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The Great War and the European avant-garde

In 1915, the French poet Guillaume Apollinaire, who had enlisted in the cavalry in late 1914, wrote a poem called “Guerre” (“War”), which begins:

Rameau central de combat
Contact par l'écoute
On tire dans la direction “des bruits entendus”
Les jeunes de la classe 1915
Et ces fils de fer électrisés
Ne pleurez donc pas sur les horreurs de la guerre
Avant elle nous n'avions que la surface
De la terre et des mers
Après elle nous aurons les abîmes
Le sous-sol et l'espace aviatique . . .

Central combat sector
Contact by sound
We're firing toward “noises that were heard”
The young men of the class of 1915
And those electrified wires
Then don't weep for the horrors of war
Before the war we had only the surface
Of the earth and the seas
After it we'll have the depths
Subterranean and aerial space . . .¹

To Anglophone readers, whose touchstone for the poetry of the Great War is the lyric of Rupert Brooke, Wilfred Owen, or Siegfried Sassoon, the apocalyptic sentiments expressed in Apollinaire's “War” must seem all but incomprehensible. Did *les jeunes de la classe 1915* really believe that the war would provide entrance to a Brave New World in which the heights of the heavens and depths of the earth would be sounded?

The answer, surprisingly, is yes. Or perhaps not so surprisingly given that *avant-garde* was originally a military term: it referred to the front flank of

the army, to the advance guard that prepared the way for the rest of the troops. The avant-garde is by definition *embattled*, and for the European avant-garde of the early century war signified, at least at the outset of the conflict, both revolution and liberation. It was not until 1916, when the realities of trench warfare could no longer be ignored, that the avant-garde changed its mind about war. But by then, many of its finest artists – the Italian Futurist painter Umberto Boccioni (1880–1916) and architect Antonio Sant’Elia (1888–1916), both serving on the Italian Front, the French sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska (1891–1915), serving at Neuville St. Vaast, and the German Expressionist painter Franz Marc (1880–1916), who fought in the Battle of Verdun – had been killed. Others were severely wounded: in 1916 Apollinaire himself received a head wound from which he never fully recovered (he died of influenza in 1918), while his friend and fellow poet Blaise Cendrars lost his right arm in combat. In Russia, the man considered by Roman Jakobson as the greatest poet of the century, Velimir Khlebnikov, was a victim, first of the war, then of the October Revolution and the Civil Wars. He died of gangrene poisoning resulting from starvation in 1922 at the age of thirty-seven.

But in the first years of the war, Cendrars and Khlebnikov were caught up in a war fever that may have been most intense in Germany, which had become, by 1914, the most powerful country in the world. After centuries as a loosely integrated set of autonomous principalities, the new unified Germany created by Bismarck in 1870 had modernized itself with a vengeance. Industrialization moved with amazing speed: the production of steel, for example, which was only a quarter of Britain’s in the early 1870s, had caught up by 1914 and equaled that of Britain, France, and Russia combined. Mass education had produced an astonishingly high rate of literacy. And, as Modris Eksteins explains in his *Rites of Spring*, the watchword, especially in Berlin, became *Die Flucht nach Vorne*, the flight forward.² Novelty was prized for its own sake and inner freedom considered much more important than liberty or equality. The Nietzschean command, *Du sollst werden, der du bist* (“You shall become what you really are”), gave rise to the restless search for new forms, new modes of being.

The enemy of this *Flucht nach Vorne* was Britain, which represented, in German eyes, the Old Order, the land of bourgeois comfort, complacency, arrogance, and the status quo. Britain, writes Ecksteins, was “the symbol of an ethic of enterprise and progress based on parliament and law”; it stood for a way of life inimical to the “thrusting energy and instability Germany was seen to typify.” For the “new Germans,” Britain’s pretensions as to free trade, the open market, and a liberal ethic, masked its real purpose, which was to retain its international position as the great imperial power. War, in

this scheme of things, meant, as Magnus Hirschfeld, the leader of Berlin's homosexual movement put it, the fight for "honesty" and "sincerity" against the "smoking jacket culture of Britain and France." War, wrote Hermann Hesse to a friend in 1914, was a matter of art: "To be torn out of a dull capitalistic peace was good for many Germans and it seems to me that a genuine artist would find greater value in a nation of men who have faced death and who know the immediacy and freshness of camp life."³ And Franz Marc, whose *Red Horses* and *Tiger* of 1912–13 represented primitivist forms in intense expressionist colors, wrote in his prospectus for the *Blaue Reiter Almanac* (1912):

Today art is moving in a direction toward which our fathers never even have dreamed. One stands before the new works as in a dream and hears the horse-men of the Apocalypse in the air. An artistic tension is felt all over Europe . . . Everywhere in Europe new forms are sprouting like a beautiful anomalous seed, and all the places where new things are occurring must be pointed out.⁴

Then, when war broke out, Marc wrote from the Front, "Let us remain soldiers even after the war . . . for this is not a war against an eternal enemy . . . it is a European civil war, a war against the inner invisible enemy of the European spirit."⁵

Even Dada, or, more accurately, pre-Dada, was not immune to this view of war as apocalyptic purge. "For a while," recalls Richard Huelsenbeck in *Memoirs of a Dada Drummer*, "my dream had been to make literature with a gun in my pocket."⁶ In Berlin in 1914, he met Hugo Ball, who had been co-founder of the Munich magazine *Revolution*:

I had been seeing a good deal of Hugo Ball, but one day he vanished. Although a civilian, he had hopped on an army train, and the soldiers had cheerfully let him ride along. In Liège, he was taken out and arrested, but when they realized that he was an idealist and not a spy, they sent him back home. He returned to Berlin and worked for various magazines.⁷

Ball soon left Germany behind and settled with his wife, the *chanteuse* Emmy Hennings, in Zurich, where they founded the Cabaret Voltaire, which soon attracted such other avant-gardists in exile as the Romanian Tristan Tzara (born Sammy Rosenstock), and the Alsatian Hans (or Jean) Arp. Exile, as we shall see later, was often a precondition of avant-garde activity. More important: the prewar and war avant-garde was most prominent, not in the great urban centers like Berlin or Paris, but on the periphery, especially in those still backward but rapidly industrializing nations, Italy and Russia. "The closer to Paris, which was the centre," explains Pontus Hulten, "and the more established the bourgeois culture, the stronger

was the resistance to the new ideas . . . The more peripheral countries moved directly into a new, constructive phase, as there was less to be destroyed.”⁸

Take the famous *Futurist Manifesto* of 1909. Its author, the Italian F. T. Marinetti, shrewdly published his piece on the front page of the Paris newspaper *Le Figaro* (February 20), so as to put the art world, whose center was certainly Paris, on notice that a new Italian art and poetry had arrived. Never mind that at the time the manifesto was published, not a single Futurist painting or sculpture had yet been produced. The power and shock value of the Manifesto was to change all that: by 1910, the Futurist artists themselves had moved to center stage.

The outrageous content of the 1909 Manifesto, especially its advocacy of war, must be understood in this context. The Manifesto has often been reviled for its ninth proposition, “We will glorify war – the world’s only hygiene – militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom-bringers, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn for woman.”⁹ What do these pugnacious and offensive words really mean? The Manifesto begins with a narrative:

We had stayed up all night, my friends and I, under hanging mosque lamps with domes of filigreed brass, domes starred like our spirits, shining like them with the prisoned radiance of electric hearts. For hours we had trampled our atavistic ennui into rich oriental rugs, arguing up to the last confines of logic and blackening many reams of paper with our frenzied scribbling.

An immense pride was buoying us up, because we felt ourselves alone at that hour, alone, awake, and on our feet, like proud beacons or forward sentries against an army of hostile stars glaring down at us from their celestial encampments. Alone with stokers feeding the hellish fires of great ships, alone with black specters who grope in the red-hot bellies of locomotives . . .¹⁰

Like much of Marinetti’s writing, this passage is oddly contradictory. The drive to break with the past, to Make It New, and especially to celebrate the new working classes is ironically offset by the luxury and exoticism of the poet’s salon, with its hanging mosque lamps, its domes of filigreed brass, and its rich oriental rugs. Marinetti had been brought up in wealthy surroundings in Egypt – later in the Manifesto, he refers to the ditch in which his car overturns as resembling “the blessed black breast of my Sudanese nurse”¹¹ – and his own rebellion is still couched in the language of Decadence he had inherited. Making it new became, for him as for other avant-gardists, inseparable from Primitivism and Orientalism: in Futurist painting, stokers and railroad workers are depicted, not as ordinary men, but as part of an exotic and colorful landscape. The enemy, in this context, was the status quo: the timid and provincial nineteenth-century culture that had turned

Italy into no more than a vast museum, where the locals acted as *cicerones* for British and American tourists, an Italy feeding on its glorious Renaissance past with no confidence in its own ability to produce great art. Indeed, so hopeless was the backward Italy of the papacy and the monarchy, of the traditional family in which the wife/mother was wholly subservient to her husband, that it must be exploded from within. Hence Marinetti's manifestos boast titles like "Against Past-Loving Venice" and "Down with Tango and Parsifal." Tango was what high society types were dancing and hence execrable; *Parsifal* (Wagner) symbolized the power and would-be domination of Germany.

The Manifesto thus becomes a celebration of "the love of danger, the habit of energy and fearlessness" (Proposition no. 1). The formula for poetry is not "emotion recollected in tranquility" (Wordsworth) or negative capability (Keats) but "Courage, audacity, and revolt" (no. 2). No more is literature "a pensive immobility, ecstasy, and sleep"; rather, "We intend to exalt aggressive action, a feverish insomnia, the racer's stride, the mortal leap, the punch and the slap" (no. 3). And the New Beauty, which can only be born out of struggle (no. 7), is the "beauty of speed" (no. 4), so that "A roaring car that seems to ride on grapeshot is more beautiful than the *Victory of Samothrace*" (no. 4).

"VORTEX," as Ezra Pound was to put it just a few years later, "IS ENERGY." And again, "The image is not an idea. It is a radiant node or cluster . . . a VORTEX, from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing."¹² Only energy, Marinetti believed, could transform an Italy that had "for too long" served as "a dealer in secondhand clothes." "We mean to free her from the numberless museums that cover her like so many graveyards." In this scheme of things, war is equated with revolution; war is what will destroy the old world and allow the new to be born. Marinetti's eleventh and final proposition is worth citing in full because it set the stage for so much brilliant painting by Marinetti's Futurist followers:

II. We will sing of great crowds excited by work, by pleasure, and by riot; we will sing of the multicolored, polyphonic tides of revolution in the modern capitals; we will sing of the vibrant nightly fervor of arsenals and shipyards blazing with violent electric moons; greedy railway stations that devour smoke-plumed serpents; factories hung on clouds by the crooked lines of their smoke; bridges that stride the rivers like giant gymnasts, flashing in the sun with a glitter of knives; adventurous steamers that sniff the horizon; deep-chested locomotives whose wheels paw the tracks like the hooves of enormous steel horses bridled by tubing; and the sleek flight of planes whose propellers chatter in the wind like banners and seem to cheer like an enthusiastic crowd.¹³

If this hyperbolic homage to technology now strikes us as curiously naïve, we must remember that the romance with the machine and especially the airplane was ubiquitous for the artists coming of age during the *avant-guerre*. Even Franz Kafka, in the subtle and ironic depiction of aviation found in his youthful newspaper article “Die Aeroplane in Brescia” (1909), describes himself as mesmerized, at the Brescia Air Show, by the image of the aviator Louis Blériot (who was soon to be celebrated as the first aviator to cross the English Channel), so seemingly relaxed, even bored, before take-off, so disciplined once up in the air. “One can see,” writes Kafka, “his erect upper body above the wings; his legs extend deep down into the machine of which they have become a part. The setting sun . . . shines on the floating wings.” Hesitating in midair for a moment, the plane suddenly lifts. “What is happening?” Kafka asks. “Up there, 20 metres above the earth, a man is imprisoned in a wooden cage and defends himself against a freely chosen invisible danger. We, however, stand below, wholly caught up in a trance and watch this man.”¹⁴

Neither Marinetti nor Kafka nor Robert Delaunay, whose 1914 Synchronist painting *Homage to Blériot*, with its colorful biplanes circling a diminutive Eiffel Tower and its abstracted images of propellers, had any idea that the airplane, designed as it seemed to be for transportation and sport, would soon be used to drop bombs on one’s enemy. War, in these heady years of the *avant-guerre*, was conceived as a kind of noisy purge – bang bang bang! – as in Marinetti’s long onomatopoeic performance piece *Zang Tuum Tuumb*. Its consequences were simply not understood. The most recent European war, after all – the Franco-Prussian War – had taken place in 1870, before any of the Futurists were so much as born.

Accordingly, when the Futurist painters – Umberto Boccioni and Giacomo Balla, Carlo Carrà and Gino Severini, all of them from lower-middle class provincial backgrounds – took up Marinetti’s call, they interpreted his prescriptions as aesthetic rather than political. Boccioni’s *The City Rises* of 1910 (figure 7) can be seen as an almost textbook illustration of Marinetti’s “We will sing of great crowds . . .” In *Futurist Painting: The Technical Manifesto* (1910), Boccioni made the case for a simultaneism as the new space–time of modernity: “How often have we not seen upon the cheek of the person with whom we are talking the horse which passes at the end of the street. Our bodies penetrate the sofas upon which we sit, and the sofas penetrate our bodies.”¹⁵ And his great bronze sculpture of 1913, *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* (figure 8) fuses human, animal, and machine parts to create a monstrous helmeted, faceless and armless figure (with protruding swelled chest, narrow waist, and winged legs), striding the universe like a colossus.



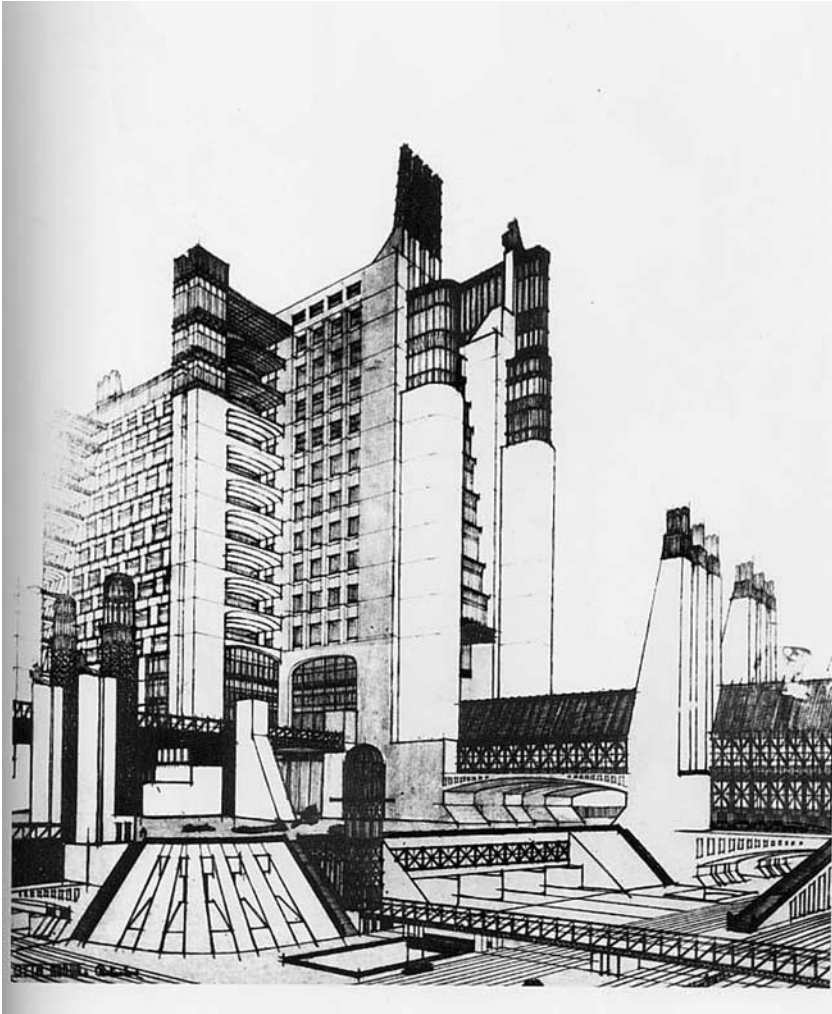
7 Umberto Boccioni, *The City Rises*, 1910–11

In a similar vein, the Futurist architect Sant’Elia complained, in his *Manifesto of Futurist Architecture*, of the “supreme imbecility of modern architecture, perpetuated by the verbal complicity of the academies, the internment camps of the intelligentsia, where the young are forced into the onanistic recopying of classical models instead of throwing their minds open in the search for new frontiers.”¹⁶ But despite this violent language, Sant’Elia was essentially a visionary: his ink and colored pencil drawings for *La Città nuova* typically have airplane hangars on the roof even as trains and motorways pass through the buildings’ underground chambers with a metal footway at street levels (see figure 9). Sant’Elia’s buildings were inspired, at least in part, by the American skyscraper, but the Italian architect wanted a “tower” that would stand, not in isolation, but as part of a larger community structure. Accordingly, the geometric grid with its standard rectangular windows is everywhere embedded in the variegated rounded, elliptical, and conical masses that make the resulting structure look curiously weightless, permeable, and interpenetrating. Right angles intersect oblique surfaces in a structure notable for its decenteredness: the expected front entrance, for example, is replaced by a number of openings at unexpected sites. The tubular external elevator shafts (since imitated in dozens of skyscraper hotels) arise from a mysterious place below ground, whose location is not visible to the eye of the viewer. Indeed, the variety of levels and bridges, of ramps and tunnels, of metal filigree and solid concrete, and the differentiation of tower



8 Umberto Boccioni, *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, 1913

and balcony shapes, makes the whole structure seem to be floating. Such design, suggests Sanford Kwinter, sets the stage for the “truly polymorphous, procedural – action – or information-based-architectures that began to emerge in the late ’50s and ’60s.” Sant’Elia’s New City “is a system . . . with no inside or outside, no center and no periphery, merely one virtual circulating substance – force – and its variety of actualized modes – linear, rotating, ascending, combining, transecting.”¹⁷



9 Antonio Sant'Elia, *La Città nuova*

How to reconcile this visionary utopianism with the cult of war? In 1915, when Boccioni and Sant'Elia joined the Battalion of Cyclist Volunteers, they shared the patriotic fervor of their fellow-interventionists: war, for the moment, seemed like the next adventure in making oneself over. Disillusion rapidly set in. Shortly before he was killed in a fall from his horse in August 1916, Boccioni wrote in his diary:

I shall leave this existence with a contempt for all that is not art. There is nothing more terrible than art. Everything I see now is on the levels of games

compared to a good brushstroke, a harmonious verse or a sound musical chord. By comparison everything else is a matter of mechanics, habit, patience of memory. Only art exists.”¹⁸

As such poignant remarks reveal, the Futurists could never quite reconcile their aesthetics to their actual political situation. Energy, violent transformation, vision, technoculture, rejection of the past: these qualities animated the striking variety of Futurist experiments, from the performance art of the *serrate futuriste* (Futurist evenings), to cinema, radio, and the decorative arts. What the Italian movement lacked, however, was a built-in critique that would have made poets, artists, and architects understand the downside of novelty and ceaseless change. Marinetti’s *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature* (1912) is a case in point. The manifesto makes the case for *parole in libertà*, words set free from the “straightjacket” of normal syntax. Poetry, Marinetti argued, could get rid of most parts of speech, especially the decorative adjective along with the adverb, that “old belt buckle that holds two words together.” Punctuation was also to be eliminated so that poetry might be “an uninterrupted sequence of new images” – the “imagination without strings.” Ezra Pound’s Imagism comes directly out of this doctrine. And further: Marinetti advocated the destruction of “the *I* in literature; that is, all psychology”¹⁹ – an idea that appealed enormously to D. H. Lawrence.²⁰ “To substitute for human psychology, now exhausted, the lyric obsession with matter”: this seemed, on the face of it, a useful antidote to bourgeois individualism.²¹ And this new materialist poetics would use, not free verse, but free words, scattered across the page.

Marinetti’s own *parole in libertà* are, as Johanna Drucker points out in her book *The Visible Word*, among the finest early exemplars of visual poetics.²² Certainly, these “poems” are more interesting than most of the normative Italian lyrics of the day, including Marinetti’s own. But the endless cataloguing of “analogous” nouns, as in “noise + weight of the sun + orange odor of the sky + 20000 right angles,” and onomatopoeic typographic units, capturing the sound and look of battle, as in *Karazouc-zouc-zouc/Karazouc-zouc-zouc/nadI-nadI AAAAAAAA*, is also tiresome in its simplification and reduction of experience. Marinetti’s technical inventiveness far outstripped his powers of analysis and left him vulnerable to charges of mere bombast. For a more profound relation of avant-garde to the Great War, we must turn to the Russian variant of Futurism.

The Word as Such

In his memoir *My Futurist Years*, Roman Jakobson, himself once a Futurist poet under the pseudonym Aljagrov, describes the wild poetry evenings in

Moscow cafés in 1914, when he himself was still a teenage Gymnasium student and Vladimir Mayakovsky a mere twenty-one. When Marinetti, “the caffeine of Europe,” as he was called, arrived in town, the poets were ready to challenge his ideas, “if not to ‘throw rotten eggs,’ as [Mikhail] Larionov proposed, then in any event to greet him with open hostility.”²³ Still, Marinetti exerted his personal charm on the group:

The atmosphere in the Alpine Rose was very friendly. When we were getting ready to leave there was a parting toast, and someone asked: “Will you come to visit us again soon?” Marinetti answered: “No, there will be a great war,” and said that “we will be together with you against the Germans.” I recall how Goncharova, quite strikingly, raised her hand and said: “To our meeting in Berlin!”²⁴

Natalya Goncharova and her companion Mikhail Larionov were among the most radical and outspoken of the Russian Futurist artists; like Marinetti, they celebrated “the whole brilliant style of modern times – our trousers, jackets, shoes, trolleys, cars, airplanes, railways, grandiose steamships,” and declared that “ours is a great epoch, one that has known no equal in the entire history of the world.”²⁵ Performance artists, they painted their faces and ran through the Moscow streets in costume. At the same time – and here is where the paradox of the avant-garde comes in – Goncharova insisted on promoting an exclusively Russian art – especially icons and *lubki*, the peasant woodblocks which influenced such of her artist’s books as *A Game in Hell*. “I shake the dust from my feet and leave the West,” she declared in 1913, “considering its vulgarizing significance trivial and insignificant . . . my path is toward the source of all arts, the East.” And in the Rayonist Manifesto of that year, she and Larionov declared, “Long live nationality!”, setting the stage for Goncharova’s pugnacious toast “to our meeting in Berlin.”²⁶

The sometimes bellicose nationalism of the Russian avant-garde no doubt reflected its provincial origins: most of the leading artists and poets who converged in Moscow and Petersburg came from the distant provinces: Mayakovsky from the Caucasus, Khlebnikov from the Caspian Sea, Kruchonykh from the southern Ukraine, and Malevich from a village near Kiev where his father worked in a sugar factory. In his autobiography, Malevich gives a moving account of his first contact, at age twelve, with professional artists – three painters sent down from Petersburg to paint icons in the village church – and how their example revolutionized his thinking.²⁷

Rapidly urbanized and often living in poverty, the avant-garde embraced the cause of revolution. In their 1912 *A Slap in the Face of Public Taste* (1912), printed demotically on gray and brown wrapping paper with a sackcloth

cover (the color, one reviewer wrote maliciously, is that of “a fainted louse”), the poets produced a manifesto that resembles Marinetti’s in calling for the “overthrow” of the Academy and urging its reader to “Throw Pushkin, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, *et al.*, overboard from the Ship of Modernity.”²⁸ The manifesto further called for a new language and descried all attempts at showing “good taste.” A *Slap* was followed in 1913 by Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh’s pamphlet *Slovo kak takovoe* (“The Word as Such”), which made the case for *zaum* or transrational poetry and declared that “New verbal form creates a new content, and not vice-versa.”²⁹ The terms *sdvig* (shift, dislocation) and *faktura* (texture), so important to Russian Formalist theory a few years later, were put forward here, the general view being that “new poetry” requires an entirely new language. Even the letter, as the manifesto *The Letter as Such* put it, has magic properties.

The linguistic revolution not only preached but practiced by the Russian avant-garde was much more far-reaching than that of its Italian counterpart. Indeed, it remains central to poetics today: witness the so-called Language movement that came into being in the US in the mid-1970s – a movement that has strenuously made the case for the primacy of the signifier rather than its referent. At the same time, on the threshold of the 1914 war, Marinettian jingoism was echoed by poets like Mayakovsky. The latter had joined the Social Democratic party as early as 1908 when he was fourteen, and he was soon arrested and jailed for printing and distributing illegal literature. From then on, his spirit was resolutely agonistic – *contra*. The outbreak of war seemed to spell the overthrow of the hated autocratic regime. As his American biographer Edward J. Brown tells us:

[Mayakovsky] was caught up in the mighty wave of patriotic and anti-German fever that infected all levels of Russian society in that year . . . Patriotic jingles to accompany propaganda posters occupied the poet from August to October 1914, and he even produced a number of drawings, an enterprise in which he was joined by many artists of the Russian avant garde . . . The posters, called *lubki*, were primitive in content, and aimed at a wide and tasteless audience. The verses were on the same level: Austrians and Germans figure as repellent cartoon characters impaled on the bayonets or pitchforks of brave Russian soldiers, defending the Slavic lands.³⁰

Again, in “Civilian Shrapnel,” a series of articles for the liberal magazine *Virgin Soil*, Mayakovsky declares that war is “magnificent” because it threatens to dislodge the philistines who have dominated poetry and replace them with a poetic muse who “wants to ride the gun-carriage wearing a hat of fiery orange feathers.”³¹

The war, so it seemed at first, was merely the transition to the longed-for 1917 Revolution. “Cubism and Futurism,” Malevich declared in 1919, “were revolutionary movements in art, anticipating the revolution in economic and political life of 1917.”³² But of course it didn’t work out that way. The Russian Futurists assumed naïvely that being avant-garde was preparation enough for the construction of the new proletarian state. But, as Leon Trotsky wrote in *Literature and Revolution* (1922):

To say that Futurism has freed art of its thousand-year-old bonds of Bourgeoisdom is to estimate thousands of years very cheaply. The call of The Futurists to break with the past, to do away with Pushkin, to liquidate tradition, etc., has a meaning insofar as it is addressed . . . to the closed-in circle of the Intelligentsia. In other words, it has meaning only insofar as the Futurists are busy cutting the cord which binds them to the priests of bourgeois literary tradition. But the meaninglessness of this call becomes evident as soon as it is addressed to the proletariat. The working class does not have to, and cannot know the old literature, it still has to commune with it, it still has to master Pushkin, to absorb him, and so overcome him.³³

The argument that aesthetic change by no means guarantees meaningful political change has been made throughout the twentieth century. It is an argument that, like its opposite, is always simplified. In the case of the Russian avant-garde, the most interesting case (and one that goes against the common wisdom of Mayakovsky or even Malevich) is that of Khlebnikov.

An ardent Germanophobe, before the war, Khlebnikov was given to declaring that he eagerly awaited the moment when “the Russian steeds” would “trample the streets of Berlin.” But when he was drafted on 8 April 1916, he seems to have had a wholesale conversion. As an enlisted man in the 2nd company of the 93rd Reserve Infantry Regiment, Khlebnikov felt totally lost. He wrote his friend Nikolai Kulbin that “he could not remain a soldier because he had already sworn an oath to poetry.”³⁴ On 8 April 1916, he wrote the following poem, this one down-to-earth and realistic unlike his earlier avant-garde experiments:

Me too? You mean I’ll have to grab a gun
(a dumb thing, heavier
than handwriting)
and go marching down some highway,
beating out 365 × 317 regular heartbeats a day?
Knock my head to fragments and forget
the government of twenty-two-year olds,
that attack the madness of elder statesmen?

Another gnomic little poem reads:

The King is out of luck:
The King is under lock
And key
Infantry Regiment Ninety-three
Will be the death of the child in me.

And a lyric called “Palm Sunday” contains the lines:

From the pen of war comes one full stop after another,
graveyards grow suburbs like capital cities –
different people, different dispositions.
The whole wide world has bandaged its feet
in ragged strips of young men’s bodies . . .³⁵

The outbreak of the Revolution freed Khlebnikov, at least for the moment: he left his regiment, wandered from place to place, sometimes falling into the hands of the Reds, sometimes the Whites. By 1920, he was living near Baku on the Caspian sea, working feverishly on his mathematical theory of history, to be published as *The Tables of Destiny*. In 1921, he was briefly back in Moscow, preparing his writings for publication; then he left again, hoping to return to his family home in Astrakhan, but died before he could get there.

In a statement about his work (1919), Khlebnikov declared, “I swore to discover the Laws of Time and carved that promise on a birch tree (in the village of Burmakino, Yaroslavl) when I heard about the battle of Tsushima.”³⁶ The reference is to the Russo–Japanese War of 1904–5, but it might have been about World War I and the Civil Wars as well. To explain to himself the horrors of death in battle, Khlebnikov had to invent a series of complex mathematical formulae, based on the algorithms of 2 and 3. *The Tables of Destiny* seems almost perverse in its elaborate numerology, but the fantastical and gnomic book provides us with what Yeats called, with reference to *A Vision*, “metaphors for poetry.” The prophetic books present, for example, new theories of space/time in exceptionally rich metaphoric language, in keeping with Khlebnikov’s earlier *Zaum* poetry.³⁷

In February 1921, Khlebnikov, then living on the Russian/Persian border, wrote sadly to Mayakovsky, “The writer’s inkwell is dry, and the fly was *not* amused when it dove in for a swim.” And he adds, “I have studied much and become a master of numbers. I could create a springtime of numbers, if only the presses were working. But instead of a heart I seem to have something resembling a chunk of wood or a kippered herring.”³⁸ But in these years he wrote a series called “Hunger,” which gives one of the most vivid pictures

we have of the famine of the Civil War years. Here is a lyric from the “In the Village” section:

In the hut next door with the board roof
a grim-faced father
broke up the bread into breadcrumbs
with hardened fingers.
only to look at.
It wouldn't fill a sparrow, the one
that chirped just now.
You eat with your eyes nowadays.
“Times aren't right,” the father muttered.
The black bread looked like topsoil
With bits of ground-up pine cone.
At least their eyes can eat.
Mother stood by the stove,
white with pain.
Black coals of hunger
burn in the pits of her eyes.
The thin slice of a white mouth.³⁹

The matter-of-factness of this little poem is astonishing. The contrast of black and white – the “black coals of hunger” versus the “thin slice of a white mouth” – the notion of eating only with one's *eyes*, the transferred epithet in the last line, in which slice refers not to the bread but to the mother's mouth, and the suggestion that soon the family may well be eating topsoil filled with ground-up pine cones – these stark images are presented without comment; there is no moralizing about war and its sufferings, no generalization of any sort. Although Paul Schmidt's colloquial translation cannot capture the sound structure of this poem, its pain comes through.

The sequence continues in this vein:

Roast mouse.
Their son fixed it, went and
Caught them in the field.
They lie stretched out on the table,
Their long dark tails.
Today it's a decent dinner,
A real good meal!
Just a while back the housewife would shudder
and holler, smash the pitcher to smithereens
if she found a mouse drowned in the cream.
But now, how silent and peaceful.

Dead mice for dinner
 stretched out on the table,
 dangling dark tails . . .⁴⁰

Again, the lyric is depersonalized, documentary, imagistic, almost casual. Ironically, in ways Marinetti did not anticipate, war did turn out to be “the hygiene of the people,” in that it eliminated so many of them from the earth. The death motif dominates Khlebnikov’s later work as it does Mayakovsky’s in the years preceding his suicide.

The Great Wheel and the Tower

The Russian situation is thus particularly dark but it was also the situation that produced what were perhaps the greatest avant-garde works. Now let us go back to the more equivocal situation in the France of the early war years, when Apollinaire so romantically celebrated “les jeunes de la classe 1915.”

Here the key figure is the poet, novelist, travel-writer, journalist Blaise Cendrars, whose *La Prose du Transsibérien et de la petite Jeanne de France* (1913) anticipates the Great War in uncanny ways. John Dos Passos, who translated and illustrated this and other Cendrars poems in a beautiful edition of 1931, has this to say in his Foreword:

The poetry of Blaise Cendrars was part of the creative tidal wave that spread over the world from the Paris of before the last European war. Under various tags, futurism, vorticism, modernism, most of the best work in the arts of our time has been the direct product of this explosion, that had an influence in its sphere comparable with that of the October revolution in social organization and politics and the Einstein formula in physics.

Dos Passos cites Joyce and Stein, the early Eliot and Wyndham Lewis, Stravinsky and the Diaghilev ballet, and concludes sadly:

Meanwhile, in America at least, poetry (or verse, or little patches of prose cut into inevitable lengths on the page, or whatever you want to call it) has, after Masters, Sandburg and the Imagists, subsided again into parlor entertainment for highschool English Classes.

The stuffed shirts have come out of their libraries everywhere and rule literary taste . . . A young man just starting to read verse in the year 1930 would have a hard time finding out that this method of putting words together had only recently passed through a period of virility, intense experimentation and meaning in everyday life.⁴¹

In Cendrars's case, the "intense experimentation" involved verbal–visual collaboration. As published by the radical press *Les Hommes nouveaux*, *La Prose du Transsibérien* bore the subtitle, "poems, simultaneous colors, in an edition attaining the height of the Eiffel Tower." The "first simultaneous book," as it was advertised, was made up of a single sheet of paper, divided down the center, which unfolded like an accordion, through twenty-two panels to a length of almost seven feet. The height of the Eiffel Tower was to be attained by lining up the 150 copies of the text vertically. The book was the collaboration of Cendrars and the painter Sonia Delaunay (see figure 10). The left half contains Delaunay's painted semi-abstract forms in bright primary colors, culminating at the bottom in a small Eiffel Tower, like an innocent red phallus, penetrating an orange Great Wheel with a green center. On the right, the text, prefaced by a Michelin railway map of the Trans-Siberian journey from Moscow to the Sea of Japan, similarly moves down the page.⁴²

But Delaunay's visual images by no means "illustrate" Cendrars's poem. On the contrary, the visual and verbal seem to be intentionally at odds. There is nothing in Sonia Delaunay's warm, colorful biomorphic forms that matches the violence and anxiety of Cendrars's poem. But the mood of "La Prose" was itself deeply ambivalent as even Cendrars's letters testify. "This war," Cendrars wrote to a friend in September 1914 on his way to the Front (as a Swiss national, whose real name was Freddy Sauser, he had enlisted in the French Foreign Legion), "is a painful delivery, needed to give birth to liberty. It fits me like a glove. Reaction or Revolution – man must become more human. I will return. There can be no doubt." And a little later, "The war has saved my life. This sounds like a paradox, but a hundred times I have told myself that if I had continued to live with those people [the bohemian artists of Montparnasse], I would have croaked."⁴³

Like the Futurists, Cendrars was yearning for some sort of apocalypse. But the long poem he had written a year earlier – he called it "La Prose" because "Poem seems too pretentious, too closed. Prose is more open, popular"⁴⁴ – is full of violent imagery that moves from the exuberance of the opening to the horror and bloodshed of its later sections. In the Dos Passos translation, *The Prose of the Transsiberian* begins:

I was a youngster in those days,
 Hardly sixteen and already I couldn't remember my childhood.
 I was sixteen thousand leagues away from the place I was born,
 I was in Moscow, the city of a thousand and three belfries and
 seven railroadstations,
 And the seven railroadstations and the thousand and three
 belfries weren't enough for me



10 Blaise Cendrars and Sonia Delaunay, *La Prose du Transsibérien et de la petite Jeanne de France*, 1913

The Great War and the European avant-garde

For youth was so burning and so mad
That my heart smoldered like the temple of Ephesus or
 flared like the Red Square in Moscow
At sundown.
And my eyes were headlights on the old roads.
I was already such a poor poet
That I never knew how to get to the end of things . . .⁴⁵

VORTEX IS ENERGY! In the opening strophes of Cendrars's poem, violence is a form of sexual exuberance and adolescent excitement, but even in the early Moscow scenes, this exuberance is tinged with pain. The sun, for example, is seen as a "festering wound," a "crumbling ember." And in the fourth strophe, we read:

There wasn't enough in the towers and the terminals that
 filled my eyes with stars
Guns thundered war in Siberia
Hunger cold plague cholera
Millions of corpses rolled over and over in the silty stream
 of the Amur.⁴⁶

The reference here, as in Khlebnikov, is to the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05, specifically to the Battle of Port Arthur in Manchuria, but Cendrars's account of being "swallowed into the war like into a tunnel" eerily anticipates the Great War and his own role in it. For a time, as the poet journeys eastward, he is thrilled with his adventure and distracts his companion "little Jeanne," whose homesick refrain, "Say, Blaise, are we very far from Montmartre?", punctuates the poem with fantastic science-fiction stories about the Fiji islands, where "Couples faint with love in the long grass," and the "high plateaus" of Mexico where "the tulip trees grow tall" and "the tousled lianas are the sun's hair." Speed and flight, so ubiquitous in the literature of the *avant-guerre*, are central to these surreal fantasies:

If you want we'll take an airplane and fly over the country
of a thousand lakes,
Where the nights are unreasonably long;
The prehistoric ancestor'll be scared of my motor
I'll make a landing
And build a hangar for my airplane out of fossil bones of
mammoths.⁴⁷

But the clowning can't be sustained. Jeanne falls asleep (and later unaccountably disappears from the scene), and as the train draws nearer Mongolia, the poet's vision, rather like Rimbaud's in *Le Bateau ivre*, darkens:

I've seen
 I've seen the silent trains the black trains coming back from
 the Far East that passed like haunts
 And my eye like the red light on the rear car still speeds
 behind those trains.
 At Talga 100,000 wounded dying for lack of care;
 I went through all the hospitals of Krasnoyarsk
 And at Khilok we passed a long hospital train full of soldiers
 that had gone mad;
 I saw the dressing stations the widening gashes of wounds,
 bleeding at full throb
 And amputated limbs dance or fly off into the shrieking wind.
 Conflagration flared in every face in every heart . . .⁴⁸

And after further hallucinatory visions, the poet gets off the train at the “last station”: “When I got off at Harbin they'd just set fire to the offices of the Red Cross.”⁴⁹

For the reader who knows that Cendrars was to lose his right forearm in 1916, the reference to “amputated limbs” dancing or flying off “into the shrieking wind” is quite surreal. In 1913, after all, Europe was at peace and no one could have known what would happen within the year. Yet here in Cendrars's hallucinatory war dispatch, we have “100,000 wounded dying for lack of care,” soldiers “gone mad,” and the “widening gashes of wounds, bleeding at full throb” – exactly as those wounds would bleed in the war to come. Indeed, Cendrars's imagery prefigures the poet's own exclamation in *Au coeur du monde* (1917), written not long after his arm had been amputated, *Ma main coupée brille au ciel dans la constellation d'Orion* (“My cut-off hand shines in the sky in the constellation of Orion”).⁵⁰ And further: *main coupée* reminds us of the famous last line of Apollinaire's “Zone” (1913), in which the rising sun is paradoxically seen as a broken neck: “Soleil cou coupé.”

Yet it is important to note that neither Cendrars nor Apollinaire ever turned to pacifist poetry. Violence, energy, *Die Flucht nach Vorne* – these were judged to be the very spark of life. As the poet of *Au coeur du monde* puts it, “I am the man who no longer has a past.”⁵¹ And so, in the last section of *The Prose of the Transsiberian*, the “last station,” with its image of burning offices of the Red Cross, suddenly vanishes and, as in film montage, Paris reappears – a Paris the poet seems never to have left. Paris is now invoked as that “great warm hearth with the crisscrossed brands of your streets and the old houses leaning over them and warming themselves.” And if Paris is the center of the universe, its own center is the *gare centrale*, that “Central terminal, transfer station of the will, crossroad of unrest.”⁵² In the spirit of

Futurism, Cendrars calls the *gare centrale* “the finest church in the world.” But the past is not so easily occluded: notice the lassitude, the *tristesse* of the poem’s conclusion, in which an ordinary Blaise, no longer the charming adolescent who doesn’t know where to stop or the imaginative adventurer conjuring up scenes of tropical island magic, goes to the Lapin Agile to have a few drinks. And *The Prose* concludes with the invocation:

Paris
Ville de la Tour unique du grand Gibet et de la Roue.

Paris
City of the only Tower and the great Scaffold and the Wheel.⁵³

No longer is the Eiffel Tower the charming and colorful icon of Apollinaire and the Delaunays. For Paris is also the city of the great Scaffold or Guillotine, and although the Wheel is literally the great ferris wheel erected next to the Eiffel Tower for the Paris Exposition of 1900, it is also the wheel of life and, given its juxtaposition to the scaffold, of death.

In this sense, Cendrars’s poem captures, as well as any poem or fiction I can think of, the promise of the *avant-guerre* and its impending destruction by the Great War. Interestingly, even the absurdly grandiose daydreams with which Blaise entertains Jeanne contain negative images. In the Fiji Islands, where “Couples faint with love in the long grass,” “syphilis stalks where it’s warm under the banana trees.”⁵⁴ So much for tropical paradise. But for Cendrars, such contradictions are never the occasion for moralizing or meditation; rather, he wants to convey, as fully as possible, what the actual mechanized landscape – a landscape into which war will inevitably erupt – is like.

For the contemporary reader, accustomed to equating “war poetry” with “anti-war poetry,” the response of the avant-garde to World War I must seem problematic, if not reprehensible. How can we read a poet who declares that “War is the hygiene of the people”? And how could such writers as Cendrars and Khlebnikov not have undertaken a strenuous critique of the ideology of war or have worked to prevent future wars? There are, I think, two answers. First, as I have argued throughout this chapter, the word “war” carried very different meanings in 1914 from those it carries today. But second – and more important – it is only when poetry plays a minor role in society, when, as is the case today, it tends to be equated with elevated thought and vague moral uplift and is obviously not designed to *change* anything, that the public expects the poet to be a “nice” person, a spokesman for justice, freedom, and “right thinking.” But history teaches us that the ethical and

the aesthetic have rarely been equivalent, as Plato, who banished the poets from the republic, was the first to know.

A case in point is the artist who was perhaps the greatest avant-gardist of the war era – Marcel Duchamp. When war was declared in August 1914, Duchamp was twenty-five years old. Both his brothers were called up within the first few weeks, but Duchamp, having completed his one year of military service, was temporarily exempt. He was working on the *Nine Malic Molds* and did not wish to be distracted. By October, many of his fellow-artists – Picabia, Léger, Braque, Gleizes, Metzinger – had been called up and his sister had joined the nursing corps. As Calvin Tomkins tells it:

As the fighting intensified and the German troops overran Belgium, deferments were canceled. Duchamp was summoned before a draft board in January 1915. In the course of his physical exam however, it was discovered that he had a slight rheumatic heart murmur – nothing serious, but enough to keep him out of the army. “I have been condemned to remain a civilian for the entire duration of the war,” he wrote to [his patron, Walter] Pach who was back in New York by this time. “They found me too *sick* to be a soldier. I am not too sad about this decision: you know it well.”⁵⁵

Despite the taunts of friends and relatives, Duchamp had only one plan: to leave Paris and go to New York. He arrived in June 1915, and the war years proved to be his most productive: it was in this period that he made his most famous readymades and completed most of the work on the *Large Glass*.

When the US entered the war in April 1917, Duchamp was soon looking for a way to escape yet again. This time he chose Buenos Aires, a city as far removed from the action as possible, a city where there were no recruiting posters or wartime restrictions and he knew no one. Having made elaborate arrangements for the storage of his art works in the interim, Duchamp sailed for Buenos Aires in September 1918. German submarines were said to be a threat, but the voyage turned out to be quite calm. “Delightful voyage,” Duchamp wrote to his young friends Florine and Ettie Stettheimer, “The boat is slow and gentle.”⁵⁶ He had been in Buenos Aires three weeks when he received the news that his brother Raymond Duchamp-Villon, who had been wounded at the Front near Champagne, had died of typhoid fever. It was a great personal tragedy – the brothers were very close – but it did nothing to change Duchamp’s aloofness from the war. On the contrary, after the Armistice was signed in November, he stayed on in Argentina, returning to France only in June 1919, and then only for four months since, by this time, he recognized that his artistic life was in America. And art was what this ostensible anti-artist lived for.

In his own day, Duchamp was judged harshly by French artists (and some American ones) for his apolitical stance, his indifference to the fate of his country. But today we tend to judge such matters differently: Duchamp, we posit, did what he felt had to do, and the great art works are there to support his decision. Who, in any case, was right? Duchamp or his alter ego Ludwig Wittgenstein, who left Cambridge to enlist in the Austrian army as soon as war was declared, believing that the war (of which he wholly disapproved) was a testing ground, a trial that would “turn [him] into a different person.”⁵⁷ The war, he told a nephew many years later, “saved my life; I don’t know what I’d have done without it.”⁵⁸ Here Wittgenstein is referring to the personal crisis, triggered by the war, that made him rethink the propositions and mode of the *Tractatus*.

Yet just a few months into the war, the same Wittgenstein wrote in his secret journal:

I feel . . . more than ever the tragedy of our – the German race’s – situation! For that we cannot defeat England seems to me as good as certain. The English – the best race in the world – *cannot* lose! We, however, can lose and will lose, if not this year then the next. The thought that our race will be defeated depresses me terribly because I am German through and through!⁵⁹

On the face of it, this remark is oddly irrational. Neither England nor Germany represented a “race,” and even if a given nation were “the best race in the world,” victory in war was hardly guaranteed. Still, Wittgenstein’s remark is as poignant as it is endearing, largely because he takes the whole matter so seriously, assuming that it is up to *him* – to the *individual* – to *understand* what is happening. It is this complexity and unexpectedness of response that makes the writing and art-making of World War I so fascinating. Nothing is taken for granted: the Great War, viewed positively or negatively, is simply *there* as a terrifying fact of life – the decisive event of modernism.

NOTES

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3. *Ibid.*, xv, 92, 94.
4. Rose-Carol Washton Long, ed., *German Expressionism, Documents from the End of the Wilhelmine Empire to the Rise of National Socialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 47.
5. Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, 94.

6. Richard Huelsenbeck, *Memoirs of a Dada Drummer*, ed. Hans. J. Kleinschmidt, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Viking, 1974), xiii.
7. *Ibid.*, 2.
8. Pontus Hulten, ed., *Futurism & Futurisms* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1986), 17.
9. F. T. Marinetti, *Selected Writings*, ed. and trans. R. W. Flint (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972), 42.
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11. *Ibid.*, 40.
12. Ezra Pound, *Gaudier-Brzeska* (1916; New York: New Directions, 1970), 22, 92.
13. Marinetti, *Selected Writings*, 42.
14. Franz Kafka, "Die Aeroplane in Brescia," *Bohemia* 82 (no. 269), 29 September 1909, 1–3, 3. My translation. The German text is available at [www/unimaburg.de/~naeser/brescia/htm](http://www.unimaburg.de/~naeser/brescia/htm).
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16. *Ibid.*, 169.
17. Sanford Kwinter, *Architectures of Time: Toward a Theory of the Event in Modernist Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), 65.
18. Caroline Tisdall and Angelo Bozzolla, *Futurism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 181.
19. Marinetti, *Selected Writings*, 84, 87.
20. See D. H. Lawrence, letter to Arthur MacLeod, 2 June 1914, and letter to Edward Garnett, 5 June 1914, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, vol. II, 1913–16, ed. George J. Zytaruk and James T. Boulton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 180–87.
21. Marinetti, *Selected Writings*, 87.
22. Johanna Drucker, *The Visible Word: Experimental Typography and Modern Art, 1909–1923* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 105–40.
23. Roman Jakobson, *My Futurist Years*, ed. Bengt Nagfeldt, trans. Stephen Rudy (New York: Marsilio, 1992), 20.
24. *Ibid.*, 22.
25. See John Bowlt, ed., *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism 1902–1934* (New York: Viking, 1976), 89.
26. *Ibid.*, 55, 90.
27. Kasimir Malevich, "Chapters from an Artist's Autobiography," trans. Alan Upchurch, *October*, 34 (1985): 25–44; see 31–32.
28. Vladimir Markov, *Russian Futurism: A History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 46.
29. *Ibid.*, 131.
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31. See *ibid.*, 111.
32. Kasimir Malevich, *Essays on Art, 1915–1933*, 2 vols., ed. Troels Andersen, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin, 2nd edn. (London: Rapp and Whiting, 1968), I, 94.
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35. Velimir Khlebnikov, *Collected Writings*, vol. III: *Selected Poems*, trans. Paul Schmidt (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 51, 51–52, 52–53.
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38. Khlebnikov, *Collected Writings*, I, 128.
39. Khlebnikov, *Collected Writings*, III, 106.
40. *Ibid.*
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44. Cendrars, *Inédits secrets*, 371.
45. Dos Passos, trans. Cendrars, *Panama*, 37–38.
46. *Ibid.*, 40.
47. *Ibid.*, 64, 66.
48. *Ibid.*, 75–76.
49. *Ibid.*, 80.
50. Blaise Cendrars, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. I: *Poésies complètes* (Paris: Denoël, 1946), 196.
51. *Ibid.*, 197.
52. Dos Passos, trans. Cendrars, *Panama*, 80, 82.
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54. *Ibid.*, 64.
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59. Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein*, 113–14.