

# Pseudo-revolution in Poetic Language: Julia Kristeva and the Russian Avant-garde

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It is important to stress that these peculiar pseudo-revolutions, imported from Russia and carried out under the protection of the army and the police, were full of authentic revolutionary psychology and their adherents experienced them with grand pathos, enthusiasm, and eschatological faith in an absolutely new world. Poets found themselves on the proscenium for the last time. They thought they were playing their customary part in the glorious European drama and had no inkling that the theatre manager had changed the program at the last minute and substituted a trivial farce.

—Milan Kundera, *Life Is Elsewhere* (1969)

In the preface to her 1980 collection *Desire in Language*, Julia Kristeva acknowledged her ongoing debt to the pioneering linguistic theories of Roman Jakobson, a scholar who, in her phrase, “reached one of the high points of language learning in this century by never losing sight of Russian futurism’s scorching odyssey through a revolution that ended up strangling it.”<sup>1</sup> Kristeva’s statement takes us in two directions at once, both of which I will explore in this essay: it draws attention to Jakobson’s sustaining roots in the avant-garde experimentation in poetic language that flourished in Russia in the early part of this century; and it tacitly underscores Kristeva’s own ties to Russian avant-garde theory and practice.<sup>2</sup> For Jakobson, Kristeva has suggested, the brief, febrile period of artistic experimentation that Marjorie Perloff has called “the futurist moment” continued to inform his writing in vital ways long after its unnatural death at the hands of the Soviet state. Certainly Jakobson, like Kristeva, is preoccupied throughout his work—from his exploration of Khlebnikov’s “transsense” in “Recent Russian Poetry” to his 1980 study of Hölderlin’s schizophrenia—with the relationship between abnormal or “trans-normal” language and poetic language that lay at the heart of formalist theory and futurist practice in early twentieth century Russia.<sup>3</sup>

1. Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), ix.

2. Kristeva was born and educated in Bulgaria, where Russian language and culture was standard academic fare and her early work in particular bears witness to her first-hand knowledge of Russian literature and theory. For her graduate studies she went to Paris where she was, with her compatriot Tsvetan Todorov, one of the first critics to introduce Mikhail Bakhtin into western criticism.

I will be dealing in this essay exclusively with Kristeva’s work of the 1960s and 1970s, the work that is most concerned with the problem of poetic language. My chief text will, of course, be her monumental study *La révolution du langage poétique* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1974), which has been abridged in English as *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

3. Roman Jakobson, *Noveishaia russkaia poezii. Otbrosok pervyi. Khlebnikov* (Prague, 1921). Reprinted in *Texte der Russischen Formalisten II*, ed. Wolf-Dieter Stempel (Munich: *Slavic Review* 52, no. 2 (Summer 1993)

Kristeva herself has acknowledged that the poetic language that is the subject of her monumental study *Revolution in Poetic Language* has its beginnings in the work of *Opoiaz*, the Society for the Study of Poetic Language formed by Lev Iakubinskii, Osip Brik, Viktor Shklovskii and the other “young Turks” who emerged on the Russian critical scene shortly before the revolution. Indeed, Kristeva’s term “poetic language” is itself a direct borrowing from formalist theory.<sup>4</sup> A discussion of the evolution of “poetic language,” from Russian formalism to French post-structuralism, will form part of this essay—but only part, and not perhaps the most important part. For another connection suggests itself here: the theory of revolution in poetic language which emerges from the cultural upheaval that rocked France in the late 1960s and early 1970s turns out to have roots in theories of poetic language that were developed during the Russian revolution of 1917. And formalist theories of poetic language were, of course, modeled on futurist practice, a practice which did not limit its revolutionary ambitions to art alone. Clearly, the notion of “poetic language” is not the only feature these theories share. Matei Calinescu has accused the members of *Tel Quel*, the French neo-avant-garde group with which Kristeva was associated in the 1960s and 1970s, of being “monomaniacs of the idea of Revolution.”<sup>5</sup> Kristeva’s early theories of poetry would seem to bear out his charge. Her study of revolution in poetic language is also, implicitly, a theory of poetic language in revolution and even a call to revolution through poetic language. For her, as for the art and experience of the Russian avant-garde, the line between radical aesthetics and radical politics is fine indeed. At times it seems to vanish entirely.

The agonistic rhetoric of the quote with which I began—Russian futurism’s “scorching odyssey” and its brutal end—is very much a part of Kristeva’s theory, which gives new meaning to Roland Barthes’s phrase, “the death of the author,” and I will return to this later in my discussion. It also raises other unsettling questions, questions that Kristeva’s theory provokes but seldom explicitly addresses: do social change and aesthetic innovation truly go hand in hand? What happens when revolutionary theory actually meets with revolutionary practice? Can avant-garde artists coexist with, let alone influence, the political activists who are their ostensible comrades-in-arms? The Russian futurists began their aesthetic revolution with a “slap in the face of public taste”—the title of their famous manifesto—and ended, in Vladimir

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Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1972), 19–135. Abridged translation by E. J. Brown in *Major Soviet Writers: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Edward J. Brown (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 58–82. Roman Jakobson, “The Language of Schizophrenia: Hölderlin’s Speech and Poetry,” in: Jakobson, *Verbal Art, Verbal Sign, Verbal Time*, ed. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 133–42.

4. Kristeva, “From One Identity to an Other,” in *Desire in Language*, 124.

5. Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), 144–45.

Maiakovskii's phrase, by stepping on the throat of their own song. Is this the necessary fate of revolutionary poets in a revolutionary state? Kristeva has avoided both the question and the answer.

*Revolution in Poetic Language* does not discuss the Russian avant-garde or its unhappy end. It takes its examples primarily from post-structuralist central casting: Mallarmé, Joyce, Beckett, Bataille, Céline, Artaud. Kristeva has devoted, however, a brief, provocative essay to Maiakovskii and Jakobson, "The Ethics of Linguistics," which was written in 1974, the year that *Revolution in Poetic Language* first appeared in French, and her early work makes use of both Bakhtin and the formalists. "The Ethics of Linguistics," in particular, invites us to try her theories against the Russian experience and the Russian avant-garde provides a meaningful context for *Revolution in Poetic Language*. This is due not only to Kristeva's acknowledged, but largely unexplored debt to formalist and futurist theories of poetry. It also offers a vital test case for her theory, a chance to check it against the most obvious—the only?—instance in which avant-garde artists were actually drawn into the service of a revolutionary state. Kristeva's theory of the avant-garde, unlike those of Poggioli or Bürger or Calinescu, is not also a history of the avant-garde, an exploration of the avant-garde as a historical phenomenon. It is a celebration of—a summons to—avant-garde practice. As such, it perpetuates many of the myths that characterize the work of the avant-garde artists who are Kristeva's subjects "in procession trial."<sup>6</sup> In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva has put a post-modern spin on standard topoi of the early twentieth century avant-garde: resistance towards a hostile (read "bourgeois, capitalist") present for the sake of an unrealized future; the agonistic poet-martyr who risks all in his quest for this future ("rhythm, death, and the future," she has written, govern the poet's life and art).<sup>7</sup> Most importantly, perhaps, for my purposes, there is the yearning to fuse art with life and to presage, even precipitate, social change by way of aesthetic innovation. In this last and most seductive myth of the avant-garde, poetry and politics join forces as the poet advances into the "radiant future" he has helped to create through his art.<sup>8</sup>

6. The other studies of the avant-garde I refer to here are: Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); and Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-garde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968).

Kristeva's untranslatable pun on the French phrase *en procès* appears throughout *Revolution in Poetic Language*.

7. "The Ethics of Linguistics," in *Desire in Language*, 27.

8. The very titles of two avant-garde journals with which Kristeva and the futurists were associated bear witness to their similarly monumental intentions. The journal *Tel Quel* carries the ambitious subtitle *Literature, Philosophy, Science, Politics*. This falls short of the futurists, however, who ran a short-lived publication entitled *Tvorchestvo, literatura, iskusstvo, nauka i zhizn'* (creation, literature, art, science and life) in the early 1920s.

Throughout my essay I use the pronoun "he" to designate the exemplary artists

Needless to say, post-revolutionary Russian experience presents a serious challenge to this myth. It allows us to check Kristeva's theory against the exigencies of a history that Kristeva herself has strategically misread in her brief discussion of the Russian avant-garde. (And we can perhaps see yet another avant-garde legacy at work in her haphazard, willful use and abuse of history.)<sup>9</sup> In "The Ethics of Linguistics" she celebrates "the aesthetic and always political battles of Russian society on the eve of the Revolution and during the first years of victory," but by the time of Maiakovskii's suicide in 1930, "on the eve of Stalinism and fascism," the forces ranged against him are not simply those of "Russian or Soviet society." They are the forces of society as such, "any society": "A (*any*) society," Kristeva insists, "may be stabilized only if it excludes poetic language" (my emphasis).<sup>10</sup> The revolution, in other words, is off the hook. Maiakovskii was doomed in any case. By filling in the strategic blanks in Kristeva's reading of the revolution, I hope to provide a historically grounded corrective to her sweeping claims for the subversive powers of poetic language as such.

Part of the appeal of the "futurist moment" lies precisely in the support it seems to give to the myth of avant-garde "life-building" (*zhiznestroenie*) through the remarkable, if short lived, rapprochement it achieved between "avant-garde aesthetics, radical politics, and popular culture."<sup>11</sup> The avant-garde artist urgently believed that to remake art was to remake life itself. Herein lies his or her affinity with the marxist. (Kristeva, like the other members of *Tel Quel*, spent most of the 1960s and 1970s experimenting with various brands of marxism.) For Marx, Robert Tucker argues,

Human self-realization means much more . . . than the return of man to himself out of his alienated labor . . . The ending of economic alienation will mean the end of the state, the family, law, morality, etc., as subordinate spheres of alienation . . . What will remain is the

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of both Kristeva and the Russian avant-garde because they themselves discuss male artists almost exclusively. Kristeva has been justly criticized for relying upon a male model of creativity in first developing her theories of poetic language; and the futurists, on whom the formalists based their early work, were notoriously misogynist. One futurist theoretician, Aleksei Kruchenykh, went so far as to propose that his comrades-in-arms even ban feminine nouns from their verse.

9. Kristeva inadvertently has revealed her commitment to the avant-garde myth of a disposable, instantly obsolescent history by dismissing one of her own theoretical precursors, Jacques Derrida, as the practitioner of a now "outmoded avant-garde" in a 1977 essay on dissidence. This essay also informs us that dissidents who "attack political power" and, in particular, "exiles from the Gulag," hampered as they are by an unfashionable hankering for "community and law," are now passé. Their place at the "cutting edge of dissidence" has been taken by post-modern psychoanalysts and writers, much like Kristeva herself, who "attempt to bring about multiple sublations of the unnameable, the unrepresentable, the void" from their perilous outposts at Europe's and America's leading academic institutions. As the Church Lady says, "How convenient!" ("A New Type of Intellectual: The Dissident," *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi, trans. Leon S. Roudiez and Sean Hand [New York: Columbia University Press, 1986], 292-300).

10. Kristeva, "Ethics of Linguistics," 27, 31.

11. Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant Guerre, and the Language of Rupture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), xvii.

life of art and science in a special and vastly enlarged sense of these two terms. Marx's conception of ultimate communism is fundamentally aesthetic in character . . . The alienated world will give way to the aesthetic world.<sup>12</sup>

For any utopian thinker, Matei Calinescu has observed, be he poet or politician, the "paradise on earth" that is his final destination "can be conceived only along aesthetic lines, as a final transformation of economics and politics into aesthetics."<sup>13</sup> The surrealist André Breton made this connection explicit: "'Transform the world,' Marx said; 'change life,' Rimbaud said—these two watchwords are for us one and the same."<sup>14</sup> Behind these different voices we may catch the echo of yet another precursor common to both the modern and postmodern avant-garde: the Friedrich Nietzsche who announced in *The Birth of Tragedy* that "the existence of the world is justified *only* as an aesthetic phenomenon" (my emphasis).<sup>15</sup> "The world," Nietzsche proclaimed, "[is] a work of art that gives birth to itself."<sup>16</sup> Elsewhere, however, he made it clear that the "world artist," the strong "world-building spirit" can assist or even initiate this birth by assuming "the lordly right of giving names," by laying claim to the words through which we know the world.<sup>17</sup> Through naming or interpretation—for Nietzsche they were one and the same—the "world [can] be transfigured ever anew and in new ways."<sup>18</sup> "He himself is really the poet," Nietzsche noted, "who keeps creating this life."<sup>19</sup> This aesthetic activism is Nietzsche's legacy to the twentieth century avant-garde, and both Kristeva and the futurists shared his vision of a poet who makes and unmakes the world through his art.<sup>20</sup>

This, at any rate, is their optimal version of the creative and destructive possibilities of poetic language.<sup>21</sup> But both Kristeva and the

12. Quoted in Perloff, *The Futurist Moment*, 34.

13. *Ibid.*, 34.

14. Quoted in Maurice Nadeau, *The History of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Howard (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 195.

15. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and the Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 22.

16. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 419.

17. *Will to Power*, 241; *Birth of Tragedy*, 37; Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 26.

18. *Will to Power*, 537.

19. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 241.

20. I have taken the phrase "aesthetic activism" from Charles Russell's account of the literary avant-garde in *Poets, Prophets and Revolutionaries: The Literary Avant-garde from Rimbaud through Postmodernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 33. In his admirably skeptical recent study of the twentieth century's *Prophets of Extremity*, Allan Megill has placed Nietzsche's "world-building" aestheticism at the heart of post-modern philosophy and theory, and I have followed his lead in my own discussion (Megill, *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985]).

21. And of course, for the aesthetic avant-garde, "to destroy is to create," as their spiritual grandfather, the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin put it (my emphasis; quoted in Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 117).

futurists wavered in the claims they make for their revolutionary art: does it prefigure social transformation? Accompany it? Or, in the best of all revolutionary worlds, is it itself the driving force behind social change? Several passages from *Revolution in Poetic Language* suggest the range of Kristeva's readings of this relationship. "The text," we are told in the book's opening pages, "is a practice that could be compared to a political revolution."<sup>22</sup> The relationship between revolution and text is, in other words, merely metaphoric. Further in *Revolution*, however, "the signifying process" that is poetic language has succeeded in "joining the social revolution."<sup>23</sup> The social revolution, in this case, will tolerate, even embrace, poetic latecomers and aesthetic hangers-on. Further yet, poetic language has assumed pride of place among the forces arrayed against the bourgeois state; it is "the ultimate means of [the social order's] transformation or subversion, the precondition for its survival and revolution."<sup>24</sup> Poetic language, Kristeva insisted in a 1975 essay, "is the very place where the social code is destroyed and renewed."<sup>25</sup> She has finally joined forces with the futurists in their most hyperbolic, and most characteristic, claims for the efficacy of poetic language.

The futurists believed, as Vladimir Markov has observed, "that the word creates a new world by itself, that the word and the world are fused into one and that the poet enters the depth of the word."<sup>26</sup> In the 1913 "Declaration of the Word as Such" (*Deklaratsiia slova kak takovogo*), Aleksei Kruchenykh celebrated the forces unleashed by futurist "word creation" (*slovotvorchestvo*): "INTRODUCING NEW WORDS, I bring about a new content WHERE EVERYTHING begins to slip (the conventions of time, space, etc.)."<sup>27</sup> To change the word, in other words, is to change the world and the revolutionary possibilities afforded by such verbal gymnastics were, to the futurist mind, vast indeed. In "the World as Poem" (Khlebnikov's phrase), social wrongs can be righted by a slip of the pen.<sup>28</sup> For Khlebnikov, a shifted prefix transforms "investor/exploiters" (*priobretateli*) into "inventor/explorers" (*izobretateli*) and a single consonant divides the government you love to hate (*pravitel'stvo*, government) from a kinder, gentler state (*nравitel'stvo*, lov-

22. *Revolution*, 17.

23. *Ibid.*, 61.

24. *Ibid.*, 81.

25. Kristeva, "From One Identity to An Other," 132.

26. Vladimir Markov, *Russian Futurism: A History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 131.

27. Aleksei Kruchenykh, "Deklaratsiia slova kak takovogo" (leaflet, 1913); reprinted in *Manifesty i programmy russkikh futuristov*, ed. Vladimir Markov (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1967), 64. English translation in *Russian Futurism through Its Manifestoes, 1912-1928*, ed. and trans. Anna Lawton and Herbert Eagle (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 68.

28. Velimir Khlebnikov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, ed. Iu. Tynianov and N. Stepanov (Leningrad: Izd. pisatelei, 1928-1933), V: 259. English translation in *Collected Works of Velimir Khlebnikov*, ed. Charlotte Douglas and Ronald Vroon, trans. Paul Schmidt (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987-1989), I: 338.

ernment).<sup>29</sup> In this “World as Poem,” in which neologisms become the catalyst of social change, Shelley’s unacknowledged poet-legislators are finally able to take up public office: “We alone are the Government of Planet Earth . . . We have rolled up your three years of war into a single conch shell, a terrifying trumpet, and now we sing and shout and we roar out the terrible truth: the Government of Planet Earth already exists. We are it.”<sup>30</sup>

What is the language that facilitates these global transformations? Within the confines of this essay, I can do justice neither to what the futurists called “transsense” and its theoretical incarnation among the formalists, nor to Kristeva’s complex understanding of the poetic text. I will, however, discuss the common ground between them and suggest ways in which Kristeva’s poetic language may indeed derive directly from Russian avant-garde theories of poetry. Kristeva, the futurists and the formalists all emphasized the *materiality* of poetic language, its opacity, its refusal to let socially imposed meanings remain self-evident. Poetic language challenges the “rational,” apparently natural social codes that govern our everyday speech. It continuously questions the socially imposed boundaries that separate sound from sense, significance from nonsense, the social body from the suppressed, presocial, physical being that the poet taps through his work. “The poetic word . . . fully comes into being only in the margins of recognized culture,” Kristeva asserted in an early essay, and the formalists and futurists would have agreed.<sup>31</sup> The critic Kornei Chukovskii attacked futurist “transsense” as a form of “emotional belching,” a mode of speech “characteristic of wild shamans, idiots, imbeciles, maniacs, eunuchs, runners, and jumpers.”<sup>32</sup> The futurists would have considered this a fairly accurate assessment of their project. Shamanism, glossolalia, foreign speech, children’s speech, the language of psychosis, place names, proper names, riddles and jokes—this is the stuff of which “transsense” is made, according to futurist and formalist theory. These “marginal” idioms are harnessed in poetic speech in order to disrupt our notion of language as representation. “People say a poem must be understandable,” Khlebnikov declared in an essay of 1920: “Like a sign on the street, which carries the clear and simple words ‘For Sale.’ . . . On the other hand, what about spells and incantations, what we call magic words, the sacred language of paganism . . . ‘transsense’ in folk language . . . The language of magic spells and incantations rejects judgments made by everyday common sense.”<sup>33</sup> The list of “subversive” dialects which begins *Revolution in Poetic Language* attests to Kristeva’s kinship with the linguistic experiments conducted by the futurists and

29. *Sobranie sochinenii*, V: 151, 232; *Collected Works*, I: 321, 380.

30. *Sobranie sochinenii*, V: 162; *Collected Works*, I: 333.

31. “The Word, Dialogue and the Novel,” in *The Kristeva Reader*, 36.

32. Quoted in Vahan Barooshian, *Russian Cubo-Futurism 1910–1930: A Study in Avant-Gardism* (The Hague: Mouton, 1974), 95.

33. Khlebnikov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, V:225; *Collected Works*, I: 152.

charted by the formalists. "Magic, shamanism, esoterism, the carnival, and 'incomprehensible' poetry," she announced, "all underscore the limits of socially useful discourse and attest to what it represses: the *process* that exceeds the subject and his communicative structures."<sup>34</sup> (Both Kristeva and the Russian avant-garde, with their celebration of

34. *Revolution*, 17. Kristeva's reference to "carnival" calls attention, of course, to her indebtedness to the works of yet another Russian thinker, Mikhail Bakhtin; and Toril Moi, among others, has claimed that Kristeva's early theories of poetic language evolved in large part out of her ongoing dialogue with Bakhtin's own notions of artistic speech ("Introduction," in *The Kristeva Reader*, 34–35). This dialogue, however, is suspiciously lopsided and the Bakhtin who emerges in Kristeva's essay "Word, Dialogue and Novel" and elsewhere bears more than a passing resemblance to his latter-day interlocutor; at times, in fact, he is frenchified and post-structuralized almost beyond recognition. This is not the place to discuss the relationship between the two theorists in great detail. I would like, though, to call attention to several of the most salient differences between the two, differences that highlight, to my mind, Kristeva's greater affinities with Bakhtin's formalist contemporaries.

To begin with, Kristeva's Bakhtin is, like the formalists and like Kristeva herself, a great admirer of the twentieth century's literary avant-garde. "He was able to discover textual dialogism," she has asserted, "in the writings of Mayakovsky, Khlebnikov, and Andrei Bely, to mention only a few of the Revolution's writers who made the outstanding imprints of this scriptural break" ("Word, Dialogue, and Novel," 71). She could not be further from the mark. Bakhtin was notoriously unsympathetic to the avant-garde experiments of the futurists and other modernist innovators, and Khlebnikov, Maiakovskii and company make only token appearances in his work at best. Moreover, the "scriptural break" to which Kristeva refers occurs, so she has argued, with the advent of modernist writing at the end of the nineteenth century and this is precisely where Bakhtin's favored canon of truly "dialogic" writing ends, with the demise of the nineteenth century's tradition of great realist fiction.

It is not surprising that Kristeva and Bakhtin should part company on the subject of avant-garde writing. For Bakhtin, the best and highest form of aesthetic language was simply everyday speech, in all its many variants, intensified to the *n*th degree: there is no clear-cut line that divides a society's multiple, mundane dialects from the dialogic language that is the proper medium, he argued, of prose fiction. Kristeva, on the other hand, like the formalists, has insisted upon a poetic language that takes risks beyond the reach of mere mortal practitioners of daily speech.

She has followed the formalists' lead, too, in drawing her primary distinction between "poetic language," that is all artistic or aesthetic language, and daily speech, and she has drawn upon both avant-garde prose and poetic texts in making her case for the revolutionary nature of avant-garde writing. For Bakhtin, however, there was a crucial distinction to be made between poetry and prose, and his version of "poetic language," narrowly construed, bears no resemblance to the subversive force that animates Kristeva's work. In "Discourse [or "The Word," "Slovo"] in the Novel," Bakhtin explicitly attacked the notion that poetry can be anything but monologic; indeed, he argued, rather dubiously, for poetry as the inevitable *upholder* of the status quo, not its disrupter. "The language of poetic genres," he claimed, "often becomes authoritarian, dogmatic and conservative"; unlike prose, it resists "the exploitation of actual available social dialects" in creating its own ideally self-enclosed mode of speech (Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist [Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981], 287). Bakhtin's case against poetry is nothing if not debatable—but Kristeva has not even addressed the rift that separates her view of poetic language from Bakhtin's, in spite of her heavy reliance on poetry and poets' prose as exempla of revolutionary discourse.



the poet as practitioner of an abnormal, exceptional, outcast speech, seem to be, among other things, theoretically re-incoding the romantic sacred trilogy of "poet, madman and lover." One critic notes that Kristeva's theory enshrines "a radical trinity of subversion" made up of "madness, holiness, and poetry."<sup>35</sup>

Khlebnikov saw his efforts to shape the language of the future as, simultaneously, a return to speech's archaic, primordial and universal roots. The time frame of his "transsense" is, in Kristeva's oxymoronic phrase, a "future anterior."<sup>36</sup> Formalist theoreticians conceived this anteriority, this return to linguistic origins, in another way: they attempted to defeat our ready-made associations of sound and sense by tracing language back to its beginnings psychologically, in childhood babble, and physiologically, in the body's rhythms and the organs of articulation. For the formalists, linguistic infantilism, as recaptured by the poet, is a privileged state. Rousseau's myth of childhood innocence is recast in linguistic terms and the "child's prism, the infantilism of the poetic word" allows the poet to renovate the fixed and lifeless linguistic forms of adulthood.<sup>37</sup> The formalists were not concerned with the psychological implications of this infantile speech (though Iakubinskii did mention Freud in passing) nor did they connect it explicitly with their interest in the "physiology of speech."<sup>38</sup> The function of both for the formalists was, however, the same. Infantile language and language as articulation—both work to disrupt the deadened forms of daily speech and so restore this speech to material, physical life. They "resurrect" the body of the word that Shklovskii celebrated in an early essay by returning it to its origins in the body of the speaker.<sup>39</sup>

"Perhaps the greatest pleasure we receive through poetry lies generally in the articulatory aspect [of speech], in the distinctive dance of the speech organs," Shklovskii remarked in "Poetry and Transsense."<sup>40</sup> His observation might be Kristeva's point of departure. As in formalist theory, Kristeva's poetic word never exists as "pure signifier" but is always both "'word' and 'flesh.'"<sup>41</sup> Like that of the formalists and futurists, Kristeva's work is preoccupied with the liberating possibilities

35. Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (Winchester: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 52.

36. "The Ethics of Linguistics," 32.

37. Iurii Tynianov, "O Khlebnikove," in Iurii Tynianov, *Arkhaisty i novatory* (Priboi, 1929; rpt. Ann Arbor: Ardis Publishers, 1985), 586. English translation by Charlotte Rosenthal in *Major Soviet Writers: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Edward J. Brown (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 93.

38. Lev Iakubinskii, "Otkuda berutsia stikhi," in *Knizhnyi ugol: kritika, bibliografiia, khronika* (Petrograd: Ocharovannyi strannik, 1921), 23.

39. Viktor Shklovskii, "Voskreshenie slova" (leaflet, 1914); reprinted in *Texte der Russischen Formalisten II*.

40. Viktor Shklovskii, "O poezii i zaumnom iazyke," *Poetika: Sbornik po teorii poeticheskogo iazyka* (Petrograd, 1919), 24.

41. "The True-Real," in *The Kristeva Reader*, 227.

of poetic articulation and celebrates what she calls the "prelinguistic or translinguistic functioning of vocalism," the purely physical dimension of language that manifests itself in poetic sound texture and rhythm.<sup>42</sup> And like futurist "transsense," Kristeva's language of the future, which is the language of the avant-garde poetic text, has its beginnings in the verbal and oral play of early childhood.

Unlike the formalists, however, Kristeva has taken psychology as her starting point; she is indebted to Freud and Lacan in ways that I will not elaborate here. Her revolutionary poetics originates in a "speaking subject" who must continuously challenge the boundary that divides our socially constructed, linguistically constricted "selves" from what she has termed the *chora*, that is, from our earlier, pre-social, "selfless" bond with the mother's body. The poet does this by resisting language as prescribed social meaning, as organized oppression. He works, instead, to refashion language, to make from it a bridge stretching back towards a purely psycho-biological being in which "we," as socially determined subjects, temporarily cease to exist. The poetic text insistently draws us back to our beginnings in the body; through its stress on sound and rhythm, it "reconnects [us] to the phonetic, that is to the articulating body: initially the articulatory apparatus and then, through the drives to the body as a whole."<sup>43</sup> The poet's practice thus disrupts the disembodied, prescriptive speech that is the domain of what Kristeva has variously called the "Symbolic Order," the "Father" or the "Law" (all three seem to mean simply society as such), and it opens language up to the pre-symbolized, pre-socialized, profoundly subversive world of the maternal body's "pulsions," or drives.<sup>44</sup>

In *Life Is Elsewhere*, Milan Kundera's scathing portrait of the revolutionary writer as mama's boy, Kundera suggested that infantilism and revolutionary fervor necessarily meet in the figure of the avant-garde

42. Julia Kristeva, "Phonetics, Phonology and Impulsional Bases," *Diacritics*, Fall (1978): 35.

43. *Ibid.*, 33.

44. In Kristeva's later work, the relationship between the *chora*, or the semiotic, as Kristeva has also called it, and the "Symbolic Order" becomes far less polarized, as Joan Brandt noted in a recent essay on Kristeva's *Tales of Love*. Brandt observed that Kristeva has "come to look at the relationship between the semiotic and the symbolic differently, stressing less the separateness and more the interrelatedness of the two functions and ultimately problematizing the very terms of the opposition" (Brandt, "The Power and the Horror of Love: Kristeva on Narcissism," *Romanic Review* 82, no. 1 [January 1991], 91-92). She continues:

In the course of her analysis of the amorous dynamic in *Tales of Love*, Kristeva . . . comes to conclusions that alter significantly her earlier distinction between the semiotic and the symbolic. Rather than emphasizing the separateness of the two functions as she has in the past, Kristeva now finds that the experience of love that both founds the subject and dissolves it as an integrated identity indissolubly ties them together . . . the speaking subject is inevitably and permanently caught up in what is now seen as a contradictory dynamic, one that incorporates both the idealizing mechanisms of the symbolic as well as the libidinal charges linked to the semiotic (104).

poet. The poet-rebel "reaches out [to the revolution] like a child reaching out to its mother," Kundera declares, and he intends us to take the second element of his simile quite literally:<sup>45</sup>

The lyrical approach is one way of dealing with [immaturity]: the person banished from the safe enclosure of childhood longs to go out into the world, but because he is afraid of it he constructs an artificial, *substitute* world of verse. He lets his poems orbit around him like planets around the sun. He becomes the center of a small universe in which nothing is alien, in which he feels as much at home as an infant inside its mother, for everything is constructed out of the familiar materials of his own soul. Here he can achieve everything which is so difficult "outside". . . .

In immature man the longing persists for the safety and unity of the universe which he occupied alone inside his mother's body. Anxiety (or anger) persists as well—toward the adult world of relativity in which he is lost like a drop in an alien sea. That's why young people are such passionate monists, emissaries of the absolute; that's why the young revolutionary (in whom anger is stronger than anxiety) insists on an absolutely new world forged from a single idea; that's why such a person can't bear compromise, either in love or in politics.<sup>46</sup>

Both the formalists' and Kristeva's writings inadvertently lend support to Kundera's claims (to say nothing of Maiakovskii, with his alternating paeans to the new utopia and poetic pleas for his mother's love).

In the literary family romance that Kundera has described, we might, in fact, cast Kristeva as the over-indulgent mother—theoretically speaking, of course—who invariably indulges her precocious son's political and poetic hijinks. The metaphors that come to mind in describing Kristeva's poet and his practice could be taken straight from the writings of the early twentieth century avant-garde, from Maiakovskii or Apollinaire. This poet is a linguistic daredevil, perched precariously on a tightrope that stretches between sense and nonsense, cosmos and chaos, order and insanity. Or, perhaps more appropriately, he is a linguistic terrorist and his text is a poetic minefield which threatens the psychic, even physical integrity not only of its maker and his audience, but of society itself.

Poetic language, according to Kristeva, is a risky business and its repercussions extend far beyond the limits of the poetic text itself. It "allows the speaking animal to sense the rhythm of the body as well as the upheavals of history."<sup>47</sup> The homology suggested here between the structure of the self ("the rhythm of the body") and the workings of society ("the upheavals of history") is crucial to Kristeva's understanding, or misunderstanding, of the revolutionary properties of poetic speech: both self and society are essentially linguistic structures.

45. Milan Kundera, *Life Is Elsewhere*, trans. Peter Kussi (New York: Viking Penguin, 1986), 195.

46. *Ibid.*, 219–20.

47. "The Ethics of Linguistics," 34.

In this she follows her fellow post-structuralists—Lacan, Foucault, Derrida—for whom, as Derrida has announced, there is no world outside the text. Society imposes the linguistic codes which shape, define and dominate the self—but this tyrannized self can fight back (and this is where Kristeva has broken with many of her precursors and contemporaries). If this self happens to be a poet, he can lay claim to pre-linguistic resources which subvert the codes imposed on language and self from above and thus challenge their claims to transcendent, universal and transparent meaning. “Language, and thus sociability itself, are defined by boundaries admitting of upheaval, dissolution and transformation” by way of the poetic text, Kristeva has insisted in “The Ethics of Linguistics.”<sup>48</sup> The text, in other words, which works to subvert the prevailing linguistic structures can transform both society and self. We are back, in short, at the avant-garde myth of an art that remakes the world in its own image.

“I know that only those will remake the world who are rooted in poetry,” Guillaume Apollinaire exulted in a 1909 poem.<sup>49</sup> But the poet as master builder may not live to see the world his words have worked to create. He must be prepared to risk all in order to put his vision in practice. He must be prepared, again in Apollinaire’s phrase, “to lose/Life in order to find Victory.”<sup>50</sup> Apollinaire’s agonistic vision is shared not only by the early twentieth century avant-garde at large (one thinks in this context of Maiakovskii’s bloodied soul stretched above the forces of the future in “The Cloud in Trousers”). A post-modern reading of this modernist myth is central to Kristeva’s version of the artist’s life and death in *Revolution in Poetic Language*. Her poet, whose task it is to expose the oppression of the “Symbolic Order,” is in danger on several fronts at once. The self that is built of language can be linguistically undone and the avant-garde poet may end by committing a form of linguistic suicide. He may self-destruct by way of his linguistic experimentation. But the members of Kristeva’s Dead Poets Society, unlike Barthes’s or Foucault’s defunct authors, do not face metaphysical extinction alone. Kristeva’s avant-garde poet courts “a destruction of the living being” as well as of the linguistic, “Cartesian,” subject.<sup>51</sup> The powerful physical forces he unleashes in his verse may exceed the limits of even his physical self. In his life, as in his work, he is at the mercy of “rhythm, death, and the future.”

And if this were not enough, his subversive poetics pose a continuous threat to the social order whose universalist pretensions he unmasks in his writing. For society (particularly “late capitalist” society), the poet is what Kristeva has called “an unbearable monstrosity,” sub-

48. *Ibid.*, 25.

49. Guillaume Apollinaire, “Poème lu au mariage d’André Salmon,” in *Selected Writings of Guillaume Apollinaire*, ed. and trans. Roger Shattuck (New York: New Directions, 1971), 89.

50. “Toujours,” in *Selected Writings*, 177.

51. *Revolution*, 150.

ject to persecution, exclusion or worse.<sup>52</sup> Her poet is caught between a rock and a hard place, and his troubled fate is central to his role as redemptive scapegoat in the "Symbolic Order." Kristeva's avant-garde writer risks and even suffers death in order to subvert a system that oppresses all "speaking subjects." "The artist sketches out a kind of second birth," she has asserted in *Revolution in Poetic Language*. "[He is] subject to death but also to rebirth," and through his death and resurrection we are all restored, temporarily at least, to life.<sup>53</sup> As a devout post-modernist, Kristeva has dismissed all forms of theology; in her avant-garde poet, however, she has unwittingly given us a secularized, post-modern Christ.<sup>54</sup>

As such, this poet is clearly akin to the many suffering, cosmic "I"s who populate the poems of the Russian and European avant-garde, and Kristeva has drawn upon the exemplary lives and deaths of these writers in developing her theory. "Mallarmé's suffering body," "the shattered and mummified body of Artaud," "Mayakovsky's suicide, Khlebnikov's disintegration"—so runs her litany of poets *cum* sacrificial victims.<sup>55</sup> Kristeva's conflation of these very different forms of poetic martyrdom indicates the limits of her theory when it comes to Russian poetry in its singular, post-revolutionary context. Neither the formalists, nor Zhdanov "can think the rhythm of Mayakovsky through to his suicide or Khlebnikov's glossolalias to his disintegration—with the young Soviet state as a backdrop," she has claimed in "The Ethics of Linguistics."<sup>56</sup> Like the avant-garde artists her work celebrates, Kristeva is, as I have mentioned, alarmingly nonchalant when it comes to history. In this passage, as in the essay generally, the Soviet state that might seem inseparable from Maiakovskii's fate is reduced to mere stage decoration, and the role it plays in the poets' lives and deaths, when less than glorious, becomes the generic oppression that plagues the poet in "a (any) society." An unhappy ending is an integral part of the avant-garde poet's art and fate. The Soviet state is not to blame—except of course in its later stalinist "deviation"—and the myth of revolutionary concord, of peaceful coexistence between the political and the artistic avant-garde, remains intact.

Kristeva's work, predictably enough, celebrates the revolution when

52. *Ibid.*, 156.

53. *Ibid.*, 70.

54. And Kristeva's word, both "word" and "flesh," looks suspiciously like the outmoded Logos, in its Christian incarnation, that Derrida has worked so hard to deconstruct. The formalists, would-be scientists who were programmatically opposed to all forms of mysticism, are also guilty of "resurrecting," in Shklovskii's term, a christological word made up of both spirit and flesh.

55. *Revolution*, 156; "The Ethics of Linguistics," 34.

56. "The Ethics of Linguistics," 24. Andrei Zhdanov, architect of Stalin's policy of socialist realism, was, incidentally, responsible for hounding "fellow travelers" like the formalists out of Soviet literature. Kristeva's perverse pairing of the two is typical—in the same passage, she called structural linguists "wardens of repression" ("Ethics of Linguistics," 24).

it seems to reinforce this myth. Kristeva has commemorated “the aesthetic and *always* political battles of Russian society on the eve of the Revolution and during the first years of victory” (my emphasis); and Kristeva’s futurism, with its innately revolutionary nature, is able to “hear and understand the Revolution” from the start.<sup>57</sup> Unfortunately, the revolution that the futurists heard and understood was not the same revolution that Lenin, Trotskii and others were actively working to shape. The skepticism with which the political revolutionaries greeted their poetic counterparts is well known—“Can’t we find some reliable *anti*-futurists?” Lenin had asked in a 1921 note to the head of the State Publishing House—and I won’t discuss it here.<sup>58</sup> Nor will I attempt to summarize the many obstacles that the avant-garde encountered in its efforts to find a place within the revolutionary state. It is perhaps worth noting, though, that as early as 1905 Lenin had articulated the role he imagined for art in his future regime, and it was anything but avant-garde. Art was to be “a cog and a screw” in the “great Social-Democratic mechanism.”<sup>59</sup> It would be not subversive but submissive, a slave to the needs of the socialist state. His prophecies were far more accurate than those of his futurist contemporaries.

I will confine myself here to Kristeva’s privileged object, revolutionary language, and will point out merely that this phrase may be taken, and has been taken, in two very different ways, though Kristeva herself does not seem to realize this. In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, she insisted that the phrase is unequivocal, that political and aesthetic revolutions always go hand in hand: “The text is a practice that could be compared to political revolution: the one brings about in the subject what the other introduces into society. The history and political experience of the twentieth century have demonstrated that one cannot be transformed without the other.”<sup>60</sup> I’m not sure what history and politics Kristeva has in mind: modern Russian history, at any rate, demonstrates something entirely different. It tells us that the linguistic needs of the revolutionary state and those of revolutionary artists are, by necessity, worlds apart and that one language necessarily excludes the other. One way of summarizing the struggle between these two revolutionary dialects might be to ask: what happens when *zaum'* (trans-sense) meets acronym? The Soviet state was no less adept than the futurists at “language creation” and the bureaucratic code of abbreviations that was launched under Lenin—NEP, REF, LEF, VAPP, RAPP, MAPP, Litfront, Proletkult, Gosizdat—proved far more successful at answering the needs of the new regime than its futurist counterpart. One post-revolutionary theoretician, Boris Arvatov, felt compelled to

57. *Ibid.*, 27, 32.

58. Quoted in Vasilii Katanian, *Maiakovskii: Literaturnaia khronika* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1961), 145.

59. V. I. Lenin, “Partiinaia organizatsiia i partiinaia literatura,” in V. I. Lenin, *Sochineniia* (Moscow: Ogiz, 1947), 10: 27.

60. *Revolution*, 17.

compare the two “languages of the future” in a 1923 discussion of “Language Creation” (*Rechetyvorchestvo*). Both “transsense” and the burgeoning Soviet system of acronyms, he noted, cut words into their component parts and reassembled them, but their aims were completely at odds. “Transsense” worked to thwart comprehension, to make language difficult and “self-sufficient,” while the acronym aimed for maximum comprehensibility and effect with a minimum amount of effort.<sup>61</sup> Arvatov’s example is appropriately ominous; “‘Cheka,’” he wrote, “is not a ‘transsense’ word because it has a predetermined objective meaning which is necessary for fulfilling its straightforward utilitarian tasks.”<sup>62</sup> *Zaum’* and acronym, in other words, operate at cross purposes and one might argue that the futurists, eager to join their revolutionary colleagues on the linguistic battlefield, began to strangle their own song as early as 1918 when they rechristened themselves as the *Komfuty*.

“The abrogation of the boundary between real and figurative meanings is characteristic of poetic language,” Jakobson observed in an early essay.<sup>63</sup> It is also characteristic of Kristeva’s theory of poetic language. With impeccably post-modern logic Kristeva has stated in a 1981 essay that “there is no World.”<sup>64</sup> There are, in other words, only interpretations, only the multiple codes that we manage, with varying degrees of success, to impose on our own experience and the experience of those around us. *All* language is figurative from this perspective, though it may seek to convince us otherwise, and Jakobson’s distinction between real and figurative meaning thus becomes meaningless. From this standpoint, we cannot criticize the historical inaccuracies or blind spots in Kristeva’s theory of poetic language nor can we challenge its seemingly uncritical acceptance of the myths of the historical avant-garde. If, however, we refuse to take Kristeva at her word, if we insist that some interpretations are more equal than others precisely because they explain the world better, because they are in closer conformity with the facts as we know them, then Kristeva can be held accountable for her historical shortcomings. The quirky juxtapositions that might be catchy in an avant-garde poetic text—Mao and Mallarmé, Sade and Solzhenitsyn, revolutions in poetry and revolutions that suppress poetry—become, in this reading, the marks of a failed theoretical revolution in poetic language.

61. This abbreviated Soviet-speak bears, in fact, a striking resemblance to the “monotheistic Western” “system of speech” that Kristeva has condemned elsewhere as a “logical, simple, positive and ‘scientific’ form of communication . . . stripped of all stylistic, rhythmic and ‘poetic’ ambiguities” (“About Chinese Women,” in *The Kristeva Reader*, 151).

62. Boris Arvatov, “Rechetyvorchestvo,” *Lef*, no. 2 (1923): 79–91. English translation in *Russian Futurism through Its Manifestoes, 1912–1928*, 224.

The “Cheka,” the “Chrezvychnaia komissiiia” or “extraordinary commission,” was the first incarnation of what would later become the KGB.

63. *Noveishaia russkaia poeziiia*, 50; *Major Soviet Writers*, 67.

64. “Psychoanalysis and the Polis,” in *The Kristeva Reader*, 313.