

Mirskontsa (Worldbackwards): Collaborative Book Art and Transrational Sounds

Nancy Perloff

The artist's book *Mirskontsa* (Worldbackwards) occupies a unique place in the history of the Russian avant-garde. Published in Moscow in November 1912, *Mirskontsa* was the first lithographic collection of the Russian futurists and the outcome of an intricate collaboration, in which a group of poets and painters worked closely together to create a new form of book art. The participation of four painters sets *Mirskontsa* apart from most other hand-lithographed futurist books.¹ The unusual cover design, created by one of the principal collaborating artists, Natalia Goncharova, consists of two paper collages—a colored flower shape and a rectangular sheet bearing the book's title and the poets' names (fig. 1). This use of collage, possibly the first on a book cover, recurs on the cover of a later futurist book, *Zaumnaia gniga* (Transrational boog; 1915), but is otherwise without parallel in futurist book art.

Mirskontsa was also the first of the futurist books to cultivate an aesthetic of calculated spontaneity, in which the linear norm is replaced with reversibility and non-referentiality. This curious impulse to resist permanence and the authoritative has the effect of giving precedence to process over product, movement over stasis, difference over similarity, fabrication over production. Poets and artists intentionally left behind ink stains and jagged page edges to highlight the seemingly accidental character of their futurist books. In *Mirskontsa*, this aesthetic manifests itself through the subtle modification from copy to copy of the color, shape, and material of the flower collage on the cover.² In addition, contents often vary so that, for example, new poetry and imagery replace or supplement existing material, paper size and texture differ, and the ink color and typographic design of individual stamped pages changes dramatically. While several of the futurist books that followed *Mirskontsa* display similar shifts in content and design, these changes do not add up to the same overarching aesthetic statement.

A most intriguing innovation of *Mirskontsa* is the pivotal role of sound in relation to word and image. The transrational language of *zaum* (*za* [beyond]; *um* [the mind]), or "beyonsense," expresses itself in *Mirskontsa* through its startling phonic dimension. A live reading of the poetry yields chains of neologisms, disconnected words, and pure vowel and consonant sounds that do not convey meaning in a traditional sense. Yet the phonic valence of these "words," when heard in conjunction with the visual design and the reading of word and image, carries a rich and subtle array of tones, moods, and associations.



Fig. 1. Natalia Goncharova (Russian, 1881–1962). Cover design for *Mirskontsa* (Worldbackwards; St. Petersburg, 1912), collage, 19.2 × 15.2 cm (7⁹/₁₆ × 6 in.). Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute (88-B27486).

For the Russian futurists, it was not only the “word as such” (self-sufficient, non-referential) but also, to quote the Russian theorist Roman Jakobson, the “sound as such.”³ Its presence in futurist book art transformed an essentially visual and verbal medium into an auditory one. Futurist books were meant to be heard, not merely read. Inside them we find the first examples of the form known today as sound poetry.⁴

Given the experimental nature of *Mirskontsa* and the fame of at least three of its collaborators—Goncharova, poet Velimir Khlebnikov, and painter Mikhail Larionov—why has this avant-garde book collaboration been so little studied? Certainly, the hand-lithographed books of the Russian futurists constitute a private, and therefore lesser-known, discourse than, for example, the large public debates that poets and painters organized to accompany exhibitions.⁵ But most significantly, *Mirskontsa* represents neither poetry nor painting nor graphic art but, rather, a hybrid form called the artist’s book, defined in this case by its use of sound poetry; collage; the interplay of word, image, and sound; hand-drawn designs and hand-lettered text; and the deliberate production of variant copies. Current scholarship on the Russian avant-garde devotes ample attention to the classic modernist poets from Anna Akhmatova, to Boris Pasternak, and even to the revolutionary poetry of Vladimir Mayakovsky. Similarly, much has been written about the paintings of Kazimir Malevich and, to a lesser but still significant degree, those of Goncharova and Larionov. By contrast, the contributions of Khlebnikov and poet Alexei Kruchenykh, and of Malevich, Goncharova, and Larionov to the artist’s book are scarcely recognized, especially by English-language writers, nor does there seem to be a critical method for analyzing this genre. This essay proposes a method of reading artist’s books of the Russian avant-garde that highlights the interplay of word, image, and sound, foregrounding the phonic.

I

The active role of sound in *Mirskontsa* begins with the title, which is a *zaum* neologism conceived by the two poets, Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh. Composed of three words strung together, the neologism can be translated as *mir* (world), *s* (from), and *kontsa* (the end): “world from the end.” When elided into one, the result is a compound word, which, in its Russian pronunciation, contains a stress shift. Instead of pronouncing *kontsa* with an emphasis on the final syllable, “konTSA,” as is correct when this genitive form of *konets* (end) is used alone, the stress shifts to the second syllable, “SKON,” resulting in the pronunciation “mirSKONtsa.” Sound, in the form of a stress shift, calls attention to the neologism, which is commonly translated as a run-on word: “worldbackwards.” This translation invokes the end of the world as well as a reversal back to the beginning, that is, to the ancient world (space) and the prehistoric past (time).

Shortly before the publication of *Mirskontsa*, Kruchenykh wrote a poem with the *zaum* title “Starye shchipty zakata” (“Old tongs of sunset”), which he later published in the collection *Poshchekhina obshchestvennomu vkusu* (A slap in the face of public taste)

in 1912.⁶ Kruchenykh’s poem explores a world of time and space reversals by scrambling the order of events in an erotic tale of an officer and his redheaded coquette. Although it is possible to rearrange the stanzas chronologically, Kruchenykh leaves so much unknown—for instance, Who is “No. 8” in the fourth stanza? And who kills the officer?—that his poem retains a structural uncertainty.⁷ In the final stanza, the poet steps out of his narrative and comments on the reversals, observing that there are multiple ways to organize his poem. This stanza, like the title, *Mirskontsa*, can be translated in several ways. A transliteration, followed by a literal translation, reads:

primechanie sochinitelia
 vlechet mir
 s kontsa
 v khudozhestvennoi vneshnosti on
 vyrazhaetsia i tak: vmesto 1-2-3
 sobytiia raspologaiutsia 3-2-1 ili
 3-1-2 tak i est’ v moem
 stikhotvorenii

note by the author
 draws the world
 from the end
 in its artistic appearance it
 expresses itself like this: instead of 1-2-3
 the events are arranged 3-2-1 or
 3-1-2 so it is in my
 poem

A free translation by the Slavicist Nikolai Firtich reads:

note by the writer
 carrying the world
 backwards
 in the work of art
 could be expressed as follows: instead of 1-2-3
 events are unfolding as 3-2-1
 or 3-1-2 This is the way it is in my
 poem.⁸

Firtich’s translation has the advantage of connecting the “work of art” with the “world” that it carries backwards, but the disadvantage that “mir / s kontsa” (world from the end), even as three separate words rather than as neologism, is more ambiguous and multilayered than “world backwards” implies. While “world backwards” indicates a straight time reversal, “world from the end” contains the unsettling contradiction that

the end of the world—suggesting both apocalypse and resurrection—rewinds back to the beginning of the world and therefore exists in both past and future. The declarations of the futurians in Khlebnikov’s prologue to the opera *Victory over the Sun* (1913)—“All’s well that starts well!”—“And ends?”—“There will be no end!”—express a similar mystery surrounding past, present, and future and a similar claim for a victory over time.

Vladimir Poliakov credits Kruchenykh with the first published use of the words “mir s kontsa” in the stanza of “Starye shchiptsy zakata” quoted above, and Khlebnikov with the invention of the neologism.⁹ Before producing their artist’s book, the two poets were preoccupied with *mirskontsa* as a concept, a literary method, and a key principle of futurist aesthetics. Indeed, in response to Kruchenykh’s poem, Khlebnikov wrote a play he called “Mirskontsa,” which narrates its story in reverse chronological order, beginning with a man (the hero) laid to rest in his coffin and ending when he and his wife are wheeled off in baby carriages.¹⁰ Khlebnikov’s interest in the concept of time, especially the conflation of past and present, can be traced earlier to letters he wrote to the poet Vasily Kamensky in 1909. In these letters, he describes plans for a big novel in which the lives of different eras are “piled into a single current at one and the same time,” as well as a “complicated piece, *Times Transversal*, where the logical rules of time and space are broken.”¹¹ In a letter to Kruchenykh from 1913, Khlebnikov emphasized the humorous and absurd implications of *mirskontsa*. He argues that only by waiting until the ends of our destinies, when things “return unto dust”—when we are deceased—will we know how our lives have unfolded.¹²

II

The brilliance of the artful neologism lies in its infinite suggestibility and its multiple tones and implications. To be pulled in reverse or to carry the world from the end is comical but also ominous and frightening. Poetry and prose in *Mirskontsa* consist mostly of short, uneven lines that lack syntax and are built of beyonsense words and strings of images that do not share common content. Their sonic repertoire of partial rhymes and surprising shifts in stress generates an eerie humor that contrasts with, even as it accentuates, the dark references in the text to rotting, scissors, plague, and smoldering.¹³ This subtle interplay of verbal, vocal, and visual elements and the disorienting theme of the book’s title operate on a large scale, moreover, through the heterogeneous genre of *Mirskontsa*, which has no clear models or precedents in Russian book art.¹⁴ On the levels of literary imagery and structure, the poets Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh make use of a device known as *sdvig* (shift, dislocation), which is closely linked to spatial techniques in cubo-futurist painting. The abrupt transitions between *zaum*-like words and between pages of the book, along with the *sdvigi* of its pictorial imagery, transfer the objects depicted to a different plane of reality and thus make them strange to the perceiving subject. The Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky, who advocated this “semantic shift,” argued that the “device of making it strange” came from the assumption that the purpose

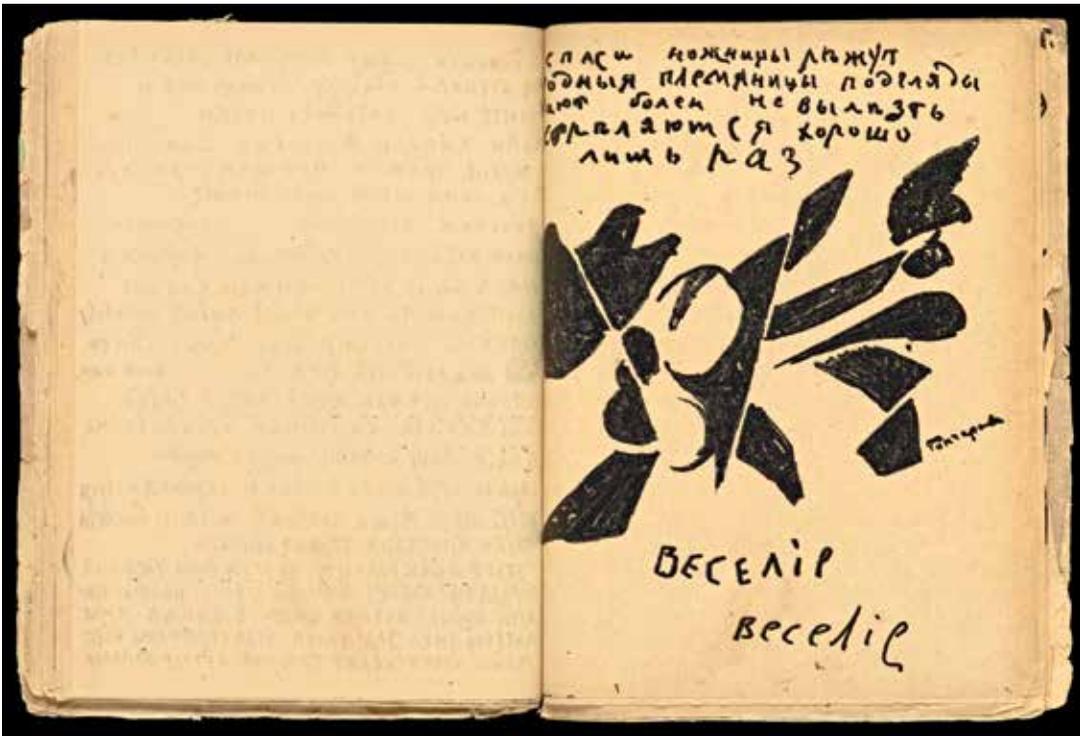


Fig. 2. Natalia Goncharova (Russian, 1881–1962) and Alexei Kruchenykh (Russian, 1886–1969). Design and text for “Veseliie,” in *Mirskontsa* (Worldbackwards; St. Petersburg, 1912), lithograph, 19.2 × 28.4 cm (7⁹/₁₆ × 11³/₁₆ in.). Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute (88-B27486).

of art is to avoid habitualization.¹⁵ On the first in a succession of four pages that display the heterogeneity and defamiliarization operative in *Mirskontsa*, Goncharova creates an image and handwriting for the poem “Veseliie” by Kruchenykh (fig. 2). This collaborative practice, in which the visual artist designs the page, including the hand lettering of the poetry, appears throughout *Mirskontsa* and was boldly articulated by the poets in their manifestos. Khlebnikov believed that the mood of the poetry alters the artist’s handwriting during the process of hand lettering the poem onto the pages of a book, and that the handwriting, thus changed, conveys this mood to the reader independently of the words. Hand-lithographed books interested him because “the writer’s hand tuned the reader’s soul to the same wave length.”¹⁶ In the manifesto, “The Letter as Such,” written with his collaborator Kruchenykh in 1913, the two poets coined the word *rechar*—from *rech*’ (speech)—which Gary Kern translates as “speechist,” Paul Schmidt as “word-wright,” and Gerald Janecek as “worder,” all designating the actual writer who is expert in questions of poetic language. Kern’s “speechist” is optimal because it incorporates sound as well as writing:

But just ask any speechist, and he'll tell you that a word written by one hand or set in one type is completely unlike the same word in a different inscription.

After all, you wouldn't dress all your pretty women in the same regulation peasant coats, would you? . . .

Of course, it is not obligatory that the speechist also print the book in his own hand. Indeed, it would be better if this were entrusted to an artist.¹⁷

Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh even call for the founding of a special profession of "handwriting artists."¹⁸ Their readers thus confront the challenge of interpreting poetry not as something that has already been written and finalized in print, but rather as an ensemble of calligraphy, imagery, and visual design produced by an entrusted artist. The return of some of these poems (for example, Khlebnikov's "Nash kochen" and Kruchenykh's "Dyr bul shchyl") in entirely new visual settings in later futurist publications attests to the close working relationship between poets and painters and to the significance of their handwriting aesthetic.¹⁹

On the page of *Mirskontsa* in question, Goncharova calls attention to the Russian word, ВЕСЕЛИЕ (*veselie*)—which means gaiety or merriment—by writing it twice at the bottom of the page and isolating it from the rest of the text. The crooked, childlike letters, with their use of the archaic letterform "i" rather than its modern form "И" and their mixture of block and cursive writing, dance beneath her large, central lithograph.²⁰ By floating the repeated title word apart from the text and image above, Goncharova highlights the assonance (repeated "E") created by the repetition and shifts the emphasis from the word's semantic content to its phonetic and graphic representation, that is, to what the word sounds and looks like. She introduces irony, moreover, by juxtaposing the abstract sounds of *veselie* with the ominous free verse above. This *zaum* text omits syntax and punctuation and speaks in precise, disjointed phrases about scissors, pain, and suicide:

| | |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| SPAsi NOZHnitsy REzhut | save scissors are cutting |
| RODnya pleMIAnitsy podGLIAdy- vaiut Bolen ne VYlezt' | nieces peep sick not to crawl out |
| streLIAiutsia khoroshO | shooting well |
| LISH' RAZ' | only once ²¹ |

Spoken as a sound poem, the five-line free verse opens with two lines of three stresses each (indicated by capital letters). This pattern breaks up when Goncharova wraps the long Russian word for "peep" (podGLIAdyvaiut) into the next line of text and follows it with cryptic phrases lacking a subject. The lines become progressively shorter, moving from two lines of three stresses to two lines of two stresses, and closing with the two shortest words.

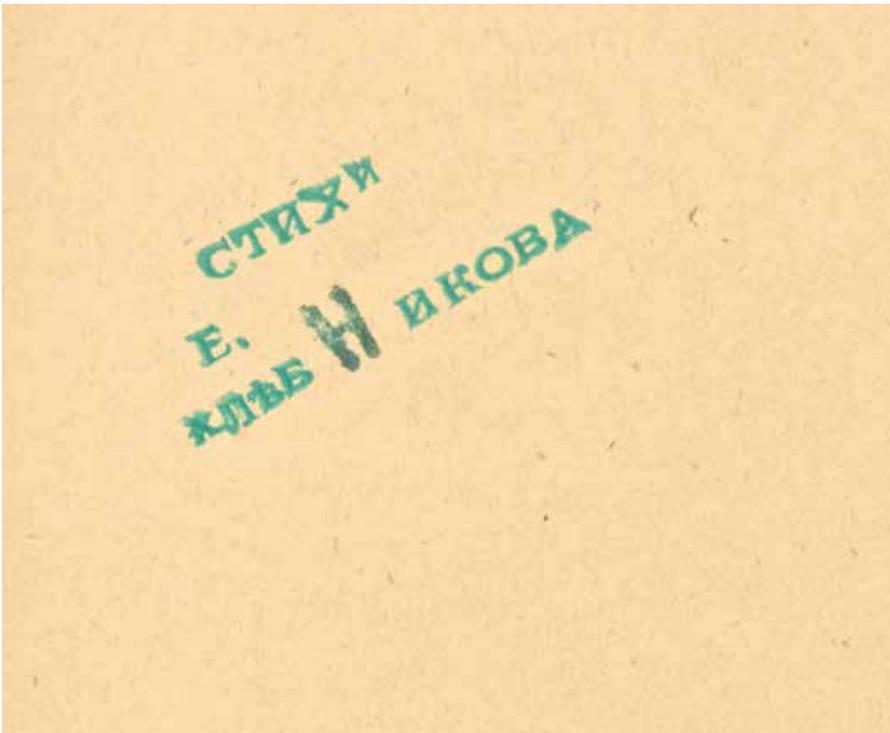


Fig. 3. Alexei Kruchenykh (Russian, 1886–1969). “Stikhi V. Khebnikov” (detail), in *Mirskontsa* (Worldbackwards; St. Petersburg, 1912), rubber stamping, 19.2 × 28.4 cm (7⁹/₁₆ × 11³/₁₆ in.). Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute (88-B27486).

Goncharova’s visual presentation enhances this sonic disjointedness by compressing some letters while inserting extra space between others. Lettering and orthography produce a poem that is only partially legible and therefore well in keeping with the cryptic language of Kruchenykh’s verse. As a collage text, this verse finds a visual parallel in the cutout leaves and petals of Goncharova’s drawing. Yet unlike the sinister text, the drawing has a folklike charm matched by the lyrical sounds of the word *veselie*. This charm and the collage-like drawing of a flower recall the cover of *Mirskontsa*. To cut something renders it incomplete, just as no copy of *Mirskontsa* is final.

The “Veseliye” page is followed by a contrasting page of green rubber-stamping that announces “Poetry by V. Khebnikov” (fig. 3). Kruchenykh produced this and all the rubber-stamped pages in the book with a child’s typeset primer. Here he splits the poet’s surname in two by using a potato cut (a potato carved into a letter or shape, inked, and applied like a stamp) or a rough stencil to form an oversize Cyrillic “Н” (equivalent to the roman N) and by inserting spaces on either side of it.²² The effect is to transform the familiar name “Khebnikov” into two words, each difficult to decipher.²³ On a title page designed to introduce his fellow poet, Kruchenykh stamps letters that look blurry and tenuous, an impermanence enhanced by the diagonal splay of the text and

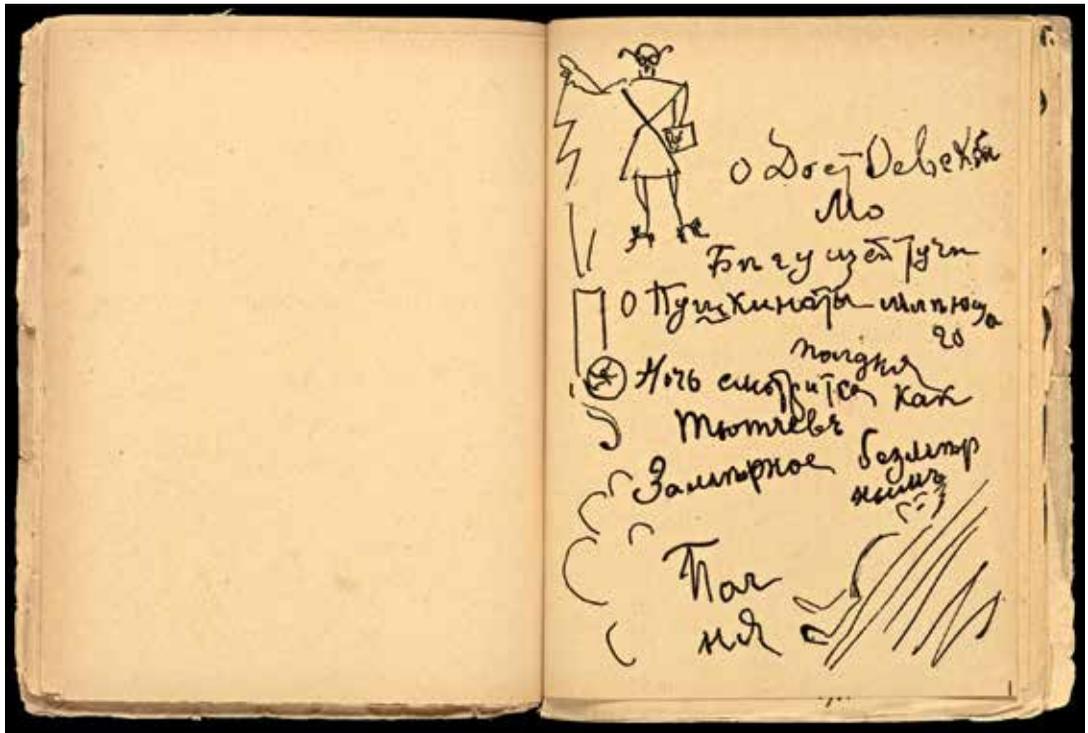


Fig. 4. Nikolai Rogovin (Russian, act. 1910s) and Velimir Khlebnikov (Russian, 1885–1922).

Design and text for “O Dostoevskii mo begushchei tuchi,” *Mirskontsa* (Worldbackwards; St. Petersburg, 1912), lithograph, 19.2 × 15.2 cm (7⁹/₁₆ × 6 in.). Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute (88-B27486).

the inconsistencies in inking and in letter size. Kruchenykh’s shortened forms of Khlebnikov’s name might also be a comical play both on long Russian names and patronymics and on the Russian practice of abbreviations and acronyms.

The shifts of disparate graphic and phonic materials continue with a transcription by artist Nikolai Rogovin of Khlebnikov’s lyric, “O dostoevskii mo begushchei tuchi” (“O Dostoevskii mo of a running cloud!”) (fig. 4).²⁴ Rogovin selects a poem originally written as a quatrain in iambic tetrameter and applies a fanciful arrangement of the text that breaks up lines and words, alters capitalization, and effectively transforms “O dostoevskii mo” into an irregular free-verse lyric.²⁵ Visual ambiguities caused by fusing graffiti-like writing with drawing, and word with image, occur to the left of the second line, which invokes the poet Pushkin. Here Rogovin draws a *pushka* (a cannon) and gives it a handle that resembles a Cyrillic “П” (equivalent to the roman P). In similar fashion, the hair of the man-cat leaning against a slope on the lower right unfurls like skywriting and could be read as the final syllable of the poem’s penultimate word, “bezmerNYM” (measureless). To the left of “zamerno” (beyond any measure), which opens the final line, Rogovin inserts curves that suggest the clouds of the title and echo but invert the Cyrillic “З” (equivalent to the roman Z).

Rogovin's verbal-visual play is a response to Khlebnikov's sound poem, which transforms the proper names "Dostoevsky" and "Pushkin" into magical words with abstract qualities:

O dostoevskimo begushchei tuchi.
O pushkinoty mleiushevo poldnia.
Noch cmotritsia, kak Tiutchev,
Zamernoe bezmerym polnia.

O Dostoevskiimo of a running cloud!
O Pushkinotes of sizzling midday!
Night stares at you like Tiutchev,
Filling the beyond measure with the measureless.²⁶

Neologisms in the last line (*zamernoe* and *polnia*) overdetermine the concepts of "measureless" and "filling," by adding the prefix *za-* (beyond) and turning the modifier for "full" (*polny*) into an invented noun, "polnia," strengthened by its partial rhyme with "poldnia." Rogovin's iconography, with its composites of letters and pictures, comments visually on the combined sounds that produce neologisms in Khlebnikov's poetry. The incantatory, celebratory recitation that characterizes the first two lines, with their repeated long "O" and "U" vowel sounds, contrasts with the short consonant sounds of the next two ("och," "ot," "tch" "mer"). Is Khlebnikov making playful homage to Russia's canonical writers, or is he anticipating the famous command to "throw Dostoevsky and Pushkin overboard from the ship of Modernity," which he and others would publish in 1912 in the manifesto *A Slap in the Face of Public Taste*? The additional reference to the nineteenth-century Romantic poet Fyodor Tiutchev, who was rediscovered by the symbolists and is now considered, with Pushkin and Mikhail Lermontov, to be the last of the three great Russian poets of the nineteenth century, underscores the ongoing importance of theories of language, both symbolist and futurist. Tiutchev's poem *Silentium* (1830) may explain why Khlebnikov associates him with night and the unknown in the last two lines.

The arrangement of word and image on the fourth page of this heterogeneous group likewise plays with clarity and authenticity of writing and drawing (fig. 5). This time the artist is Larionov, who prints a two-line sound poem by Khlebnikov in mirror version so that it reads from right to left. Larionov inverts some of the Cyrillic letters and contrasts them with the symmetrical Cyrillic "Ж" and "H," and with the cursive and print forms of "T," which do not change appearance when inverted. This verbal-visual expression of the *mirskontsa* principle continues with the image, which Larionov drafts so that we must tilt our heads or rotate the book. When we do so, we see a menacing rooster with a tooth-like comb contemplating a knife, while the poem, already in mirror version, becomes two vertical columns of tumbling letters. In both viewings, the lack of alignment between text and image creates a disquieting humor.

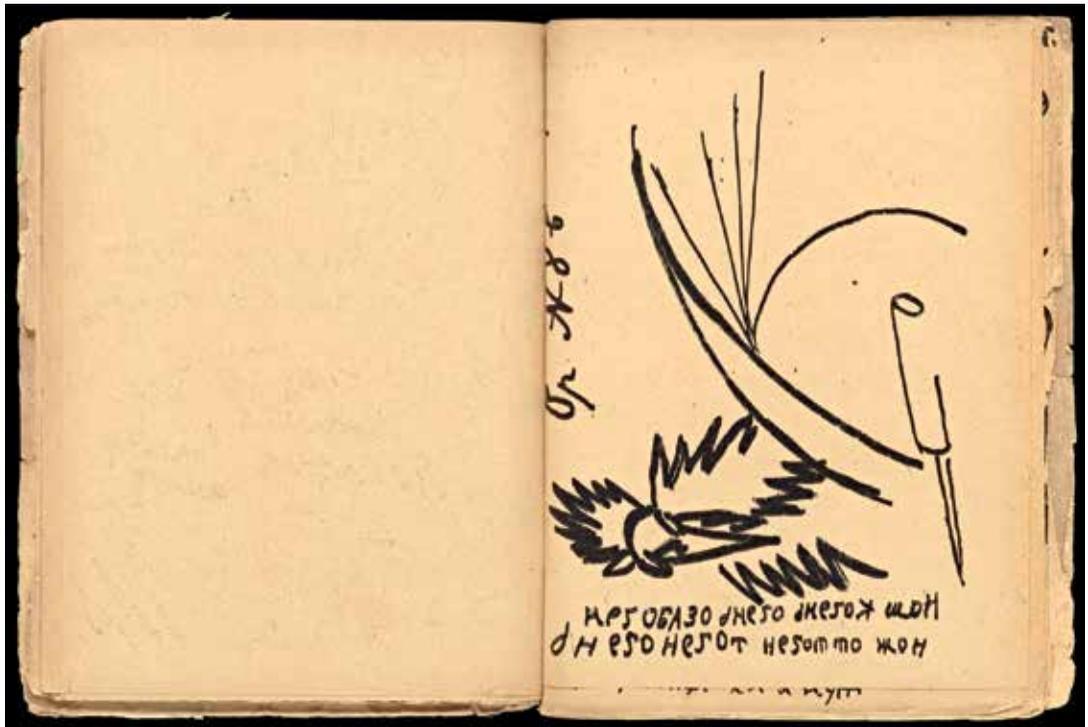


Fig. 5. Mikhail Larionov (Russian, 1881–1964) and Velimir Khlebnikov (Russian, 1885–1922). Design and text for “Nash kochen,” *Mirskontsa* (Worldbackwards; St. Petersburg, 1912), lithograph, 19.2 × 28.4 cm (7⁹/₁₆ × 11³/₁₆ in.). Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute (88-B27486).

Larionov’s ominous rooster vies with the comical sounds of Khlebnikov’s poem, even as it calls attention to their threatening semantic implications. The poem is a phonic sequence of rhyming participles built around the common word sound *ochen’* (very). Since sound plays such an important role in driving word choice, an analysis of the poem must begin by focusing entirely on the sounds (without translation, for the moment). Here is the poem in transliteration:²⁷

Nash kochen’ ochen’ ozabochen
 Nozh ottochen tochen ochen’

[Play Audio](#)
 (10 sec.)

With its repeated, rhyming *ochen’* embedded into nearly every word, the poem sounds like a nonsensical tongue twister, a beyonsense poem, and on a purely sonic level it is. Yet Khlebnikov uses no neologisms. Rather, he derives adjectives from verbs so as to emphasize their common sound. Moreover, the key word, “KOchen,” has multiple etymologies. It is a variant spelling, with a different stress, of the word “koCHAN,” meaning “cabbage head” when followed by the word “kapusty.” In etymological dictionaries that Khlebnikov would have had access to—such as the dictionary of 1893 by I. I. Sreznevsky—both “koCHAN” and its variant spelling “KOchen” are derivatives of the Latin *membrum virile* (the male reproductive organ).²⁸ Another etymologically related word—“KOchet,”

which is graphically similar to “KOchen”—can be traced to southern dialects of Russia, where it means “petukh” or “cock” (the male bird). By suggesting this form of the word as well, Khlebnikov expands its male connotations.

Khlebnikov’s punning on “koCHAN,” with its associative meanings of cabbage head, phallus, and cock, takes us directly to Larionov’s image, which offers a witty response in the form of a phallic rooster comb and knife and spiky arc forms suggestive of a head of cabbage. As collaborators, Larionov and Khlebnikov have created a page in which word plays off image in a highly evocative way. Referentiality is indeterminate, thus posing a real challenge for translators. Indeed, the two translations that Khlebnikov’s poem has yielded fail to capture the puns or the disturbing mood expressed by the interplay of word and image. The first, a literal translation, reads: “Our cabbage head is very very worried / The sharpened knife is very very sharp.”²⁹ The second, by Paul Schmidt, mimics Khlebnikov’s pattern of repeated sounds in the poetry: “Let us all be heads of lettuce; / let us not let knives upset us.”³⁰ The humor of both translations is consistent with the comical, seemingly nonsensical sound repetitions. “Nash” (our) and “noz” (knife) participate in this repetition, since they differ from one another in meaning and belong to different parts of speech but are linked phonically through their opening consonant, contrasting vowel, and monosyllabic form. Humor derived from both these sound patterns and the translations is at odds, however, with the sinister encounter of cock and knife. Khlebnikov’s sound poem makes room for this range of implications. A reading that emphasizes the repeated vowel “o” (of *ochen*) highlights the laughable, childlike sounds of the verse, whereas a dwelling on the repeated consonants (*sh, zh, ch*) harshly accentuates the threat posed by the knife, as well as the disturbing transformation of knife into phallus.³¹ Sound thus triggers a complex interweaving of word and image.

The four successive pages of *Mirskontsa* that I have addressed relate to one another as materials in a collage. Poets and painters juxtapose one page against the next with little stylistic connection apart from the shared commitment to handmade processes—whether hand lithography or rubber stamping. With such abrupt shifts (*sdvig*) between abstract imagery and representation, between metrical verse, free verse, and lyric—all made evocative and ambiguous through the sounds of the poetry—each page in *Mirskontsa* becomes a “page as such.” The collage on the cover, designed by Goncharova, is emblematic of what the book holds inside.³²

III

Goncharova’s cover designs for *Mirskontsa* work closely with a concept of book format and production that was most likely developed by Kruchenykh. In 1912, prior to the publication of *Mirskontsa*, Kruchenykh initiated a collaboration with Goncharova and Larionov on a series of postcards, in which drawings and texts were hand-lithographed on one side, and artist’s name, title of drawing, publisher’s name (Kruchenykh), and printer’s name were typeset on the reverse. Susan Compton argues convincingly that the postcards served as a lead-up to the hand-lithographed books.³³ In his design for

Mirskontsa, Kruchenykh pushes the limits of handmade processes. He cultivates a deliberately unrefined and unconventional appearance by choosing a square format, a stapled binding, and cheap, brittle paper with rough edges. The makeshift nature of the binding and the paper captures an aesthetic that Goncharova, as creator of the cover, expresses in each of the 220 collages that she designed for the book.

On the Getty copy (see fig. 1), she uses a single sheet of green paper, pastes a cut-out in the shape of a flower, and creates a second collage out of a white strip of paper for the title and the authors' names. The lower stem of the flower is partially covered by the white strip, while the three petals on the upper right appear to have originally extended beyond the cover itself but have since been torn or cut off. Goncharova thus experiments with partial views, equivocal readings, and gestures of incompleteness. Her lettering of the title, МИРСКОИЦА, and the authors' names, А. КРУЧЕНЫХ В. ХЛЕБНИКОВ, mixes print (ОН of the title, ЕН of Kruchenykh, ОБ of Khlebnikov), with cursive (the "Р" in "МИР" and the "У" in "КРУ"), the latter partially concealing the archaic letterform "Е" of "ХЛЕБНИКОВ." The obscuring of visual forms and letters and the general disorderliness of the writing offset the strict alignment of the first initials of first and last names ("А" and "В") and ("К" and "Х") and of the hard signs at the end.³⁴ Highlighted and, in the case of the "К" and "Х," made similar in form, these self-sufficient "letters as such" become abstract, independent sounds that anticipate the importance of the phonic dimension in this book.

On other copies of *Mirskontsa*, Goncharova modifies her flower collage. She varies the shape—so that some cutouts bear a closer resemblance to flower forms than others—and she uses a range of colors and materials, from shiny black, glossy or matte green, and marbled papers, to gold and silver foil with printed patterns. The variants reflect Goncharova's particular fusion of primitivism and the movement toward nonobjective art. Seen one way, the Getty cover (see fig. 1) evokes a human form with splayed legs and arms, or a flower stem tilted at a diagonal so that petals on the left appear closer, and therefore larger, than those on the right. Viewed another way, the collage is a purely abstract form in which edges are partly torn and concealed. Copies at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, similarly oscillate between abstract imagery and stylized cutouts evocative of a human figure, a flower cup with stems and blossom, and a child's toy paper boat (figs. 6, 7).

At the turn of the century, members of Sergei Diaghilev's society, The World of Art (*Mir iskusstva*), published an eponymous journal consisting of gilded leather bindings, original drawings, and essays on art, sculpture, and literature illustrated with photographs and printed on sumptuous paper. The contrast between deluxe objects such as *Mir iskusstva* and the later Symbolist journal, *Zolotoe runo* (The golden fleece), and the hand-sized, makeshift futurist books is telling. A copy of *Mirskontsa* from the Mayakovsky Museum's collection has a cover collage cut out to resemble a human figure and fabricated from gold-patterned foil (fig. 8). The gold creates an unnatural effect far removed from the earthy green of the Getty copy. Our attention hovers between this awkward, primitive shape and the gold foil, which may be a parodic reference to the

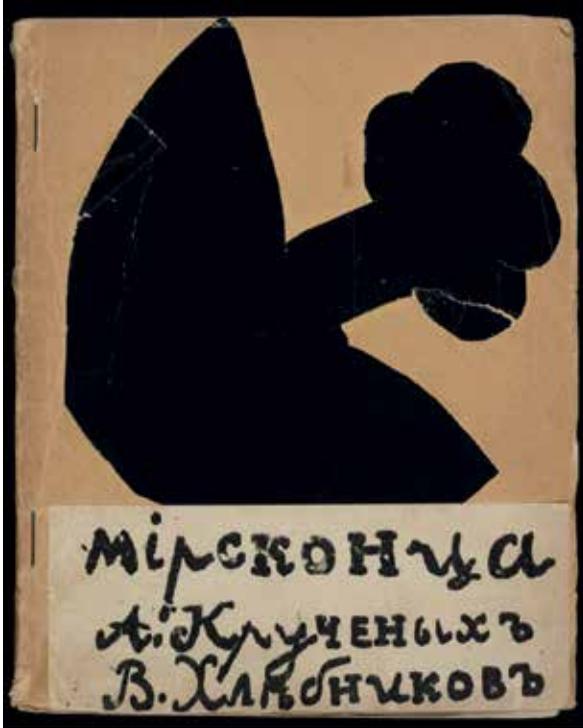


Fig. 6. Natalia Goncharova (Russian, 1881–1962). Cover design for *Mirskontsa* (Worldbackwards; St. Petersburg, 1912), collage, 18.4 × 14 cm (7¼ × 5½ in.). New York, Museum of Modern Art, Gift of The Judith Rothschild Foundation. © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY.

Fig. 7. Natalia Goncharova (Russian, 1881–1962). Cover design for *Mirskontsa* (Worldbackwards; St. Petersburg, 1912), collage, 18.4 × 14 cm (7¼ × 5½ in.). New York, Museum of Modern Art, Gift of The Judith Rothschild Foundation. © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY.



Fig. 8. Natalia Goncharova (Russian, 1881–1962). Cover design for *Mirskontsa* (Worldbackwards; St. Petersburg, 1912), collage, 19.7 × 15.1 cm (7³/₄ × 6 in.). Moscow, State Mayakovsky Museum. Courtesy the State Mayakovsky Museum, Moscow.

elegant materials of Russian Symbolist journals. For Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh, moreover, among its many implications, *mirskontsa* may have been a verbal parody of “Mir iskusstva,” as well as a phonic play on these words.

Even if such references are unintentional or coincidental, they are consistent with the humor of futurist book art, which presents a provocatively different concept of the medium. By favoring variability and ephemerality over a linear and fixed work of art, the collaborators on *Mirskontsa* redefined the artist’s book, opening its contents to transrational sounds, chosen to enhance or work in tension with handwritten words and images.

Nancy Perloff is an associate curator of modern and contemporary collections at the Getty Research Institute.

Notes 1. Futurist books typically involve multiple collaborators, but *Mirskontsa* is unusual among hand-lithographed books in featuring six contributors: two poets and four painters. Only *Vzorval’* (Explodity, 1913), with one poet and five painters, and *Starinnaia liubov’; Bukh lesinyi* (Old-fashioned love; A forestly boom, 1914), with two poets and three painters, approached this intensity. Russian scholar Vladimir Poliakov dates the publication to late November 1912. See Vladimir Poliakov, *Knigi russkogo kubofuturizma: izdanie vtoroe, ispravlennoe i dopolnennoe* (Moscow: Gilea, 2007), 402.

2. At 220 copies, the run of *Mirskontsa* was smaller than that of the two futurist books that preceded it, *Starinnaia liubov* (Old-fashioned love, 1912) and *Igra v adu* (A game in hell, 1912), each published in an edition of 300. Futurist books that followed *Mirskontsa* appeared in editions of 300 or higher, with the exception of *Te li le* (1914), in an edition of 50, and *Zaumnaia gniga* (Transrational boog, 1915), numbering 140. See Margit Rowell and Deborah Wye, eds., *The Russian Avant-Garde Book: 1910–1934*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2002), 250–53.

3. Roman Jakobson, *My Futurist Years*, ed. Bengt Jangfeldt and Stephen Rudy, trans. Stephen Rudy (New York: Marsilio Publishers, 1992), 24.

4. Subsequent books that call for live readings of the poetry are *Vzorval* (Explodity; 1913), *Pomada* (Pomade; 1913), *Utinoe gnezdyshko . . . durnykh slov* (A little duck’s nest . . . of bad words; 1913), *Te li le* (1914), and *Zaumnaia gniga* (Transrational boog; 1915).

5. On the public debates, see Jane Sharp, “The Russian Avant-Garde and Its Audience,” *Modernism/Modernity* 6, no. 3 (1999): 91–116.

6. According to the Russian edition of Khlebnikov’s collected works, Khlebnikov sent Kruchenykh a letter in September 1912, in which he thanked his friend for the poem “Starye shchiptsy zakata.” I date the poem based on this letter. See Rudolf Duganov, ed., *Velimir Khlebnikov. Sobranie sochineniii v shesti tomakh*, vol. 6, part 2 (Moscow: Nasledie, 2000), 144–46.

7. For one analysis of this poem, see Gerald Janecek, “Mirskontsa u Khlebnikova i u Kruchenykh,” in Z. IU. Petrova and N. A. Fateeva, eds., *Iazyk kak tvorchestvo. Sbornik statei k 70–letiiu V. P. Grigor’eva* (Moscow: Institut russkogo iazyka RAN, 1996), 81–85.

8. Nikolai Firtich, “Worldbackwards: Lewis Carroll, Aleksei Kruchenykh and Russian Alogism,” *The Slavic and East European Journal* 48, no. 4 (2004): 593.

9. Poliakov, *Knigi russkogo kubofuturizma*, 169.

10. Most Khlebnikov scholars agree that he wrote his play *Mirskontsa* in 1912. According to Gerald Janecek, Kruchenykh’s poem was a response to Khlebnikov’s play. See Janecek, “Mirskontsa u Khlebnikova i u Kruchenykh,” 80–81. Poliakov concurs with that date in his *Knigi russkogo kubofuturizma*, 346–47n22. The English edition of Khlebnikov’s collected works also dates the play to 1912. See Charlotte Douglas, ed., *Collected Works of Velimir Khlebnikov: Volume II, Prose, Plays, and Supersagas*, trans. Paul

Schmidt (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), 249. However, there is some discrepancy, since the play is dated 1913 in Duganov, *Velimir Khlebnikov. Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 4, 225. It was first published in the collection *Riav!: perchatki* (Roar!: gauntlets!; 1914).

11. Charlotte Douglas, ed., *Collected Works of Velimir Khlebnikov*, vol. 1, *Letters and Theoretical Writings*, trans. Paul Schmidt, Letters 11 and 16, 43 (letter 11), 49 (letter 16).

12. Douglas, *Collected Works of Velimir Khlebnikov*, 1:74 (letter 44a).

13. See Vladimir Markov, *Russian Futurism: A History* (Washington, D.C.: New Academia Publishing, 2006), 42–43.

14. See Gerald Janecek, “Kruchenykh contra Gutenberg,” in Margit Rowell and Deborah Wye, eds., *The Russian Avant-Garde Book: 1910–1934* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2002), 43, including his translation of Evgeny Kovtun, *Russkaia futuristicheskaia kniga* (Moscow: Izd. Kniga, 1989), 79. In highlighting the heterogeneous character of *Mirskontsa*, Janecek’s and Kovtun’s emphasis is largely on contrasts in script, lettering, and graphics, rather than on the changing relation of word-image-sound.

15. Viktor Shklovsky, “Art as Technique,” in idem, *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 12. See also Viktor Erlich, *Russian Formalism: History—Doctrine*, 3rd ed. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1981), 76.

16. Khlebnikov, *Stikhi* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia pechatnia, 1923), 52. Cited in Evgeny Kovtun, “Experiments in Book Design by Russian Artists,” *Journal of Propaganda and Decorative Arts* 5 (1987): 49.

17. Velimir Khlebnikov and Alexei Kruchenykh, “The Letter as Such,” in Gary Kern, ed., *Velimir Khlebnikov Snake Train: Poetry and Prose* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Ardis, 1976), 199.

18. Cited by Kovtun, “Experiments in Book Design by Russian Artists,” 49.

19. For example, Kruchenykh’s “Dyr bul shchyl” appeared first on a page hand-lithographed by Larionov in *Pomada* (1913) and a year later on a page written in color by Olga Rozanova in *Te li le* (1914).

20. The “i” was officially replaced by an “И” in the “Resolutions of the Orthographic Subcommittee of the Imperial Academy of Sciences,” 11 May 1917. Before these resolutions passed, artists often used the new orthography, but not consistently. See Gerald Janecek, *The Look of Russian Literature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), 249.

21. I use a translation by Antanina Sergieff, Ph.D. candidate in Slavic Languages and Literatures, University of California, Los Angeles.

22. On the rubber-stamping and potato-cut techniques, see Poliakov, *Knigi russkogo kubofuturizma*, 402; Compton, *The World Backwards*, 72; Janecek, “Kruchenykh contra Gutenberg,” 45.

23. One can note that “khleb” is the Russian word for “bread.”

24. Nikolai Efimovich Rogovin was a lesser-known artist of the Russian avant-garde who worked in Moscow in the 1910s and was close to Larionov. See Kovtun, *Russkaia futuristicheskaia kniga*, 167.

25. My verbal-visual reading of Rogovin’s setting of Khlebnikov draws on Brian M. Reed, “The Book as Such from Neo-Futurism to Futurism,” paper delivered at the 43rd meeting of the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies, 17–20 November 2011. For a free translation, see Ronald Vroon, ed., *Collected Works of Velimir Khlebnikov*, vol. 3, *Selected Poems*, trans. Paul Schmidt (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 29.

26. I use Gerald Janecek’s translation in Janecek, *The Look of Russian Literature*, 82.

27. Audio of these lines is available on the *Getty Research Journal* website: www.getty.edu/research/grj/grj5.

28. A. G. Preobrazhensky, *Etymological Dictionary of the Russian Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), 372–73. In his definition of “kochan” as *membrum virile*, Preobrazhensky cites I. I. Sreznevsky, *Materialy dlia slovaria drevne-russkogo iazyka po pis'mennym pamiatnikam*, vol. 1 (St. Petersburg: Tipografiia imperatorskoi akademii nauk, 1893), 1305. I am indebted to Antania Sergieff for assistance with

the etymological research on “kochen.”

29. Translated by Gerald Janeczek, *The Look of Russian Literature*, 82.

30. See Ronald Vroon, ed., *Collected Works of Velimir Khlebnikov*, vol. 3, *Selected Poems*, trans. Paul Schmidt (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 38.

31. Nina Gurianova pointed out to me these two different readings of the poem. The theme of implied castration recalls Larionov’s series of “Barbers” paintings, executed between 1907 and 1911.

32. Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant-Guerre, and the Language of Rupture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 141–42.

33. Compton, *The World Backwards*, 70.

34. Perloff, *The Futurist Moment*, 136–37.