

Telegraphic Language

Ian Andrews 1991

A world shrunk by speed Human energy centupled by speed will master time and space we create the new aesthetic of speed. We have almost abolished the concept of space and notably diminished the concept of time. We are thus preparing the ubiquity of multiplied man. (F.T. Marinetti, *Destruction of Syntax - Wireless Imagination - Words-in-Freedom*, 1913)

It was this modern world "shrunk by speed" that prepared the stage for a new form of modernist literature informed by new advances in technology, and a youthful impatience with the wordiness of conventional language. This new literary form was dubbed the 'telegraphic style' of poetry. Two factors contributed to the simultaneous eruption of telegraphic poetry all over Europe, in the early part of the twentieth century. One was the discoveries of Marconi in radio, and the other the contemporary mythification of the Eiffel Tower.

In 1909 Marconi was awarded the Nobel Prize for physics on account of his work with wireless telegraphy. The possibility of being able to communicate with anywhere on the globe clearly excited the poetic imagination. News could be transmitted and received virtually instantaneously thousands of miles away, and so the distance negating power of radio fed a desire to attribute mystical qualities to it. A plethora of poetic texts appeared right across Europe, bearing the influence of this new science. The German Expressionist, Franz Richard Behrens wrote in a style which he called Telegrammstil; Ukrainian Panfuturist Mykalo Semenko wrote "Cable Poem of the Ocean;" Mayakovsky, in 1914 declared that the nervous life of cities requires quick economical abrupt words; Blaise Cendrars experimented with a form he called the "telegramme poem;" Nicolas Beauduin was writing wireless poems and the Polish Futurist Stanilaw Mlodozienieg wrote telegraphic poems. Radio and wireless telegraphy is also mystified and fetishised in a number of Italian Futurist texts: Marinetti's *Zang Tumb Tumb* (1914), Fillia's Lussuria Radio *Elettica* (1925), Gerbino's *Telegrapho e Telephono dell Anima* (1926), Emilo Buccafusca's *Realradioculla* (1934), Farfa's *Marconia* (1937), Buzzi's *Poema di Radio-onde* (1940), Marinetti and Masnata's *La Radia* (1933), and Depero's *Uriche-radiofoniche* (1934).

One of the most detailed appraisals of wireless communication is Khlebnikov's *The Radio of the Future* (1921), written while he was working as a night watchman for the Russian Telegraph Agency (ROSTA). These Modernist poets translated Marconi's discoveries from scientific fact to poetic myth. The letters TSF ('telegraphie sans fil' or 'telegraphia senza fili') figure prominently in the

poetry of Apollinaire, Marinetti and various others, and become the trademark of a crucial modernist sensibility. The quasi-magical realization that communication could be achieved without connecting wires gave birth utopian visions of a new, or scientifically liberated humanity. Many of these texts promote the almost Nietzschean idea of "cosmogonic Man" or "telegraphic Man".

In *The Shock of the New*, Robert Hughes suggests that "for Robert Delaunay, the master image of culture was the Eiffel Tower which he viewed with real ecstasy as an ecumenical object, the social condenser of a new age"¹ The first regular radio broadcasts were being received from the tower in 1909 and the popular feeling was that the tower possessed a new kind of poetry which communicates mysteriously with the entire world. The Eiffel Tower figures as a symbol of the new sensibility and combines associations of being at the center of a vast communications network, of enjoying a new kind of Promethean (or Zarathustrian) overview of the world.

In June 1913, F T Marinetti published his manifesto: *Destruction of Syntax - Wireless Imagination - Words-in-Freedom* in which he proclaimed a freedom of images and analogies with no connecting wires of syntax and no punctuation. At about the same time, the Russian Cubo-Futurist, Alexie Kruchenykh, in the leaflet *Declaration of the Word as Such*, formulated a theory of transrational language, *Zaum* (an abbreviation of *Zaumnyy Yazyk*), a "free language" without definite meaning. In his essay *New Ways of the Word*, Kruchenykh writes:

We loosened up grammar and syntax; in order to depict our dizzy contemporary life and the even more impetuous future, we must combine words in a new way, and the more disorder we introduce into the sentence structure the better. **2**

and in an untitled manifesto in the booklet *A Trap for Judges 2*:

We ceased to regard word formation and word pronunciation according to grammatical rules, since we have begun to see in letters only vectors of speech. We loosened up syntax..... we abolished punctuation marks, which for the first time brought to the fore the role of verbal mass and made it perceivable.

Both the Russians and the Italians promoted the invention of new forms of representation adequate to express the speed and intensity of the modern world. Marinetti refers to "zones of intense life" (revolution, war, shipwreck, earthquake, etc) which for him are the catalysts for the production of a fractured mode of speech. For Marinetti, a person in such a situation would waste no time constructing sentences but would instinctively destroy the syntax of their speech. The result would be "handfuls of essential words with no conventional order." **3** Thus, for Marinetti, these zones of intense life require a new type of speech, a telegraphic speech, delivered with a tempo which matches the speed required by the telegraphic reporting of war correspondents (in 1911 Marinetti was a war correspondent in the Libyan War). This dramatic reduction of language elements

serves, not only as an economy of speed, a need for abbreviation, "Quick give me the whole thing in two words," but, more importantly, as an intuitive link with the universe. For Marinetti, telegraphic speech reveals the analogical foundation of life itself.

Echoing Marinetti, Kruchenykh defines his *Transrational Language* as the means of expression a person resorts to at crucial moments, citing, as a model for *Transrational Language*, the glossolalic speech of the flagellant, V Shishkov. Glossolalia, or speaking in tongues, is a type of non-meaningful speech characteristic of schizophrenics and religious mystics, the pure unmediated expression of divine presence through inspiration. For the futurists, this communication with the divine is, in a sense, a two way street. Divine inspiration is channeled through glossolalia into language and, conversely, (in terms of poetic practice) *Transrational Language*, through its inner laws, penetrates the divine essence of reality, resulting in a state of higher intuition. Glossolalia constitutes a complete separation between signifier and signified, concept and sound, it is signification in its purest form, with no recourse to any referential function, the manifestation of language in the realm of pure materiality. **4** The Russian Cubo-Futurists treated words purely as plastic and sonorous materials. Kruchenykh declares that totally new words (and new ways of combining them) are needed in order to depict the new; "and so a new word was created... a genuine testimony of faith, the revelation of things unseen." **5** For Kruchenykh, conventional language is not adequate for the expression of states of inspiration. In *New Ways of the Word*, Kruchenykh boldly asserts that "the word is broader than thought - The word (and its components, the sounds) is not simply a truncated thought, not simply logic, it is first of all the transrational (irrational parts, mystical and aesthetic)." **6** The aim of the Cubo-Futurists was to arrive at unmediated comprehension through the word itself, through a quasi-mystical process of identification with the phonic elements, which reveals a higher meaning beyond signification. Bound up with this reverence with the word is the concept of irrationality or trans-sense. In poetry of Cubo-Futurism, the formalist practice of "Ostranenie", or making strange provided an important theoretical justification. "We learned to look at the world backward, we enjoy this reverse motion (with regard to the word we noticed that it can be read backward, and that then it acquires a more *profound meaning!*" **7** Thus the production of irrationality, of non-sense, was believed to present a world with new content; it provides a means of perceiving the world through to its core, as if to pierce through a veil of obscurity to find an underlying reality. Kruchenykh takes from Cubism the notion that irregular perspective generates a new fourth dimension. This irregular perspective applied to poetry (in the form of irregular structuring of a sentence, grammatical irregularity, unexpected phonetic combinations and word formations), according to Kruchenykh, generates a new perception of the world.

Going beyond telegraphic lyricism, Marinetti proposes the introduction of Onomatopoeic Harmonies, "to render all the sounds and noises of modern life" **8** He speaks of "a free expressive orthography", "an instinctive deformation of

words corresponds to our natural tendency towards onomatopoeia." **9** Both the Transrational Language of Kruchenykh, and Marinetti's Words-in-Freedom, privilege this notion of onomatopoeic naturalness, that is, the possibility of a 'natural' universal language arising through the natural conjunction of words and acoustic images, a language untainted by the arbitrariness of signification. Marinetti writes;

it matters little if the deformed word becomes ambiguous. It will marry itself to the onomatopoeic harmonies, or the noise-summaries, and will permit us soon to reach onomatopoeic psychic harmony, the sonorous but abstract expression of an emotion or a pure thought. **10**

Thus Marinetti theorizes the possibility of a more efficient use of language closer to abstract thought, unhampered by the unnecessary baggage of phonetic signification, the supreme goal of which is onomatopoeic psychic harmony.

Jacques Derrida speaks of a tradition, which since Plato, consistently valorises divine or natural writing over human finite artificial inscription. " there is therefore a good and a bad writing: the good and natural is the divine inscription in the heart and the soul; the perverse and artful is technique, exiled in the exteriority of the body." **11** The formulations of Words-in-Freedom and Transrational Language in their idealized purest form repeat this opposition. What is valorized is a poetic practice in which words immediately signify an eternal and universal truth, a primordial logos.

Futurism seems to be condemned to repeat this opposition without bringing it into question. As a movement, Futurism remains almost exclusively antithetical and reactive, merely replacing previous values with new values. Futurism never questions the setting up of values in the first place. For example Futurism simply declares "The Aeroplane is beautiful; where as Dada and Surrealism question the very values of 'beauty' and 'ugliness'. The Italian Futurists despised analysis and detail. Marinetti's telegraphic lyricism is a strategy for rejecting the intellectualism of passeist syntax.

For Kruchenykh, new verbal form creates a new content but, in an act of glossocentrism he advocates the invention of new native (Russian) words; "do not use foreign words in your literary works." **12** For Kruchenykh there is something of a primordial feeling about the Russian language. However he feels that his native language fallen from its natural primordial state, through the subordination of the word to rational thought. Thus he advocates a new transrational language with its roots in the primordial sonority of the Russian language. Marinetti, on the other hand, does not seem to be possessed of the same reverence for the Italian language but, then, Italian is not his first language (Marinetti grew up speaking and writing in French). For Marinetti, the essence of language lies in its evolution towards brevity, which he believes is the key to the essence of matter. Marinetti is concerned with a search for an essential language

in the sense of the requisite style for the new technological age, one adequate to the modernist spirit. Marinetti writes; "The plunge of the essential word into the water of sensibility minus the concentric circles that the word produces." **13**

The penetration of Words-in-Freedom into the depths of material reality without an excess of signification, polyphony and redundancy in conventional language, "only the unsyntactical poet who unlinks his words can penetrate the essence of matter". However, unlike the Russian Futurists, Marinetti had no illusions about Words-in-Freedom becoming a universal language of the future. Kruchenykh, on the other hand, declares that "Transrational works can provide a universal poetic language, born organically, and not artificially, like Esperanto."**14** It was proposed that the utilization of *Zaum* would eventually be extended to everyday speech, not as a special language for a selected audience but as the "language of the street". However, from a strictly linguistic viewpoint, the possibility of Transrational Language ever becoming colloquial seems very remote since it presupposes only the potential ability to signify.

This contradiction arises from a misunderstanding of the very nature of language. According to Saussure, Language cannot be based exclusively on the material element of sound. The linguistic signifier is not phonic but incorporeal - "constituted not by its material substance but by the differences that separate its sound image from all others." **15** The Russian Futurists focused their interest purely on the phonic element, organizing language according to sonorous and euphonic criteria to create a transrational poetry without reference.

Similarly, Marinetti's Words-in-Freedom is at odds with its aspirations towards brevity and accelerated communication. In paring down the syntactic structure of language in order to focus on individual words, Marinetti arguably retards the pace of delivery and increases the incidence of ambiguity.

While both the Italian and the Russian Futurists were concerned with the liberation of language from convention meaning in order to be able to express, at the speed of pure thought, the ubiquity of Being in a fast and multifarious world; and both proclaimed the importance of sound as pure emotional signification through onomatopoeic naturalness, and revered in the primordial aspect of the word; certain important differences remained. Technology, particularly wireless communication, became an aesthetically determining factor, in both poetic form and content. However, unlike the Italians, the Russians were, to an extent, wary of the dehumanization of industrial society, preferring to keep intact a connection to the earth via the primordial sonority of their native tongue, and finally moving toward the Constructivist values of Man controlling his own destiny through conscious social change. The Italians, on the other hand, rejoiced wholeheartedly in the glorification of war, speed and technology and the intense nihilism of a total acceleration of life. Their modernist vision of the future united Man and machine forever in a multiple and simultaneous awareness; an existence in which human potential would be multiplied by the efficiency of

technology.

1. Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New: Art in the Century of Change*, London: BBC, 1980, P. 36.
2. Alexei Kruchenykh, "New Ways of the Word" in A. Lawton & H. Eagle. *Russian Futurism through its manifestoes 1912-1928*, Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1988, P. 73.
3. F. T. Marinetti, "Destruction of Syntax - Wireless Imagination - Words-in-Freedom" in Richard Pioli, ed. *Stung by salt and War The Creative Texts of the Italian Avant-Gardist F. T. Marinetti*. New York: Peter Lang, 1987. (unpaginated). Also in Umbro Apollonio, ed. *Futurist Manifestoes*. New York: Viking, 1973, P. 98.
4. Allen S Weiss, "Psycho Pompomania" in *The Aesthetics of Excess*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989, pp. 117-118.
5. Kruchenykh, "New Ways of the Word," Lawton Op Cit, P. 72.
6. Ibid., P. 71.
7. Ibid., P. 76.
8. Marinetti, Op Cit., P. 104.
9. Ibid., P. 106.
10. Ibid.
11. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Trans. Gayatri Spivak, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1976, P. 15.
12. Kruchenykh, "New Ways of the Word," Lawton, Op Cit., P. 77.
13. Marinetti, Op Cit., P. 100.
14. Kruchenykh, "Declaration of Transrational Language," Lawton, Op Cit., P. 183.
15. Ferdinand De Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, Trans. Wade Baskin, New York: McGraw Hill, 1959, pp. 118-119.