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Mathematical Rebellion. Zero in the Russian Avant-Garde

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MATHEMATICAL REBELLION.

ZERO IN THE RUSSIAN AVANT-GARDE

Jason Strudler

A DISSERTATION

PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY

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IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE

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ABSTRACT

In the early twentieth century, many avant-gardists became convinced that traditional art had run its course, and they viewed themselves as being on the verge of discovering a new aesthetics. Such discussions came to revolve around the mathematical concept of zero, which was theorized by Andrei Bely, Aleksei Kruchenykh, Kazimir Malevich, Daniil Kharms and others as a meeting point between the old and the new. My project traces the development of this concept in poetry, prose and the visual arts. It focuses on the years between Bely's first writings on zero (1902) and the death of Malevich (1935), who theorized a "zero of forms" out of which the art of the future would emerge. In my study, I take on new interpretations of the figures discussed above, examining the different ways in which the Russian Avant-Garde sought artistic potential in nullification and used zero as a metaphor for both total destruction and creation *ex nihilo*.

In my first chapter, I situate zero in its broader cultural context, discussing works by Vladimir Mayakovsky, Kornei Chukovsky and Vasilisk Gnedov, who saw zero as a threshold between the culture of the past and that of the future. In my second chapter, I turn to Bely and his idea of the "terror of zero," a simultaneous experience of all of culture and its total negation that informs numerous works from his third symphony (1902) to his novel *Petersburg* (1913-14). My third chapter centers on Kruchenykh, who argued that the new art should retain the form of zero rather than go beyond it, and came to view *zaum'* poetry as an aesthetic of zero, which he interpreted as non-resolution. My last chapter traces Malevich's lifelong engagement with zero; focusing on the *Black Square* (1915) and other Suprematist paintings, I show how the artist's turn to abstraction

represented an attempt to find a place for the self in absolute nihilism. In my conclusion, I examine works by Kharms, Nikolai Oleinikov and the Nichevoki group to trace the transition to an absurdist zero in the early Soviet period.

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INTRODUCTION

Rebellion in Liminal Spaces

The "Imaginable Border" of Art

In his foreword to Aleksei Kruchenykh's 1926 book *Kalendar'* [*Calendar*], Boris Pasternak addresses the Futurist poet's relation to art in the following terms:

> Роль твоя в нем любопытна и поучительна. Ты на его краю. Шаг в сторону, и ты вне его, т.е. в сырой обывательщине, у которой больше причуд, чем принято думать. Ты—живой кусочек его мыслимой границы. […] И ты так крепко держишься за творчество в его первичной стадии, что можно не бояться никаких переходов. Их не будет. Ты его возмужалости не допустишь. (Kruchenykh 1926, 3)
>
> Your role in it is interesting and educational. You are on its edge. A step to the side, and you are outside of it, i.e. in a raw low culture in which there is more whimsy than we are used to thinking. You are a living slice of its imaginable border. […] And you cling so tightly to creation in its primary stage that there is no need to fear any transitions. There will be none. You will not permit its maturity.

In words of guarded praise, Pasternak places Kruchenykh at the "imaginable border" of art and not-art. Reading his poetry as a form of liminality, he notes a consistent refusal to allow "maturity" beyond this point. Here, the much-discussed Futurist pursuit of freedom from tradition takes on a new context. Kruchenykh is described as "clinging" to a "raw insularity" that, on the surface, bears little relation to the "Zarnitsy Novoi Griadushchei Krasoty" ["Lightning of the New Impending Beauty"] (Burliuk et al., no page) discussed in the Futurist manifesto "Poshchechina obshchestvennomu vkusu" ["A Slap in the Face to the Public Taste," 1912]. Yet, as Pasternak recognizes, the poet clearly saw this "edge" of art as being worthy of the aesthetic rebellion waged in its honor.

It is in the context of Pasternak's understanding of liminality that I approach this project, a study of the Russian avant-garde concept of zero. Avant-garde liminality is typically understood as a historical phenomenon, related to the fin-de-siècle idea of the decline of culture and its ultimate apocalyptic demise (see, for example, Hansen-Löve 2005). This narrative has much to do with the cataclysmic events of the First World War and the Russian Civil War, which indeed threatened in numerous ways to reduce Russian society to nothingness. However, as we see in the passage above, this was only one of its possible applications of a liminal zero. Indeed, as far as Kruchenykh was concerned, liminality was also aesthetic (the "edge" of art) and experiential (the struggle to remain at that edge).

While Pasternak does not delve into Kruchenykh's possible reasons for wanting to remain at a liminal point, numerous avant-gardists theorized precisely this topic at great length. Wassily Kandinsky expresses his own understanding of liminality in zero in his book *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* [*In the Spiritual in Art*, 1912], where he writes:

> Bei der näheren Bezeichnung ist das *Weiß*, welches oft für eine *Nichtfarbe* gehalten wird […], wie ein Symbol einer Welt, wo alle Farben, als materielle Eigenschaften und Substanzen verschwunden sind. Es ist ein Schweigen, welches nicht tot ist, sonder voll Möglichkeiten. […] Es ist ein Nichts, welches jugendlich ist oder, noch genauer, ein Nichts, welches vor dem *Anfang*, vor der Geburt ist. […] Und wie ein Nichts ohne Möglichkeit, wie ein totes Nichts nach dem Erlöschen der Sonne, wie ein ewiges Schweigen ohne Zukunft und Hoffnung klingt innerlich das *Schwarz*. (Kandinsky 2009, 99-102)

> As a closer definition, *white*, which is often regarded as a *noncolor* […], is like the symbol of a world where all colors as material qualities and substances have disappeared. It is a silence that is not dead, but full of possibilities. […] It is a nothingness that has the character of youth or, more exactly, a nothingness that exists before the *beginning*, before birth. […] *Black* has an inner sound of nothingness bereft of possibilities, a dead nothingness after the sun has become extinguished, an eternal silence without future, without hope.

In this passage, we see liminality expressed as duality, with an edge similar to the one described above separating two different visions of nothingness. For Kandinsky, there exists both a black nothingness that constitutes the end of all things, and a white nothingness that represents the beginning of everything, a newness that is "full of possibilities." In other words, Russian avant-gardists understood liminality as access to totality. The narrower the edge, the more potential freedom it brought.

Precursors and Previous Interpretations

Aage Hansen-Löve has identified Gogol and Dostoevsky as two significant precursors for the avant-garde zero, noting their proclivities for emptiness and apocalyptic thought (see Hansen-Löve 1996; Hansen-Löve 1997). Discussing Gogol's take on zero, he relates it to the concept of the "empty space" ["Leerstelle"] (ibid. 183), which formally has much in common with avant-garde liminality. However, for Hansen-Löve, this emptiness is ultimately tied in with the "inexpressible," a concept that avant-gardists saw as anathema. As we saw in the two passages above, they were primarily concerned with the possibilities of expressivity. Indeed, in his essay "O poezii" ["On Poetry," 1919] the artist Kazimir Malevich dismissed Tiutchev's famous lines from "Silentium," writing that "mysl' izrechennaia est' lozh'" ["a thought uttered is a lie"] only because thought itself was not to be trusted (see Malevich 1995, 1: 144). Meanwhile, discussing Dostoevsky's zero, Hansen-Löve asserts that his novels raise "the question of whether it is still possible to write novels at all" (Hansen-Löve 1996, 299). As we will see throughout this project, avant-gardists certainly challenged the validity of traditional forms of art, yet the primary question for them was not "if," but "how" to

write. Ultimately, the avant-garde zero is far more focused on potentiality than on the lack thereof.

Nonetheless, this does not mean that zero was a strictly positive concept for the Russian avant-garde. In this sense, Nikolai Firtich's association between zero and access to a "higher causality, a higher logic" (Firtich 2009, 362) is somewhat oversimplified, privileging a triumphant reading of avant-gardism over a sense of the anxieties and terrors that the writers and artists involved linked with liminality. In order to pursue the nuanced reading demanded by a study of this size, I analyze the avant-garde not from the top down, but from the ground up, reading zero through actual examples of Russian avant-garde discourse, and focusing on a variety of figures and a variety of possible interpretations. My goal is to reconstruct avant-garde dialogue around the concept of zero, and in doing so to shed new light on the numerous possibilities that avant-gardists saw in their struggle for and presence in this liminal space.

The Narrative of Zero

Because I am not privileging any one particular interpretation, this project will not follow a course of overcoming with a triumphant narrative for the Russian avant-garde. Instead, this is a story about how overcoming and not overcoming are equally fraught with problems. In my first chapter, I situate zero in its broader cultural context, discussing works by Vladimir Mayakovsky, Kornei Chukovsky and Vasilisk Gnedov, who saw zero as a threshold between the culture of the past and that of the future. In my second chapter, I turn to Bely and his idea of the "terror of zero," a simultaneous experience of all of culture and its total negation that informs numerous works from his

third symphony (1902) to his novel *Peterburg* [*Petersburg*, 1913-14]. My third chapter centers on Kruchenykh, who argued that the new art should retain the form of zero rather than go beyond it, and came to view *zaum'* poetry as an aesthetic of zero, which he interpreted as non-resolution. My last chapter traces Malevich's lifelong engagement with zero; focusing on the *Chernyi kvadrat* [*Black Square*, 1915] and other Suprematist paintings, I show how the artist's turn to abstraction represented an attempt to find a place for the self in absolute nihilism. In my conclusion, I examine works by Kharms, Nikolai Oleinikov and the Nichevoki group to trace the transition to an absurdist zero in the early Soviet period.

CHAPTER ONE

The End as the Beginning. Russian Approaches to Zero

Chukovsky and the Futurist Zero

In 1914, the critic Kornei Chukovsky published "Ego-futuristy i kubo-futuristy" ["Ego-Futurists and Cubo-Futurists"], one of the first notable studies of Russian Futurism written by an external observer. Seeking to encapsulate the movement's fundamental characteristics, he wrote:

> Тут бунт ради бунта, […] тут восторг разрушения, и уж им не остановиться никак. Всю культуру рассыпали в пыль, все наслоения веков, и уж до того добунтовались, что, кажется, дальше и некуда,—[…] до пустоты, до нуля, до полного и абсолютного nihil, до той знаменитой поэмы знаменитого Василиска Гнедова, где нет ни единой строки […]. Это бунт против всего […], коренной российский нигилистический бунт, вечная наша нечаевщина, и это совершенная случайность, что теперь она прикрылась футуризмом. (Chukovskii 130).
>
> Here we have rebellion for the sake of rebellion, […] here we have the joy of destruction, and there is no way for them to stop now. They have scattered all of culture into the dust, all the layers of the ages, and they have already rebelled to the point where, it seems, there is nowhere left to go,—[…] to emptiness, to zero, to a complete and absolute *nihil*, to that famous poem by the famous Vasilisk Gnedov where there is not a single line […]. This is rebellion against everything […], a natively Russian nihilistic rebellion, our eternal Nechaevism, and it is a total coincidence that it has now become cloaked in Futurism.

In this passage, Chukovsky presents Russian Futurism as a "rebellion against everything," and therefore a movement propelled by total destruction. Using the example of Vasilisk Gnedov's "Poema Kontsa" ["Poem of the End," 1913], a poem that contains no words aside from its title, he argues that the movement's primary goal is the reduction of culture to a "complete and absolute *nihil*," i.e. to nothingness. In this context, he

views the term Futurism as misleading, as it disguises the genuine spirit of the newest generation of Russian writers. For the critic, Russian Futurism's true focus is the destruction of the past, which renders any relation to the future-oriented Italian avant-garde purely coincidental.[1] He understands the movement not as a contemporary borrowing from Europe, but as a "natively Russian nihilistic rebellion" rooted in the destructive principle of "zero."

In discussing developments in the arts in terms of zero, Chukovsky reflects a larger tendency that had developed in Russian avant-garde circles by the mid-1910s—a tendency that is most famously reflected in Kazimir Malevich's philosophical writings, but can be found in the works of numerous of his contemporaries. Using Chukovsky's essay as a point of departure, this chapter will consider what it meant for zero to be "in the air" in Russia during this period. Pioneering studies by Aage Hansen-Löve and Nikolai Firtich have identified zero as a major theme of the Russian avant-garde and sought to locate it in its larger philosophical and cultural background, particularly in the context of other themes such as negation (Hansen-Löve 1994), eschatology (Hansen-Löve 2005) and transcendence (Firtich 2000; Firtich 2009). While taking the conclusions of these scholars into account, my approach will diverge from their focus on zero as an overarching cultural theme and instead examine it as a discourse with many possible variants. Along with a discussion of historical background, I will analyze works by several writers from the period, demonstrating how zero came to be a focus of debate among avant-gardists on a series of issues critical to modernist aesthetics. I will attempt

1 As Vladimir Markov notes, the term "Futurism" was indeed mistakenly applied to the "Hylea" group (Vladimir Mayakovsky, Velimir Khlebnikov, Aleksei Kruchenykh, etc.) and only later adopted by the members of this group themselves (see Markov 177-19). However, as Marjorie Perloff successfully demonstrates (see Perloff), this fact does not diminish the influence of Italian Futurism on the Russian avant-garde.

to outline the basic concerns that defined this debate, while also considering their implications for competing trajectories of avant-gardism in Russia.

Nihil and Nihilism

In his discussion of the Futurist zero, Chukovsky draws on an etymological and semantic proximity to *nihil* ["nothing"] to link the concept with nihilism. He thus raises an important question for this project: to what extent can the avant-garde debate about zero be seen as part of a larger interest in nihilist philosophy? In addressing this question, I will examine a series of texts beginning with Ivan Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* (literally, *Fathers and Children*) [1862], the novel that popularized the term nihilism and brought broad public attention to the movement. Turgenev's novel tells the story of Yevgeny Bazarov, a young student who is described as holding the following beliefs:

> —Он нигилист,—повторил Аркадий.
>
> —Нигилист,—проговорил Николай Петрович.—Это от латинского nihil, ничего, сколько я могу судить; стало быть, это слово означает человека, который... который ничего не признает?
>
> —Скажи: который ничего не уважает,—подхватил Павел Петрович […].
>
> —Который ко всему относится с критической точки зрения […]. Нигилист—это человек, который не склоняется ни перед какими авторитетами, который не принимает ни одного принципа на веру, каким бы уважением ни был окружен этот принцип.
> (Turgenev 1978, 7: 25)

> 'He is a nihilist,' repeated Arkady.
>
> 'A nihilist,' said Nikolai Petrovich. 'That's from the Latin *nihil*, *nothing*, so far as I can judge. Therefore the word denotes a man who... who doesn't acknowledge anything?
>
> 'Say, rather, who doesn't respect anything,' added Pavel Petrovich […].
>
> 'Who approaches everything from a critical point of view […]. A nihilist is a man who doesn't acknowledge any authorities, who doesn't accept a single principle on faith, no matter how much that principle may

be surrounded by respect.' (Turgenev 2008, 22-23).[2]

In Turgenev's portrayal, nihilism relates primarily to intergenerational conflict. The character Arkady Kirsanov, a friend of Bazarov, views it as a rejection of all authorities and a refusal to accept uncritically received ideas regardless of the respect that they have traditionally commanded. The spirit of total rebellion that Chukovsky describes in his essay is certainly present in the above passage, as is the nothingness that he associates with zero.

To the extent that nihilism can be distilled to a distrust of authority, its traces can be clearly seen in Russian Futurism, whose most famous manifesto, "Poshchechina obshchestvennomu vkusu" ["A Slap in the Face to the Public Taste," 1912], declared the need to "brosit' Pushkina, Dostoevskogo, Tolstogo i proch. i proch s Parokhoda sovremennosti" ["throw Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy etc. etc. from the Steamship of Modernity"] (Burliuk et al., no page). In this and other writings, the Futurists demonstrated antagonism against their literary "fathers" and the values or "tastes" associated with them. Turgenev's novel intersects most clearly with the Futurist zero in the disagreement that it depicts over the role of the root *nihil* in nihilism. Nikolai and Pavel Kirsanov, Arkady's father and uncle, respectively characterize a nihilist as a person who "doesn't recognize anything" and one who "doesn't respect anything." Adopting a view of nihilism based on a reading of *nihil* as nothing, they interpret it as a total negation of all values. Alternately, defining a nihilist as a person who "approaches everything from a critical point of view" and refuses to "accept a single principle on faith," Arkady presents the philosophy as a skeptical rather than totalistic view of the world. In his

2 For quotations from *Fathers and Sons*, I use the Richard Freeborn translation, adjusted for accuracy and style.

vision, nihilism moves away from its root in "nothing," taking the form of a targeted negation of specific ideas.

The two sides of this debate differ in their understanding of the scope of nihilism, yet both view it as an "otnoshenie" ["relationship"] to society, which presupposes an ongoing connection between the nihilist and the society that he or she rejects. The following discussion between Bazarov and Pavel Kirsanov clarifies the nature of this relationship:

> —Так,—перебил Павел Петрович,—так: вы во всем этом убедились и решились сами ни за что серьезно не приниматься.
>
> —И решились ни за что не приниматься,—угрюмо повторил Базаров […].
>
> —А только ругаться?
>
> —И ругаться.
>
> —И это называется нигилизмом?
>
> —И это называется нигилизмом,—повторил опять Базаров […]. (Turgenev 1978, 7: 51)

> 'I see,' interrupted Pavel Petrovich, 'I see. Meaning you're convinced of all this and have decided for yourselves not to do anything serious about anything.'
>
> 'And we've decided not to do anything about anything,' Bazarov repeated sombrely […].
>
> 'And just to swear at everything?'
>
> 'And just to swear at everything.'
>
> 'And that's called nihilism?'
>
> 'And that's called nihilism,' Bazarov repeated […].
> (Turgenev 2008, 52-53).

In deciding "not to do anything about anything," Bazarov disavows all activities aimed at bringing down Russian society. Restraining his nihilism to personal belief, he maintains a relationship between society and the individual in which both remain intact and in opposition to one another. He thus demonstrates that, even in its most uncompromising variant, his understanding of nihilism remains distinct from the total destruction that Chukovsky associates with zero. As we see in Bazarov's statements, the formulation of

nihilist ideology found in *Fathers and Sons* is characterized less by the destructive nothingness described by the critic than by a relationship of passive negation.

Nihilism never became a concrete philosophy, and the major thinkers associated with its development in Russia—Mikhail Bakunin (1814-76), Nikolai Chernyshevsky (1828-89), Dmitry Pisarev (1840-68), Pyotr Kropotkin (1842-1921) and Sergei Nechaev (1847-82)—form a diverse group who had divergent opinions on the scope and nature of the destruction that they deemed necessary. In this context, it is significant that Chukovsky describes the nihilistic rebellion of the Futurists in terms of Russia's "eternal Nechaevism," associating it—negatively, as the suffix "shchina" indicates—with the most radical of these thinkers. Along with his infamous murder of a member of his own revolutionary group,[3] Nechaev is best known for his manifesto "Katekhezis revoliutsionera" ["Catechism of a Revolutionary," 1869], in which he wrote:

> Революционер—человек обреченный. […] Он в глубине своего существа, не на словах только, а на деле, разорвал всякую связь с гражданским порядком и со всем образованным миром […]. Он для него—враг беспощадный, и если он продолжает жить в нем, то для того только, чтоб его вернее разрушить. (Nechaev 244)
>
> A revolutionary is a doomed man. […] In the depths of his being, not only in words but in deed, he has severed all ties with civil order and with the entire educated world […]. He is its ruthless enemy, and if he continues to live in it, then it is only so as to better destroy it.

Declaring the need to "sever ties with civil order and with the entire educated world," Nechaev mirrors Bazarov's denial of the value of all existing authorities and principles. However, unlike Bazarov, he advocates their destruction "not only in words but in deed." His focus on action results in a new relationship between the nihilist—whom he calls a "revolutionary"—and society. In rejecting society, Nechaev's revolutionary does not

3 On November 21, 1869, Nechaev and several other members of Narodnaya Rasprava killed another member, Ivan Ivanov, over an ideological disagreement.

passively refuse to take part in it, but rather lives in it "so as to better destroy it." Acting as an "enemy" of the world in which he lives, he empties himself of "all ties with civil order," using this emptiness to purge society of the same ties from within. Nechaev's philosophy eliminates the border between the individual and society that characterizes Bazarov's nihilism, creating an internal and external unity based in destructive nothingness.

While Nechaev's approach to nihilism brings him close to Chukovsky's zero, there is one sense in which Bazarov remains truer to the concept. We see this in the following passage, a continuation of Bazarov's discussion with Nikolai Kirsanov:

> —Вы все отрицаете, или, выражаясь точнее, вы все разрушаете… Да ведь надобно же и строить.
>
> —Это уже не наше дело […]. (Turgenev 1978, 7: 51)

> 'You're condemning everything or, to be more precise, you're pulling everything down, but surely you've got to build something as well.'
>
> 'That's not for us to do […].' (Turgenev 2008, 50)

Dismissing the notion that one should build in addition to destroying, Bazarov rejects practical goals for nihilism, just as he had rejected practical action carried out in its name. His response of "That's not for us to do" presents negation as a goal in and of itself. Meanwhile, Nechaev's manifesto sets a very different goal for nihilism:

> У товарищества ведь <нет> другой цели, кроме полнейшего освобождения и счастья народа, то есть чернорабочего люда. […] это освобождение и достижение этого счастья возможно только путем всесокрушающей народной революции […]. (Nechaev 247)

> The comradeship has no goal other than the fullest liberation and happiness of the people, that is of the working people. […] this liberation and the achievement of this happiness is possible only by means of a totally destructive revolution of the people […].

For Nechaev, nihilism amounts to a "totally destructive revolution," yet the nothingness

that results is not the ultimate goal of his ideology. Nechaev recognizes "no goal" aside from a society based around the "fullest liberation and happiness of the working people," a utopian value far removed from Bazarov's rejection of constructive impulses. Envisioning total destruction as the only way of achieving this goal, he transforms nihilism from a solution into a means to an end. In providing for a path from destruction to creation, his case presents a challenge to Chukovsky's notion that nihilists have "nowhere left to go" after zero.

The approaches to nihilism that I have examined so far have hinged on the idea of *nihil*, but have ultimately diverged from it. In Bazarov's case, nihilism stopped short of the achievement of a state of nothingness; in Nechaev's, it sought a larger goal beyond this nothingness. However, Chukovsky provides a further example of nihilist thought in which nothingness serves as the final goal. He writes:

> Маринетти еще не родился, а уж Савва Леонида Андреева на Волге, на Урале восклицал: / «Я решил уничтожить все... старые дома, старые города, старую литературу, старое искусство, Третьяковскую галерею и другие, поважнее которые... Нужно, чтобы теперешний человек голый стоял на голой земле. Нужно оголить землю, нужно уничтожить все… Мы сделаем хороший костерчик и польем его керосином». (Chukovskii 131)
>
> Marinetti had not yet been born, and Leonid Andreev's Savva was already on the Volga, in the Urals, calling out: / "I decided to destroy everything… old houses, old cities, old literature, old art, the Tretyakov Gallery and other things of more importance... Contemporary man must stand naked on a naked earth. We must denude the earth, we must destroy everything… We'll build a good fire and splash it with kerosene."

Chukovsky's quotations stem from Leonid Andreev's 1906 play *Savva*, whose protagonist both espouses and acts on overtly nihilistic ideas. In the play, Savva murders a wealthy merchant, then returns to the village in which he was born to engage in an act of terrorism. Planting a bomb on the occasion of a church holiday, he intends to destroy

the village's most prized possession, a miracle-working icon. However, Savva's plan is thwarted, and he ultimately meets a fate as violent as the philosophy in which he believes, beaten to death by a crowd of villagers who have learned of his actions.

The philosophy to which Savva adheres carries the Russian nihilist tradition to a radical extreme. Calling for the destruction of everything "old," he rejects not only the bourgeois society that was opposed by thinkers such as Nechaev, but along with it the idea of society altogether. In his call to "destroy everything," Savva has in mind a literal "denuding" of the world, following which man will "stand naked on a naked earth." Abandoning Nechaev's utopia created from nothingness, he envisions one that is located within the state of nothingness itself. Savva's particular dream of utopia demonstrates the extent to which Russian variants of nihilist thought differed in their aims, and a comparison of Bazarov, Nechaev and Savva reveals far more commonality in the path to be taken by nihilism than in the end created by it. Chukovsky remains correct in noting the ideology's close association with the *nihil* implied in its name, yet this association resembles far more a movement toward *nihil* than a relationship of identity between nihilism and nothingness. In this sense, Chukovsky's description of a Futurist "poryv k nuliu" ["rush toward zero"] (ibid. 131) serves as an apt metaphor for nihilism's relationship with the idea of *nihil*. As a "rush" toward a zero-point, nihilism functions as an impulse to destroy rather than the location of destruction. Meanwhile, zero itself serves as the destination of the nihilistic impulse, a point that gives it both an end and a significance with respect to that end. Raising the question of how to arrive at the point of destruction and what to do with it, zero differentiates the true goals of the philosophies of Bazarov, Nechaev and Savva from their nihilistic means. As we will see in the following

sections, it similarly provides a means of identifying the divergent goals of what Chukovsky monolithically presents as avant-garde nihilism.

Marinetti and Russian Nietzscheanism

While Chukovsky largely neglects variation in Russian approaches to nihilism, he does distinguish Russia's nihilism from Western models. His assertion that Filippo Tommaso Marinetti "had not yet been born" when "Savva was already on the Volga" refers to the fact that the Italian poet's "Futurist Manifesto" was written in 1909, three years after *Savva*. Therefore, the most extreme forms of Russian nihilism chronologically preceded Marinetti's movement. However, Chukovsky sees Russian and Italian nihilism as diverging in more than chronology. He writes:

> Италии как не кричать: к черту Данте, к черту Рафаэля! ведь из-за своих грандиозных покойников она вся превратилась в мертвецкую, ведь этими тяжелыми трупами придавлено молодое растущее, ведь ей словно кто запретил жить настоящим и будущем, а дозволил только прошедшее. (ibid. 131)
>
> How can Italy not cry out "to hell with Dante, to hell with Raphael"?[4] After all, because of its grandiose dead men, it has become completely transformed into a mortuary, its young growth has been held down by heavy corpses, it is as if someone forbid it to live in the present and future and permitted only the past.

Chukovsky reads Italian Futurism as Marinetti's reaction to a "mortuary" of tradition, a suffocating pressure for new Italian artists to engage with the "grandiose dead men" of their culture. He views the movement as a natural attempt to escape the past in order to "live in the present and future," a justification that resembles Marinetti's own. In his

4 While Chukovsky may simply be listing two of Italy's most famous cultural figures, it is also possible that he is alluding to Salieri's lines from Pushkin's *Mozart and Salieri* [1830]: "Mne ne smeshno, kogda maliar negodnyi / Mne pachkaet Madonnu Rafaelia, / Mne ne smeshno, kogda figliar prezrennyi / Parodiei beschestit Alig'ieri" ["I cannot laugh—when some benighted hack / Besmirches Raphael and his Madonna; I cannot laugh—when some repellent clown / With parody dishonors Alighieri"] (Pushkin 1977, 309; Pushkin 2009, 125). This translation belongs to James E. Falen.

"Futurist Manifesto," Marinetti wrote: "Do you really want to waste all your best energies in this unending, futile veneration for the past, from which you emerge fatally exhausted, diminished, trampled down?" (Marinetti 15).[5] Drawing on typical avant-garde rhetoric, both the poet and the critic use metaphors of oppression and sickness to present nihilism as a healthy alternative in contemporary culture.

Chukovsky similarly examines a conflict between past and future in the case of the Russian avant-garde, yet this time he arrives at a strikingly different conclusion:

> Но мы, новорожденные, без вчерашнего дня, без традиций, почти без истории, без памятников, когда же мы успели изведать эту тиранию прошедшего, этот гнет преданий и предков? Ведь только что начали робко завязываться слабенькие узелочки культуры, какие-то законы, каноны, уставы, как вот уже рявкнула […] глотка: […] сожжем!.. (Chukovskii 131)
>
> But we, newborn children, with no yesterday, with no traditions, almost with no history, with no monuments, when did we manage to get acquainted with the tyranny of the past, that oppression of traditions and ancestors? Just as weak little knots of culture were beginning to be tied, some form of laws, canons, regulations, a voice […] cried out: […] let's burn it down!..

In the Russian context, Chukovsky hears the cry of "to hell with Dante, to hell with Raphael" replaced by one of "let's burn it down," an echo of Savva's call to "build a good fire and splash it with kerosene." Although "let's burn it down" surely reflects the spirit of Italian Futurism no less than Marinetti's declarations, the critic views it as contextually distinct. For Chukovsky, Russia's Futurist nihilism differs in that it rejects a "newborn" culture, one that instead of featuring an "oppression of traditions and ancestors" has "no traditions" and only "weak little knots of culture." In describing Russia's cultural ties themselves as "weak," he returns to his metaphor of sickness and health for purposes of juxtaposition. While he views the new Italian artists as a "young growth" threatened by

5 This translation belongs to Doug Thompson.

the oppression of tradition, he sees tradition in the role of this fragile new development in Russia, treating the new "laws, canons, regulations" as values threatened by Russia's artists.

Chukovsky's reversal of these roles reflects a vision of different historical processes at work in Russian and Italian culture in the early twentieth century. In characterizing Italy's tradition as a mortuary full of corpses, he positions Marinetti's nihilism as a reaction to destruction that has already occurred. His historical model is one of a beginning after the end, entailing a move forward into new creation. Meanwhile, in reading Russian Futurism as a fight against the newborns of culture, Chukovsky interprets it as the destruction of this new beginning and a return to the traditionless state that preceded it. We find an apt illustration of this second historical model in his earlier discussion of a stripping away of the "layers of the ages," which introduces an alternative understanding of nihilism as reversion. In contrast with Italian nihilism, which he associates with a path into the culture of the future, the critic presents Russian Futurism as a path backward to a zero-point of culture.

Chukovsky's analysis factors the avant-garde zero into ongoing debates between the Slavophiles and the Westernizers, drawing inspiration from the idea of Russia's historical separation from the West.[6] Siding with the Westernizers, he assumes a lag in Russia's progress, attributing the country's alternative approach to nihilism to its unique historical context. This exceptionalist mode of argumentation results in one of Chukovsky's more questionable claims, as it denies the Russian Futurists the ability to

6 We find an iteration of this idea in Pyotr Chaadaev's highly influential "First Letter" [1829]: "The fact is that we never moved forward together with other nations […]. We stand as if outside of time, the worldwide education of the human race has not reached us. The wondrous linkage of human ideas in the succession of generations and the history of the human spirit, having brought it to its contemporary state in the entire rest of the world, have not had any influence on us" (Chaadaev 1: 323).

create. However, in doing so, it also reveals a significant bifurcation that runs through his discussion of nihilism, one that categorically separates the impulses of creation and destruction. According to the critic's paradigm, Russian nihilism entails movement back toward an origin in nothingness, while Italian nihilism involves an opposite movement away from this nothingness. For Chukovsky, both impulses involve a destructive zero as a point of orientation, yet they have nothing more in common. Represented by his two historical models, creation and destruction represent opposite approaches to the concept of zero. As such, they demonstrate its importance as a point that both unifies and divides them.

Not all writers involved in the discussion of the avant-garde zero maintained Chukovsky's sharp division between creation and destruction. A divergent approach can be found in the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, whose significance for Russian avant-garde thought was enormous. Describing the philosopher's appeal for the writers and artists of early twentieth-century Russia, Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal notes that "his injunction to 'smash the old tables of values' [...] was a powerful ingredient in the revolutionary mix, sweeping away the old and clearing a path for the new. It justified the rebellion against tradition that was already underway" (Rosenthal 1986, 4). Nietzsche's idea of "sweeping away the old and clearing the path for the new" is commonly referred to as "creative destruction," a term that implies fluidity between the impulses discussed above. We find an explicit reference to this fluidity in Nietzsche's book *On the Genealogy of Morals* [1887], where he explains creative destruction by writing that "if a temple is to be created a temple must be destroyed" (Nietzsche 2000, 531).[7] Arguing that the creation of new values is possible only after the destruction of old ones, Nietzsche

7 This translation belongs to Walter Kaufmann.

links Chukovsky's two approaches to nihilism organically, as two parts of a single approach. His notion that the potential for creation can be accessed only by means of destruction positions Russian nihilism as a necessary precursor to the creative approach that Chukovsky favors.

The particular reception of Nietzsche's creative destruction that we find in Russian Futurism was in many ways prepared by the Symbolists, the generation of writers and artists that immediately preceded the avant-garde. In his 1907 essay "Budushchee iskusstvo" ["Future Art"], the Symbolist writer Andrei Bely declared:

> Если на развалинах храма, видимо рухнувшего, можно создать новый храм, то невозможно воздвигнуть этот храм на бесконечных атомах-формах, в которые отольются ныне существующие формы, не бросив самые формы; […] музыка, архитектура, скульптура, поэзия—все это отжившее прошлое […]. Мы должны забыть настоящее: мы должны все снова пересоздать: до этого мы должны создать самих себя. […] Вот ответ для художника: […] он должен стать своей собственной художественной формой. (Belyi 1910, 452-53)
>
> If upon the ruins of the temple, which has apparently collapsed, it is possible to build a new temple, then it is impossible to build this temple using the endless atomic forms in which contemporary forms are expressed without abandoning the forms themselves; […] music, painting, architecture, sculpture, poetry—all of this is the moribund past […]. We must forget the present; we must recreate everything anew: but first we must create ourselves. […] Here is the answer for the artist: […] he must become his own personal art form.

Drawing on Nietzsche's language from *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Bely blames the fall of the temple on the refusal of contemporary artists to reject traditional aesthetic forms. He refers to the world of the arts as a "moribund past" that must be forgotten, calling for the abandonment of the old temple, which he similarly regards as "sepulchral." Upon the ruins of this temple, he seeks to build a new one in which the artist will become "his own personal art form," created independently of the past and even the present. While Bely

employs the same metaphors of sickness and oppression that Chukovsky finds in Marinetti, his essay demonstrates a utopian strain that is absent from the writings of both —and, some would argue, from those of Nietzsche as well.[8] The personal art form that he discusses results from a world "recreated anew" and freed not only from the oppression of Dante and Raphael, but from all existing forms of art. Bely theorizes creative destruction as something far greater than the release of new creation from the weight of past. In the destruction of the temple of the arts, he sees the possibility of creating something genuinely new that no longer relates to them.

Placing this utopian reading of Nietzsche in its Russian avant-garde context, Nina Gurianova writes:

> Nietzsche's nihilistic overtone, which Maurice Blanchot calls "the very sense of his thought," paradoxically acquires a new, positive character. Blanchot suggests that here "nihilism is an event accomplished in history that is like a shedding of history—the moment when history turns and that is indicated by a negative trait: that values no longer have values in themselves. There is also a positive trait: for the first time the horizon is infinitely open to knowledge […]." Adopted by the early avant-garde culture, this nihilistic intonation becomes a leap defining freedom to create […]. (Gurianova 2012, 28)

Gurianova relates the Russian reading of Nietzsche to what the French philosopher Maurice Blanchot refers to as the "positive" side of creative destruction. In dividing Nietzsche's idea into the positive quality of creation and the negative quality of destruction, the philosopher creates a bifurcation based in a value judgment similar to Chukovsky's. However, Blanchot differs from Chukovsky in that he locates the impulses of both destruction and creation together, placing them at what he calls the "moment when history turns." Although based in a state in which "values no longer have values in

8 Discussing what she refers to as a "distinctively Russian Nietzsche" (Rosenthal 1986, 38), Rosenthal notes that "there is simply no Western counterpart to the eschatological intensity of Russian visions of a new culture" (ibid. 39).

themselves," he views this zero-moment, the moment between destruction and creation, as one that is also "infinitely open to knowledge" and therefore to creation. As Gurianova notes, a similar reading of Nietzsche offered Russian avant-gardists a total "freedom to create" not just after, but from the very point of their destruction.

We find an explicit example of the Nietzschean zero-point in Vladimir Mayakovsky's *Oblako v shtanakh* [*A Cloud in Trousers*, 1915]. The *poema*, which Bengt Jangfeldt identifies as one of the poet's most Nietzschean works,[9] contains the following lines:

> Славьте меня!
> Я великим не чета.
> Я над всем, что сделано,
> ставлю «nihil».
>
> Никогда
> ничего не хочу читать.
> Книги?
> Что книги!
> (Maiakovskii 1: 181)
>
> Praise me!
> The great ones are no match for me.
> Under everything that's been done
> I put "nihil."
>
> I never
> want to read anything.
> Books?
> What are books!

As the poet of the future, Mayakovsky dismisses the "great ones," the classic writers of the past, as "no match" for him. Rejecting "everything that's been done," he refers to the past as "nihil," engaging in an act of negation that is directly associated with zero. Significantly, in discussing the total rejection of tradition in zero, Mayakovsky uses the

9 Jangfeldt notes that Mayakovsky includes numerous Nietzschean elements in his *poema*, as well as alluding to Nietzsche directly in his reference to himself as the "segodniashnego dnia krikogubyi Zaratustra" ["shriek-lipped Zarathustra of the present day"] (see Jangfeldt 45).

word “stavliu” [“I put” or “I place”]. He thus identifies zero not only as nothingness, but as a location, one placed by the Nietzschean artist at the point of his destruction. Mayakovsky also refers to himself as the “zlatousteishii, / ch’e kazhdoe slovo / dushu novorodit” [“most golden-tongued, whose every word rebirths the soul”] (ibid., 1: 183). Leaving only himself at zero, he attributes to himself the power of “rebirthing,” which accords the potential for creation from nothingness that Blanchot describes.

In his *poema*, Mayakovsky attacks both the great writers of the past and their methods of expression. His declaration of “Books? / What are books!” parallels Bely’s rejection of traditional forms, presenting his “nihil” as the moment between the destruction of these old forms and the creation of new ones. Moreover, in rejecting the book, the medium in which he produces his own art, Mayakovsky mirrors Nechaev’s emptying of the self in order to precipitate a broader emptying of society. His statement also displays a key element of irony and self-awareness, as Mayakovsky never literally abandoned the format of the book, just as he and the Russian Futurist group made no real attempt to throw Pushkin from the steamship of modernity, instead using the rhetoric of negation to call for a new approach to art.[10] In this sense, *Oblako v shtanakh* reveals an important tension between nihilist action and nihilist rhetoric that lies at the center of the avant-garde zero. As an apocalyptic concept that posited the total negation of the past and the creation of a new future *ex nihilo*, zero divided avant-gardists between genuine utopian impulses (in the case of Bely) and figurative approximations (in the case of Mayakovsky). Just as Russian nihilists differed on the necessity and extent of destruction, the question as to whether zero required literal or merely figurative destruction became a central point of Russian avant-garde debate.

10 For a nuanced take on the Futurist reception of Pushkin, see Hacker; Vinitskii.

Gnedov and the Aesthetics of Zero

While Mayakovsky understood zero as a figurative space for the renewal of art, the Ego-Futurist poet Vasilisk Gnedov took a different approach in his book *Smert' iskusstvu* [*Death to Art*, 1913], which Chukovsky identified as a principal example of the avant-garde zero. Of the fifteen poems in Gnedov's thin volume, the first fourteen have a length of one line each and are written in a form of *zaum'* ["transrational language"] that resembles the early poems of Aleksei Kruchenykh.[11] As the book progresses, the poems become shorter and more difficult to interpret. The first, entitled "STONGA" [untranslatable], reads "Polynchaetsia—Pepel'e Dushu" [untranslatable] (Gnedov 1913, 3), while the fourteenth lacks a title and reads merely "Iu" [untranslatable] (ibid. 7).[12] The final poem consists only of a title, "Poema Kontsa (15)"; in a move that would become its author's greatest claim to fame, the remainder of the page is blank. Gnedov thus realizes his title *Smert' iskusstvu* by transitioning from avant-garde poetry to the end of poetry as such. In a clear example of Chukovsky's "Russian" nihilism, he peels back the layers of poetry to reveal nothingness, arriving at zero by means of a literal process of attrition.

Upon the publication of *Smert' iskusstvu*, critics such as Andrei Shemshurin pointed out parallels between Gnedov's minimalist style and that of the Symbolist poet Valery Briusov, who wrote the famous monostich "O zakroi svoi blednye nogi" ["Oh cover your pale legs"] in 1894 (see Shemshurin 21). In an interview that Briusov gave on the subject of his poem, he described his aims in the following manner:

> Если вам нравится какая-нибудь стихотворная пьеса, и я спрошу вас: что особенно вас в ней поразило?—вы мне назовете какой-нибудь

11 For a discussion of the commonalities and differences between the *zaum'* poetry of Gnedov and Kruchenykh, see Schmidt 8-9.

12 For an analysis of this poem in the context of Ego-Futurist aesthetic theory, see Nilsson.

> один стих. Не ясно ли отсюда, что идеалом для поэта должен быть такой один стих, который сказал бы душе читателя все то, что хотел сказать ему поэт?.. (Briusov 85)
>
> If you like a certain poetic work and I ask you "What in particular struck you about it?" you will name a certain one line. Does it not follow that the ideal for the poet must be such a single line that would communicate to the soul of the reader everything that the poet wanted to say to him?

In identifying the poetic ideal as a single line that "would communicate everything that the poet wanted to say," Briusov attempts to reduce art to its most economic form. In a process similar to Gnedov's, he seeks this form in the paring down of traditional elements. However, "O zakroi svoi blednye nogi" stops short of the destruction of such elements, and thus short of the zero-point of poetry. Gnedov reaches this zero-point in *Smert' iskusstvu*, extending Briusov's pursuit of minimalism into nothingness and finding the logical end of poetic economy in poetry without words. Creating a literal companion to Mayakovsky's "Books? / What are books!", he locates his ideal in non-verbality, the point where poetry ceases to exist.

Gnedov's literal understanding of zero received a theoretical foundation in the preface to his book, which was written by his fellow Ego-Futurist, the poet Ivan Ignatiev. There we read:

> Слово подошло к Пределу. […] Когда Человек был Один, Ему не нужно было способов сношения с прочими, ему подобными существами. Человек «говорил» только с Богом и это был так называемый «Рай». […] Пока мы коллективцы, общежители—слово нам необходимо. Когда же каждая особь преобразится в объединиченное «Ego»-Я,—слова отбросятся самособойно.
> (Ignatiev 1)
>
> The word has approached its limit. […] When Man was Alone, He had no need for means of intercourse with other beings similar to him. Man "spoke" only with God and this was the so-called "Eden." […] While we are collectivers, together-dwellers, the word is indispensible to us. But when every individual transforms into a self-unified "Ego"-I, words will

fall away themselvesly.

In this passage, Ignatiev discusses "Poema Kontsa" as a "limit" of the word, one that separates the verbality of "collectivers" and "together-dwellers" from a transcendent humanity with "no need for means of intercourse," i.e. for forms of language. Imagining words "falling away" in this transcendent state, Ignatiev shares Chukovsky's vision of nihilism as a reversion to emptiness. However, the emptiness that he describes represents more than the destruction of existing forms of art, marking a return to a primordial existence in a "so-called 'Eden.'" Describing a time when "Man 'spoke' only with God," Ignatiev presents Gnedov as the leading representative of a "budushchii […] put' Literatury" ["future path of Literature"] (ibid. 2) that will lead humanity back into that state.

Ignatiev characterizes humanity's original state as one of a "self-unified 'Ego'-I." He thus highlights the link between selfhood and the avant-garde zero, arguing that the ego begins at the point of destruction. His notion has much in common with *Oblako v shtanakh*, paralleling Mayakovsky's identification of self-affirmation with the placing of zero. Nonetheless, Ignatiev undertakes a more Ego-Futurist approach to zero, transforming the self into a tautological, "self-unified" entity, one that exists "Alone" and therefore has no need for Mayakovsky's "rebirth" in language out of nothingness. Instead of creating a new approach to the word, the Ego-Futurist self rejects it in favor of a mystical, non-verbal means of communication with God. For Ignatiev, Gnedov's zero marks the point where communication as we know it is overcome, vanishing along with its necessity.

Despite having reached the "death of art" with "Poema Kontsa," Gnedov did not

abandon his literary activities. He frequently gave public readings of *Smert' iskusstvu*; Ignatiev describes these readings in the following terms:

> Ему доводилось оголосивать все свои поэмы. Последнюю же он читал ритмо-движением. Рука чертила линии: направо слева и наоборот (второю уничтожилась первая, как плюс и минус резултатят минус). «Поэма Конца» и есть «Поэма Ничего», нуль, как изображается графически. (ibid. 2)
>
> He happened to envoice all of his poems. He read the last one by means of rhythmo-motion. He drew a line with his hand: from right to left and vice versa (the second canceled out the first, just as a plus and minus resultate a minus). "The Poem of the End" is indeed a "Poem of Nothing," zero as it is portrayed graphically.

Gnedov's "readings" of "Poema Kontsa" have significant thematic ties with the Nietzschean understanding of zero. His presentation of negation as two linear hand motions—a "plus" and a "minus," the second of which "cancels out the first"[13]—recalls the divided impulses of creation and destruction, particularly in the form in which Blanchot describes them. In a gesture that Ignatiev views as "zero as it is portrayed graphically," he cancels out creation with destruction, leaving nothing. These readings may have been influenced by Nietzsche's famous theory of the theater, outlined in *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* [1872], which consisted of a binary between the creative, ordered Apollonian principle and the destructive, chaotic Dionysian principle. Regardless, Gnedov was surely the first, and likely the only, member of the Russian avant-garde to explicitly approach zero from the perspective of performance.

In explaining Gnedov's performances of "Poema Kontsa" as "zero as it is portrayed graphically," Ignatiev draws attention to the most complex facet of the poet's approach to zero. Given his express declaration of the "death of art," i.e. the end of

13 Gnedov in fact performed "Poema Kontsa" differently on different occasions. For a discussion of these variants, see Sigov 120.

traditional forms of art, it is notable that he chose to expand his depiction of that death into performance, a further artistic form beyond poetry. Moreover, when Ignatiev refers to his performances of the poems of *Smert' iskusstvu*, which he claims have forged a path to the end of verbal communication, he uses the neologism "ogolosivat'" ["envoice"] and the verb "chitat'" ["to read"]. Invoking metaphors that denote the use of precisely such communication, he implies that it has been negated, yet not fully overcome. Indeed, Gnedov's performances of "Poema Kontsa" are unique for the Russian avant-garde in that they repeat the act of nullification instead of moving beyond it into new creation. Responding to the historical point in which, to adopt Blanchot's terms, "values no longer have values," he adopted a ritualistic approach. In emptying poetry of content in his performances, he created art "at zero" by reenacting this loss of meaning.

In 1914, Gnedov adopted a new approach to zero, exemplified by his poem "Poema nachala (Beloe)" ["Poem of the Beginning (White)"], which I cite and translate in the appendices to this chapter. As we see in its title, "Poema nachala" serves as an attempt to move beyond the reenactment of destruction into a new beginning. Gnedov presents this new beginning in the following terms: "Temnota rodit zvezdy, / Zvezdy rodiat tishinu. / Mesiats rozhdaetsia v skazke, / […] / Otkuda zhe belyi veter roditsia?" ["Darkness gives birth to stars, / Stars give birth to silence. / The moon is born in fairy tales, / […] / Whence is the white wind born?"] (Gnedov 1914, 7). All four lines demonstrate the importance of birth in "Poema nachala," as a form of the root "rod" ["birth"] appears in each of them. In reading creation out of nothingness as birth, Gnedov adopts a fitting response to his idea of the "death of art," as well as an approach similar to Mayakovsky's treatment of art after zero as "rebirth." He conceives this birth

as an emergence from "darkness" to the light of stars, a transformation of zero that he associates with the color white.[14] As we see in the lines "Beloe vse: / Beloe schast'e, belyi vostorg, / Beloe—beloe—chasto byloe" ["Everything is white: / White happiness, white joy, / White—white—frequently the past"] (ibid. 7), Gnedov understands birth as a total whiteness, creating an alternate image of the totality of zero, which he also reflects in the title of his poem. In revisiting the word "white" in various contexts throughout "Poema nachala," he revives his connection between zero and repetition, but from a different perspective, as he now repeats an act of creation instead of destruction. Given this shift away from destruction, his statement that "Stars give birth to silence" is particularly significant, as it shows that he now associates silence with creation as well.

In a further point of interest, the line "White—white—frequently the past" associates white with the past traditions that Gnedov had sought to destroy in "Poema Kontsa." The poet thus associates rebirth with a return by way of a new beginning. We see this clearly when he writes that "Radost' nesu i belo-bylogo" ["I carry the joy of the white-past as well"] (ibid. 8), depicting himself as carrying the past into new creation. As a sign of this return, numerous lines ("Tvoe beloe telo, a ia—pokryvalo" ["Your white body, and I am the blanket"], "Ia, nenagliadnaia, radost' beskryluiu / Tikho na grud' tebe perel'iu" ["I, my beloved, will quietly pour / Wingless joy across your breast"], "Ty u menia lezhish' na belykh berezkakh, / Tvoi potselui rastaial nad lesom: / Belyi medved' tseluetsia s belym vetrom" ["You lie by me in the white birch trees, / Your kiss melted above the forest: / A polar bear is kissing the white wind"] (ibid. 8)) feature a return of communication between people, which Gnedov depicts primarily through an amorous

14 Gnedov may be alluding to the importance of white for Bely's treatment of zero, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

encounter. While the communication presented remains non-verbal, the overt eroticism of "Poema nachala" is far removed from the Ego-Futurist idea of "self-unification."[15] As Crispin Brooks notes, the poem's final stanza, "My nitku porvali i set' vyshivaem... / Sviazhem nitku, / Kak belyi veter viazhet volosy Nashy" ["We tore the thread and we sew a net... / We tie the thread / Like the white wind ties Our hair"] (ibid. 8), transforms the Ego-Futurist "I" into a new "We" (see Brooks 68).[16] In the line "We tie the thread," the word "We" becomes a metaphor for a renewed connection between people. Meanwhile, "We tore the thread and we sew a net" presents this metaphor as one of creation following destruction, as the poet and his lover tear the thread before using it to sew. Subsequently, they are themselves "tied" by the wind in the form of the color white. For Gnedov, white serves as a unifying principle, restoring ties between people and between past and future, thus finding a utopian unity within creative destruction.

It should be noted that "Poema nachala" is a far more traditional poem than the ones found in *Smert' iskusstvu*. Aside from the word "tomi" ["languishes"] there are no neologisms, and we find several instances of meter and rhyme. As Henrike Schmidt points out, "This lyric poem, notable for its 'classical' form […], represents a return to language as a means of poetic expression" (Schmidt 271). Indeed, the juxtaposition of "beloe" ["white"] and "byloe" ["the past"], the means by which Gnedov creates his image of a utopian future, draws on sound play, a very traditional means of creating meaning in poetry. While Gnedov literalizes the nihilist rhetorical strategy of Russian Futurism in order to reach zero in *Smert' iskusstvu*, he finds a way out of zero in "Poema nachala" by means of a figurative approach. As a return to traditional poetry, "Poema

15 Gnedov's epigraph, "O, mech vash sladok, Pavel Shirokov" ["O, how sweet is your sword, Pavel Shirokov"], features erotic undertones as well.

16 The capitalization of "We" gives it particular force.

nachala" represents the other side of the problem discussed in relation to Mayakovsky's *Oblako v shtanakh*. Following literal destruction, it raises the question as to whether genuine utopian creation is possible after zero.

Conclusion. The Problem of Creation

In his manifesto "Ot kubizma k suprematizmu" ["From Cubism to Suprematism," 1915], Malevich wrote that, in his search for new forms, he "preobrazilsia v nul' formy i vyshel za 0—1" ["transformed [himself] into the zero of form and went beyond 0 to 1"] (Malevich 1995, 1: 34). In this chapter, I have sought to complicate the idea of zero beyond the simplicity of this equation, in which destruction is directly followed by creation *ex nihilo*. Discussing various ways in which nihilists and avant-gardists engaged with zero, I have shown that some diverged from Malevich's approach substantially, seeking solutions in inaction or in zero itself, while others found the transition beyond zero to be problematic. The case of Vasilisk Gnedov is particularly telling. Referring to his "Poema Kontsa," Brooks writes that "by following Futurist aesthetics through to their logical conclusion, Gnedov created a prototype anti-art text" (Brooks 52). Departing from this common interpretation, I would argue that Gnedov may have sought a conclusion to Futurist aesthetics, yet his approach in fact served as a new beginning for Russian avant-garde art. In reading zero literally, he opened new questions for Futurism, ones that failed to lead him to utopian creation, but nonetheless would produce significant reactions from avant-gardists who subsequently turned to the subject.

In her discussion of Nietzsche and the Russian avant-garde, Gurianova introduced creative destruction in terms of a "freedom to create" *ex nihilo*. However, while Nietzsche's idea certainly allows for this utopian possibility, the case of Gnedov

demonstrates that the freedom to create from zero is not equivalent to the ability to do so. As of 1915, Malevich understood utopian creation as a natural extension of destruction; as a result, he did not question his ability to exit the zero-point. Meanwhile, further writers and artists, several of whom will appear prominently in this project, challenged the natural and inevitable escape from zero, turning Gnedov's problematization of creation into a central focus of Russian avant-garde debate. This complication of creation from zero would additionally be undertaken by the Symbolist writer Andrei Bely, the subject of the next chapter, who focused his approach on what he saw as the experiential, rather than transitional, nature of the concept.

APPENDIX 1

ПОЭМА НАЧАЛА.

(Белое).

О, меч ваш сладок, Павел Широков.

Темнота родит звезды,
Звезды родят тишину.
Месяц рождается в сказке,
Сказки—томи любви.
Откуда же белый ветер родится?
Из сказок?—
Может, из сказок;
Может, из белых ночей;
Может, из белого тела;
Может, из томных очей.

Все так и реет,
Все так и веет,
Все так и сеет,
Белое все:
Белое счастье, белый восторг,
Белое—белое—часто былое...

Радость несу и бело-былого,
Белое лью и белым смотрю—
И душу, и радость свою обеляю.
Мой восторг, радость, мой белый чертог—
Твое белое тело, а я—покрывало;
Приникнем, и белое будет для нас покрывало—
Не саван, а белый покров...

Ивы смотрели, плакали ивы,
Горы взглянули—в счастьи уснули,
Месяц по сказке поплыл.
Я, ненаглядная, радость бескрылую
Тихо на грудь тебе перелью.

О волны мои сарафаном овитые,
Океан полевых маргариток,
Вихревой аромат обнаженной сирени!
А тебя для меня обнажил белый ветер,
Обнажил, положил, аксамитом укрыл.
Ты у меня лежишь на белых березках,

Твой поцелуй растаял над лесом:
Белый медведь целуется с белым ветром.

Мы нитку порвали и сеть вышиваем...
Свяжем нитку,
Как белый ветер вяжет волосы Наши!
(Gnedov 1914, 7-8)

APPENDIX 2

POEM OF THE BEGINNING.

(White.)

O, how sweet is your sword, Pavel Shirokov.

Darkness gives birth to stars,
Stars give birth to silence.
The moon is born in fairy tales,
Fairy tales are the languishes of love.
Whence is the white wind born?
From fairy tales?
Perhaps from fairy tales;
Perhaps from white nights;
Perhaps from a white body;
Perhaps from languishing eyes.

And so everything soars,
And so everything spreads,
And so everything sows,
Everything is white:
White happiness, white joy,
White—white—frequently the past…

I carry the joy of the white-past as well,
I pour white and I see in white—
I whiten my soul and my joy.
My delight, joy, my white chamber—
Your white body, and I am the blanket;
We descend, and white will be the blanket for us—
Not a shroud, but a white veil...

The willows watched, the willows cried,
The hills glanced—they fell asleep in happiness,
The moon swam through a fairy tale.
I, my beloved, will quietly pour
Wingless joy across your breast.

O my waves woven with tunic,
Ocean of daisies in the field,
Elemental aroma of the bare lilac!
And the white wind stripped you bare for me,
Stripped you bare, laid you down, covered you with samite.
You lie by me in the white birch trees,

Your kiss melted above the forest:
A polar bear is kissing the white wind.

We tore the thread and we sew a net...
We tie the thread
Like the white wind ties Our hair!

CHAPTER TWO

Numerical Terror. Andrei Bely and the Experience of Zero

Zero and the Pyramids

Perhaps influenced by his famous mathematician father, Andrei Bely saw the avant-garde zero as a more distinctly mathematical concept than the writers discussed in chapter one.[1] We see this clearly in the following passage from his novel *Peterburg* [*Petersburg*, 1913-14[2]]:

> В пирамиде есть что-то, превышающее все представления человека; пирамида есть бред геометрии, то есть бред, […] измеряемый цифрами. / Есть цифровый ужас—ужас тридцати друг к другу приставленных знаков, где знак есть, разумеется, ноль; […] зачеркните вы единицу, и провалятся тридцать нолей. / Будет—ноль. / В единице также нет ужаса; сама по себе единица—ничтожество […]. Но единица плюс тридцать нолей образуется в безобразие пенталлиона […]. (Belyi 2004, 327)
>
> There is something in the pyramid that exceeds all of man's understanding; the pyramid is a delirium of geometry, i.e. a delirium that is […] measured by numbers. / There is a numerical terror—the terror of thirty digits placed back to back, where the digit is, of course, zero; […] cross out the one, and the thirty zeros will disappear. / There will be zero. / There is no terror in a one either; a one by itself is a nonentity […]. But a one plus thirty zeros transforms into the hideousness of a quintillion.

Bely envisions the mathematical figure of the pyramid as a "delirium of geometry," a form so immense that it exceeds our ability to comprehend it, yet one that can nonetheless be "measured by numbers." The "delirious" nature of the pyramid relates to the fact that it reveals a gap between presentation and comprehension, as we are capable of indicating it in mathematical form, but not of understanding what that form represents.

1 Bely was the son of the mathematician Nikolai Vasilievich Bugaev.

2 *Peterburg* was first published in a series of three installments between 1913 and 1914 and then reworked for subsequent publications in 1922 and 1928. In order to maintain the chronology of my argument in regard to both Bely and the avant-garde zero, I refer to the first version of *Peterburg* throughout. For further discussion of the variants of Bely's novel, see Gottlieb; Dolgopolov 277-310.

This gap produces a sensation that Bely terms "numerical terror," a fear that stems from the mathematical potential of representing the infinite or near-infinite through concrete means.

As an example of numerical terror, Bely introduces the quintillion—a term for the number 10^{30}, which he describes as "thirty digits placed back to back, where the digit is zero." In discussing this number, he notes that, taken alone, both its one and its individual zeros amount to "nonentities," and therefore nothing worthy of terror. However, when the zeros are placed behind the one, they transform it into an impossibly large number. Bely characterizes this figure as the "hideousness of a quintillion," noting that while each of its individual parts is comprehensible, the transcendent whole that they form when placed together exceeds all understanding, producing a feeling of terror. Here, zero plays a dual role, representing both the insignificance of mathematical form and the enormity that it is capable of representing. As the concrete measurement of the infinity of the pyramid, it becomes a symbol for the terror that we experience in relation to the presentation of this infinity.

Bely's reading of the pyramid relates in part to biographical experience. In 1911, he traveled to Egypt, where he saw the ancient pyramids and described them in a letter to Aleksei Petrovsky as "bezumie i uzhas" ["madness and terror"] (Belyi and Petrovskii 153). His letter reflects a sustained interest in the form of the pyramid as a symbol of overwhelming experience. However, biography offers less aid in addressing the question of why Bely chose to associate this experience with a mathematical pyramid in *Peterburg*, or how it came to be specifically linked with the concept of zero in his mind. The role of zero in Bely's novel has been noted by several scholars (see Maguire and

Malmstad 121, 124-25; Langer 292-96; Zink 222-37; Firtich 2000; Firtich 2009), yet it also appears in a series of less-studied works by Bely from 1902 onward, where it is associated with a similar sense of metaphysical terror. In this chapter, I will examine zero as a persistent theme in Bely's writing, tracing his engagement with the concept from his early works through *Peterburg*. Building on the themes introduced in the passage above, I will focus on zero's role as experience, demonstrating its significance both for Bely's understanding of metaphysics, as well as for the generation of avant-gardists who would subsequently turn to zero to address their own philosophical and aesthetic concerns.

Mathematics as Metaphysics

Bely's association between metaphysics and a mathematical zero can be traced back to early works such as his third "symphony"[3] (*Vozvrat* [*The Return*, 1902]) and his essay "Sviashchennye tsveta" ["Sacred Colors," 1903].[4] The latter work displays a particularly clear metaphysical bent, beginning with a quote from the First Epistle of John:

> «Бог есть свет и нет в Нем никакой тьмы». Свет отличается от цвета полнотою заключенных в него цветов. Цвет есть свет, в том или другом отношении ограниченный тьмою. Отсюда феноменальность цвета. […] Бесконечное может быть символизовано бесконечностью цветов, заключающихся в луче белого света. […] Мы существа, созданные по образу и подобию Бога, в глубочайшем начале нашего бытия обращены к свету. Вот почему окончательная противоположность божественности открывается нам *условно* ограничением цвета до полного его отсутствия. Если белый цвет—символ воплощенной полноты бытия, черный—символ небытия, хаоса […]. (Belyi 1911, 115)
>
> "God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all." Light differs from color in the fullness of colors that it contains within itself. Color is light

3 For an analysis of Bely's genre of the symphony, see Kovač; Alexandrov 5-67; Keys.
4 For an overview of the role of color symbolism in Bely's works, see Cioran; Postoutenko.

> that is in one way or another limited by darkness. This gives us a phenomenality of color. […] The infinite can be symbolized by the infinity of colors contained in a ray of white light. […] We are beings created in the likeness of God, and in the deepest foundation of our being oriented toward the light. That is why the polar opposite of godliness appears to us *conventionally* as the limitation of color to its complete absence. If the color white is the symbol of the incarnated fullness of being, then black is the symbol of nonexistence and chaos […].

In this passage, Bely posits that what we experience as the "phenomenality of color"—that is, our physical perception of color—has its origins in the Epistle's opposition between light and darkness.[5] According to his argument, we experience the light of God in symbolic form as the color white, which contains all existing colors within itself, while we perceive darkness, the "polar opposite of godliness," as black, the absence of all color. Between the two poles, each individual color consists of "light that is in one way or another limited by darkness," which transforms the binary of black and white into a continuum of color. In this context, we see the significance of what Bely describes as humanity's "orientation toward the light." In presenting humanity as existing not within the light of God, but rather somewhere along the continuum, he creates potential for progress toward light or white, and thus toward the destination they ultimately represent: the "fullness of being" in God.

The first color that appears along the continuum between black and white is gray. Bely describes its appearance in the world in the following manner:

> Черный цвет феноменально определяет зло, как начало, нарушающее полноту бытия, придающее ему призрачность. Воплощение небытия в бытие […] символизирует серый цвет. И поскольку серый цвет создается отношением черного к белому, постольку возможное для нас определение зла заключается в относительной серединности, двусмысленности. […] Исходя из характера серого цвета, мы

5 The fuller context of Bely's quotation reads: "This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. / If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth." (1 John 1: 5-6, King James Bible)

> постигаем реальное действие зла. Это действие заключается в возведении к сущности отношения без относящихся. Такое отношение—нуль, машина, созданная из вихрей пыли и пепла, крутящаяся неизвестно зачем и почему. (Belyi 1911, 115-16)
>
> The color black defines evil phenomenally, as the principle that disrupts the fullness of being and makes it illusory. The embodiment of nonexistence into existence […] is symbolized by the color gray. And to the extent that the color gray is created by a relationship between black and white, this makes possible a definition of evil that consists of relative in-betweenness and ambiguity. […] Originating from the character of the color gray, we perceive the real effect of evil. This effect consists of the bringing into being of a relation without things related. A relation of this sort is a zero, a machine made from whirlwinds of dust and ash, spinning for unknown purposes and reasons.

In describing the intersection of black and white as an "embodiment of nonexistence into existence," Bely raises a problem of overt metaphysical and religious significance. Indeed, turning to the concepts of good and evil for the first time in his essay, he refers to gray, the color that results, as the "real effect of evil." His introduction of these concepts creates a new binary in which gray stands in opposition to the good of white. It is notable that instead of associating this evil with the chaos and nonexistence of black, Bely defines it in other terms. Characterizing evil as a "zero," he stresses a quality of "in-betweenness" that places it in contrast to both the being represented by white and the non-being represented by black. Bely's evil lies not in nonexistence, but in a neutrality of existence, in a zero that represents an indeterminate place between light and darkness.

For Bely, the neutrality of zero also implies an "illusoriness" of being, which creates the impression of insubstantiality and insignificance. We see this impression reflected in his discussion of a "machine made from whirlwinds of dust and ash, spinning for unknown purposes and reasons." Variants of the phrase "dust and ash" appear several times in the bible, one example being the following lines from Genesis 18:27: "And

Abraham answered and said, Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, which am but dust and ashes." Here, as elsewhere, the phrase refers to the insubstantiality of human life before God and eternity. Yet while this and other similar biblical passages posit humanity's ability to plead its case, however insignificant, before a greater power, Bely's zero-relationship eliminates such a possibility. His reference to humanity's relation to the universe as a "machine" presents an image of the world in which God has been obscured by a cold, mathematical eternity. In the face of a neutral zero, humanity lacks even a minimal degree of recourse.

In describing zero as a machine "spinning for unknown purposes [*zachem*] and reasons [*pochemu*]," Bely also juxtaposes it with the progress toward God that he discusses at the beginning of his essay. As a result of its spinning, the machine is constantly in motion; however, with an origin and destination ("pochemu" and "zachem") unknown to humanity, it remains perpetually in the same place, demonstrating no sign of a forward impulse. In this sense, zero's lack of forward motion echoes its sense of insignificance, representing insubstantiality as a lack of development. Remaining in place, it operates as a non-linear diversion along humanity's path. Bely thus presents zero as a spatial as well as a metaphysical concept. In the same manner as gray is opposed to both black and white, zero is opposed in its spinning stasis to the rest of the continuum of color, and as such it challenges humanity's potential for progress along it.

Bely further expands upon the consequences of zero's spatial properties in his discussion of the concept as a "relation without things related":

> положим, существует нечто безотносительное; тогда проявление безотносительного совершается особого рода измерением; назовем это измерение глубинным, а противоположное ему плоскостным. Когда для измерения предметов мы восстановляем три координатных

> оси, то от нас зависит одну из трех осей назвать измерением глубины […]. От нас зависит выбор координатных осей. Если безотносительное глубоко сравнительно с относительным, то выбор глубины и плоскости с нашей стороны всегда относителен. Мы уподобляемся точке пересечения координатных осей. Мы—начало координат. […] Такая логика […] [в]се срывает и уносит... но никуда не уносит […]. (ibid. 116)
>
> let us assume that there exists something absolute [literally "non-relational"—JS]; in this case, its manifestation must occur in a dimension of a special kind: let us call this dimension depth, and its opposite flatness. When, in order to measure objects, we create three coordinate axes, it depends upon us to name one of them the dimension of depth […]. The determination of the axes depends upon us. If the absolute is profoundly commensurate with the relative, then the choice of axes on our part is always relative. We become like the point of intersection of the coordinate axes. We are the point of origin. […] This kind of logic […] [t]ears everything apart and carries it away... but does not carry it anywhere […].

Bely discusses the relation without things related by means of the mathematical metaphor of a "non-relational" or "absolute," by which he means a point that exists alone in space. In order to define the location of any point, he notes, it must be expressed with respect to a "coordinate system" (x, y, z), whose axes he identifies in terms of "glubina, shirina i dlina" ["depth, length and width"] (ibid. 116), as well as relative to a "point of origin": (0, 0, 0). However, a point that exists alone in space by definition lacks any frame of reference of this sort. As a result, anyone who seeks to define its location in the coordinate system must do so "relatively." In other words, one must oneself become the point of origin, the zero-point of measurement from which the absolute is defined.

In characterizing zero as a relation without things related, Bely likens it to a point of total subjectivization, since the positing of an absolute "depends upon us" rather than upon objective factors. He writes that "if the absolute is profoundly commensurate with the relative, then the choice of axes on our part is always relative," meaning that while zero does not deny the existence of absolutes, it represents a subjective perspectival point

from which knowledge of them becomes impossible. In this sense, zero connects the impression of insubstantiality with the impossibility of knowledge outside the self. Describing zero as a concept that "tears everything apart and carries it away... but does not carry it anywhere," Bely returns to its illusory and static nature in the context of a destruction of objective knowledge. He argues that zero offers no real path for humanity, instead "tearing apart" all other paths. For anyone located at this point, a path to the fullness of being appears to be impossible, as its location has been obscured by the destructive subjectivity of zero.

Zero as Point of Origin

Although Bely uses zero to describe the problem of progress in total relativism, he also sees within the concept a potential solution to this problem:

> Казалось бы,—единственное бегство—в себя. Но «Я»—это единственное спасение—оказывается только черной пропастью […]. И вот чувствуешь, как вечно проваливаешься—со всеми призраками, призрак со всеми нулями нуль <так!>.[6] […] Так что мир приближается к нулю, и уже нуль […]. Кто скажет, что это действительно бездна, тот отношение примет за сущность. […] Не следует бояться бунтующего хаоса. […] Нужно вступить во мрак, чтобы выйти из него. (ibid. 116-17)
>
> It would seem that the only escape is into oneself. However, the "I"—the only salvation—turns out only to be a black chasm […]. And so you feel that you are falling eternally—a phantom with all of the other phantoms, a zero with all of the other zeros. […] So the world is approaching zero, and is already zero. […] Whoever says that this is truly an abyss mistakes the relation for reality. […] We should not fear the rebellious chaos. […] We must enter the darkness in order to exit from it.

Bely views zero as particularly dangerous, as its negation of objective measurement encourages an "escape into oneself." Returning to the Christian rhetoric of the opening

6 There appears to be a typographical error here. Presumably, this line should read: "I vot chuvstvuesh', kak vechno provalivaesh'sia—so vsemi prizrakami prizrak, so vsemi nuliami nul'."

of his essay, he discusses this escape as an illusory "salvation," drawing a contrast with genuine salvation in the light of God. With this contrast, Bely argues that the path to enlightenment cannot be found in the "I," which ultimately represents a "chasm" rather than an exit, a state of entrapment in which one becomes "a phantom with all of the other phantoms, a zero with all of the other zeros." In this image of multiplying zeros, he equates the retreat into the "I" with a propagation of illusoriness and an eradication of knowledge and significance.

Nonetheless, Bely views the retreat into relativism not as an inevitability, but as a misunderstanding. Arguing that "whoever says that this is truly an abyss mistakes the relation for reality," he posits that the relation without things related can be overcome and that a genuinely objective reality can be attained. Describing the means of accomplishing this feat, he writes that humanity "must enter the darkness in order to exit from it," a method of confronting subjectivity that brings out an important dualism in his understanding of zero. A reading of zero as the relation without things related treats the subjective "I" as the origin of all human experience. Resulting in the perception that "the world is zero," since nothing objective can be known beyond the zero-point, this reading transforms zero into a symbol of infinite nothingness. However, Bely's alternate reading of zero as a point of origin equates the concept with a mathematical beginning out of which all other numbers emerge. In arguing that we must enter the chaos of zero in order to move beyond it, he presents this potential for constructive creation as the solution to the threat of relativism. He thus treats zero not only as a state of destructive subjectivity, but as a perspectival point from which the path of spiritual progress toward an absolute can begin.

Given Bely's dual reading of the concept of zero, it is significant that the initial stages of progress occur within zero itself:

> Первое сияние, разрезающее мрак, окрашено желто-бурым зловещим налетом пыли. Этот зловещий отблеск хорошо знаком всем пробуждающимся, находящимся между сном и действительностью. Горе тому, кто не рассеет этот зловещий отблеск преодолением хаоса. (ibid. 117)
>
> The first radiance that cuts through the darkness has the hue of an ominous yellowish-brown layer of dust. This ominous sheen is well-known to those in the process of awaking who are between dream and reality. Woe betide him who does not disperse this ominous sheen by overcoming chaos.

Rather than present "yellowish-brown" as an independent stage, Bely describes it merely as an "ominous sheen" of the previous one, a layer of the dust that represents the stage of gray. The reason for this categorization becomes clear when he explains that the color represents a state "between dream and reality." Yellow does not yet signify an "overcoming of chaos," but merely a different relation to it, the moment where one becomes conscious of the fact that the abyss of subjectivity is an illusion. In placing yellow within zero, Bely presents the zero-point not merely as a stage to be overcome, but also as a space with transformative power. Meanwhile, red represents a third and final relation to chaos. Bely describes it as the "poslednii predel otnositel'nosti" ["final limit of relativism"] (ibid. 120), explaining it as "otnositel'nost' bor'by mezhdu Bogom i diavolom" ["relativity in the battle between God and the devil"] (ibid. 122). Red symbolizes a relation in which the influence of light and darkness remains equal, yet consciousness has already begun to develop into action. The "battle" that takes place in this phase demonstrates that measurable progress, i.e. progress beyond zero, begins only after action within and against it.

Following red, Bely discusses a series of intermediate colors that culminate in white, which signifies humanity's attainment of the fullness of being. Significantly, he describes this achievement as occurring by means of a "kol'tso vozvrata" ["ring of return"] (ibid. 126) in which "nachalo vremen slivaetsia s kontsom" ["the beginning of time merges with the end"] (ibid. 126). In this cyclical ending, the disruption of humanity's linear course of progress by zero acquires new meaning. In positing a path back to the beginning by means of the end, Bely attributes a transformative quality to the cyclicity of zero. Envisioning zero equally as a state of nothingness and a mathematical point of origin, he finds within it both the end of purely linear progress and the potential for progress in return. He thus demonstrates that the idea of zero contains within itself not only the loss of the absoluteness of being, but the path to its restoration—a new beginning within the end.

The Terror of Zero

While "Sviashchennye tsveta" depicts humanity's path to the fullness of being, *Vozvrat* presents zero as a more individual experience. As the title of Bely's symphony implies, the roots of this experience lie in a cyclicity similar to that of his essay. Meanwhile, as numerous scholars have noted (see, for example, Alexandrov 48), Bely's treatment of cyclicity also has strong roots in the Nietzschean concept of "eternal return" (in Russian, *vechnyi vozvrat* or *vechnoe vozvrashchenie*), an idea that experienced great popularity in Russia and Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century. In his writings on eternal return, Nietzsche offered a vision of life in which there were infinite reiterations, yet finite possibilities, meaning that everything had potentially already

occurred and would occur again. In *The Gay Science* [1882], he described the experience of such a vision in the following manner: "If this thought gained possession of you, it would change you as you are or perhaps crush you. The question in each and every thing, 'Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?' would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight" (Nietzsche 1974, 274).[7] In this quote, Nietzsche presents eternal return as a philosophical test, one in which one must live one's life as if one had to relive it in the same manner infinite times.

In approaching the idea of return on an individual level, Bely ostensibly seeks to realize Nietzsche's test in *Vozvrat*. His symphony opens on an otherworldly beach set in close proximity to "Vechnost'" ["Eternity"] (Belyi 1905, 13), i.e. to the experience of all of time at once. There, a child encounters a mysterious old man, who laments: "On dolzhen povtorit'isa… Sluchitsia odno iz nezhnuznykh povtorenii ego… […] vozniknet on dlia vechnykh povtorenii" ["He must repeat… One of his unnecessary repetitions will occur… […] he will arise for eternal repetitions"] (ibid. 25-28). In "arising for eternal repetitions," the child literally undergoes the experience described by Nietzsche. However, as we see in the old man's reference to the child's repetitions not just as eternal, but as "unnecessary," Bely pursues his own vision of the test to different ends than the philosopher. By introducing a question of necessity lacking in Nietzsche's theory, he shifts the focus of eternal return from philosophical imperative to a test of the purposefulness of life, an idea that accords with his treatment of the theme of progress in "Sviashchennye tsveta."

Falling asleep, the child awakes into a new life as Yevgeny Khandrikov, a physics

7 This translation belongs to Walter Kaufmann.

student in Bely's contemporary Moscow. Khandrikov leads an unhappy existence,[8] residing in a world characterized by an absence of the necessity discussed by the old man:

> Говорил. […] А Вечность взывала и в душе, и в окнах лаборатории. / Говорил: «Работаю на Ивана. Иван на Петра. А Петр на меня. Души свои отдаем друг за друга». / «Остаемся бездушными, получая лишь необходимое право на существование»... / «Получая нуль, становимся нулями. Сумма нулей—нуль»... / «Это – ужас»...
> (Belyi 1905, 54)

> He spoke. […] And Eternity called out in [his] soul and in the windows of the laboratory. / He spoke: "I'm working for Ivan. Ivan's working for Pyotr. And Pyotr's working for me. We give our souls to each other." / "We are left soulless, receiving only the unavoidable right to exist..." […] "Receiving zero, we become zeros. The sum of the zeros is zero..." / "That's terrifying [literally "terror"—JS]..."

In contrast with the eternity that "calls out in his soul," Khandrikov views his temporal existence as a series of empty exchanges. Arguing that he and his colleagues give their "souls" to their work and to each other, he notes that they receive in return "only the indispensable right to exist," i.e. the bare material support for that existence. This exchange leaves them "soulless," as Khandrikov sees its materiality as rendering access to the eternal impossible. Significantly, Bely juxtaposes the eternal with localized existence in this passage by introducing two different forms of necessity, represented respectively by the words "nuzhnyi" ["necessary"], which we encountered earlier, and "neobkhodimyi" ["indispensable," or literally "unavoidable"], which we find in Khandrikov's monologue. If the former term represents the metaphysical necessity that applies to the child at the beginning of the symphony, then the latter stands for a material necessity that defines Khandrikov's existence and stands in sharp contrast to metaphysics.

8 In his lack of contentment with the world, Khandrikov reveals a connection with his namesake, Pushkin's Yevgeny Onegin. The characters share a first name as well as the epithet *khandra* ["spleen"], a prominent motif in Pushkin's novel.

Recoding his statement that "we give our souls to each other / we are left soulless" as "receiving zero, we become zeros," Khandrikov creates an association between zero and the negation of metaphysical necessity. His formulation alludes to the concept's mathematical properties, as zero reduces the value of any number to zero in multiplication. When Khandrikov notes that "the sum of the zeros is zero," we see a mathematical exchange that results not only in the displacement of spiritual content, but in its total eradication. Here, Khandrikov presents zero as a spiritual malaise capable of spreading and annihilating all sense of purpose. His experience of an overwhelming spread of nothingness leads him to describe zero as "terror," an emotional response that apparently alludes to Nietzsche's characterization of eternal return as an "ungeheurer Augenblick" ["terrible/monstrous moment"] (Nietzsche 1954, 2: 202).[9] Following Nietzsche's lead, Bely depicts the experience of eternal return as the individual experience of powerlessness to impact eternity. His treatment of the terror of zero shows Khandrikov ill-prepared to withstand the consequences of this "greatest weight" as described by the philosopher.

Between Linearity and Cyclicity

In one of the numerous philosophical statements that he makes throughout *Vozvrat*, Khandrikov associates the cyclicity of Nietzsche's return with zero:

> Все неопределенно. Самая точная наука породила на свет теорию *вероятностей* и *неопределенных уравнений*. Самая точная наука—наука самая относительная. Но отношение без относящихся—нуль. / Все течет. Несется. Мчится на туманных кругах. Огромный смерч мира несет в буревых объятиях всякую жизнь. Впереди него пустота. И сзади то же. / Куда он примчится? (Belyi 1905, 83-84)

9 Kaufmann translates this as "tremendous moment" (Nietzsche 1974, 273), but the word "ungeheurer" also implies a sense of terror upon which Bely clearly draws.

> Everything is undetermined. The most precise science gave birth to the theory of *probability* and *indeterminate equations*. The most precise science is the most relative. But a relation without things related is zero. / Everything is flowing. Rushing. Tearing along in nebulous circles. The massive whirlwind of the world carries all life in its stormy embraces. Before it is emptiness. Behind it the same. / Where will it rush off to?

In a metaphor familiar from "Sviashchennye tsveta," Khandrikov compares the contemporary experience of the world to a spinning "whirlwind." His description of this whirlwind as "tearing along in nebulous circles" emphasizes its stasis in cyclicity. Meanwhile, in describing the whirlwind as being flanked by "emptiness" in front and behind, he rules out any potential for linear progress in the world that the whirlwind represents. In the context of this metaphor, Khandrikov addresses the current state of the sciences, critiquing them for failing to replace the defunct model of linearity. He notes that even the "most precise science," mathematics, has abandoned precision, leading only to theories based around the relativistic concept of "indeterminate equations." Far from mapping progress, he argues, the sciences have merely succeeded in arriving at a subjective "zero," the same "relation without things related" that we recall from "Sviashchennye tsveta." Reinforcing the state of existential "indetermacy" that he associates with the whirlwind, they fail to produce a necessity-based path out of zero.

Although Khandrikov associates the whirlwind with spiritual stasis, it is notable that this metaphor allows for a different kind of movement beyond the one analyzed above. In arguing that the whirlwind carries "all of life" along its path, he raises the question "Where will it rush to?" In doing so, he introduces the possibility that while movement within the whirlwind is cyclical and bound to the logic of eternal return, the whirlwind itself is capable of forward motion. His question alludes to Gogol's *troika*

metaphor from the end of *Dead Souls*, which is reinforced by his repetition of the words "nestis'" ["to rush or soar"] and "mchat'sia" ["to tear along"]:

> Не так ли и ты, Русь, что бойкая необгонимая тройка, *несешься*? […] Эх, кони, кони, что за кони! […] Заслышали с вышины знакомую песню […] и, почти не тронув копытами земли, превратились в одни вытянутые линии, летящие по воздуху, и *мчится*, вся вдохновенная богом!.. *Русь, куда ж несешься ты, дай ответ?*
> (Gogol' 1937, 6: 247, my italics)

> And art not thou, my Russia, *soaring* along like a spirited, never-to-be outdistanced troika? […] Ah, these steeds, these steeds, what steeds they are! […] Ye have caught the familiar song coming down to you from above […] and, almost without touching earth with your hoofs, ye have become all transformed into straight lines cleaving the air, and the troika *tears along*, all-inspired by God! . . . *Whither art thou soaring away to, then, Russia?* (Gogol' 1996, 248, my italics)[10]

Given his profound doubts regarding humanity's path, it seems unlikely that Khandrikov is aware of the famous metaphor for divinely-inspired progress that serves as a subtext for his discussion. Nonetheless, his unintentional allusion attributes a grandeur to humanity's future that belies the existential uncertainty of the whirlwind. In bypassing his protagonist, Bely reveals that the zero of the whirlwind may indeed contain a means of advancement within itself, albeit one that lies beyond the pursuit of linear progress.

Additional statements by Khandrikov reflect a similar potential for advancement in zero despite its rejection of linearity:

> Хандриков прыгнул в конку. […] Сквозь бледные стекла созерцал жавшихся друг к другу пассажиров. […] Все они были, бесспорно, разных образов мысли, но сошлись в одном пункте—у Ильинских ворот. […] Он думал: «Быть может, наш мир—это только конка, везомая тощими лошадьми вдоль бесконечных рельсов. И мы, пассажиры, скоро разойдемся по разным вселенным...»
> (Belyi 1905, 55)

> Khandrikov leapt into the omnibus. […] Through the dim glass, he contemplated the passengers, who were crowded together. […] All of

10 This translation belongs to Bernard Guilbert Guerney.

> them, undoubtedly, had different molds of thought, yet they came together at one point—at the Ilinsky Gates. […] He thought: "Perhaps our world is merely an omnibus driven by lean horses along endless rails. And we, the passengers, will soon go our separate ways into various universes."

In a further allusion to Gogol's horse-run *troika*, Khandrikov presents the world as "merely an omnibus driven by lean horses along endless rails," producing a new metaphor for historical advancement based in actual human experience. Despite its subtext, his metaphor again reflects a skeptical view of progress. Khandrikov envisions people as passengers traveling in an unknown direction, while the passive voice of "driven by lean horses" reduces their potential for agency. Moreover, in stating that "we, the passengers, will soon go our separate ways into various universes," he rejects the idea that this collective "we" even entails unity. While progress is typically understood as a united movement toward a goal, he interprets this impression as no more than the momentary, and possibly coincidental, convergence of disparate paths.

Through his metaphor of the omnibus, Khandrikov poses a problem similar to that of the relation without things related in "Sviashchennye tsveta." In delimiting interaction between individuals to an intersection (in this case, at the Ilinsky Gates), he maps the human experience of the world as a coordinate system with a point of origin. In this system, the path of any individual can be known only to the extent of his or her intersection with another path, as there exist no external points against which subjective knowledge can be defined. Thus, human knowledge is again reduced to a zero-point. However, while zero functions as a retreat into total subjectivity in "Sviashchennye tsveta," in *Vozvrat* it also serves as a space for communion with others making a similar retreat. When Khandrikov argues that "all of them had thoughts of different molds, but they came together at one point," he raises the possibility of intersection as a means of

definition, this time through communal rather than isolated subjectivity.

In a later monologue on the subject of progress, Khandrikov takes the idea of communion at zero further:

> Быть может, прогресс идет по прямой. Или по кругу. Или и по прямой, и по кругу—по спирали. […] Может быть, спираль нашего прогресса […] обвернута вокруг единого кольца спирали высшего порядка. […] Может быть, эти спирали, крутясь друг вокруг друга, описывают все большие и большие круги. Или круги уменьшаются, приближаясь к точке. Может быть, каждая точка во времени и пространстве—центр пересечения многих спиральных путей разнородных порядков. И мы живем одновременно и в отдаленном прошедшем, и в настоящем, и в будущем. (ibid. 82-83)
>
> Perhaps progress moves along a line. Or along a circle. Or along both a line and a circle, along a spiral. […] Maybe this spiral of our progress is wrapped around the single ring of a spiral of the highest order. […] Maybe these spirals, circling around one another, make larger and larger circles. Or the circles get smaller, converging on a point. Maybe every point in time and space is the center of intersection of numerous spiral paths of various orders. And we live simultaneously in the distant past, the present, and the future.

In this passage, Khandrikov augments his metaphor of the omnibus by turning to the historical model of the "spiral," a Hegelian combination of the linear and cyclical models of history.[11] With the aid of this model, he finds a potential resolution of the two historical processes that mark his experience of the world. The spiral's expansion into "larger and larger circles" offers the possibility of movement in a clear direction, bringing the concept of necessity into eternal return and potentially freeing Khandrikov from the terror of his stasis at zero.

Discussing the spiral in the context of Bely's later use of it in *Peterburg*, David Bethea refers to it as a means of "escape from the 'eternal return' of Nietzsche" (Bethea 120). In the case of Khandrikov, who literally undergoes eternal return, this statement

11 Bely's model of the spiral draws on the Hegelian concept of sublation, as will become clearer when it reappears in *Peterburg*.

can also be taken literally. The spiral provides Khandrikov with a potential release from the purposelessness of his existence, offering him access to other existences "in the distant past, the present, and the future." This access takes place by means of "centers of intersection," which resemble the points of intersection from Khandrikov's metaphor of the omnibus. However, instead of functioning as brief and accidental points of communion with other individuals, they provide a connection with other places and times, and even potential communion with alternate selves. The spiral offers escape by transforming an "unnecessary" zero into the means of necessity. It thus allows for the attainment of a "higher order" within the zero-point itself, which serves here not only as the experience of Nietzsche's "greatest weight," but as the means of release from this weight.

Destruction at Zero

While such considerations give Khandrikov hope regarding the existence of higher causality, he remains pessimistic about the possibility of discovering it in his life. Driven insane by the terror of zero, he commits suicide by drowning himself. The child from the beginning of the symphony then awakens to the old man's words: "Mnogo raz ty ukhodil i prikhodil […]. Mnogo raz venchal tebia stradan'em […]. I vot prishel, i ne zakatish'sia. / Zdravstvui, o moe bezzakatnoe ditia" ["You went and came many times […]. Many times I crowned you with suffering […]. And now […] you have come, and you will not set. / Greetings, oh my sunsetless child"] (Belyi 1905, 126). When the old man tells the child "you have come, and you will not set," we learn that Khandrikov's suicide has resulted in the child's permanent return to the setting from the beginning of

Vozvrat. His description of the child as "sunsetless" implies not only the end of repetition, but that this end comes by means of an overcoming of eternal return, a law that had previously dominated the existence of the symphony's characters. In offering a conclusion of this sort, Bely presents the reader with a double paradox. The first part of this paradox concerns chronology, as eternal return arrives at its end, thereby revealing itself to in fact be temporal. The second part concerns necessity, given that it is precisely by means of an "unnecessary" repetition that that the child/Khandrikov overcomes the lack of necessity in his existence. Here, Bely presents the lack of necessity in zero both as a terrible moment and as a catalyst, since Khandrikov's experience of it leads him to pass the test of eternal return and transcend his own insignificance.

It is worth noting that Khandrikov passes his Nietzschean test by means quite different from those outlined by Nietzsche. Instead of coming to terms with the terror of return and living as if it were the truth, he is instead overwhelmed by the experience and refuses it, destroying himself in his act of refusal. While Khandrikov's reaction would surely represent a failure for Nietzsche, Bely reads it as a success, which we see in the old man's reference to the child's experience as a "crown of suffering." By introducing this biblical allusion, the old man likens the child's situation to Christ's, highlighting the righteous and transcendent nature of his actions. In addition, his image of the crown of suffering specifically references the biblical crown of thorns, which draws a clear parallel with the tragic but also glorious fate of Christ. In his resolution of the problem of return, Bely shows that transcendence occurs not by means of Nietzschean acceptance, but rather through an act of self-sacrifice at zero. Linking this self-sacrifice with Christian themes, he posits progress to a higher truth, one that abandons both the linear progress of science

and the cyclicity of Nietzschean experience in favor of a mystical transcendence through destruction.

Zero as Tautology

While scholarship to date has largely overlooked the theme of zero in "Sviashchennye tsveta" and *Vozvrat*, Bely's treatment of the concept in *Peterburg* has received attention. Nikolai Firtich sees the novel as one of the seminal texts for the Russian avant-garde zero, crediting it with introducing the concept of "exiting beyond zero" (Firtich 2009, 360), which would later become the foundation of Kazimir Malevich's theory of Suprematism. In support of this thesis, Firtich cites a 1914 letter from Roman Jakobson to Aleksei Kruchenykh that touches upon the subject of zero (see ibid. 364). Noting Bely's use of zero in *Peterburg*, Jakobson comments on its association with the idea of a "zakonechnoe" ["post-ending"] (Iakobson 1999, 59), which he compares to the Futurist theory of *mirskontsa* ["worldbackwards," or literally "the world from its end"] (ibid. 59). This theory, whose relation to zero will be discussed in chapter three, concerns the ability to access a new beginning after the end of the world (see Janecek 1996a). As we have seen, the idea of transcending an end in zero indeed coincides with the approach that Bely took in "Sviashchennye tsveta" and *Vozvrat*. However, while it exists in *Peterburg* as well, my reading will demonstrate that the novel shifts priority away from it. Examining the role of zero itself as a transcendent force, I will demonstrate that it in fact functions as the primary experiential center of Bely's novel.

One of the most notable qualities of Bely's treatment of zero in *Peterburg* is a

combination of the universal and individual perspectives of his earlier works. We see this hybrid approach in the following passage:

> В детстве Коленька бредил; по ночам иногда перед ним начинал попрыгивать эластичный комочек […]. Вдруг комочек, разбухая до ужаса, принимал всю видимость шаровидного толстяка-господина; господин же толстяк […] все ширился, ширился и грозил […] лопнуть. […] И он разрывался на части. / А Николенька, весь в бреду, принимался выкрикивать праздные ерундовские вещи […]: что и он округляется, что и он—круглый ноль; все в нем нолилось—ноллилось—ноллл... (Belyi 2004, 227)
>
> In childhood, Kolenka was [often] delirious; sometimes at night a rubbery gob would begin to leap around in front of him […]. Suddenly the gob, swelling horrifically, would take on every appearance of a spherically-shaped fat gentleman; that gentleman […] would become wider and wider and threaten […] to burst. […] And he would explode into pieces. / And Nikolenka, in complete delirium, would begin to scream idle, nonsensical things […]: that he too was becoming round, that he too was a round zero; everything in him zeroed, zerroed, zerrr....

Bely's passage concerns a childhood hallucination that his novel's protagonist, Nikolai Apollonovich, recalls under traumatic circumstances. After being blackmailed by terrorists and given a bomb with which he is supposed to assassinate his father, he falls into a trance and begins to wind it, setting the device into motion. He then returns to a thematically-linked vision from his past: an image of a "rubbery gob" that expands and becomes "rounder and rounder" before "exploding" like a bomb. He associates this process with "zero," reviving the link between zero and the experience of self-destruction discussed in the previous section.

On the one hand, Bely presents the experience of zero as a deeply personal one for his protagonist. Alluding to Nietzsche, he describes Nikolai's vision in terms of "terror"; later, he refers to it as "tol'ko chto byvshii *s nim* uzhas" ["the terror that just happened *to him*," my italics] (ibid. 227), emphasizing its individual nature. Bely's discussion of

personalized terror creates a parallel with his third symphony, yet his latter quote draws attention to an increased degree of subjectivity in zero. While the terror of zero is merely an experience for Khandrikov, it is an event that happens directly to Nikolai, who perceives himself as actually becoming a "round zero." We see the directness of his transformation reflected in the statement that "vse v nem nolilos'" ["everything in him zeroed"]. The invented term "nolit'sia" ["to zero" or "to become zero"] is reflexive, as a result of which Nikolai becomes both the subject and object of zero, rendering him indistinguishable from the terror that he experiences.[12] Nikolai's proximity to zero has considerable significance for his apparent fate. If zero inspires Khandrikov to commit suicide, then the protagonist of *Peterburg* cannot distinguish himself from it enough to arrive at such a decision. The preordained outcome of his zeroing is an "explosion into pieces," which shifts the focus of Bely's narrative from an act of self-destruction in zero to zero itself as inevitable self-destruction.

Bely's shift is particularly interesting in the context of the reaction of Nikolai's governess, which offers a more universal perspective on the experience of zero. Attempting to calm Nikolai, she tells him "eto—rost" ["it's growth"] (ibid. 227), asserting that his experience is a natural one. In deferring to organicity, the governess points to a significant theme in the passage, the link that zero creates more broadly between growth and destruction. This link can be seen most clearly in the figure of the "spherically-shaped fat gentleman," who is likewise associated with zero, yet represents a growth that transcends the purely individual elements of Nikolai's vision. The fat gentleman introduces a prominent social theme, playing upon popular satirical

12 Bely additionally reflects the union between his protagonist and zero on the level of paronomasia, as the word "nol'" ["zero"] finds strong echoes in his nicknames "Kolen'ka" and especially "Nikolen'ka."

representations of bourgeois culture from the period. When he explodes as a result of his constantly-increasing size, his "bursting" symbolizes a revolutionary idea: the end of a bourgeois culture that has stretched to its breaking point. We find a similar depiction of the explosion of an overfull culture in Bely's essay "Budushchee iskusstvo," where he likewise describes his vision of the end using the term "lopnut'" ["to burst"]: "myl'nyi puzyr'—pered tem kak lopnut'—perelivaetsia vsemi tsvetami radugi" ["the soap bubble —before bursting—overflows with all the colors of the rainbow"] (Belyi 1910, 449). In *Peterburg*, zero not only reflects Nikolai's personal fears regarding growth, it also represents an abstracted fear linked to the larger development of culture and society. This terror of zero has implications both as individual experience and as a foreboding of future apocalyptic destruction.

Whereas young Nikolai only vaguely comprehends the broader cultural significance of zero, his older self comes to terms with it when faced with the reality of destruction. Falling into a trance brought on by his activation of the bomb, he enters a space that he perceives as "absoliutnyi nol'" ["absolute zero"] (Belyi 2004, 235), where he arrives at a new understanding of his life. Bely describes this new perspective in the following terms: "Delo zhizni ego okazalos' ne prosto zhiznennym delom: […] do rozhdeniia emu vruchennaia i velikaia missiia: missiia razrushitelia" ["His life task turned out not to be simply a life task: […] before birth there was a great mission entrusted to him: the mission of a destroyer"] (ibid. 237). Having attained the zero-point that he imagines himself becoming as a child, Nikolai now views himself as a "destroyer," a representative of culture-wide terror whose "life task" existed long "before birth." This discussion of a life task brings the theme of necessity into Bely's treatment

of zero in *Petersburg*, while the connection of individual experience with a "great mission" recalls Khandrikov's Christ-like overcoming of eternal return in *Vozvrat*. However, as a result of Nikolai's direct association with zero, his path of necessity lies in becoming the very destructive force that Khandrikov seeks to escape. He fulfills his mission not by conquering zero and moving beyond it, but by transforming himself into an agent of it.

In his trance, Nikolai imagines a conversation with his father, Apollon Apollonovich Ableukhov, where the latter offers a more complete reading of the necessity of zero:

> —«Ай, ай, ай, что ж такое *'я есмь'*?»
> —«Я есмь? Нуль...»
> —«Ну, а нуль?»
> —«Это, Коленька, бомба...» (ibid. 239)
>
> —"Ai, ai, ai, what is 'I am'?"
> —"I am? Zero..."
> —"Well, and zero?"
> —"That, Kolenka, is a bomb..."

In this passage, Apollon links zero with the self using the Old Church Slavonic form "ia esm'," an archaic expression for "I am." The expression has biblical connotations, recalling "Ia esm' Sushchii" ["I AM WHO I AM"],[13] the much-debated tautological answer that God gives to Moses regarding his name. Members of the Russian Symbolist movement frequently used the expression "ia esm'" to refer to Christian self-affirmation,[14] and Apollon's discussion draws on this context to confirm the link that *Peterburg* establishes between zero and the expansion of the self. Meanwhile, in positing

13 The fuller context reads: "And Moses said unto God, Behold, when I come unto the children of Israel, and shall say unto them, The God of your fathers hath sent me unto you; and they shall say to me, What is his name? what shall I say unto them? And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM" (Exodus 3: 13-14, King James Bible).

14 See, for example, Viacheslav Ivanov's poem "Sloki" ["Shlokas," 1904].

that "ia esm'" is zero, he shows the two concepts to be not only similar, but indistinguishable. This self-referential definition mirrors the tautological rhetoric of the biblical statement, drawing a parallel between self-affirmation and Bely's similarly tautological treatment of zero. Apollon's tautology becomes even more complex when he expands it to include a third concept, associating both "ia esm'" and zero with a "bomb." The equivalence of "ia esm'" and the bomb creates a unity between self-affirmation and self-destruction, two apparently antithetical concepts, at zero. As the location of both of these concepts, zero emerges as an idea capable of containing within itself both tautological totality and its absolute negation.

Bely presents this all-encompassing tautology most clearly elsewhere in the exchange between father and son. Fulfilling his life task, which he now refers to as the "starodavnee mongol'skoe delo" ["ancient Mongol task"] (Belyi 2004, 237), Nikolai calls for the "razrushenie" ["destruction"] (Belyi 2004, 237) of Europe.[15] Appropriately, given his function as zero, he bases his declaration in the values of "nikto i nichto" ["no one and nothing"] (Belyi 2004, 237). Meanwhile, his father responds by calling for "ne razrushen'e Evropy—ee neizmennost'" ["not the destruction of Europe—its immutability"] (ibid. 237), which he associates with the value of "numeratsiia […] na vekovechnye vremena" ["numeration […] for all eternity"] (ibid. 237). The location of this debate at "absolute zero" has significance for both perspectives. While Nikolai sees the end of Europe in zero as destructive nothingness, Apollon sees its continued existence in an alternate reading of zero, the constructive point of origin out of which all numbers

15 Bely refers to the "razrushenie ariiskogo mira" ["destruction of the Aryan world"] (ibid. 237). The term "Aryan" is used as a synonym for "European" in many early twentieth-century Russian texts, such as Symbolist leader Dmitry Merezhkovsky's 1906 essay "Griadushchii kham" ["The Oncoming Savage"] (see Merezhkovskii).

emerge.[16] However, the debate between Nikolai and his father is more complex than a mere conflict between different readings of zero. In summing up his argument, Apollon tells Nikolai: "Vot kakoe—mongol'skoe delo" ["That's the Mongol task"] (Belyi 2004, 237), creating an association between both visions and the Mongol task. Referring to this line, John Elsworth argues that Nikolai "realizes that he and his father, for all their differences, are in the service of the same force" (Elsworth 101). Given Bely's emphasis on negation in tautology, I would argue that Nikolai and his father are in fact in the service of the same force and opposite forces simultaneously. As his debate with his father demonstrates, Nikolai's "Mongolian" identity unites both zero as destruction and zero as creation—both apocalypse and its opposite—within itself.[17]

In bringing his destructive and constructive readings of zero together, Bely also associates the concept with two complementary visions of atemporality. We see the first of these in Nikolai's unification of nothingness with "numeration for all eternity." By combining both eternity and its negation, Bely equates atemporality with timelessness—i.e., with the abolition of time. Meanwhile, when Nikolai asks his father what the current "letoischislenie" ["chronology"] (Bely 2004, 239) is, Apollon responds by calling it "nulevoe" ["zero-chronology"] (ibid. 239). He thus reads atemporality as the zero-point of time, or the beginning of chronology. While these readings recall Bely's treatment of zero in his earlier works, they also represent a merging of concepts that were previously

16 In this context, Gudrun Langer's hypothesis that Apollon's name relates to the famous mathematician Apollonius seems apt (see Langer 281).

17 It is worth noting an additional subtext to which numerous scholars have previously drawn attention: the binary of the Apollonian and the Dionysian that appears in Nietzsche's book *The Birth of Tragedy*. For Nietzsche, the Apollonian represents the creation of systems of order, while the Dionysian represents the destruction of this order by chaos. As should be clear in his name, Apollon Apollonovich in part stands for the theme of Apollonian order in *Peterburg*. However, Nikolai Apollonovich, whose name makes him the son of Apollo, does not necessarily conform to the strictly Dionysian elements of the novel. Instead, his debate with his father implies that he is able to simultaneously represent both order and chaos. For studies devoted to the influence of Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* on Bely's thought, see Bennett; Gerigk; Zink 182-252.

separate. Discussing the function of time in *Vozvrat*, Vladimir Alexandrov notes that Khandrikov "can be said to exist in the past and in the future to the extent that […] he has both glimpses of a previous existence and the fate that lies ahead" (Alexandrov 51). Khandrikov's presence at zero may provide him with glimpses of eternity, yet his access, as Alexandrov notes, is indirect. In both "Sviashchennye tsveta" and *Vozvrat*, Bely builds on the premise that humanity is separated from timelessness and must use zero as a perspectival point from which this timelessness can be regained. In contrast, Nikolai's presence at the zero-point in *Peterburg* grants him immediate access to both chronology and eternity, allowing him to bypass the linear aspect of Bely's earlier writings.

Beyond the Spiral

Nikolai's negation of linearity in zero is significant given Bely's continued interest in the spiral model. In 1912, he devoted an essay to the subject entitled "Liniia, krug, spiral'—simvolizma" ["The Line, Circle and Spiral of Symbolism"]. Examining this essay, Andrea Zink discusses the role of zero with regard to the spiral:

> The geometrical-kinetic metaphor of an expanding spiral condenses Bely's dream of a growing culture. Its origin can be retraced, and its ending is reached at the point when, while continually returning to the past, it overtakes this past, including its zero-point, on a higher level. (Zink 231)

Zink's analysis shows Bely operating with a more pre-determined model than in *Vozvrat*. Whereas his zero previously functioned as a potential access point to additional repetitions, she describes its role in his essay as serving both as the end-point of one repetition and the origin point of a new one on a "higher level." In this model, the function of "cultural growth" becomes more transparent. The completion of one level leads directly to the beginning of a superior one, creating a vision of the spiral that

focuses explicitly on progressivity. Eliminating the possibility of backwards or parallel motion that we saw in his symphony, Bely presents progressive growth not only as the solution to return, but as an inevitable solution.

On the whole, Zink accurately portrays the trajectory of the spiral as it is presented in "Liniia, krug, spiral'—simvolizma." However, on the subject of zero her discussion diverges somewhat from Bely's theory. The only reference to zero that appears in his essay places the number in a very different context:

> Переживание было бы правдой в том случае, если бы сумело оно охватить все бывшие, сущие и грядущие миги одного человека; и далее: все бывшие миги отца, деда, прадеда; все грядущие миги сына, внука и правнука. […] Только полная совокупность всех мигов времени нас вернула бы к первоистоку. […] Декаллион мигов был бы равен единому мигу, сумма—слагаемой. В одном случае равенство слагаемого и суммы возможно: при условии, что слагаемое есть ноль; […] здесь ноль—переживаемость мига. (Belyi 1912, 14)

> Experience would be truth in the case that it were able to capture all of the past, present and future moments of a single person; and further: all of the past moments of one's father, grandfather, great-grandfather; all of the future moments of one's son, grandson and great-grandson. […] Only the complete summation of all moments in time could return us to the prime source. […] The decallion of moments would be equal to a single moment, the sum to the component. Only in one situation is the equivalence of the component and the sum possible: in the condition that the component is zero; […] here zero is the experience of a moment.

Bely argues that personal experience could be considered truth only if it were to encompass the "complete summation of all moments in time." Such a case would involve what he refers to as a return to the "prime source," an experience of the totality of time that resembles the return to the fullness of being in "Sviashchennye tsveta." According to Bely, time could be experienced in its totality if the sum of all moments were equivalent to the value of a "single moment." This, in turn, could occur only if the value of both all of time and a single moment were "zero." In presenting zero as both the

"experience of a moment" and the totality of experience, Bely creates a model not for progress through zero, but for the combined experience of all moments in a single moment, allowing for the attainment of the fullness of being within zero itself. His inclusion of "all of the past moments of one's father" and "all of the future moments of one's son" within zero also explains how Nikolai's experience comes to envelop his father's consciousness. In Bely's essay, self-affirmation at the zero-point expands beyond the self, the previous focus of his writing on zero, to include the experience of a totality of selves.

Following the passage above, Bely writes that "krugovoe dvizhenie ne osoznavaemo v mige. Vechnoe ne mozhet perezhivat'sia" ["circular motion is not cognizable in the moment. The Eternal cannot be experienced"] (ibid. 14). Responding to his statement, Robert Maguire and John Malmstad argue that "Bely grants that immediate experience would be Truth if it could embrace *all* moments, past and future […]. However, experience is far too limited (and limiting) to make that even remotely possible" (Maguire and Malmstad 99). While this evaluation certainly applies to Bely's thoughts on the experience of the eternal in circular motion, it should be noted that he returns to the potential of a "soedinenie mgnoven'ia s Vechnost'iu" ["unification of the moment with Eternity"] (Belyi 1912, 19) at a later point in his essay. If we read Bely's statement in the context of *Vozvrat*, we find that it reflects one of the central themes of the symphony. Rather than denying the possibility of experiencing truth in the moment, his argument reiterates Khandrikov's problem of incomplete access to timelessness due to the cyclicity of his existence. Although it may be the case that "circular motion is not cognizable in the moment," Bely allows that zero, as both the moment and eternity, may

nonetheless hold the solution.

Bely discusses the potential for a unification of the moment with eternity in more detail in a section of his essay entitled "Simvolizm" ["Symbolism"]. Basing the experience of this unity in his larger theory of Symbolism,[18] he conceives it as a function of the symbol, which he describes as the "tret'e izmerenie dvizheniia" ["third dimension of movement"] (Belyi 1912, 19). According to Bely, the line and circle represent "dlina" ["length"] (ibid. 19) and "shirina" (ibid. 19), two dimensions that merge to form the model of the spiral. Meanwhile, the symbol offers the additional dimension of "glubina" ["depth"] (ibid. 19). Here we see the same discussion of coordinates as in "Sviashchennye tsveta," yet this time they are used for development outwards instead of inward focus on the zero-point. In its expansion into a further dimension, the symbol supersedes the spiral just as the spiral supersedes both the line and the circle. Significantly, Bely writes that "simvolizm […] ne evoliutsioniruet, a on narastaet" ["Symbolism […] does not evolve, but it increases"] (ibid. 20), a sentiment that parallels Nikolai's atemporal experience of the growth of culture. In this statement, we find a profound contrast with the form of cultural growth that Zink describes. If the spiral represents linear and cyclical growth through zero to higher levels of existence, then the symbol represents organic growth within the zero-point itself. Transcending the necessity for progress in the spiral, zero allows for an escape not only from Nietzsche's cyclicity, but potentially from the spiral altogether.

We see this potential for organic growth beyond the spiral in the following passage of *Peterburg*, where Nikolai describes his experience of zero to the revolutionary Aleksandr Dudkin:

18 For an excellent overview of Bely's theory of Symbolism, see Cassedy 1984; Cassedy 1987.

> рос я […] в неизмеримость, преодолевая пространства; […] и со мною росли все предметы; и—комната, и—вид на Неву, и—Петропавловский шпиц; […] и уже приканчивался рост (просто расти было некуда, не во что); в этом же, что кончалось, в конце, в окончании,—там, казалось мне, было какое-то иное начало: законечное, что ли... […] у меня не имеется органа, который бы умел осмысливать этот смысл, так сказать, законечный; в месте органов чувств ощущение было—«ноль» ощущением; а воспринималося нечто, что и не ноль, и не единица […]. (Belyi 2004, 261-62)
>
> I grew […] into immeasurability, overcoming space; […] and with me grew all of the objects; my room, the view of the Neva, and the Peter and Paul spire; […] and the growth was already coming to an end (there was simply nowhere else to grow, nothing to grow into); in that which was ending, in the end, in the conclusion,—there was some sort of other beginning: post-ending or something... I do not have an organ that would be able to make sense of that meaning—that is to say, the post-ending one; in place of sensory organs there the sensation was a "zero" sensation; and I perceived something that was neither zero nor a one […].

Returning to the sensation of growth, Nikolai describes it as a "'zero' sensation" that he associates with the attainment of "immeasurability." Completing his growth at a point where "there was simply nowhere else to grow, nothing to grow into," he experiences overfullness on both an individual and a universal level. He explains that "with me grew all of the objects," demonstrating an expanded sense of self that mirrors the course of growth through zero in "Liniia, krug, spiral'—simvolizma." Indeed, in the form of his view of the Neva and the Peter and Paul spire, the city of St. Petersburg expands as an extension of his own apocalyptic expansion.

Despite the forebodings present earlier in the novel, Nikolai's growth ends not in explosion, but in what he describes as a "post-ending" and "some sort of other beginning." To the extent that it allows a glimpse of a new existence at the end of his current one, his experience recalls the logic of the spiral model. However, although the "other beginning" that he witnesses represents the return of limited access to higher

forms of being, we find no coincidence of ends and beginnings to facilitate such access. Nikolai explains his experience as something that is "neither zero nor a one," and therefore as something that lies beyond the destructive nothing and the constructive point of origin that form the zero-based tautology of his experience. Moreover, he tells Dudkin that he lacks "an organ that would be able to make sense of that meaning—that is to say, the post-ending one." He thus implies that this "post-ending meaning" exists not only beyond zero, but also beyond the sense of selfhood that is located there. Significantly, Bely expresses this phenomenon with the verb "vosprinimalosia" ["it was perceived"], removing the first-person pronoun from the equation. No longer the primary means through which zero can be transcended, selfhood offers Nikolai no possibility of connection to a new beginning. He finds himself confined to the moment of apocalypse, unable to realize the "symbolic" growth that lies beyond the tautology of his experience in zero.

Conclusion. The Meaning of Atemporality

As of the present, there have been two major attempts to read Bely's novel in terms of mathematical concepts. In their article "Petersburg," Maguire and Malmstad argue for a reading based on the model of the circle. Positing that the novel ends without the sort of transformation that we saw in *Vozvrat*, they write that "there are no spirals in Petersburg […]; the circle dominates, and with it the sense of futility and sterility that Bely associates with the circle throughout his writings of the period" (Maguire and Malmstad 138). Meanwhile, in "*Petersburg:* The Apocalyptic Horseman, the Unicorn, and the Verticality of Narrative," Bethea rejects this reading. Discussing Bely's use of

the circle metaphor in his novel, he argues:

> This image of violent and senseless recurrence, of a world possessed by Nietzschean madness, has led most commentators to the conclusion that Bely's overall design is circular […]. But what is overlooked in this view is the "profoundly teleological" element in Bely's thinking […].
> (Bethea 129)

Favoring the spiral model, Bethea writes that "the composition of *Petersburg* might be said to resemble a series of expanding circles" (ibid. 128). He sets out to solve the problem of "*how* might these circles […] become a spiral with a way out, how might they rise out of the notion of apocalypse at the end?" (ibid. 129).

While both readings have considerable merits, they share a tendency to treat Bely's novel temporally, i.e. to discuss it in terms of progress, even if this progress merely entails a return to the beginning. In doing so, they underestimate the atemporal significance of the mathematical zero-point for *Peterburg*. In his novel, Bely envisions zero as a moment that, in a very Nietzschean sense, contains the impulses of both destruction and creation. In this manner, his zero superficially resembles that of Vasilisk Gnedov, who saw his "Poema Kontsa" as the juncture between the end of the old culture and the beginning of the culture of the future. However, while Gnedov attempted to progress from "Poema Kontsa" to "Poema nachala," highlighting the teleological significance of his zero in creation *ex nihilo*, Bely envisions zero as an experience in itself, one that already encompasses all values and their complete negation. Representing an experience of the totality of culture at the moment of apocalypse, his zero places the individual who experiences it simultaneously in time and in eternity.

In the context of this atemporal experience of zero, it is significant that Jakobson views Bely's idea of the "post-ending" as his most essential contribution to the avant-

garde debate on the subject. In equating this moment of potential transcendence with *mirskontsa* and the "otkrytie stran budetlianskikh" ["discovery of Futurist lands"] (Iakobson 1999, 59), the critic reads it in a wholly positive light, one that holds important possibilities for avant-garde creation. Indeed, if we read Nikolai's experience in the context of "Liniia, krug, spiral'—simvolizma," we find that it accords with the potential for the utopian growth of culture that is described in the essay. However, when Bely denies Nikolai the ability to go beyond zero in his novel, he casts a shadow on Jakobson's optimistic vision. Drawing attention to the limitations of selfhood at zero, he raises the question as to whether transcendence is feasible for the self as it currently exists. While advancement beyond zero may be possible in the world of *Peterburg*, it is not clear that the self as we know it will be included in this experience. Reading the world not "from zero," but "at zero," Bely presents the experience of the zero-point as one that, much as in his discussion of the pyramid, implies access to a vision of higher necessity without the capacity for grasping its transcendent meaning.

CHAPTER THREE

Zaum' as Zero. Aleksei Kruchenykh and the Poetics of Non-Resolution

Kruchenykh and Readability

In a 1917 letter to the critic Andrei Shemshurin, Aleksei Kruchenykh addresses the matter of readability in his *zaum'* ["transrational"] poetry, discussing it in terms of zero:

> Загадка... Читатель любопытен прежде всего и уверен, что заумное что-то значит, т.е. имеет некоторый логический смысл. Так что читателя как бы ловят на червяка—загадку, тайну. В женщине и искусстве нужна тайна. / Сказать: люблю—это связывает и очень определенно, а человек никогда не хочет этого. Он скрытен, он жаден, он тайнотворец. И вот имеется вместо люблю другое равное и, пожалуй, сугубое—это и будет: *лефанта чиол* или *раз фаз газ... Хо-бо-ро мо-чо-ро* = и мрачность, и нуль, и новое искусство!
> (Kruchenykh 2012, 94)

> A riddle... The reader is first and foremost curious and convinced that the transrational means something, i.e., has a certain logical sense. So it's as if you've hooked the reader on a worm—a riddle, a mystery. In women and art one needs mystery. / To say I love [you]—that binds one very clearly, and a person never wants that. He's secretive, he's greedy, he's a creator of mystery. And so instead of I love [you] there's something different that's equivalent and, if you will, exceptional—and that's *lefanta chiol* or *raz faz gaz... Kho-bo-ro mo-cho-ro* = darkness and zero and the new art!

Beginning his discussion with a metaphor as provocative as it is playful, Kruchenykh claims that art requires mystery, just as a woman does. In matters of love, traditional, figurative language makes logical statements such as "I love you," yet such statements are too clear and too binding, something that neither a lover nor a reader of poetry wants. Meanwhile, in declarations such as "kho-bo-ro," *zaum'* implies a deeper meaning just beyond the reader's grasp, creating what Kruchenykh refers to as a "riddle." *Zaum'*

functions according to mysterious principles, and it is precisely due to its mystery that the reader continues to read, just as a suitor is attracted to a woman he cannot fully understand. All of this leads up to the question as to whether such riddles in *zaum'* can actually be solved and, if so, what solving them would entail. However, Kruchenykh evades this question, describing his poetry merely as "darkness and zero and the new art."

Kruchenykh's letter to Shemshurin discusses the basic premises of *zaum'* with a nonchalance typical of the poet's theoretical writings. In this context, his humorous reference to *zaum'* as "zero" deserves particular attention. In the late 1910s, the term appeared frequently in Kruchenykh's works, causing the poet Igor Terentiev to refer to him as a "grandioznyi nul'" ["grandiose zero"] (Terent'ev 1). Kruchenykh's writings on zero have traditionally been read in the context of those of Kazimir Malevich, whose Suprematist zero is one of the best-known theories of the Russian avant-garde.[1] However, as will become clear, Kruchenykh's zero was in fact in many ways at odds with the fundamental principles of Suprematism. In this chapter, I propose a new model for interpreting Kruchenykh's most elusive poetry based on his discussion in this letter of *zaum'* as zero. In analyzing Kruchenykh's works from the late 1910s, I will demonstrate that his theory of zero represents a highly original and significant contribution to the culture of the Russian avant-garde in its own right, one that is founded in an evasion of the question of progress that haunted the previous two chapters.

1 Yevgeny Kovtun famously asserted that "the idea of reducing all objective forms to zero and advancing beyond zero—into non-objectivity—belonged to Malevich" (Kovtun 1976, 186). Recently, Nikolai Firtich, Aage Hansen-Löve and Nina Gurianova have discussed zero's importance for the Russian avant-garde beyond Malevich and taken Kruchenykh's contributions into account (see Firtich 2000; Firtich 2009; Hansen-Löve 2005; Gurianova 2009). However, the only study other than this one to discuss Kruchenykh's explicit statements on zero describes his poetry from the late 1910s as "Suprematist" (Ziegler 237).

Zero in *Pobeda nad solntsem*

The history of Kruchenykh's engagement with zero begins with his 1913 opera *Pobeda nad solntsem* [*Victory over the Sun*]. The opera tells the story of a band of *budetlianskie*[2] *silachi* ["Futurist Strongmen"] who wage war against the sun.[3] Kruchenykh uses the sun to refer both to the Apollonian themes of the Symbolists and to the cult of Pushkin, the "sun of Russian poetry." Drawing on the famous Futurist call to throw these and other classic writers from the "Steamship of Modernity," he details a campaign against the values of the past. One of the characters of Kruchenykh's opera declares: "vspomnite proshloe / polnoe toski oshibok... / […] vspomnim i sopostavim s nastoiashchim... tak radostno" ["recall the past / full of the errors of despondence... / […] let's remember it and contrast it with the present... so joyful"] (Kruchenykh 1913b, 18), while another urges: "Ne ver' staroi mere" ["Don't trust old measures"] (ibid. 6). The victory of the Futurist Strongmen over the sun leads to a "zhizn' bez proshlogo" ["life without the past]" (ibid. 17) where people find themselves "osvobozhdennye ot tiazhesti vsemirnogo tiagoteniia" ["liberated from the burden of global gravity"] (ibid. 18) and free to act independently of the influence of the metaphorical sun.

Kruchenykh's theme of the destruction of the sun played an important role in the development of Russian avant-garde theory, particularly in relation to the theme of zero. In a 1914 letter to Kruchenykh on the subject of his opera, Roman Jakobson compared the poetry of his day to stained glass whose "zhivopisnost'" ["picturesqueness"] (Iakobson 73) arose merely as a side-effect of the sun shining through it. He wrote: "No vot pobeda nad solntsem […]. Stklo <tak!> vzorvano, iz oskolkov […] sozdaem uzory

2 Kruchenykh often uses the term *budetlianin* instead of *futurist*, demonstrating his complicated understanding of Futurism.

3 For an overview of the event, see Dadswell.

radi osvobozhdeniia. Iz […] nulia tvorim liubuiu uslovnost'" ["But then there is the victory over the sun […]. The glass has been shattered, from the shards […] we can create patterns for the sake of liberation. From […] zero we can create any convention whatsoever"] (ibid. 73-74). Realizing the Nietzschean implications of Kruchenykh's opera, Jakobson read it as an allegory of creative destruction where the art of the future emerges out of the destruction of tradition. Significantly, Jakobson located this destruction at a point he referred to as "zero."

The following year, Malevich, who may have been familiar with Jakobson's ideas (see Firtich 2009, 364-65), continued the critic's thematic explorations in a series of sketches based around *Pobeda nad solntsem*. A few of these sketches depicted Kruchenykh's Strongmen with zeros on their chests (see Shatskikh 52-60). They also included a backdrop for the opera, which Malevich described in a letter to the artist and composer Mikhail Matiushin as "chernyi kvadrat<,> zarodysh vsekh vozmozhnostei […], v opere on oboznachal nachalo pobedy" ["black square<,> the embryo of all possibilities […], in the opera it signified the beginning of victory"] (Malevich 2004, 1: 67). In this letter, Malevich's first discussion of his *Chernyi kvadrat* [*Black Square*, 1915], the artist explicitly associated his painting with the victory over the sun—i.e., its destruction—in Kruchenykh's opera. In referring to it as "the *embryo* of all possibilities" and "the *beginning* of victory," he also linked the opera with Jakobson's idea of a new beginning in total annihilation. Several months later, Malevich began to refer to the *Chernyi kvadrat* as a "nul' formy" ["zero of form"] (Malevich 1995, 1: 34) and "nul' form" ["zero of forms"] (ibid., 1: 53), drawing further attention both to the emerging avant-garde idea of an origin in nothing and to Kruchenykh's importance in its theorization.

Malevich at Zero

Kruchenykh himself turned to an explicit discussion of zero in a series of works from the late 1910s. A surviving scene from his lost play *Gly-Gly* [untranslatable, 1917] begins:

(Угол вакзала. впереди—будетляне, сзади—толпа)
К. Малевич Гамлет эль тетку текк
Хрящ — вечняху хлюнду онулил.[4]
нулево
пулево
кулево . . дыж
(в толпе:) лошади падают с небес
глыбы земли
метеор черный каккамень каабы
К. Малевич (подымая) разляпаные калоши и грязь
(Kruchenykh 1918b, 26)[5]

(Corner of a train station. futurists in front, crowd in back)
K. Malevich Hamlet L flowed his aunt
Cartilage — he nullified eternity sentimentalism.
nullily
bulletly
sackily . . boom
(in the crowd:) horses are falling from the heavens
boulders
a meteor black likethestone of kaaba
K. Malevich (picking it up) splotched galoshes and dirt[6]

In this scene, we find an association between *zaum'* and zero that recalls Kruchenykh's letter to Shemshurin. A character named K. Malevich speaks the *zaum'* words "Gamlet el' tetku tek,"[7] prompting the note that he has "nullified eternity sentimentalism." This

4 In a fragment that will be discussed later, Kruchenykh defines *vechniakha* as "vechnost'" ["eternity"] and *khliunda* as "sentimentalizm" ["sentimentalism"] (Malevich 2004, 2: 111).

5 For the full scene, see ibid. 26-30. Smaller fragments also appear in a letter to Shemshurin (see Kruchenykh 2012, 88-90), as well as alongside illustrations by Varvara Stepanova, which can be found in Aleksandr Rodchenko's archives in Moscow and in the book collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. I have preserved the typographical particularities of Kruchenykh's original publication with the exception of his use of upside-down letters.

6 Given that attempts to translate Kruchenykh's poetry run counter to my argument, all translations should be read as detailed glosses on ultimately untranslatable texts.

7 This *zaum'* speech stems from a letter by Malevich, who hoped to join Kruchenykh in the Caucasus to escape the draft in World War I. Malevich wrote: "Ne nuzhen li Vam opytnyi chertezhnik, ili povar, gotovliu khorosho Gamlet el' tetku tek" ["Do you need an experienced draftsman, or a cook, I cook

"sentimentalism" surely refers to the figurative statements such as "I love you" that Kruchenykh discusses in his letter as being replaced by the more "exceptional" and less concrete language of *zaum'*, and we see the triumph of *zaum'* over tradition depicted allegorically in *Gly-Gly*. As an apparent result of Malevich's *zaum'* speech, a "meteor black likethestone of kaaba" falls from the heavens and is lifted up by the artist. The Black Stone of Kaaba, the holiest relic of Islam, is thought to be a meteorite, and it is held in a container in the form of a black cube. As Aleksandr Parnis notes, this makes it an analogue to Malevich's *Chernyi kvadrat* (see ibid., 2: 110). Meanwhile, the Black Stone recalls not only the *Chernyi kvadrat*, but also the Arabic origin of the number zero and Islam's own ban on figuration. In creating this network of associations, Kruchenykh highlights Malevich's role in the nullification of the figurative tradition and presents the wielder of the Suprematist relic as a leading figure in avant-garde destruction.

Kruchenykh's allusions to signs from the heavens and religious artifacts reflect Malevich's own statements about the *Chernyi kvadrat*. The artist famously hung his painting in the icon corner at the "0,10" exhibition (1915) and referred to it as a non-figurative "tsarstvennyi mladenets" ["Christ child"] (Malevich 1995, 1: 53).[8] Beginning with his early manifestos, he presented himself as a pseudo-Christian prophet who "preobrazilsia v nule formy i vyshel za nul' k tvorchestvu" ["transformed [himself] in the zero of forms [i.e., the *Chernyi kvadrat*—JS] and exited beyond zero to creation"] (ibid., 1: 53), to the new art made possible by his act of destruction.[9] However, Kruchenykh pays tribute to Malevich's Christlike view of himself only to thwart it, and his portrait of

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well Hamlet L flowed his aunt"] (Malevich 2004, 1: 94).

8 For a discussion of the *Chernyi kvadrat* in the context of the Orthodox iconic tradition, see Tarasov 344-53.

9 For a broader discussion of Christian themes in Malevich's Suprematist writings, see Hansen-Löve 2002.

Malevich in *Gly-Gly* bears as much resemblance to the Antichrist as to Christ. Following the artist's *zaum'* utterance, meteors, horses and boulders fall from the sky, followed by widespread death and destruction. Cartilage, whose name echoes the play's apocalyptic themes in its implication of corporeal destruction, responds to Malevich's *zaum'* with the words "nulevo / pulevo" ["nullily / bulletly"]. His association between *nul'* ["zero"] and *pulia* ["bullet"] highlights the destructive over the creative potential of zero, encouraging the reader to reevaluate the principles behind the Suprematist movement. Kruchenykh's preference for violence and destruction becomes even clearer with the appearance of three "Strongmen,"[10] who recite Kruchenykh's own poetry and thus serve a clearly programmatic function.[11] The Strongmen commit numerous acts of violence and are referred to not as heroes, but as "ubiitsy; dushiteli" ["murderers; stranglers"] (Kruchenykh 1918b, 30).[12] In attributing acts of violence to his most programmatic and, indeed, prophetic characters, Kruchenykh blurs the lines between salvation and annihilation. Challenging Malevich's constructive reading of zero, he presents the Futurist/Suprematist aesthetic as destruction for its own sake.

In *Gly-Gly*, Kruchenykh appropriates Malevich's *Chernyi kvadrat* to produce an approach to zero that differs significantly from the one theorized by the artist. The value of zero would be a point of contention for Kruchenykh and Malevich throughout the latter half of the 1910s, reflecting a serious divergence in their visions for art after nullification. Beginning with his 1915 essay "Ot kubizma k suprematizmu," Malevich

10 In *Gly-Gly*, the characters are referred to as *voiny* ["warriors"], but Kruchenykh refers to them as *silachi* ["strongmen"] in a letter to Shemshurin (see Kruchenykh 2012, 88).

11 One of the Strongmen declares: "Molites' molites' / papa rimskii umer / pritsepiv na pup / numer..." ["Pray pray / the pope is dead / having stuck in his navel / a number..."] (Kruchenykh 1918b, 29). Kruchenykh later identified these lines as Mayakovsky's variation on his own poetry (see Kruchenykh 1930, 14).

12 Here we find an important parallel with *Pobeda nad solntsem*, where, as Gurianova notes, Kruchenykh "does not allow any emotional empathy with [its] heroes" (Gurianova 2012, 130).

described his *Chernyi kvadrat* as only the "pervyi shag chistogo tvorchestva v iskusstve" ["first step of pure creation in art"] (Malevich 1995, 1: 27) and urged his friends and colleagues to follow him "za 0—1" ["beyond 0 to 1"] (ibid., 1: 34), beyond destruction to a creative stage of Avant-Gardism. Meanwhile, in his 1917 book *Nosoboika* [*Nose Swatter*], Kruchenykh noted the importance of Malevich's path from zero to one only to conclude: "A. Kruchenykh— / genii, epokha, / nul'" ["A. Kruchenykh / is a genius, an epoch, / a zero"] (Kruchenykh 1917c, no page). Kruchenykh himself thus refused to adopt Malevich's one, opting to remain at the destructive zero-point of art depicted in *Gly-Gly*. It is worth noting here that Kruchenykh discusses his work not only as "zero," but also as an "epoch." Rejecting zero as the first step of pure creation, he seeks to extend destruction from a mere stage into indefinite duration.

The Epoch in Zero

Kruchenykh's discussion of his work as both "zero" and an "epoch" also alludes to Kornei Chukovsky's 1914 essay "Ego-futuristy i kubo-futuristy," whose significance for the avant-garde zero was discussed in chapter one. In his essay, Chukovsky presents the Futurists as representatives of a "zloveshchii poryv k nuliu" ["sinister rush toward zero"] (Chukovskii 131), which he associates both with Vasilisk Gnedov (the author of "Poema Kontsa") and with Kruchenykh (see ibid. 130-31). Regarding Kruchenykh specifically, Chukovsky writes: "pust' drugie smeiutsia nad nim, dlia menia v nem prorochestvo, apokalipsis, […] dlia menia on tak grandiozen i grozen, chto vsiu epokhu ia gotov nazvat' epokhoi Kruchenykh" ["let others laugh at him, for me there is prophecy in him, apocalypse, [...] for me he is so grandiose and awe-inspiring that I am prepared to

call our entire epoch the epoch of Kruchenykh"] (ibid. 118). Kruchenykh evidently took pride in this honor, quoting Chukovsky's words in several of his books (see, for example, Kruchenykh, Kliun and Malevich, back cover). In *Nosoboika*, his description of himself as "a genius, an epoch, a zero" brings together the two moments quoted above, uniting their irony with a more serious understanding of their consequences. Indeed, Chukovsky's epoch of zero renders Kruchenykh the major voice of an era defined by destruction and apocalypse, giving his poetry the permanent cultural presence denied it by Malevich's move to one.

Kruchenykh theorizes his epoch of zero further in a draft of an essay or letter from the same period (c. 1917-18):

> Это гений или вернее 0 (нуль). / «Вся эпоха» и пронырливый нуль—это одно и то же! / Наша эпоха в нуле! / В нуле прежнее, / а новое для нас еще как нуль. / Мы идем от нуля форм, / другие еще не дошли до нуля. / Нуль—последняя перебивка цен. / «Сверх-человек» еще больше человек, чем нечто, / а нуль—может лягушка, а может—вечность. / Будачи-баячи увидели вечняху не формой / […] романтичного огня (букет серы, черта и заката), а в виде круглого нуля. / Не только отсутствие одежды, но и голого человека, отсутствие всего […]. / Мир не только перекроен (футуристы, сдвиг, белиберда), но и выброшен. / Что же остается? Ничего. / Что же будет? Нечто за нулем<,> мирсконца вернее нульсконца, мир уже умер. (Malevich 2004, 2: 111)
>
> It's genius or rather 0 (zero). / The "entire epoch" and a crafty zero—it's one and the same! / Our epoch is in zero! / The past is in zero, / and the future is still like zero for us. / We emerge from the zero of forms, / others still haven't reached zero. / Zero is the final annihilation of values. / The "Übermensch" is still more a man than anything, / but zero is maybe a frog and maybe eternity. / The Futurer Lullers saw eternity not in the form […] / of Romantic fire (a bouquet of sulfur, of a devil and of the sunset), but in the form of a round zero. / Not only the absence of clothes, but of the naked man as well, the absence of everything […]. / The world is not only covered up (the Futurists, *sdvig*,[13] nonsense), but thrown away as well. / So what's left? Nothing. / What will there be? Something after

13 The Futurist theory of the *sdvig* ["shift"] was popularized by David Burliuk in his essay "Kubizm" ["Cubism," 1913] (see Burliuk et al. 98) and by Shemshurin in his study "Futurizm v stikakh V. Briusova" ["Futurism in the Poems of V. Briusov," 1913] (see Shemshurin 5).

> zero<,> worldbackwards or rather zerobackwards, the world has already died.

In this essay, Kruchenykh describes the "epoch in zero" as a "final annihilation of values" in which the world is "not only covered up (the Futurists, *sdvig*, nonsense), but thrown away as well." He envisions a destruction of the existing order, following which literally "nothing" remains. Here, Kruchenykh's discussion of the Futurists and their methodologies as a mere "covering up" marks a significant development in his views on zero. The reference recalls the Futurists' claims to represent the art of the future at the expense of all other artistic movements, reflected in such declarations as "Tol'ko my—*litso nashego* Vremeni" ["Only we are the *face of our* Time"] (Burliuk et al., no page). Kruchenykh dismisses these claims, viewing not "we" but a faceless zero as the face of his time. In rejecting the replacement of old values with new ones, he proposes a further degree of destruction: the future—and the Futurists—must be thrown away along with the past.

Similarly, Kruchenykh calls for "not only the absence of clothes, but of the naked man as well, the absence of everything," which, as Parnis notes, refers to Leonid Andreev's play *Savva* (see Malevich 2004, 2: 111). As discussed in chapter one, Andreev's play centers around the *sverkhanarkhist* ["Überanarchist"] (see ibid., 2: 111) Savva, a Russian iteration of the Nietzschean Übermensch, who seeks a solution to society's problems in the total destruction of society. Savva's utopia, a "tsarstvo cheloveka" ["kingdom of man"] (Andreev 2: 107), or "golaia zemlia i na nei golyi chelovek" ["the naked earth and on it naked man"] (ibid., 2: 107), privileges the revolutionary impulses of humanity, which he describes as being "sil'nee dinamita" ["more powerful than dynamite"] (ibid., 2: 107). However, for Kruchenykh, Savva's

vision too closely resembles Futurist attempts to replace one order with another. The poet proposes not only the destruction of institutions, but of those who destroy them, stripping the world of Savva's man as well.

Kruchenykh's primary critique of the nihilism displayed by Savva and the Futurists[14] relates to what he sees as its excess of humanity. Discussing the avant-garde Übermensch explicitly, he dismisses him as being "more a man than anything" and contrasts him with zero, which he describes as "maybe a frog and maybe eternity." The poet thus offers two complementary metaphors for zero in contrast to the Übermensch. The first of these, "zero as a frog," references Turgenev's novel *Fathers and Sons*, where we are told of the nihilist Bazarov: "v prinsipy ne verit, a v liagushek verit" ["he doesn't believe in principles, but he believes in frogs"] (Turgenev 1978, 7: 26; Turgenev 2008, 24).[15] In this metaphor, zero represents a nihilistic understanding of truth that challenges the centrality of humanity's values, subordinating the "kingdom of man" to a cold, indifferent kingdom of "frogs." Meanwhile, "zero as eternity" relates to Kruchenykh's description of an all-encompassing zero where "the past is in zero, and the future is still like zero for us." Here, past, present and future are united in an undifferentiating zero that renders human activity ineffectual by focusing exclusively on the moment of destruction. In both iterations, as a frog and as eternity, Kruchenykh presents zero as a super-human phenomenon that transcends the Übermensch, positing the powerlessness of creative destruction in the face of the ultimate nihilist value of nothing.

Particularly in the latter sense, zero allows Kruchenykh to formulate a critique of the utopian programs of the avant-garde from the perspective of their own destructive

14 Significantly, in "Ego-futuristy and kubo-futuristy," Chukovsky refers to Savva as the "dukhovnyi otets russkogo kvazifuturizma" ["spiritual father of Russian quasi-Futurism"] (Chukovskii 131).

15 This translation belongs to Richard Freeborn.

impulses. Writing that "the Futurer Lullers[16] saw eternity not in the form of Romantic fire (a bouquet of sulfur, of a devil and of the sunset), but in the form of a round zero," he mocks the idea of an end-time that would give meaning to historical events. Kruchenykh thus posits a total absence of teleology, offering zero as a new, anti-utopian model for understanding humanity's place in history. In his statement that "we emerge from the zero of forms, others still haven't reached zero," he asserts that one's place in history is judged in terms of proximity not to a beginning or an end, but to zero, the point of nullification. Significantly, "zero of forms" refers to Malevich's description of his *Chernyi kvadrat*. Here, Kruchenykh presents Malevich's painting, which both the poet and artist viewed as a powerful symbol of the avant-garde zero, as the sole perspectival point in a nullified world.

From *mirskontsa* to *nul'skontsa*

Kruchenykh also conceives of a "something after zero," which he calls "mirskontsa" ["worldbackwards"] before correcting it to "nul'skontsa" ["zerobackwards"], since "the world has already died." Here, he adapts *mirskontsa*, one of the most fundamental concepts for his early aesthetics, to his later theory of zero. In his 1913 essay "Novye puti slova" ["New Ways of the Word"], Kruchenykh defines *mirskontsa* in the following way:

> Чем истина субъективней—тем объективнее<.> Субъетивная объективность—наш путь. Не надо бояться полной свободы […]! / Мы стали видеть мир насквозь / Мы научились следить мир с конца […] (относительно слова мы заметили, что часто *его можно читать с конца и тогда оно получает более глубокий смысл!*) / Мы можем изменить тяжесть предметов (это вечное *земное притяжение*) […]. (Kruchenykh 1913a, 34)

16 Kruchenykh distinguishes the *zaum'* poets from the *futuristy* by referring to them as *budachi-baiachi*.

> The more subjective the truth is, the more objective it is<.> Subjective objectivity is our path. There's no need to fear complete freedom […]! / We began to see the world through and through / We learned to investigate the world from its end […] (regarding the word, we noted that *it could often be read from its end and then it acquires a deeper meaning!*). / We can change the weight of objects (that *eternal earthly gravitational pull*) […].

In this passage, we find a discussion of a dismantling of order in the interest of "complete freedom," as Kruchenykh compares the contribution of the *zaum'* poets to a mastery of the "eternal earthly gravitational pull." Discussing the concrete effects of this mastery on poetic language, he introduces the concept of *mirskontsa*, here literally defined as reading the world "from its end." Kruchenykh claims that a word read backwards "often acquires a deeper meaning," proposing the annulment of the most basic foundations of literature and, indeed, literacy in the name of the liberation of the word.

However, the degree of subjectivity introduced by the word "often" implies that despite Kruchenykh's interest in aesthetic disruption, he does not believe that a word read in the traditional direction is necessarily less meaningful. Kruchenykh's freedom after destruction avoids mention of the creation of the new "conventions" that define Jakobson's approach to zero. Instead, declaring the ability of the *zaum'* poets to "change the weight of objects," he focuses on a relativistic approach to existing conventions. Moreover, Kruchenykh writes that "the more subjective the truth is, the more objective it is," and that "subjective objectivity is our path," proposing an aesthetics in which a subjective vantage point replaces tradition as the point of departure. Here, the destruction of conventions appears to entail the destruction of their dominant role. An example of Kruchenykh's subjective approach can be seen in the poem "starye shchiptsy zakata..." ["old pincers of the sunset...", 1913], where Kruchenykh writes: "vmesto 1-2-3 / sobytiia

raspologaiutsia 3-2-1 ili / 3-1-2" ["instead of 1-2-3 / events are arranged 3-2-1 or / 3-1-2"] (Kruchenykh 1912, 88). In attacking tradition, *mirskontsa* undermines tradition's claims to objectivity, allowing for numerous subjective readings.

The potential for multiple readings offered by *mirskontsa* has significant ethical implications for *zaum'*. In the same section of "Novye puti slova," Kruchenykh writes:

> Наши новые приемы учат новому постижению мира, разбившему убогое построение […] «идеалистов», где человек стоял не в центре мира, а за перегородкой. […] Нам не нужно посредника-символа […], мы даем свою собственную новую истину, а не служим отражением некоторого солнца […]. (Kruchenykh 1913a, 33)
>
> Our new devices teach a new comprehension of the world, crushing the impoverished construction of […] the "Idealists," where man stood not at the center of the world, but behind a partition. […] We don't need an intermediary symbol […], we offer our personal new truth rather than serve as the reflection of some sun […]"

In his references to Idealism and "intermediary symbols," Kruchenykh critiques the philosophy of the Symbolists for reducing man to the role of mediator of a more important value. Arguing that the *zaum'* poets "offer [their] own new truth rather than serve as the reflection of some sun," he alludes to *Pobeda nad solntsem*, presenting the opera as a victory over the era of reflective poetics. Significantly, Kruchenykh argues that the destructive "new devices" of *zaum'* can be used to liberate humanity, restoring man to his rightful place at the "center of the world." In this sense, Kruchenykh has not yet distanced himself from the world of *Savva* to the extent that he later would. However, even in this early essay, he already demonstrates a move away from the unified conception of humanity discussed in Andreev's play. Referring not to human Truth, but to a "personal new truth," Kruchenykh ties *mirskontsa* to a subjective vision, one that abolishes reflection in order to preserve individualism.

Expanding on his defense of subjectivity in "Novye puti slova," Kruchenykh's *nul'skontsa* challenges the centrality not only of the sun, but of man as well, positing the equalization of all perspectives in zero. The transition from *mirskontsa* to *nul'skontsa* shows a distillation of Kruchenykh's most radical ideas in the late 1910s—one that, far from marking a turn to Malevich's aesthetics, distinguishes the poet from other participants in both the Suprematist and Futurist movements. Along with demonstrating important divergences from Malevich's ideas, *nul'skontsa* draws a clear distinction between Kruchenykh and his fellow *zaumnik* Velimir Khlebnikov. As is well known, the two poets devised the concept of *mirskontsa* together (see Janecek 1996a). However, Khlebnikov understood the concept in its most literal sense, as we see in his play *Mirskontsa* [1912], which tells the life stories of two characters from death to birth. Envisioning a retrospective study of events that would cast light on their significance, Khlebnikov adopted *mirskontsa* as a means of determining the basic laws of history. In theorizing the end as a solution, he ultimately fell into the category of poets Kruchenykh describes as viewing eternity "in the form of Romantic fire," and it is significant that the number one played a far more significant role than zero in Khlebnikov's poetics.[17] Meanwhile, Kruchenykh came to see *mirskontsa*—later *nul'skontsa*—as an examination of the world not from a decisive and illuminating endpoint, but from the point of neutralization in zero. Notably, Kruchenykh's works from the late 1910s associate this neutralization with the emergence of personal truth, showing his nihilistic worldview to be humanistic in an unexpected way. In abandoning the reflective poetics of Symbolism and the anthropocentric nihilism of the early avant-garde, *nul'skontsa* seeks to create a

17 In "Nasha osnova" ["Our Foundations," 1919], Khlebnikov discusses his and Kruchenykh's poetry in the context of his theory of the *edinitsa* ["unit" or "one"] (see Khlebnikov 672).

self-sufficient position in which no perspective is subordinate to any other.

The Poet at Zero

As we see in Kruchenykh's 1918 poem "I budet ne to chto my v gazete ezhednevno / chitaem..." ["And it won't be what we read every day / in the papers..."], *nul'skontsa* serves as an alternative vision not only of avant-garde history, but also of the role of the poet within such a vision:

И будет не то что мы в газете ежедневно
читаем
Перепутаю все края
Выкрою Нью-Йорк рядом с Китаем
И в начале происшествий и новых алфавитов
поставлю
Я.
Будет Чехов сидеть на французской горчице
Перьев своих сильнее острясь
На колени к нему в восторге вспрыгнет спина певицы
А вместо меню захудалых—ручаюсь!—бесконечная мразь!
А на баранине клеймо: огромной закорюкой мой клятый глаз!
Пусть красками всех афиш и погребальных объявлений
Будет кричать мое: гви-гва!
Пусть прославляется красный нуль и гений
И лопнет от гнева редактора голова!
(Kruchenykh 1918a, 2-3.)

And it won't be what we read in every day
in the papers
I'll mix up all the lands
I'll cut out New York and with it China
And at the beginning of the happenings and the new alphabets
I'll put
I.
Chekhov will eat only French mustard
Making himself sharper than his quills
And a songstress' back will jump onto his knees in rapture
And instead of a menu for poor men—I swear!—there will be endless scum!
And the brand [stamped] on the lamb: my cursed eye with an enormous flourish!

Let the colors of all the posters and burial announcements
Cry out my *gvi-gva!*
Let the red zero and genius by praised
And let the editor's head explode in fury.

In this poem, Kruchenykh associates the *zaum'* poet with the principle of relativity, contrasting his *zaum'* with traditional order ("what we […] read every day") and equating its role with a "mixing up" of this order. As an example, he places *я* "at the beginning of […] the new alphabets." Here, the word *я* serves a double function as the last letter of the Russian alphabet and as the Russian word for "I." In a clear allusion to *mirskontsa*, Kruchenykh reverses the order of his new alphabets so that they are read from the end. Meanwhile, *я*'s role as "I" references the role of *mirskontsa* as an individualistic alternative to traditional poetry. Kruchenykh's disruption of traditional order thus serves to refocus the point of origin in poetry on the subjective perspective of the *zaum'* poet.

Kruchenykh's subjective repositioning in his poem is also accompanied by the nihilistic approach discussed in his essays. As we see in the statement that his *zaum'* utterance "gvi-gva" will be read on "all the posters and burial announcements," *zaum'* acts for Kruchenykh as a declaration of the death of conventional poetry. Meanwhile, in an elaborate gastronomical metaphor, Kruchenykh declares his desire to replace the meager portions of Chekhov's traditional "menu for poor men" with *zaum'*, which he calls "endless scum." This discussion of *zaum'* displays a humorous recalibration in which tradition is challenged and scum, though traditionally conceived as an unpleasant and undesirable concept, becomes the highest of poetic values in Kruchenykh's system.[18] The significance of this recalibration becomes particularly clear at the end of the poem, where Kruchenykh employs a further reference to Chukovsky, referring to himself as a

18 Kruchenykh's discussion of scum surely in part represents an ironic take on critical reactions to *zaum'*.

"red zero and genius." Kruchenykh's association of the beginning of the new alphabets with the *zaum'* poet and the *zaum'* poet with zero reflects the move from *worldbackwards* to *zerobackwards* that dominated his works from the latter half of the 1910s. Thus, we find here one of the clearest poetic treatments of the relationship between *zaum'* and Kruchenykh's understanding of zero as radical subjectivity.

Kruchenykh's poem also alludes to Vladimir Mayakovsky's *poema Oblako v shtanakh*, addressing the ideas discussed with regard to it in chapter one. The relevant lines read:

> Славьте меня!
> Я великим не чета.
> Я над всем, что сделано,
> ставлю «nihil».
> (Maiakovskii 1: 181)
>
> Praise me!
> The great ones are no match for me.
> Under everything that's been done
> I put "nihil."

In these lines, Mayakovsky equates the world's accomplishments with a zero-value. Leaving only himself as the representative of his times, he engages in what Kruchenykh had come to view by the late 1910s as a typical Futurist act of nullification. Meanwhile, in his lines "And at the beginning of the happenings and the new alphabets I'll put [*postavliu*] / I," Kruchenykh complicates Mayakovsky's act of nullification. Replacing "nihil" with "I," he draws another parallel between himself and zero, now associating himself with the culture that Mayakovsky dismisses as valueless. This reference not only completes the move from "covering up" to "throwing away" discussed in Kruchenykh's fragmentary essay, it also affirms his vision of both self-negation and self-affirmation in zero. We see these two qualities together at the end of the poem, where Kruchenykh

responds to Mayakovsky's lines "Praise me! / The great ones are no match for me" by writing: "let the red zero and genius be praised / and let the editor's head explode in fury." Here, Kruchenykh justifies his devaluation of his own poetry by equating his genius not with a Mayakovskian incomparability, but with a zero-based incomprehensibility. The *zaum'* poet is praiseworthy for remaining at rather than rising above the point of nullification—for occupying a position whose meaning can be judged only from the subjective vantage point of zero.

Zero as a Riddle

Kruchenykh applies his discussions of comprehensibility more directly to *zaum'* in his 1917 book *Nestroch'e* [*Notline*], where he asserts that "zagadku v zaumi legko otgadat', komu nuzhno" ["the riddle in *zaum'* can easily be guessed by those who need to"] (Kruchenykh 1917b, no page). In stressing the personal nature of his poetry, he comes close to Pavel Florensky's reaction to his poem "Dyr bul shchyl" [untranslatable, 1913]: "Mne lichno eto […] nravitsia […] No skazhite vy: 'A nam ne nravitsia',—i ia otkazyvaius' ot zashchity" ["I personally like it […]. But if you were to say, 'Well, we do not like it,' I would refuse to defend this position"] (Florenskii 2: 183-84). While allowing for the possibility of solving riddles in *zaum'*, Kruchenykh offers no guarantee that a solution will be objectively meaningful, and he casts doubt on any relationship with *zaum'* that transcends the personal. In this sense, the riddles created by *zaum'* can indeed be interpreted productively in the context of zero, as Kruchenykh implies in his letter to Shemshurin. While they reproduce the form of traditional riddles by encouraging the search for solutions, any solution will be empty without the possibility of universal

intelligibility. Kruchenykh's *zaum'* escapes the comprehensibility that Khlebnikov's seeks to provide, drawing the reader in with promises of enlightenment only to leave him in the subjective "darkness" discussed at the beginning of this chapter.

A representative example of Kruchenykh's zero-based riddles can be found in his 1916 poem "nulty pul..." [untranslatable]:

нулты пул
аравод
жамавор
нул
ныл
чила
чига
тык
нык!
дрензык
зымн
зы
(Kruchenykh 1999, 466).[19]

"nulty pul..." is typical of Kruchenykh's radical *zaum'* works from the late 1910s. None of its words are immediately recognizable, yet the poem nonetheless creates the impression of meaning. Here, genre plays an important role, as the semblance of stanzaic structure in "nulty pul..." encourages the reader to read it in the context of traditional poetry. We find further encouragement in Kruchenykh's use of paronomasia: the poem's phonetics are dominated by the letters of its first word, *nulty*, containing 6 instances of "n," 3 of "u," 5 of "l," 2 of "t," and 7 of "y." Significantly, the phonetic clusters of the first half of "nulty pul...", *nulty-pul-nul-nyl*, center around the familiar word *nul'*, offering the theme of zero as a clue. The line "nulty pul" also mirrors *Gly-Gly*'s lines "nulevo / pulevo," reiterating Kruchenykh's association between zero and violence. However,

19 The poem was later published with minor alterations as "Armian" ["Of Armenians"] (see Kruchenykh 1917a, no page).

despite these implications, “nulty pul...” never produces a satisfying manifestation of word *nul’*, since the word never appears as a complete entity, and no soft “l” appears anywhere in the poem, thwarting anagrammatic resolution. Thus, while Kruchenykh creates the impression of a pull toward traditional signification, this pull never fully manifests itself and ultimately leaves the reader at zero.

In its unification of formal and thematic treatments of zero, “nulty pul...” demonstrates the possibility for an approach to Kruchenykh’s poetry based around this theme. While Kruchenykh’s zero has parallels with other avant-garde readings of the concept, its most characteristic elements distinguish it sharply from them. Unlike Gnedov, whose “Poema Kontsa” concludes the book *Smert’ iskusstvu*, Kruchenykh had no interest in the end of aesthetics, and critics such as Janecek have identified semantic tendencies even in his most radical *zaum’* (see Janecek 1996b, 49-69). Meanwhile, the prospect of using zero to create new aesthetic systems (in the cases of Jakobson and Malevich) or to arrive at new conclusions about life and art (in the case of Khlebnikov) did not appeal to Kruchenykh either. As we see in “nulty pul...”, Kruchenykh’s *zaum’* functions as zero in the sense of “not-one,” negating poetic tradition without abdicating its role as poetry. At its most radical, Kruchenykh’s *zaum’* navigates the space between the comprehensibility of traditional poetry and the end of poetry in silence. It maintains its readers’ interest with the promise that it may return to traditional language and be solved, yet its goal is to play with rather than attain this resolution.

We find a play with resolution that ends on a different note in Kruchenykh’s 1919 poem “Bezma / bzama...” [untranslatable]:

Безма
бзама

сма**НИ**
яан ану
илу чилир
ГЕНЕР...
безумный финансист я аннули—
рую генИльцев
сочиняю круговой пугамек!
ПЫРЯЮ ФОССОМ[20] БРАТЬЯМ—БАНКИРАМ В БОК!
радиусы: Тагоры—Собиновы[21] запрятаны
в богоугодные заведеньица
там РАТАТОРЯТ старческий паек!
Я переверчиваю цены, столбняки—таксы,
беспромазно попадаю на безвестно верст в цель
Понижаю курс на МЫЛОВАРЕННЫЕ ЛАСКИ
ДОБИВАЮ МИРОВОЙ **ПРОСТРЕЛ**
и ни один мой торговый дом не прогорел![22]
(Kruchenykh 1919a, 113)

Bezma
bzama
sma**NI**
iaan anu
ilu chilir
GENER...
a mad financier, I ann—
ul the genius-decayers
I compose a 360-degree frightmachinegun!
I HIT MY FELLOW BANKERS IN THE SIDE LIKE VOSS!
the Tagore-Sobinov radii are stowed away
in charitable institutions
there they CLAMBER senile rations!
I twirl prices, stupor taxes,
without missing I hit the target from who knows how many miles
I lower the rate of exchange on SOAP-COOKED CARESSES
I SMASH A GLOBAL **EXIT WOUND** THROUGH
and not one of my trading houses has burned down!

In this poem, Kruchenykh provides the anagrammatical resolution missing in "nulty pul..." Out of the sounds of the transrational lines "Bezma / bzama / sma**NI** / iaan anu / ilu chilir / GENER," he builds the far more comprehensible "bezumnyi finansist ia annuli

20 Werner Voss (1897-1917) was a German fighter pilot.
21 Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was an Indian poet; Leonid Sobinov (1872-1934) was a Russian opera singer.
22 Kruchenykh later republished this poem in a slightly different form (see Kruchenykh 1919b, 21).

— / ruiu genIl'tsev" ["a mad financier, I ann— / ul the genius-decayers"].[23] The remainder of "bezma / bzama..." is written in similarly absurdist, yet otherwise recognizable and even programmatic language, using martial metaphors to proclaim the victory of the *zaum'* poets against traditional cultural figures such as the poet Tagore and the opera singer Sobinov. Here, Kruchenykh uses *zaum'* not to thwart the reader's expectations, but to prepare them. However, such resolution involves no less a degree of play with tradition than in "nulty pul..." Drawing on the concept of *nul'skontsa* and its leveling of expressive possibilities, it creates a fluidity between transrational and conventional expression that privileges neither. Thus, even in one of his more easily readable poems of the late 1910s, Kruchenykh subjects his language to extreme relativization. Moreover, given the strong presence of *nul'skontsa* in "bezma / bzama...", it is significant that the poem includes a reference to zero. With its root in *nul'*, the word *annuliruiu* ["I annul"] demonstrates that Kruchenykh's *zaum'*, in both its more overtly radical and more traditional manifestations, is fundamentally concerned with poetry as zero, as a force that finds significance not in the creation of systems, but in the act of nullifying them.

Conclusion. Zero as the Underground

In his letter discussed earlier in this chapter, Jakobson commented on Kruchenykh's approach to poetry by writing: "pomnite, vy govorili, chto liuboi riad bukv v priamom ili obratnom poriadke—est' poeziia, i nazyvali eto […] podpol'noi tochkoi zreniia" ["you said that any string of letters in its forwards or backwards order was

23 Although the word *genil'tsy* is invented, it is interpretable from context and therefore differs from the "pure" *zaum'* of "nulty pul..."

poetry, and called that […] an underground point of view"] (Iakobson 73). Amidst a discussion of the principle of *mirskontsa*, the critic notes an intriguing suggestion by Kruchenykh. His description of *zaum'* as "underground" poetry refers to the Underground Man, the protagonist of Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*. It is fitting that Kruchenykh would choose Dostoevsky's character as a model for the *zaum'* poet. As Gurianova notes, "for the early Russian avant-garde, the 'poetics of the underground' opposed the creation of any fixed or immutable ideas or absolutes in both social and aesthetic questions" (Gurianova 2012, 2). In his total opposition to absolutes, the Underground Man represents a more radical nihilism than that of the avant-garde Übermensch; his destructive impulses lead to a rejection not only of tradition and progress, but of everything. Dostoevsky's character refuses to participate in any ideology, and his reluctance to be pinned down by established modes of thought and expression results in a retreat into himself, into the subjectivity of the underground.

While Dostoevsky understood the Underground Man as the symptom of a broad social problem,[24] Kruchenykh, in a further appeal to irony, presents him as the solution. He thus engages in a self-negation that is both consistent with the behavior of the Underground Man and predicated on the principle of *nul'skontsa*, which allows no dominant position. The significance of Kruchenykh's retreat to the underground becomes clearer when his aesthetic searches are placed in their historical context. As I have shown

24 In his preface to *Notes from the Underground*, Dostoevsky writes: "I avtor zapisok i samye 'Zapiski', razumeetsia, vymyshleny. Tem ne menee takie litsa, kak sochinitel' takikh zapisok, ne tol'ko mogut, no dazhe dolzhny sushchestvovat' v nashem obshchestve, vziav v soobrazhenie te obstoiatel'sta, pri kotorykh voobshche skladyvalos' nashe obshchestvo. Ia khotel vyvesti pered litso publiki, povidnee obyknovennogo, odin iz kharakterov protekshego nedavnego vremeni. Eto—odin iz predstavitelei eshche dozhivaiushchego pokoleniia" ["Both the author of the notes and the *Notes* themselves are, of course, fictional. Nevertheless, types such as the creator of these notes not only could, but are also bound to exist in our society, taking into account the circumstances that have shaped our society. I wanted to present to the public, in a more striking manner than usual, one of the character types belonging to the very recent past. He is one of the representatives of a generation still surviving"] (Dostoevskii 1989, 4: 452; Dostoevskii 2008, 3). This translation belongs to Jane Kentish.

in this chapter, *zaum'* appeared at a time in Russian culture when a nullification of the past was being widely discussed, yet it was unclear what was to follow. In poems such as "nulty pul..." and "bezma / bzama...", Kruchenykh's *zaum'* reflects its origins in this historical moment by engaging in a perpetual nullification of traditional poetry and struggling to remain at the zero that it creates. In a 1916 letter to Matiushin, Malevich aptly describes the primary complex of Kruchenykh's *zaum'*, writing that the poet "eshche vedet bor'bu […], ne davaia ostanavlivat'sia nogam dolgo na odnom meste; no 'vo chto' visit nad nim" ["is still continuing [his] battle […], never letting his feet rest long in one place; but the 'into what' hangs over him"] (Malevich 2004, 1: 88).[25] Indeed, in reducing aesthetic tradition to nothing, Kruchenykh rejects the idea of seeking solutions in new systems, viewing Malevich's "into what" as a betrayal of avant-garde values. In this sense, Chukovsky is perhaps correct in his view of the poet as the foremost representative of a zero-epoch of Russian culture. Kruchenykh creates poetry for a culture positioned equally between the old and the new, refusing to enter into either, and finding his solution only in the non-resolved underground of zero.

25 Malevich may be drawing on the religious rhetoric of "Vo chto ty verish'?" ["What do you believe in?"].

CHAPTER FOUR

The Face of Zero. Kazimir Malevich's Framing of the Self

The Artist as Nothing

Unlike Aleksei Kruchenykh, who understood zero as a means of escape from systematization, Kazimir Malevich approached the concept in a totalistic manner. We see this clearly in his 1923 essay "Suprematicheskoe zerkalo" ["The Suprematist Mirror"], where he writes:

> 1) Науке, искусству нет границ, потому что то, что познается, безгранично, бесчисленно, а бесчисленность и безграничность равны нулю.
> 2) Если творения мира—пути Бога, а «пути его неисповедимы», то он и путь равны нулю.
> 3) Если мир—творение науки, знания и труда, а творение их бесконечно, то оно равно нулю.
> 4) Если религия познала Бога, познала нуль.
> 5) Если наука познала природу, познала нуль.
> 6) Если искусство познало гармонию, ритм, красоту, познало нуль.
> 7) Если кто-либо познал абсолют, познал нуль.
> 8) Нет бытия ни во мне, ни вне меня, ничто ничего изменить не может, так нет того, что могло бы изменяться, и нет того, что могло бы быть изменяемо. (Malevich 1995, 1: 271)

> 1) Science and art have no boundaries because that which is known is boundless, incalculable, and boundlessness and incalculability are equal to zero.
> 2) If the world's creations are the ways of God, and "his ways are inscrutable," then he and his way are equal to zero.
> 3) If the world is the creation of science, knowledge and labor, and their creation is endless, then it is equal to zero.
> 4) If religion has known God, it has known zero.
> 5) If science has known nature, it has known zero.
> 6) If art has known harmony, rhythm, beauty, it has known zero.
> 7) If anyone has known an absolute, he has known zero.
> 8) There is no being either within me or without, nothing can change anything, so there does not exist that which could change itself, nor that which could be changed.

Malevich's essay presents the world as a boundless and incalculable zero, undifferentiated and undifferentiatable in its nothingness. Not only is God equal to zero, so are the means of knowing him, as well as those individuals who attempt the act of knowing. With this latter category, Malevich has in mind the artists of the world, along with other traditional seekers of truth. By equating them with zero, he offers an unusual interpretation of the role of the artist in society, one that is striking even within the context of the avant-garde zero. In Malevich's vision, neither art nor the artist possesses the means to alter the world, which remains in a state of non-being that is inseparable from them. Instead of zero as the potential for absolute creation, he reads zero as the absolute impossibility of creation.

Drawing on this and similar philosophical explorations of nothingness, Felix Philipp Ingold characterizes Malevich as being no longer an artist ["kein Künstler"] (Ingold 1985, 198), but rather a creator "from nothing for nothing" (ibid. 195). His reading reveals an important and largely unexplored tension in Malevich's art. Despite equating art with nothingness and viewing the artist as a non-entity, he consistently turned to art as a means of self-expression.[1] Describing this apparent paradox in his worldview, T. J. Clark notes a struggle—both for his disciples and for his future scholars—"to come to terms […] with Malevich's extraordinary physicality and concreteness as a painter, and with the deployment of these qualities in pursuit of an ending, maybe a self-canceling" (Clark 269). In this chapter, I will argue that the paradoxical relationship between Malevich's vision of the world as nothingness and the subjective materiality of his paintings lies at the heart of his understanding of zero. Examining his use of the

1 Many scholars have noted Malevich's abandonment of painting in the mid-1920s (see, for example, Shatskikh 2000a; Hansen-Löve 2007b). However, during this period, he continued to produce works of applied art and design, as well as the sculpture-like figures that he referred to as *arkhitektony*.

concept at crucial points throughout his career, I will trace his attempts to reconcile the loss of the self in nothingness with the need for personal artistic creation through this very nothingness.

The Frame of Reason

Malevich's engagement with zero began in 1914, with a short-lived movement that he referred to as "fevralizm" ["Februarism"] (see Malevich 2004, 1: 62).[2] Although it lasted only a year and a half before he turned to Suprematism in September 1915 (see Malevich 2004, 1: 69), Februarism produced a series of notable works including *Korova i skripka* [*Cow and Violin*, 1914[3]], *Anglichanin v Moskve* [*An Englishman in Moscow*, 1914], and *Aviator* [*The Aviator*, 1915]. In an untitled essay from 1915, Malevich explained the theory behind his movement in the following terms:

> Художнику разум нужен только для домашнего обихода, а художники употребляют его в картину. […] За ненадобностью я отказываюсь от души и интуиции, 19 февраля в 1914 году я отказался на публичной лекции от разума. / Предупреждаю об опасности—сейчас разум заключил искусство в 4-хстенную коробку измерений […]. Бегите, пока не поздно. […] Высшее художественное произведение пишется тогда, когда ума нет. (Malevich 1995, 56-57)
>
> An artist only needs reason for home use, but artists put it to use in their paintings. […] Due to a lack of necessity I renounce the soul and intuition, on February 19 in the year 1914 I renounced reason at a public lecture. / I warn [you] of danger—reason has now imprisoned art in a 4-walled box of dimensions […]. Run before it is too late. […] The highest work of art is created when there is no intellect.

In his statement that "on February 19 in the year 1914 I renounced reason at a public lecture," Malevich reveals the significance of the name "Februarism" by placing it in the context of the utopian destruction discussed in chapter one. Much like Vasilisk Gnedov,

2 For a chronology of the Februarist movement, see Gurianova 2003; Shatskikh 2009; Shatskikh 2012.

3 The precise chronology of Malevich's works is a matter of much scholarly debate. I rely on Andrei Nakov's dating throughout (see Malevich 2002).

he centers his art around a point of nullification, in this case that of reason and the intellect. Yet Malevich proves himself to be even more concerned with avant-garde historicity than Gnedov, deriving the very name of his movement from the historical moment of destruction that occurred in February 1914. Orienting his future creation around that moment, he shows that the aesthetic principles of his movement do not just stem from his destructive act, but are in fact equivalent to it.

In arguing that reason has "imprisoned art in a 4-walled box of dimension," Malevich presents it as a form of captivity, which qualifies his act of destruction as an act of liberation. Notably, he views this act as an essentially personal one, juxtaposing his own liberation ("I renounced reason") with the future potential liberation of other artists. Encouraging his readers to "run before it is too late," he declares the need for each of them to individually free themselves and their art from the bounds of the intellect. Malevich's focus on individuality highlights the unusual approach to selfhood that is involved in Februarism's destruction. On the one hand, the movement serves as a means for artists to escape from aesthetic imprisonment, achieving freedom of expression in the process. On the other hand, the forces that are presented in the role of jailers are in fact those that are associated with selfhood: the soul, intuition and the intellect. In this sense, Malevich proposes a freeing of the self from what is traditionally seen to be the self. This paradox is accompanied by a parallel from the art world, as he describes the prison of reason as a "4-walled box of dimensions." In this clear reference to the frame of a painting, he calls for the destruction of the characteristic that traditionally identifies a painting as such. He thus asserts that the intellect and the frame are equivalent rational forms from which art must be freed in order to achieve a new, unrecognizable form of

selfhood.

Although zero is absent from the above essay, which represents Malevich's only significant theoretical statement on Februarism, it appears frequently in works attributed to the movement, where it is often associated with the destruction of the frame of the intellect. We see this clearly in the following sketch:

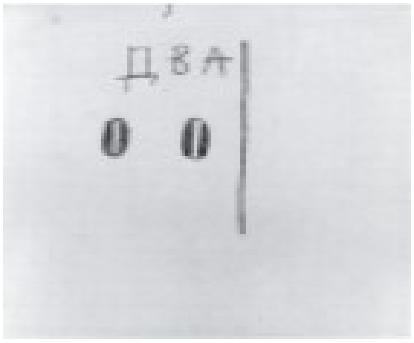


Figure 1
Untitled, 1915
Pencil on paper
8.8 x 11.5 cm.
Private collection

Here, we find an apt illustration of the destruction of reason described above. The vertical line to the right side demonstrates a nullification of the frame. Its presence along one side speaks to the intention of holding the work within its bounds, while its absence along the other three indicates a liberation from its closed form. Meanwhile, the word "dva" ["two"] and the two numerical zeros that stand beneath it thwart rational communication through a confusion of verbal and visual signals. This disruption of traditional signification is compounded by the fact that the literal meaning of the text when read rationally is reduced to "zero," as this is the only information that is clearly conveyed. In an interesting interpretation, Ingold refers to Malevich's sketch as "figurative" (see Ingold 1988, 58), reading the zeros as two eyes and the *Д* as a hat with hair beneath it (see ibid. 58). As such, the work would demonstrate a nullification of

human form in the association of this form with zero. While such an interpretation may seem far-fetched, it highlights Malevich's attempts to eradicate traditional selfhood from his art. In place of selfhood, we find cold, mathematical zeros that relate neither to the human form nor to the human ability to approach them on a rational level.

The Intellect at Zero

Malevich engages with the theme of selfhood in an even more marked fashion in his painting *Aviator*:



Figure 2
Aviator
Oil on canvas
125 x 65 cm.
Russian Museum, St. Petersburg

In this painting, we find a zero placed prominently on the head of a human figure, that of the titular "aviator." As Nikolai Firtich notes, this symbol indicates "the reason that has

been reduced to zero" (Firtich 2000, 68). In this sense, the painting depicts a nullification of the traditional subjectivity that Malevich sees as imprisoning artistic creation. We also find a new symbol here that serves a similarly destructive purpose: a saw that runs down along the middle of the painting by the aviator's head. Charlotte Douglas identifies the saw as a metaphor for the "cutting or slicing" (Douglas 1994, 82) of art in Malevich's paintings. She links it with the Cubist dissection of perspective (ibid. 64), a technique we find utilized in *Aviator* and many of Malevich's other works from his Februarist period. Indeed, the saw appears in both *Anglichanin v Moskve* and *Usovershenstvovannyi portret I. V. Kliuna* [*Perfected Portrait of I. V. Kliun*, 1913], where instead of being placed alongside the head, it goes through it, serving as a metaphor for the cutting of the intellect and the cutting of artistic forms. Zero is thus associated not only with a liberation from the frame, but also with a liberation from traditional perspective.

As in the case of Malevich's essay, *Aviator* demonstrates a focus on the historicization of liberation. A red arrow directs us to the zero-point on the aviator's head, detailing a path into the destruction of reason. With this in mind, Firtich additionally interprets the painting as representing "an exit beyond zero, which is designated by the rays exiting from it" (Firtich 2000, 68). However, while we indeed encounter rays of light that stem from the zero-point, it is less clear that they are meant to represent an exit "beyond" zero. In fact, in emerging from zero, these rays spread out in multiple directions, presenting zero as far more of a perspectival point than a point of exit. In the context of Malevich's association between zero and Cubist dissection, we see that it functions as a symbol for multiplicity following the destruction of the single perspective. In this manner, Malevich's painting works as a visual corollary to

Kruchenykh's *nul'skontsa*, whose significance for the avant-garde zero was discussed in the previous chapter. This interpretation is supported by Malevich's assertion on the reverse side of his canvas that the painting represents "(ne simvolizm) karta ryba <tak!> oznachaiut tol'ko sebia" ["(not symbolism) the map and the fish mean only themselves"] (see Malevich 2000, 321). As in the case of Kruchenykh's *nul'skontsa*, Malevich's zero operates as a symbol of tautological signification. The severing of connections that he associates with it hails a new historical period, one in which forms cease to be bound by rational connections and become independent forms with their own significance.

Several of Malevich's works from his Februarist period link zero with the theme of multiplicity. We find examples of this theme in the following two sketches:

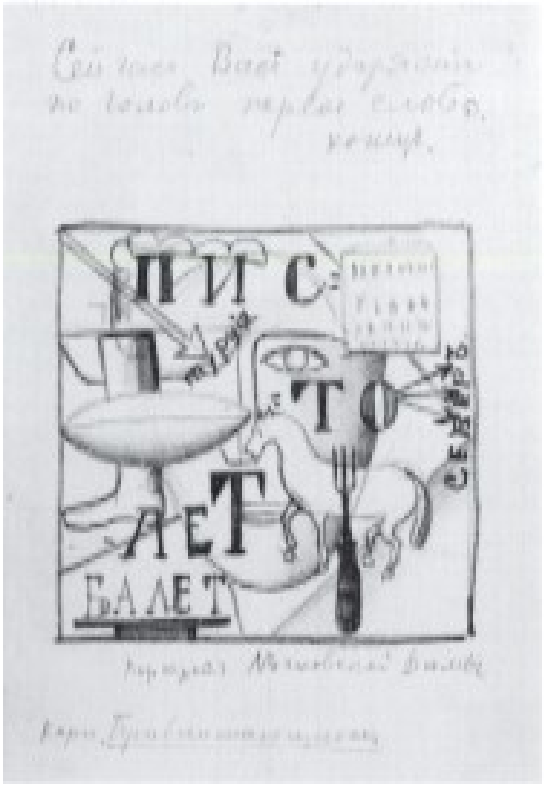


Figure 3
Portret moskovskoi damy [*Portrait of a Moscow Lady*], 1914
Pencil on graph paper
15.4 x 10.7 cm. (frame: 8 x 8 cm.)
Khardzhiev-Chaga Foundation, Amsterdam



Figure 4
Untitled, 1914-15
Pencil on graph paper
12 x 9.9 cm. (frame: 8.7/9 x 6.8/7 cm.)
Khardzhiev-Chaga Foundation, Amsterdam

Both sketches feature a confusion of verbal and visual signals reminiscent of the works discussed above, but further complicated by the addition of more material belonging to these signifying groups. We also see an interesting play with verbality, as both zeros additionally function as the letter "O," appearing in the words "pistolet" ["pistol"] and "pokhoronnoe" ["burial"]. Despite a fluidity of signification, the overall function of these symbols is clear. Their appearance is identical to the zeros featured in the two zeros sketch and *Aviator*. Meanwhile, further illustrating the themes of the latter work, they feature arrows stemming from them that point outward in various directions. Allowing for not one, but multiple perspectives that emerge from zero, they confirm Malevich's interest in the concept as both the destruction of traditional, rational subjectivity and the creation of a new subjectivity unburdened by the demands of the mind.

The following sketches of Futurist Strongmen, which were discussed briefly in the previous chapter, aptly illustrate Malevich's vision of the mind at zero:



Figure 5
Budetlianskii silach [*Futurist Strongman*], 1915
Pencil on paper
16.2 x 8 cm.
State Literary Museum, Moscow

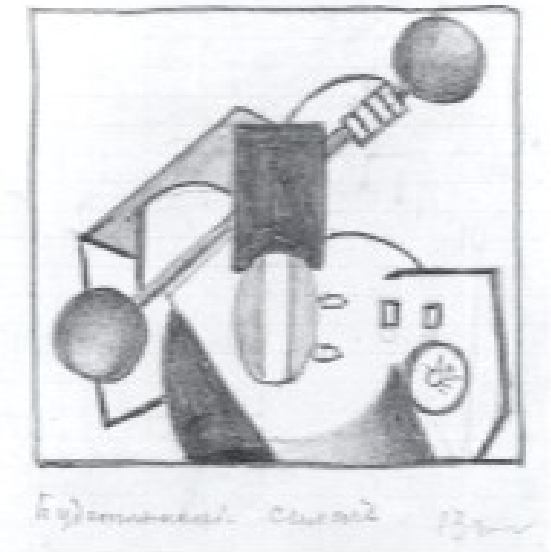


Figure 6
Budetlianskii silach, 1915
Pencil on paper
10.2 x 11.5 cm. (frame: 8 x 8.6 cm.)
Khardzhiev-Chaga Foundation, Amsterdam

Both Strongmen feature zeros upon their chests, reiterating the eradication of traditional selfhood that Malevich associates with the concept. However, this time the theme is also supported by the total blankness of their faces, which demonstrates a nullification not only of the intellect, but of individual personality. Malevich's 1915 sketches are particularly significant when compared to his earlier, 1913 portraits of the Strongmen, who retain their faces. We thus see a significant shift in his understanding of *Pobeda nad solntsem* that accompanied his development of a Februarist theory, a move away from Kruchenykh's reading of subjectivity as individuality. In his total rejection of selfhood, Malevich arrived at a conceptual abstracting of the human form with important consequences for the non-objective works that he was beginning to create. In this context, it is worth noting that the official title of the *Chernyi kvadrat* is *Chetyrekhugol'nik* [*Quadrilateral*], which denotes a form similar to that of the shapes that the Strongmen are given in place of heads.[4] As we will see in the following sections, the *Chernyi kvadrat* in fact represents an alternate aesthetic solution to the problems addressed in Malevich's revisited Strongmen.

Between Mindlessness and Mathematics

In a further sketch from Malevich's 1915 *Pobeda nad solntsem* series, we find an appearance of zero in a somewhat different context:

4 For a discussion of further appearances of quadrilaterals in Malevich's Februarist works, see Simmons 225-26.

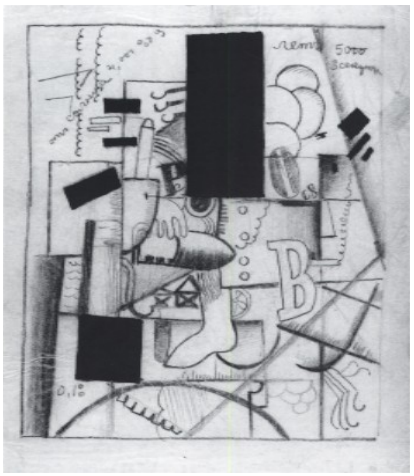


Figure 7
Untitled, 1915
Pencil on tracing paper mounted on cardboard
11.8 x 10.5 cm. (frame: 10.3 x 9 cm.)
Khardzhiev-Chaga Foundation, Amsterdam

This untitled sketch, which according to Malevich was intended as a backdrop for Kruchenykh's opera (see Malevich 2004, 1: 67), features three different approaches to the avant-garde zero. One of these is a zero-shaped object that appears slightly upwards and to the right of the center of the work; judging by its proximity to an *P* and a *B*, this object is again meant to function both as a letter and as a mathematical symbol. The second approach is represented by Malevich's inclusion of several Suprematist-style rectangles that resemble the ones featured in his Strongman sketches. Meanwhile, in the lower left-hand corner, just below a Suprematist-style square, we find the digits "0,1," which constitutes the sketch's third approach to zero. This approach has particular significance, as it represents a departure from Malevich's tendency to use zero as a solitary symbol.

We additionally find these digits in the following sketch from the same period:

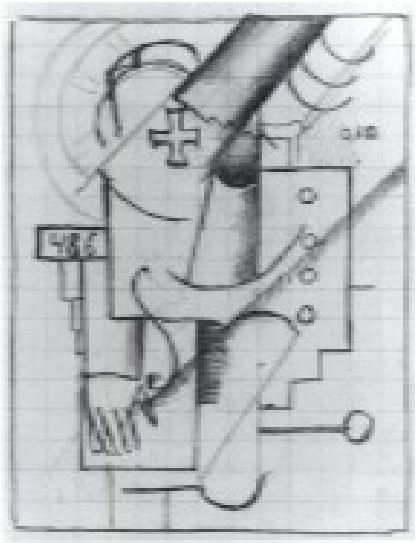


Figure 8
Untitled, 1914-15
Pencil on graph paper
16.5 x 11.2 cm. (frame: 8.5 x 6.6 cm.)
Anna Leporskaya Archive, St. Petersburg

A similar combination of numbers appears in the upper right-hand corner of this second sketch, but this time it reads "0,10," a sequence that has considerable significance for the development of Suprematism. Indeed, it resembles the name of the "0,10" exhibition, whose precise meaning has never been deciphered.[5] Notably, the "0,10" exhibition bore the additional title of "Posledniaia futuristicheskaia vystavka kartin" ["The Final Futurist Exhibition of Paintings"], an ambiguous statement that referred either to the impossibility of a subsequent Futurist exhibition, to the impossibility of a subsequent exhibition of paintings held by the Futurists, or to both simultaneously. In either case, "0,10" signified the end not just of traditional art, but of the first stage of avant-garde art, and potentially of painting as such, in a destructive zero.

We find a hint at the meaning of the number "10" in a letter from Malevich to Mikhail Matiushin sent on May 29, 1915. There, the artist wrote:

5 For prominent attempts, see Kovtun 1978, 222-24; Firtich 2009, 357; Shatskikh 2012, 102.

> Мы затеваем выпустить журнал и начинаем обсуждать как и что, ввиду того что в нем собираемся свести все к нулю, то и решили его назвать «Нулем», сами же после перейдем за нуль.
> (Malevich 2004, 1: 66)
>
> We plan to publish a journal and are beginning to discuss how and what, keeping in mind that in it we plan to reduce everything to zero, we decided to call it "Zero," then we ourselves will cross beyond zero.

Malevich's letter represents both a confirmation of his Februarist ideas on zero and a sign of the emergence of a new direction with regard to it. His description of a plan to "reduce everything to zero" is his most overtly Nietzschean explanation of the concept. Meanwhile, his discussion of an aesthetic that occurs not just after zero but "beyond" it demonstrates a substantial change to his understanding of avant-garde historicity. For Malevich, the presence of something beyond destruction radically alters the role of the artist with regard to the zero-point. We see this clearly in his statement that, following the reduction of art to zero, "we ourselves will go beyond zero," implying that the most radical of the new artists have not yet arrived at their intended destination. For the first time, Malevich looks forward rather than backward at his aesthetic goals, still pivoting from zero, but now in a direction that is apparently represented by the mysterious number "10."

Malevich discusses the completion of his transition to this new number in his 1915 manifesto "Ot kubizma k suprematizmu," whose significance for the avant-garde zero was noted in chapter one. There he writes:

> Стремление художественных сил направить искусство по пути разума давало нуль творчества. И в самых сильных субъектах—реальные формы: вид уродства. / Уродство было доведено у более сильных почти до исчезающего момента, но не выходило за рамки нуля. / Но я преобразился в нуль формы и вышел за 0—1. (Malevich 1995, 1: 34)
>
> The attempt by artistic forces to lead art along the path of reason has

> produced a zero of creation. Even among the strongest parties, realistic forms were a kind of deformity. / This deformity was taken by the strongest almost to the point of disappearance, but it did not go beyond the bounds of zero. / But I transformed myself into the zero of form and exited beyond 0 to 1.

In this essay, Malevich fully realizes the Nietzschean potential of his letter to Matiushin. Offering a dual interpretation of zero, he discusses it as both a "zero of creation," which stands for the failure of traditional "artistic forces," and a "zero of form" that allows him to "exit beyond 0 to 1." Zero thus continues to serve both as an end and as a new beginning, yet it is no longer the location of the new art, having been replaced by "1." Here, the number 10 takes the form of 1, the number present in his sketch for *Pobeda nad solntsem*, demonstrating the interchangeability of the two for Malevich, who appears to simply have in mind a numerical concept beyond zero.

In his discussion of an escape from the "bounds of zero," Malevich notably uses the word "ramki," which has an additional meaning as "frame." Presenting his move as a liberation from this frame, he borrows the rhetoric of his Februarist theory, yet to very different ends. In this case, the arrival at zero signifies the overcoming not only of the physical and conceptual boundaries of painting, but of its internal contents as well. As the "point of disappearance" of "realistic forms," i.e. of realistic representation in art, zero indicates a move into total abstraction. Moreover, as we see in the phrase "bounds of zero," the concept serves a dual role, both as the frame that holds traditional forms and as the means of escape from them. This dual role has considerable significance for the role of selfhood in the artistic process, as we see in Malevich's assertion that "I transformed myself into the zero of form and exited beyond 0 to 1." Whereas the self was previously renounced, it now becomes the means of its own nullification and

transcendence. Positing a transformation into the zero of form, Malevich presents the destruction of selfhood in art as a prerequisite for the creation of something new beyond the self.

Malevich's essay blurs the lines considerably between the transformation of artistic forms and the transformation of human forms. We see this clearly in the following passage, where he writes:

> Вся бывшая и современная живопись до супрематизма, скульптура, слово, музыка были закрепощены формой натуры и ждут своего освобождения, чтобы говорить на своем собственном языке и не зависеть от разума, смысла, логики, философии, психологии, разных законов причинности и технических изменений жизни. (ibid., 1: 27)
>
> All past and contemporary art before Suprematism, sculpture, the word, music, were enslaved by the form of nature and await their liberation in order to speak in their own voice and not depend upon reason, sense, logic, philosophy, psychology, various laws of causation and technological changes in life.

With the abandonment of reason, Malevich seeks the same in artistic forms as he does in his own person: the affirmation of the self through an act of self-destruction. He sees in Suprematism the emergence of the individual "voices" of forms of art, ones that no longer depend on external justification. Elsewhere in his essay, he writes that in art "nado vyvodit' te formy, kotorye by vytekali iz ego sobstvennogo tela" ["one must extract those forms that would flow out from its own body"] (ibid., 1: 34), attributing to his materials an individual body along with a voice. In mixing metaphors of art and life, he proposes a form of selfhood in both that is natural rather than constructed, existing individually from other forms and "extracted" by the artist. For Malevich, creation "from zero" as opposed to "at zero" abandons his earlier Cubist-influenced interest in multiplicity in favor of tautological individuality.

As many scholars have noted, Malevich placed his *Chernyi kvadrat* at the physical center of his section of the "0,10" exhibition, presenting it as the origin point of Suprematism (see, for example, Douglas 1975, 1-8). It is therefore worth analyzing the work in the context of the new vision of selfhood discussed above:



Figure 9
Chetyrekhugol'nik
Oil on canvas
79.9 x 79.5 cm.
Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

In *Chernyi kvadrat*, the destruction of the art of the past is presented in the form of a black monochrome. The painting functions most obviously as an erasure of recognizable forms, i.e. as the zero-point of figuration that Malevich discusses in his essay. For this reason, Boris Groys describes it as a "transcendental painting—the result of the pictorial reduction of all possible concrete content" (Groys 15-16). Similarly, Aage Hansen-Löve reads it in the context of the Old Testament ban on representations of God, much like the Islamic ban on representation discussed in the previous chapter (Hansen-Löve 2007b, 196). However, like the zero-point that stands at the center of Malevich's Suprematist

theory, the *Chernyi kvadrat* can be seen as existing as two separate, though connected, beings. The first of these beings is the rejection of Futurist painting and the Futurist self, which indeed makes the work apophatic in that it points the way to a new world of creation beyond itself and beyond zero. Meanwhile, the second of these beings is the liberation of the body—both painterly and human—into a new form of selfhood. In this sense, according to Malevich's theory, the *Chernyi kvadrat* possesses materiality in a way that no painting that preceded it could.

The New Face of Art

In his transition from Februarism to Suprematism, Malevich changed the title of his planned journal to reflect the new focal point of his art. Nina Gurianova explains the meaning of this act in the following manner:

> The metamorphosis in the title of Malevich's journal from Nul to Supremus is symbolic. While both titles convey the anarchic idea of creating the world out of "nothing" and the equation of "nothing" with "everything," the shift in emphasis from the extreme nihilism of "zero" to the utopian supreme domination ("Suprematism" meant "supremacy" to Malevich) marked a new stage in the evolution of the avant-garde. (Gurianova 2003, 49)

According to Gurianova, the new title *Supremus* does not betray the totality of nothing and everything contained in the zero of the *Chernyi kvadrat*, yet it does approach it from a different perspective. Having advanced from zero to "1," Malevich now sees zero from the vantage point of "supreme domination," i.e. from the completion represented by the "natural," abstract forms of Suprematist art. If Februarism entailed first looking back from the zero-point and then looking forward from it, Suprematism meant looking back at zero itself from the point of view of utopian creation and the new, liberated self.

We see this new perspective, along with a greater sense of its significance, in Malevich's manifesto "Ot kubizma i futurizma k suprematizmu." There he writes:

> Усилие художественных авторитетов направить искусство по пути здравого смысла—дало нуль творчества. / И у самых сильных субъектов реальная форма—уродство. / Уродство было доведено у более сильных до исчезающего момента, но не выходило за рамку нуля. / Но я преобразился в нуле форм и вышел за нуль к творчеству, т.е. к Супрематизму, к новому живописному реализму—беспредметному творчеству. […] Квадрат не подсознательная форма. Это творчество интуитивного разума. / Лицо нового искусства! / Квадрат живой, царственный младенец. / Первый шаг чистого творчества в искусстве. До него были наивные уродства и копии натуры. (Malevich 1995, 1: 52-53)

> The efforts of artistic authorities to direct art along the path of common sense has produced a zero of creation. / Even among the strongest parties, realistic form is a deformity. / This deformity was taken by the strongest almost to the point of disappearance, but it did not go beyond the bound of zero. / But I transformed myself within the zero of form and exited beyond zero to creation, i.e. to Suprematism, to the new painterly realism—non-objective creation. […] The square is not a subconscious form. It is creation by intuitive reason. / The face of the new art! / The square is a living Christ child. / The first step of pure creation in art. Before it there were only naïve deformities and copies of nature.

Despite the similarities between the titles of Malevich's first two Suprematist manifestos, there are significant differences between these versions. For example, one of the key lines of the original version, "I transformed myself into the zero of form and exited beyond 0 to 1," now reads "I transformed myself within the zero of form and exited beyond zero to creation." Thus, the previous transformation into zero now becomes a transformation that takes place at zero. Discussing this latter vision of zero, Firtich characterizes it as a "perspectival point" (Firtich 2000, 67), which accords with Gurianova's treatment of journal titles. Yet the effects of this simple grammatical change are considerably more far-reaching. Whereas Malevich previously saw zero as a state of being, it now additionally functions as a location, one in which one transforms oneself in

order to become something else.

In this shift from zero as a state to zero as a location, we find an accompanying change in the role of selfhood in Suprematist art. The self no longer undergoes a transformation into zero, as a result of which it is no longer nullified. Instead, it is transformed within zero, meaning that its previous properties experience change rather than their complete destruction in the original version of the manifesto. Indeed, in Malevich's discussion of "intuitive reason" we see a return of qualities that he had earlier rejected in a transfigured state. Transformed by its presence at zero, individual selfhood returns as something new, as we see in Malevich's description of the *Chernyi kvadrat* as the "face of the new art." Here, we witness the reappearance of the face, now transfigured so that it no longer resembles "copies of nature," but instead represents a form in and of itself. Significantly, this return takes place in the form of abstraction, as a result of which Hansen-Löve refers to the *Chernyi kvadrat* as a "post-iconic zero-form" (Hansen-Löve 2005, 281), i.e. as an icon after the end of representation. In this phase of Suprematism, the self, having passed through the point of zero, reemerges as an abstracted entity.

In the context of Malevich's liberation and abstraction of the face in Suprematism, it is worth noting his later comments on the frame and the framing of existence in the *Chernyi kvadrat*. In *Die Gegenstandslose Welt* [*The Non-objective World*, 1927], Malevich wrote: "The square in a white frame was already the first form of non-objective sensation. The white borders are not borders framing the black square, but only […] the sensation of non-being"[6] (Malevich 1995, 2: 109). Responding to this statement, Yve-

6 Since Malevich's book was written in Russian but published in German, I quote only my English translation.

Alain Bois argues that it is in fact the case that "the white square (frame, background?) is delimited by a square" (Bois 33). In other words, it is the liberated face that is transcribed upon the background rather than the other way around. We thus see a new approach to Malevich's concept of the frame, one in which selfhood transformed by zero frames the world around it.

The Sublime Self

Following a period of creation "from zero," Malevich turned toward a new phase that he would come to refer to as "belaia bespredmetnost'" ["white non-objectivity"] (Malevich 1995, 3: 95). This period is characterized by an interest in predominantly white paintings of which the following three works represent the most significant examples:

Figure 10
Belyi kvadrat [*White Square*], 1918
Oil on canvas
78.7 x 78.7 cm.
Museum of Modern Art, New York

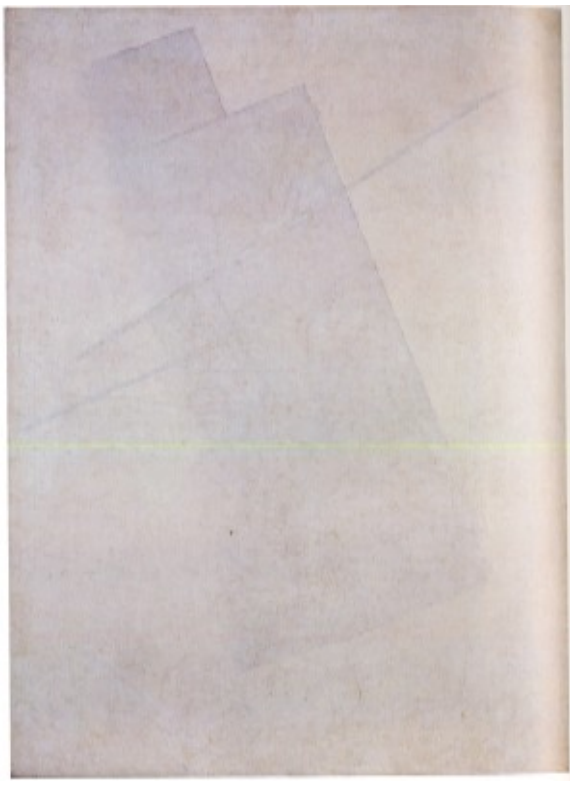


Figure 11
Untitled, 1918
Oil on canvas
97 x 70 cm.
Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam



Figure 12
Untitled, 1918
Oil on canvas
97 x 70 cm.
Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam

While Malevich associated his transition into Suprematism with a move to "1," he saw the emergence of "white Suprematism" as a return to the theme of zero. We see this clearly in his book *Mir kak bespredmetnost', ili vechnyi pokoi* [*The World as Non-Objectivity, or Eternal Peace*, 1922], where he writes: "Stavliu na ploshchadi mirovykh torzhestv *belyi mir kak Suprematicheskuiu bespredmetnost'*, torzhesvto osvobozhdennogo Nichto" ["I place upon the squares of world celebrations *the white world as Suprematist non-objectivity*, the celebration of the liberated Nothing (Malevich 1995, 3: 216). In this assertion, we no longer find a liberation of the face or of natural forms; instead, Malevich seeks the liberation of nothingness itself. Here we see a further shift—this time from a vision of zero as a liminal state or location to an understanding of nothingness as the whole of existence.

Noting the lengthy theoretical texts that Malevich produced during his "white" stage, critics have often characterized it as a move away from painting toward philosophy. Hansen-Löve describes it as a period of "zero-thought and zero-discourse" (Hansen-Löve 2005, 282). Jean-François Lyotard's interpretation is similarly influenced by Malevich's engagement with zero-based philosophical thought. Discussing the paintings of the white series (figures 10-12), he reads them as a prototypical example of the category of "sublime" art, writing: "As painting, it will of course 'present' something though negatively; it will therefore avoid figuration or representation. It will be 'white' like one of Malevitch's squares; it will enable us to see only by making it impossible to see; it will please only by causing pain" (Lyotard 78). Lyotard interprets the white paintings as apophatic works, ones that convey their meaning primarily by depicting absence. Falling on the side of those who view Malevich's treatment of zero as essentially philosophical, he reads the artist as a typical modernist seeking to access to the infinite through negative presentation (see ibid. 80).

Nonetheless, even in his white period, the most overtly nihilistic of his life, Malevich used zero as a means of engaging with the problem of presentation rather than withdrawing into nihilism. We see this in the second of the white paintings above (figure 11), which clearly presents a form that does not reduce to emptiness. Indeed, as Douglas notes, "the white figure on a white background is a ghostly geometrized human form, merging with a limitless white space" (Douglas 1994, 100). Thus, we see the return of the representational human form in white after its dissolution in the *Chernyi kvadrat*. Of course, it should be noted that the humanoid figure marks a return to Malevich's earlier works in another sense, again lacking the face that he had sought to revive, transfigured,

in his pre-white period works. Moreover, as Douglas notes, the figure dissolves into white (see ibid. 100), which means that it demonstrates an altogether different form of nullification than the *Chernyi kvadrat*. Instead of a single act in a single location, we see a dissolution into the totality of nothingness described in Malevich's essay "Suprematicheskoe zerkalo." Douglas aptly refers to this as the "intimate and essential kinship of the human figure and cosmic space" (ibid. 100). In Malevich's white period, both selfhood and its absence are united in an all-embracing zero, one that seeks to resolve the tension between creation and its impossibility in a cosmic harmony of nothingness.

We find a fitting description of this process in *Mir kak bespredmetnost*, where Malevich writes:

> Пусть все так будет, как на поверхности *живописного* холста, где человек, в нем изображенный, *ничего не видит, где руки его ничего не поднимают, где ум его ничего не постигает, где все, на нем существующее, превращено в плоскость безразличную, беспредметную, бесценную; в этом моем «пусть так будет» только подтверждение того,* что в существе лежит каждого учения и каждого познания,—т.е. пусть будет между вами единство или равность, как нуль. (Malevich 1995, 3: 184-85)
>
> Let everything be like it is on the surface of a *painterly* canvas, where the person depicted in it *sees nothing, where his arms do not raise anything, where his mind does not comprehend anything, where everything existing in him is transformed into an indifferent, non-representational, invaluable plane; in my "let it be like this" there is only the affirmation of that* which is in the essence of every teaching and of all knowledge—i.e., let there be unity and equality among you, like zero.

In this passage, we see that the frame acquires a new significance in the zero of Malevich's white period works. It no longer delimits the painting as it did in his Februarist stage, nor is it delimited as in the case of the *Chernyi kvadrat*. Instead, it nullifies the painting itself, producing a background against which the figure's mind and

actions, the expression of its self, fade into non-being, into "an indifferent, non-representational, invaluable plane." Here, zero serves as an equalizing concept, uniting the frame with what is framed upon what Malevich notably describes as "*painterly* canvas." Far from abandoning painting, he sees the solution precisely on this canvas, in which he finds the potential of combining the self with its own vanishing point.

Conclusion. The Stalinist Zero

Given the totality of the nothingness that dominates Malevich's writings from his white period, it has surprised many scholars that he subsequently returned to semi-figurative painting in the late 1920s, creating works in the following style:



Figure 13
Krest'iane [*Peasants*], 1928-29
Oil on canvas
77.5 x 88 cm.
Russian Museum, St. Petersburg

These late paintings have typically been analyzed in the context of Malevich's thoughts on society and politics, as well as his engagement with current developments in Soviet

life. John Bowlt asks "What is the meaning of these faceless, armless peasants […]? How do we explain their eerie silence, their suspension of time […]?" (Bowlt 1996, 49). He then answers these questions by writing that "for Malevich these suprematist beings—larger than life, streamlined, and immortal—were descendants of the robust, vigorous peasants who also served as prototypes for his strong men in *Victory over the Sun* in 1913" (ibid. 49). Reading Malevich's late paintings as a positive statement, he considers them to be the realization of the artist's vision of utopia in semi-figurative form.

Andrew Wachtel takes the opposite stance. Discussing this series, he notes a common theme of "depersonalization and depsychologisation" (Wachtel 250), arguing that "the world depicted by Malevich is one in which bodies are present but minds have no place, a world devoid of psychology and selves" (ibid. 255). Wachtel sees these paintings as representing the "existential hopelessness, even terror" (ibid. 254-55) of the Stalin years. Flipping this argument on its head, Anna Wexler Katsnelson writes that "no longer enslaved to the depiction of an object although still ostensibly married to a figure, Malevich's late peasant series reformulate the metaphor we see by turning it on its head, as it were—no longer a depiction standing for a man, but a figure standing for painting *an sich*" (Katsnelson 117-18). Returning to the conceptual nature of early works such as the two zeros sketch, she presents his late paintings as a way of subverting the demands of Stalinist art by painting painting itself under the guise of creating socially-conscious art.

It would not be particularly unusual for Malevich to react to Stalinist policies, given his numerous essays on Soviet politics and his overt interest in Lenin (see, for example, Ingold 1979; Grygar; Akinsha). Nonetheless, what is notable for this present

study is that his return to figuration and his apparent turn to political consciousness occurred by means of the very engagement with zero that made him the most uncompromising of the Russian avant-garde's abstractionists and the author of the famous *Chernyi kvadrat*. The peasants shown above are not the same as the Strongmen that Malevich sketched for Kruchenykh's opera more than a decade earlier in 1915, nor are they the same as his abstract Suprematist works. Yet whether they serve as a symbol of political oppression or social utopia, or mark a veiled attempt to produce pure painting in Stalinist Russia, Malevich's faceless peasants represent something else—a lifelong struggle with the concept of the self in painting and an attempt to reconcile it with the beginning and end of the avant-garde in zero.

CONCLUSION

The Absurdist Zero

"Many will think that this is absurd..."

This project has examined the Russian avant-garde zero in a number of contexts, among them nihilistic rebellion, utopian creation, mystical numerology, liminal existence, radical subjectivity and the affirmation, preservation and negation of selfhood. However, one major theme that it has largely shied away from thus far is that of the absurd. Here I have in mind particularly the absurd in its more humorous manifestation, a delight rather than terror in nothingness and the loss of meaning. My delay in introducing this seemingly natural association with zero is due in part to the fact that members of early avant-garde circles tended to take the concept very seriously. We detect no traces of humor in the writings of Ego-Futurists such as Gnedov and Ignatiev, and Bely applies unusually earnest vocabulary even to his more ironic discussions of zero-based terror. Chukovsky finds room for humorous jabs at various avant-garde programs, yet he too appears to find little that is amusing in the idea of reducing culture to nothing. While Mayakovsky seems to be more inclined to appreciate the potential for humor as such in zero, his humor is directed primarily at the old world of culture that is being negated, and he applies little of it to his own role in the process of negation.

The early avant-gardists who did touch upon the theme of the absurd in relation to zero largely rejected such an association. In his untitled Februarist essay, Malevich writes:

> Высшее художественное произведение пишется тогда, когда ума нет. / Отрывок такого произведения: / —Я сейчас ел ножки телячие. /

> Удивительно трудно приспособиться к счастью, проехавши всю Сибирь. / Всегда завидую телеграфному столбу. Аптека.— / Конечно, многие будут думать, что это абсурд, но напрасно, стоит только зажечь две спички и поставить умывальник. (Malevich 1995, 1: 57)
>
> The highest work of art is created when there is no intellect. / An excerpt from a work of this sort: / —I just ate veal legs. / It is surprisingly difficult to get accustomed to happiness after crossing all of Siberia. / I always envy the telegraph pole. A pharmacy.— / Of course, many will think that this is absurd, but in vain, one need only light two matches and install the sink.

In introducing his vision of Februarist poetry, Malevich presents a *zaum'*-like form as the ideal of the new art. As is clear from its etymology, the word *zaum'* is fundamentally concerned with states beyond the "um" ["intellect" or "mind"] and the traditional sense that accompanies it. Malevich stresses this quality in his poem, which appears to encode the transcendence of the mind in its final sentence: *за*жечь… *ум*ывальник. With its direct negation of the "um," a concept that Kruchenykh only sought to relativize, his zero-aesthetic perhaps comes the closest of those proposed by the avant-garde to the genre of nonsense poetry. Nonetheless, he anticipates this argument and dismisses it, writing that "many will think that this is absurd, but in vain." He then follows his dismissal with a further turn to apparent absurdism, justifying it with the notion that "one need only light two matches and install the sink." However, even this turn points more to a light self-ironization rather than to a step away from his position. While rejecting logical sense, Malevich equally rejects nonsense, pursuing a middle path that, as seen in chapter four, would remain vague until the emergence of the "intuitive reason" of Suprematism.

Kruchenykh also addresses nonsense from a critical point of view in his essay on *nul'skontsa*:

> Будачи-баячи увидели вечняху не формой / […] романтичного огня (букет серы, черта и заката), а в виде круглого нуля. / Не только отсутствие одежды, но и голого человека, отсутствие всего […]. / Мир не только перекроен (футуристы, сдвиг, белиберда), но и выброшен. (Malevich 2004, 2: 111)
>
> The Futurer Lullers saw eternity not in the form […] / of Romantic fire (a bouquet of sulfur, of a devil and of the sunset), but in the form of a round zero. / Not only the absence of clothes, but of the naked man as well, the absence of everything […]. / The world is not only covered up (the Futurists, *sdvig*, nonsense), but thrown away as well.

Particularly in this last statement, Kruchenykh rejects the use of nonsense in his *zaum'* works, demonstrating that, like Malevich, he does not view the transcendence of sense as its absence. Indeed, he associates nonsense with the less radical members of the Futurist movement, those who remained within the bounds of a partial rejection of tradition, failing to adopt the zero-based aesthetic that he proposed. It is particularly interesting to note that while Malevich understands nonsense as a form that goes too far in its loss of meaning, Kruchenykh takes the opposite stance, viewing it as an insufficiently radical gesture. Interpreting nonsense as a "covering up" of the world, he envisions it as a further attempt to replace old values with new ones, and therefore as an insufficiently nihilistic aesthetic, one that falls short of the relativization of all values that he seeks in zero.

The first members of the Russian avant-garde to embrace nonsense and the absurd in relation to zero belonged to a little-studied group called the *nichevoki* ["Nothingists"]. The group emerged shortly after the 1917 Revolution and vanished soon after,[1] but in the meantime they produced a striking manifesto entitled "Dekret o Nichevokakh Poezii" ["Decree on the Nichevoki of Poetry," 1921], in which they wrote:

1 For more on this group, see Markov 380-81; Krusanov 1992; Nikitaev; Krusanov 1996, 2/1: 395-405; Bowlt 1998.

> В поэзии ничего нет; только—Ничевоки. […] Жизнь идет к осуществлению наших лозунгов: / Ничего не пишите! / Ничего не читайте! / Ничего не говорите! / Ничего не печатайте!
> (Sadikov et al. 1921, 8)

> In poetry there is nothing; there is only the Nichevoki. […] Life is moving toward the realization of our slogans: / Don't write anything! / Don't read anything! / Don't say anything! / Don't publish anything!

The Nichevoki manifesto surely represents one of the most radical statements made by the Russian avant-garde, calling for an end to reading, writing, speaking, etc.—in other words, to all literary and extra-literary communicative activities. The extent to which it was meant to be taken literally is unclear, given that it itself appears in a published book that includes several other manifestos by the group. In addition, the Nichevoki continued to publish poetry following their decree, demonstrating no intention of acting upon the very slogans that they claimed "life" had already begun to realize. In this sense, they resembled Mayakovsky in *Oblako v shtanakh* far more than Gnedov in his "Poema Kontsa," adopting a figurative zero with clear absurdist qualities, one that was itself "nullified" by their inaction in respect to its principles.

The poetry of the Nichevoki group creates an interesting juxtaposition with their theoretical statements, as we see in the following work by one of their leaders, Riurik Rok:

> Не дрогнет бровь и губы стынут строго.
> Круги черчу.
> И все ясней в пространствах крышка гроба
> Большою птицей реет чуть. (Rok 36)

> My brow does not tremble and my lips freeze severely.
> I trace circles.
> And ever clearer in space the roof of the grave
> Flutters slightly like a large bird.

This stanza from Rok's long poem *Nichevoka* [*The Nothingist*] has hints of absurdism,

but it is largely impressionistic, and moreover demonstrates a traditional use of rhyme and meter. In this sense, its dedication—not to one of the more radical avant-gardists, but instead to Andrei Bely (see ibid. 36)—is particularly telling, revealing a substantial gap between theory and practice in the works of the Nichevoki. This gap appears to differ from the intentional transition to a figurative zero that we find in Gnedov's "Poema nachala." Indeed, the group continued to preach absurdist nihilism with statements such as "Dada nichego ne znachit!" ["Dada doesn't mean anything!"] (Sadikov et al. 1921, 5), which additionally sought a link between their zero and the European avant-garde. Meanwhile, within the Soviet Union, their approach to nullification was not appreciated by other poets who had engaged with avant-garde zero. The Nichevoki were specifically rejected by Mayakovsky and Kruchenykh at the former's "Chistka poetov" ["Purge of Poets"] in 1921 (see Sadikov et al. 1922, 11; Kruchenykh 1930, 4).

The OBERIU Zero

The next decade saw the emergence of a more clearly integrated absurdism in Russian approaches to zero, particularly in the works of the OBERIU group and other writers associated with them. In his much-discussed essay "Nul' i nol'" ["Zero and Nil," 1931],[2] Daniil Kharms wrote:

> Предполагаю и даже беру на себя смелость утверждать, что учение о бесконечном будет учением о ноле. Я называю нолем, в отличие от нуля, именно то, что я под этим и подразумеваю. […] Символ нуля—0. А символ ноля—О. Иными словами, будем считать символом ноля круг. […] Посторайтесь <так!> увидеть в ноле весь числовой круг. Я уверен, что это со временем удастся <так!>. И потом пусть символом ноля останется круг О. (Kharms 2: 315)

2 My discussion of Kharms' essay will briefly examine it in comparison to the visions of the Russian avant-garde zero presented in this study, and therefore does not seek to be a complete interpretation. For further treatment of this and other zero-themed works by Kharms within the context of his own works, see Jaccard 85-88; Niederbudde 184-205; 404-35; Iampol'skii 287-313; Hansen-Löve 1994.

> I propose and even take it upon myself the audacity to assert that the study of the eternal will be the study of zero. I call zero, in contrast to nil, precisely what I understand by this. […] The symbol of nil is 0. But the symbol of zero is O. In other words, we will consider the symbol of zero to be a circle. […] Try to see in zero the entire numerical circle. I am certain that in time you will succeed! And then let the symbol of zero remain the circle O.

Kharms' essay presents considerable difficulties for the translator due to its binary of "nol'" and "nul'," two forms of the word "zero" that both appear with regularity in Russian. This problematic moment also represents the key to its originality and its roots in the absurd. In dividing zero into two different meanings, one of which stands for the roundness of infinity and the other of which stands for an empty nothingness, Kharms mirrors Bely's dualistic approach, which divides the concept between the relation without things relative and the point of origin. He thus recalls the Russian utopian reading of creative destruction as the totality of both impulses at the zero-point. However, this is where the parallels end. In creating a dualistic zero, Kharms in fact transforms Bely's utopian program into an absurdist parody of utopian thinking. As the lighthearted tone of the statement that "I am certain that in time you will succeed" demonstrates, the point of this exercise is reduced to the attempt to see zero in two different senses. Instead of representing a means of altering the nature of the world, the function of Kharms' zero is simply to be imagined.

The tautological understanding of zero that appears in the works of Bely, Kruchenykh and Malevich[3] similarly acquires absurdist properties in Kharms' essay. We see this clearly in his assertion that "I call zero, in contrast to nil, precisely what I understand by this." Here, the separation of zero into two approaches no longer reveals

3 For a discussion of Malevich's substantial influence on Kharms, see Levin; Shatskikh 2000a.

an essential truth about the world and no longer serves as a means of changing it or transcending it. Instead, it is shown to be a whim of the author, who defines it in this manner simply because it is in this manner that he understands the concept. For Kharms, zero reflects its totalistic nature in its impossibility of definition by means of any terms beyond itself, which forces anyone who contemplates the concept into similarly tautological language. It is precisely here, in the forced retreat into tautology, that he introduces an element of humor largely overlooked by other writers and artists discussed in this project. With no recourse or relevance to external topics, zero—Kharms' O—becomes a truly all-encompassing and ideal symbol of absurdity.

Among the works of Nikolai Oleinikov, a writer affiliated with the OBERIU group, we find a similarly tautological (and dualistic) presentation of zero. His poem "O nuliakh" ["On Zeros," c.1934] reads as follows:

Приятен вид тетради клетчатой:
В ней нуль могучий помещен,
А рядом нолик искалеченный
Стоит, как маленький лимон.

О вы, нули мои и нолики,
Я вас любил, я вас люблю!
Скорей лечитесь, меланхолики,
Прикосновением к нулю!

Нули—целебные кружочки,
Они врачи и фельдшера,
Без них больной кричит от почки,
А с ними он кричит «ура».

Когда умру, то не кладите,
Не покупайте мне венок,
А лучше нолик положите
На мой печальный бугорок.
(Oleinikov 36)

The sight of a notebook of graph paper is pleasant to me:

A powerful zero is housed within it,
And next to it a little mutilated zerolet
Stands like a little lemon.

O, my zeros and zerolets,
I loved you, I love you!
Recover soon, you melancholics,
By means of contact with a zero!

Zeros are curative circlets,
They are doctors and paramedics,
Without them a sick man cries about his liver,
While with them he cries "hurray!"

When I die, do not place a wreath on my grave,
Do not buy me a wreath,
Instead lay a zerolet
On my sorrowful hillet.

In this poem, zero achieves tautology by populating the entire world and fulfilling all functions within it, serving as an object of desire, a curative element, a source of joy and a reason for peace even after death. In its propensity for multiplication, Oleinikov's zero has much in common with the spreading nullity that Bely depicts in "Sviashchennye tsveta," *Vozvrat* and *Peterburg*. However, instead of representing a source of existential terror, a symbol of the vanishing of significance from the world, this zero instead becomes a universal panacea. As we see in the lines "Recover soon, you melancholics, / By means of contact with a zero!", Oleinikov turns the anguish of nullification into a pleasant and restorative process. Although he briefly alludes to avant-garde violence in his discussion of a "mutilated zerolet," the emptying of all values ceases for Oleinikov to be the "negative trait" described by Maurice Blanchot. Seen through the lens of the absurd, even the final nullification of death humorously becomes a triumphant moment, with a zero laid upon the poet's "sorrowful hillet."

Oleinikov's zero functions not only as a means of confronting destruction in life,

but as an aesthetic solution as well. In "O nuliakh," we find the concept associated with numerous poetic clichés. For example, the line "I loved you, I love you" recalls Pushkin's poem "Ia vas liubil" ["I loved you," 1829]; in this allusion, the figure of the Romantic muse is replaced with the mathematical figure of zero. Meanwhile, the final stanza of the poem, with its wreaths, graves and sorrowful hillets, calls to mind the standards of elegiac vocabulary. In this sense, zero once again becomes the center of a new art, as it earlier did for the avant-gardists of the 1910s. However, here nullification indicates not the negation of tradition, but a return to it through a transformed understanding of nothingness, one that privileges humorous absurdity over the anxiety of form. The unusual cadences notwithstanding, the poem is written in Pushkin's beloved iambic tetrameter, demonstrating a clear step away from the liminal forms of Gnedov, Kruchenykh and Malevich. In a paradoxical twist, Oleinikov uses his absurdist zero as a return to a radically different origin, one located in the very historical tradition that served as the focus of avant-garde destruction.

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