



ON ONE ANCESTOR: VASILISK GNEDOV IN THE WORK OF SERGEJ SIGEJ AND RY NIKONOVA¹

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Abstract

This article looks at the influence of the Futurist poetry of Vasilisk Gnedov on the work of Sergej Sigej and Ry Nikonova. Gnedov is not a well known Futurist, so the extent to which they refer to him in their literary and critical work is unusual. Sigej has evolved his own forms based on Gnedov's text-less 'Poëma konca' ('Poem of the End') and other poems. Aspects of Gnedov's work turn out to be deeply integrated into Sigej's, a fact he openly acknowledges. In contrast, although Nikonova notes that Gnedov's work was a precursor to her vacuum, gesture, and vector poetry, she emphasises the independence of her creative path over any sense of deliberate evolution. Nevertheless, some general thematic concerns – such as the absence of text and its replacement with other elements – can be traced to Gnedov's 'Poëma konca'. The article includes many previously unpublished works by Sigej and Nikonova and draws on the author's correspondence with them.

Keywords: *Gnedov; Nikonova; Sigej; Russian Futurism; Poëma konca*

Я создаю свое искусство будущего.
(I create my art of the future; Vasilisk Gnedov)²

Far from threatening to toss their ancestors "from the ship of modernity", as the Russian Futurists once declared, Sergej Sigej and Ry Nikonova demon-

strate openly that their work is rooted in the daring and original tradition of the Russian avant-garde. Explaining the “Transfurist” ethos they invented in the 1980s, Sigej stated: “Ideja transfurizma prosta: my polagaem neobchodimym razvitie vsech dostizhenij našich predšestvennikov i sintez ètogo tradicionnogo uže russk. avangarda s sovremennoj poëtič. kul’turoj” (“The idea of Transfurism is simple: we believe it necessary to develop all the achievements of our predecessors and to synthesise this already traditional Russian avant-garde with contemporary poetic culture”; Kuzminsky and Kovalev 1986: 547). In articles, manifestos and other statements of purpose, Sigej and Nikonova refer to the achievements of a number of Russian avant-garde poets, but they especially highlight three. Sigej has written that Chlebnikov, Kručnych and Gnedov are the forerunners to whom the subsequent generation (Zdanevič, Terent’ev, Tufanov, Čičerin) are greatly indebted (Gnedov 1992: 7). The same three have a place in the second Transfurist manifesto of August 1980, which talks about “Polistilistika / vol’nyj razmer Chlebnikova, sdvig Gnedova i Kručnych – načalo” (“Polystylistics / the unrestricted scale of Chlebnikov, the displacement of Gnedov and Kručnych are the starting point”; Kuzminsky and Kovalev 1986: 550). While two of these three poets are relatively well known, whether for the art of word-creation (Chlebnikov) or for *zaum’* (Kručnych), the prominent place they accord the far more obscure figure of Gnedov is surprising. This article looks at the ways and the extent to which Gnedov’s “art of the future” has been an influence on the work of the two contemporary poets Sergej Sigej and Ry Nikonova.

Vasilisk (Vasilij Ivanovič) Gnedov arrived in St. Petersburg in 1912 with the intent “perevernut’, obnovit’ literaturu, pokazat’ novye puti” (“to invert and renovate literature, to show new paths”; Gnedov 1992: 130), just in time for the explosion of Russian Futurism into public consciousness. Like Rimbaud, a figure he idolised, Gnedov produced a small amount of scandalous and innovative poetry, around fifty works in total, before disappearing from the literary world. For a short time, he was a notorious figure, with his public appearances generating column inches in the St. Petersburg press in 1913. Gnedov’s contribution to Russian Futurism consisted of poems containing idiosyncratic neologisms and radical experiments in poetic form, and he is best known for his booklet *Smert’ iskusstvu* (*Death to Art*), which included the notorious blank-page ‘Poëma konca’ (‘Poem of the End’). One critic of the time wrote that Gnedov had gone so far that no one, not even Kručnych, could compare with him (Zakrževskij 1914: 98). Unlike other Futurists, though, Gnedov did not write theoretical articles to explain and justify his challenging and innovative existing works; as Nikonova has pointed out, “Gnedov ne byl teoretikom, skoree genial’no-intuitivnym praktikom” (“Gnedov was not a theorist, but rather a wonderfully intuitive practitioner”; Nikonova 1996: 37). That Gnedov did not become as well known as

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