin created many abstract appliquéés of colored paper in 1913-14—one of which was shown at the 1973 exhibition commemorating *The Stray Dog* in Leningrad and three of which belong to Kul'bin's nephew in Leningrad—why reject Kul'bin as a "dilettante" and the works as "fakes" (p. 125)? In seeking to impose his pedantic and exclusive opinions on the course of history, Khardzhiev may distort it even more than his colleagues have done.

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THE ONE AND A HALF-EYED ARCHER. By *Benedikt Livshits*. Translated, annotated, and with an introduction by *John E. Bowl*. Newtonville, Mass.: Oriental Research Partners, 1977. 272 pp. Illus. \$25.00.

A well-known memoir of Russian Futurism now makes its rather expensive debut in English translation. The "archer" of the title is both the destructive Scythian riding out of the East and the thoroughly Westernized half-blind promoter of the Russian avant-garde, David Burliuk. Burliuk once declared that twenty-five years was the proper "life span for any truth." In this case, Livshits's recollections must be read in the perspective of 1933 (when they appeared in Russian), as well as of 1911-14 (when the events described took place).

Specialists know this memoir of the Hylaeans (a group of provincial avant-garde poets and painters including the Burliuks, Mayakovsky, Alexandra Ekster, Velemir Khlebnikov, and Livshits himself) from either the 1933 original or the 1971 French translation. The familiar stories are all here: Ekster returning from Paris with photographs of the latest artistic novelty; schoolboy friends on vacation at Burliuk's Crimean home deciding to create the Hylaea movement in 1911 because "a label was indispensable"; Burliuk's father's comment that he could "paint better with my left foot"; Burliuk's discovery of Mayakovsky; and the painted faces, scandalous performances, and toilet-paper manifestoes of the young Futurists. According to Livshits, Russian Futurism was a poetic search for Russian roots whose genius was Khlebnikov, not Mayakovsky, a movement which "died without heirs" during World War I. He states that Mayakovsky "joined the Revolution independent of Futurism, if not in spite of it," and maintains that Russian Futurism was unconnected with the Russian Revolution and did not survive it.

Livshits's interpretation of Russian Futurism must be understood in the context of 1933, when a 47-year old Jewish artist and critic recanted his youthful mistakes under party pressure. Livshits himself wrote that his memoir was intended to "expose