

An Ecology of the Russian Avant-Garde Picturebook

Sara Pankenier Weld

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An Ecology of the Russian Avant-Garde Picturebook

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by Sara Pankenier Weld

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Introduction

A natural history of the Russian avant-garde picturebook

The history of life is more adequately represented by a picture of punctuated equilibria than by the notion of phyletic gradualism. The history of evolution is not one of stately unfolding, but a story of homeostatic equilibria, disturbed only rarely (i.e., rather often in the fullness of time) by rapid and episodic events of speciation. (Eldredge & Gould 1972: 84)

In 1972, evolutionary biologists Niles Eldredge and Stephen Jay Gould proposed the radical new concept of “punctuated equilibrium” as a model for a kind of evolutionary change, whereby evolutionary development is marked by isolated episodes of rapid species formation, or speciation, between long periods of little or no change (Gould & Eldredge 1977; Eldredge & Gould 1972). Although Gould and Eldredge were speaking of evolutionary biology, their model of speciation proves remarkably applicable to the evolutionary development of the Russian avant-garde picturebook after a time of revolution, which is the subject of this book, *An Ecology of the Russian Avant-Garde Picturebook*. Indeed, the early twentieth century witnessed isolated episodes of rapid innovation and development in the Russian avant-garde picturebook, which were preceded and followed by long periods of little or no change. This book investigates the dynamic interplay of word/image and politics/art through the close examination of telling episodes in this period characterized by innovative and unprecedented creative achievements in the Russian avant-garde picturebook.

I argue that naturalistic models of the complex interactions of dynamic systems offer effective tools for describing and understanding the sophisticated interrelations of politics and art, as well as censorship and creativity, in the early Soviet period. The concept of punctuated equilibrium outlined above thus also might be applied to the sudden and rapid flourishing of the Russian avant-garde picturebook in the 1920s and 1930s, as disparate forces converged around the shared goal of producing formative picturebooks for children in a time bookended by long periods of stasis. Yet it also describes how the pressures of censorship, politics, and ideology cut that development short. Ultimately, these forces artificially punctuated the natural development of the Russian avant-garde picturebook and led to its extinction, just as the censor strikes out an offensive text or image, leaving behind a mere ellipsis.



Figure 1. Cover design and interior storyboards by Vladimir Lebedev for *Mnogotochie* [Ellipsis, 1926]. Art © Estate of Vladimir Lebedev/RAO, Moscow/VAGA, New York

An intriguing episode illustrating the complexities of these dynamics and the punctuation of an uneasy equilibrium is the case of the picturebook *Mnogotochie* [Ellipsis, 1926] by the famous and influential picturebook duo comprised of writer Samuil Marshak and avant-garde artist Vladimir Lebedev, whose effective, prolific, influential, and long-lasting collaboration spawned numerous imitators in the hey-day of the avant-garde. Their picturebook *Ellipsis*, however, demonstrates how the delicate interplay of word/image, politics/art, and creativity/censorship may fail, since *Ellipsis* hit the cutting-room floor. Although the story was published later in a children's magazine with just a few black and white illustrations under the title "*Znaki prepinanii*" ["Punctuation Marks," 1928], the innovative picturebook itself, with its characteristically avant-garde images, was never published. It has hardly seen the light of day, in fact, since fragments survive only in a museum archive in St. Petersburg, Russia.

Treating a trial, banishment, punishment, and the arrest of workers, *Ellipsis* seems to have too visually represented politically charged topics and, though addressing ideology and a kind of purging of negative elements of punctuation, notably the character Ellipsis, the book fell prey to a kind of self-reflexive censoring that rendered it too a mere ellipsis. This example shows that, although Marshak and Lebedev proved enormously successful in the creation of avant-garde picturebooks in the 1920s and early 1930s, they themselves were not without blemish, risk, or fear; they too were forced by the end of the 1930s to adapt to increasing censorship and ideological control that ended the period of avant-garde innovation in the picturebook. Although many other artists, writers, and intellectuals would not survive the Stalinist purges that peaked in the 1930s, Marshak and Lebedev successfully adapted to changing conditions, assuming editorial roles in the comparatively safe haven of children's publishing, where they in turn were in a position to help others as literature and art increasingly came under seige in the 1930s. In order to survive, however, Marshak and Lebedev, like many others, were compelled to leave all avant-garde innovation behind, such that their later work proves completely unrecognizable alongside their avant-garde achievements of the 1920s and 1930s.

As the example of *Ellipsis* illustrates, the dynamics surrounding Russian avant-garde picturebooks are complex and the stakes high – at best, the publication of the literary work itself was at risk, while, at worst, it was a matter of life and death for its creators. For this reason, the Russian avant-garde picturebook, like Russian literature at large, offers a uniquely telling example of the dynamics of literary ecology within a context of censorship. In my use of an ecological approach to understanding the place of works of word and image within their unique and dynamic environment, I am charting new ground in bringing insights from other naturalistic disciplines into literary studies. At the same time, however, I am also participating in a broader movement to bring ecological approaches to language and literature and other examples of the blurring of boundaries between disciplines. For example, in linguistics

Einar Haugen pioneered the field of linguistic ecology and ecolinguistics with his book *The Ecology of Language* (1972), where he defines language ecology as the study of interactions between any given language and its environment. In world literature, apart from a broader ecocritical trend which also popularizes a looser sense of literary ecology, a recent noteworthy example that moves in the direction of this study is Alexander Beecroft's *An Ecology of World Literature: From Antiquity to the Present Day* (2015), whose ecological heuristic grounds itself in a concern with "the interaction of literature with its environment" (3). Like such scholars, I employ ecology to conceptualize the complex interactions of the Russian avant-garde picturebook with its literary, artistic, historical, and political environment and the dynamic interplay of beneficent and detrimental forces. Ecology thus acknowledges the synchronic complexity of the object of study within its environment, as well as the diachronic changes that may result from its evolution over time.

The unique and short-lived artistic phenomenon of the Russian avant-garde picturebook, then, can be characterized as originating in an at first inspiring and fruitful revolutionary environment, where it exploited a unique new ecological niche to achieve unprecedented heights of innovation. An ecological niche denotes both the habitat and the adaptations that allow an organism to persist and reproduce, or its place in a biotic environment, including its relation to available resources, such as food, and threats, such as predation. In the case of the Russian avant-garde picturebook, the initially nurturing habitat in which it originated rapidly transformed into an increasingly inimical environment, thereby punctuating the natural development of the Russian avant-garde picturebook and, ultimately, causing its extinction.

In addition to the concept of punctuated equilibrium, other naturalistic models also help to describe the ecology of the Russian avant-garde picturebook from its origins to its evolution and from its adaptation to changing circumstances until its eventual extinction, including the impact of the censor and other selective pressures on the art form. In some ways, these intense pressures, and concomitant evolutionary adaptations, might be compared to the complex interactions and at times non-intuitive relations of predator and prey. Indeed, apart from its obviously negative impact, and its devastating and sometimes fatal consequences for writers, censorship and a certain degree of creative restriction might even exert some beneficent influence on the literary organism (cf. Loseff 1984). In this sense, these might be productively compared to evolutionary pressures, which at times have the potential to drive innovation and even increase the vigor of the literary work, as well as the interpretive sophistication of its audience.

In this book, I argue that Russian avant-garde aesthetics and revolutionary politics, which had undergone convergent evolution in their investment in the child as privileged subject, achieved an unprecedentedly productive, if short-lived, collaboration in the period of the 1920s and 1930s around the Russian avant-garde

picturebook. The uneasy equilibrium of politics and art, which originated in a shared investment in the success of children's books in the early Soviet period, increasingly began to be disrupted by the fraught relationship between creativity and censorship. If, for a time, censorship even had some beneficent effects on the subtle encoding of sophisticated visual and verbal messages, as this book explores through particularly illustrative examples and episodes, this situation proved temporary, as the aims of post-revolutionary Soviet politics and avant-garde art increasingly diverged. Once they diverged beyond the point of effective and productive collaboration, and the still tolerable creative restrictions that had inspired innovation and ingenuity yielded to a single ideologically governed and officially determined pseudo-aesthetic, termed socialist realism, then only one ideologically correct line could survive.

If Boris Groys famously and polemically makes the straightforward, if counter-intuitive, claim about "The Birth of Socialist Realism from the Spirit of the Avant-Garde" (Groys 1996: 193–218), then I wish here to complicate his notion of a straightforward line of development through the idea of punctuated equilibrium. To argue for the continuous development of socialist realism from the spirit of the avant-garde is to fail to account for contravening ecological pressures upon the avant-garde that narrowed the window of opportunity, creating an evolutionary bottleneck, as it were, through which only one strain or lineage might survive. This is no organic development and the selective pressures were most unnatural. If the surviving strain was socialist realism, then this does not argue for its organic evolution, but rather for its unnatural selection. This view accounts for the extinction of innovative lines originating in the avant-garde aesthetic that were not permitted to survive. The role of censorship in governing artistic development cannot be ignored.

In *An Ecology of the Russian Avant-Garde Picturebook*, I argue that straightforward historical or teleological models fail to describe the complex dynamics that arose from the fraught interactions of word and image, politics and art, and creativity and censorship evident in the Russian avant-garde picturebook, or Russian literature and art more generally. Instead, naturalistic models prove more useful in illuminating these complex dynamics and exploring the evolution of art in an increasingly inimical environment. I submit that in this literary ecology, we witness counter-intuitive effects, like benefits conferred on prey by predation, or a trophic cascade, wherein the force of predation might paradoxically allow other parts of the ecosystem to flourish in unexpected ways (cf. Ripple et al. 2016). If wolves can change the course of a river, in a famous example of a trophic cascade in Yellowstone National Park, then the flourishing of a realm like Soviet children's literature, or translation, is a result of the diversion of creative energy in response to the pressure of censorship.

In this sense, Russian children's literature itself, if not its practitioners, may be seen to have benefited from censorship in certain regards and within certain parameters. In the case of the Russian avant-garde picturebook, however, this beneficial effect proved fleeting. Eventually, unnatural selective pressures led to the victory of the propagandistic

word and political ideology over avant-garde aesthetics, art, and innovation. Ultimately, censorship smothered creativity, just as politics overrode art, and the word took precedence over the image. Thus transpired the extinction of the Russian avant-garde picturebook. Only socialist realist children's literature was permitted to survive and shape future generations. Yet literary archeology can still unearth testaments to this time and a forgotten history that open our eyes to the unique literary ecology of the Russian avant-garde picturebook and of Russian literature and art in general.

Unnatural selection

When, in his landmark treatise *On the Origin of Species by the Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (1859), Charles Darwin describes the principle of natural selection, he bases his groundbreaking new theory of what occurs in nature on what people have long witnessed "in the hands of man:"

Can the principle of selection, which we have seen is so potent in the hands of man, apply in nature? I think we shall see that it can act most effectually. [...] Let it be borne in mind how infinitely complex and close-fitting are the mutual relations of all organic beings to each other and to their physical conditions of life. [...] [C]an we doubt (remembering that many more individuals are born than can possibly survive) that individuals having any advantage, however slight, over others, would have the best chance of surviving and of procreating their kind? On the other hand, we may feel sure that any variation in the least degree injurious would be rigidly destroyed. This preservation of favourable variations and the rejection of injurious variations, I call Natural Selection. (1859: 81)

In this book I propose to view the fierce censorship that prevailed in the Soviet Union and exerted an outsized influence on the publication and survival of works of literature as a form of intense selective pressure, such as Darwin himself characterized as "so potent in the hands of man." Perhaps, to be fair, in this instance it more appropriately might be termed "unnatural selection." This book explores how this process of unnatural selection shaped the evolution of the Russian avant-garde picturebook as literary organism by recontextualizing each work within its original literary ecology, and by closely examining it within the environment of evolutionary influences and selective pressures that shaped it.

In considering the role of this unnatural selection on the development of the Russian avant-garde picturebook, I build on the work of Lev Loseff, who penned the scholarly study *On the Beneficence of Censorship: Aesopian Language in Modern Russian Literature* (1984). Building on Loseff's ideas and a few brief naturalistic references he makes, I wish to argue that other evolutionary models, such as protective camouflage and notions of coevolution, also can inform our understanding of the dynamic interrelations of censorship and Russian avant-garde picturebooks.

I propose that we might consider literature as part of a dynamic system wherein the conceptualization of the interplay of censorship and other selective pressures might be informed by concepts and metaphors appropriated from naturalistic study. Here, in *An Ecology of the Russian Avant-Garde Picturebook*, the evolution of Russian avant-garde picturebooks and their unnatural selection offers a uniquely telling example of a natural history of literature.

The positive aspects of the evolutionary process and advantageous adaptation to adversity which is implied in natural (or unnatural) selection resonates with Loseff's approach in his account of "the beneficence of censorship." He observes that, "with the return of an unrelenting censorship, what is more, writers would sometimes entertain the paradoxical thought that, like it or not, censorship had become a factor in the creative process, owing to which an Aesopian manner was not artistically detrimental, but beneficial" (Loseff 1984: 11). Loseff cites the nineteenth century Russian writer and thinker Alexander Herzen's trenchant insights:

...censorship is highly conducive to progress in the mastery of style and in the ability to restrain one's words [...] The word implied has greater force beneath its veil and is always transparent to those who care to understand. A thought which is checked has greater meaning concentrated in it – it has a sharper edge [...] Implication increases the power of language.

(Herzen 1937: 400–401, cf. Loseff 1984: 11, 284)

Herzen here articulates a characteristic Russian idea, also succinctly expressed by the metaphysical poet Fyodor Tyutchev, in the poetic line from "Silentium": "The thought that is uttered is a lie" (Tyutchev 2002: 123). Similarly, exiled poet and Nobel laureate Joseph Brodsky remarked that "the machinery of constraint, of censorship, of suppression turns out to be – this is a paradox – useful to literature" (Brodsky 1978: 8, cf. Loseff 1984: 12, 248). In short, as Loseff notes, "in their observations the masters of Aesopian language directly link a writer's formal virtuosity to the censorship and the necessity of avoiding its snares" (Loseff 1984: 12). With the metaphor of the snare, and in rejecting "the traditional comparison between hangman and victim" and instead proposing comparison of the situation with "one with ecological import: wolves are needed to keep the deer in top form" (12), Loseff moves in the direction of this study.

Among principles deriving from natural history, the concept of protective camouflage, which evolves through the dynamic interrelations (and perhaps even antagonistic coevolution) between "predator" and "prey," also might be applied in a literary context and in the particular situation of Soviet children's literature. For instance, the oppositional relations of writers/artists and censorship function in a dynamic interrelation where the successful transmission of an encoded message, or survival itself, may depend on escaping detection. From the perspective of evolutionary biology, camouflage can be defined as the use of any combination of materials, coloration, or illumination for concealment, either by making something harder to see, which is

termed crypsis, or by disguising something as something else, which is termed mimesis. Both principles of protective camouflage, I would argue, are relevant for the discussion of early Soviet children's literature under the selective pressure of censorship.

Overall, in fact, Soviet children's literature offers a kind of mimetic camouflage, or strategic mimicry, for imperiled writers who found in children's literature an opportunity to disguise as something else messages intended only for certain audiences. An ecological approach thus aids considerably in understanding literary dynamics in this period. For example, in discussing the upsurge in translation activity in the Soviet era, Loseff connects this diversion of energies "to a heightening of ideological censorship which had pressed writers out of original writing," and adds:

no one further dared draw attention to the analogous, and perhaps even more revealing, situation in Russian children's literature to which, ever since the 1920s and by reason of similar imperatives, the most prominent writers had extended their energies. (194)

Indeed, Loseff goes on to devote an entire chapter to the example of Soviet children's literature (193–213).

This idea of mimetic camouflage applies on various levels of analysis, including audience. For instance, in his systematic classification of Aesopian devices on the level of intended audience (sender and receiver), Loseff includes the example of an apparent audience of children, when the actual audience is adults (60–61, 86). The actual audience (adults) is thus mimetically camouflaged as children, just as literature for adults is mimetically camouflaged as children's literature. Indeed, what might appear to the censor to be a simple story for children, may reveal itself to be something else entirely when subjected to closer scrutiny by its actual intended audience – skilled Aesopian readers. If what appears to be intended for one audience by mimetic camouflage turns out to be for another audience, then this bifurcates Wayne Booth's idea of the implied reader (1961) and adds to it the implied censor. Similarly, on the level of language itself, one might consider how Aesopian language might appear to be one thing, namely a harmless story that succeeds in passing the censor, while simultaneously offering something else entirely, such as a clandestine communication that would be opposed by the authorities. Such ambivalent children's literature thereby uses mimetic camouflage to bypass the censor through an implied audience and transmit another meaning to its actual audience.

By the same token, the Aesopian language that children's writers use also offers a kind of cryptic camouflage, or crypsis, that makes its hidden messages harder to see, thereby defeating the censor, who here serves as a kind of predator. Successful Aesopian language, which Loseff views through the perspective of information theory, manages to bury a covert message within the noise, which information theory posits is present in any channel of communication (42–43). In short,

An Aesopian text will make its way successfully from author to reader if what is in actual fact an Aesopian device is perceived by the censor as a lapse in the author's command of his craft (as noise outside the competence of the censorship) and by the reader as the express indication of an Aesopian text which awaits decoding. The skill of the Aesopian author lies in his ability to arrange such a successful transaction. (44–45)

To put it another way, the author or artist of a picturebook engages in crypsis, or cryptic camouflage, just as prey does in relation to a predator, in order to avoid detection by the censor. These cryptic layers of communication evolve under the selective pressure of censorship. Paradoxically, censorship necessitates their existence, hastens their evolution, and, thus, encourages them to flourish.

If one examines such interactions in an evolutionary context over time, the dynamics become still more complex. Here naturalistic models of coevolution may be applied, since the antagonistic relations of censorship and the creative work, or the writer/artist creating it, may lead to reciprocal effects and development. Thus one might see alterations that occur as a result of censorship, or even a kind of arms race involving the continual evolution of new methods of disguising cryptic messages once one code has been cracked. Such dynamics illustrate a kind of antagonistic coevolution, where new methods necessarily evolve once one adaptive avenue has been closed down. At the same time, however, the evolving ability of authors to communicate with their audience by circumventing the censors, and of the audience to comprehend these messages, might be regarded as a form of mutualistic coevolution, since the nature of communication between author and reader also evolves over time.

Furthermore, children's literature addresses the next generation of readers and acts upon their own evolution as individuals and as interpreters of literary texts. In this sense, as Loseff notes, "The function of Aesopian literature with respect to the former [children] is, of course, the gradual nurturing of a future Aesopian reader" (213). Aesopian children's literature thus trains the next generation of readers to become discerning and initiated interpreters of subtle textual details, conferring a certain benefit further down the trophic cascade. In this way Aesopian literature and Aesopian readers coexist in a kind of mutualistic coevolution. Of course, censors also evolve in their sophistication or in response to costly mistakes, whether their own or others', so the arms race of predator and prey goes both ways. How or why censors fail to, or may choose not to, intercept these messages remains an open question; but it is worth remembering that censors themselves were only human.

Censorship in Russian literature and children's literature

Censorship in Russia dates back to centuries of autocratic rule under successive dynasties of tsars. For example, in 1804, the Russian imperial statute on censorship read, in part:

1. The Censor has the duty to consider all manner of books and essays that are presented for public consumption.
2. The primary object of this consideration [is] to bring to the public books and essays that contribute to true education of the mind and the formation of manners, and to remove books and essays of ill intent.
3. Pursuant to this end, no book or essay shall be printed in the Russian Empire except following review by the Censor. (Patrusheva & Grinchenko 1804)

Such statements illustrate the fundamental assumptions regarding censorship deriving from Russia's imperial history and long preceding Soviet censorship. From this perspective, the establishment of Soviet censorship merely perpetuated an old Russian tradition. Yet this long tradition of censorship was not without periods of liberation. After revolutionary unrest in 1905 and 1917, censorship was abolished. As literary historian Herman Ermolaev notes, "the Bolsheviks, however, viewed freedom of expression as a direct threat to their ideology and dictatorship" and began to persecute the press immediately after October 1917 (Ermolaev 1997: 1). So when the Council of People's Commissars set up the censorship organ Glavlit in 1922, it merely reinstated a Russian tradition dating back to centuries of autocratic rule under the tsars, momentary relaxations of censorship after 1905 and 1917 notwithstanding.

Autocracy and children's literature had close ties dating back to the earliest days of Russian children's literature, when printed children's literature was created specifically for future rulers. Examples include Karion Istomin's 1694 *Primer* for the tsar's children (Istomin 1981), and the tales Catherine the Great wrote for her grandsons in 1781 and 1783 (Ekaterina II 1893). As Russian children's literature developed into an established field of its own, and truly came of age in the twentieth century, its relations with censorship became more complex as well (cf. Hellman 2013b). Once the new Soviet state was established, children's literature assumed political importance due to its potential role in indoctrinating the young to become ideal Soviet subjects.

The official interest in children as an audience proved double-edged, however, since now impolitic influences also must be kept out. For instance, in 1923, the Soviet Union officially barred from importation, among other things, "children's literature containing elements of bourgeois morality and lauding old conditions of life" (Blium 1994: 194, cf. Ryzhak n.d.: 2). Indeed, Ermolaev summarizes the changing tenor of censorship at this time:

In the 1920s the prohibitive role of censorship was supplemented by an educative one. The censor not only banned the offensive text but also made, or suggested, additions in order to further political, ideological, or moral upbringing of the reader in tune with the immediate goals of the ruling Communist Party. (259)

Though Ermolaev here discusses literary censorship in general, the import for children's literature of the shift to an educative mission is clear. The next decade provided new challenges; "In comparison with the 1920s, Soviet censorship during the 1930s and early 1940s intensified and spread" (51). In 1931 Vladimir Lenin's influential widow Nadezhda Krupskaya gave a keynote speech at the First All-Russian Conference on Children's Literature tellingly entitled "Children's Literature – a Mighty Weapon of Socialist Education" (Hellman 2013b: 361). By 1932, ideologically governed socialist realism, which glorified communist values through realistic imagery, had come into being. In the following year, 1933, the authorities took full control of children's publishing houses (Tveritina 2014). In 1934, socialist realism was instated as the officially proscribed aesthetic approach for all Soviet literature and art. In such an environment, the Russian avant-garde picturebook could not survive for long.

In a global context, worldwide examples show that, in fact, censorship has often applied even more rigorously and often to literature for children (see, for example, Hunt 2001: 255–258), even in places where censorship is not conventionally regarded as being in existence. In fact, the child is often upheld as an "emblem of futurity" in Lee Edelman's words (Edelman 2004: 3–4, 11–12) and much censorship is done in the name of the child, as Marjorie Heins discusses in her tellingly titled volume *Not in the Front of the Children: "Indecency," Censorship, and the Innocence of Youth* (Heins 2001). The question of managing influences on children, as opposed to giving them freedom to determine what to read themselves, often characterizes the paternalistic relations of adults with children, particularly in a "neontocracy," a term denoting cultures that place a value on children for their own sake and seek to manage their upbringing actively, a model that prevails in much of the Western world but not necessarily elsewhere (cf. Lancy 2008). In a totalitarian political state, these principles apply even more strongly due to the political benefits of indoctrinating the young, who assume outsize importance in building, for example, a new communist world (Kirschenbaum 2001, Kelly 2007). They loom even larger and characterize the paternalistic and infantilizing relations of autocratic leadership with all people, not only children.

From a different perspective, Russian children's literature, as a politically privileged medium, offered some comparative freedom and thus provided an unexpected outlet for energies stymied elsewhere and diverted into books for the young. If Yuri Lotman spoke of the periphery being "the area of semiotic dynamism" (Lotman 1990: 134), then children's literature offered precisely this periphery. It

was further from scrutiny, and still allowed a certain degree of experimentation, as a result of the greater freedom it offered, at least for a time. Children's literature thrived on the creative resources being directed to it in a trophic cascade. As a result of this complex constellation of forces, Russian children's literature benefited from a productive synergy, cross-pollination, or hybrid vigor, brought by the combined contributions of specialists diverted from a variety of other realms. In children's literature these creative individuals found a new frontier to explore. Yet, as Lotman notes, peripheral genres may eventually move to the center (134) and, in the particular case of the Russian avant-garde picturebook, even to the center of focus of the censor.

Exploiting a new ecological niche

The evolution of the early Soviet picturebook thus began as the exploitation of a new ecological niche or habitat characterized by certain resources and limitations that arose due to a unique constellation of circumstances in the early Soviet period. As a result of cataclysmic historical developments in Russia in 1917, the picturebook form, which had arisen during prerevolutionary times for a privileged audience, now came to be reappropriated for new functions. It evolved and even flourished as it exploited the new niche of mass-produced literature for Soviet children. Post-revolutionary educational policies and increased levels of literacy offered a new audience of readers, and considerable resources were channeled into publishing children's literature to help create the "new Soviet man." In the 1920s and 1930s, major writers, poets, artists, and other intellectuals turned their energies to this new area, which led to a successful wave of innovation where burgeoning avant-garde aesthetics, a newly created and acknowledged audience, and an ideologically motivated investment in future Soviet subjects, worked together synergistically to produce new experiments and aesthetic achievements in the Russian avant-garde picturebook.

Russian children's literature already was experiencing a resurgence and rebirth thanks to the influence of writer and critic Korney Chukovsky, whose contributions to Russian children's literature proved transformative in the 1920s (Hellman 2013b: 311). Likewise, the children's poet Samuil Marshak exerted considerable influence as an editor of children's literature in the 1920s and 1930s. Picturebooks based on texts for children written by Chukovsky and Marshak and typically illustrated by artists Vladimir Konashevich and Vladimir Lebedev, respectively, abounded in the ensuing decades. Following in the footsteps of these significant early influences and shepherded by writer Maxim Gorky, who also played a central role in 1920s Soviet children's publishing, early Soviet picturebooks underwent a creative explosion.

In the 1920s, early Soviet picturebooks benefited from the synergy of different energies being brought to the genre and producing new results. For example, Russian avant-garde picturebooks were, like the avant-garde propaganda posters of the Russian Telegraph Agency (ROSTA), ideally designed to be mass-produced and seize attention, as evident in their simplified lithographic design and the limited palette of colors they employ. The same avant-garde aesthetic evident in pictorial art, posters, propaganda, and advertising thus informed the early Soviet picturebook, which engaged in a similar pedagogical project for the illiterate. In this moment in the evolution of the Russian avant-garde picturebook these seemingly disparate influences came together in a kind of mutualistic coevolution, which also demonstrated a hybrid vigor as the uneasy bedfellows of avant-garde aesthetics and Soviet ideology coevolved to produce unique creations of lasting force.

In the next phase of the evolution of the early Soviet picturebook, the ideological component emerges even more noticeably in picturebooks seeking to straddle avant-garde aesthetics and increasingly influential Soviet ideology. Gradually, the comparatively free development and hybrid vigor of these interacting forces and influences in the 1920s gave way to increased restrictions as political aims became more explicit and enforced in the 1930s, in keeping with socialist realist ideological influence in the arts. Eventually censoring forces began to winnow out works, writers, and artists who deviated from the ideological goals that were becoming increasingly defined. As a result, the ecological niche of the early Soviet picturebook shrank demonstrably as an ideologically determined evolutionary bottleneck formed. Ultimately only works by writers and artists who accommodated by altering their style and substance to conform to the selective pressures of the censors would survive.

A process of antagonistic coevolution in the literary ecology of the Russian avant-garde picturebook occurred as increasing restrictions begin to compromise texts, so that censorship drove rapid and divergent literary evolution. At this point, Russian avant-garde aesthetics started to fall out of step with ideological intensification. In such transitional texts and editions, as discussed in the penultimate chapter in this book, the dictates of socialist realism at first combined uneasily with avant-garde aesthetic features. Eventually, however, even such compromises were no longer possible. For instance, even previously successful picturebooks by Marshak and Lebedev gave way to the pressure of socialist realism in their visual appearance, forsaking the avant-garde and experimental approach that had characterized their early years of collaboration when the impact and influence of their books was at its peak. The evolution and eventual demise of avant-garde picturebooks by Vladimir Lebedev thus demonstrate the forces at play and the increasing influence of ideology and censorship in this period.

Other Russian avant-garde picturebooks discussed in this volume display different adaptive strategies in a transitional evolutionary period. As mentioned earlier, protective camouflage using Aesopian language offered an adaptive strategy for getting a message across to an intended audience, despite the ideological demands of the environment or policing of literature by the censor. Soviet children's literature as a whole, in fact, exemplifies mimetic camouflage, or mimesis, since often something may appear to be children's literature but is not. The absurdist writer Daniil Kharm's, who is discussed in Chapter 10, offers many examples of this, since his creative energies were entirely sublimated in the form of children's literature as a result of the circumstances that surrounded him. In fact, by the late stage of his career, no other publication avenues than children's literature were open to this late member of the avant-garde.

A telling example of literary mimicry is Kharm's short children's poem "*Iz doma vyshel chelovek. Pesenka*" ["From that house there left a man. A Song," 1937], which seems a simple poetic tale about a man who leaves home and disappears into a dark wood (Kharm's 2000a). Broaching a dangerous topic during the height of the repression and Stalinist purges, when many people really were disappearing, Kharm's clandestine commentary proved impermissible. Its interception led to Kharm's arrest and future publication difficulties. This example, which is discussed further in Chapter 10, thus also displays a case of fateful code-breaking. The censors' interception of the subversive content, belied by the simple surface, had serious consequences for the author. As a result, even the Aesopian avenues of communication in children's literature were closed off to Kharm's. Eventually, he paid with his life for this and other brave refusals to adapt his aesthetics to the standards of censorship. Repressed, like many of his fellow avant-garde children's writers, Daniil Kharm's was arrested and died in prison.

Other instances of at least momentarily successful camouflage abound in picturebooks discussed in the body of this book. Examples of adaptive coevolution, though rare, also occur. Sometimes success may lie in adaptability itself, instability of meaning, and the use of both cryptic and mimetic camouflage. For example, ambivalent discourse might always appear to be something else, even its own opposite, thereby encoding any critical messages in cryptic communication. As discussed in Chapter 6, works by Yury Olesha exemplify a surprisingly successful ambivalent discourse that succeeded even under harsh conditions of censorship. Olesha's revolutionary fairy tale for children, *Tri tolstiaka* [Three Fat Men, 1928], like his similarly ambivalent Soviet novella for adults, *Zavist'* [Envy, 1927], is a case in point, since it appears to conform to the revolutionary themes of its time and to remain ideologically correct (Olesha 1998). At the same time, however, under closer scrutiny, its symbolism proves remarkably ambivalent and double-sided, such that the opposite meanings also can be read into it. The secret of Olesha's success lies

in the cryptic and mimetic camouflage he accomplishes through the ambivalent and ambiguous tone for which he is famed (cf. Peppard 1989), although he too eventually fell silent under the pressures of censorship.

Unfortunately, such examples of successful adaptive coevolution, where independence of expression can be retained under trying circumstances of censorship, prove increasingly rare over time. Instead, constraints in the literary environment generally tightened in the 1930s: Aesopian messages were intercepted, Aesopian authors were silenced by censorship, repression, or death, and Aesopian avenues, such as the Russian avant-garde picturebook, were closed down. Facing an evolutionary bottleneck as a result of the fierce predation of censorship and unnatural selection, the Russian avant-garde picturebook, and its creators, had only one viable option remaining to survive these harsh conditions – adaptation. Even if some creative energies could find other outlets, the Russian avant-garde picturebook could not survive intact, since its ideologically incorrect aesthetic approach, which did not conform to the demands of socialist realism, was visually self-evident.

Literary ecology as dynamic system

In short, as the literary ecology of Russian avant-garde picturebooks demonstrates, an unnatural selection, driven by censorship, played a role in determining the development of the early Soviet picturebook before its unique and innovative features were driven to extinction. Censorship even contributed to the diversion of literary energies from elsewhere into children's literature, which was an officially supported and less closely policed environment for a longer time than literature for adults. But once the Russian avant-garde picturebook had lost the freedom to evolve and adapt within the official literary realm, and even within children's literature, the work of art ceased to function in any kind of ecological equilibrium with its environment, or to be a "living" or dynamic thing. By this point, the literary work lost its capability to creatively adapt within government sanctioned print media. At that point, literary innovation was driven out of official discourse, though it might reemerge in unofficial discourse, such as in the later phenomenon of samizdat, the clandestine dissemination of work in carbon copies (Feldbrugge 1975, Kind-Kovács 2013, Komaromi 2015); or be diverted into safer areas like translation (Inggs 2011) and animation (Pontieri 2012). Indeed, in the face of such severe environmental constraints, adaptation proved the only option.

Alternatively, these creative impulses might bide their time, lying latent in the genetic code, as it were, until restrictions loosen. In this regard, the recurrence theorem of dynamical systems posited by dynamic systems theorist Henri Poincaré holds that certain systems will, after a sufficiently long but finite time, return to a

state very close to the initial state. As this book will show, early Soviet avant-garde picturebooks first evolved to exploit a new niche and flourished in the dynamic synergy of intersecting and interdisciplinary influences, then became endangered under fierce censorship and selective pressure, and finally were driven to extinction. Yet, despite being forcibly and artificially deprived of natural successors or direct descendants due to unnatural selection, the extraordinary achievements of those years were not lost forever. After a sufficiently long but finite time, their achievements were recognized and, once the environment proved sufficiently conducive, they reappeared in later incarnations, such as in the series of reprints of ground-breaking avant-garde picturebooks published in the series *Izbrannye detskije knigi sovetskikh khudozhnikov* [Selected Children's Books by Soviet Artists], which appeared in the Soviet Union in the 1970s and 1980s. By maintaining a place in the latent legacy of artists and writers, despite the vagaries of censorship and environmental circumstance, the Russian avant-garde picturebook exerted and continues to exert an influence on contemporary generations of artists and writers, in Russia, the emigration, and in the world at large.

That Henri Poincaré developed his theories of dynamical systems and understanding of their evolution out of the study of the three-body problem seems appropriate, since Lev Loseff, whose work points toward the naturalistic approach to literature pursued in *An Ecology of the Russian Avant-Garde Picturebook*, began his own elucidation of these principles by considering the interactions of three bodies, namely "Author, Reader, and Censor" (Loseff 1984: 5). Indeed, out of the complex interactions of these three bodies, the dynamic system and the evolution of Soviet literature are revealed. Russian children's literature and the Russian avant-garde picturebook are, if anything, even more complex, for here we have two readers, child and adult, while the author is also accompanied by the artist and the text by the image.

Even the censor might be divided – into the external censor and the internal censor. As Ermolaev notes, writers were also forced "to engage in a humiliating self-censorship to secure publication or reprinting of their works. Even before putting down a single word, the author had to weigh what would be passed or tabooed by his editors or Glavlit" (260). Lithuanian poet Tomas Venclova expresses it differently,

The apparatus of censorship is one of the most secret spheres of the Soviet system. As many Soviet writers have pointed out the first – and most important – facet is the built-in censorship apparatus that each writer carries within himself. This is the first censor you must pass: the most exacting, the most complex. (1978: 61)

Clearly, the evolution of early Soviet picturebooks under these harsh circumstances was anything but simple; rather, it was subject to severe selection pressures and was supremely dynamic in its workings, but also uniquely revealing as an example of

literary ecology. In this respect, centuries of folk wisdom anticipated the findings of natural science, as illustrated by the old Latin adage “*Mater artium necessitas*,” or English writer Richard Franck’s augmentation of it in 1694: “Art imitates Nature, and Necessity is the Mother of Invention” (1821: 52).

An ecology of the Russian avant-garde picturebook

In the 1920s and 1930s, then, many well-known Russian poets, writers, artists, and intellectuals engaged their creative efforts in producing picturebooks for young children. Due to a mistakenly simplistic assumption that these prominent figures turned to children’s literature simply as a refuge from increasing Soviet censorship and control over literature and the arts, these rare materials in large part have escaped notice in the past. This book seeks to redress this oversight and give these materials their due by taking the opposing view. If the Russian avant-garde picturebook exploited a unique ecological niche at a time when peak avant-garde creativity and investment in children’s literature happened to coincide with a political investment in the child – in an environment of increasingly harsh conditions of censorship and existential threat – then this seems to me all the more reason to attend closely to these books. For they are uniquely telling creative products dating from a time when voices were being silenced and avant-garde aesthetics were fighting for their survival.

If it has happened that these books and their creators were forcibly decontextualized by the vagaries of history and politics, and their creators silenced and their artists repressed, then the picturebooks that remain as a testament to this time and the experience of their creators ought to be recovered and recontextualized. *An Ecology of the Russian Avant-Garde Picturebook* seeks to consider these books ecologically within the artistic, literary, intellectual, social, political, historical, and cultural environment that produced them. It aims to illuminate the dynamically interacting systems that led to their creation by taking an ecological approach to the interacting forces uniquely displayed by illustrative episodes and case studies from the history of the Russian avant-garde picturebook. Within an ecological framework that considers literature as a dynamic system, this book mounts a close analysis of word and image and their synergistic interplay in avant-garde picturebooks by prominent Russian writers, artists, and intellectuals. Doing so exposes the cultural debates and intellectual history of a critical period in which extraordinary countervailing forces, vacillating at times between antipodal avant-garde and revolutionary principles, played out a drama of which these books survive as telling artifacts. Ultimately, this book argues that the Russian avant-garde picturebook offers a uniquely illustrative and rich example of literary ecology that sheds light on issues of creativity and censorship more broadly as well.

Indeed, even for the nonspecialist, the Russian avant-garde picturebook offers eye-opening insight into a stimulating and challenging period and the complex mechanics and dynamic interactions of creativity and censorship. In addition to entertaining or educating children, ostensibly their intended audience, which may actually be protective camouflage, these books also do much more. Sometimes they provide a venue for experimentation and new aesthetic achievements in the vein of innovative avant-garde experimentation in the arts. At times they offer an ideologically charged outlet for revolutionary messages or politically engaged figures, such as revolutionary poet Vladimir Mayakovsky discussed in Chapter 9. At other times they provide a subversive space for covert communication with a selected audience or for the subtle processing of contemporary personal or historic trauma, as in the case of work by the silenced modernist poet Osip Mandelstam treated in Chapter 4.

If children's literature did provide a refuge for noteworthy individuals who were facing repression, such as beleaguered Russian Formalist theorist Viktor Shklovsky, discussed in Chapter 8, who was forced in 1930 to officially recant the theoretical work upon which he built his career, this fact should not detract from but rather enhance the value of their creative products in terms of offering insight into this period of silencing. They are forms of subtle protest whose forgotten history can be recovered by acts of literary archeology, as it were. These artifacts contain artistic achievements, messages, and acts of witness uniquely determined by their environment and that could not have arisen in any other time and place. As the extraordinary output of Russian avant-garde picturebooks in the 1920s and 1930s shows, this environment also proved uniquely fruitful during its brief existence, before its evolution was cut short and its uneasy equilibrium punctuated. The widespread engagement in early Soviet children's literature in general, and in the Russian avant-garde picturebook in specific, thus proves to be overdetermined aesthetically and politically – and uniquely complicated as a dynamic system.

The unique Russian context

If both modernism and the avant-garde might be characterized as aesthetic movements in literature and art that sought to break with the past and find new, experimental forms to express the new sensibilities of the twentieth century, then the avant-garde can be characterized as more radical and extreme in its efforts – across literature, art, music, theater, and film – to position itself at the forefront or vanguard of artistic experimentation and aesthetic renewal. In Russia, the avant-garde's radical approach to aesthetics was politically charged and revolutionary in its implications as well as aesthetics, as exemplified by the revolutionary picturebook *Pro dva kvadrata* [About Two Squares, 1922] by radical avant-garde artist El Lissitzky.

As discussed in more depth in Chapter 2, it offers a political parable of revolution in picturebook form. The initially close relations of politics and avant-garde art would become more complicated after the revolution, however, and soured definitively and conclusively in the 1930s. The apparent suicide of revolutionary poet and erstwhile children's writer Vladimir Mayakovsky in 1930 may be read in many ways, including as a sign of the parting of the ways between the political ideology of the post-revolutionary state and the avant-garde individual.

In Russia, as early as 1908, as part of the shared quest for new creative frontiers and experimental innovations, modernist and avant-garde enterprises and experiments had begun a reevaluation of the child as subject, audience, and source of inspiration. As part of a broader Western practice of artistic primitivism, which might be defined (and critiqued) as the cultivation of "primitive" art as a source of renewed vitality in art (Goldwater 1986), leading figures of the Russian avant-garde also turned to children's art and language as sources of inspiration. As I argue elsewhere, this practice of infantile primitivism, or the collection and imitation of children's creative productions, gradually moved along a continuum toward the assertion of an infantilist aesthetic, a term I apply to theory and practice that asserts the independent value of the infantile perspective and the child's own subjectivity (Weld 2014c: 4). For this reason, the privileged status of the picturebook medium in the early Soviet period ought to be viewed within the context of a widespread reevaluation of the child on aesthetic grounds, augured by modernism and the avant-garde. Far from being a reluctant refuge for beleaguered Russian writers and artists, then, picturebooks at this time represented a privileged form, overdetermined creative outlet, and a promising ecological niche.

Following the tumultuous events and revolutionary unrest leading up to the year 1917, when the Bolsheviks seized power and radically reconfigured Russian society, childhood also moved into the political focus of the state, as it sought to indoctrinate future generations according to new ideological principles. As early as 1918, children's literature came to be conceived of as a "weapon" in the ongoing ideological battle, when Lev Kormchy published an article in *Pravda* entitled "*Zabytoe oruzhie*" [A Forgotten Weapon, 1918], where children's books were seen as a weapon for educational reform and for the proper inculcation of the "new man" (cf. also Putilova 1982: 5; Balina & Rudova 2005: 189; Hellman 2013a: 20–45). Children's books thus were militaristically viewed as a weapon in a war where, it would seem, both battlefield and spoils are the minds of children, a theme which recurs in Chapter 6 of this book. Tellingly, in her collected writings on the subject of children's literature, Krupskaya displays an "implicit faith in the efficacy of children's literature for behavior modification" (Raymond 1974: 206). In the Soviet Union, childhood, and thus children's books, assumed great political significance, as also occurred elsewhere in times of political or cultural change and tension.

At the same time, the young age of the audience and the apparent, and only apparent, “innocence” of the picturebook medium did offer an outlet that evaded aesthetic and ideological censorship longer than many other literary forms. For the purposes of this analysis, I echo previous scholars in viewing censorship as “a ‘regulative’ operation – that is, a process by which works of art that have entered the public sphere are controlled, repressed or even destroyed by the representatives of political, religious, or moral authority” (Childs 1997: 4, cf. Jansen 1991: 7–8). As Marietta Chudakova notes, children’s literature offered Soviet writers an alternative form of creative expression denied in literature for adults (1990: 248). Marina Balina and Larissa Rudova also describe this “comfort zone and relative freedom for children’s literature” and characterize children’s literature as “a haven for many generations of Soviet writers and poets” (2005: 188).

The comparative freedom offered by children’s literature was not without limitations, however, particularly with the growing dominance of socialist realism as the only officially sanctioned approach permitted in literature and the arts (Ronen 2000: 969–979). Even before this, however, as Balina and Rudova note, the state made “regular intrusions” into children’s literature:

Control over Soviet children’s literature manifested itself, for instance, in official attacks on the children’s poetry of Chukovsky, Marshak, and Vladimir Mayakovsky as early as the 1920s; in the war on the fairy tale genre in the late 1920s to early 1930s; in the obscurantist campaigns against the Leningrad section of Detgiz [Children’s State Publishing House] in 1937 (2005: 188)

Censorship and state control, or a need for ideological correctness, were thus never far away, and exerted both direct and indirect influence. By 1934, once socialist realism became the officially proscribed approach to literature and arts, the end of an extraordinary era of avant-garde picturebook experimentation was written on the wall. Though the term socialist “realism” makes an apparent claim to be realistic, it in fact was more romantic in its idealistic depictions of a utopian socialist future and even hagiographic in its approach to the hero and his or her martyrdom to the greater cause of socialism, for example (Clark 1985). As a result of such increasingly ideological interventions in the arts, the 1930s marked a decline in creative expression in literature and art in many respects. Yet, to some extent, children’s literature still offered comparatively more secure refuge, insofar as beleaguered writers and artists could find creative freedom there at least a little longer than in literature for adults.

In Russia, the avant-garde experimentation of the picturebook could not, however, endure beyond the 1930s. Aesthetics had become a matter of life and death by this point and, indeed, many of the most talented Russian writers and artists, including figures discussed in this book, such as Vladimir Mayakovsky, Osip

Mandelstam, and Daniil Kharms, had all perished by 1942. The 1930s witnessed the Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin's Great Purges, a time of deadly political repression that peaked between 1936 and 1938. In such times, some writers and artists, such as Samuil Marshak, Vladimir Lebedev, and Viktor Shklovsky understandably felt compelled to adapt their techniques to the officially prescribed methods of their day, as their very survival depended on it.

These picturebooks thus must be viewed against the unique backdrop of the post-revolutionary consolidation of the Soviet State in the Leninist and Stalinist periods. It was on these shifting sands that avant-garde aesthetics and revolutionary politics temporarily came together and coevolved in unique ways before diverging forever as a result of increasingly irreconcilable differences. Far from being mere products of necessity, a way to make ends meet, or a convenient refuge, then, these picturebooks represent valuable artistic achievements in their own right. From a purely aesthetic standpoint, the heights of innovation showed by Russian avant-garde picturebooks remain unsurpassed. Yet, as result of the constellation of interacting forces acting upon them and laid bare by an ecological approach to their interpretation, they also prove uniquely telling. This book aims to examine these artistic artifacts as aesthetic objects while simultaneously recontextualizing them within the dynamic complexities of their originary environment. Only thus might one truly understand implications obscured, for example, by the necessities of censorship or the vagaries of history. In many cases, the very existence of these books depended upon the success of their camouflage and adaptive strategies, even if these could not ensure their continued survival over time.

Picturebooks, ideology, and censorship

The picturebook medium has rightly been called children's literature's "one truly original contribution to literature in general" (Nodelman 1999: 69–70). Its innovative and complex use of image and text rightly situates the picturebook within the study of word and image. Indeed, the picturebook achieves "something that no other literary form has mastered" (Nikolajeva & Scott 2001: 262). It uniquely combines image and text into a complex signifying whole, which has been termed an "iconotext" in scholarship on picturebooks (Hallberg 1982: 163–168), where the interplay of word and image, which are on truly equal footing, goes further than the iconotext as understood in other disciplines (cf. Wagner 1996: 15) or the "imagetext" conceived by W. J. T. Mitchell (1994: 95). The manner in which image and text work together, however, is anything but simple. For example, as Nikolajeva and Scott show in their typology of picturebooks, the relationships of image and text can involve symmetry, complementarity, enhancement, counterpoint, and

contradiction. As the examples in this book show, such dynamics prove even more complex under restrictive ideological conditions or censorship.

Although abundant studies of picturebooks have followed the work of seminal picturebook scholar Perry Nodelman (see for example Nikolajeva & Scott 2001; Arizpe & Styles 2003; Sipe 2011; Kümmerling-Meibauer 2014), he first highlighted some of the basic complexity of picturebooks:

by limiting each other, words and pictures together take on a meaning that neither possesses without the other – perform the completion of each other that Barthes calls “relaying” [...] each tells us of something the other is incapable of telling or that the other could tell only with difficulty; together, they mean something quite different and a lot more specific than each on its own. (1988: 221)

Within the context of censorship, such as has historically pertained in Russia, Nodelman’s words about telling silences and complementary forms of expressions suddenly take on another meaning. Censorship adds additional nuances to the following claim, for example:

Because they communicate different kinds of information, and because they work together by limiting each other’s meanings, words and pictures necessarily have a combative relationship; their complementarity is a matter of opposites completing each other by virtue of their differences. As a result the relationships between pictures and texts tend to be ironic: each speaks about matters on which the other is silent. (221)

Indeed, the present study considers how the messages told by image and text in these picturebooks at times may differ. Images may speak volumes about matters on which the text remains silent, for a variety of reasons, and vice versa. In this way, I would argue that the unique form of the picturebook, with its significant silences and the complementary communicative potential of image and text might prove particularly adaptive for conditions of censorship and silencing, such as those that characterized the early Soviet period. Through its use of the picturebook iconotext, the Russian avant-garde picturebook had two communicative channels to exploit for mimetic and cryptic camouflage.

In other ways also, the situation of the picturebook in general proves particularly interesting in the case of the Soviet Union specifically. Nodelman sums up the uniqueness and status of the picturebook and its position with respect to “critical notice”:

The picturebook genre is a paradox. On the one hand it is seen as children’s literature’s one truly original contribution to literature in general, a “polyphonic” form which absorbs and uses many codes, styles, and textual devices, and which frequently pushes at the borders of convention. On the other, it is seen as the province of the young child, and is therefore beneath serious critical notice (1999: 69–70)

In the case of the Soviet Union, or in conditions of censorship and repression that governed there, picturebooks offer a still more complex paradox, since the very fact that picturebooks were the province of the young child and might pass beneath notice actually conferred considerable advantages, including protective camouflage and Aesopian channels of communication that remained open once other avenues had closed. This effect also privileges the early Soviet picturebook as medium in the unique literary ecology of the Soviet Union.

Natalie op de Beeck also seeks to contextualize picturebooks and their study in a variety of dimensions relevant for this study. She observes, “A combined literary, cultural studies, and art historical approach is necessary to provide critical perspectives on the picturebook itself [...] The picture book’s materiality, narrative structures, and topical content develop in parallel with political movements” (2010: ix). I would add that the Soviet case proves particularly illustrative of such political dynamics. Like her, I consider the Russian avant-garde picturebook a hybrid text that “functions as a sequential visual narrative, a literary work, a mediating object, and a tangible material artifact” (2010: ix) of Russian culture. I would argue that it is only in considering all of these dynamic interrelations through an act of literary archeology and the recontextualization of the work in its literary ecology that one can begin to grasp the full implications of these texts.

Ideological aspects of the picturebook also prove significant for the Soviet picturebook. As Maria Nikolajeva observes, “ideological contextualization is of importance” for understanding “Text, Context, Intertext” in the referential code of the picturebook (2010: 38). Indeed, picturebooks in the Soviet context were valued by many, and certainly officially, as ideological vehicles for young children. Nikolajeva elaborates on the intricacies of ideology in ways worth keeping in mind for the interpretation of Soviet books for children, when she notes that “unsophisticated readers [...] can still be unaware of ideological messages,” while the “verbal and the visual narratives can differ in their ideology” or be “ironic toward the other” (38). For example, one reader might note the value system embodied in the text, while missing “the counterpoint offered by the images” (38). Such observations display the complexity involved, as obtains even more particularly in the case of the ideologically charged but artistically innovative Soviet picturebooks, which navigate the confluence and contrast of art and ideology. In picturebooks, ideology may be overt or covert, paraded or subverted, and for readers, young or old, it might be noted or entirely missed.

As Nikolajeva observes in her article on “The ‘Serendipity’ of Censorship,” in a special issue of *Para*doxa* devoted to the subject of censorship in children’s literature, it is a commonplace that “Soviet children’s literature benefited extremely from the general unfavorable literary climate in the country when many excellent mainstream writers chose children’s literature as a form of inner exile when they no longer could publish for adults” (1996b: 379). Indeed, for the many prominent Russian writers who wrote picturebooks for children in the 1920s and 1930s, the

fact that the picturebook at first passed below the radar did offer a certain creative refuge for beleaguered individuals. Yet the conventional wisdom that children's literature in this period served only as a form of reluctant outlet for writers proved a convenient falsehood since it strategically deflected attention from their work for the writers who found their only communicative possibilities there.

Lev Loseff, himself a poet, critic, and erstwhile children's writer, as well as the son of the children's writer Vladimir Livshits, was uniquely positioned to recognize "the beneficence of censorship," as discussed earlier in a naturalistic context. Through his focus on Aesopian language, Loseff draws critical attention to the sophisticated subterfuge that took place within Russian literature in general, and in children's literature in particular. Loseff describes Aesopian language thus:

Imagine the situation, therefore, when the Author, who fully understands the system of political taboos (i.e., the censorship) determines to anticipate the Censor's intervention: dispensing with a number of direct statements in the text and with the straightforward depiction of certain details of real life, he replaces them with hints and circumlocutions. While his rationale in this instance lies outside literature, the Author has no means but the literary – tropes, rhetorical figures, and intrigues within the structure of the work as a whole – to realize his hints and circumlocutions. [...] It is this systematic alteration of the text occasioned by the introduction of hints and circumlocutions which these pages will take to be Aesopian language. (1984: 6)

Indeed, many works of Russian literature often prove less innocuous than they seemed to the censors who cleared them for publication, or, for that matter, to readers who fail to decipher their Aesopian language.

One example of Aesopian discourse is the well-known and later beleaguered children's poet Korney Chukovsky, who famously includes parodic and subversive layers within his popular and by now classic children's poems. Loseff describes Chukovsky's first work for children, *The Crocodile*, (1917), as follows: "this first creation of modern Russian children's literature was by its very nature ambivalent: for children, it was both game and story, stimulating awareness and liberating the imagination; for adults it was a satirical Aesopian parody" (1984: 197–198). Although published 10 years before Stalin came to power, Chukovsky's second narrative poem for children "Tarakanishche" (The Big Bad Cockroach, 1923; Chukovsky 1999c), offers "an allegorical picture of the political situation in a nation brought to heel by the dictatorship of a trifling political faction" and gives permanence to the nickname "the cockroach" which had been given to Stalin, such that by the 1930s "the title 'the cockroach' was uniquely Stalin's" (Loseff 1984: 199). On the basis of such claims, Loseff declares the existence of an entire body "of successful anti-totalitarian Aesopian satire, conceived on the basis of children's literature" (199). As this example shows, it is worth remembering that anti-totalitarian satire may be found in the most unlikely of places.

More recently, further literary investigations have highlighted other Aesopian layers in Chukovsky's texts, which can serve as a proxy for Russian children's literature in general. In 1992, just after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, literary scholar Boris Gasparov published an article highlighting the sophisticated parodies and double meanings in Chukovsky's *Moidodyr* [Wash 'Em Clean, 1923] (Chukovsky 1999b), which have left in it "their invisible stamp" (Gasparov 1992: 304–319). The multifaceted and multitalented Korney Chukovsky, who represents a larger than life presence in the history of Russian children's literature, does appear in many guises throughout this book, although his picturebooks from this period receive minimal attention. The reason for this is because the aesthetics of these picturebooks, though remarkable in their own right, generally tend less toward the radical avant-garde aesthetic favored in the selection of case studies in this book, which by necessity had to be limited. One exception is Korney Chukovsky's *Telefon* [Telephone, 1926] illustrated by Konstantin Rudakov, which includes elements on its cover and some interior designs with characteristically avant-garde block lettering and geometric repetition of shapes (Chukovsky 1999d). As such an example shows, the scope of this book is by no means comprehensive; it focuses on fewer books in order to delve more deeply into the analysis of word and image and engage in an ecological recontextualization of each. It also favors those texts where issues of word/image, politics/art, and creativity/censorship come to the forefront in revealing and more widely applicable ways.

Lev Loseff devotes one chapter of *On the Beneficence of Censorship* to "Aesopian Languages as a Factor in the Shaping of a Literary Genre (From the Experience of Children's Literature)" (1984: 193–213). Though children's literature scholars today would balk at the characterization of the diverse body of children's literature as a single genre, Loseff's overall point rings true. I concur with his claim that Soviet children's literature not only makes use of Aesopian language, but proves Aesopian as a whole and in its very nature, since this entire body of literature offered an alternative expressive outlet where Russian writers could encode their messages. For this reason Russian children's books should be regarded as no mere refuge, but rather as a locus of sophisticated subterfuge.

Children's literature in the Soviet Union was uniquely positioned and, far from having a low status as it sometimes has had elsewhere, instead absorbed the creative energies of many of the most prominent writers in Russia. Loseff remarks on this circumstance at the beginning of his discussion of the "situation in Russian children's literature to which, ever since the 1920s [...] the most prominent writers had extended their energies" (193). As examples, Loseff lists the writers Yesenin, Zoshchenko, Mandelstam, Mayakovsky, Pasternak, Platonov, Prishvin, Vvedensky, Zabolotsky, Kharmis, Vladimirov, Oleinikov, and Schwartz (193). Indeed, Russian children's literature in the early Soviet period proves a uniquely illustrative body

of literature, as this book aims to show by giving key picturebooks by significant individuals the close attention they merit.

Considering the cultivation of the reader that takes place in such works, there is a subversive and covert socialization process going on in Soviet children's literature. This clandestine process parallels and runs counter to the overt socialization process that takes place in revolutionary Soviet children's literature on the surface. This is not to say that Soviet children's literature was always subversive. Early materials examined in this book, for example, often display ardent revolutionary convictions in accord with the political tides of the day. Much of the most extreme avant-garde artistic experiment in picturebooks coevolved, for a time, alongside the politically charged revolutionary fervor and displayed the influence of other ideologically motivated genres, such as propaganda posters. Yet, as this book shows in its final chapters, avant-garde aesthetics began to be regarded as too radical in the post-revolutionary period and suffered increasing censorship. At the same time, some censored and silenced figures continued to find refuge in children's literature where clandestine messages still might appear.

In some respects, Loseff's study of Aesopian language in the Russian/Soviet context finds a parallel echo in children's literature theory of subsequent decades. Particularly relevant are the ideas of dual audience initially conceptualized (Shavit 1986) and rearticulated by Zohar Shavit (1999), refined by Barbara Wall (1991), and now widely used in children's literature scholarship, where the concept of dual audience is widely applied (cf. Beckett 1999). Also arising out of research into the dynamics surrounding children's literature's multiple audiences, the concept of "crossover" literature addresses the movement of literature from one audience to another (Falconer 2004; Falconer 2009; Beckett 2008). In the Soviet context, the shift from child to adult audience as a result of censorship and subterfuge proves particularly charged, and illuminating.

Loseff's attention to the two categories of readers relevant for children's literature, or to the dual orientation to child and adult and the play with ambiguity and simplicity (1984: 193–194), finds an echo in aspects of Shavit's work. Shavit reformulates the concept of ambivalence, which she initially derives from Yuri Lotman's broader notion of ambivalence articulated in "The Dynamic Model of Semiotic Systems" (1977), to apply it to children's literature. She writes:

In such a way, unlike other texts that assume a single implied reader and a single (though flexible) ideal realization of the text, the ambivalent text has two implied readers: a pseudo addressee and a real one. The child, the official reader of the text, is not meant to realize it fully and is much more an excuse for the text than its genuine addressee. (1986: 71)

Although this view now may seem simplistic in the light of further developments in the study of dual audience in children's literature research more globally, this lineage from Lotman and in Shavit's formulation proves apt in a Soviet context and in the case of censorship, a phenomenon with which theorists like Mikhail Bakhtin and Yuri Lotman were abundantly familiar. Some texts under examination in this book exemplify precisely this sort of ambivalence, since, in a few cases, the child reader may prove more of a "pseudo addressee," while the genuine addressee is not merely an adult, but a skilled Aesopian reader.

Also fruitful in capturing the subtle distinctions and shifting variations between a variety of addressees in these books is the later scholarly distinction Barbara Wall makes (1991) by exploring variations in the concept of the implied reader to distinguish between single address, which speaks to a child audience; dual address, which speaks to both child and adult on equal terms; and double address, where the adult is addressed over the child's head. This range of nuances more aptly describes the complex interplay of audiences in children's literature in general and in picturebooks specifically. In the Russian avant-garde picturebooks examined in this book, selected in part for the complexity of their address, double address is frequently on display, as the child addressee sometimes serves more as a decoy to permit expression between adults that cannot find another outlet. But Wall's concepts allow for more sophisticated shifts, within one book, in terms of the address of these multiple audiences. In the Russian context, however, the censor also exerts a considerable force within the dynamic systems of address. This has profound effects on the communicative potential and strategies employed by the author in reaching an audience of children or adults.

In a Soviet setting then, Aesopian children's literature is doubly encoded for an ambivalence that sometimes parallels relations between child and censor (when both remain ignorant of a political subtext, if for differing reasons) or those between censor and adult (who both might shield the child from themes deemed inappropriate for an audience of children). In the Soviet context, one might offer the example of how fairy tales and anthropomorphism were deemed inappropriate for children in the early Soviet period (Hellman 2013b), an ideologically motivated act of censoring by adults that counters children's own tastes. Not only does children's literature play a uniquely complex role in the Soviet/Russian context, then, the Soviet situation also exposes theoretical issues applicable even more widely in cases of divergent readership. Due to this multi-faceted overlay of influences and encoding, the issue of Aesopian language in Soviet children's literature proves especially intricate. It reveals the signifying potential of narrative ambivalence and dual or double address, which sustain the co-existence of multiple narrative planes communicating different messages to different audiences, distinguishable with respect to the author by age, sophistication, motivations, and allegiance. Any instrumental

understanding of the structural complexities of the censored Soviet picturebook fails, however, to appreciate the extent of their aesthetic achievements, ingenuity, and unstable signifying systems.

To sum up, far from being mere byproducts of authorial necessity and a restrictive censorship, these rare books by remarkable Russians merit far closer attention than they have heretofore been accorded. The conventional view of Soviet picturebooks as a form of reluctant refuge amounts to a gross oversimplification and suffers from a mistaken logic on many levels. First of all, many picturebooks embody the spirit of revolutionary times and wholeheartedly aim to contribute to the socialization of future Soviet subjects, being part and parcel of the ideological enterprise. Others achieve unsurpassed heights of avant-garde experimentation – in precisely the narrow window of time in which such creative achievements were possible, and even flourished. If in some cases the picturebook creators sought and found in the infantile a fleeting creative refuge or protective camouflage for covert communication, this in no way diminishes the significance of their creative works as art objects. On the contrary, it heightens their value as artifacts of their time. This book thus aims to show the multidimensional web of significance and signification in an array of avant-garde picturebooks through illustrative case studies and illuminating episodes in the ecology of the Russian avant-garde picturebook. It stands to reason that this selection is by no means comprehensive, nor could it be; rather, it is the tip of an iceberg of forgotten materials that await further detailed exploration.

In short, the early twentieth century in Russia witnessed an astonishing output of significant children's books by prominent Russian artists, writers, and intellectuals. Although these materials have escaped extensive scholarly notice in the past, they have begun to be rediscovered. Recent scholars have introduced the subject to audiences through informative works, particularly Evgeny Steiner's *Stories for Little Comrades* (Steiner 1999, see also Steiner 2002), and informative resources such as handbooks and catalogues (Lemmens & Stommels 2009; Rothenstein 2013). Newly translated reprints by Tate Gallery in London and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, such as Marshak and Lebedev's *Baggage* (2012) and Marshak and Lebedev's *Circus and Other Stories* (2013), have made these rare books more accessible to a wider audience. The present volume aims to focus a spotlight on these unique materials, even as it introduces them to a wider public. In short, the picturebooks examined here represent valuable artistic achievements in their own right, as well as revealing historical, political, and cultural artifacts when reconsidered in the ecological context of their originary time and place. Ultimately this book underscores how the significance of Russian avant-garde picturebooks, with their fraught interrelations between literature and censorship, aesthetics and politics, should not be underestimated, neither in a general sense, nor in the particularly complex context of Soviet picturebooks.

PART I

Ex nihilo nihil fit

The evolution of the Russian
avant-garde picturebook

CHAPTER 1

Precursors of the avant-garde picturebook



Figure 2. Cover design by Alexandre Benois for *Azbuka v kartinakh* [Alphabet in Pictures, 1904]

In examining twentieth-century precursors of the Russian avant-garde picturebook, this chapter seeks to acknowledge that the Russian avant-garde picturebook did not evolve entirely *ex nihilo*, avant-garde claims to originality to the contrary (Krauss 1997: 197). The Russian avant-garde picturebook benefited from and evolved out of significant artistic achievements at the end of the imperial era and the beginning of the twentieth century. The finely produced abecedarium *Azbuka v kartinakh* [Alphabet in Pictures, 1904] (Figure 2), written and illustrated by famed artist and critic Alexandre Benois, exemplifies the artistic achievements of the preceding

period, even as it offers a glimpse into the very different literary and cultural environment of the prerevolutionary era. As such, this book provides a telling aesthetic and cultural counterpoint to the post-revolutionary avant-garde alphabet discussed later in this chapter, as well as the Russian avant-garde picturebooks discussed in subsequent ones.

This chapter spans two transformative decades surrounding the fateful revolutionary year 1917, when the Bolsheviks seized power, paving the way for the eventual creation of the Soviet state. The example of the collection co-edited by Benois, *Yolka* [Christmas Tree, 1918], which was published in this very time period, shows that picturebooks also bore witness to the tumultuous reconfiguration of society that occurred as a result of revolutionary unrest and violence between the years 1905 and 1917. *Christmas Tree* offers a unique glimpse into these times and the reconfiguration of society taking place. As an artifact from a transitional time, this book unsurprisingly displays on its pages contradictions and contrasts, aesthetic and political, that coexisted in 1917, a year that punctuated with revolution the natural evolution of the Russian picturebook. It also offers a kind of “who’s who” on its pages and preserves their artistic and literary reactions to this moment of revolutionary rupture. Through close examination of these two picturebooks from the two decades preceding the rise of the Russian avant-garde picturebook in the 1920s and 1930s, this chapter intends to display the radical changes in word and image that took place, as well as to demonstrate the changing relationship between art and politics that shaped the unique environment and ecology of the Russian avant-garde picturebook in this period.

Abecedarium of an imperial era at its end

Alphabet in Pictures by Alexandre Benois displays the significant aesthetic achievements that preceded the innovations of the Russian avant-garde picturebook. As a founder and participant of the World of Art movement, which promoted a revival of earlier forms such as folk art and took an interest in puppet theater, carnival, and fairy tales, Alexandre Benois and other World of Art colleagues drew upon the cultural resources of the past to create exquisitely illustrated books for the children of the elite, such as his own. His ornately illustrated alphabet book showcases the state of the art at the beginning of the twentieth century. Of course *Alphabet in Pictures* cannot represent all prerevolutionary publishing, but Benois’s book does serve as an exemplary product of the artistic achievements in picturebook design in the prerevolutionary period that set the stage for the evolution of the Russian avant-garde picturebook.

Though seemingly a simple abecedarium, albeit beautifully produced according to the aesthetic achievements of the World of Art at the beginning of the twentieth century, this exquisite book also contains within its pages vivid images of an era that was coming to its close. As the high production values of this book demonstrate, the World of Art movement had elevated the status of the picturebook to high art. At the same time, the pages of *Alphabet in Pictures*, which would be read only by the children of the privileged elite, also reflect the luxurious decadence of the late imperial period in Russia. In many senses, then, this book stands in stark contrast to the production values, aesthetics, and intended audience of the Russian avant-garde picturebooks, which were intended to be cheaply mass-produced, display a revolutionary aesthetic, and reach a wide audience of children to shape them into ideal citizens of the new Soviet state. In this sense, *Alphabet in Pictures* offers a telling counterpoint to the picturebooks of the 1920s and 1930s.

If Alexander Pushkin's novel-in-verse *Eugene Onegin* (1833) has been deemed an "encyclopedia of Russian life" in the early nineteenth century (Belinsky 1988), then Alexandre Benois offers a visual encyclopedia of Russian childhood at the end of the imperial period, just before the dawn of a new era which brought with it cataclysmic historical events, revolution, and an entirely new reality. Suffused with the material culture of aristocratic childhood, *Alphabet in Pictures* also reflects the biases, injustices, and blind spots of this era, as will be made evident by a focus on issues of class, gender, race, and ethnicity in this chapter. To radically recontextualize a book such as this, which represents the apex of the previous era's picturebook design, exposes the role childhood, children's culture, and children's literature play as the unevenly distributed riches of one era gave way to a new period with its own ideological uses for childhood, children's culture, and children's literature. Through the complexities of image and text, symbol and subtext, history and context, each of these books speaks volumes about Russia in the early twentieth century, showing how picturebooks can be telling artifacts as well as extraordinary works of art.

A basic introduction to language, literacy, and literature, an abecedarium or alphabet book could be mistaken for a neutral pedagogical tool. In truth, however, alphabet books are rife with contemporary ideology, whether explicit or implicit, buried within language or within imagery. Indeed, abecedaria reflect the values and limitations of the society that creates them and help shape the next generation through formative childhood impressions. With regard to the nature of an alphabet, an alphabet can be defined as:

a particular form of script in which discrete graphic symbols or letters correspond with individual sounds of speech. It is thus a sign system that links *graphemes*, the smallest written mark that causes a change in meaning, with *phonemes*, the smallest unit of sound that distinguishes one word from another.

(The Chicago School of Media Theory 2015 n.p.)

If an alphabet such as Cyrillic links graphemes with phonemes, then the abecedarium assists children in making this connection with the help of images.

The linguist Charles Sanders Peirce distinguishes between the Icon and the Symbol as a type of sign (Peirce 1955: 102). The Icon refers to an object by referencing some quality of the object, while Symbols, such as words formed by letters, refer to an object using a predetermined law. The seemingly humble alphabet book thus walks the beginning reader through a quantum leap of cognition, which uses image and text to initiate the pre-literate child into literacy and move their cognition from Icon to Symbol – or the Symbolic, in Kristevan terms. Yet, as W. J. T. Mitchell observes, we cannot simply cast words as arbitrary signs and images as merely relational ones, since Icons, such as illustrations in an alphabet book, also follow visual conventions, which themselves must be taught (Mitchell 2003). The cognitive leap staged by the abecedarium thus depends on conventional icons as well as conventional symbols. Indeed, as Benois's *Alphabet in Pictures* shows, an alphabet book also introduces the child to the governing aesthetic and representational conventions of the time and, in so doing, also visually represents the unspoken ideology that predetermines the process of selection and specific visual and verbal details.

Alphabet in Pictures abundantly displays the World of Art's artistic interest in folk tales, which connects this artistic movement to Romanticism and the late nineteenth-century revival of the folk tradition. These inspired the exquisite illustrations of World of Art artists like Alexandre Benois and Ivan Bilibin, who famously illustrated Russian folk tales with elaborate marginal designs. Benois's book also includes abundant imagery from folk tales, such as B for Baba Yaga, B for *volsheb-nik* [sorcerer] or *velikan* [giant], and a page showing C for *slasti* [sweets], where a candy house like that of Hansel and Gretel is depicted. The influence of so-called "Oriental tales" is also felt, such as in the letter X for *khan*, a Mongolian ruler, and *khalat* for a kaftan. The exoticized "other" proves exceedingly common on its pages, as in, for example, E for *Egipet* [Egypt], H for *Napadenie* [Attack] accompanying an illustration showing Native Americans, or IO for *Iurta* [Yurt].

Also characteristic of the World of Art movement and the work of Alexandre Benois are the theatrical elements in the book. These draw upon the movement's relations to the theater and set design. It has been said that the highest achievements of the World of Art were in stage design and book illustration (Saint-Rat 1989). Benois, who served as a scenic director at the Marinsky Theater in St. Petersburg, would go on to design sets for the famed Ballet Russe in Paris in 1905. Indeed, several scenes in *Alphabet in Pictures* depict the theater, and the framing of every inset composition is itself theatrical. Many images are even framed by curtains as if on stage. For instance, the first page displays its contents on a stage framed by drapes, T for *Teatr* [Theater] (Figure 3), depicts a stage with a performance underway, and the page Φ for *Fokus* [Magic trick] also depicts a stage performance by a magician. Such decadent ornamentation, like the intricate details and elaborate framing of



Figure 3. Illustration by Alexandre Benois for *Alphabet in Pictures*

each page of the fairy tales illustrated by World of Art artist Ivan Bilibin, offers an extreme contrast to the simplified style of avant-garde picturebooks in the subsequent early Soviet period, which eschews any marginal decoration or framing, and instead employs blank negative space to frame its compositions.

Much ideology can be contained within the pages of a simple primer, alphabet book or picturebook, and the Benois abecedarium is no exception. Due to the unique concatenation of circumstances in prerevolutionary Russia, however, Benois unwittingly captures on the pages of this book an era at its end. He thus memorializes the period just before the 1905 revolution, which presaged a period of unrest in Russia that culminates with the tumult of 1917. The Bolshevik coup d'état then radically reordered Russian society and effectively abolished the aristocracy and class-based system represented on the pages of *Alphabet in Pictures*. This book thus offers a final paean to the aristocratic childhood that was idealized and enshrined in Russian literature by writers such as Leo Tolstoy, even as it serves as its epitaph.

Alphabet in Pictures offers ideologically charged presentations of childhood and of the world, for an audience of elite children. It thus displays how an alphabet book may be filled with ideological messages that indoctrinate an impressionable audience according to exclusive categories such as class, gender, race, and ethnicity

that empower one group at the expense of another. The acquisition of literacy and culture by the privileged few here excludes those represented on the margins as strategically “other” in terms of class, gender, race, and ethnicity.



Figure 4. Illustration by Alexandre Benois for *Alphabet in Pictures*

In the subconscious content of its pages, Benois’s *Alphabet in Pictures* displays the trappings of childhood of the privileged elite, including Benois’s own children. The page for the Cyrillic letter “Я” (Figure 4), for example, uncritically reflects these different worlds of childhood on one page, as it illustrates something as benign as an apple tree. Here finely dressed aristocratic children pick apples from apple trees in play, while peasant children labor to pick them up in baskets. Though the peasant children face the audience, while the privileged boys and girls face away, focusing on the activity of picking apples, it is evident that the peasant children, shabbily dressed in Tolstoyan peasant shirts, are meant to be invisible. The composition is blind to them. Similarly, the girls stand still, being fundamentally passive spectators, as shown by their empty hands that are either clasped or invisible, while the aproned and bonneted nanny watches the boys with alarmed concern. The aristocratic boys who are actively and perhaps riskily engaged in climbing the tree and

picking apples, just for fun, are the obvious focus of the composition. Yet, this image still speaks the truth about the separate and starkly divided worlds of childhood that occupied the very same spaces in pre-revolutionary Russia.



Figure 5. Illustration by Alexandre Benois for *Alphabet in Pictures*

Images display many scenes of privileged childhood, depicting the leisure and play of aristocratic children. Illustrations show an abundance of toys for socializing the children of the nobility according to clearly defined gender roles, such as toy soldiers for boys and innumerable dolls for girls. In one illustration, evidently upper-class children enjoy the performance of a magician on stage. Numerous estates serve as the background of various childhood scenes, such as in the illustration (Figure 5) showing that “Д is for Dacha,” a luxurious country home boasting a reflecting pool with swans and potted fruit trees. Multiple servants bustle about and attend to the mundane needs of the aristocracy; for example, a nanny braids a girl’s hair in her bedchamber. Indeed, girls are typically represented in an intimate, domestic sphere and, if venturing outside to play at domesticity by enjoying a picnic in a forest, they are subjected to attack by a wild band of Native Americans. Boys, on the other hand, as typical of boys’ books and girls’ books in the West in the late

imperial period, venture far afield on dangerous adventures, while girls stay close to home, in keeping with new, narrowly defined gender roles that would also be called into question by the Russian Revolution and its new ideology.

Concomitant with the age of empire and colonialism still reflected here, there appears an interest in native folk belief and indigenous people around the world, albeit colored by primitivist caricature, if not outright racism. This proves particularly evident on the page for the outdated letter Ъ. The composition features many inset images of “riding” [ѣзда] and “eating” [ѣда]. The latter vividly demonstrates beliefs about “The Raw and the Cooked,” in the words of Claude Lévi-Strauss (Lévi-Strauss 1969). The top center image is a “civilized” white boy with a napkin under his chin, eating politely with fork and knife at a place set on a white tablecloth. Whiteness, cleanliness, and modern notions of hygiene are emphasized here. On either side of him are caricatured images of the primitive “other;” one is a dark-skinned cannibal voraciously biting into a white-skinned human leg, evidently raw, and the other a leather-clad Inuit holding a whole, raw fish that he is presumably eating or sharing with his attentive dog, as he sneers at the viewer. These represent caricatures of the “barbarians” to the north and south, signaled by racial difference represented through racist caricature. In contrast, the bottom center image shows a finely clad boy astride a prancing horse with a trimmed mane and bobbed tail, underscoring the animal’s domestication and subservience. Other images show a careening dog-sled and a dark-skinned man with feathered headdress barely remaining atop an ostrich. These contrast with a horse-drawn sleigh on snow and several figures riding an elephant, including colonial figures in white costume who look around at leisure while a dark-skinned native with bare skin and a turban steers the elephant. The imperial and colonial perspective of the imperial white Russian is highly evident in these and other illustrations, which display both a primitivist fascination with and horror at an exoticized native “other.” These images display a marked lack of insight that dehumanizes the individuals constructed by a racist colonial gaze as “primitives,” as well as peasants and servants disenfranchised by the class system. In some cases, their treatment resembles that of animals as if they too should be properly subjugated and domesticated.

It is within such a racist, colonial, and primitivist framework that the book constructs its apparent protagonist, an exotically clad, dark-skinned boy who goes from illiteracy to literacy over the course of the book. He figures on the cover (Figure 2), where he stands front and center among many objects displayed. He appears again on the title page (Figure 6), where he sprawls on the floor beside two Russian boys, poring over a book. Here the absence of girls is telling; the acquisition of literacy staged here seemingly applies in a gendered fashion only to boys, regardless of race or ethnicity, and would seem to exclude the girls, who are not granted access to the apples of the tree of knowledge, despite the seemingly inclusive motto on the title page of the book: “learning is light, while ignorance is darkness.”



Figure 6. Title page by Alexandre Benois for *Alphabet in Pictures*

This character's most dramatic entrance, however, is on the first interior page of the book (Figure 7), where he stands large before his audience on the page "A" is for "Arap," itself a problematic term deriving from the Turkic word for "Arab" but also with racially charged archaic connotations like "blackamoor," or worse. With a broad stance showing his pointed slippers and billowing harem pants, he brandishes one cutlass and has several more weapons hanging on his person. Below his turban, from which beads and feathers dangle, he smiles broadly showing his bright white teeth, red lips, and almost crazed wide-open eyes that seem less a realistic representation than a kind of performative blackface. In this image his foreignness by race and ethnicity is on display, and aggressively so, as indicated by the drawn weapon. His body itself creates an A shape with widely planted feet and a belt across his waist, while the curtain also mimics this shape. Here the racial and ethnic "other" faces the privileged aristocratic child reader of the book; yet, it is an orientalized projection of that primitivist gaze that is shown. The choice of an exoticized ethnic "other," however, offers a surprising opening to this abecedarium, signaling how wide-ranging in its imaginative speculations and theatrical range it will be. This implied geography stands in contrast to the narrowing of scope seen later in the Soviet period, and shown in the depiction of race in Chapter 7.



Figure 7. Illustration by Alexandre Benois for *Alphabet in Pictures*

The aggressive effect of this character's posture, face-to-face positioning, and brandished weapon is somewhat softened, however, by the wooden stage and yellow curtains around him, which frame and contextualize him in a less threatening setting, thereby making a performance of his person and stance. This character returns at the end of the book (Figure 8), on the page for *v* and *o*. By this point, having acquired literacy on a course from ignorance to reading and writing, now the newly civilized savage has learned to write in Russian. In contrast to the first page where he stands in opposition to the reader, here he brandishes a quill instead of a cutlass (being thereby disarmed by the colonial and enlightenment project) and occupies his other hand with an inkpot. His smile is now mild and his bearing is not aggressive, but friendly. Rather than challenging the audience with his posture, now facing slightly away, he smiles at the viewer while engaged in the task of writing in ink. His savagery and threatened violence, as in this primitive meaning of a smile, now has been redirected by the civilizing process, in a fulfillment of the colonizing project within the scope of the book's imperial vision.

The text the foreign boy has written reads, "I have learned to read and write in Russian," numerous inkblots and crossed out letters notwithstanding. Russian



Figure 8. Illustration by Alexandre Benois for *Alphabet in Pictures*

here is the imperial language par excellence to be acquired by the savage. The presentation of the imperial Russian alphabet is thus framed through the acquisition of literacy by an exoticized and orientalized racial and cultural “other.” At the same time, however, this character offers a telling counterpoint to the civilizing process to which aristocratic Russian children, or all children, are supposed to submit wholeheartedly as part of the enlightenment project headed by adults. Culture, civilization, and literacy here appear in opposition to the savagery of the unschooled child, as well as the exoticized “other.” The imperial torch-bearers, the sons of the aristocracy, are thus being shown what they ought not to be through the example of this defamiliarized “other.” Girls, however, are confined to a domestic sphere filled with dolls and other nurturing forms of care, such as playing nurse, while boys play at war, no doubt in the service of empire. In the end, all “savagery” is neatly framed by play, theater, textual labels, marginal ornamentation, and the picturebook itself.

Though like a plaything to the privileged children featured here, the foreign boy has shed his savagery and become enlightened like them. His foreignness is still signaled, however, by his exoticized foreign garb, which theatrically still marks him as “other” externally, even if his mind has become enlightened by his acquisition of the

Russian language. This trajectory echoes how the African slave Abram Hannibal, who was a favorite of Peter the Great, rose through the ranks, finally becoming a general and nobleman in his own right. Ultimately, from a teleological literary perspective, he becomes the great grandfather of the revered national poet Alexander Pushkin. Hannibal's example might also be regarded within the context of the eighteenth to nineteenth-century imperial practice of bringing Africans to court. In this light, the exoticized "other" represents a plaything not only to children, but also to adults in the highest echelons.

The hero of Benois's alphabet book embraces enlightenment in accord with the aforementioned motto: "Learning is light, while ignorance is darkness." The dark and light color scheme within this view, which also seems reflected in the racially charged depictions of the foreign "other," naturally places imperial Russia at the pinnacle of civilization, while discounting the intrinsic value of foreign cultures and native forms of knowledge, which stand only in useful contrast to the values the book upholds. As an illiterate situated squarely at the bottom of the hierarchy in which the children of the elite aspire to occupy the highest echelons, this boy also mutely stands in for all the disenfranchised in this era. Not included here is the unspoken and invisible childhood of the lower classes or the adult population that was infantilized by circumstances that left them illiterate and disempowered, and whose disenfranchisement revolutionary unrest sought to remedy.

Throughout the book, the stylistic approaches evident on its pages, the theatrical framing, and the quality of production display the aesthetic achievements of the World of Art movement that laid the groundwork for early Soviet enterprises in the genre of the illustrated book. At the same time, the new Soviet book and books for children shed the trappings of privilege not only in the imagery but also in the material "means of production." Early Soviet picturebooks were mass-produced by cheaper and simpler means. They could then reach a much wider audience, including street urchins and peasant children who, with the revolution, were granted the opportunity to acquire literacy. In contrast, Benois's fictional depiction of the acquisition of literacy by an exoticized "other" actually aids the acquisition of literacy only by aristocratic children, like Benois's own, who figure most significantly in the theater of the aristocratic imagination.

Cost clearly is no object in the production of *Alphabet in Pictures*. It was beautifully produced on thick, high-quality paper and bound in an ornately printed hardcover binding. Gold paint and many high quality colors that stand the test of time embellish its pages. Other material details display the signs of the times as well. The original book is stamped "Permitted by censor. S.-Petersburg, October 24, 1904," illustrating the ubiquitous if fluctuating presence of censorship in Russian history, imperial or otherwise. This stamp in 1904 preceded the abolition of censorship as a result of the 1905 revolution in Russia, which prompted constitutional

reform, although the abolition of censorship did not prove permanent and was firmly back in force in the Soviet period, as marked by the establishment of the censoring agency Glavlit in 1922. In a further sign of the times, which were about to come to an end, the book employs the old orthography. It devotes pages to a handful of soon to be outdated letters and signs, such as Ѣ, ѵ, і, ѿ, and the hard sign ѣ, which would be formally abolished by orthographic reforms associated with the revolution. These reforms suddenly rendered prerevolutionary Russian writing outdated and marked, surviving only in the emigration, where Alexandre Benois also would take up residence. Revolutionary changes thus went as far as revising icon and symbol and the new population of the newly formed state would have to be taught a new alphabet of ideology, as shown in the next chapter.

Revolutionary rupture in the picturebook



Figure 9. Cover Design by Vladimir Lebedev for *Yolka* [Christmas Tree, 1918]. Art © Estate of Vladimir Lebedev/RAO, Moscow/VAGA, New York

After more than a decade of tumult, the era captured and memorialized within the covers of *Alphabet in Pictures* had reached its definitive end. In the aftermath of the revolutionary turmoil in 1917, Alexandre Benois collaborated on another volume for a new generation – the children of revolution, as it were. Co-edited by Benois and Kornei Chukovsky, and overseen by writer Maxim Gorky, this collection marked the collaboration of the World of Art movement, whose ornate book design of the past was represented by Benois, and the revolutionary literature of the future represented by Gorky, who would become an influential figure of Soviet letters. Indeed, Gorky's work and influence later helped to inspire the ideologically governed socialist realism that became the official Soviet aesthetic in 1934. Entitled *Yolka* [Christmas Tree, 1918], using a word that literally means fir tree but typically refers to a Christmas tree, this volume appeared at the time of the Orthodox Christmas holiday season following the tumultuous events of 1917. With a cover by Vladimir Lebedev (Figure 9), it was published in "Petrograd," the name St. Petersburg bore briefly between 1914 and 1924, in a liminal period of history. Like a final holdout from another era, this tree, and perhaps the entire collection, seems to stand as a feeble gesture toward normalcy for children during the first Orthodox Christmas holiday after the Revolution. Yet it is also an anachronism, as indicated by the peculiar and uneasy hybridization of styles and periods on its pages.

The book includes an ornate frontispiece illustration (Figure 10) by Alexandre Benois that recalls the Christmas tree depicted on the cover of *Alphabet in Pictures*. The illustration by Benois still preserves the World of Art aesthetic as if nothing had changed, but Russia would never be the same. Benois's design depicts a religiously charged Christmas tree surrounded by angels rather than the "New Year's" tree that would become its secular replacement in Soviet lore. Yet this is also a world of children, from the boy and girl being served a platter to all the winged cherubs in the tree. Most indicatively, an infant with a star and bright light as a halo around his head is posed atop the tree, recalling the baby Jesus celebrated by the Christmas holiday. As if a gesture of peace during a time of tumult, this elevation of the child echoes the Biblical idea that "a child shall lead them." As the King James Bible phrases it, "The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them" (Isaiah 11: 6). Here, in a Christmas truce, disparate forces, figures, and possible enemies unite on behalf of the child and a new generation that will lead them. This symbolism displays the centrality of the child in an old Christian ethic, just as it is metamorphosing into the Soviet focus on the child, which was not without its own religious precursors or hagiographic associations.

Itself a unique anachronism, *Christmas Tree* still employs the letters abolished by orthographic reforms in this same year. It also includes in its pages an odd blend of the ornate style of the World of Art (Figure 10) alongside a more simplified folk



Figure 10. Illustration by Alexandre Benois for *Yolka* [Christmas Tree, 1918]

influence demonstrated in the illustrations of budding illustrator Vladimir Lebedev (Figure 9). If, like *Eugene Onegin*, *Alphabet in Pictures* served as an encyclopedia of Russian life by showing the trappings of high culture childhood in its theatrical style, *Christmas Tree* begins to display a raucous revolutionary undercurrent and new carnivalesque folk element. As such, it recalls Tatyana's famous nightmare in *Eugene Onegin*, where, after engaging in folk divination, the maiden Tatyana dreams of being chased through the forest by a bear and discovers Eugene, whom she loves, presiding over a diabolical horde of monsters. The dream concludes with a sequence that accurately predicts the death of his friend, Tatyana's sister's fiancé, at Eugene's hand. The cover illustration by Vladimir Lebedev (Figure 9) offers a dark and frightening vision of a similarly bestial or carnivalesque bacchanale with Father Frost and a dark towering troll presiding over a dance around the tree involving a wolf, bear, fox, and rabbit who anthropomorphically join "hands" around a tree. Here three predators, wolf, bear, and fox, dwell with the rabbit, their prey, in a carnivalesque leveling resulting from the tumult of revolution. Along with the darkness of the composition and the surreptitious effect of this bestial bacchanale,

where the unseen viewer witnesses animals and folk figures engaging in anthropomorphic activities, the association with Tatyana's pagan dream hints at darker happenings in the past or future. Here no child figures in the depiction, but is all the more incorporated as the viewer of a gripping carnivalesque moment.

Comparing Lebedev's wholly pagan fir tree on the cover with that by Benois in the frontispiece reveals a startling contrast between the coarser folk-inspired style Lebedev here explores and Benois's ornate World of Art aesthetic. Lebedev employs black, white, and a revolutionary or ritualistic red, while Benois uses a softer yellow, green, blue, white and black. For Lebedev, fur, shadows, and thick black lines dominate. Benois, on the other hand, uses fine black lines to delineate shapes. Apart from the green tree in the center, the composition is predominantly white, the color that comprises the clouds, background, the large winged angel bringing a platter to a boy and girl in the foreground, and the heads, clothing, and limbs of the innumerable winged cherubs bustling about the branches of the tree. Also white is the light from the many candles on the tree and the radiant star-shaped halo emanating from the head of the young child atop the tree. Lebedev shows a dynamic scene of dancing and action, while Benois still preserves a sense of privilege. Finely dressed children stand still and observe the angelic activity about the tree as the large angel's platter approaches them, while a toy train, domestic scene, and a book opened to a Christmas tree await them under the tree. Lebedev shows wild animals carousing in human fashion, while Benois shows only two diminutive domestic pets, a small dog and cat who passively observe the scene, like the boy and girl who stand in for the audience and watch the detailed scene presented on the page. For Benois, the theater of revolution still stands at a remove, while for Lebedev and his child spectators, the raucous whirlwind proves frighteningly and uneasily close at hand.

Juxtaposing these two trees, which are both included within the covers of *Christmas Tree*, reveals how Benois depicts a religiously charged Christmas tree, clinging to the past as if to reassure children that nothing has changed, while the pagan fir tree of Lebedev shows the wild and frightening energy of revolution that leaves the place of the audience, or the rabbit among the many predators, fundamentally uncertain. The eventual fate of the rabbit, however, may be answered in an interior poem entitled "*Kak prygal zaichik*" ["How the Hare Jumped," 1918] (Vengrov 1918: 10), which is also illustrated by Lebedev in a more stylized but still folk-inspired manner. This frightened rabbit jumps from place to place, but these hops are simultaneously shown in a sequence extending around the bottom edges of the page to a book and finally to a fir tree and right into the jaws of a wolf. The poem concludes, "[He] jumped! and was lost..." (Vengrov 1918: 10). This outcome is hardly reassuring for the stereotypically cowardly rabbit depicted on the cover, or for others nervous about the outcome of revolution.

Indeed, the content of the collection, if recontextualized in the light of history, does weigh in on recent revolutionary events in remarkably rapid fashion. As Hellman observes, “*Christmas Tree* was one of the first children’s books (if not the first!) to be published in Soviet Russia” (Hellman 2013b: 293). For example, the influential Soviet writer Maxim Gorky contributed a piece called “Samovar,” which describes how a neglected samovar and teapot blow up, and might be read as a parable of revolution. The braggart samovar, which has been left lit, ultimately explodes, wreaking havoc on his environs. The chimney cap, who could have extinguished the samovar, remarks, “Take a look at that: people always / Lament their fate, / While forgetting to put the chimney cap / On the chimney pipe!” (Gorky 1918b: 9). The teacups, described as unafraid, also weigh in, laughing and singing, “There once was a samovar, / Small but hot-headed, / And one time no one put / The chimney cap atop it! / The heat inside was extreme, / While there was just a little water. / The samovar broke apart, – / It served him right / Served him ri-ight!” (Gorky 1918b: 9). In Gorky’s story the samovar serves as a warning to attend to matters in due course and not to allow steam to build up or the consequences can be much worse, a message with revolutionary implications. “Samovar” boasts characteristic illustrations by artist Yury Annenkov, who also illustrated renowned poet Alexander Blok’s *Dvenadtsat’* [Twelve, 1918], another very early poetic response to the revolution.

For *Christmas Tree*, Gorky also offers a retelling of the folk tale “*Pro Ivanushku-Durachka*” [“About Ivanushka the Fool,” 1918] (Gorky 1918a: 35–38), which includes a color illustration of a simpleton in tattered dress by famed Russian realist artist Ilya Repin (35). The glorification of the simpleton fits with the revolutionary ethos of the period and with Gorky’s own value system, as reflected in his writings. Indeed, assorted writers and illustrators of prominence published their work in *Christmas Tree*, which emerges as an eclectic blend of styles at an unusual historical moment. In addition to writer Maxim Gorky and illustrator Yury Annenkov, other significant writers featured on its pages include Korney Chukovsky, Sasha Chorny, Aleksei Tolstoy, Valery Bryusov, and Vladislav Khodasevich, while illustrators include World of Art artists Mstislav Dobuzhinsky, Ivan Puni, and Sergey Chekhonin.

Korney Chukovsky contributed a retelling of the English folk tale “*Dzhek pobeditel’ velikanov*” [“Jack the Giant Killer,” 1918] (Chukovsky 1918a: 11–18). The idea of a much smaller boy hero defeating the Goliath-like giants also fits the spirit of the revolutionary times. After Jack is offered the hand of a princess, the tale concludes with an egalitarian Soviet reply, “Thanks, but no thanks. I have no desire to marry a princess. I shall marry a swineherd’s daughter” (Chukovsky 1918a: 18). Similarly, when Chukovsky retells a Norwegian folk tale “*O glupom tsare*” [“About the Stupid Tsar,” 1918] (Chukovsky 1918b: 19), the mockery of the imperial regent seems pointed. In the tale, the tsar is deposed and the hero Peter succeeds him,

“and everyone rejoiced, that they had been delivered from the stupid tsar” (25). In light of the recent abdication of the tsar, the historical parallels prove obvious.

The poet Sasha Chorny, meanwhile, contributes a poem tellingly entitled “*Trubochist*” [“Chimney Sweep,” 1918] (Chorny 1918: 34) that reevaluates this simple proletarian profession. He exhorts children not to be afraid despite what they see and what they may have heard – a message intended for all children of revolution. “He’s not at all, not at all frightening,” the poem reassures them, and encourages, “Give him your hand now quickly! / You’ll wash the soot off – it’s no misfortune” (Chorny 1918: 34). Chorny here seems to address fear and disgust, from the perspective of privileged children, and all who have seen their lives disrupted by revolution. The chimney also functions symbolically in that sense, as a fiery and dangerous passage. The apparent ambivalence about the chimney sweep raises the question of how to relate to historical events and that which has been changed by the revolutionary rupture.

Even Valery Bryusov’s poem “*Razgovor cheloveka s myshkoi, kotoraiia est ego knigi*” [“Conversation of a Man with the Mouse that is Eating his Books,” 1918] displays a reversal of the typical power structure. The man has complete sympathy with the mouse and offers him a cookie, but only asks him to cease eating his books (Bryusov 1918: 26). Here a figure of power and privilege graciously give up confections to the disempowered mouse, in the hope that the legacy of the intelligentsia, in the form of his beloved books, be preserved. Sadly, in the trying days to come, as modernist writer Evgeny Zamyatin relates in his story “*Peshchera*” [“The Cave,” 1923], even the intelligentsia would burn previously cherished books and papers for fuel in times of serious peril and desperation. Primitive material needs, starvation, and cold would characterize the aftermath of revolution and the ensuing civil war, showing the life and death stakes of the post-revolutionary period.

Origins of the revolutionary picturebook

The revolutionary year 1917 marks the start of a new, post-revolutionary era, when image, text, art, and politics converged and began to coevolve under the aegis of the Russian avant-garde picturebook. By the 1920s, the soon to be outdated World of Art figures, with whom many influential post-revolutionary figures had collaborated in *Christmas Tree*, had passed the baton to the future leaders of art and literature in the post-revolutionary Soviet period. Building upon and breaking away from aesthetic accomplishments of the past, a new and markedly different generation of children's writers, critics, and illustrators charted a radically different aesthetic and ideological course through the landscape of childhood. Foremost among these foundational figures for the origins of the revolutionary picturebook are avant-garde artists Vladimir Lebedev and El Lissitsky, whose influential early picturebooks are the focus of this chapter. Together, Lebedev and Lissitsky can be credited with inspiring the most radical avant-garde innovations in the early Soviet picturebook.

In the 1920s, stimulated by an environment of avant-garde innovation in book design and the fusion of avant-garde art and ideology in propaganda posters, Vladimir Lebedev developed into a leader in avant-garde book design. Yet his work also benefited from the radical experiments of avant-garde artist El Lissitsky insofar as the two worked in tandem in initiating the new creative realm of the revolutionary picturebook. In one case Lebedev and Lissitsky even illustrated the same story, Rudyard Kipling's *The Elephant's Child*, albeit in different languages, Russian and Yiddish respectively. Both Lebedev and Lissitsky found unique ways to fuse avant-garde aesthetics with revolutionary ideology, as their highly influential achievements in the year 1922 show. The case of the influential figures Lebedev and Lissitsky thus exemplifies the unique synergy and convergent evolution of avant-garde aesthetics and a political investment in the child as picturebook audience. At this stage a mutualistic coevolution emerges as disparate forces fuse and stimulate new creative achievements to exploit the new ecological niche of the Soviet picturebook.

Underrepresented figures: An excursus

Among the influential precursors to the Russian avant-garde picturebook cited thus far, however, the notable absence of women deserves additional commentary in this excursus. Indeed, as the examples discussed in this chapter already demonstrate, the foundational figures of early Soviet children's literature, and the Russian avant-garde picturebook likewise, were largely male. Exceptions to the general pattern in early twentieth-century Russian children's literature include the very popular but often demeaned pre-revolutionary writer Lydia Charskaya, whose legacy Ben Hellman credits in his history of Russian children's literature (Balina & Vyugin 2013; Hellman 2013b). Her wildly popular school stories were beloved by girls, and all children, if derided by critics such as Korney Chukovsky. Although not directly pertinent as a precursor to the Russian avant-garde picturebook, Charskaya still figures as a significant popularizer of children's literature at the beginning of the twentieth century and clearly captivated a real audience of children, despite the opinion of critics or the political aspirations of the state, which would assume control over the production of literature in the 1930s. Her example also illustrates the wider variety of alternatives available beyond the picturebook form.

Also vilified, if perhaps more privately, was Vladimir Lenin's widow Nadezhda Krupskaya. Engaged in children's literature issues from a pedagogical and political perspective, Krupskaya served as Deputy Minister of Education beginning in 1929. Although outside literature proper, Krupskaya had tremendous influence politically and pedagogically in ways directly relevant for the success of early Soviet picturebooks, and later limitations imposed upon them. She also had many followers among the so-called "pedologists," who enthusiastically pursued the study of children's psychology and pedagogy with the sanction of the state after the 1917 revolution, and particularly in the 1920s. The derisive attitude towards these figures and the movement of pedology might also be critiqued from a feminist perspective.

In the dominance of male figures, children's literature did not wholly differ from Russian literature generally. It too had been heavily dominated by men in the nineteenth century, at least, although Anna Akhmatova, Marina Tsvetaeva, and other women poets contributed their own powerful voices in modernist poetry in the early part of the twentieth century, precisely in the time that Russian children's literature began to flourish. Just as literary scholars have been recovering forgotten women writers of the nineteenth century, such as poet and prose-writer Karolina Pavlova, so too forgotten women children's writers are now beginning to be recovered, notably by Ben Hellman in his encyclopedic history of Russian literature for children (2013).

As for women artists influential for Russian avant-garde picturebooks in particular, Albert Lemmens and Serge Stommels laudably include multiple instances of striking avant-garde work by many women artists, such as Vera Yermolaeva,

Maria Siniakova, Anna Borovskaia, Natalia Ushakova, Tatyana Pravosudovich, Maria Pashchenko, and Olga Deineko in their handbook *Russian Artists and the Children's Book 1890–1992* (2009: 81–127). They also remark on the underrepresentation of women artists: “Never equaling the male leading positions in the artistic unions or organizations, women artists never had the same opportunity to generate the same influence (and income)” (243).

The most significant exception in terms of the underrepresentation of women illustrators in avant-garde picturebooks and the attention they have heretofore garnered may be Vera Ermolaeva, who was an illustrator of significance already immediately after the revolution. For example, her cover design for Nikolay Aseyev's *Top-top-top* (1925) is striking and avant-garde, with an inverted perspective, bold figures dynamically arranged, and geometrically stylized vehicles driving down its margins. Noteworthy too is her inclusion of a very young girl on the cover, with a small red bow atop her head and the curvature of her shirt and skirt shaded in a style reminiscent of human figures painted by avant-garde artist Kazimir Malevich. Ermolaeva thus includes a young girl in the avant-garde project and represents her multi-dimensionally as a figure with volume, while all others, including the large adult male in uniform behind her, are represented as flat. Ermolaeva's work no doubt deserves more attention than it heretofore has garnered, a few exceptions notwithstanding (Kovtun 1975; Rosenfeld 1999b). Lemmens and Stommels remark of Ermolaeva that she was “halted in her development as an artist and illustrator by the change of the political climate that eventually would cost her life” (2009: 243). Abroad, meanwhile, Nathalie Parain (Natalia Chelpanova) may be regarded as an important successor to the Russian avant-garde tradition in the emigration in France, as Sandra Beckett notes (Beckett 2015: 224–226). In the Soviet Union, however, since the window of opportunity proved quite brief, in the overall scheme of things, any women who joined avant-garde children's book illustration after it had been established by founding figures, who were in a better position to do so, would have had little time to make a unique contribution before this window closed. Perhaps this too explains the dearth of women artists and authors among the Russian avant-garde picturebooks explored in this book.

In short, most of the figures historically credited with founding twentieth-century Russian children's literature and the Russian avant-garde picturebook were men. They too played an important role in legitimizing Russian children's literature through their higher, more secure status. Whatever her flaws, political inclinations, or ties to the maligned pedological movement, Nadezhda Krupskaya proves an exception in this regard, since she also elevated the significance of children's literature. Subsequent generations of children's writers would see a larger proportion of women, including Korney Chukovsky's own daughter Lydia Chukovskaya, whose own writings and accounts of the period offer retrospective insights that prove

useful in this book. Marshak and Lebedev also famously had female successors, although they often were regarded in a demeaning light, as if purely imitative and lacking originality. Indeed, misogynistic patterns do emerge in the way women's contributions to Russian children's literature were discounted. Those who achieved notoriety of any kind were often vilified in ways that prove questionable from a feminist perspective.

Perhaps as a result, women did not occupy the most influential positions in the children's literature or illustration in this period. In this respect, in its underrepresentation of women, the spheres of the Russian avant-garde picturebook resembled the Russian avant-garde more generally, where men also predominated in the cult of the child which I elsewhere call the "infantilist aesthetic of the Russian avant-garde." It stands to reason, however, that in both cases these prominent men, with their secure cultural status, may have helped legitimize serious approaches to the child and the field of children's literature as a whole. Perhaps if it had not been so dominated by prominent male figures, early Soviet children's literature might not have enjoyed the high status it had throughout the Soviet period, however much gender equality was touted by communism.

The dawn of a new era in picturebook design



Figure 11. Cover Design and Illustration by Vladimir Lebedev for *Slonenok* [The Elephant's Child, 1922]. Art © Estate of Vladimir Lebedev/RAO, Moscow/VAGA, New York

Vladimir Lebedev's influence on avant-garde picturebook design can hardly be overstated. In the 1920s, Lebedev rose to great prominence as a leading and trend-setting avant-garde illustrator. Alongside the poet and children's writer Samuil Marshak, who was his long-time collaborator, Lebedev became a leader in children's publishing; Marshak became the editor of the children's book publishing house, while Lebedev became its artistic director. A particularly noteworthy moment for the origins of the revolutionary avant-garde picturebook is the publication of Lebedev's pathbreaking illustrations (Figure 11) for Korney Chukovsky's translation of Rudyard Kipling *Slonenok* [The Elephant's Child, 1922]. Evgeny Steiner rightly calls this work an artistic manifesto for children's book illustration (1999: 42). By radically deconstructing the shape of animals into simplified geometric components and monochromatic fields of color, Vladimir Lebedev translates the avant-garde aesthetics of the period to children's book illustration. If the illustrations of the World of Art movement delivered the entire world to the child on a silver platter within an ornate ornamental frame, Lebedev instead challenges his child audience with a radically deconstructed image divorced from its framing or background. At the same time, the carnivalesque conglomeration of wild animals recalls Lebedev's 1918 illustrations of wild beasts around a fir tree in *Christmas Tree*. Here too the child is not depicted, but engaged by the work of art itself.

In his decomposition of the image, Lebedev may have been inspired by the spirit of Rudyard Kipling's *Just So Stories* (1902), where "The Elephant's Child" also appears. Like the traditional genre of how and why stories, or *pourquoi* tales, Kipling's tale offers a fanciful narrative explanation for how the elephant got his trunk. Through his visual approach to the story, Lebedev, like Kipling, explains the how and why of the constitution of the image; but Lebedev goes beyond Kipling in disassembling every animal and image into component parts. In this way, like Kipling who offers the child reader the opportunity to simply enjoy the tale or question the veracity of the explanation rendered, Lebedev issues an invitation to the child to cognitively piece the picture back together again, as if a set of shapes or geometric blocks. The illustration itself resembles children's blocks or playthings, thus shedding new light on constructivist or other avant-garde deconstruction of the image into minimal components of child's play.

Lebedev's *The Elephant's Child* also owes something of its avant-garde innovation and constructivist approach to the Lamarckian view of evolution represented in Kipling's writings (MacDuffie 2014: 18–34). Kipling's etiological tales explain why things are the way they are, while, at the same time, by applying avant-garde, constructivist, and formalist terminology, they allow the child to enter into the construction of the object by baring its devices. Lebedev declares that "the drawing must be made so that the child can *enter into the work of the artist*, that is, can understand what the skeleton of the drawing was and how its construction took

place” (Glotser 1987: 133). The three-dimensional object, or in this case living thing, is radically flattened and deconstructed into constituent shapes as if a child’s paper construction, like those Lebedev himself remembers from his childhood (Petrov 1972: 13, 250). The composition resembles something the child might play with and reassemble and is thereby akin to the cognitive challenge issued to its audience by a modernist or avant-garde work of art. Yet Lebedev’s innovative new aesthetic approach to picturebook illustration also seems informed by Kipling’s classic children’s story, a colonial perspective on exotic animals of the colonized world, and traditional tales that explain to naive audiences why things are the way they are.

In his picturebook innovations, Vladimir Lebedev likely found inspiration in similarly innovative experiments by El Lissitsky. Lissitsky’s many Yiddish picturebooks in the same period, including his own Yiddish version of *Elfandel* [The Elephant’s Child, 1922] published under the pseudonym Kraft, also deconstructed images and lettering. For example, on the cover of *The Elephant’s Child*, Lissitsky deconstructs Hebrew script into simpler geometric components, like solid circles, rectangles, and lines. Otherwise, however, Lissitsky’s shapes are rendered more calligraphically with an effect more like shading. Lebedev’s designs and the lettering on the book cover thus appear more visually striking. Yet El Lissitsky’s Yiddish children’s book designs clearly point in the same direction, although less boldly perhaps than his other avant-garde picturebooks in Russian in this same period.

In his most representative depictions, Lebedev constructs animals out of basic geometric shapes, such as on the book cover. It shows the victorious, reshaped elephant with a fairly integral if still stylized shape, surrounded by a flattened composition ornamented with geometric shapes indicative of his exotic setting. At the bottom it also shows a significantly shrunken crocodile, who even seems to have gone “belly-up” in defeat. At other times, Lebedev’s compositions effectively deconstruct animals into geometric shapes, such as in the interior illustration pictured. In this violent scene, the elephant’s child is being pummeled and abused by the other animals. This scene thus highlights the violence of the deconstruction of the body and of avant-garde aesthetics in the revolutionary moment. Such violence proves a common underlying theme in post-revolutionary Soviet picturebooks. After all, Kipling’s story treats the malleability and resilience of the abused body, which may be appropriate to the immediately post-revolutionary moment after years of historical trauma that ensued during the civil war that ravaged Russia between 1917 and 1920.

Interestingly, many of the animals Lebedev features here, including the elephant himself, recur in key moments in picturebooks in this period, thereby indicating the influence of this artistic manifesto to which writers and artists allude through intertextuality or intervisuality. For example, the humanoid ape who punches like a man, in contradistinction to the armless quadrupeds and bipedal who kick the elephant,

returns in future prose, poetry, and illustrations. The ostrich with its strange and comically depicted head also recurs in multiple places, as later images will show.

In his approach to children's book illustration, Lebedev transferred the same avant-garde methods and radical visual effects that he had been using in Russian Telegraph Agency (ROSTA) propaganda posters. These also used similarly simplified and geometrically stylized visual imagery (Steiner 1999: 43). Incontrovertible evidence of this translation of avant-garde aesthetics from the poster to the picturebook includes the recurrence of the same proletarian workers represented in Lebedev's constructivist posters in revolutionary picturebooks such as *Ice Cream*, *Yesterday and Today*, or the unpublished *Ellipsis*, all of which will be discussed in more detail in subsequent chapters. The translation of these tropes from avant-garde propaganda into children's books displays how, to be understood in the proper light, all art, propaganda, advertising, and picturebooks in the early Soviet period must be viewed as part of a continuum, and cannot meaningfully be divided by audience, ideology, or rhetorical intent. The picturebook must be considered as part of a greater ecology of the avant-garde. In truth, these disparate art forms share many considerations, despite the obvious differences with respect to audience. For example, all must seize the attention of the viewer, simplify the composition for easier and cheaper mass printings, and offer vivid illustrations to visually educate a possibly illiterate or inattentive audience according to predefined rhetorical or ideological aims.

The creation of a new audience

Like propaganda and posters aimed at the illiterate, early Soviet picturebooks were meant to address, or even create, an entirely new audience. As mentioned earlier, Nadezhda Krupskaya termed children's literature "one of the mightiest weapons in socialist education of the new generation" (Krupskaya 1979: 36, cf. Balina 2008: 4). The new status of the child as audience is evident in two works by the prominent and revolutionary artistic figures, artist El Lissitsky and poet Vladimir Mayakovsky. In joint and separate works, these highly influential figures, who were widely known for works not intended for children, bring the politically charged child subject into innovative and influential art books intended for all audiences, as well as picturebooks intended for children.

Also published in 1922, El Lissitsky's celebrated picturebook *About Two Squares*, reduces to basic geometric components a revolutionary parable about two squares. Through its focus on red and black squares, it stages a revolutionary drama in a visually accessible manner. This book elevates the revolutionary picturebook to high art on such a level that it plays a central role in art history worldwide. Yet it is all too

rarely acknowledged by art historians to be the children's book that it is, as evidenced by the fact that it is addressed to an audience of children: "to all / to all / little children" (Figure 12) (Lissitsky 1922: n. pag.). This diminutive phrasing infantilizes the audience of revolutionary and avant-garde art – all become as little children. The composition itself emphasizes the reference to an audience of "little children" as a significant white presence in a field of blackness.



Figure 12. Dedication page by El Lissitsky for *Pro dva kvadrata* [About Two Squares, 1922]

Similarly, *About Two Squares* also conjures a child audience in its playful and participatory tone, beginning as it does by exhorting its audience, like children, in the imperative "not to read," but to act to construct a better future instead: "don't read // take up // scraps of paper / little posts / blocks of wood // stack / paint / build" (Lissitsky 1922: n. pag.). It thus emerges that the ideal audience of this revolutionary parable, and of this canonical text of world art history, is children. Indeed, the child is the political subject *extraordinaire* in this period.

Lissitsky's book symbolically addresses children and commands them to attention and exhorts them to participate in the construction of the future augured by the red square's arrival. The prominent role of the child as addressee and participant

in the construction of the future also finds a more subtle echo within the imagery of the book. On the final page, one reads “this is the end / onward” at the same time that, in the shadow and shelter of the victorious Red Square, a tiny red square is held up. In this anthropomorphic moment, the ritual gesture amounts to an acknowledgment and display of the small red square as offspring and a symbolic continuation of the larger Red Square.

Indeed, like their rhetoric and art itself, avant-garde artists of El Lissitsky’s ilk evidently engaged themselves in the act of cultivating a youthful audience of actual children through children’s books. In so doing, they sought to involve children in the process of constructing a new world and incorporated infantile features in their new avant-garde aesthetic. By the end of the book, the initially two-dimensional and aperspectival depiction of the two squares has become a three-dimensional and perspectively rendered composition. It is as if the audience of children has attended to the commands issued at the outset and stacked geometric blocks to participate in the construction of the revolutionary future the book foresees.

The child as political subject also appears in Mayakovsky’s “*Skazka o krasnoi shapochke*” [“The Tale of Little Red Cap”], one of the poems included in Mayakovsky’s poetry collection *Dlia golosa* [For the Voice, 1923], which is innovatively designed and illustrated by El Lissitsky (Mayakovsky 1923c). Judging by the poems it contains, this groundbreaking avant-garde collection is not addressed to children, although its interactive form and visually dramatic avant-garde aesthetic offer visual appeal to audiences of all ages through vivid but simplified geometric illustrations. After a typical Russian fairy tale opening, “The Tale of Little Red Cap” presents a revolutionary revision of the traditional story. It replaces the little girl with a cadet, while the red color of the cadet’s cap takes on revolutionary significance.

The pronounced sound repetition and word play has an infantile effect, from the opening line “Once upon a time there lived a cadet / In a red cap the cadet was dressed” to later formulations like “after the cadet [followed] a cadet / and the cadet’s father and the grandfather of cadets.” Sound predominates over meaning due to the exaggerated repetition, typical of children’s play with language, as Korney Chukovsky observed in *Ot dvukh do piati* [From Two to Five, 2001]. Aspects of child lore, such as a casual treatment of morbid themes, also appear, such as in the climax of the poem, which declares, “Everyone knows what sort of diet wolves have: / they consumed the cadet down to the cuffs,” including an insignificant detail about the cuffs for the sake of its sound. “The Tale of Little Red Cap” most directly conjures an audience of children at its moralistic end, when it addresses children directly: “When you are going to engage in politics, children, / don’t forget the tale about this cadet.” Interestingly, Mayakovsky emerges here as a paternalistic figure, as often occurs when he addresses an audience of children, although in his writings otherwise he himself very much plays the child, or *enfant terrible*. These examples

show that children, and the picturebooks aimed at the child as audience, must be regarded within the political context of the revolutionary times that endow childhood with new import.

In the years 1922 and 1923, the child as political subject definitively has been born, as shown by Lebedev, Lissitsky, and Mayakovsky. For these radical avant-garde figures, and many others who would follow their lead, the Russian avant-garde picturebook proves the ideal place to address children and, in so doing, bring this very audience into being. Clearly, then, for revolutionary artists, picturebooks of the early Soviet period offer no mere hiding place, where the reluctant might cower in hopes that the storm will pass. Instead, picturebooks prove a privileged medium that attracts the most prominent avant-garde artists. In the year 1922, figures such as Vladimir Lebedev and El Lissitsky elevate the picturebook to the forefront of the aesthetic and ideological aim to reshape society according to a utopian aesthetic and political ideal, which is still optimistically construed by revolutionaries in the early Soviet period. The mutualistic coevolution of these two distinct forces would continue in the 1920s.

A new post-revolutionary alphabet



Figure 13. Cover design and illustration by Vladimir Lebedev for *Azбука* [Alphabet, 1925]. Art © Estate of Vladimir Lebedev/RAO, Moscow/VAGA, New York

The influences and radical innovations highlighted above paved the way for astonishingly creative activity in the area of the picturebook during the early Soviet period or the 1920s and 1930s. By this time, even the very alphabet had been radically reconfigured for a new era. Lebedev's own abecedarium *Azbuka* [Alphabet, 1925] (Figure 13) provides a kind of answer to Benois's abecedarium from the late imperial era and the decadence of the World of Art. Unlike *Alphabet in Pictures*, Lebedev's mass-produced and radically simplified alphabet book sheds all the trappings and ornamentation of the pre-revolutionary world. Just as easily, it prunes the letters discarded by the orthographic reforms undertaken in 1917 in association with the revolution. Here a simplified avant-garde style, affecting image as well as lettering, seeks to educate a new audience. It embraces an entirely different, populist educational philosophy and target population, while Benois's privileged and aristocratic audience has lost its standing and ended up on the wrong side of the revolutionary battle lines.

A complete reversal in focus has taken place. While Benois's calligraphic printed letters, large and small, make obeisance to the ornate and theatrically presented imagery, Lebedev subordinates the images to the massive and monolithic capital letters in block print that dominate each page. Instead of the rich colors and details in Benois's work, Lebedev's images are entirely in black and white, their dark shapes dramatically contrasting with a plain white background. Images lack any border or ornamentation. Here one witnesses a radical simplification and narrowing of focus. If each Benois page performs an elaborate story or stages an exquisite spectacle for the eye of a privileged child audience, then Lebedev offers a simplified didactic lesson for the Soviet everychild.

Lebedev's *Alphabet* thus addresses a newly literate audience of children and future Soviet subjects created by new educational policies and major ideological shifts. The new Soviet child, viewed as the necessary precursor of the new Soviet man and woman, has been granted literacy and equal, if not in some senses superior (because still ideologically pure), status in the Soviet state. *Alphabet* displays a bold new approach to the abecedarium in the age of mechanical reproduction. The ornamental nature of Benois's book, which still retained something of the feel of an illuminated manuscript or the touch of an artist's hand, here gives way to stark contrast and vast negative spaces necessitated by mechanized lithographic printing techniques.

Letters here loom large on each page; emphasizing this salient detail sharpens the focus on the task of learning letters (the child's labor, perhaps), while lavish and unnecessary ornamentation has fallen away. The objects surrounding each letter lack labels and thus offer an implied cognitive invitation to reattach icon and symbol. Their smaller size underscores the lesser importance of words before the monolithic and totalizing letter. That images appear exclusively in black and white

seems almost retrogressive compared to *Alphabet in Pictures*, but efficiency and economy justify the choice in the context of mass production for the greatest possible number. It is a new niche these books are to occupy. In the absence of borders or margins, negative space here takes on a new role, and signifies the newness and possibilities of the post-revolutionary horizons (and the radical erasure it entails). In fact, the letters of the title on the cover are comprised entirely out of negative space. They are seemingly held by a bear, a traditional symbol of Russia, muzzled and harnessed here by negative space.

This use of empty space proves characteristic of new print technologies, like lithography, that predominate in this period as part of an attempt to reach a broader audience through mass production. This print technology encourages the avant-garde simplification and deconstruction of images into the geometric planes or textures that become a trademark of this political era and a new stage of media production for the masses. Arguably revolutionary in its very essence, this aesthetic approach fragments each integral whole into fields of light and dark and other textural contrasts that impinge upon the totality of the letter. Such jarring juxtapositions show symbol and icon to exist in an oppositional or inimical relation; the all-powerful letter dwarfs the living creatures and objects whose initial sounds it vaguely denotes. Here the symbol reigns supreme over the icon, while in Benois it was the icon that overpowered the symbol.

Thus, if each composition by Benois has the effect of a time-consuming and absorbing work of art intricately handcrafted for one individual, then Lebedev's pages are like posters mass-produced with a printer's block for a large collective of people. The high quality of the materials, like the ink, paper, and binding, used in the World of Art abecedarium have ensured its preservation, while the thin and cheaply produced pages and block prints of Lebedev's *Alphabet*, though produced in greater number for a broader audience (the initial print run being 15,000 copies), have only barely survived the passage of time in library archives and collections – and this in a faded and brittle state. Still, today, these radically different aesthetics peacefully coexist in archives and collections as unique testaments to their time, like fossils laid down within different sedimentary layers and waiting to be recovered by literary and artistic archeology to tell the tale of their own times and evolution.

Aesthetic renewal from the primitivist periphery

Avant-garde artist Vladimir Lebedev made his career as a member of the avant-garde that aspired to a revolutionary break from the past and a new aesthetic path forward that coevolved, for a time, with utopian political goals. Lebedev's own aesthetic innovations, however, drew inspiration from a variety of sources, some of which reflect influential sources for avant-garde experimentation more generally. This chapter highlights primitivist sources of inspiration within lesser-known books by Lebedev in order to relate these influences to the innovative new approach to illustration shown in the more well-known avant-garde picturebooks for which he is famous. Considering Lebedev's famous innovations, as discussed in the previous chapter, in the light of these analogues helps to recontextualize his own contributions to avant-garde art, as well as to situate the evolution of Lebedev's work within the greater ecology of the avant-garde of which he was part.

If primitivism, as mentioned earlier, can be defined as the cultivation of "primitive" art as a source of renewed vitality in art (Goldwater 1986), then Lebedev's brand of primitivism ranges from typical sources of an exotic "other" to homegrown and national examples of the "primitive" close at hand, which involve the child more directly. At the same time, Lebedev's primitivism combines in a unique way with an avant-garde focus on the mechanics of construction and the baring of devices that, in the case of his art, prove especially attuned to his own ideas of infantile perception and cognition. However artificial it may be, Lebedev attempts to create an infantile approach to form, reflecting his own intuitive understanding of children's own artistic, visual, and cognitive approach to form. Seeking out the origins of Vladimir Lebedev's new aesthetic approach to picturebooks through close examination of his experimental early works for children reveals how the aesthetic renewal he accomplishes for Russian avant-garde picturebooks draws from the primitivist periphery, just as avant-garde art does, thus revealing a shared etiology.

Primitivist play in the picturebook

In his typology of play, Roger Caillois coins the term *paidia* to describe play characterized by “uncontrolled fantasy” or “make-believe,” as opposed to the more regulated and rule-governed *ludus*. The word retains the etymological trace of its derivation in the Greek word for child and the idea of children’s play, as Caillois freely admits, “I have chosen the word *paidia* because its root is the word for child” (1961: 27). If there is such a continuum of play, where play ranges from the *paidia* of children’s imaginative play to the regulated *ludus* typical of adult games, Vladimir Lebedev’s picturebook *Prikliucheniia chuch-lo* [The Adventures of Scare-Crow, 1922] occupies a paradoxical ground. For this book represents the imaginative play of the author, who constructs it to resemble the pretend play of the child, but adult constructions remain a regulating force beneath the surface, in the subtext, and in the interstices between shapes.

By examining the play of this picturebook from a constructivist perspective and then deconstructively one can tease out the play of signifiers and instability of meaning within the iconotext. First one might approach the book as an example of beneficent interplay, where the adult behind the iconotext encourages the child as artist and writer. The ideas of imitation and interplay that emerge out of such an examination can provide new insights into the role of child’s play in the Russian avant-garde aesthetic more generally. Then, a critical deconstruction of the implications of this book can interrogate the presentation of the child and others in this book and question if these actually limit the child’s expressive possibilities, or deprive the child of creative agency. In this way one might raise the question of whether the child becomes a primitive “other” framed in terms of an opposition not dissimilar to that governing the depiction of the Native American schematically represented on its cover (Figure 14) or, for that matter, the buffalo that is the target of his drawn bow.

In the early twentieth century in general, as for the Russian avant-garde in particular, the child served as an originary source within philosophies of art and play. Not uncommon at the time were such statements as by the artist Alexandre Benois that “All children’s play is art” (1908: 3) or by the poet Maximilian Voloshin that “Artists are simply children who have not forgotten how to play” (1988: 271). Such formulations prove typical for the Russian avant-garde’s practice of infantile primitivism and the infantilist aesthetic, which was predicated on this glorification of child’s play and the child as artist, and also reflected the revolutionary spirit of the times.

Within this wider context, the picturebooks of Vladimir Lebedev represent one of the first times that radically experimental avant-garde art is directed to the child as a worthy audience in itself. Yet, for a dozen years already a construct of the “infant/child” had been providing the Russian avant-garde with a model for how to



Figure 14. Cover design by Vladimir Lebedev for *Prikliucheniia Chuch-lo* [The Adventures of Scare-Crow, 1922]. Art © Estate of Vladimir Lebedev/RAO, Moscow/VAGA, New York

playfully deconstruct conventions and accomplish the renewal of art and language that was their aim. Thus, when Lebedev engages in an imitation of the art, language, and pretend play of the child in this picturebook, he follows a precedent established by avant-garde practice. Lebedev's infantile primitivism becomes at once more complicated and more problematic, however, since the avant-garde's abstract construct of a child, through this picturebook, reaches an audience of actual children.

Written in 1922, *The Adventures of Scare-Crow* was one of Vladimir Lebedev's earliest picturebooks and one of very few also authored by the influential illustrator. As such an early work, and one representative of an experimental period in Lebedev's development, it can reveal much about the origins of Lebedev's picturebook aesthetic and the sources that initially inspired him in his development. It also exhibits a degree of immaturity. According to art historian Vsevolod Petrov, Lebedev himself felt that he here commits the mistakes of an inexperienced writer and illustrator for children (1976: 5). Lebedev did not ever again attempt such an overt imitation of children. If this book constructs the child as "primitive," four subsequent books turn to folk sources of the "primitive." His picturebooks inspired by folk stories and themes include *Medved'* [The Bear], *Tri kozla* [Three Goats], *Zayats, petukh i lisa* [The Rabbit, the Rooster, and the Fox], and *Zolotoe yaichko* [The Golden Egg] published in Petrograd by Mysl' in 1923–1924 (for complete reproductions of the latter three, see Lebedev 1976). A primitivist interest in indigenous art also is evident in the slightly later book *Okhota* [The Hunt, 1925], although this wordless book uses no text to frame the images (Lebedev 1925b). After these primitivist experiments, the established illustrator turned his attentions almost exclusively to avant-garde illustration, editorial work, and the training of future

generations of illustrators. Yet, for this very reason, *The Adventures of Scare-Crow* becomes all the more important as an artifact that displays the origins of Lebedev's picturebook aesthetic.

This book reveals Vladimir Lebedev's keen attention to children's play, language, and art and displays his self-conscious imitation of an infantile aesthetic. The surface and texture of the story immediately reveal this imitativeness, from the schematic illustrations and awkward block lettering to the simple style of storytelling. In addition, the pretend play of a child, as inspired by an immediately present toy-like object, serves as the sole motivating principle behind the story. The story of *The Adventures of Scare-Crow* begins, "In the garden there lived an Indian costume Scare-Crow and everyone was afraid of him. This was boring for him. Then he came up with something." It then tells the story of how Scare-Crow uses some crows to fly to a point where he can grip an airplane flying over the ocean to America. After tumbling off the airplane in New York and catching hold of a departing train, he falls off and enjoys a series of adventures. He overcomes a threatening herd of buffalo, proves himself by saving a sinking steamship, survives being swallowed by a fierce bear, and confronts "an evil and brave Comanche chieftain." The story then shows Scare-Crow's failed attempt to make a crocodile trap, which instead sends him flying off into space. At this point he is lost to the narrative, which abruptly ends.

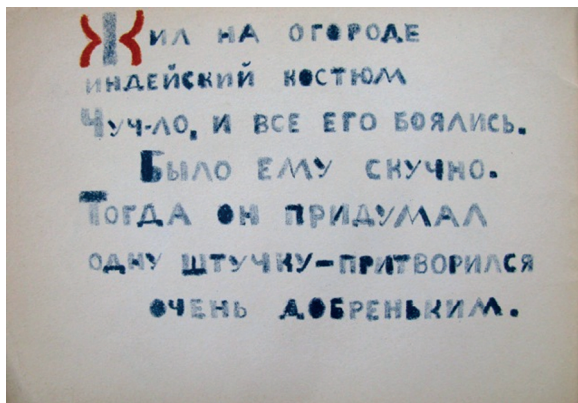


Figure 15. Text by Vladimir Lebedev for *The Adventures of Scare-Crow*. Art © Estate of Vladimir Lebedev/RAO, Moscow/VAGA, New York

Lebedev demonstrates a considerable interest in children's play through the manner in which he crafts the story to imitate children's own narrative imaginings. Immediately evident among the features of the infantile primitivism Lebedev displays in this book is the graphic texture of the iconotext. Images and text are rendered in basic colors using a medium that artfully resembles crayon. This represents

conscious artifice, since the adult artist has access to the medium of his choice and is not restricted to crayons as a young child typically might be. Nor has the artist produced each page of text and image by hand, although they are made to appear this way (Figure 15). Instead, the book has been mass-produced using lithographic plates. In an increasingly mechanical age, illustrations and typography have merely been constructed to appear inexact and laboriously hand-drawn. Indeed, Russian avant-garde art books of the 1910s and 1920s often strive for the effect of the “hand-made,” perhaps because of anxiety and nostalgia brought on by the “age of mechanical reproduction,” as articulated by Walter Benjamin (1968). The appearance of hand-lettering in this book displays how interdependent image and text are in the picturebook form and how lettering at times must be treated visually.

Lebedev’s schematic illustrations simplify objects according to the geometry of the shapes that constitute them. They exhibit a reductivist and minimalist approach to representation typical of avant-garde art. Yet here their stylization artificially imitates a child’s limited ability in naturalistic representation, or economy of effort. The compositions depend on symmetry and balance, even as they render objects in an aperspectival manner. After fragmentation into roughly geometric shapes, each image is flattened and reassembled into a two-dimensional composition that represents the idea of the original image in a symbolic and stylized way. Significantly, the process of reassembly introduces “gaps” that might function as a metaphor for the task of the playful reader, who engages in interplay with the picturebook iconotext. From a constructivist or deconstructive perspective, it is these interstices, the absences between presences, that merit further investigation.

Comparing this book to famous and defining picturebooks Lebedev was yet to write, as well as to his nearly contemporaneous illustrations for *The Elephant’s Child*, discussed in the previous chapter, sheds new light on the origins of Lebedev’s trademark avant-garde style. The imitation of the child’s approximate and distorted renderings of shapes and structures offers one originary source for Lebedev’s playful deconstruction of form and the participatory role his art creates for the reader who must reconstruct the image. This “constructivist” approach grants children entrance into the artistic process, since it challenges the child reader to reassemble the geometric shapes in order to achieve recognition. The constructivist style thus invites the child to enter into the artistic process and engage with the work of art. In this sense, Lebedev’s picturebook aesthetic can be compared to the most esoteric modern art. For the radical challenge to interpretation modern art poses also involves the spectator actively in the constitution and interpretation of the work of art.

The primitivist imitation of the child predetermines Lebedev’s artistic approach to the picturebook iconotext of *The Adventures of Scare-Crow*. Evidently, the unique picturebook aesthetic Lebedev developed in this period originates in part from such

early attempts to enter into the perspective and perceptions of the child, as well as from Lebedev's interest in child's play and imagination. His influential compositions for *The Elephant's Child*, as shown earlier, work in a similar fashion. Further evidence of Lebedev's attention to the child's perspective appears in his later theoretical statements on how to illustrate for children. Although few such writings exist, the ones that do exhibit a distinct tendency to ground his theoretical statements in the consciousness and perspective of the child (Glotser 1987). Lebedev repeatedly writes about the need for the artist to return to childish consciousness and to recollect and reexperience childhood. In this, it would seem, he draws less on pedagogical theories of his time than on the precedent established by modernist writers, such as Benois and Voloshin quoted earlier, and the avant-garde valorization of the infantile. His early experiment in *The Adventures of Scare-Crow* serves as the most conclusive evidence of this principle in his early practice. Through this book Lebedev obviously, if somewhat clumsily, attempts to stage a return to childish consciousness, although, of course, he ultimately fails to do so, since it is in essence impossible.

Other avant-garde stylistic principles also exert an influence in this book. For example, it revels in depicting modern forms of transport, a popular subject due to the avant-garde interest in speed, modernity, and the construction of the future. For instance, Lebedev's depiction of the airplane recalls its treatment by other avant-garde artists, such as Natalya Goncharova who painted "Angels and Airplanes" (1914) and "The Plane over the Train" (1914). The theme of the train soon would become pervasive in production books for Soviet children, as Steiner discusses (1999: 111–167), including in Lebedev's illustrations for *Baggage* (1926). The Suprematist paintings of Kazimir Malevich and the Constructivist art and sculpture of Vladimir Tatlin also find reflection in the minimalist reductivism and geometric constructivism of these compositions, such as the sinking steamship. In Lebedev's work, then, avant-garde art becomes child's play, even as child's play becomes avant-garde art.

The story itself also imitates child's play on the level of its underlying theme and motivation. The implied scenario is this: A child is provoked to imagine, draw, and narrate a series of adventures after being inspired to do so by the presence of an intriguing toy-like object – a scarecrow in Native American costume. The "Indian costume Scare-Crow" seems to acquire an independent identity while it is being described in the first line of the story, as if an imagined character emerges to fill out the stuffed toy that is the actual and present subject. Through capitalization and slight distortion, the term for "scarecrow" becomes a name. In Russian, the two-syllable "*Chuch-lo*" contains a strong aural echo of the three-syllable word "*chuchelo*," meaning scarecrow or stuffed animal or bird. This "Indian" costume indeed is stuffed with an animating spirit and then gradually acquires active agency to add to its imaginative will and passive resourcefulness.

The text of *The Adventures of Scare-Crow* similarly exhibits infantile primitivism, as it strives to imitate the imaginative play of the child on the level of language and narrative. Presented in boxy block print, the story begins with a conventional opening, starting with the verb “lived” [*zhil*], as in the typical fairy-tale opening “*Zhil (da) byl*,” functionally equivalent to “There once lived” in English. After the initial problem, a state of boredom, the narrative quite simply relates a series of episodes, loosely linked by contrived transportation from place to place. The narrative lacks a central conflict or guiding principle apart from the boredom and desire for adventure that motivates the hero, or a supposed child at play. The episodic nature of events and the formulaic features, as well as particular details in the story itself, like being swallowed by a wild animal and then emerging alive and whole from its stomach, also owe a debt to the fairy tale tradition, an intertextual influence often present in children’s own narratives. The casual treatment of violence and death also characterizes fairy tales, child lore, and children’s own stories and drawings. Scare-Crow himself experiences the impermanence of death, while the seemingly conclusive death of the “brave” Comanche chieftain provokes no emotional consequences. Similarly, Scare-Crow’s battle wounds mend easily, just as plugging the leak in the steamship proves a simple task, in the same way as might occur in folk tales. Adventure, danger, escape, and death all figure in the story and the bounds of probability do not restrain the narrative at all. The increasingly improbable adventures are set in the landscape of the imagination.

Other formal elements of the story might be described as infantile. The narrative frequently interrupts itself or violates the conventions of punctuation, particularly in moments of high tension or surprise. Capitalization also occurs strangely, as in “Wigwam.” Near the end of the story a nonsequitur appears in a strange and undetermined voice, as if the narrator becomes one with the character of Scare-Crow: “Catching crocodiles with bait is very interesting.” By this point, even the weak links between episodic events have been lost and transition occurs somewhat absurdly, as if at random. Such tendencies also typify the less convention-bound stories children sometimes write, as was being celebrated by avant-garde poets in the preceding decade (cf. Kruchenykh 1914, 1923). The most infantile aspect of the narrative, however, is the conclusion. Just as the chain of events retold in the story begins suddenly, motivated purely by the boredom of the hero or imagining child, the narrative ends abruptly, as if the narrator has become bored or someone’s imagination has been exhausted. The story’s end is not justified; the narrative simply trails off open-endedly: “Scare-Crow was very light and flew so high in the sky that no one knows where he is and what happened to him next.”

This open ending could be regarded as offering the child reader an opportunity to continue the story of *The Adventures of Scare-Crow*. Seen in this light, Lebedev may present an unfinished story that seeks to approach and engage the

child's own narrative abilities. Similarly, his simplified illustrations for children also might be termed unfinished, since they require cognitive interplay in order to be reassembled into the images they represent. Reading the pretend play of this picturebook pedagogically thus shows it to be teaching the child to make a picturebook. In this sense, the simplicity of its form represents an invitation to the child to engage in something similar, or take up a crayon and fill alternate pages with hand-lettered text and simple drawings, just as El Lissitzky exhorted his audience to engage in active play by building things out of simple materials in *About Two Squares*, as described in chapter 2. Baring its construction in avant-garde fashion, *The Adventures of Scare-Crow* demonstrates how to create a narrative by simply taking a nearby object and using one's imagination to animate it and invent a series of adventures. While this educational project and scaffolding of imaginative play might seem an admirable pedagogical goal, it also seems worthwhile to interrogate and deconstruct this project by critically examining its subtexts and implications.

Theories of the "toy" may serve to open up the question of the simulacrum constructed by the adult for the child. In his essay on "A Philosophy of Toys" (1853) Charles Baudelaire rightly points out the toy's significance as art: "The toy is the child's earliest initiation to art, or rather for him it is the first concrete example of art" (1965: 199). Yet, adult nostalgia toward the "Golden Age" of childhood often threatens to distort the childhood it would "recreate," as numerous scholars of children's literature have shown. In *Mythologies* (1972), Roland Barthes levels a harsh critique at contemporary toys for related reasons. He writes,

All the toys one commonly sees are essentially a microcosm of the adult world; they are all reduced copies of human objects, as if in the eyes of the public the child was, all told, nothing but a smaller man, a homunculus to whom must be supplied objects of his own size. (53)

His critique of contemporary toys and indictment of the adults who provide them continues as he develops the idea that toys are "usually based on imitation" and not meant to produce children who are "creators" (54).

[F]aced with this world of faithful and complicated objects, the child can only identify himself as owner, as user, never as creator; he does not invent the world, he uses it: there are, prepared for him, actions without adventure, without wonder, without joy [...] he is never allowed to discover anything from start to finish.

(53–54)

Barthes indeed draws attention to the more sinister aspect of the simulacrum offered to the child: by depriving the child of creative opportunities, ready-made toys usurp the child as creator. Though these ideas may seem to resonate primarily in the

modern age, the strict guidance of play and imagination applies very much during the Soviet period, particularly as censorship increased and only one, considerably less playful, approach to the arts would be permitted.

Vladimir Lebedev himself recalled the magic of his homemade toys, such as colorful figures cut out of cardboard with moving parts (Petrov 1972: 13). Although he may imitate the nostalgic memory of toys that he himself created from start to finish, the primitivist adult cannot draw with the child's hand or speak with the child's voice. At best, he creates an inauthentic imitation of the child. The primitivist offers instead a projection of himself on the blank canvas of the supposed "other" he would frame as "primitive." At worst, however, he usurps the child's voice and agency through his false impersonation, just as the ready-made toy is not actually playful, and in some sense deprives the child of the joy of independent discovery and the creative process. Thus the staging of child's play is not playful at all, nor does it involve any actual child, only a limited projection of one. Such issues highlight the artificiality of the adult's engagement in child's play and the practice of infantile primitivism. Just as Barthes critiques the man-made toy, art historians scrutinize the primitivist, and Jacqueline Rose questions the basic premise of children's literature in her reflections on "the impossibility of children's literature" (1984), so this adult enterprise ought to be approached with due skepticism and wariness. For in all these cases, although a construct of the child proves absolutely central, the real child is conspicuously and wholly absent.

Indeed, by recreating the child's imagination and imitating child's play, *The Adventures of Scare-Crow* constructs the child subject in an artificial manner and usurps the child's own place in the playful act. Viewing the text from this perspective reveals adult distortions or constructions that exert an influence in the text. Ultimately, the inauthentic imitation of the child's voice subjugates the unruly fantasy of the child to the adult's regulated reconstruction of it. According to Petrov, who also remarks on imitations of the techniques of children's drawings as a feature of this book, Lebedev himself regretted the naive mistakes he makes in it. Petrov writes,

Lebedev set off on the wrong track here, as he subsequently judged for himself. According to his own assertions, "if the artist thinks like a child in an affected way, then nothing good will come of it, and his drawing will be easily exposed as artistically counterfeit [*fal'shivyi*] and tendentiously pedological". (1976: 5)

A certain degree of affectation and falseness does appear in Lebedev's primitivist imitation of the child's artistic manner in *The Adventures of Scare-Crow*. Primitivism often carries such baggage along with it. Like colonialism, it is predicated on a self-serving construction of a strange "other," namely the "primitive."

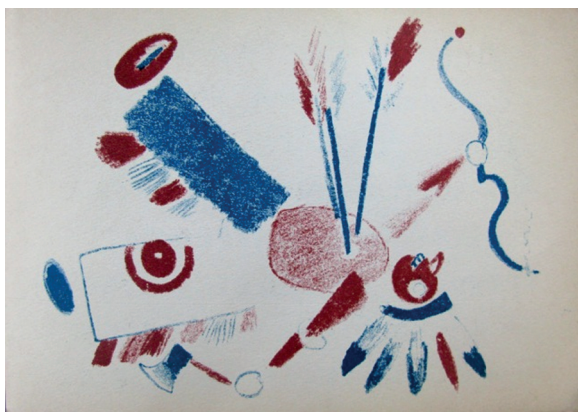


Figure 16. Illustration by Vladimir Lebedev for *The Adventures of Scare-Crow*.
Art © Estate of Vladimir Lebedev/RAO, Moscow/VAGA, New York

For the sake of comparison, an illustrative example appears in the primitivist construction of another subject that occurs on multiple levels of the text – the indigenous peoples of North America. The protagonist Scare-Crow himself is described as an “Indian costume” and in the most violent encounter in the book (Figure 16), he faces the “evil and brave” Comanche chieftain in battle. Though Scare-Crow rushes to save the “civilized” people endangered by a sinking steamship, he fights and kills the Comanche chieftain in much the same way that he slaughters an entire herd of buffalo and eviscerates a bear. Nature, it appears, is to be dominated or confronted with rapacious violence, just as colonial doctrine dictates that virgin land be colonized and cultivated and native people violently subjugated. Evident examples of the construction of colonial subjects according to preconceived notions of “Indians” or the “Wild West,” such as the caricature of the Comanche chief, throw into relief how limiting the construction and occupation of a “primitive” subject can be. Such constructs constrain the expressive and behavioral possibilities of the subject, no matter how benevolent the primitivist’s intentions. In the end, the “Indian costume” does not recognize himself in the “brave” Native American chieftain he fights to the death.

Scare-Crow is indeed only a costume – one supposedly animated by a child, but behind whom there actually lurks an adult author playing at child’s play but unaware of his own bias, cultural ignorance, and colonial perspective. For example, if the slaughter of a herd of buffalo by Scare-Crow refers to the actual slaughter of entire herds of buffalo from the trains crossing the American plains, then this sad fact of American history ought to be attributed to European settlers who killed them for sport rather than to a stuffed toy simulacrum or proxy for the indigenous peoples who depended on the buffalo for their livelihood. Such examples

of misrepresentation in this book illustrate how constructions of the “primitive” other invariably reflect and are determined by preconceived biases in the primitivist rather than the so-called “primitive.”

In this manner, the supposedly childlike picturebook for children reveals itself to be riddled with adult preconceptions and constructions that misinform and inculcate a colonial ideology. Thus, the primitivist construct of the child that the book employs on a more subtle subsurface level also constrains the child subject according to an adult’s preconceived notions of the “childish.” Indeed, parallels between the construction of colonial subjects and children in relation to adults have been noted by Johannes Fabian in his study of primitivism. He remarks, “Are we to overlook that adult-child relations are also, and sometimes primarily, fraught with barely disguised attitudes of power and practices of repression and abuse?” (2002: 63). Of course, no facile equation can be drawn between child and native, since the child grows up to become an adult, while the native cannot escape categorization as “other,” but in a synchronic perspective the hierarchical view, whether defined by space or time, has some similar effects in subjugating the “other” being constructed as “primitive.” (On the “temporal otherness of childhood,” see also Beauvais 2015b: 18–20).

The Adventures of Scare-Crow thus ought to be approached with due caution. For, though the texture and substance of the story are meant to resemble the pretend play of a child, it is Lebedev who is guilty of pretense as he manufactures a return to childhood and constructs the appearance of children’s art. When an adult imitates child’s play and attempts to recreate the child’s experience, then the adult introduces distortions due to nostalgic coloration or a limiting construction of the child subject. Likewise, the attempt to imitate the art, language, and pretend play of children runs the risk of usurping the child’s voice or unconsciously subjugating the child to a constructed notion of what a child is and how a child should engage in art, storytelling, or play. Thus the *paidia*, or uncontrolled fantasy of the child’s imaginative play, which at first appears to be the subject of the picturebook, upon closer examination reveals itself to be the more regulated *ludus* or artful games of the adult. In other words, the primitivist imitation of child’s play with which this picturebook originates itself proves to be a costume behind which adult artifice masquerades. This child’s play is not actually child’s play, but avant-garde art.

Other primitivist sources of avant-garde innovation

If *The Adventures of Scare-Crow* draws upon children’s art as a source of innovative new approaches to composition and lettering, other books by Lebedev in this period reveal additional primitivist sources of inspiration for avant-garde innovation. A contemporaneous book illustrated by Lebedev, *Zolotoe yaichko* [The Golden Egg,

1923], shows the influence of the folk tradition (Figure 17). In so doing, it blurs the boundaries between Lebedev's imitations of naive infantile and folk styles, both of which may be regarded within a primitivist framework and in the context of broader primitivist practices in Russian art in the preceding decades. Authored by the illustrator himself, *The Golden Egg* turns a primitivist eye to the folk tradition and retells a traditional folk tale, just as he ventriloquized through the child in *The Adventures of Scare-Crow*. As literary scholar and theorist Marianna Torgovnick observed, "The primitive does what we ask it to do. Voiceless, it lets us speak for it. It is our ventriloquist's dummy" (1990: 9).



Figure 17. Illustration by Vladimir Lebedev for *Zolotoe iaichko* [The Golden Egg, 1923]. Art © Estate of Vladimir Lebedev/RAO, Moscow/VAGA, New York

The Golden Egg exhibits material culture of the countryside at the same time that it imitates the style of a child in its simplistic crayon-like drawings and studiously naive lettering (Figure 17). By the same token, the naively flattened compositions and the simple juxtaposition of image and text display a more infantile aesthetic

unique to the picturebook genre, or even the handmade child's book as also evident in *The Adventures of Scare-Crow*. The choice of subject and theme hint at a common tradition to which primitivism might lead and where child and folk influences fuse, namely folk tales. The simple rhymed prose shows how the metrical poetry of the folk tradition and children's language also employs common elements, sharing a similarly aural component, as Chukovsky notes in his contemporaneous study of children's language *From Two to Five*, which first appeared in 1928 (Chukovsky 1971).

Traditional peasant costumes depicted here recall folk art, embroidery, and crafts, thereby exemplifying and exoticizing the folk primitive of the nineteenth-century turn to the people. Still, the stylized peasants depicted herein represent an uneasy blend of traditional and modern, as shown by what they wear on their heads in particular. In this sense they recall the laborers of Lebedev's propaganda posters, thereby displaying the underlying ideological component that unites some of the typical subjects – proletarian, peasant, and child – who figure in Lebedev's primitivist books. Together, they represent the new and previously illiterate audiences that Lebedev addresses with his posters, propaganda, and picturebooks. They are regarded as disempowered populations that socialism, communism, and Soviet ideology seek to empower and inculcate in the new ideology, while the artistic practice of primitivism found new value in their very "backwardness." Yet such primitivism is doubly suspect insofar as its treatment of the "other" is both pejorative and imperial in its attempt to colonize, claim, and inculcate the "othered" subject, although masked by supposedly benevolent intentions, as colonialism also was.

Another primitivist text, the appropriately wordless *Okhota* [The Hunt, 1925] (Figure 18), features a different and more traditional "primitive" that defines the exotic "other" as ethnically and spatially distant, in contrast to the "primitives" close to home found in the folk tradition and the child. It employs a flattened apectival composition and draws upon indigenous art from all over the world as it reveals tableaux scenes of the hunt featuring indigenous people and exotic animals. At the same time, however, as in Alexandre Benois's pre-revolutionary *Alphabet in Pictures* discussed in chapter one, the uneasy juxtaposition of the colonizing "white man" and the indigenous people serving him recalls the unjust dynamics of the colonial world and the critiques of it offered by a postcolonial perspective. These, like the uneasy power relations between child and adult highlighted by Jacqueline Rose, reveal the hazards of primitivism, which objectifies the "primitive" created and reified by its own perspective. Like the elephant Lebedev depicts (Figure 19), the "other" has been harnessed in the name of an imperialist power that denies its freedom. The colonizing power, even if unconsciously, aims its weapons at the back of the elephant's native rider, failing to recognize the humanity of the "other," who is fused with the animal according to a racist evolutionary hierarchy.



Figure 18. Illustrations by Vladimir Lebedev for *Okhota* [The Hunt, 1925]. Art © Estate of Vladimir Lebedev/RAO, Moscow/VAGA, New York



Figure 19. Illustration by Vladimir Lebedev for *The Hunt*. Art © Estate of Vladimir Lebedev/RAO, Moscow/VAGA, New York

These sources of Lebedev's primitivism, in their very variety, might enrich our understanding of Lebedev's startlingly innovative approach to composition in *The Elephant's Child*, discussed in the previous chapter. In the context of Lebedev's other, less famous primitivist experiments, *The Elephant's Child* now can be shown to fuse a primitivist simplification of means and naive aperspectival depiction with avant-garde aesthetics, just as occurred in the widespread infantile primitivism of avant-garde practice. Examining these other lesser-known books by Lebedev thus helps contextualize the artist's famous work on *The Elephant's Child* within the fuller ecology of his artistic development and aesthetic influences. It then becomes clear how closely Lebedev's own trajectory corresponds to that of other avant-garde innovators who also employ a primitivist approach to accomplish the simplification of means they were seeking as part of a new artistic aesthetic. Clearly Lebedev sought sources for the primitive in many places as part of his innovative avant-garde practice for an audience of children. All this again underscores how useful it proves to consider these artistic works in the ecological context of their time and place, however much the avant-garde, by its very nature, seeks to obliterate its debt to influential predecessors. In short, *The Elephant's Child* should be viewed not as the original work of Lebedev's new school of picturebook design, but as one manifestation, and perhaps the culmination, of a variety of influences he was exploiting in accordance with avant-garde principles and a broader primitivist practice. As these examples show, Lebedev's avant-garde innovations translate these influences into a form that it deems ideally suited for the cognitive level of the child and an audience of children, thus adapting avant-garde art to an audience of children, but also adding an infantile and primitivist influence to avant-garde art. Like Lissitsky, Lebedev makes art into a child's plaything as he creates a new approach to design.

The child viewer presupposed by this approach, however, proves more of an adult construct than an accurate assessment of the audience, since at least some children were not able to comprehend, engage in, and cognitively reassemble the figures represented by Lebedev, as Evgeny Steiner notes (1999: 46). This fact underscores the artificiality of the Russian avant-garde construct of the child despite the fact that children's art, perspective, and cognition proved highly inspirational for avant-garde innovation. The idealized aesthetic construct of the child conveniently serves the avant-garde, like the tamed elephant in Lebedev's depiction in *The Hunt*, in its own quest to simplify means and radically revolutionize artistic expression. In other words, the avant-garde uses the child and other primitivist models to destroy the coherence of past representation and obscure its own debt to prior influences as part of its revolutionary approach to art, but these pieces of the puzzle remain available for reassembly if we look more closely.

In considering the influences of Lebedev's avant-garde innovations, this chapter has prioritized illustrations over text, or image over word. In the next chapter, however, the analysis of a picturebook by famed poet Osip Mandelstam focuses

more heavily on the verbal texture of the book, though the vivid avant-garde illustrations by Boris Ender also feature in its interpretation. As the evolution of the Russian avant-garde picturebook moved into another phase, to be considered in Part II on “Unnatural Selection: Censorship and Ideology,” new selective pressures provoke the appearance of sophisticated subtexts and hidden implications within the verbal, and in some cases visual, intricacies of the book. By this point in its development, the avant-garde picturebook, which had been instantiated as an art form by artists like Lebedev and Lissitsky, began to offer other renowned figures a new aesthetic pathway. With the increasing interplay of censorship and ideology, the picturebook also became a vehicle for the camouflaged delivery of ideas whose expression by this point had become impossible by other means.

PART II

Unnatural selection

Censorship and ideology

Dual audience and double vision

Aesopian depths and hidden subtexts

To read only children's books,
To treasure only children's thoughts,
To cast far away all that's large,
To rise from a deep sorrow.
Osip Mandelstam, 1908

"Tired to death of life," the speaker in the renowned poet Osip Mandelstam's 1908 poem "To read only children's books..." seeks refuge in the infantile, whence he might rise again from his world-weary sorrow and misery (1997: 89). In 1924–1926, about to slip into a period of poetic silence, when he turned away from writing poetry for adults and moved into prose and translation, Mandelstam again found refuge in children's books, publishing four picturebooks of poetry for children, *Primus* [Primus, 1925], *Dva tramvaia* [Two Tramcars, 1925], *Shary* [Balloons, 1926], and *Kukhnia* [Kitchen, 1926]. In this chapter, to illustrate some of the Aesopian complexities at play in Russian children's literature, I will demonstrate what sophisticated Aesopian levels coexist in a little-known artifact of this period – Osip Mandelstam's picturebook *Two Tramcars*, which was illustrated by avant-garde artist Boris Ender. The Aesopian ambivalence in this picturebook results from the manner in which it is directed at multiple audiences at once, under conditions of increasing ideological pressure and censorship that influenced all the picturebooks discussed in Part 2.

The children's story contained within *Two Tramcars* has an innocuous sound disturbed only by certain discordant moments in its tone, which hint at its ambivalence and Aesopian depths. Pursuing these moments of rupture reveals a more tragic trajectory, one that the political environment and censorship precluded from being openly expressed. A closer examination reveals that, through its use of Aesopian language, this unique picturebook offers contextual, intertextual, and subtextual depths that tremendously enrich its system of signification and add adult sophistication layered below the apparently simple surface of a picturebook for children. In this way, *Two Tramcars* exemplifies mimetic and cryptic camouflage on multiple levels, if considered within its original ecology.

This book thus exists on multiple planes simultaneously. On one level, the child might read a simpler text with a happy resolution, and ideally be joined in this

interpretation by the censor. As Larissa Klein Tumanov states in an article analyzing Aesopian language in other works of Soviet children's literature, "there was another hypothetical adult reader: the censor, who it was hoped, would read more like a child and not perceive (or even attempt to perceive) any subversive Aesopian sub-text" (1999: 129–130). At the same time, the author and an adult reader trained to read an Aesopian text might accomplish their own communication around darker political and psychological themes as they shelter behind an idealistic construction of the child for whom a happier tale of wish-fulfillment and psychological restoration is being told. Truly then, the adult writer and reader here take refuge and even exploit the possibilities provided by a children's book to engage in double address over the heads of the child audience. In this sense, "to read only children's books" does not necessarily mean "to treasure only children's thoughts."

Osip Mandelstam's writing for children in the 1920s sheds unique light on issues of censorship and Aesopian language. According to the conventional wisdom, he wrote for children at this time simply in order to help make ends meet. His wife Nadezhda Mandelstam maintained that her husband "had not written them with children in mind at all, but rather to entertain her and to earn some much-needed money" (Sokol 1984: 170). Indeed, Mandelstam's poems for children have largely been discounted, as in the representative comments by Soviet poet, writer, and editor Alexander Tvardovsky, whose 1968 article in praise of the poetry of Marshak derided Mandelstam's poetry for children. He remarks:

these poems leave an impression of affectation and stiffness. As if this adult person had been abandoned [...] all day in an urban apartment with small children [...] trying to entertain them with poems (1968: 238)

Tellingly, the situation Tvardovsky describes amounts to an infantilization of a silenced and censored writer who finds refuge amongst children. Though his criticism of their domesticity might be most applicable to *Primus* or *Kitchen*, for instance, Tvardovsky also ridiculed the subject of *Two Tramcars*:

[He] even wrote an entire tale about two tramcars – Klik and Tram, but all this out of necessity, without authentic enthusiasm (238)

This example offers a typically reflexive discounting of Mandelstam's writings for children as the product of necessity and trying circumstances. By the same token, however, the conditions under which they are written also raise the stakes, since the possibility to communicate is limited by censorship even as the situation itself would both provoke and silence protest. The assumption that children's literature written by writers seeking refuge has nothing to communicate thus proves mistaken indeed.

On the fiftieth anniversary of the poet's death, art historian Yevgenia Zavadskaya undertook to begin the rehabilitation of Mandelstam's work for children in the

article “*Tramvainoe teplo*” [“The Warmth of a Tramcar,” 1988]. Countering the belief that Mandelstam wrote for children disinterestedly and out of pure necessity, Zavadskaya notes that “childishness” was widely associated with his person and his work (54). Such a claim is often applied to children’s writers, as well as to beleaguered Russian avant-garde writers, such as Daniil Kharms, who were infantilized by fierce censorship and their difficult circumstances and precarious position. Recall Mandelstam’s poetic lines at the opening of this chapter, which indicate the comfort and psychic refuge that might be offered by the infantile.

As mentioned earlier, the presumption that one would only write for children out of desperation rather than desire is itself a result of a unique Soviet situation. Official government policies endowed children’s literature with such importance that it became economically and politically expedient to engage in writing it, which then might occasion skepticism and suspicion among intellectuals. Such assumptions, however, fail to take into account the fact that it was not Soviet politics that led leading lights to the child. Rather, Soviet politics was itself led to the child by an overdetermined focus on the child already manifest in many realms, including a documented interest in the child in modernist literature and avant-garde art. Naturally, these artistic influences also had a direct impact on poets like Mandelstam, apart from that mediated by official Soviet policies.

Mandelstam personally demonstrated concern about the future of children’s literature, as well as sympathy for leading figures who fell out of favor once the Soviet state asserted its control over this burgeoning literary sphere. One prominent example is the critic and writer Korney Chukovsky who had engaged with children’s literature creatively by writing poetry for children and theoretically by studying children’s language in the aforementioned volume *From Two to Five*. Mandelstam’s satirical piece “*Detskaia literatura*” [“Children’s Literature,” 1969], which was written at the time of the debates on the place of fantasy in children’s literature in the late 1920s, implicitly defended the beleaguered Chukovsky (50–51, 357–359). A scathing attack on the pedologists, who were led by Lenin’s widow Nadezhda Krupskaya, this piece could not be published at the time of its writing. Privately, though, Mandelstam was engaging himself in the contemporaneous debates on children’s literature and defended its leading lights.

Similarly, though the poem “Two Tramcars” has been largely discounted, including by Elena Sokol who discusses it only briefly (1984: 172–173), Mandelstam expressed in his letters that it was especially dear to him (Zavadskaya 1988: 51). Considering all of these indications of Mandelstam’s investment in issues regarding children’s literature, including writing several works of his own, it would seem that *Two Tramcars* deserves a closer look, especially as its publication preceded a period of poetic silence – in a time when increasing censorship was coming to bear on writers such as Mandelstam.



Figure 20. Cover Design by Boris Ender for *Dva tramvaia* [Two Tramcars, 1925]

Two Tramcars, the story of a tramcar who breaks down and is finally found by his friend after a protracted search, originally appeared as a picturebook published in Leningrad in 1925, though it was written in 1924. In its original publication with illustrations by Boris Ender, *Two Tramcars* is visually striking and artistically significant in itself. With a dynamic cover (Figure 20) and avant-garde illustrations to accompany twelve pages of text, Boris Ender designed a picturebook of chronolithographic prints inspired by elements of constructivist art. Bold primary colors and exaggeratedly geometric shapes emphasize the mechanics of objects being represented, and bare the devices of the artistic composition.

In Ender's illustrations, the montage and juxtaposition of geometric shapes flattens urban scenes into two dimensions and emphasizes the mechanistic construction of modern vehicles, buildings, and infrastructure (Figure 21). The flattened and distant portrayal of urban objects has an alienating impact upon the viewer. These visual elements of the picturebook display a new vision of childhood surroundings radically different from the pastoral scenes of a Romantic childhood or Rousseau's educational ideal. The uneasy juxtaposition of rural and urban symbols and old



Figure 21. Illustration by Boris Ender for *Two Tramcars*

and new technologies is evident, for instance, in the coexistence of horse-drawn carriages and automobiles. Only one page features adult pedestrians, and one small child trailing a woman, walking among horse-drawn carriages rather than automobiles. The compositions thus radically dislocate people, and children, from an alienating urban landscape that represents a stark and austere modernity and gives little space for the child. (Mayakovsky's urban poems, with their anthropomorphism or animation of urban objects that similarly skirt the line between infantile aesthetics and the modernist adult, prove comparable in this respect.) A new and modern era forms the setting for this urban tale.

At the same time, however, the apparent parameters of the uplifting children's story observe far older folk conventions with respect to structure and narrative arc. In Propp's terms, Mandelstam tells a typical tale beginning with absention and loss or villainy and concluding with liquidation of loss or villainy and implied homecoming (Propp 1975, 1998). The hero, the tramcar Tram, repeatedly seeks assistance from urban denizens as he searches for his friend Klik, but these figures fail to assist him until he finds a helper figure, an automobile, who gives him the

knowledge he needs to locate his lost friend. After finding his friend, he prepares to tow him home. At first glance, all of this seems structurally predictable according to folk and fairy tale forms.

Indeed, every initial indication points at this child audience, including the fairy tale sound of the opening and the patterns established by rhythm and rhyme. The first stanza of the poem renders in lilting trochaic meter a fairy tale-like opening that situates the story firmly in a place that might be called home.

In the park there lived two tramcars / Klik and Tram. /
They rode off together / In the mornings.

Here the form subdivides two rhymed lines of trochaic hexameter into longer and shorter lines, which creates an auditory simulation of the sound of the trams on their tracks (cf. English “clickety-clack”). In its use of a trochaic meter and adjacent rhyme in this first stanza, Mandelstam’s poem follows exactly the guidelines for children’s poetry that Korney Chukovsky elaborates, on the basis of his observations of children’s own language, in *From Two to Five*.

The street, that beauty, who is mother to all tramcars,
Loves to happily wink her electricity.
The street, that beauty, who is mother to all tramcars,
Sent the sweepers to sweep off the rails.

Although the rhythm and rhyme is lost in translation here and elsewhere, this child-oriented opening uses active and playful imagery that takes the narrative perspective of a child by representing the tramcars as the multiple children of a beautiful mother.

After these first two stanzas, however, the largely trochaic meter undergoes a shift. The next ten lines present a steady stream of amphibrachs, but at the point of the metrical shift, two lines draw attention to themselves.

From the clickety-clack at every juncture
On the rails Klik’s wagon platform began to ache

At this point a jarring change in meter simulates the mechanical breakdown of Klik. The accompanying illustration (Figure 22) also emphasizes this critical moment by representing multiple mechanical explosions and a hopeless juncture and disjuncture of rails.

Mandelstam’s poem and Ender’s illustrations give individuality and voice to the tramcars throughout the poem, beginning with the expression of family ties and relationships and continuing with the capacity to feel pain and friendship. Otherwise, in an ideologically governed socialist realist or propagandistic context, these machines might be assumed to be glorified mechanical objects, which perfectly follow a planned program symbolized by the rails laid out before them (on the



Figure 22. Illustration by Boris Ender for *Two Tramcars*

glorification of the mechanical, see Steiner 1999: 111–167). Instead, the breakdown of Klik violates this mechanized model: his weakness represents a deviation from an ideal. For this reason, he is mocked and no one but his “brother” Tram cares enough to help him.

A coachman and children are laughing at Klik:
“There’s a sleepy tramcar! Look!”

Here, children, the supposed audience of the story, are among the first to make a mockery of this key figure in the story, despite Klik’s very human experience of pain: “Klik’s platform was aching.” This indication of heartlessness in the poem’s only direct verbal representation of the target audience offers quite an indictment in a children’s book that otherwise seems to call for compassion for the weak. This representation of children indicates perhaps that children are to look at themselves critically, and to scrutinize their own bullying, if they can muster sympathy for the inanimate hero. Alternatively, evident distancing from an audience of children may indicate that another audience than children is intended, marking the first

rupture in the otherwise child-oriented storytelling tone established by the opening of Mandelstam's poem. Perhaps the child here is a pseudo addressee and the address dual, if not double.

On a literal level these lines explain why Klik's platform has begun to suffer damage. The usage of the verb "to ache," however, also gives human feeling to his pain and eventual breakdown, and alerts the reader to anthropomorphic interpretations of his ailments. Indeed, the word choice here has added Aesopian layers: in a broader context, the term used for juncture [*stuk*] can signify knocking, as of an unexpected visitor, and the term "*zvon*" colloquially might refer to rumor, or ominous whispering. These persistent torments, which occur at every junction or meeting-place [*styk*], affect Klik's mental stability to the extent that he forgets his own number, the signifier by which tramcars usually are known. "He forgot his number, not five, not three." The severity of forgetting basic aspects of one's identity indicates that Klik's difficulties go beyond physical pain to include mental breakdown. The parallel with Mandelstam's own situation, as quoted in the epigraph, underscores these implications. The poem thus renders Klik with great sensitivity and sympathy, despite the reactions of others. The narrative shifts away from Klik as a focalizing consciousness at this point, when he reaches out for his friend.

"Tell me, conductor, tell me, driver,
Where is my dear cousin Tram?"

Here Klik refers to Tram by the term "*dvoiurodnyi brat*," which literally means cousin and underscores their close kinship.

Clearly, the close relationship between these tramcars, as well as such experiences as friendship, pain, and suffering, reflects the anthropomorphosis of the tramcars. This story of a new urban era, which makes urban vehicles for communal transportation into hero and victim, very much depends upon endowing these things with subjectivity. During the most emotionally-charged moments in the story – on the cover when we encounter the hero, on the first page when the friends Klik and Tram are presented, and on the third page when Klik breaks down – a frontal perspective on the tramcars has an anthropomorphic effect that makes their headlights resemble eyes. Similarly, in the text, when Klik asks for Tram, he says, "I always recognize him by his eyes." Klik, likewise, can be recognized by his "varicolored headlights," and later these confirm that it is indeed he who has been found, "One eye is rose-colored, the other darker." In a time of crisis, the eyes of Klik can even produce tears: "his varicolored headlights were tearing up." These headlight-eyes thus serve as the site of individuality and personality and offer a window into the soul of an (in)animate object.

Their most anthropomorphic eyes, as well the tramcars' individual personalities and ability to speak, violate the rules being drafted for Soviet children's literature

to forbid fantasy, fairy tales, and anthropomorphism. Mandelstam's own violation of this prohibition against anthropomorphism explains the opening of his satirical piece "Children's Literature":

Children's literature is a difficult thing. On the one hand, one cannot allow the anthropomorphosis of animals and things; on the other hand, the child has a need for play. But as soon as the little beast starts playing, he immediately personifies something. One must keep a close eye on children's literature. (1969: 50)

The final line above, which happens to employ an idiom involving eyes – "keep a close eye on" – satirically draws attention to the scrutiny and ideological censorship children's literature provokes from censors and other authorities. It also amounts to a *double entendre*, since this close scrutiny might also be justified in the Aesopian readers that comprise its audience.

Indeed, the Aesopian reader must look into the intertextual links of Mandelstam's poem in order to decode its most subtle significance. The tramcar actually occurs frequently as a subject in early twentieth-century Russian poetry, as demonstrated by Roman Timenchik in his semiotic study on the symbolism of the tramcar in Russian poetry (1987). Yet Mandelstam's children's poem, which describes a lost tramcar, conjures one of these specifically, namely the famed poet Nikolay Gumilyov's popular ballad "The Lost Tramcar" from 1919. It describes a surreal trip by a flying tramcar through otherworldly realms.

I walked an unfamiliar street
And suddenly heard a raven's cry,
And the sound of a lute, and distant thunder,
In front of me a tram was flying.
How I jumped onto its foot board,
Was a mystery to me,
Even in daylight it left behind
A fiery trail in the air.
It rushed like a dark, winged storm,
And was lost in the abyss of time...
Tram-driver, stop,
Stop the tram now! (Gumilyov 2016, n.pag.)

In the magical otherworld of this "abyss of times," the speaker even faces someone he knows to be dead.

And slipping by the window frame,
A poor old man threw us an inquisitive glance-
The very same old man, of course,
Who had died in Beirut a year ago.

This intertextual association of the lost tramcar with Gumilyov's ballad offers the key to the Aesopian decoding and double vision of Mandelstam's poem. With this Aesopian key, *Two Tramcars* proves to be not just a simple tale for children, but also a sophisticated work with significant interpretive implications on the level of adult discourse and culture, which remain hidden beneath the apparently benign surface of the picturebook publication.

Further indications also support this intertextual interpretation and linkage between the poets Mandelstam and Gumilyov. In one instance, the poem describes the proximate geography of events.

The street began among five corners,
And the street ended among big gardens

As Zavadskaya points out, this route ends in Tsarskoe Selo, which is where Nikolay Gumilyov lived (1988: 55). Having already concretized the intertextual relationship of this poem to the ballad "The Lost Tramcar" in the image of Klik, the lost tramcar, Mandelstam's poem thus brings the everyday reality of the poet himself into the poem as well. Indeed, in *Two Tramcars* the late poet Gumilyov is embodied by the lost tramcar Klik, and the author represents himself in Tram, who searches for his friend. Evgeny Steiner coaxes out the anagrammatic significance of these names: "Tram/Mandelstam and Klik/Nikolay Gumilyov" (1999: 126). The relationship between the kindred tramcars then becomes that between the two kindred poets Mandelstam and Gumilyov, who had significant contact through social and poetic ties, including their membership in "Guild of Poets" and the poetic school of Acmeism.

Thus this picturebook putatively for children carries within it a powerful subtext related to the memory of Nikolay Gumilyov who had died four years before. Like the old man who had died in Beirut the year before but is resurrected in "The Lost Tramcar," *Two Tramcars* resurrects the author of "The Lost Tramcar" itself. This act of poetic resurrection is all the more significant in light of the fact that Gumilyov's execution in August of 1921 for alleged White Guard activities was a traumatic event for Mandelstam personally, as well as for the entire intellectual community in St. Petersburg, who saw this as "the end of Petersburg," or "the end of any kind of normalcy for intellectuals" (Clark 1995: 150). In this sense, *Two Tramcars* can be seen as Mandelstam's poetic revisitation and revision of a tragic and traumatic event through literature and, particularly, children's literature. At the time of writing this poem, Mandelstam claimed in a letter to Gumilyov's former wife, the esteemed poet Anna Akhmatova, that his dialogue with Nikolay was never interrupted (Zavadskaya 1988: 55). These indications of Mandelstam's sense of their otherworldly bond and of his ability to commune with the dead poet support this interpretation as well.

Children's literature proved an ideal forum to treat this theme for many reasons. First of all, the controversial topic of an executed poet, which could not be

treated openly, could be more safely treated in an Aesopian manner in children's literature. The simplicity of the language, imagery, and plot, not to mention of the picturebook medium, offered an opportunity to endow the content with allegorical significance. The conventions of children's literature grant the writer an opportunity to alter the fate of the weak and vulnerable according to the rigid but just structure of folk and fairy tales, or the more comforting morals in children's literature, even as he returns to a tragic and traumatic event that affected him personally. Rather than being irretrievably lost, as were Gumilyov and other political victims of the state, in the children's poem the lost tramcar Klik finally is found by Tram: "And Tram found Klik on the square."

In the children's book *Two Tramcars*, Mandelstam brings the friendship of the two tramcars to the forefront and gives Tram the power to save Klik from an otherwise sad fate. Read as Mandelstam's covert tribute to the late Gumilyov, and rewriting of historical events to address and assuage the trauma of the loss experienced by Mandelstam personally and the intelligentsia generally, *Two Tramcars* acquires great significance as an ambivalent Aesopian text. It speaks volumes through its contextual, subtextual, and intertextual associations, even while telling different tales to different audiences and communicating divergent messages to each.

In a more universal sense, the final lines of the simple, child-oriented story deliver the moral message that one should be compassionate and helpful toward those weaker than oneself.

"...Now I'll tow you behind me.
You are younger – so hook on behind!"

If read, however, as an encoded response to the fate of Gumilyov, who was lost and not found, then the poem presents a more ambivalent tone. It implicitly critiques an oppressive system and society that does not protect the weak and vulnerable, or those who fail to stay on track. Their only hope is their devoted friends, who will stop at nothing to track them down. (A famous example is Gumilyov's former wife Anna Akhmatova, who was forcibly silenced by censorship in 1925 and saw her first and second husband and son suffer at the hands of the authorities, a theme she treated in secret in the long poem "Requiem," which could not be published until 1963). The subtextual content of the children's poem thus carries an indictment of the cruel indifference of the city toward the weaker or lost individual.

When various representatives of the cityscape respond with absolute ignorance and indifference to Klik's persistent questioning about Tram, their unhelpful ignorance becomes a refrain in the poem. With its repeated rhyme and rhythm, it begins to sound like a sing-song taunt: "We do not know anything, / We have not seen him." This refrain emphasizes how helpless and alone the individual is before the forces of urban and societal indifference. Finally Tram turns to the towering

seven-story building located at the intersection of three streets and asks this ideally positioned authority for help. He pleads:

“Tell me, you, seven-story
Stone sharp-eyed building,
With all your windows you see
All three streets around,
You haven’t heard anything about Klik,
About this young tramcar, have you?”

Tram’s plea is met with stony indifference and accustomed cruelty. The building answers, spitefully, “The building answered very maliciously: / ‘Many like him have passed through here.’” This edifice thus emerges as a villain indifferent to the plight of the lost and vulnerable individual who is one of the central characters in the poem and here is shown to be one of many. Its declaration marks the culmination of the cruel indifference of the city and also signals that this one individual loss stands in for many others as well.



Figure 23. Illustration by Boris Ender for *Two Tramcars*

Considering the political undertone of the poem, which the subtextual presence of the fate of Gumilyov brings to the foreground, this edifice emerges as a villain in a more concrete sense as well. Tram turns to this sharp-eyed building, which watches over everything in all directions, as an authority that may have heard of Klik's fate. The building does not claim not to know his fate; rather, it denies the significance of this individual's potentially sad fate, because many such things have happened here. In this sense, the stone, stone-cold, or stonily immovable building emerges as a potential perpetrator of crimes against individuals whom it considers insignificant. It also symbolizes the impersonal authority that has no pity and refuses to help those who inquire after loved ones who have mysteriously disappeared. Thus, the sharp-eyed stone building represents the secret police, the same institution responsible for the murder of the poet Nikolay Gumilyov.

The hero, by contrast, is represented in Ender's illustration (Figure 23) as a tiny simplified figure placed far below this towering edifice, which is flanked by other large buildings with many windows impersonally observing his plight. One might venture that it is no coincidence that, just like the malicious building in Mandelstam's book, the Soviet secret police headquarters – in the Lubyanka building on Lubyanka Square in Moscow – has seven levels of windows and is bordered by three streets. In this light Ender's illustrations serve to advance the Aesopian aim, insofar as they obfuscate this connection by including eight rows of windows and placing a row of buildings immediately adjacent to the building, instead of showing how it is bordered by three streets. The fairy tale sound of the numbers seven and three also obscure the specificity in the text, as they sound like sacred numbers common in the folk tradition. This subtle clue thus might escape detection by the censor, while still being understood by an initiated audience.

In contrast to this frightening adult subtext, the conventions of children's literature provide an opportunity to revise the end of the story. In Propp's structural terms, which apply quite consistently in children's literature, evolving as it has from the folk tradition and fairy tales, the initial lack or villainy must be liquidated. Indeed, Tram finds Klik, in one single line that is set apart from all the rest. After this restoration and recovery of what was lost, the children's poem ends with the reunion of the two friends and Tram's monologue upon finding his friend. He says,

And tramcar said to tramcar
 "I miss you, Klik,
 I am very glad to hear
 How your bells are ringing."

Tram speaks of missing his friend Klik in the present tense, as if a message to one who has not been recovered, which gains added meaning when read as Mandelstam's words to Gumilyov. When Tram speaks of how glad he is to hear how Klik's bells

ring, then the ringing bells recall Gumilyov's poetry, which continues to sound, even if he is no longer alive.

Most unusual in a child-oriented text is the penultimate couplet. It includes Tram's question and Klik's answer: "'Where is your rose-colored eye?' 'It went blind.'" The tramcar Klik has lost his rose-colored headlight, symbolizing the loss of rosy optimism and innocence that has occurred through his ordeal, including the shaming and lack of sympathy he suffered when broken down. A permanent physical reminder of the lasting consequences of a character's sufferings, though common in the folk tradition or in ritualistic practice and rites of passage, is less common in a story for children. This serves as a final indication that the tale plumbs darker depths than one might expect at first glance.

Indeed, the blindness of this one eye might be compared to that of one-eyed Odin, that Northern Oedipus, who sacrificed one eye in exchange for wisdom (on Odin as Northern Oedipus, see Bragg 2004). Other famous examples of blindness in the Classical tradition also underscore how bodily impairment in one regard might signify unusual ability in other regards, such as the storytelling ability of a blind Homer or the prophetic insight of the blind Tiresias. In this sense, Klik's impaired sight not only symbolizes the wisdom he has acquired as a result of suffering and sacrifice, but also hints at his poetic or visionary ability (cf. Linfield 2010).

Indeed, sight forms a powerful metaphor throughout the story of *Two Tramcars*. It begins with the anthropomorphosis of the two tramcars that occurs when one views their headlights as eyes and the varicolored eyes that distinguish Klik from others and give him his individual identity. It continues with the encounter with the sharp-eyed and villainous edifice that is all-knowing but indifferent to their plight and concludes in the moment when Tram bears witness to the fact that Klik has been blinded in one eye by his ordeal and suffering. The distinction between two differently colored eyes at the onset and, even more so, between the seeing and the blinded eye at the end, perfectly symbolizes the ambivalence of this literary text, as well as Aesopian literature and children's literature generally. It effects a kind of double vision as it addresses a dual audience, seeking to transmit wisdom to some and to escape detection by others who, by failing to decode its Aesopian language, unwittingly turn a blind eye to it.

The unspoken and the unspeakable

Political allegory in children's books



Figure 24. Cover design storyboard by Vladimir Lebedev for *Mnogotochie* [Ellipsis, 1926]. Art © Estate of Vladimir Lebedev/RAO, Moscow/VAGA, New York

If blindness results in a physical failure to see or detect something, then censorship seeks to eliminate the thing itself so as to prevent its being seen. Such a censoring process, and even a physical purging of errant individuals, is evoked by the lines “After a strict trial / They eliminated Ellipsis / Forever.” They declare the eternal banishment of an anthropomorphized ellipsis named Ellipsis, who is the unfortunate protagonist of the unpublished 1926 picturebook *Ellipsis* written by Samuil Marshak and illustrated by Vladimir Lebedev and mentioned at the beginning of

this book (Figure 24). This quotation expresses one goal of Soviet censorship as regards picturebooks and other verbal and visual forms, as treated in Part 2 of this book. Censorship seeks to eliminate the multivalent and unstable symbolism of the unspoken, un-represented, and merely implied in favor of a uniform and univocal discourse that is ideologically “pure.” Yet, the quotation about the censorship of the unspoken, employing as slippery a signifier as the ellipsis, reveals itself under closer scrutiny to be fundamentally unstable. The ellipsis – or omission points – can never be eliminated forever, least of all by the censor who creates them through forcible elisions. There will always remain unspoken or unspeakable, unrepresented or unrepresentable empty spaces, interstices, and slippery signifiers in any visual or verbal text, including early Soviet picturebooks. As an ellipsis illustrates, even an absence can be a form of presence.

This chapter analyzes the implications of such “omission points,” using the motif proffered by the title, character, and subject of *Ellipsis*. In so doing, it aims to illuminate how taboo, censorship, and unstable symbolism function in Russian avant-garde picturebooks from the 1920s, as relevant to the subject of Part 2, while exploring the theoretical nuances of these concepts more widely. In this time period, which witnessed the consolidation of the Soviet state, censorship exerted an increasing selective pressure as the Soviet state tightened its control over the arts. This chapter analyzes omission points or strategic ellipses necessitated by censorship and resulting from the broader ecology of the text considered within its ideological context. It tackles issues of taboo and censorship first by addressing theories behind the unspeakable and unrepresentable and then by analyzing certain visual allegories that develop to fill the lacunae left by that which cannot be depicted. Finally it considers the instability of symbols and their implications, despite the apparent intentions of their artists, publishers, and censors.

The heart of the analysis focuses particularly on certain highly developed visual allegories that evolved to fill the gaps left by what could not be said directly while communicating revolutionary ideology to an audience of children. A central motif explored here is the use of the grotesque and carnivalesque body of the big fat man as a political symbol. It also offers an opportunity to reflect on the deeper implications of the semiotics of size evident in the relations of hero and villain. Indeed, extreme gluttony functions as an overdetermined visual allegory in a number of Soviet picturebooks, as extended examples from several of these show. Ultimately, the resolution of the visually and verbally driven plot hints at the unspoken and unspeakable subtext of the political allegory. This chapter thus takes as its subject instances of ellipses in the visual and verbal imagery of five illustrated Soviet children’s books published in the mid to late 1920s.

Omission points, ellipsis, and the existence of a taboo

Borrowing from Jacques Derrida, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Gilles Deleuze, Jenny Chamarette considers the significance of the ellipsis in her article on “Thinking Visual Ellipsis” (2007). She describes the history of this term beyond its traditional definition as a linguistic device or sign, focusing on its relations to “stuttering, lapsed utterance, censorship, concealment of identity and abbreviation” (34). She elaborates on the ellipsis as follows:

It signifies a voluntary omission of a structure, which nonetheless does not prevent the production of meaning [...] represented by three dots (the *points de suspension*), the ellipsis is a reflexive and flexible representation of meaning [...] It is the deletion of a constituent element from a whole or a reverse metonym. The “gap” that ellipsis leaves behind has the potential to signify the possibilities of connotation or cross-representation between spaces, words, or phrases and the possibilities of supplementary meaning. (34–35)

If this composite description of the significance of the ellipsis demonstrates the rich symbolism of the unspoken, Chamarette expresses her own theoretical view of the ellipsis more succinctly when she writes, “Paradoxically, as a palpable absence, if it is possible to talk about such a thing, ellipsis is a means of accessing that which cannot be expressed within language in a form that nonetheless maintains a visual proximity with the written word” (35–36). Indeed, the ellipsis is an absent presence that draws attention to itself and to the significance-laden rupture in the verbal-visual text.

One reason to resort to ellipsis is an act of censorship or self-censorship in response to the existence of a culturally, ideologically, or politically prescribed taboo. In the case of children’s literature such taboos proliferate because of the perceived sensitivity of a child audience and the political, religious, and ideological implications of messages they receive. Although not addressing Russia specifically, Anne Scott MacLeod observes that the concept of intellectual freedom historically has had little place in literature for children (1983: 32). She adds that the implicit code that has governed children’s literature in the first half of the twentieth century “is most easily described in the negative, by its taboos” (32). Even in an Anglo-American context where freedom of speech is touted as a core value, waves of censorship responding to culturally, ideologically, religiously, or politically proscribed taboos proliferate. Around the world, conservative beliefs are often upheld in the name of the child, while radical views are propagated in children’s literature, such as is described in *Learning from the Left* (Mickelberg 2006). Both radical and conservative views provoke calls for censorship on exactly the same basis.

One illustration by Nikolay Denisovsky for Mayakovsky's children's book *Chto takoe khorosho i chto takoe plokho?* [What is Good and What is Bad?, 1925] offers a particularly vivid and playful performance of an act of censorship in response to a supposed taboo – against the depiction of “evil” as defined herein. Throughout, Mayakovsky's didactic narrative elaborates on diametrically opposed examples of “good” and “bad” in order to instruct children on morality and proper behavior. But in a particularly dramatic example of what not to do, the moral condemnation of the erring child is so extreme that the picturebook suffers a metatextual rupture. The author himself enters into the text to speak his moral judgment, “I / don't even / want to put / such a one / in my little book.” Accordingly, the representation of the child appears blotted out in a huge spot of black ink (Figure 25).



Figure 25. Illustration by Nikolay Denisovsky for Vladimir Mayakovsky's *Chto takoe khorosho i chto takoe plokho?* [What is Good and What is Bad?, 1925]

This staged avoidance and observance of a taboo performs a supernatural and primitive conception where the representation of the taboo-bound phenomenon is understood to be as threatening as the phenomenon in itself. In some sense it

playfully responds to the primitive psychology of the child as conceptualized by Freud in *Totem and Taboo* (1913), where the depiction of the thing is tantamount to the thing itself and provokes “objectified fear” (Freud 1989: xxviii–xxix, 33, 139). Here the boundaries between fiction and reality are blurred. The staged anxiety of representation surrounding this supreme example of “what is bad” dramatizes the danger of even depicting evil. Yet, this image contradicts the words of the author, since the illustrator clearly *has* put this child in the book; otherwise, there would be no need to blot him out with black ink. Readers thus witness an act of censorship that blackens out what once *was* there and still evidently remains in the faint signs of disjointed limbs splayed out in protest.

Clearly, even in the child’s view, there is no actual threat or hazard involved in depicting this child, however morally reprehensible he is being defined to be within the framework of the moralizing book. Thus this performance by an adult of a primitive psychology with respect to a taboo and objectified fear more persuasively offers an act of adult censorship. This act denounces and punishes the child who transgresses the moral code being prescribed by the adult author, whose oversized presence and authority is signaled with an oversized red pronoun. The illustration itself thus performs the denunciation and violent punishment of the child-transgressor. The staged blotting out of the transgressive body’s depiction performs an act of violence upon him. In some sense it sanctions violence upon his body, even if it here is merely ink over an artistic depiction. Violence thus emerges again in the subsurface level of post-revolutionary Soviet picturebooks and in Mayakovsky’s books specifically.

This particular image, where the offending child is blotted out, has other associations when regarded within the ecological context of Soviet history, photography, and their intersection. As David King shows in his book on “the falsification of photographs and art in Stalin’s Russia” (1997), the obligatory blotting out of a person from the official register of persons was a sinister sign that they had been purged and eliminated from the ranks of those deemed morally acceptable. Accordingly, they were blacked out as if they had never existed. Such an act displays a latter-day, Soviet return to the taboo against seeing or speaking about “evil” – or the dead. The unspeakable truth is censored and efforts are made to erase collective memory. Yet, ultimately, this totalitarian attempt at the denunciatory elision of a subject fails. The subject that once existed cannot be erased entirely and remains an absent presence, just as the ink-blot in some slippery sense draws attention to what lurks beneath.

The grotesque body of the big fat man

Apart from this eloquent example of a strategic ellipsis, the resistance to portraying evil more commonly finds other recourse, such as through the development of visual allegories that stand in for the taboo topic in a kind of visual circumlocution, as it were. Here the avoidance of a taboo verges on a kind of self-censorship that transforms harsh imagery into what might be deemed more appropriate for children, whether due to psychological, pedagogical, or political motivations. In short, many different kinds of censorship are applied to children's literature, particularly in a totalitarian state, although children's literature proves a closely watched genre all over the world, even where freedom of expression purportedly exists.

One especially productive example of visual allegorization from Soviet iconography of the 1920s is the "big fat man." The highly recognizable figure of the big fat man draws upon the iconography of political propaganda of the period, including poster art by two artists involved with the children's books under discussion here – Vladimir Lebedev and Vladimir Mayakovsky. Examples from Nikolay Punin's 1922 collection of Lebedev's poster art, for instance, illustrate how the big fat man provides the vilified contrast for the worker celebrated by propaganda posters (Punin 1922). Although the fat man is typically much larger, in one case the enemies' exaggerated roundness and miniscule size render them wholly non-threatening as they tumble before oversized workers striding toward them with sharp tools menacingly balanced on their shoulders. Other representations of the big fat man that emphasize excessive size combine imagery of exaggerated wealth and shameful gluttony.

The resemblances between children's book illustrations and propaganda poster art arise in part from similarities between the visual needs of their audience. After all, the demands of an uneducated and illiterate mass audience, when combined with the immediacy of message-delivery required by posters and propaganda, correlate quite closely with the needs of a preliterate audience with a limited attention span and an undeveloped ability to interpret visual subtleties. For this reason, the close ties between avant-garde poster art and children's picturebooks – both artistically and in the person of artists and writers engaged in both fields – should not be surprising. Yet little recognized is the extent to which the Russian avant-garde and experimental Soviet children's literature of this period represent one and the same aesthetic, as Lebedev's example abundantly demonstrates. Still, despite the apparent visual similarities between the iconography of avant-garde posters and picturebooks, Soviet picturebooks develop the allegorical reformulation of the capitalist villain as a big fat man considerably further and in several more dimensions than propagandistic iconography. For, due to the unique possibilities of the picturebook

form, the verbal and visual elements of the picturebook iconotext work together to create an overdetermined verbal and visual plot distilled in the visual and symbolic representation of the big fat man.

For any uninformed audience, the visual allegory of the big fat man reformulates abstract concepts like capitalist overconsumption and greed into as concrete and understandable a form as visually embodied size and shape. Yet, an initial distinction between poster art and illustrations for children is the manner in which the big fat men retain a carnivalesque quality in depictions for children. Within a child's frame of reference, their appearance is clownish, rendering them both harmless and seemingly impervious to harm. Marshak and Lebedev's *Tsirk* [Circus, 1925] demonstrates precisely this association of the imagery of the ridiculously round belly – this is a clownish figure maladapted for the real world. The child's version of the big fat man thus retains a link with carnival laughter and light-heartedness that again helps avoid the taboo against depicting evil. The visual system of the picturebook is thus far more subtle than that of the propaganda poster, which needs not observe any taboo associated with a child audience. In children's literature, however, the laughably comic aspect of the big fat man's visual appearance also ensures that the game appears unreal. The audience thus obeys the rules of the circus, where the persecution of this "other" need not provoke pity, only laughter.

Yet, as Mikhail Bakhtin notes, carnival laughter is deeply ambivalent (Bakhtin 1984a: 127, see also Bakhtin 1984b: 11–12). Indeed, the Bakhtinian notion of carnival foregrounds its opposition to official culture. As Krystyna Pomorska writes in her summary of Bakhtin's critical legacy in *Rabelais and His World*, "Dialogue so conceived is opposed to the 'authoritarian word' (*avtoritarnoe slovo*) in the same way as carnival is opposed to official culture" (1984: x). Carnival imagery thus threatens to be highly unstable, even if ostensibly used to communicate official ideology. Indeed, the carnivalesque aspects of the big fat man destabilize its symbolism in a manner that runs counter to the intentions of the "authoritarian word" – or the censor.

In his study of the grotesque, Bakhtin calls the reduction of the ideal and abstract to the material sphere of the earth and the body the essential principle of grotesque realism (1984b: 19–20). The allegory of the big fat man participates in precisely this tradition when it reduces abstract political ideals like capitalism to a grotesque bodily manifestation that emphasizes earthy pastimes like eating, drinking, and digesting and exploits the bodily symbolism of the belly. As with the Rabelaisian Pantagruel, the "wide-open mouth" and "theme of swallowing" dominate in this visual allegory (279) and, like with the comic character Fat William of medieval folklore, an unusually abundant belly serves as a bodily symbol for the character's nature (292). Bakhtin elaborates on the symbolism of the body:

Eating and drinking are one of the most significant manifestations of the grotesque body. The distinctive character of this body is its unfinished nature, its interaction with the world. These traits are most fully and concretely revealed in the act of eating; the body transgresses here its own limits: it swallows, devours, rends the world apart, is enriched and grows at the world's expense. (281)

The imagery of the all-consuming body thus must be understood as a carnivalesque image with deep ties to folk tradition and inherently opposed to official culture. However it may be intended to be used for propagandistic purposes, this image still retains the attraction and power of the grotesque, including its subversive message with respect to the world and authority. Here is a transgressive body that does not observe the conventional limits placed upon it.

Extreme gluttony as allegory

Picturebook manifestations of the big fat man typically celebrate extreme gluttony in uniquely child-centered incarnations at the same time that they develop the verbal and visual plot of the overdetermined allegory. If such a semiotics of size renders the power dynamic of the revolutionary struggle in terms especially adapted for children, it still perpetuates the hierarchical relations of adults and children and even exploits these analogically as a mechanism of persuasion and control. This blind spot of viewing of the child as "other" fails to recognize the discourse of domination that prevails in the relations between adults and children. On the one hand, the adult writer who is writing for children perpetuates a certain ideology by superimposing a vision of the self on the other that restricts the child's autonomy. In no way does the mere replacement of the terms of the analogy itself challenge these relations.

However, the carnivalesque implications of the fully developed visual and verbal allegory *do* present such a challenge, insofar as the oversized villain typically suffers a defeat celebrated by victorious collectives of children. The clown disguised as a king – with regal power and position in the world – suffers a carnival-style dethroning that reverses the temporary festival hierarchy and restores order in society (Bakhtin 1984b: 197). In this sense, the carnivalesque aspect of the big fat man offers subversive implications for the child who emerges victoriously at the end, despite the semiotics of size that stacks the odds against him or her. Thus, despite its ideological aims, the dominant discourse fails to censor the subversive message against power dynamics that also entrap children.

Similar forms of gluttony also characterize other big fat men in Russian avant-garde picturebooks of this period. As a rule, these pictorial allegories present children with a facile analogy that reduces ideological debates to simple visual imagery in order to avoid taboo topics. Yet, at the same time, hidden complexities



Figure 26. Illustration by Nikolay Kupreyanov for Vladimir Mayakovsky's *Skazka o Pete tolstom rebenke i o Sime, kotoryi tonkii* [The Story about Peter, the Fat Child, and about Simon, Who is Thin, 1925]

remain in the visual ellipses of the text and the uses of the grotesque and carnivalesque. Mayakovsky's children's book, tellingly entitled *The Story about Peter, the Fat Child, and about Simon, Who is Thin* [1925], summarily presents such a reductionist ideology through its title and its cover (Figure 26), designed by Nikolay Kupreyanov. Even the textual labeling of the two children, Simon and Peter, reflects their size and shape – thick and rounded cursive letters describe Peter as “fat,” while thin and tall print describes Simon as “thin.” The thin proletarian child, dressed in everyday brown, waves toward the viewer, while the overprivileged Peter, who is dressed in a pampered child's sailor suit, is depicted in the process of overeating, with his fists full of food and his enormous teeth bared. Kupreyanov's illustrations portray the bad example as a laughable caricature frozen in a gluttonous pose, while the good example strides toward the future and greets his potential emulators. Mayakovsky's didactic book thus presents this analogy in its simplest incarnation: fat is bad and thin is good.

At the same time, however, these two Biblical names also illustrate their closeness, since the Apostle Peter was once Simon and later would battle another Simon. In its original meaning, the name Simon means one who has heard and Simon indeed has heeded the call for proletarians to unite. Peter, meanwhile, undergoes torments akin to crucifixion, as a scapegoat in whose demise bystanders all take pleasure. The name Peter is associated with the rock or foundation, and in Russia also may be related to the somewhat ambiguous and divisive figure of Peter the Great, who represents both autocracy and aristocracy, or Saint Petersburg, the city he built, which serves nationally both as a source of pride and a symbol of the poor treatment of “the little man.” Perhaps the distinction between these two young class enemies is less distinct than it first appears. The underlying significance of their names is obscured by diminutives equally applied to both children, Sima for Simon and Petya for Peter.

Regardless of the straightforward ideological message, the grotesque caricature Peter remains more visually attractive and interesting, as well as more uniquely individual than its opposite. In contrast, the proletarian child fades into the background as a nearly faceless representative of an idealized category. Indeed, the simple ideal is represented in a more monochromatic and two-dimensional fashion, while the exaggerated caricature occupies space in a colorful and three-dimensional manner. The same holds true in the heavy-handed narrative, where Simon behaves according to an unrealistic standard of perfection, while Peter deviates from this proletarian standard in satisfying ways even if he suffers greatly for it. Simple words at the end of their introductions reduce all the complexities of their characters to one ideological opposition in the untranslatably derogatory declaration: “this Peter was bourgeois” (545). In contrast, Simon is described in and through a euphonious bird song: “Birds with a song flew past, singing ‘Simon’s a proletarian’” (547). Even nature and prophetic birds sing out in praise of Simon’s choices. As the story progresses, the analogy of overconsumption delivers an explanation of what bourgeois means for an audience of children. As the story nears its denouement, Peter’s overconsumption and gluttony approaches absurdity: “Peter adroitly consumed / All the canned goods with their packaging. / He swallows everything without chewing: / the bourgeois sure has an appetite!” (554). These extensions of overconsumption into the realms of the absurd drive the overdetermined propagandistic message home, yet they are also destabilized by their comic and carnivalesque aspects – which are accompanied by uproarious and liberated laughter that has its own subversive potential.

However simplistic the exposition and visual representation of ideology, the resolution of these children’s books typically develops the visual allegory of the big fat man in a multidimensional manner. One of the more striking incarnations of the



Figure 27. Cover design and illustration by Vladimir Lebedev for Samuil Marshak's *Morozhenoe* [Ice Cream, 1925]. Art © Estate of Vladimir Lebedev/RAO, Moscow/VAGA, New York

development of this visual allegory occurs in Marshak and Lebedev's *Morozhenoe* [Ice Cream, 1925] (Figure 27). This picturebook first presents a similarly facile opposition of collectives of hardworking ice cream men and of good Soviet children to a singular gluttonous villain (Figure 28). The depictions of both workers and children borrow from Lebedev's propaganda posters, displaying the telltale worker's cap and the schematic posture of the working man, while other children don the red Pioneer kerchief to signal their ideological correctness. Noteworthy here is how both workers and children march mindlessly in step in a leftward direction. Their ideological opposite, on the other hand, is depicted in a very different manner: oversized even upon the page, his dimensions reach an absurd extreme. The geometrization of Lebedev's characteristic style transforms the big fat man into almost perfect spheres as he throws his head back and guzzles all the ice cream. The ideological significance of his gluttony, though likely to be beyond the comprehension of the child audience, is indicated by his overprivileged accoutrements – dress shoes, hat, pocket watch chain, cravat, and so on. These symbols of wealth and privilege make the scene between ice cream men, proletarian children, and big fat man highly unrealistic, in fact. Less to the ideological point are his spectacles, which fall off him, and typically stand for the intellectual, rather than the materially privileged.



Figure 28. Illustrations by Vladimir Lebedev for Samuil Marshak's *Ice Cream*. Art © Estate of Vladimir Lebedev/RAO, Moscow/VAGA, New York

At the conclusion of the book, the villain meets the end predestined to the extreme glutton in a carnivalesque world of circus tricks and magic. In its pictorial incarnations for children, the big fat man typically overconsumes to the point of a climactic metamorphosis that restores order and justice to the world. As mentioned earlier, this metamorphic moment might be compared to the ritual dethroning and abuse of the clown disguised as a king at the end of carnival festivities. For example, in *Ice Cream*, the big fat man consumes so much ice cream that he turns into a snowdrift – or actually an enormous mound of ice cream. The proletarian children then have the pleasure of unseasonal winter sports and other activity upon his tasty remains. In *The Story about Peter, the Fat Child, and about Simon, Who is Thin*, meanwhile, overconsumption leads to the eventual explosion of the overeater.

It pours and drizzles, to widespread joy, with all sorts of buns and treats. / There is laughter among the little folk: / – What a miracle! Miracle of miracles! / No, this is not a miracle, children, / but comes from Peter who has burst

(Mayakovsky 1973: 556–557)

Thus the delectable edibles Peter's body has been hoarding are redistributed equitably to all the proletarian children in the city.

Significantly, the moment of explosion itself is usually elided by the illustrations, as also occurs in the other books discussed here. The metamorphic demise of the overly gluttonous body rarely finds direct visual representation. Its occurrence

is marked, instead, by a strategic visual ellipsis. This elision would indicate that the outcome of the political allegory of the big fat man and his extreme gluttony appears to be unrepresentable since it touches upon a taboo – or the purview of some form of censorship controlling what is acceptable to depict for an audience of children. Here an authoritarian voice intrudes to dispel any sense of miracle and emphasize the didactic point:

No, / this is no miracle, children, – / but from Peter who has burst. / Everything fat Peter consumed, / is being spread out for miles. / Like a downpour it rains / and they come in throngs – / Lots of bread, / lots of sweets / and sausages galore! / The children ate, / and the [pioneer] brigade / ate with pleasure all in turn. / A lavish feast for the puppy also: / it eats it up / and again stuffs his cheeks – / with sausage skins. / The feast is done, – / And the tale is too (Mayakovsky 1925: 24)

Here the spectacle of the explosion of the overconsuming bourgeois child might also be compared to an act of ritual sacrifice and, in some sense a cannibalistic feast, where the body is actually consumed. Like eating the body of Christ, here a new community, or *communitas*, is created and bound together through this act of ritual sacrifice, demarcated by a ritual feast.

Unspoken here, however, is the extent to which this children's picturebook speaks the truth about revolutionary violence through its carnivalesque caricature. Indeed, as René Girard theorizes, a sanctioned act of violence may serve to quell violence in the community (1972: 14). Girard elaborates:

The death of the individual has something of the quality of a tribute levied for the continued existence of the collectivity. A human being dies, and the solidarity of the survivors is enhanced by his death. The surrogate victim dies so that the entire community, threatened by the same fate, can be reborn in a new or renewed cultural order. Having sown the seeds of death, the god, ancestor, or mythic hero then dies himself or selects a victim to die in his stead. In so doing he bestows a new life on men. (255)

Indeed, as a scapegoat, fat Peter has assumed almost mythic proportions – and even more so through his remarkable death. Evidence for how this act of ritual violence has created a new world emerges in the line: “the public rejoices / [it's] a children's republic.” Tellingly, the new utopia envisioned in this story is a children's republic, united by the ritual destruction of the vilified aberrant child. This fact offers evidence for how Mayakovsky viewed his audience of children as the citizens of a new, utopian children's republic purged of all negative characteristics. The darker implications prove reminiscent of the provocative thesis of Boris Groys arguing for “The Birth of Socialist Realism from the Spirit of the Avant-Garde” (1996: 193–218). Indeed, this avant-garde children's book points squarely at “The Total Art of Stalinism” (Groys 1992).

Of course, the motif of just desserts and of the punishment of sins, such as gluttony, is pervasive in children's literature more broadly and across national traditions. For example, Heinrich Hoffmann's *Der Struwwelpeter* [Slovenly Peter] (1845) demonstrates the disastrous consequences of misbehavior through exaggeration and vivid visual illustrations. Food, meanwhile, also proves a rich topic in children's literature and in research, as does gluttony (Carrington & Harding 2014; Malewski 2014). In the Soviet case, however, this universal and seemingly child-friendly topic takes on additional dimensions that prove ideologically charged and demonstrate a much darker dimension as well.

Numerous published picturebooks from the 1920s display how the idea of capitalist overconsumption finds multidimensional elaboration in overdetermined visual allegories based on the idea of the grotesque body and extreme gluttony. In its incarnations for children, the image contains the plot: the "just" punishment of the big fat man (or child) is written into his body and predetermined by his sin. Noteworthy, however, is the fact that the big fat man's eventual destruction is tellingly elided in a strategic visual ellipsis that shields children from the visual display of revolutionary violence otherwise contained in the text and the plot. The climax is thus visually elided, although its symbolic realization is crucial to the plot and its ideological implications. Tellingly, later editions of the story also soften the violence of the resolution, with Peter simply being mailed home instead. This act of censorship underscores how the original version of the picturebook serves as a testament and account of a historical moment of revolutionary rupture that sanctioned violence upon the body in the name of ideology. It thus offers evidence of the censoring of revolutionary violence after the revolutionary period. All the same, all this goes to show that Russian avant-garde picturebooks from this era speak truths about the time that otherwise go unspoken. And eventually even these truths are silenced, censored, elided, as Russian avant-garde picturebooks also were, as a whole, once their time had passed.

At the same time, the richly developed visual allegories upon which these stories depend also contain unstable symbolism related to the roots of the grotesque and carnivalesque in folk traditions. These retain their potential to subvert the reigning hierarchy and represent a cathartic outlet against authority. Indeed, the revolutionary message and implications thus might, even unintentionally, also be applied to children in their relations with adults, due to other unspoken power dynamics recalled by the idea of the big fat man as villain, since he typically is an adult. The children's republic is also opposed to adults here, including perhaps children's own parents. The revolutionary potential of any revolt against authority highlights the paradoxical nature both of carnival and of revolution – for when revolution has occurred, or the carnival reaches its end, the powers that be reestablish their authority all the more firmly and must quell the original revolutionary impulse.

Yet, regardless of the will of the authorities, there is no final revolution. As Evgeny Zamyatin writes in his 1923 essay “On Literature, Revolution, Entropy, and Other Matters,” revolution is infinite: “Revolution is everywhere, in everything. It is infinite. There is no final revolution, no final number” (1970: 107).

When outright revolution proves possible, the oppressed or dispossessed look instead to carnival for its subversive implications representing revolt against all authority. If not even carnival is possible, then there is always play. For we are, after all *homo ludens*, and in the consideration of play, our most ludic subset is children – *puer ludens*. It is precisely this playful aspect that stands at the nexus of the child and avant-garde experimentation. In this sense, the subversive play of the child is replicated by all, playfully, in carnival, while revolution takes the subversive aspect so seriously that it can no longer be described as playful, as real violence attests.

Censorship, the unspoken, and the unspeakable

Remaining unspoken in these narratives, where evil is rendered comical, metamorphosis is carnivalesque, and justice occurs effortlessly, is the struggle implied by the revolutionary metaphor. Elided here, in each of these examples, are the cruel realities of social upheaval in revolutionary times. Only the destruction and disappearance of the villain’s original body hints at the violent subtext of the ideological allegory being delivered to children. This strategic omission would seem to indicate that revolutionary violence is the biggest taboo of all. Therefore, it is elided, or at least avoided, through sublimation into the comic and carnivalesque. The concrete representation of an abstract and yet profoundly real concept through comic and grotesque visual allegory thus allows the violence of revolution to remain unspoken. Yet, the omission points remain and hint at this absent presence – violence upon the body – which lies at the heart of the political allegory representing the revolutionary overthrow of the gluttons of the old order.

Though this particular visual allegory – showing the overdetermined fate of the big fat man – enjoyed many prominent elaborations in Soviet picturebooks of the 1920s, one cannot treat the subject of taboo and censorship without acknowledging that not all visual and verbal imagery proved successful at navigating this dangerous terrain, such as through the use of strategic ellipsis. In most cases, one only witnesses what did make it past the censors. Though the continued exploitation of visual clichés proved reasonably safe, as did the socialist realist avoidance of any taboo topics, the more daring confrontation of troublesome themes proved more risky. Yet such cases reveal still more clearly how imagery and symbols maintain an essential instability. However ideologically “pure” the artist’s intention, imagery retains an independent symbolic life in the network of interpretations created

between the viewer and the viewed. A perfect example is the case of the picturebook *Ellipsis*, which took on taboo topics and was subjected to censorship as a result.

If many Soviet picturebooks of the 1920s suffered the fate of being judged too radical and avant-garde in their visual and verbal content *after* their original publication, it seems that this particular book was judged guilty of violating taboos and conducting impermissible formal and visual experimentation even *before* it could be published. It thus tells a powerful story of its own about taboos and visual censorship. The ellipsis of its title hints at its unspeakable subjects. One might recall here that, though the mark of the censor often was a complete elision and sometimes was a black blotting out of image or text, not unlike the image of a blotted out boy in Mayakovsky's book, the more subtle trace of the censor was the ellipsis: [...]. The subject of the book *Ellipsis* thus also includes censorship itself.

Indeed, if evil and revolutionary violence were elsewhere deemed taboo and carefully sublimated in visual allegories that mask the violence of social upheaval, here these forbidden topics are dealt with too freely for the censors. This book for children actually *represents* revolutionary agitation, arrests, punishment, and execution (Figure 29), even if it replaces most flesh and blood individuals with forms of punctuation. In this sense, the conceit of this book realizes the metaphor of the ellipsis many times over – if an ellipsis is considered the replacement of something more significance-laden with mere punctuation marks. These taboo topics, apparently considered too close to evil and violence to be dealt with in other children's books, appear only all too directly in *Ellipsis*. The failure to observe these taboos would seem to explain why this now forgotten book was censored and destined for nearly complete oblivion. As far as I know, this picturebook exists only in the fragments of the original storyboard preserved in the archive of an affiliate of the Russian Museum in St. Petersburg. Ironically, however, the ideological stance of the picturebook is on the side of the censors. Its heroes and victims are revolutionary agitators. Ultimately, then, it is the instability of visual and verbal imagery that rendered its interpretation too ambiguous and multivalent.

Indeed, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the very subject of *Ellipsis* is the most slippery signifier of all. Still, the title and cover of the book focuses on "Ellipsis" himself, who is excluded/eliminated forever by the judgment of his peers. Though he is trapped and subjected to the scrutinizing gaze of the viewer on the cover, it is he who provokes visual interest and plot-driven fascination. Thus attention focuses on a bad model for behavior rather than on examples for emulation. This runs counter to the ideals of socialist realism, as well as violating the taboos and (self-)censorship that otherwise limit the appearance of evil and bad examples in children's books or stage their blotting out or their metamorphic or explosive end. Just as Ellipsis's face is blotted out with the three dots of the ellipsis, his behavior, motivations, and feelings remain obscure – omission points – that



Figure 29. Interior page storyboard by Vladimir Lebedev for *Ellipsis*. Art © Estate of Vladimir Lebedev/RAO, Moscow/VAGA, New York

intrigue a reader, despite the author's or illustrator's intentions. At the same time, the roundness of his face, as well as his dress and the dark surroundings that trap him, help to visually identify him as a villain of the big fat man family.

One page of the original storyboard displays evidence of revolutionary violence in a manner otherwise elided in Soviet picturebooks of the 1920s (Figure 29). On this page two dark mechanical soldiers have arrested and enchained two colorful workers who “printed a protest, / An unlawful manifesto” which reads “He who does not work – does not eat!” Note that the text employs the same metaphor of eating and consumption to deliver revolutionary ideology to children in a palatable form. Otherwise, however, this illustration goes much further than other picturebooks in depicting the revolutionary violence described in the text through the unusual words, “All who wrote the manifesto / Were placed under arrest.” The illustration shows how the victims of the state walk with their heads bowed and their backs bent – as if with broken spirits. In this way, they deviate dramatically from the victorious postures typical of the otherwise quite similar workers depicted in propaganda posters by Lebedev. This book thus presents agitation and its punishment and

defeat unusually directly and perhaps impermissibly so, according to the judgment of the censors. The proletarian side suffers a setback that apparently was deemed impossible to print. Though in this case it is the Tsar's soldiers who are arresting the revolutionary workers, who elsewhere stand as victorious heroes in the iconography of the period, the instability of symbolism could suggest to the audience more recent examples of arrest in a period of increasing censorship and repression. The subject of arrest, particularly of agitators on the side being put forward for children as good, must have been deemed inappropriate for children – or perhaps for any audience.

Ironically then, the book *Ellipsis* uses too few strategic ellipses or omission points; it did not avoid taboos and sublimate its messages in response to cautious self-censorship. The reduction of revolutionary actors to punctuation marks was not enough to avoid saying something unspeakable or to eliminate the instability of signification. As a result, *Ellipsis* itself was censored – reduced to an omission point and all but elided from existence. Yet, it is this picturebook that more honestly bears witness to the violence and victimization of the revolution, and its aftermath, than do the children's books that elide taboo topics or evade censorship by sublimating troublesome topics in visual allegory. Still, however restrictive the censorship, the instability of visual and verbal symbols may yet live to tell another tale. For this is the essential “instability of visual ellipsis: it slips between text, language, and image without finding a resting place or allowing meaning to come to rest” (Chamarette 2007: 48).

Indeed, though the picturebook *Ellipsis* was censored and never published, a sanitized version of the story did appear on the pages of the avant-garde children's magazine *Ezh* [Hedgehog, 1928]¹ (Figure 30). Juxtaposing these to the fragments of the picturebook storyboard that remain shows to what extent those revolutionary and violent truths were eliminated. Instead, the story “*Znaki prepinaniia*” [“Punctuation Marks,” 1928] describes a far more staid meeting where punctuation marks discuss ostracizing one of their number, Ellipsis. With the threatening gesture of raising his fist, the exclamation point begins the meeting by denouncing the ellipsis: “We have seen at first hand, / That there is no space for an ellipsis / In this building at the meeting / Of honest punctuation marks. / We must banish him / Like we banished the *yat*!” (Marshak 1928: 26). The mention here of the banishment of the old letter “*yat*” refers to the orthographic reforms associated with revolution, which abolished four letters and the hard sign at the end of words. Abolishing the ellipsis seems very different, however, once it has been anthropomorphized as a character amongst other anthropomorphized punctuation marks (Figure 31). Fundamentally impossible also is the idea of eliminating the ellipsis, since it is an ellipsis, or absent presence, that remains when something has been eliminated.

1. *Ezh. Ezhemesiachnyi zhurnal dlia detei mladshogo shkol'nogo vozrasta*. Leningrad: Gosizdat, 1928–1935. “Ezh” also serves as an abbreviation for the first letters of the Russian word “monthly [*ezhemesiachnyi*]” in the descriptive subtitle “Monthly Journal for Young School-age Children.”



Figure 30. Illustration by Vladimir Lebedev for Samuil Marshak's "Znaki prepinaniia" ["Punctuation Marks," 1928]. Art © Estate of Vladimir Lebedev/RAO, Moscow/VAGA, New York

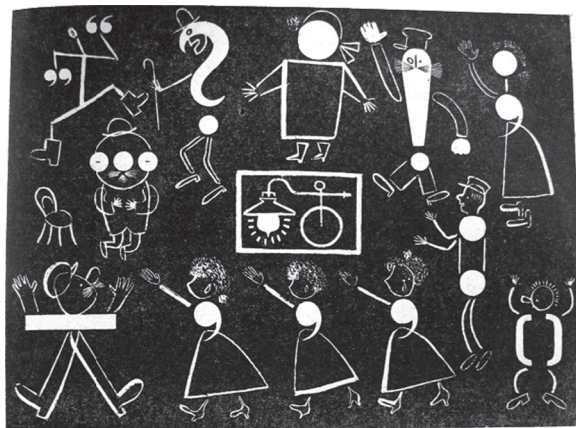


Figure 31. Illustration by Vladimir Lebedev for Samuil Marshak's "Punctuation Marks" Art © Estate of Vladimir Lebedev/RAO, Moscow/VAGA, New York

Though the later version elides the revolutionary activities of the unprinted picture-book, the sense of a group ostracizing one of its numbers remains. The agitator asks, "Do we need spineless mumblers?" (26), referring to Ellipsis. After this rhetorical question, which brooks no dissent, he calls for a vote. "All who are – against / And all who are – for / Answer us / Straight in the eyes." The vote is not anonymous but instead entirely public. It also sets up a dynamic where each voter faces the collective and must not look away or hide anything, or risk being associated with the stated flaws of the wishy-washy spineless mumbler Ellipsis. Ultimately, the brief story ends with an outcome that could be clearly foreseen: "After a strict trial / They eliminated Ellipsis / Forever." Though the revolutionary activities have now been removed from the story due to censorship and other political exigencies, the situation of a union, or soviet, discussing members and bringing them forth for denunciation, judgment, and formal exclusion also reflects a reality that would become even more pronounced in the 1930s when literature too began to be subjected to restrictive and proscriptive policy and ideology. Children's books and children's writers were also facing censorship and, as a result, might preemptively censor themselves and necessarily strive to adapt to the conditions under which they might survive. This is not to say that they would not still voice resistance in a more subtle way, however, such as through the use of irony.

On the history and significance of the ellipsis in Russian literature, it is also worth noting that the ellipsis figured prominently in nineteenth-century Russian literature and particularly in poetry, from Alexander Pushkin to the Silver Age. Monika Greenleaf sums up one such approach to Pushkin's use of ellipses: "To Viktor Shklovsky, Pushkin is the eternal subversive for whom every text represents a chance to encode radical Aesopian messages, whose every ellipsis is both politically and playfully motivated; or rather, whose play *is* political" (1994: 8). In the context of the later Soviet period, meanwhile, the ellipsis might self-referentially allude to censorship and the unspoken. For example, Rachel May writes about the use of ellipsis by Abram Tertz (Andrei Sinyavsky) in a later Soviet period, summing it up "For Tertz/Sinyavsky ellipses are also pregnant with politically dangerous innuendo" (1994: 130). May elaborates, "The ellipsis can signify an unspecified continuation, a pause, something that is left out or cannot be included. Throughout Tertz's fiction about writers and writing it serves as an emblem of insecurity, fear, and censorship" (131). Tertz's example thus illustrates the subtle and subtextual associations of the ellipsis with censorship within the Soviet signifying system and its unique ecology of censorship.

Similarly, in his study of the beneficence of censorship in Russian literature, Lev Loseff sums up the uses of ellipses and the shift that takes place between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries:

Ellipsis is an effective and frequently used form of Aesopian language. As in a number of other instances, however, one must note the movement from clearly designated, straightforward ellipses in literature before the revolution to veiled and more subtle forms of Aesopian ellipsis during the Soviet era. Such ellipses anticipate the increased Aesopian wariness of the reader (1984: 104–105)

One thus might consider the ellipsis itself to be a response to censorship and that the sophistication of the strategic elision may evolve over time in response to shifting ecological conditions. In this sense, then, the unpublished *Ellipsis* takes on the subject of censorship, even as it itself, ironically, remains unpublished.

In contrast to Mandelstam's work discussed in the previous chapter, both Samuil Marshak and Vladimir Lebedev's *Ellipsis* and Vladimir Mayakovsky's *What is Good and What is Bad?* (1925) seek to work within the censorship in a nearly propagandistic manner. At the same time, however, the instability of imagery and symbolism and the unruly potential of the grotesque and carnivalesque still contain a darker undertone and a subversive potential. Sometimes the very act of censoring, such as the idea of eliminating that which is judged "bad," or speaking the unspeakable, like an impermissible allusion to the violence of revolution, helps guarantee its entrance through slippage into the unstable visual and verbal text. Thus these books also communicate ideas beyond their apparent intentions and reflect negatively on the system they seek to propagandize. In the case of *Ellipsis*, the book becomes unpublishable until it is altered to speak another truth in "Punctuation Marks," while Mayakovsky's didactic books are published, but can evoke sinister comparisons when read in historical context. These books thus illustrate how unstable visual imagery and symbolism prove to be, if even the most complicit books can pivot to challenge the authoritarian discourse within which they function.

By the same token, the use of absence as a device, like Lotman's "minus device" (1977b: 51) itself proves connotative. It is a significant absence and an absent presence. Osip Mandelstam opens a famous poem with the phrase "I've forgotten the word that I wanted to say..." (1920), thereby devoting his entire poem to the theme of the unspoken before repeating near its end, "But I've forgotten what I want to say" at which point, disembodied thought, like the blind swallow in the opening stanza, "returns to the palace of shadows" (1997b: 152–153). In the case of the ellipsis, or censored speech, that which is left unspoken may still speak if we hearken to it. Thus, the picturebook *Ellipsis*, which connotes a Lotmanesque minus device that removes something and leaves behind a telling absence, itself is silenced, although it continues to exist to tell its tale through censored fragments. In so doing, this archival artifact reveals more about the creative process and silencing than do hundreds of published texts.

The discussion of the visually rich materials in this chapter, with their elaborated metaphors, undercurrents of violence, and questionable power dynamics, will find many points of resonance in the next chapter, which also includes textually elaborated metaphors and brutal implications. Although a more sparsely illustrated novella, and not technically a picturebook, it develops some of the same visual ideas within a predominantly verbal structure and continues to engage the issues of censorship and ideology on which Part II focuses. In so doing, this book traces the increasingly forceful pressures characterizing the literary ecology of Soviet children's literature and shows how the same metaphors and themes recur in a variety of forms of Russian avant-garde children's literature.

Revolutionary rhetoric and the semiotics of size

At the end of the first chapter of *Tri tolstiaka* [Three Fat Men, 1928], an illustrated novella for children written by Yury Olesha in 1924, the scientist Doctor Arneri loses his spectacles in the revolutionary tumult. Soon thereafter he remarks, “My spectacles, of course, were broken. When I see without glasses, I probably see things just as a person with good vision sees if he puts on glasses. It’s very unpleasant” (1998: 138). Thematized at the outset of the story, the Doctor’s myopic vision, as he has a close encounter with history in revolutionary times, offers a hint about the interpretation of events in this tale. Though it would seem to be a revolutionary fairy tale for children that relates the story of the overthrow of three fat men through the revolt of the common people, upon closer examination, *Three Fat Men* employs a complex symbolic system rife with the ambivalence for which Olesha is known in his famous novel for adults *Zavist’* [Envy, 1927]. If *Envy* structurally employs a kind of stereoscopic vision and its main character celebrates looking “through the wrong end of binoculars” (cf. Nilsson 1973: 254–279), then *Three Fat Men* relies on a kind of blurry vision, as thematized by Doctor Arneri’s broken spectacles – at least to pass by the censors.

Under closer scrutiny, however, Olesha’s apparently revolutionary symbols, imagery, and metaphors shift before one’s eyes and offer different perspectives than those that initially seem to be intended. They thereby exemplify Aesopian language, as Lev Loseff defines it, and show how deeply a more extensively elaborated novella can employ subtle signification to subversive effect, as commonly occurred in Soviet literature for children – and adults. Even names become myopically blurry due to their foreignness and the vaguely Italian and certainly non-Russian nature of the names, which distances the setting and thus obfuscates any political critique. By donning Aesopian spectacles, on the other hand, one might, as Doctor Arneri says at the beginning of the book, keep the dust out of one’s eyes (Olesha 1998: 134).

This book also subtly treats the plight of the intellectual, whose bespectacled self proves weak in the face of revolutionary tumult and violence, although strong of mind. This reevaluation of the intellectual elite, and the weak and small individual, alongside the elevation of the proletarian and the strong bodies it celebrates, thus also finds a subtle portrayal in this seemingly innocuous revolutionary fairy tale.

In so doing, it situates the new Soviet reality within a harsher evolutionary context, where the definition of “fitness” has suddenly changed.

This chapter begins with a discussion of revolution, the body, and the semiotics of size in Yuri Olesha’s *Three Fat Men* from a near-sighted or myopic perspective, and then takes a broader, macroscopic perspective to focus on the subversive significance of references to politics and history, before taking a microscopic look at the symbolism of the story and its implied prehistory. From these various perspectives, and within the broader ecology of Russian avant-garde children’s literature, it becomes clear how children’s literature and childhood itself represented a contested space in early twentieth-century Russia.

Although this book is not a picturebook, strictly speaking, since image and text are not on equal footing, insofar as text predominates over image, the inclusion of Olesha’s illustrated novella in this book otherwise devoted to Russian avant-garde picturebooks is justified instead by its relevance to the subject of the big fat man discussed in the previous chapter, as well as the unique insights into Aesopian discourse it offers through its more extensive verbal elaboration of issues, including the visual metaphors and theme of revolutionary violence in the previous chapter. In this sense, *Three Fat Men* offers its own uniquely illustrative literary ecology that illuminates the sophisticated workings of textual discourse in evading the censor through a kind of narrative ambivalence more evident in text than in image.

From a myopic perspective, *Three Fat Men* employs palpable and seemingly revolutionary metaphors of power and the body that engage with an implicit semiotics of size. Indeed, according to a simple schematic representation correlating power and size, the Three Fat Men represent one extreme. In historical and political context, and echoing the political propaganda of the period, the excessive size of the Three Fat Men indicates the overinflated and parasitic nature of overconsuming capitalist oligarchs, hereditary monarchs, wealthy peasants, or Soviet citizens who exploited the temporary liberalization of business policies in the 1920s to amass great wealth, termed NEPmen. As this extensive list indicates, the outsized figure represented in this semiotics of size offers an inclusive and ultimately unstable category that can be applied or reapplied to anyone in a position of excessive power or influence.

As shown in Figure 32, a telescopic use of perspective by artist Mstislav Dobuzhinsky enhances and even exaggerates the semiotics of size through its use of perspective, thereby enlarging the three fat men and shrinking the children shown in the background, while Doctor Arneri stands as a bespectacled witness in the center of the composition, facing the viewer. Here the exploitative villains’ nearly spherical shape, like the use of perspective, which also favors them in some sense, emphasizes the uneven distribution of resources, since a sphere contains the maximal volume possible. Their round form also represents a kind of inherent



Figure 32. Illustration by Mstislav Dobuzhinsky for Yuri Olesha's *Three Fat Men*

instability or potential energy, which, as is visually evident, would be activated from the outside by a revolutionary push, revolt, or revolution, a word which itself also derives from circular motion and a dynamic metaphor. Their absurdly swollen and overinflated shape is potentially explosive from within, if it continues to be inflated beyond the bounds of what is humanly possible. Such an explosion would, by implication, redistribute resources more equitably – at the expense of the overinflated body of the heretofore, according to the official Soviet Marxist ideology, unjustly privileged big fat man. The propagandistic visual representation thus both encourages and obscures, through its cartoonish depiction, revolutionary violence upon the oppressor's body.

Olesha's portrayal of wrongful wielders and abusers of power borrows from the simplified and allegorical visual iconography of political posters, propaganda, and picturebooks of the 1920s, although he develops the surrounding story more extensively than do these other more telegraphic forms. Olesha thus goes further

in exploring the motif of gluttony displayed in Mayakovsky's *The Story about Peter, the Fat Child, and about Simon, Who is Thin* or Marshak and Lebedev's *Ice Cream*, which were discussed in the previous chapter. Just as in visually similar propaganda, the oversized villain in these books meets a consistently predestined end. He over-consumes to the point of a climactic metamorphosis that, according to Marxist ideology, restores order and justice to the world. *Three Fat Men* hints at this same metamorphic aspect when the Three Fat Men expand dangerously in girth when suffering from anxiety, like balloons about to burst, such as at the conclusion to the story when the masses have mobilized against them and threaten their oligarchic hold on power.

Gluttonous overeating serves a markedly carnivalesque role in all of these instances and particularly in *Three Fat Men*. The exiled Russian writer and academic Arkady Belinkov famously links Olesha's novel for children *Three Fat Men* to his ambivalent novella for adults *Envy* on precisely this basis. He writes "Olesha's first novel about the Revolution is called *Three Fat Men*, but for some reason his second novel about the consequences of the victory of the Revolution is called *Envy* and not *The Fourth Fat Man*" (1972: 31). Tellingly, an earlier paragraph which justifies this claim carries a footnote (when published in the United States in *The Russian Review*) that indicates "This paragraph was removed by the censor." This paragraph observes, scandalously, that:

The positive hero, the master of the novel, "...a ruler and a Communist ..." is the same kind of fat man as his prerevolutionary non-Communist predecessors. Nothing has changed. The fat men triumph as before, and as before those who protest against them perish. (31)

Yet, one might note the difference between these two texts, which Belinkov so aptly links together, since the Three Fat Men are defeated in the children's book only to reemerge in his novella for adults. Belinkov's concluding statement that "Every encroachment on freedom, by whatever high motives it is explained, is criminal" finds more of an echo in Olesha's children's book than it at first may seem (37).

In his discussion of gluttony in Olesha's *Envy*, Ronald LeBlanc also mentions *Three Fat Men*:

Although gluttonous overeating has often been represented in literary texts as a comic device that helps to sustain the carnivalesque spirit [...], it is also a deadly "sin" that has traditionally been used for satiric purposes by authors who wish to inveigh earnestly against social, moral, and political excesses. Indeed, gluttony serves as perhaps the central satiric theme in Olesha's *Three Fat Men* (*Tri tolstiaka*, 1924), where a small cruel oligarchy of the "rich" (*bogachi*) and the "gluttonous" (*obzhory*) is shown to batten upon the common people, growing fat at the expense of the starving masses. (2001: 223)

Indeed, LeBlanc's evocation of the grotesque and carnivalesque proves highly appropriate. From beginning to end, the text represents a carnivalesque time out of time and a rupture of the reigning order that signifies a change of regime, especially considering the revolutionary time period being depicted. In addition, the circus setting and themes prevalent in much of Olesha's books, whether in actual fairs or the circus-like action in a revolutionary time and space, also challenge aspects of the habitual order (cf. Cornwell 1993: 1–13). Ultimately, however, one might observe that, as with the carnivalesque, the basic order and hierarchy are not challenged, since the Three Fat Men, and the child Tutti, who has been appointed their heir, are unseated by three other strong men – Tibul the circus performer, who is strong of body, Propero the gunsmith, who is strong in terms of force, and Doctor Gaspar Arneri, who is strong of mind – with their own child follower, Suok.

Olesha frequently uses the child's perspective to reveal the truth or defamiliarize the familiar. Richard Borden discusses Olesha's focus on childhood in relation to his concept of the metaphor (1998: 441–454). In this respect, one might also consider the Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky's summary of Olesha's talent as "the ability to see the world anew, in an amazingly child-like manner, to make his primal sense of the world understood" (1973: 194–205). Similarly, Shklovsky had earlier commented that "Olesha sees things like a child" (1933: 121). The child's eye view thus emerges as a critical element in the revolutionary critique offered by the story, although its message proves more ambivalent than it first may appear.

The circus theme – and characters like the lifelike mannequin, child actress, tight rope walker, balloon vendor, caged man-beast, et cetera – conjure a carnival atmosphere that, by extension, renders the Three Fat Men as clownlike and laughable, offering comic relief to the violent and revolutionary tension being built up. A Saturnalian reversal and masquerade is also evident in how Mstislav Dobuzhinsky's 1928 illustrations of the big fat men (Figure 33) highlight their bestiality and depict their porcine features with exaggerated roundness. In the text, the pink and bare flesh of the three fat men and the strong man who sides with them is emphasized. Like these textual descriptions, Dobuzhinsky's illustrations conjure the pig, a carnivalesque creature that often figures in the nineteenth-century comic writings of Nikolay Gogol, who also featured a fat man by the name of Chichikov as anti-hero in his novel *Mertvye dushi* [Dead Souls, 1842; 1972]. As shown on the cover, with its myopic view of the three fat men's faces, multiple chins, and turned-up noses, Dobuzhinsky's porcine depiction emphasizes a dehumanizing view of the villains. In this context, the bestial view of human beings also serves to legitimize the violence the revolutionary text encourages upon their vulnerably plump bodies – as sacrificial victims, animals, or scapegoats.

As depicted in this same illustration, the oligarchic collusion of the Three Fat Men ensures that they remain one inseparable mass, depersonalized and undistinguished

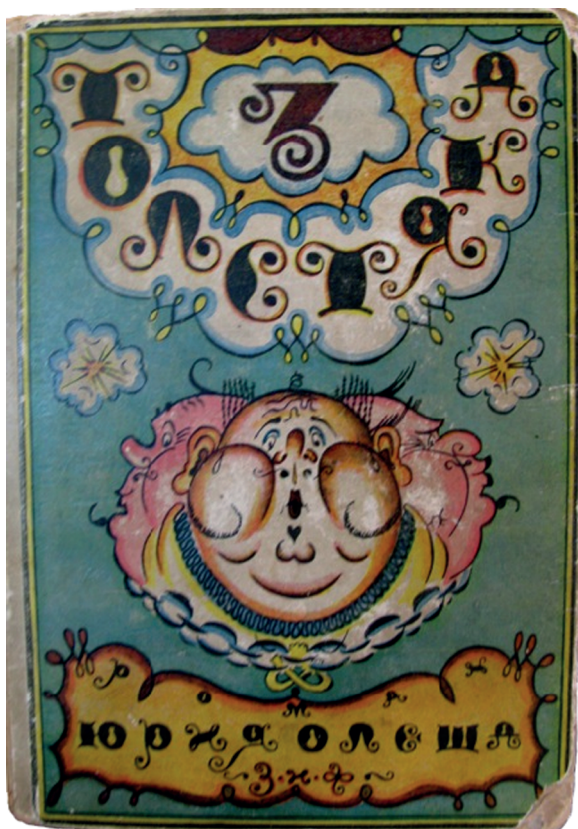


Figure 33. Cover design by Mstislav Dobuzhinsky for Yuri Olesha's *Three Fat Men*

by their individual names and therefore open to interpretation and replacement by other villainous figures. In this case, where children are pitted against enormous and exploitative oligarchs, the semiotics of size visually communicates a political and revolutionary metaphor for an audience of children. As typical of classical forms of children's literature, such as the fable or fairy tale, the villains are large and powerful, while children are small and weak. Their relative sizes underscore the child's weakness and help signal that it is the underdog who deserves the audience's sympathy. Similarly, their more human form seems vulnerable, even as the caricatured bodies of the villains are set up as easy targets. The semiotics of size thus expresses the underlying discourse of power in forms familiar to children, who are already sensitized to issues of size and power involved in the relations of children and adults. Note how the respective sizes of children and villains, as opposed to that of adults and villain in propaganda posters, serve as visual representations of highly dissimilar power dynamics, delivering a different message to the child audience about their own strength and power.

Since the oversized villain typically suffers a defeat celebrated by victorious collectives of children, the carnivalesque dethroning of the big fat man also offers subversive implications for the child who emerges victoriously at the end, despite the semiotics of size that stacks the odds against him or her. Thus, despite its apparent ideological aims, the semiotics of size also contains a subversive message against adult power dynamics that entrap children, or on behalf of any disempowered subject being oppressed, including by post-revolutionary powers. The oppressive dynamic of the hierarchical system remains unchanged.

Apart from the wealthy and aristocratic allies of the *Three Fat Men*, everyone else works toward the overthrow of the Three Fat Men – including the adult forces represented by the athletic body of the tightrope walker Tibul, the brute force represented by the gunsmith Prospero, and the intellectual force in a weak body represented by the doctor Gaspar Arneri with his glasses and cane. Only their collective effort, strength, and size, proves sufficient to overthrow the power of the Three Fat Men. According to the semiotics of size, the least power would seem to be accorded to the small children in the text, Suok and Tutti. And yet, the small and seemingly powerless children not only participate in and play a key role in the revolutionary narrative, they also act as significant agents of change.

Children's value, including for a totalitarian regime, relates to the fact that, in a diachronic perspective, children are destined to grow into power over time (on the subject of power in children's literature, see Nikolajeva 2010b and Beauvais 2015b). Tutti the Heir, for instance, represents a shape-shifter in time, since he has been selected to succeed the Three Fat Men and therefore has outsized value and influence over them, which he exerts through his tantrums and will. Suok, meanwhile, is a shape-shifter in space, since, as a professional circus performer and actress, she has the ability to violate boundaries and cross borders that confine her. With an emergent and even post-human identity, she effectively steps out of her own body and into that of others, including into and out of the inanimate body of a doll that resembles her. These two children thus transcend, in time and space, the restrictions that would confine them. Their outsized importance subverts the semiotics of size.

Viewing *The Three Fat Men* within a comparative perspective on children's literature, fables, folklore, or fairy tales, meanwhile, underscores the foreordained victory of the small and disempowered hero typical of these forms. Deriving from the circumstances at their origin, these genres often contain a subversive impulse and display a reversal of the power dynamics that govern the relations between children and other disempowered subjects in a world of powerful adults or authority figures (on the subversive impulse in children's literature, see Lurie 1990). Similarly, *Three Fat Men* visually and allegorically renders this age-old power dynamic and differences between size and power in a hyperintelligible way. Upon closer examination, however, *Three Fat Men* also transcends the narrow ideology of

revolutionary Marxism and enters into the loaded subject of power dynamics and the potentially fraught relations between adults and children. Indeed, focusing on the child subject in particular reveals how the children in the text are imprisoned by adult ideology. The impoverished and orphaned Suok must work for the circus to which she has been sold, while Tutti is profoundly alienated by his upbringing as the heir of the Three Fat Men. In short, both are alienated from other children, and from “childhood” itself. Both of these children, boy and girl, are held hostage to the ideology of the adults who have adopted them and who seek to implant their own political views in each child, as their symbolic descendant and follower. In this representation, all adults in the text may be equally guilty of seeking to make children into puppets by inculcating them into their own ideology in order to promote their own belief systems. The same may be said of adults outside the text and Soviet society, thus telescoping out Olesha’s subtle critique by reversing the telescope.

If a myopic perspective exposes apparently revolutionary ideology evident on the surface level of the text, as shown by this semiotics of size, then a macroscopic look at its imagery in a broader ecological context exposes a brutal history that the text, like Soviet literature and official Soviet history, rapidly glosses over. Still, these dangerous implications remain latent on a deeper, Aesopian level of the text. Indeed *Three Fat Men* includes remarkably truthful historical references that find an outlet in the Aesopian levels of this “revolutionary fairy tale” for children. In this sense, the tale seems to process a recent and traumatic experience for the author and generation that just witnessed it. For instance, from the first, the text bears witness to revolutionary violence, brutality, and bloodshed as “fairly frightening” (Olesha 1998: 137). By the end of the first chapter, one sees workers fall to the ground bleeding, “They fell, covered with blood” (137), and the injury of the heroic Prospero, who is bleeding, dehumanized by a rope around his neck, and about to be thrown into prison – “He had matted hair, a bloody face, and a thick loop around his neck” (138). Doctor Arneri also encounters numerous dead bodies, though he myopically focuses most on the loss of his own spectacles, which distracts from the violence evidenced by visual detail. Yet, from the first, *Three Fat Men* bears witness to revolutionary violence in a surprisingly honest way. It actually offers a remarkably open account of the intellectual bystander’s experience of revolution.

Other politically charged historical references also occur. The text touches on the taboo subject of cannibalism more than once, including when one of the Three Fat Men abandons chewing on a napkin and chews on the Third Fat Man’s ear instead: “He abandoned his napkin and immediately started chewing the ear of the Third Fat Man. Incidentally, it resembled a little dumpling” (156). Though treated light-heartedly and comically here, with the comparison to a dumpling, and with a revolutionary implication about the exploitation of man by man, this proves a disturbingly timely topic when considered against the backdrop of the severe famines

that occurred in Russia following war, unrest, and the reorganization of society in the wake of revolutionary tumult in 1917. Cannibalism was even reported in this time. Indeed, the topic reemerges on a more serious note when the balloon seller who has ended up in the Three Fat Men's giant cake legitimately fears for his life: "What will happen? – the balloon seller worried. – What will happen? They will eat me up!" (156). Indeed, from the balloon seller's fear of death by cannibalism, the narrative shifts to the discussion of other barbaric practices, namely the threatened execution of Prospero the gunsmith (156) and then to the fact that he is imprisoned in an iron cage in the Palace Zoo of Tutti the Heir – "he, as before, sits in an iron cage [...] in the zoo of Tutti the Heir" (157). The narrative thus moves from the fear of cannibalism to other violent and disempowering acts by human beings against other human beings, such as execution and imprisonment. The end result of such bestial treatment – the imprisonment of human beings under terrible conditions, as if animals in a zoo – is the self-fulfilling prophecy that they turn into beasts. Such is the implication when Suok confuses an imprisoned man-beast in the zoo with Prospero. The regressive devolution of man to beast he exemplifies shows the impact of man's bestial brutality to man and provides an implicit commentary on revolutionary times and any repressive regime. Interestingly, Viktor Shklovsky also humanizes a caged ape in the epistolary novel *Zoo. Letters Not About Love* (*Zoo. P is'ma ne o liubvi*) (1923) (2000: 5–82). As the protagonist of the aptly-named Zoo identifies with "this poor foreigner" (28), so *Three Fat Men* blurs the distinctions between man and beast. The juxtaposition of Shklovsky's face-to-face scene through the bars of a cage with Olesha's thus reveals the theme of imprisonment of human beings latent in any representation of an ape-man in a cage.

Shielded by its fantastical and otherworldly aura, this revolutionary fairy tale thus bears witness to the violence and bloodshed of the revolution and civil war; post-revolutionary famine, cannibalism, and the gluttony of the New Economic Policy established to revive the nearly ruined economy in Russia after civil war; and the execution, bestial treatment, and imprisonment of human beings that takes place in the name of ideology. The fairy-tale frame Olesha employs thus allows for a remarkably honest account of traumatic aspects of recent history, just as the foreign and vaguely Italian names distance the story to enough of an extent that its social and political critique could seem removed from the Soviet Union.

The post-revolutionary powers can by no means be exonerated on any implied charges of brutality, even if their own ideological inclinations purport to justify the revolutionary violence of the preceding period. Indeed, even in Olesha's tale, the revolutionary victors replicate the same structure they overthrew and would seem to condemn when they imprison the Three Fat Men in the very cage in which Prospero had once been held captive. A mere reversal about an axis in a carnivalesque suspension of time does not challenge the basic hierarchy in itself. Indeed, the revolutionary

implications of a revolutionary tale do not necessarily stop with the overthrow of one unjust regime, but, as Yevgeny Zamyatin said, revolution is infinite (1970: 107). A post-revolutionary tale of revolution thus has potentially subversive implications in this sense as well; according to the simplified allegorical implications of the semiotics of size, any overinflated power ought to be overthrown. The same, of course, applies to any overinflated authority, including the post-revolutionary “fourth fat man,” as Arkady Belinkov terms it, as mentioned earlier.

The final moments of *Three Fat Men* reveal that the encaged man-beast is the long-imprisoned and radically dehumanized scientist Toub who belatedly provides the narrative with the prehistory of the children Tutti and Suok. If the taboo topics mentioned above concern people in general, then Toub reveals a nightmarish prehistory that concerns children specifically. He bears witness to the true relationships of which Tutti and Suok were forcibly deprived. Here it is revealed that they are sister and brother: “There were two of you: sister and brother – Suok and Tutti” (248). Toub thus restores to them a meaningful relationship, the loss of which each had sensed and mourned deeply. The deprivation of a close companion explains the perpetual sadness and loneliness of Tutti, whose name is described as meaning “Separated” in “the language of the poor” (249), although “Tutti” in Italian means “All.” For him, the deprivation or recovery of his sister is akin to the loss or restoration of “All Life Itself” (249), which is what Suok supposedly means in “the language of the poor,” although also a personal reference for Olesha. Language here reveals essence, and names are shown to have personal meaning intrinsically connected to identity. The *Three Fat Men*, in contrast, remain depersonalized.

In their callous treatment of the relationship of brother and sister (and parent and child), which predates the story itself, the *Three Fat Men* show an ability to wholly objectify human relationships and children in particular. They separate brother and sister (and parent and child), since their interest, or self-interest, extends only to Tutti the Heir. They sell Suok to the circus in exchange for a parrot, showing their low estimation of her human value, which might also be critiqued from a feminist perspective. They then replace Suok with a doll as a stand-in for a human being and beloved sister, revealing their preference for object over subject. (Significantly, Doctor Arneri instead mistakes the object for a subject, when he takes the doll for a real person.) Though Toub, with almost magical scientific skill, designed an extraordinary doll that perfectly resembles Suok, it did not replace her for Tutti.

The real Suok, on the other hand, shows an ability to skillfully navigate subjecthood and objecthood, as an actress who can portray a doll and thereby slip into and out of any subject position when convenient, just as she had slipped into and out of existence for Tutti. The juxtaposition of girl and doll recalls that of Pinocchio, particularly at the end of the story when, having become a real boy, he faces his disembodied other self as an inanimate object (Collodi 1986: 461). Like Pinocchio, Suok’s doll body

sometimes even proves convenient in receiving, in effigy, violence intended for her. Unlike Pinocchio, however, Suok assumes objecthood and subjecthood as it suits her. Empowered by her skill as a performer and her comfort with performance, circus, carnival, and theater, Suok proves comfortable improvising on any stage no matter the circumstances she faces. As a result, she, as the expression goes, steals the show.

In children's literature since Romanticism and the works of E. T. A. Hoffmann, the idea of the puppet often engages categories of object and subject, as relevant for depicting children's position in society, as well as their maturation process, which involves the development of voice, power, and agency, where there once was none. (On toys in children's literature, see Kuznets 1994). The *Three Fat Men*, by replacing Suok with a doll, signal their desire to replace the child as active subject with a passive object. Her gender adds a sinister note to their view of her value, objectifying replacement of her with a doll, and willingness to sell her to others. Suok, on the other hand, shows that she, as a child trickster figure, is a shape-shifter willing to challenge the boundaries that confine her. Like an Alice figure before a looking-glass, Suok faces a mirror reflection in the doll and, through her looking-glass resemblance, steps into another world. In so doing, she displays voice and agency and, through her shape-shifting ability, becomes an active agent of revolution. Truly, actual children do become involved with revolution and war, both as victims and as participants. Likewise, Suok proves a participant in history and also an active agent of her own fate.

Viewed microscopically, however, the loss to which Toub bears testament is much greater than what might be restored by the recovery of the relationship between brother and sister with which the text happily concludes. Toub also explains, "When you were four years old, the guards of the *Three Fat Men* kidnapped you from your own home" (248). Suok and Tutti, then, were stolen from their parents and made into orphans by the state. This irrecoverable loss for both children and parents remains completely unspoken in the text. This theme of the orphan, however, also speaks to the historical realities of post-revolutionary times, when millions of orphans, who were made destitute by societal tumult, roamed the country (Ball 1994). This momentary reference to an ugly historical reality proves pointed in the sense that the state was in some sense responsible for the abandonment and orphaning of real children. This unspeakable but finally spoken origin story thus alludes to children being wrested from their parents in multiple senses. Through *Three Fat Men*, Olesha subtly highlights the moral bankruptcy of a totalitarian regime that must forcibly seize children from their parents in order to artificially create heirs for an infertile ideology. This message also strikes back at the revolutionary ideology it seems to propagandize through children's literature. The kidnapping of children and the struggle for an heir thus reveals to what extent children serve as battleground and spoils in actual and ideological war, as evidenced by Soviet children's literature in this period.

For the sake of ideology, even the body and mind of the child becomes a contested space. The reason for the scientist Toub's imprisonment was his refusal to replace Tutti's heart with an iron one.

The Three Fat Men ordered me: "Remove the heart of this boy and make him a new iron heart." I refused. I said that one must not take from a person his human heart. That no kind of heart – neither iron, nor ice, nor gold – can be given to a person in place of a simple, authentic human heart. (249)

The fact that, in the symbolic system of *Three Fat Men*, cages also are made of iron seems significant, since it is the encaging of the heart that is their ideological goal. Though Toub's talents had served the Three Fat Men before, Toub here takes a stand for the integrity, inviolability, and independence of the heart. In effect, the brilliant intellectual had argued that no human heart shall be a battleground, and was then imprisoned himself in an iron cage instead, thereby proving that the human heart, intellect, and body, *are* battlegrounds for ideology. The Three Fat Men were not defeated by Toub's brave refusal, however, and proceed by other means. If they cannot accomplish their goal of turning Tutti's heart into iron by forcible means, they can at least claim to do so. Toub reveals: "And from that time they started to inculcate in the boy that he had an iron heart. He was to believe in this and be cruel and severe" (249). The surprisingly subversive Aesopian implication here is that if the entrenched powers cannot accomplish their task, then they resort to propaganda and brainwashing.

Most significant with regard to childhood as contested site, however, is the fact that this is not just a human heart, but a child's heart. The children reading this Aesopian text not only hear this admission that the child's heart is a battleground, but also hear a declaration of the independence of their hearts. They are shown how Tutti the Heir, who holds the key to the prison, remains innocent and can be redeemed. Olesha delivers not only the message that childhood is a contested space and a dangerous battleground, but also offers a conclusive answer, through the examples of Suok and Tutti. No matter the ideologies that seek to imprison them, or the adults who claim them as heirs, children everywhere are all the same. In *Three Fat Men*, the child's heart is innocent, good, and eternally pure. Even the heir of the powers-that-be can be redeemed and remains innocent and inviolable, retaining his tender heart and his ability to live a different life outside the walls that imprison him. This amounts to a bold and anti-Machiavellian claim that the children of one's enemies remain innocent and may become one's friends. In political and historical context, this proves a profoundly counter-revolutionary critique.

Consider, for instance, the title of Tutti the Heir. Though it at first might seem to express his relationship and significance to the Three Fat Men, it also may be read on a deeper level as a reference, conscious or not, to an actual historical personality. In the immediately preceding era, and up to 1917, another young boy had been

marked as “Heir” in the Russian imperial context, namely the Tsarevich Aleksei, the youngest child and only son of Emperor Nicholas II, the last Russian emperor. Like Tutti, Aleksei had in his childhood at court been doted upon, spoiled, and protected to a fault, although in Aleksei’s case this was due to his hereditary affliction, hemophilia, which left him vulnerable to uncontrolled bleeding. The similarity is underscored by the relative weakness and vulnerability of Tutti the character, which resembles the medical frailty of Aleksei. After the February Revolution, when Nicholas II was compelled to abdicate, Aleksei and the entire Romanov family were exiled to Siberia, where they were imprisoned until their brutal murder in 1918. Like Aleksei, Tutti is imprisoned in the castle and allowed no contact with the outside world or other children.

In *Three Fat Men*, the violence comes closest to the body of Tutti the Heir when, during the revolutionary unrest, Palace Guards symbolically stab his doll, as shown in a brutal depiction by Dobuzhinsky (Figure 34). More akin to political caricature vilifying an enemy “other” than avant-garde aesthetics, this scene nonetheless portrays a violent scene surprising in a book for children. It shows the splayed feminine form of the doll, who is impaled on a saber, while multiple sabers are brandished between the legs of disembodied figures. For an audience of adults, the scene unmistakably conjures sexual violence and a brutal gang rape by soldiers, as if an atrocity of war perpetrated on one child and witnessed by another.



Figure 34. Illustration by Mstislav Dobuzhinsky for Yuri Olesha’s *Three Fat Men*

Understandably devastated by the scene of violence upon his doll vividly displayed in this 1928 illustration, but only indirectly retold in the text itself, Tutti enters the scene in tears. In the depiction and in the text, he displays a vulnerability and tenderness that counters the fierce reputation being cultivated for him. In this sense Tutti also defies narrow traditional gender constructions, as he is not afraid to display tenderness or tears and fiercely loves his doll. His human empathy proves very different from the brutal caricature of masculinity in the soldier depicted in the foreground and the cruelty of all the soldiers. In this scene and others Tutti appears a passive victim, while his sister proves an active agent throughout the book. The look-alike doll thus serves to receive, and perhaps absorb, rage and violence directed at both Tutti and Suok, as if an effigy that spares the children, both brother and sister, from falling victim to the ritual scapegoating brought forth by the carnivalesque atmosphere of this revolutionary moment. Like a magical doll in folk tales, the doll in the story thus protects the real children from the violence of the revolutionary moment by standing in for them in moments of danger. The theme of the doll standing in for another also highlights the Aesopian implications of metaphors, where identity is emergent and fluid, leaving signification most unstable. Indeed, the comparably vulnerable and weak Tsarevich Aleksei and his family had no such protection, and faced real brutality and deadly violence.

Further confirmation of the link between the historical heir and the fictional heir lies in the discourse about their hearts, which also relates to their vulnerability, tenderness, and love for others. The Three Fat Men want Tutti's tender heart to be made of iron, just as they imprison others in iron, while the vulnerable (if pampered) Tsarevich was understood to have a heart of gold. For instance, the Tsar's Colonel Mordinov said of Aleksei, "He had what we Russians usually call a 'golden heart.' He easily felt an attachment to people, he liked them and tried to do his best to help them, especially when it seemed to him that someone was unjustly hurt" (Zeepvat 2004: 20). The discourse surrounding Tutti's heart, which is the real crux of the matter – and the key to success – in the *Three Fat Men*, thus mirrors the discourse about Aleksei's heart, even as it adds the related idea of tenderness and vulnerability, as opposed to the strength and possible protection of an iron prison. In Olesha's tale, the innocence and redemption of Tutti the heir, who blissfully sleeps through the revolutionary events, offers a stark contrast – or even an implied critique – with respect to the historical reality of the cold-blooded murder of the heir Aleksei and the entire Romanov family. In Olesha's revolutionary fairy tale, despite all the violence it describes, and even depicts, children themselves prove innocent and inviolable.

Yet, in all of these cases, in the explicit metaphor, in the implicit historical referent identified here, and in a broader interpretive sense, Olesha shows that the child's heart represents a symbolic battleground, just as childhood proves a

contested space in a war for the future and people's hearts and minds. Ultimately, however, in *Three Fat Men* it is not Tutti's lonely heart, whose nature prevails over nurture, that is in question, insofar as it remains untouched by corruption and the influence, propaganda, and brain-washing of the Three Fat Men. Nor is it Suok's life-giving heart, representative of Life-Itself, that is sought, since it remained true all along. Rather, it is the heart of the reader – adult as well as child – for which the text is vying.

Contrary to the apparent ideological charge of its semiotics of size and revolutionary account, the book's conclusion actually implores its readers to retain in their hearts tenderness and sympathy for the innocent, no matter the iron ideologies of their time. Thus, the book also offers the child reader another kind of training – to decode the Aesopian language. The astute reader thus might apprehend the subversive message voiced by the encaged intellectual who argues for the fundamental independence and inviolability of the human heart, no matter what iron will or ideology threatens to encage it. Here one might recall Johannes Fabian's question, "Are we to overlook that adult-child relations are also, and sometimes primarily, fraught with barely disguised attitudes of power and practices of repression and abuse?" (2002: 63). Though the overt and covert messages of this ideologically charged revolutionary fairy tale may be ambivalent, and look very different when viewed myopically, macroscopically, or microscopically, there can be no doubt as to where the ultimate battleground is – the child's heart. And Olesha employs dual address in speaking to both child and adult audience on equal terms.

In the end, then, the semiotics of size in Yury Olesha's *Three Fat Men* reveals an unstable and ambivalent system of signification that offers multiple Aesopian dimensions and functions within a complex literary ecology. What would have seemed a mere revolutionary fairy tale, with an obvious ideological charge, also reveals a double-edged revolutionary message against anyone in power, or anyone hoarding resources or running an oppressive police state, including revolutionaries after the revolution. Even in the realm of children's literature, a fictional account of the revolution, after the revolution, by nature becomes somewhat counter-revolutionary. Similarly, if the semiotics of size at first seemed to pit the revolutionary forces of smaller people against the entrenched powers of the great, then these same semiotics of size offer an entirely different and subversive message when applied to the relationship between children and adults. The semiotics of size in *Three Fat Men*, then, offers the small and powerless child, like any disempowered subject in any system, encouragement to struggle against the larger and powerful adults, or any corrupt and oppressive leadership, as well as against the larger ideology that imprisons them. It encourages them to recognize the inviolable purity of their own hearts and resist the iron grip of ideology.

Three Fat Men thus offers its own subtle, if very ambivalent, protest against the censorship and ideology characteristic of this period and apparent in the books discussed in this section on “Unnatural Selection: Censorship and Ideology.” In the next section, entitled “Adaptations: Re-Orienting the Picturebook,” this book will turn to a discussion of figures who adapted to the new political situation and re-oriented themselves according to its ideology. All of the figures discussed in the next few chapters proved themselves capable of strategic adaptation under selective pressures. Their ability to adapt and re-orient their work within a new literary ecology helped ensure their survival, at least in the short term.

PART III

Adaptations

Re-orienting the picturebook

Early Soviet images of America in picturebooks

Russian avant-garde picturebooks by the successful picturebook duo Samuil Marshak and/or Vladimir Lebedev, such as *The Adventures of Scare-Crow*, *Circus*, and *Mister Twister*, display contradictory and evolving images of America that reflect both old visions of the West, as well as new views of the United States increasingly colored by revolutionary ideology. A diachronic examination of their shifting imagery and ideological orientation reflects their adaptation to increasing ideological demands and their re-orientation to the demands of the changing literary ecology of the Russian avant-garde picturebook.

The interplay and, at times, tension between image and text in these books reflects a variety of influences, aesthetics, and ideologies. Nevertheless, both image and text indisputably display the cultural attraction of America, first in its nineteenth century manifestations in images of the frontier and wilderness of the West, then in the carnivalesque appeal of American culture in the transitional time of the 1920s, and finally as a kind of ideological counterpoint in the 1930s. By 1933, both image and text contribute to an ideological vilification that views the United States of America through a dark lens. These images thus display an early Soviet view of American history, culture, and ideology that vacillates between cultural attraction and increasingly ideologically charged repulsion, which Soviet picturebooks, it would seem, were compelled to reflect. Throughout, images and text serve a rhetorical purpose, although verbal and visual associations sometimes proceed in quite unexpected and unintentional directions. A close examination of iconotext details, recontextualization in time and place, and a critical view informed by race and ethnic studies reveal the full implications of these depictions of America as a foreign “other” and ideological opposite. These books thus tell a tale of adaptation and re-orientation reflective of the greater literary ecology of the period.

Early images of America

In order to establish a starting point with respect to a shifting orientation toward the United States of America, it is worth returning to Vladimir Lebedev’s picturebook *The Adventures of Scare-Crow*, examined earlier from the perspective of its primitivist sources. It describes a Native American scarecrow’s episodic adventures as he

goes increasingly far from his presumably Russian home to explore American territories across the ocean: “he flew across the ocean to America” (Lebedev 1922: 5). On the one hand, the book thus offers a classic view of the American frontier wilderness; but on the other hand, it also combines this old image with inlays of modern technology and urbanization, such as the modern age and the avant-garde celebrate. Increasingly modern imagery includes steamboats, trains, airplanes, and skyscrapers. As shown below (Figure 35), a naively rendered scene of a sinking ship and its plummeting passengers offers a detached avant-garde deconstruction of object and subject into geometric components. Even Scare-Crow is scarcely recognizable as he attempts to play the hero and right the ship.



Figure 35. Illustration by Vladimir Lebedev for *The Adventures of Scare-Crow*.
Art © Estate of Vladimir Lebedev/RAO, Moscow/VAGA, New York

Whereas the steamboat depicted here (Figure 35) belongs to the nineteenth century and has literary associations with writers like Mark Twain, the train, airplane and skyscraper (Figure 36) offer views of a technologically modern America, such as when “Scare-Crow fell off onto the tallest building in the world and found himself in New York” (7). Between the years 1913 to 1930, and in 1922 when *The Adventures of Scare-Crow* was written, the Woolworth Building in New York was indeed the tallest building in the world. The skyscraper description and illustration in the book, however, prove comically inaccurate: “From the roof tops many chimneys stuck out and puffed black smoke” (7). For the Russian illustrator Vladimir Lebedev, the skyscrapers themselves still belong so firmly to the future that they are misapprehended and represented with abundant chimneys and streams of smoke. The American setting is underscored again by a statement about general travel practices in America, which are oddly applied to New York specifically: “In New York everyone travels by train, and he also wanted to do so” (9). This reflects an industrialized

and modern vision of America, far from true, and in outright contradiction with the Wild West and natural idyll presented in the book otherwise. America thus represents a contradictory hybrid of old and new and the romanticized fulfillment of the dreams of the Old World about the “New.”



Figure 36. Illustration by Vladimir Lebedev for *The Adventures of Scare-Crow*.
Art © Estate of Vladimir Lebedev/RAO, Moscow/VAGA, New York

Traditional images of the American frontier include the book’s portrayal of wilderness or wild spaces, wild animals such as the bear and abundant buffalo, and Native American people. These images likely derive in part from the imagery of James Fenimore Cooper and Mayne Reid, who were popular in Russia in translation, and certainly helped shape the Russian vision of America (on translated children’s literature in Russia, see Hellman 2013b). Though hardly known in America today, the Scots-Irish American children’s writer Mayne Reid’s prolific writings, including his portrayals of the American West, were extremely popular worldwide, and particularly in Russia, from the late nineteenth century on. For example, Vladimir Nabokov’s autobiography *Speak, Memory* (1966: 197–213) waxes on about Mayne Reid’s *The Headless Horseman* (1866), when Nabokov describes his boyhood reading in Russia in the early decades of the twentieth century (see also Johnson 1992). Such examples display the literariness of Lebedev’s depiction of America – through a child’s eyes, as discussed previously.

When Scare-Crow kills a herd of buffalo, he is replicating the behavior of American hunters, who drove the buffalo to near extinction in 1890. “When he turned around, he noticed that he was hanging from the horn of the largest buffalo, and around him a whole herd galloped in fear. Scare-Crow did not lose heart and shot down all the buffalo” (11). This scene itself thus, by definition, dates to before 1890. The inimical and rapacious attitude toward nature continues with

Scare-Crow's confrontation with a bear, which is resolved by Scare-Crow emerging victoriously from the bear's stomach clutching his knife. The war with nature depicted here, although it has a relationship to American reality, also proves reflective of a Russian or Soviet attitude toward the environment and natural world (cf. Josephson 2013). In Soviet children's literature, the inimical relations of man and nature feature prominently, for example, in the title and content of Marshak's story *Voina s Dneprom* [The War with the Dneiper River, 1931c], as scholars have discussed (Orlov 2004; Husband 2006; Rudova 2013). Like William Husband, Larissa Rudova discusses the environmental consciousness in Soviet children's literature of the 1930s, where she offers an epigraph quoting Stalin that sets the tone for this period: "People battle nature and use nature for the production of material good" (2013: 152). Precisely such a view is evident in *The Adventures of Scare-Crow*, which offers a distinctly Soviet version of American environmental and ecological history.

The depiction of indigenous peoples in *The Adventures of Scare-Crow*, as mentioned earlier, proves problematic from a postcolonial point of view. No recognition of the self in the "other" takes place, just as America remains comprehensively "other" in this characteristically Russian depiction. America figures merely as a blank canvas and terra incognita for the imagination and childish fantasies of adventure and glory, where characters like the Native American "Indian" and wild animals act as ready-made stereotypes and stock characters. In the same way that Scare-Crow leaves the animals, buffalo and bear, massacred in his wake, so the Native American chieftain is left splayed, shot through by an arrow from Scare-Crow's bow. Scare-Crow's aforementioned failure to recognize his own Native American self in the chieftain, who is so exoticized as "other," reveals that he is not himself a Native American, but only a stuffed doll stock character himself, through which the Russian gaze views America, but fails to see anything but its own projection, with all its colonialist and discriminatory limitations. In this sense the book also reflects a historical reality predetermined by an Old World, Eurocentric, and colonial view of the North American territories and their native inhabitants. This rapacious attitude toward nature and the native people of America reflects less the historical reality in the United States, although the limitations of the depiction have features in common with local shortcomings. It more convincingly reflects Russia's own attitude toward its own seemingly limitless frontiers, nature, and natural resources, a tendency only further exacerbated in the Soviet period (cf. Josephson 2014).

American and Russian carnivalesques

The collaboration of Samuil Marshak and Vladimir Lebedev in *Circus* displays a very different and distinctly contemporary view of America and the carnivalesque cultural attraction it held for Russia. The circus subject of Marshak's poem reflects the chaos and excitement of this carnival atmosphere. Multiple references, both textual and visual, link this at first seemingly international circus to America specifically. First of all, textually, the circus is in Russia for the first time and therefore is clearly not Russian. The billfold with which the text begins declares "For the first time / In Russia / On its way / To New York / Circus Zaniboni" (Marshak 1925: 1). This well-traveled and internationally influenced and appreciated circus bearing the Italian name Zaniboni would not necessarily have to be linked to America. Still, the fact that it is headed to New York seems significant and symbolically indicative of the cultural magnetism of the United States at this time: the circus is only passing through Russia, while it is actually headed toward New York. Its American destination clearly serves to enhance its allure in Russia as it is advertised in this way on the circus billfold that begins the book.



Figure 37. Illustration by Vladimir Lebedev for Samuil Marshak's *Tsirk* [Circus, 1925].
Art © Estate of Vladimir Lebedev/RAO, Moscow/VAGA, New York

Underscoring America's reputation in the circus industry, one might note that the famous Barnum and Bailey Circus, which was founded in America in 1875, had reached great popularity already by the 1880s. It was famous for its act involving Jumbo, advertised as the world's largest elephant. Jumbo was an African bush elephant owned by a zoo in Paris, then London, and then bought by P. T. Barnum in London in 1881, and taken to New York for exhibition in 1882. This act could be seen to symbolize America's ascent to circus supremacy, as it were. By these indications, Barnum and Bailey, America, New York, and the elephant Jumbo were inextricably linked historically and culturally. Thus the mention in Marshak's text of an elephant by the name of Jumbo explicitly or at least implicitly refers to this American cultural institution and all of its associations: "Old Jumbo is busy doing his thing / Old Jumbo beats a drum" (7). Indeed, to all appearances, Lebedev's depiction of the elephant Jumbo (Figure 37) represents the same species of African Bush Elephant with large ears and broadly splayed toes that Jumbo also was. The episode with Jumbo concludes: "The [Young] Pioneers all say – / he signed up with a [Pioneer] brigade" (7). The text thus symbolically repossesses the much admired and somewhat contested elephant Jumbo for Russian children, as mediated by the collective action of the Soviet youth movement called the Young Pioneers founded in 1922. Here another elephant is radically reconfigured and ideologically harnessed for the pleasure of Soviet power and its own imperial ambition.

These textual associations with the carnivalesque cultural attraction of America might also be combined with distinctly American cultural markers. One early page (Figure 38) reads "He throws up in one stroke and catches as a joke / A porcelain vase, bottle, and a child" (3). Though nothing in Marshak's text evinces a clear association with America specifically, Lebedev's illustration is multiply encoded in ways that relate to America's own cultural symbols and contemporary issues, as well as the representation of America abroad. First of all, the circus performer in this case is dressed in stars and stripes. His trousers and bowtie bear red and white stripes, his jacket sports a field of blue with white stars and red lapels, and his top hat is red ornamented by a blue band with white stars, echoing his jacket. This outfit alone indelibly relates him to the classic personification of America as "Uncle Sam." This image came into use in 1812, was prevalent in political cartoons, and was immortalized in recruitment posters from 1917. Universal elements in depictions of Uncle Sam include his red and white striped trousers and a jacket, bowtie, and top hat involving variations of blue and white stars. Lebedev's depiction observes this established iconography to perfection, thus making this figure a representation of America.

Interestingly, however, Lebedev overlays a racial element on Uncle Sam, who conventionally would be depicted as white – as part of an American blindness to the black experience that deprived its African-American population of basic rights and representation from the early days of American slavery. The white skin of Uncle Sam



Figure 38. Illustration by Vladimir Lebedev for Samuil Marshak's *Circus*. Art © Estate of Vladimir Lebedev/RAO, Moscow/VAGA, New York

as personification of America rendered America's non-white population invisible, as also conjured by the title of African American writer Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man*. In Lebedev's illustration, however, this character's skin is depicted as black, thereby changing the race of the traditional personification of the United States. At the same time, however, this is not necessarily a racially sensitive maneuver, since this figure's simplified and stylized depiction, where only white teeth are visible as facial features, dehumanizes him as a caricature unfortunately reflective of racist imagery of the day. Here the darkness of his skin is exoticized, as if from an uncomprehending perspective fascinated by an exotic "other" observed only from a distance.

This depiction evokes blackface, the theatrical makeup used by white actors in minstrel shows and vaudeville to perform as a stylized caricature of a black person from the nineteenth century until the first half of the twentieth century. Indeed, this performer's formal attire and striped trousers resemble typical minstrel costume, thereby marking him as an unusual conflation of the specific figure Uncle Sam and the generic style of minstrel shows. One might wonder if "Uncle Sam"

has been confused or deliberately conflated with “Uncle Tom,” the title character of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s influential anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which was published in 1852 and was well known around the world. It was also made into a blackface film released in 1903. Varied American signifiers are all combined in this one image that truly blends iconic American cultural signifiers in a single melting pot, both ignorant and offensive in the modern day, but also perspicacious as a critique of American practices in that time.

The blackface depiction of this circus performer is also echoed by the design of the doll, or literally “child,” he is juggling in the air. This racially caricatured doll, with its oversized red mouth, might be compared to minstrel dolls popularized by the infamous Golliwogg. This was a rag doll that the American-born children’s book illustrator Florence Kate Upton modeled in 1895 on minstrel dolls she had had as a child and which became very popular and highly controversial, especially in America. For this reason, a recent English-language reprint by Tate Gallery of Marshak and Lebedev’s *Circus* with the original 1925 illustrations has made the understandable choice to replace this racially controversial image.



Figure 39. Illustration by Vladimir Lebedev for Samuil Marshak’s *Circus*. Art © Estate of Vladimir Lebedev/RAO, Moscow/VAGA, New York

In contrast to the racially charged portrayals of people who are associated in some way with America, Uncle Sam/Tom, and minstrel shows, other portrayals of race in the picturebook, which are not associated with America, have a very different tonality. Noteworthy in this respect, as depicted in Lebedev's illustration (Figure 39), is the interracial marriage of the Muscovite Spiridon Kuzmich: "Spiridon Kuzmich [is] – / a native Muscovite. / While his spouse Darya – / is from the other hemisphere" (8). Here the celebration of diversity and interracial understanding and harmony belongs to Russia. In contrast, some American states still maintained so-called anti-miscegenation laws until the 1960s. In the Soviet period, the issue of race and racism was increasingly deployed to differentiate the two nations, while casting the United States in an increasingly negative light, as shown in the next picturebook as well.

Twisted and twisting ideologies

The critique of America as a racist nation reaches an apogee in Soviet children's literature in the propagandistic 1933 book *Mister Twister* by Samuil Marshak and Vladimir Lebedev. Here issues of race move from the background into the foreground and become key to the plot, as well as to the cultural and ideological distinctions that the openly propagandistic children's poem draws between the United States of America and the Soviet Union. It tells the tale of the extremely wealthy Mister Twister – "Mister / Twister / Former / Minister, / Mister / Twister / Businessman and banker, / Owner of factories, / Newspapers, steamships" (Marshak 1933: 5). As Twister's extended epithet indicates, many American associations are wrapped up in this one person (cf. also Leving 2011: 296).

As a former minister, a title that rhymes with his surname Twister, this character even represents the United States government, in some sense. Yuri Leving points out that later editions even make Twister a member of Congress to further emphasize his ties to the United States government (2011: 286–287). This link to the government underscores the ideological dimension of the text, which clearly opposes capitalism and communism, as well as racism and internationalism. At the same time, however, Mister Twister's clearly Anglo-American name offers many associations related to or countering his presentation in the story. As a translator of English poetry and children's poetry, Marshak certainly would have understood the basic implications of the name he had chosen, although it might escape an audience of children. The linguistic allusion addresses a very specific educated adult audience, just as the ideological implications also might not be fully appreciated by a child. Indeed, the character represents a "twisted" or corrupted man whose values were all wrong, while the story presents the unraveling of expectations he

experiences in Soviet Russia – in part, one might add, through the trickery of the hotel doorman who decides to teach him a lesson.

Yet, at the same time, the idea of a twist also refers to a very dynamic action, which one might link to a liberated American music and dance tradition with origins in African-American and West African traditions. For example, the swing style of jazz and dance, which originated in America and primarily arose out of African-American communities, took America and the world by storm in the roaring 1920s as cities like New York and Chicago boomed and America prospered and became a cultural force to be reckoned with around the world. The later “twist” dance also originated in African-American and West African traditions, such as the African American plantation dance “wringin’ and twistin’” which can be traced back to the nineteenth century. Likewise, one of the hit songs of early blackface minstrel shows was Joel Walker Sweeney’s “Grape Vine Twist,” which was also inspired by slaves, and was being played in the mid nineteenth century (Winans 1976: 412). All this is to say that the name Mister Twister also may develop out of a liberating, interracial cultural tradition that America also represented abroad, particularly in music and dance.

This representative of extreme American wealth and inequality, who is a banker, businessman, and director in addition to his ties to government, decides to travel the world with his wife and daughter. “Mister / Twister, / Millionaire, / Travels as a tourist / To the USSR” (15). Oddly, the rhyme pairs the seemingly ideologically opposed words “millionaire” and the final letter “R” in “USSR.” Twister travels with twenty-four suitcases carried by four giant servants: “In a line / four / Giants / Are Walking, / Carrying / Twenty-four / suitcases” (8). Obviously and propagandistically, these suitcases display his excessive material possessions. He also has servants of superhuman proportions, removed from later versions of the book.

The caricature of the American oligarch and the plot of this story of cultural confrontation include Mister Twister’s virulent racism, which offers a scathing critique of the United States through his example. He offers the instruction: “Only see to it, / That there will not / Be nearby / Black people, / Chinese people, / And other / Rabble. / This Mister / Does not like / Colored folk” (7). The book thus offers a caricature and critique of American racism in contrast to the purported internationalism of communist ideals. Clearly the “other” is being used to project a favorable version of the self, or Soviet Union, through contrast to its ideological opposite, the United States of America. As Twister travels across the ocean by boat to Russia – “The steamship travels / From America to us” (12) – segregation by race is met to his satisfaction (14). The people he cannot abide, merely because of the color of their skin, travel the seas in a different steamship. That Twister himself owns steamships shows that his own racist beliefs may have an inordinate influence on the industry itself.

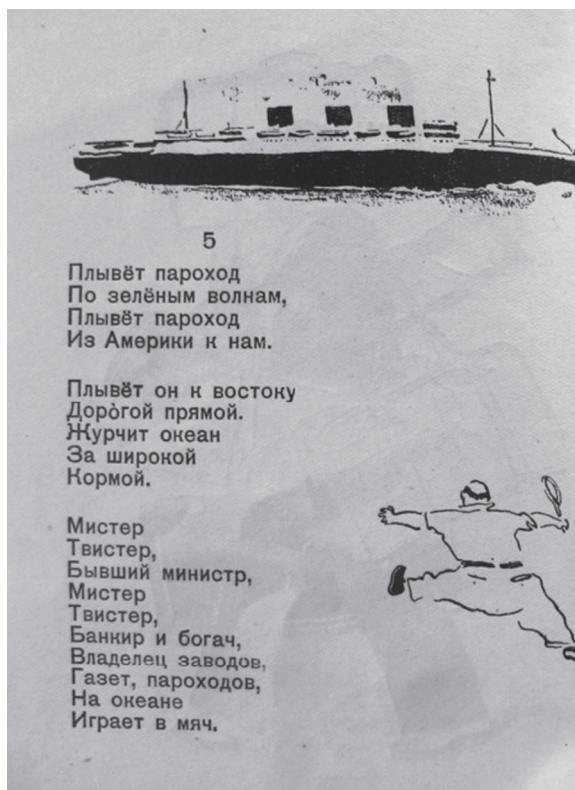


Figure 40. Illustration by Vladimir Lebedev for Samuil Marshak's *Mister Twister* [Mister Twister, 1933]. Art © Estate of Vladimir Lebedev/RAO, Moscow/VAGA, New York

The issues of segregation aboard ship highlighted here also provoke association with the fairly recent tragedy of the Titanic, which sank in 1912 and disproportionately affected the lower classes aboard the ship as the lifeboats were far too few. Indeed, the visual depiction by Lebedev of the ship in which Mister Twister travels (Figure 40), in both 1933 and 1937 editions, evinces a distinct resemblance to the Titanic itself. In contrast to this tragedy, or the labor or suffering aboard ship by the impoverished lower classes, “Mister / Twister, / The former minister, / Banker and money bags, / Director of factories, / Newspapers, steamships, / On the ocean / Plays at ball” (13). Twister thus stands at the top of the pyramid and power structure batted upon the common man and which is critiqued by communism through its propagandistic caricatures of fat “money bags” such as him. That the book is published during the era of the Great Depression only further deepens the injustice of such unevenly distributed resources and Twister’s ostentatious show of wealth and leisure.

In Soviet Russia, however, Mister Twister finds that he cannot continue to maintain his racist standards. Booked at the famous pre-revolutionary hotel Angleterre, meaning “England” in French, the Twisters are staying at a hotel demarcated as Anglo-American in Soviet Russia. It was later renamed with the more general *Evropeiskaya* or “European” rather than the specific “England,” as well as through a domesticated Russian adjective rather than the foreign or, in a Russian context, historically aristocratic French tongue. Even on a trip to the Soviet Union, however, Mister Twister finds he cannot be parted from his own domestic issues and values, though the Soviet Union will not tolerate them. At his hotel, he encounters a black man: “Suddenly / The foreigner’s / Mouth / Opened wide. / Mister Twister / Broke into / A sweat. // Above them / From Room Number / One hundred and ninety / Came / A dark-skinned person / Of enormous / Stature” (22). The illustrations of the 1937 edition (Figure 41) depict a strikingly and impeccably dressed tall black man in hat and with pipe, descending the stairs, and reflected six times in the mirrors around: “The black man / With his hand / Touching / The railing, / Walked / Calmly / And smoked / A pipe // And in the mirrors, / Resembling each other, / Walked / Black people, / Walked / Black people / Each Smoking / A short / Pipe” (24). This stylish individual, as underscored by the dynamic and cinematic visual representation of him, resembles famous film stars of the era, such as Buster Keaton.

In this historical time and space, this depiction may even refer to a poet of the Harlem Renaissance. The Jamaican poet and Harlem Renaissance member Claude McKay had visited the Soviet Union as early as 1922, a visit he describes in a 1923 article “Soviet Russia and the Negro” (1923–1924). In fact, McKay concludes this description of his visit by recounting a conversation with an Anglophile by the name Chukovsky. Chukovsky related to Claude McKay a story of American racism dating to his time in London. Chukovsky was staying in a boarding house in London when he was asked to serve as a messenger for the landlady in a racially discriminatory situation when a landlady felt compelled to deny a black American gentleman of the cloth access to the guest room in order to accommodate the demands of a racist white American family (1923: 118). This very episode seems oddly reflected in Marshak’s poem, including in the Anglophile specificity of the hotel Angleterre and in the reading I here propose where both the Twisters and the “dark-skinned” guest would be American. For the scenario in Marshak’s poem also represents a transplantation of racism in a kind of travelogue, where travelers fail to do “as the Romans do.”

Another Harlem Renaissance figure, the American poet Langston Hughes, was invited to visit the Soviet Union in 1932, the year before the publication of *Mister Twister*, along with twenty-two other black intellectuals who were fed up with legal segregation in the United States and looked hopefully at the ideals of international communism embodied in the USSR. The visit of these African-American poets



Figure 41. Illustration by Vladimir Lebedev for Samuil Marshak's *Mister Twister* (1937). Art © Estate of Vladimir Lebedev/RAO, Moscow/VAGA, New York

represented a propaganda opportunity for the Soviet Union and a mark of shame for the United States. Indeed, the illustration of this man in the less stylized 1937 edition certainly shows a certain resemblance to Langston Hughes. As for the pipe, a liking for pipes does figure in Hughes's poem "Theme for English B" in the lines "Well, I like to eat, sleep, drink, and be in love. / I love to work, read, learn, and understand life. / I like a pipe for a Christmas present, / or records, Bessie, bop, or Bach" (Hughes 1999: 207). The poem goes on to elaborate a theme appropriate for "Mister Twister": "I guess being colored doesn't make me not like / the same things other folks like who are other races. / So will my page be colored that I write? / Being me, it will not be white." Hughes's statements about race, as well as his play with color, writing, and the projection of the self upon a page, proves apt for Marshak and Lebedev's *Mister Twister* as well.

The American businessman cannot tolerate the racial integration he encounters in the Soviet Union. "Mister / Could not / Restrain his fury, / [He] looks / To the

right / And looks / To the left. / ‘If Black people are staying / In this hotel, / We will not for anything / Stay here’” (25). In his search for accommodation in Russia that meets his racist standards, and the American practice of segregation (which only ended with the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s), Mister Twister is outwitted by the Russian porter, who calls ahead and ensures his failure to find alternative accommodation.

When all Soviet hotels refuse to offer him accommodation, Twister’s daughter suggests that they simply buy a house, in yet another parody of capitalist overconsumption. “‘Buy it!’ The father / Answers, / Sighing. / ‘You are not in Chicago. / My dear’” (35). This famous line, where the spoiled daughter is forced to reconsider her assumptions in the face of an entirely new context, shows the new limitations placed upon the Twisters traveling outside of America and in the Soviet Union. But even this ideologically appropriate line can be misapplied in a subversive manner.



Figure 42. Cover design by Vladimir Lebedev for Samuil Marshak’s *Mister Twister* (1933). Art © Estate of Vladimir Lebedev/RAO, Moscow/VAGA, New York

The textual mention of Chicago specifically draws attention to another aspect of the characterization of Mister Twister. Indeed, Lebedev’s visual depictions of Mister Twister (Figure 42) in every way, down to his cigar and fedora, resemble the

infamous American gangster Al Capone, who led the crime syndicate “The Chicago Outfit” and was active in the 1920s and until 1931. Other aspects of Al Capone echoed in Lebedev’s depiction of Mister Twister are his prominent eyebrows and facial hair, his facial features and build, as well as his pose and the typical angle of his face due to scarring Capone had suffered on one side. As a result of the visual association accomplished by the illustrations, and perhaps triggered also by the text’s mention of Chicago (where, as the father’s response to his daughter’s suggestion indicates, anything goes), the excessively wealthy American in the story – and all of America perhaps? – is tainted by associations with crime and corruption. On the basis of such inequality, capitalism is itself corrupt, by implication. Indeed, wealth is viewed suspiciously. Turned back upon Soviet Russia, however, this implication also reflects on the New Economic Policy (NEP) period of economic liberalization in the 1920s in the Soviet Union. It also relates to a persistent Russian skepticism toward ill-gotten wealth with deep roots in the folk tradition and still evident today.

At the resolution of the story of Mister Twister, the American millionaire is forced to accept the simplest possible accommodation. He has a nightmare about not having a place even at home any longer, which indicates that his original assumptions have been shaken in a way he also will bring home with him. In the end, he must accept the original, racially integrated terms offered to him at the Soviet luxury hotel. The porter explains ecumenically:

“Only at the same time / Do keep in mind: / The room to the right / Is taken by a Chinese man, / The room to the left / By a Malaysian. / The room over you / Is taken by an Indian, / The room under you / Is taken by a Zulu man. / The room opposite / Is taken by a Creole woman / The room over her – / A Mongolian man and woman // And in the general / Neighborhood / Of yours / There will be / San, / Tuareg, / Papuan people!” (44–46)

The Soviet Union is thus presented as internationally attractive and diverse and upholding standards of racial equality, a propagandistic message and aspiration more true, perhaps, in propaganda than in reality.

Offering a similar vilification of America on racist grounds, the almost contemporary 1936 film “Circus” blends many of the themes in these early Soviet picturebooks. For example, it concludes with a scene where Soviet citizens of various ethnicities embrace and sing lullabies to the mixed race child of a white American circus artist, who has fallen victim to racism, but finds refuge, love, and happiness in the USSR. Juxtaposing such values, and early Soviet propaganda with issues still relevant today in both places, underscores how the same issues recur as each country struggles to define itself through opposition and project its own negative features on the “other.” Clearly propaganda or rhetoric differ from actual reality in Russia and the United States of America with respect to race and ethnicity, but

perhaps the critical view that each offers of the “other” from the outside can help to illuminate each country in a different light.

To sum up, these early Soviet picturebooks show a transformative shift in the depiction of America and the symbolic position it occupies for Russia or the Soviet Union that reflects the increasing presence of ideology in the picturebook. These books preserve characteristic views of the “other” shaped by literature, culture, and ideology from the nineteenth to the twentieth century and into the early Soviet period. The final example, which also reflects a changed aesthetic, having moved away from radical avant-garde depictions and closer to realism or a kind of caricature, illustrates how the Soviet Union had begun to establish its own identity in opposition to the West. It also seeks to resist the cultural attraction of America, evident in the earlier two books, through exaggerated propaganda that reflects its own anxieties, as well as a critical view of America as “other.” These depictions in image and text vacillate between poles of cultural attraction and ideological repulsion. In so doing, they display the rivalry that characterizes the relations of these two nations who provoke interest and horror in each other due to discordant values, as well as some deeper similarities.

The infantilization of thought and theory in books for children



Figure 43. Title page illustration by Mstislav Dobuzhinsky for Osip Mandelstam's *Primus* [Primus, 1925]

An illustration by artist Mstislav Dobuzhinsky for Osip Mandelstam's collection *Primus* (Figure 43) depicts the commonly held belief that an ostrich, whether out of cowardice, innocence, or naïveté, will hide its head in the sand in the face of danger. This belief has given rise to expressions like “to bury one’s head in the sand” in English or “to hide one’s head under a wing” in Russian. For this reason, when beleaguered writers and artists in the 1920s refer to the ostrich as symbol, their choice has broader implications. For example, when the prominent Formalist theorist and writer Viktor Shklovsky, in disgrace and forced to recant his views, chooses to write a children’s story from the perspective of an ostrich in his 1928 children’s book *Nandu II*, his choice of symbol signifies many things, although at first it may appear that he merely buries his head in the sand of children’s literature

to avoid the dangers around him. Compelled to adapt and re-orient himself by the countervailing pressures upon him in this period, Shklovsky finds a rare outlet in children's literature in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

Like Shklovsky, Mandelstam also refers to the ostrich as symbol in his 1925 collection of children's poems, which is called *Primus*, and contains the lines "Only ostriches in a desert / Hide their head under a wing." Mandelstam's formulation indicates that the ostrich's move is provoked by its context, rather than something intrinsic to its nature. The book's illustrator Mstislav Dobuzhinsky, who also illustrated *Three Fat Men* by Yury Olesha discussed in Chapter 6, emphasizes the ostrich in a subtle yet also prominent position on the title page. Appropriately perhaps, it hides behind the cover but still prominently introduces the content of the volume. The illustration shows an ostrich hiding its head beneath its wing, as the Russian expression would have it, as arrows from multiple directions fly all around it. Just so, prominent writers, artists, and intellectuals like Osip Mandelstam and Viktor Shklovsky sought refuge in children's literature during dangerous times. Sometimes only subtle visual cues, such as this ostrich illustration, address the pathos of the situation of trying to hide in the face of danger.

According to naturalists, however, ostriches are fierce and aggressive creatures. An understanding of their ecology reveals that they dig into the sand not because they seek to hide themselves, but to create a hidden safe haven for their eggs, which they tend and turn carefully when they appear to have their head in the sand. Faced with predators, ostriches instinctively protect their eggs not by hiding, but by running away from them at a fast clip, thus leading predators, which they prefer to outrun, on a wild goose chase – so as to deflect attention from the eggs they would protect. Perhaps more attention ought to be given to the buried eggs of the ostrich – and all the treasures that threatened writers have secreted within children's literature. An ecological approach that recontextualizes these artifacts within the environment from which they originated thus might reveal hidden meanings that could not be expressed at the time, as writers and artists had to adapt and reorient themselves in a rapidly changing environment.

Through the close analysis of little-known books by Viktor Shklovsky, including a children's book about the experiences of an ostrich during civil war and a picture-book about shadows from a puppy's perspective, this chapter illustrates how unexpected and personal philosophical ruminations and expressly forbidden theoretical views appear in picturebook form, due to circumstances necessitated by ideology or censorship. Considering Shklovsky's children's books in the context of the theories Shklovsky was being forced to disavow in this period enriches the interpretation of their implications. Though their simple surface may deflect the censor's eye, close scrutiny reveals more profound depths that communicate to a dual audience of children and adults. Clearly, treasures buried beneath the sands of children's literature by censored and silenced Soviet intellectuals merit closer scrutiny.

Of ostriches and *ostranenie*



Figure 44. Illustration by Nikolay Tyrsa for Viktor Shklovsky's "Straus" ["The Ostrich," 1928]

In 1928, Shklovsky published a semi-nonfictional story about an ostrich witnessing civil war in Russia. It appeared under the title "Straus" ["The Ostrich," 1928] in an early issue of the children's magazine *Hedgehog* (1928: 4) (Figure 44) and, in the same year, in a separate illustrated volume under the title *Nandu II* (1928) (Figure 45). This story may be regarded productively in the context of Shklovsky's theoretical interest in the naive perspective and the infantilist aesthetic more generally, since the selection of an ostrich as protagonist, the main device in the story, can be related to the theoretical concept that Shklovsky coined, which may be translated either as "estrangement" or "defamiliarization." The original Russian term *ostranenie*, in fact, contains an aural echo with "ostrich" in English or "straus" in Russian. If, as Shklovsky claims in his famous Formalist theoretical article "Art as Device" (1990: 58–72), art serves to make the stone "stony" again, then Shklovsky's ostrich also reminds us of the stone's stoniness – by eating it.



Figure 45. Illustration by Nikolay Tyrsa for Viktor Shklovsky's *Nandu II* [Nandu II, 1928]

The selection of an ostrich as a naive observer and locus of perspective defamiliarizes the actual subject and enables a detached account of war. This choice might be juxtaposed to Shklovsky's observation in "Art as Device," that humans can even become habituated to war: "Automatization devours [...] the fear of war" (63). Shklovsky's decision to deliver an account of the civil war in Russia from the naive perspective of an ostrich also draws from the example of Leo Tolstoy's earlier story "*Kholstomer*" ["Kholstomer," 1885], which is written from the perspective of a horse. Shklovsky subjects this story to prolonged analysis in "Art as Device," where he includes it as a key illustration for the concept of *ostranenie*. Though unusual in literature for adults, such anthropomorphism, which gives voice to a usually voiceless animal, is not unusual in fables, fairy tales, or children's literature, all genres close to Tolstoy's literary practice in his later pedagogical period when he himself compiled the primers *Azbuka* [Primer, 1872] and *Novaia Azbuka* [New Primer, 1875] (cf. Tolstoy 1978) and adapted reading materials in *Russkie knigi dlia chteniia* [Russian Books for Reading, 1875] (Tolstoy 1957). For both Tolstoy and Shklovsky, this unusual perspective provides an ideal vantage point from which to expose the strangeness of the most familiar elements of human society.

The story is set in the steppes below Melitopolis, the site of altercations between the opposed forces of Whites loyal to the Tsar and Reds fighting for revolution during the Civil War. Yet Shklovsky's story presents its hero as new to this setting, since he has recently arrived from abroad.

When the ostrich arrived from Hamburg to the steppes below Melitopolis, he was most of all surprised at the migratory birds: they were there in countless number. If he had not been brought here, he would not have come out of his own will. (3)

Through the ostrich's observations and specific reactions to his new environment, the narrative establishes the ostrich as a sentient being with a distinct perspective characterized by surprise, estrangement, and reflection. Like a travel account, this opening defines the narrative perspective as that of an exile. That the ostrich arrives from Germany, where Shklovsky himself had lived as an émigré in 1922–1923, seems significant.

As mentioned earlier, Shklovsky previously had compared exile and exotic animal in a zoo in the epistolary novel *Zoo. Letters Not About Love*, which he published while living in Berlin. In his symbolic account of the émigré experience, the émigré protagonist identifies with the monkey behind the bars of a cage:

The rest of the time the monkey climbs the bars of his cage, squinting at the public. I am doubtful, do we have the right to hold this distant relative of ours in prison without trial. And where is his consulate? The monkey probably longs for the forest. Humans seem like evil spirits to him. And all day this poor foreigner sits bored inside the Zoo.
(Shklovsky 2000: 28)

Shklovsky evinces a sympathetic perspective toward the creature in the cage, the description of which moves from monkey to distant relative, thereby recalling historical, evolutionary, and Darwinian kinship. He then takes the monkey's perspective to reflect on the experience of lacking a consulate or any kind of advocate and of being an exile far from his native environment, experiences which Shklovsky has recently shared. By the time the description culminates by calling the monkey a poor foreigner, it has fully humanized him.

In the 1920s, when these texts were written, human zoos, which contributed to the spectacularization of the "other," still existed in major Western cities (Blanchard 2008). The German merchant Carl Hagenbeck exhibited Samoan and Sami people beginning in 1874; then in 1876 arranged a Nubian exhibit that was very popular in Europe, touring Paris, London, and Berlin; and in 1880 began to exhibit Inuit people in the Hamburg Zoo. The 1878 and 1889 Parisian World Fairs included human zoos and, as late as 1931, the French Colonial Exhibition in Paris displayed humans, often nude or nearly nude, in cages. So, in short, though it is surprising and shocking today, what Shklovsky describes here is not far from the reality in major Western colonial capitals as late as the 1920s, when he is writing.

If the protagonist of the aptly named *Zoo* identifies with "this poor foreigner," then Shklovsky positions the reader of *Nandu II* to have the same experience, while identifying with a captive animal that offers a defamiliarized perspective on history and the reader's own surroundings. Indeed, the ostrich's travel account unfolds as a series of undigested impressions presented in a jarring sequence of juxtapositions typical of Shklovsky's prose style in writings for adults. A scene when the ostrich escapes is described in prose that juxtaposes human and animal in a comic image:

The ostrich ran quietly, his breathing inaudible. His eyes were calm. He ran with free, gymnastic bounds, like a long-legged English athlete in running shoes. And inside him ticked the clock. (18–19)

A jarring non sequitur about the object he has swallowed concludes the already surprising description. Abrupt shifts that express thoughts from the perspective of the naive ostrich also provide a comic effect.

Through the ostrich, the narrative describes the impact of war from a defamiliarized viewpoint. For example, gunfire is described as "thunder without lightning and rain" that "simply rumbled on its own" (9). In Tolstoyan fashion, this description employs a natural analogy to defamiliarize gunfire to make it seem strange again, though the ostrich, and the audience of the story, may have become completely accustomed to it: "Nandu II was not afraid of gunfire. He had gotten used to it," the text reads (18). It then concludes with a comic observation and shift of tone: "And, moreover, his head was very small" (18). This scene might be compared with the image of the ostrich, which is besieged by arrows and hiding its

head in the frontispiece to Mandelstam's *Primus* mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. Here the besieged writer, too, has made his head very small and become accustomed to the constant gunfire.

Comic relief from the serious subject, war, comes from naive moments provided by the naive ostrich. Infantile ingestion of inappropriate objects recurs as a comic theme. Like an orally fixated infant whose first encounters with the world involve putting things in his mouth, Nandu II eats all sorts of inappropriate things.

They raised Nandu II carefully. Every day at the predetermined time, he received his breakfast and main meal [...] But still, when he roamed free on the steppe, Nandu II swallowed all sorts of hard rubbish: little stones, dry bulbs, cobs of corn, in essence, everything that could pass through his throat. (9)

The expression of the ostrich's naive and infantile interactions with the world becomes a trademark for Nandu's character, and demonstrates how the story applies Shklovsky's theoretical concept of the naive perspective to make the stone stony again. When civil war disrupts the zoo animals' lives, the ostrich enjoys his unlimited access to rocks and garbage as a result of a newfound absence of scrutiny.

Nandu II walked around in the yard and took advantage of the fact that there were now more stones and garbage on the roads in the park. Nobody was watching over him and he gulped down stones to his heart's desire. (10)

In the climax of the story, the ostrich has a close encounter with history and the military commander Semyon Budenny, whose First Cavalry Army played an important role in winning the Civil War for the Soviets. After swallowing a soldier's watch and destroying an important message, the ostrich has no comprehension of his crime: "The ostrich stood, blinking his pink eyelashes" (18). Here Shklovsky poses innocently behind the ostrich as he offers an account of the disruptions of war, perhaps enjoying the fact that, in children's literature, "Nobody was watching over him."

In this scene the naive perspective comes face to face with history, uncomprehendingly, and thus provides a fresh and innocent view of events without considering deeper implications, just as Shklovsky's story offers an unexpected view on historical events. The ostrich's innocent eye yields a perspective that is simultaneously animal, naive, and infantile. At the same time, we see how the ostrich offers a safe and innocent distance from which the writer might observe and write about historical happenings for which he has served as an accidental witness and bystander. All creatures, from ostrich to puppy to human being had seen their lives fundamentally altered by the course of events, though Shklovsky, like Nandu, felt compelled to habituate himself and use adaptation as a survival strategy in a new and dangerous environment.

Taking a closer look at the seemingly innocent children's story and its unusual glimpse of military history, however, one might notice an account of trauma

within it. For example, the traumatic experience of the exile, whether estranged by geography or historical and political events beyond his or her control, is delivered by the ostrich, if in a naive manner. Thus one might give a second thought to such statements as “If he had not been brought here, he would not have come out of his own will” (3). In these years, many people, Shklovsky included, suffered displacement, whether they physically relocated or not, and dealt with the vagaries of fate in a tumultuous time, possibly even being left feeling like an ostrich helplessly hiding its head in the face of danger.

Through the ostrich’s account, *Nandu II* also bears witness to traumatic experiences of hunger and starvation that followed in the wake of civil war, such as the Russian famine of 1921, which killed an estimated six million people. The ostrich, of course, knows nothing of all this: “Nandu II doesn’t understand anything [...] The ostrich, of course, didn’t know anything about the civil war” (11). Still, the animals experience the disruption of war, and revolution, through hunger: “they were fed worse and worse” (12). Personal experience and specific details display its impact: “On this day Nandu II didn’t even get any barley” (14). Finally, a shared hunger is experienced by all creatures, including soldiers who begin to eye the zoo animals as food. Despite the fact that it is explained to military officers that bison are rare and that shooting them therefore was forbidden, in these conditions they view the bison merely as meat.

In the hunger caused by war, the regular boundaries around the zoo cease to exist, as do moral boundaries commonplace in times of peace. The collapse of the concern for the rare and exotic animals of the zoo becomes most evident when the ostrich’s own eggs are threatened.

Nandu II sat in the steppe by the park and tended his eggs. This time there were only a few of them. Nandu II was occupied by his task. And no one had ever bothered him before. But this morning unfamiliar people came and chased him away with a boot. And took the eggs. Nandu went to see what would happen next. In the yard there was a campfire. On the campfire there was a big frying pan. They cracked the eggs and started to make an omelette. (13)

Without sufficient background to know from whence these eggs appear (both male and female ostriches tend the eggs, at different times of day), readers witness the theft and consumption of the anthropomorphized ostrich’s carefully tended eggs. The loss of these eggs, a horrifying moment we witness with their caretaker with shock and horror, symbolizes the other losses and casualties of war, revolution, and all its disruptions. Shklovsky himself had personally experienced being forced to eat his words. By the late 1920s increasing pressure on the arts had forced Shklovsky to disassociate himself from the Russian Formalist school of theory he had helped found, and by 1930 he felt compelled to officially recant his Formalist views (Shklovsky 1930). As part of his adaptation to a new environment, Shklovsky had to re-orient himself entirely.

Struggling with one's own shadows

If Shklovsky's Civil War story of the ostrich uses a naive perspective to illuminate civil war to an audience of older children, then a picturebook Shklovsky wrote three years later even more fully enters into a naive vantage-point to address a still younger audience, as shown by its picturebook form. If his previous story had an educational component and appeared in a work where words predominate over image, this picturebook instead offers an intensely personal and philosophical experience focalized through the infantile persona of a puppy facing fear and apparent existential threats. Illustrated by the artist Tatyana Lebedeva, *Skazka o teniakh* [A Story About Shadows, 1931] (Figure 46) purports to treat the subject of shadows, from a perspective accessible to even very young children. Compared to *Nandu II*, the picturebook addresses a significantly younger and more naive audience, thereby recalling Shklovsky's celebration of the naive perspective in his theoretical works. In both cases Shklovsky focalizes the narrative perspective through a naive animal, but here it is not only an animal, but a young animal – a puppy lacking experience of the world's phenomena. For this reason, the puppy interprets everything he sees literally. This infantile simplicity actually results in greater profundity.

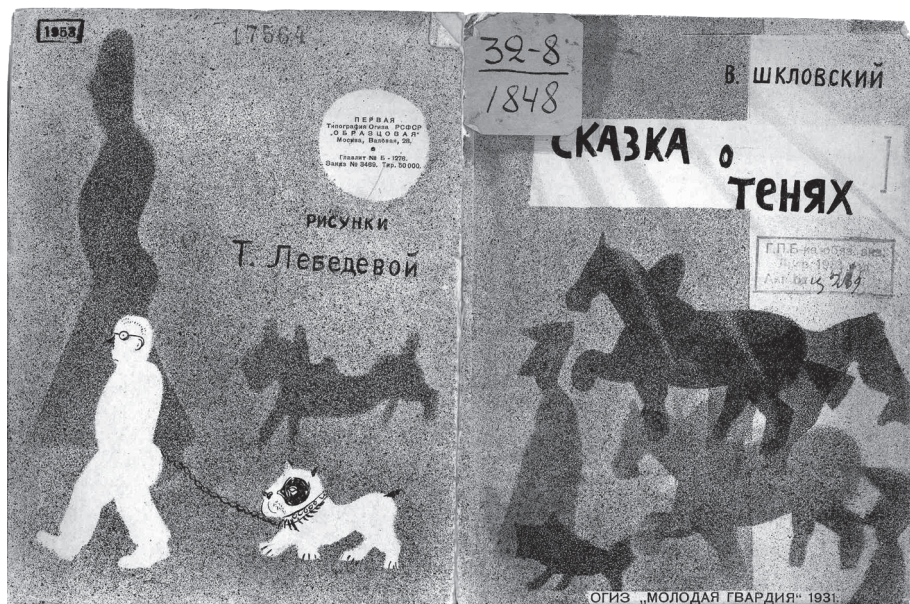


Figure 46. Cover design by Tatyana Lebedeva for Viktor Shklovsky's *Skazka o teniakh* [A Story about Shadows, 1931]. Art © Estate of Tatjana Lebedeva-Mavrina/RAO, Moscow/VAGA, New York

In this light, one might consider writer Yevgeny Zamyatin's declarations about children as philosophers in his 1923 essay "On Literature, Revolution, Entropy, and Other Matters." He declares, "children are the boldest philosophers. They enter life naked, not covered by the smallest fig leaf of dogma, absolutes, creeds. This is why every question they ask is so absurdly naive and so frighteningly complex" (1970: 110). This contemporaneous view of children as philosophers proves appropriate for Shklovsky's puppy protagonist who knows nothing and therefore asks big questions. Zamyatin goes on to compare this state to that of the new men of the day, who also must ask foolish questions in the face of radical changes, such as Shklovsky too has experienced: "The new men entering life today are as naked and fearless as children; and they too, like children [...] ask 'Why?' and 'What next?' Philosophers of genius, children, and the people are equally wise – because they ask equally foolish questions" (110). Zamyatin also critiques the complacency of those who fail to ask questions and misjudge important questions: "Foolish to a civilized man who has a well-furnished European apartment, with an excellent toilet, and a well-furnished dogma" (110). Zamyatin's ruminations capture the spirit of the post-revolutionary moment and the radical reconfiguration of society that rendered people, such as Shklovsky, "as naked and fearless as children."

Indeed, Shklovsky had undergone dramatic changes in this period, having been forced to disavow his theoretical views in the year before the publication of *A Story About Shadows*. Though this picturebook's visual and verbal symbols may at first seem comical and light-hearted, they also have profound and philosophical significance, as do the questions of the philosopher-child Zamyatin describes. The puppy's dilemmas often attain existential proportions. Shklovsky's short and segmented prose style characterized by abrupt and unexpected transitions proves appropriate for the absurdity of the text and its picturebook form. Shklovsky's trademark style thus proves naive in itself.

A Story About Shadows treats a "completely foolish puppy." It begins simply and abruptly:

On Alexandrovsky Alley there lived a completely foolish puppy.
 His father was a bulldog from the fourth floor of building 41.
 His mother was a dachshund from the bottom floor of building 43.
 And they called him himself Roshchik.
 Roshchik's master was a writer, he had a wife and three children.
 Count them.
 Roshchik couldn't yet remember his master's last name.
 Roshchik is three months old.
 He's a completely foolish puppy.

(1)

The direct address to the implied child reader, and the simple cognitive task that is proposed, takes advantage of the performative nature of the picturebook form. It thus welcomes the implied child reader at the same time that it mocks the foolishness of the puppy. But it then offers an explanation for the puppy's foolishness – he is only three months old. It is mere ignorance, then, and a naïveté that is to be expected.

In its use of the puppy's ignorant viewpoint, the text again employs the naive perspective that is privileged within Shklovsky's theoretical concept of defamiliarization, just as occurs in *Nandu II*. In "Art as Device" Shklovsky explains "the device of defamiliarization" through comparison with the description of things "as if seen for the first time" (1990: 64). Indeed, without experience or empirical knowledge, the puppy observes everything for the first time through his infantile perspective. Occurrences that prove familiar to the book's audience of children and adults for him are strange and unfamiliar. The true substance of the story, then, is his attempt to understand the world from an absurdly naive perspective. The puppy as character thus offers Shklovsky an opportunity to defamiliarize the subject of "shadows" for an audience of children. The absurd and existential interpretations of the puppy's empirical observations of shadows also resonate on another level for an audience of adults.

The puppy's ignorant foolishness is first manifest as fear, or a paralyzing uncertainty about the unknown. Of course, in light of Zamyatin's article and Shklovsky's own recent experiences, such a fear of a brave new world proves not unfounded from the author's own perspective. Lebedeva's illustrations (Figure 47) display the puppy's observations of shadows at various hours of the day, thereby offering child readers a chance to interpret these phenomena on their own, or to enter into the puppy's naive perspective on the world. At the beginning of the story, the puppy cannot determine which paw to lift first when it is time to get up in the morning. Overwhelmed by the possibilities, the puppy is paralyzed and immobile.

He is so silly that in the morning he doesn't know which paw to get up with.
 With the right front? Or the back left?
 And he has four paws.
 So he lay there until 12 o'clock pm, shuffling his paws. (2)

Though seemingly absurd and comic, this situation belies philosophical depth since it poses a puzzle involving motion, time, and infinity. In this sense, the scenario is comparable to Zeno's paradox, itself a logical puzzle and textbook example of *reductio ad absurdum*. It also shows a case of agonizing paralysis as a result of ignorance or inability to decide what to do that is also applicable to Shklovsky's own situation. For an audience of children, the picturebook poses a cognitive puzzle to engage the child and children's own logic in another participatory episode within the story, like

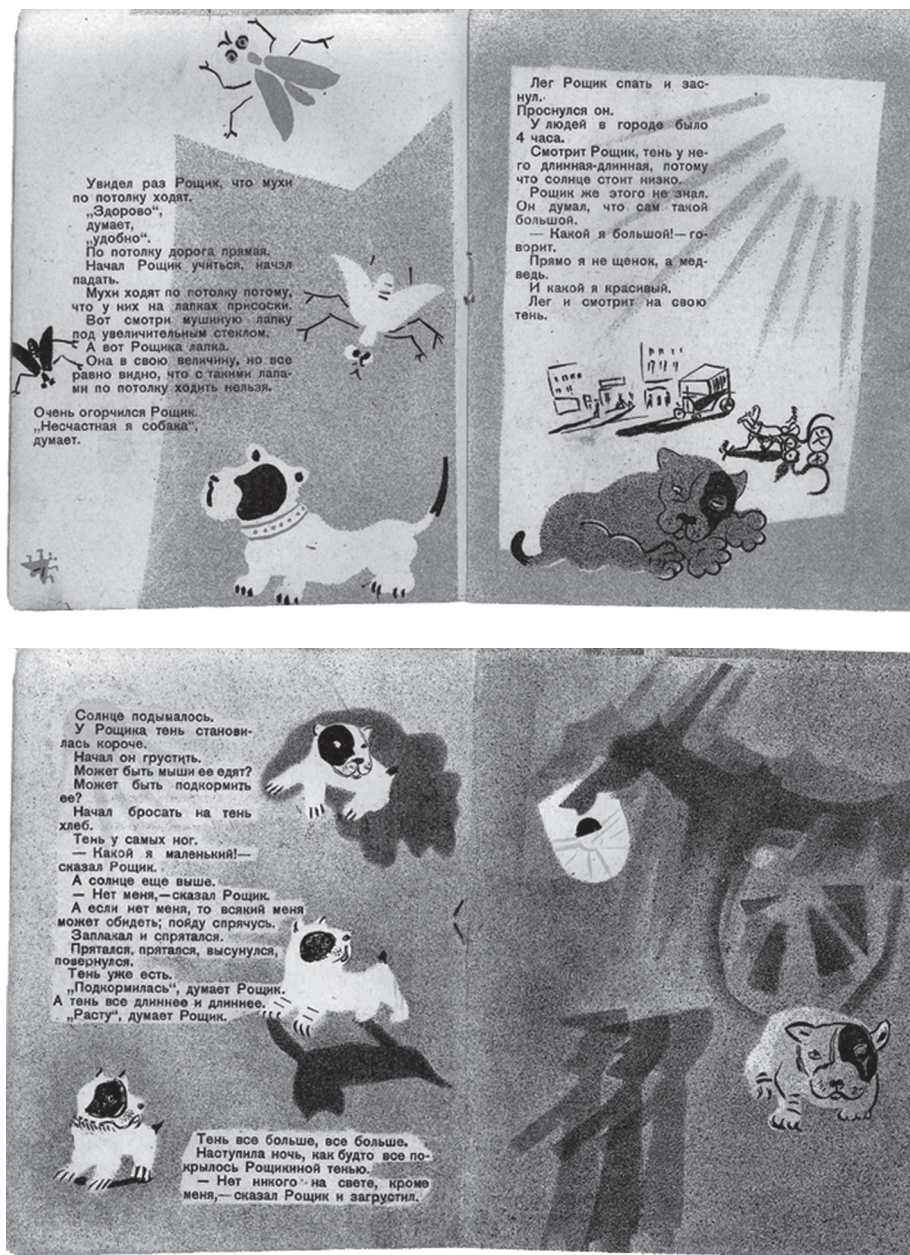


Figure 47. Doublespreads by Tatyana Lebedeva for Viktor Shklovsky's *A Story about Shadows*. Art © estate of Tatjana Lebedeva-Mavrina/RAO, Moscow/VAGA, New York

the counting task proposed at the beginning. This signals the cognitive challenges the picturebook intends to pose for an audience of children, and adults, whom it challenges to see beyond surfaces, such as the characterization of the puppy as foolish and silly, when he actually proves philosophical and inexperienced.

The theme of shadows signaled by the title of the book is also a philosophically significant subject, with intertextual echoes, in Plato's Cave, for example. Here the puppy confronts the interpretation of selfhood through shadows.

Roshchik went to bed and fell asleep.
 He woke up.
 For people in the city it was 4 o'clock.
 Roshchik looked around. His shadow was very very long, because the sun was low.
 But Roshchik didn't know this. He thought that he himself was that big.
 "How big I am!" he says.
 As if I'm not a puppy, but a bear.
 And how I am beautiful.
 He lay and looked at his shadow. (4)

Encountering shadows "for the first time," the puppy understandably interprets them literally. Based on his observations of his shadow, he concludes that he too is large, since, in the absence of any evidence or experience to the contrary, he presumes there a one-to-one correspondence between an object and its shadow. In admiring his own shadow, the puppy also resembles Narcissus and betrays a fatal flaw.

His error is that, lacking knowledge to draw upon, he bases his conclusions unquestioningly on his empirical observations of the world from his unavoidably naive perspective. Even if they prove absurd in their implications, the puppy's logic is sound, from within a naive and limited perspective, such as in Plato's cave. Considering Shklovsky's theoretical background, however, illuminates how the puppy's naive perspective serves to defamiliarize everyday phenomena like shadows and movement, objects and their representation, and even logic and cognition themselves. The puppy's thought process removes everything from its original context and the basic assumptions that accumulate through experience. Rejecting the habituation of the adult perspective, the picturebook instead singles out everyday phenomena for philosophical questioning through its use of the absurd. In these respects, Shklovsky's story may be related to the writings of other contemporary avant-garde writers who treat existential themes very seriously through the guise of the absurd, such as writer Daniil Kharms discussed in Chapter 10.

Due to his wholly literal interpretation of the world's phenomena, the puppy arrives at existentially frightening deductions. Since he deduces that he is large on the basis of the size of his shadow, the puppy's sense of self is threatened when his shadow grows smaller and vanishes.

The sun rose. Roshchik's shadow got shorter. [...]
 "I'm so small!" says Roshchik.
 And the sun went still higher.
 "I am no more," said Roshchik.
 And if I am no more, then anyone can harm me; I'll go and hide myself.
 He started to cry and hid himself.
 He hid, hid, hid, peeked out, turned over.
 There's a shadow already. (5)

The puppy is traumatized by his own thought process. Shklovsky's picturebook demonstrates how terrifying the world may be when regarded from a naïve perspective.

This picturebook for very young children thus includes paradoxical and deeply philosophical themes, as well as a personal account of existential trauma from narcissism to a threat to one's sense of self. Only the naïveté of the story makes it possible to include such an existentially shocking statement as "I am no more." At the same time, on an adult level of discourse, inflected by experience, intertextual allusions, and Aesopian nuance, these statements may be read allegorically and for subtler gradations of meaning. Thus the puppy's short-lived narcissism and despair may be seen to reflect Shklovsky's own personal experiences and self-critique – of sudden success and excessive pride before his fall from grace. Shklovsky too witnessed the disappearance of his previous identity and a need to adapt to the situation and re-orient his life and work. The fact that the adult on the cover of the book (Figure 45) resembles Shklovsky himself thus proves indicative. Perhaps it was precisely such disgrace and existential fear that he was experiencing in the period that he began to write for children.

Despite such existential implications that might emerge for an audience of adults, Shklovsky offers many more cognitive puzzles in his picturebook *A Story about Shadows* than do other children's books. His playful tone may reflect his younger audience and the spirit of the children's journals *Ezh* [Hedgehog] and *Chizh* [Siskin],² in the former of which he first published his ostrich story. It may also reflect the influence of avant-garde writers, such as absurdist writer Daniil Kharms, who regularly contributed to them. At the picturebook's conclusion, Shklovsky offers cognitive puzzles for his child reader such as might be included in these magazines:

2. *Chizh*. *Ezhemesiachnyi zhurnal dlia detei mladshego vozrasta* (Leningrad: Gosizdat, 1930–1941). "Chizh" also stands for the initial letters in the description "Exceedingly Interesting Journal [*Chrevyichaino interesnyi zhurnal*]."

A cab was driving past.
 "It would be great to ride a cab," thinks Roshchik: no need to sort out your paws.
 I will sit on its shadow and have a ride.
 He ran up and sat.
 The shadow went away.
 He ran up again and sat.
 The shadow went away.
 "Unlucky," thinks Roshchik and went homeward and out of this book.
 This is the end.

(10)

If the text gently mocks the puppy, who cannot distinguish between objects and their projections, and foolishly tries to ride on a shadow, then it also challenges the child reader to laugh and outwit him. Its curt and abrupt description typifies Shklovsky's prose style, while a sudden metatextual end grants the puppy escape from the book that mocks him. Even its metatextuality, then, offers the child a cognitive puzzle of sorts, with a comic and reassuring effect for the child reader. The adult reader, and the author himself, however, may also long for escape from discourse that mischaracterizes one. The book's conclusive pronouncement that the story is over, "This is the end," also resembles characteristic language by Shklovsky's avant-garde contemporaries like Kharmis. Projecting this declaration onto the trauma of Shklovsky's own recent experiences and the dissolution of his expressive possibilities adds a tragic tone to an otherwise playful pronouncement.

Shklovsky's theoretical views and personal experiences find further embodiment in such little-known works for children. His picturebook about shadows displays the intimate interior experience of ignorance and fear, narcissism and self-doubt. His children's story about an ostrich, whose defamiliarized perspective might help us see war from a different perspective, also shows what it might be like to be an innocent bystander as history takes its dramatic course. Far more than it would appear to, it also treats the distinctions and commonalities between humans and other animals and explores the idea of the zoo and how people treat the exotic under regular circumstances and under duress. Worth remembering also is how ostriches, despite their inaccurate popular reputation for being cowardly and naive by hiding their heads in the sand, are actually aggressive and dangerous, and that they prefer to outrun danger. They distract pursuers from the eggs they have surreptitiously nestled in the sand. Perhaps such an adaptation proves a reasonable strategy in an inimical environment, since, if these eggs are hidden well enough, they will come to no harm and may hatch another day, as secret messages in Shklovsky's picturebooks now do.

Authorial appearances in picturebooks

After his death, Vladimir Mayakovsky was made into an official Soviet poet, which indeed reflected the revolutionary ardor and ideological convictions of his youth, but not necessarily the spirit of avant-garde experiment in his work or the personal and political disillusionment he experienced at the end of his life. In this respect, Mayakovsky, at least initially, differed from many other figures treated in this book, who refused or only reluctantly or barely included an ideological component in their work once these selective pressures could not be resisted, and sooner or later were forced to discount their views or be persecuted by the regime. Ideologically Mayakovsky thus had more in common with figures such as Marshak and Lebedev, who accommodated and adapted their work to what the times required, or Shklovsky, who redefined and re-oriented himself in part through film and children's literature, and thus were able to maintain their careers in some form and achieve greater longevity. In Mayakovsky's case, however, the ideological component of his work and his politically motivated address to children was perhaps the most earnest. In his work, ideology and avant-garde art fused unproblematically to begin with, although these previously compatible components later became prohibitively incompatible even for him. Ultimately, Mayakovsky proved the most adaptable after his death, when the authorities made him into whatever they wished.

Mayakovsky enters into his work quite directly as an authorial presence whether writing for children or for adults. For instance, the tellingly named "Vladimir Maiakovskii. Tragediia" ["Vladimir Mayakovsky. A Tragedy"] features "Vladimir Mayakovsky (poet of 20–25 years)" first in its cast of characters. This chapter, focusing on Vladimir Mayakovsky's *Eta knizhechka moia pro moria i pro maiak* [This is My Book About the Seas and About a Lighthouse, 1927], *Chto ni stranitsa, to slon to l'vitsa* [Not a Page Without an Elephant or Lioness, 1928], and *Chto takoe khorosho i chto takoe plokho?* [What Is Good and What Is Bad?, 1925], looks at the child addressee as audience and analyzes the appearances of authorial doubles of Vladimir Mayakovsky within his innovative Russian avant-garde picturebooks. Such metatextual moments, which call attention to the text by alluding to a text lying outside another text, expand the arena of the picturebook and display how Mayakovsky's oft-discounted picturebooks resemble his works for adults. Like these, they too must be considered within their ecological environment and an avant-garde aesthetic context of political agitation, provocation, and performance,

as well as specific practices like photomontage and collage. They also display to what extent Mayakovsky considered children to be a significant audience, not only because of political motivations but also in a multidimensional sense.

Though Mayakovsky has been celebrated for his poetry for adults, it is seldom acknowledged to what extent the celebrated revolutionary poet Vladimir Mayakovsky specifically addressed an audience of children, despite the fact that he wrote numerous works for children.³ Even among his works for adults, two of the poems included in his famous collection *For the Voice* address the child audience quite directly. In addition to Mayakovsky's revolutionary "The Tale of Little Red Cap," which was discussed in Chapter 2, another illustrated item in this collection, "*Khoroshee otnoshenie k loshadiam*" ["Kindness to Horses," 1923] also involves a child as addressee (Mayakovsky 1923b).

This famous poem about kindness to animals, or literally "Good Relations With Horses" also engages with a significant literary history of the treatment of a horse, or a mare in particular (cf. Lahti 2010: 146–149). For example, in *Crime and Punishment* (1866), Raskolnikov's dream about a beaten mare proves a test of character for those who witness it. Known as an animal lover himself, Mayakovsky famously signed personal letters with a doodle of a puppy, thus identifying with the animal and the infantile at once (Lahti details Mayakovsky's relationship to animals, including a discussion of the etiology of this signature in Lahti 2010: 138–139). In Mayakovsky's poem "Kindness to Horses," human and animal, as well as infant and adult, forms commingle and blur in an empathic experience of common feeling – "some kind of common animal anguish." The speaker in the poem attains a moment of recognition, identification, and compassion for the horse and addresses the horse directly by calling it a child, using the rare diminutive form "*detočka* [babe]": "Babe, / we are all horses to some extent, / each of us is horselike in our own way" (55). Clearly this central message of the poem is addressed to a wide audience – all who have the empathic ability to move fluidly between subjectivities of human and animal, adult and child, and step into the subject position of the "dear child" who is addressed here. Or, for that matter, any "dear child" who might see to the heart of the matter when witnessing an act of cruelty to animals, as Raskolnikov's young dream-self does in *Crime and Punishment*.

So the message of the poem is not only that we are all horselike in some way, but also that all have a compassionate inner child who is sensitive to the experience of others and that compassionate acts have the potential to restore someone to themselves and restore a will to live. Indeed, the horse, which the poet at one point calls a "red baby" using a distinctly human term, feels itself a foal again: "it

3. In addition to works analyzed in this book, these also include *Kon'-ogon'* [Fire-Horse, 1927] and *Kem byt'?* [Who [Do You Want] To Be?, 1929] (cf. Mayakovsky 1958c: 215–276).

seemed to her that / she was a foal.” In so doing, at the conclusion to the poem by Mayakovsky (who himself would commit suicide in 1930 and could perhaps relate to such feelings) the horse finds a reason to live again: “and life was worthwhile / work was worthwhile!” (55). Clearly the infantile form, whether child or animal, acts as a kind of restorative moral touchstone for Mayakovsky.

The child audience in Mayakovsky’s picturebooks

Children represent a particularly poignant and meaningful audience for Mayakovsky. In the avant-garde picturebook for children *This Is My Book About the Seas and About a Lighthouse* (1927) illustrated by Boris Pokrovsky (Figure 48), Mayakovsky reveals a model of authorship that sheds light on his writings, art, and life more generally. A descriptive poem about the plight of sailors lost at sea and the ability of a hardworking lighthouse to bring them home safely, it concludes with an appeal to its audience: “My book cries out: / – Children, / To all, who cannot move at night, / be like a lighthouse! / light up their path with fire.” Mayakovsky thus shares with children an image of what he aspires to be: a lighthouse that illuminates a path for others. In an unusually intimate presentation of his self, though he is a common hero in his works for adults, the poet declares himself as the author, “In order to tell you about this, / this book’s words and drafts of drawings / were made by Uncle Mayakovsky.” By issuing an earnest plea in his own voice and concluding it with his own name, Mayakovsky embeds himself in the text of *This Is My Book* in a metatextual manner typical of his other experimental picturebooks for children, as well as his authorship generally.

When he intimately terms himself “Uncle Mayakovsky,” the poet bares a deeper metaphorical link as well. Clearly the idea for this most personal and revealing book derives from the root of his own name, *maiak* or lighthouse. The avant-garde poet thus declares himself openly to an audience of children. As Uncle Lighthouse, he strives to be a moral example and a metatextual guide lighting the path into and through the world of text and image. This vision also revives latent symbolism interrelating light and literacy, enlightenment and knowledge, and seeing and understanding. In all of these ways, Mayakovsky strives to be a beacon that opens portals to other worlds and minds to new ideas. Thus Mayakovsky in this children’s book constructs himself as a visionary and prophet in accordance with a traditionally Russian model of the poet. Placing Mayakovsky’s picturebooks in the context of earlier avant-garde experiments with verbal and visual form reveals that Mayakovsky’s picturebooks bring an avant-garde treatment of the text to a new audience: children. These books illustrate Mayakovsky’s model of art as a transcendent path leading to a greater metaphysical or metatextual knowledge. In all of his



Figure 48. Cover design by Boris Pokrovsky for Vladimir Mayakovsky's *Eta knizhechka moia pro moria i pro maiak* [This is My Book about the Seas and about a Lighthouse, 1927]

writings, including these picturebooks, Mayakovsky views himself as a beacon and herald of a revolutionary future. His children's books also show that he perceived a central role for Russian children in the construction and realization of that ideal future. At the same time, however, the books demonstrate the paradoxical place of the avant-garde artist in early Soviet times. They display the experiment and the innovation of the avant-garde aesthetic, but also reveal a heavy-handed didacticism deriving from a revolutionary aspiration to remake the future into an ideal image.

Mayakovsky's books for children thus deliver avant-garde experimentalism both in their texts, through experimental and playful forms of language and expression, and in their sophisticated interplay of image and text. The picturebook collaborations of author and illustrator, as well as the interdependence of text and image, produce uniquely rich works of art. Yet Mayakovsky's own fraught identity as an avant-garde writer and a political revolutionary also becomes manifest in these picturebooks, where such occasionally discordant elements coexist and coevolve. Whether writing

an experimental and playful poem for children or a socialist and socializing work of propaganda, Mayakovsky's didacticism comes from a sense of moral conviction and revolutionary ardor. Paradoxically, he often realizes these didactic impulses in experimental ways. Mayakovsky's example thus uniquely reveals how politics and art can coexist when avant-garde and revolutionary may be one and the same. As Uncle Lighthouse, he constructs himself as a moral guide and a lonely hero. Yet, in some senses, he also stands as a beacon of the avant-garde aesthetic in increasingly tumultuous times, which eventually would catch up with him too.

If conventional wisdom presumes that prominent Russian figures turned to children's literature only as a last resort when other publication possibilities had grown increasingly restricted, Mayakovsky's example counters such notions. The poet believed strongly in the importance of children's literature as part of his revolutionary convictions, as evidenced by his numerous publications for children. Moreover, the verbal and visual features of Mayakovsky's children's books unproblematically feature avant-garde experimentation alongside ideology. If avant-garde art increasingly had become imperiled in other forms of publication, Mayakovsky's works offer a concrete example of how children's literature served as the last bastion of the avant-garde aesthetic.

Between 1925 and 1929 alone, Mayakovsky published thirteen works for children (cf. Mayakovsky 1958a: 215–762). Apart from one post-glasnost study (Ebin 1989), however, this aspect of his creativity has received scant scholarly attention (an exception is Petrovsky 1986). Publications in English are still more limited, confined to a brief mention of Mayakovsky in the few surveys of Russian children's literature that exist (Loseff 1984; Sokol 1984; Steiner 1999; Hellman 2013b). This chapter seeks to redress that neglect by closely examining two of these little-known books and arguing for their significance as works that partake in the avant-garde experiments of the postrevolutionary period through their innovative use of image and text.

Mayakovsky's most experimental and self-conscious book for children, *Chto ni stranitsa, to slon to l'vitsa* [Not a Page without an Elephant or a Lioness, 1928], serves as an effective guide for children into the world of the book. Illustrated by the avant-garde artist Kirill Zdanevich, it is a remarkable example of the picture-book as iconotext and has many points of contact with avant-garde graphic design, typography, and illustration. As Mayakovsky's title indicates, the book occupies and self-consciously confuses the space between fiction (the page) and the real world (animals). The title itself implies that the elephant and lioness exist independently from the page conventionally seen to confine them. Zdanevich's cover illustration (Figure 49) also treats the book materially as a three-dimensional space out of which an elephant and a lioness can emerge. It is thus more akin to a theatrical set or the gates of a zoo than to a fictional work. This idea of the book as a portal to and from another world also partakes in metaleptic traditions of children's literature



Figure 49. Cover design by Kirill Zdanevich for Vladimir Mayakovsky's *Chto ni stranitsa, to slon to l'vitsa* [Not a Page without an Elephant or a Lioness, 1928]

worldwide (on metafiction in children's literature, see Nikolajeva 1996a: 189–206, and on metafictionality in picturebooks, see Allan 2012). It also resonates with other descriptions of early encounters with literacy from the perspective of race and ethnic studies. Indeed, accounts of initial literary experiences often employ metaphors of life and animation or voice and orality to render the profound effect of literature on the heretofore inexperienced or naive reader (on the “talking book,” see Gates 1988: xxv).

In this sense, then, Mayakovsky's book embraces the uncertain border between fiction and reality typical of a naive encounter with literature – before literary conventions have been firmly established and the boundary between art and life becomes clear. At the same time, however, this rejection of the distinction between fiction and reality may be compared with the avant-garde's defiance of these same boundaries through the performative manner in which they turned literature into life and life into literature. Such performative qualities also appear in this book, where the theatrical entertainment that is staged between its covers also

reaches into the real world and brings the author into the text and to an audience of children. For instance, the first page of the book offers a dramatic textual and visual opening.

Here the author himself, who is indicated in the text by the first-person “I,” stands in the lower right corner of the page (Figure 50). With a schematic body of unrealistic proportions and pose, he extends his right arm upward toward the figure of a lion. The author’s head is a photographic insertion among otherwise stylized lithographic illustrations that make up a typically avant-garde use of collage and photomontage. The face is, of course, Mayakovsky’s own. In his left hand he holds a red book with an unmistakable cover design further underscored by the minuscule print on its cover revealing it to be Mayakovsky’s *For the Voice*. Clearly, the avant-garde aesthetic enters into this children’s book, as indicated so literally here by the visual-textual quotation from Mayakovsky’s earlier work (an example of both intertextuality and intervisuality) and by his own face and declamatory posture.



Figure 50. Illustration by Kirill Zdanevich for Vladimir Mayakovsky’s *Not a Page without an Elephant or a Lioness*

The direct entrance of the writer into the text, which thus brings it closer to the mode of oral delivery and spontaneous performance, is typical of Mayakovsky's work for adults. He famously declaimed his own verse with a stentorian voice and retained this oral quality within his writings, as indicated by titles like *For the Voice* and his last work, *Vo ves' golos* [At the Top of My Voice, 1930] (Mayakovsky 1958d). Moreover, the hero in these writings is often Mayakovsky himself, as in his poem "Ia" ["I"] in the illustrated book *Vladimir Mayakovsky: A Tragedy* (1914) and many other works. Mayakovsky brings the same elements to bear in his works for children, which he enters metatextually.

In *Not a Page without an Elephant or a Lioness*, the representation of the book on the cover of the book itself expands the concept of the book into a three-dimensional experience with exciting – and perhaps threatening – implications. The author and artist present a revolutionary work meant to unsettle and surprise the reader into looking at things in a new way. The revolutionary tone of the book becomes clear on its first page, where the text reads: "Here I'm showing you a lion / please / have a look: / he's / not at all the king of beasts / simply a chairman." For his child audience, Mayakovsky makes literal the metaphors of Russian political life: the revolution deposes those who declare themselves to have imperial power over others. Now, they can aspire only to the chairmanship of a council or party meeting. The lion wears a red band across his chest, signaling his adoption of the revolution. Having reformed his imperial ways, he patiently rings a bell for the attention of the council of animals. The typographic rendering of Mayakovsky's text also favors the color red and uses it to draw attention to certain significant words presented in larger sizes than words in black type. The words thus enlarged and highlighted are "lion," "I," "he" (referring to the lion), and "chairman." In other words, the large red type marks those who have embraced the ideals of the revolution and are held up as models for emulation.

Such sophisticated interplay of verbal and visual elements and the composite visual effect of typography and layout risk being lost completely when the picturebook is not treated as an iconotext, since image and text play equal roles in the experience and performance of the picturebook. This fact might explain the scholarly neglect of this remarkable work, because academic editions have presented Mayakovsky's poem only in a purely textual form. Even the canonical scholarly rendering of the poem in Mayakovsky's complete collected works (Mayakovsky 1958a) omits a crucial opening page that in the original experiments with image and text, illustration and typography, and metatextual metaphors. As editor Svetlana Kovalenko notes, it was Mayakovsky himself who imperfectly recalled the published poem when asked to provide an authoritative version for the collection (370–713). Either the author himself thus failed to recall and treat the work as an iconotext, or else he recognized on some level the impossibility of translating its original picturebook form into the plain text required by an academic volume.

At the top of the unnumbered first page, a horizontal text in black reads, “Open the page door.” From the upper left corner, where the word “Open” begins, a crocodile in a diagonal placement links up with a series of animals in circular procession around the page – crocodile, pelican, camel, llama, monkey, elephant, zebra, giraffe, kangaroo, and a lion with a red banner across his back. The inspiration for the animals represented within this book came from creatures at the New York Zoological Park (Bronx Zoo), which Mayakovsky visited during his stay in America in 1925, at the time he began to write this poem (Kovalenko 1958: 370). At the end of this circular procession of images, the text continues, first in horizontal and then circular formation: “in the book / [are] the most varied beasts.” Here the largest red letters are used for the word “book,” which would contain these animals, as if they were real, in this metafictional interplay of book and picture. The layout of image and text across this page simulates the idea that the text expresses. Upon “opening the page door,” the reader sees a procession of animals streaming past. It is “in the book” that these most varied creatures have their home.

The cover and opening page thus invite the child reader into the world of the book, where all these enticing animals originate, return, and belong. As a whole, the composition celebrates “the book” generally, as well as “this book” in particular, and the text refers to the presentation in a self-conscious manner. The text also employs a metatextual metaphor through the unusual formulation “open the page door.” An actual book indeed would have been opened moments before this command to the reader is revealed. Grammatically, in Russian, the imperative “open” (*otkryvai*) cannot be used with “page,” although it can apply to a book. Thus the grammar of the sentence indicates that the direct object of the imperative “open” is the “door.” Yet, the juxtaposition of the words “page” and “door” has created a simple metaphor for children about metatextuality and literacy: the pages of a book and the book itself resemble doors that may be opened to provide entrance to the dominion of the creatures who peer out from the confines of the book on the cover. These animals also amount to a visual summary of the contents of the book for its potentially nonliterate and therefore more visually oriented audience.

Another remarkable example of Mayakovsky’s metatextual perspective is the doublespread (Figure 51) that introduces a family of elephants. The doublespread is filled with text and images of various sizes. The words again blur the line between fiction and reality: “As if alive / in our book / [are] papa elephant / mother elephant / and baby elephants.” Here the use of the plural possessive “our” embraces author, illustrator, and audience through the shared experience of the book. Mayakovsky’s innovative play with sounds, exemplified here with the elephant family cited above, “*slon, slon-ikha i slonishki*,” and at another point with “*lama doch’ i lama mama* [llama daughter and llama mama],” seems consciously adapted for an audience of children who relish simple sound repetition and rhyme, as theorized by Chukovsky in *From Two to Five*.



Figure 51. Illustrations by Kirill Zdanevich for Vladimir Mayakovsky's *Not a Page without an Elephant or a Lioness*

Mayakovsky also employs playful and nonsensical forms of expression in his poetry for children. About the elephant, he writes, for instance, “In front on his snout / is a tail / by the name of: / trunk.” This defamiliarizing description comically reverses the position of front and back, face and tail, so as to make strange the elephantine anatomy, no doubt already familiar to any child. This description also refers to Anton Chekhov’s story “Kashtanka” (1887) which uses a similarly defamiliarizing description in reverse to describe an elephant, from the perspective of the dog Kashtanka, as a huge countenance “with a tail instead of a nose” (Chekhov 1961). Compared with his writings for adults, Mayakovsky’s poetry for children is often more euphonic and simple in construction, but even his adult poetry features a preponderance of animal imagery and poetic play with the similarities between unrelated words. In this picturebook, however, the animal metaphors that he elsewhere uses to describe urban scenes are reversed, so that the size of the elephants is gauged according to an urban yardstick: they are of “two and three-story stature.” Size proves a recurrent theme developed across the doublespread until the final observation that “even their child is as tall as our father.” The theme of size, so common in children’s literature as an expression of the child’s smaller presence, both in physical stature and symbolically in terms of social position, here undergoes

a kind of revolutionary reversal: this “child” is larger than the reader’s father. The plural possessive “our” here encompasses both author and audience in one figurative family. The non-standard usage “*ikhnee*,” meaning “theirs,” moreover, marks the speech as colloquial or infantile, as does the formulation “our father.”

The accompanying illustrations underscore the tremendous size of the elephant family. Even the text is squeezed aside to accommodate their hulking shapes. The one figure of a man, who might represent “our father,” is depicted as falling backward into the corner and off the page. He appears to respond to the text around him, which demands that readers physically and gesturally express surprise and amazement at the elephants’ size: “[I] ask [you] all to move away! / Open wide your eyes and mouth / for such as these / a page is small / [we] gave / a whole / doublespread.” Here the author issues a warning in the first person, as if the fictional figures represented in the book actually pose a threat to readers in the real world. The metatextual play with fiction and reality continues in his observation that figures like these are too big for a single page – as if they are independent and real creatures whose presence cannot be controlled by the author and illustrator of the book. Indeed, the plural form of the verb “gave” seems to include not just the authorial “I” but the illustrator and publisher as well. The drama of this book, and even the process of illustration, thus depends upon its metatextual play with figures and images that extend beyond the boundaries of the book. The child reader is invited to enter into the world of the text and there join the avant-garde author Mayakovsky, who unabashedly adopts the position of author, hero, narrator, performer, and storyteller within the text.

The final section of the book begins to put a frame around the experience of the book and Mayakovsky’s own experience of the Bronx Zoo in 1925. As the observing eye turns to admire a monkey, a flash of recognition occurs: “Why sit like a statue?! / A human portrait, / never mind the tail.” This moment of mirroring, where the human recognizes his own portrait in a monkey, reveals how the animal serves as a human “other,” a structural relation destabilized by self-recognition in a simian face. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the defamiliarizing experience of the zoo, and of the monkey in particular, was also highlighted in Shklovsky’s *Zoo* (1923), when the protagonist identifies with the monkey behind the bars of the cage. For Mayakovsky too, a feeling of empathy is aroused by the flash of recognition and identification provoked by the monkey, just as the poet recognizes himself in the fallen horse in “Kindness to Horses.” Indeed, the “human zoos” mentioned earlier included the Bronx Zoo’s displaying of the pygmy man Ota Benga in 1906 in such an exhibit. So both Shklovsky’s and Mayakovsky’s acts of self-recognition with an animal behind bars may also allude to these human zoos and their inhumane framing of human beings and cruel treatment of animals.

The next line reads, “Winter’s cold for the creature.” By way of explanation, the poem elaborates, “The creature’s from America,” using the phrasing “*zverik iz ameriki*,” which plays with a self-replicating sound pattern. The geographical specificity that suddenly appears here begins to close the frame around the author’s and reader’s experience, no matter the animal’s native origins. Speaking from the author’s or reader’s perspective, as well as replicating what might be said to a child at an actual zoo, the story concludes, “I’ve seen them all, / time to head home, / good-bye, animals.” Here distance suddenly appears between the author or reader and the American zoo animals they have observed. However, the Russian form of “good-bye [*do svidan’ia*]” more literally means “until we meet again.” These parting words prove a fitting finale for a book that might be opened repeatedly. Metatextually and artistically, this collaboration between avant-garde poet Vladimir Mayakovsky and avant-garde artist Kirill Zdanevich is truly a *tour de force* that delivers to an audience of children the riches of avant-garde experimentation and collaboration in visual and verbal forms. In this picturebook “Uncle Lighthouse” introduces the child to the world of the book, image and text, and metatextual passages between reality and fiction.

Although other examples of metatexts exist among Mayakovsky’s writings for children, they tend to be less unified and experimental in their use of image and text, perhaps because moral and didactic elements predominate and dispel the elements of pure play that are so characteristic in *Not a Page Without an Elephant or a Lioness*. Mayakovsky’s earlier picturebook illustrated by Nikolay Denisovsky, *What Is Good and What Is Bad?* (1925), which was discussed previously, has a tendency toward more primitive forms, large printed fields of primary colors, and somewhat geometric compositions. If the illustrations in *Not a Page Without an Elephant or a Lioness* vigorously partake in an avant-garde aesthetic in terms of their stylized patterning and experimental typography, those in *What Is Good and What Is Bad?* take a simpler and more didactic direction.

The cover of *What Is Good and What Is Bad?* immediately communicates the simplicity of its approach to design, with two fields of color dividing the page. The lithographically printed red field at the top contains the text “What is Good” while the lower field in black, textured as if colored by hand, holds the remainder of the title, “What is Bad” The word “and” and an oversized question mark negotiate the uneven boundary between these questions. Underscoring the symbolic opposition of red and black, the words “good” and “bad” themselves are color coded on the cover and throughout the text. The color red, of course, carries revolutionary associations in the Soviet Union. According to this color symbolism, the good (red) and revolutionary inclinations of the young protagonist in the book are signaled by the red Young Pioneer neckerchief he wears. These blunt markers show the symbolic simplicity of the moral world presented in this didactic book. An avant-garde

tendency toward simplification on the model of the infantile is evident on the first page, where the protagonist stands with his legs and hands splayed out. The text reads: "A tiny son / to his father came / and the tiny one asked: / – what is / good / and what is / bad?" Thus the title of the book itself supposedly originates in a child's question, although a very affected one.

An affectedly infantile aesthetic also dictates certain visual aspects of the book, which is on the whole less artistically experimental than *Not a Page*. The simple pose and unsophisticated depiction of the boy are echoed in the drawing of a house and a stick figure that he appears to have abandoned behind him. Such simplicity of depiction, facile composition, and flattening of perspective prove typical throughout the book. Moreover, the same crayonlike line texture established in the primitive drawing also prevails in the representation of humans, animals, and some other details in the illustrations, as may be compared to the interest in children's drawings displayed by other avant-garde figures, such as Mikhail Larionov in the context of Neo-Primitivism. Manmade objects and buildings, however, are more typically presented using large blocks of lithographically printed color. These reveal a tendency toward constructivist geometry characteristic of avant-garde style in this period. Such a geometric approach emerges in a spread depicting a house disarranged into diagonals by bad weather and, on the facing page, an orderly house with windows open to good weather, while a purposeful father and son ride past on simplified bicycles. The storm creates havoc in black, whereas the orderly house displays a red door and a red flag under a red sun and a red rainbow. The harmonious red world is described as "very good for both big [people] and children." Throughout the book, the color black, with its associations to "what is bad," serves to represent a disruptive potential. Here we see the revolutionary aspects of the avant-garde aesthetic adapted to a more didactic and totalitarian view of society.

The metatextual moments of *What Is Good and What Is Bad?* begin on the second page with the author's direct address to his audience of children: "I do not have / any secrets, – so listen up, children." At the bottom of the page, he explains his purpose: "The answer / of this father / I am putting / in this book." The author thus enters the text in his own voice and draws attention to the metatextual frame of the work: "this book." In the accompanying illustration, an open book lies on the seated father's lap. Its vivid colors and text reveal that it is this very book, thus creating a recursive *mise en abyme*. This deliberate device underscores the metatextual framing in the book. Indeed, a notation on the manuscript in Mayakovsky's hand reads, "On the drawing the worker father shows his son pictures of this same book" (Kovalenko 1958: 369). However, the simplification demanded by the smaller size also has eliminated the finer details of the book's cover. As a result, the frame of the child's initial question has disappeared, as has the question mark, which is obscured by the father's hand. Thus the title of the book in the adult's hands actually reads

“Good and Bad,” which more accurately reflects the book’s didacticism: it presents the adult’s view on morality, which allows no room for questions.

The didacticism renders *What Is Good and What Is Bad?* far less experimental and playful in its content than the more aesthetically driven *Not a Page*. Still, the overt didacticism yields to occasional playful and poetic expression, as in the penultimate page of the book, which returns to the scene where the son stands at his seated father’s knee. The clock above their heads shows that twenty minutes have passed, and the book appears to have been closed. With a large fist, the father points before him at a large pink pig with black splotches on its side. The text reads, “Remember / this, / every son, / know, / every child, / from the son there grows up a swine / if the son’s a swineling.” In the original Russian, these words combine in an extended burst of repetitive sound play that builds on the association of the similarly sounding “son [syn]” and “swine [svin]” and the implicit relationship between “child [rebenok]” and the logically consistent but playful neologism “swinelet [svinenok].” The sound similarities underscore how easily a son might grow into a pig, while the linguistic correlation presents a playful paradox where language and identity converge.

In this same illustration, the boy stands with his arms dropped to his sides and his mouth shut. At the end of the story he is symbolically powerless and voiceless after undergoing the book’s heavyhanded moral lesson. Within the framework of adult values and morality imposed on the child – including the process of socialization through children’s books, which is modeled within this very text – the difference and “otherness” of the child has been underscored. As is evident in the lines where “big [people]” and “children” are distinguished from one another, the child is represented in this book as a lesser and more primitive “other,” whose base nature resembles that of a filthy beast. A child must learn to avoid anything that might pollute moral purity.

The didactic narrative elaborates on diametrically opposed examples of good and bad up to the final page, where the boy, having been successfully socialized and inculcated during the course of the story, resolves to do nothing but good. With mouth wide open, arms outstretched, and Pioneer kerchief waving, he exclaims the book’s conclusion in a “joyous” and “resolute” voice: “I / will do / what’s good / and I won’t do – / what’s bad!” The book presents the protagonist as a model for the child reader, who ideally would be similarly inculcated by the book’s lessons. The oversized red exclamation point at the end of the boy’s vow dispels the interrogative tone created by the question mark in the book’s title. It thus conclusively resolves the tension between the red-lettered “Good” and the black-lettered “Bad” sustained throughout the story. Good has prevailed over evil.

Prior to this successful resolution, the principles of good and bad are illustrated through numerous examples offered for praise or condemnation. Two of these have

particular metatextual resonance. One illustration of good depicts a small boy with his eyes focused on a primer on his lap that begins with the first five letters of the Cyrillic alphabet. With his right hand he points to a letter. Entirely colored in red, the text reads: "If a boy / loves work, / points / his finger / in a book, / about such a one / [they] write here: / he's / a good boy." Here Mayakovsky employs the language of literacy and literary praise, against a backdrop of labor, to make judgments. This situation also provides a metatextual moment of recognition for the child reader, whose own finger might be pointing at the pages of *What Is Good and What Is Bad?* and who should be motivated to emulate the good boy in all endeavors.

Though still very young, this beginning reader within the book receives praise, "he's a good boy," from impersonal others: "[they] write." A literary value system frames the child, whether a fictional character contained within a book or an actual child reader of the book. Yet, a more sinister character might also be ascribed to the impersonal "they" who determine the value and moral quality of the child. The implication is that the child is being observed, evaluated, and judged as good or bad, whether by parents, school, or the Soviet state. Adults are the moral authorities here and the arbiters of such judgments. Despite the oversimplified didactic framework of the book, good and bad remain relative terms, of course, and are very much determined by the value system and social construction of childhood. Mayakovsky's book tellingly illustrates no moral absolutes, but only some of the values adults seek to inculcate in the Soviet child or the Young Pioneer.

Indeed, such a critical view helps illuminate one of the most significant metatextual moments in this book, which is also one of the most sinister when read in a larger historical and political context, and has been mentioned earlier in this book. In this case, the depiction of morality and proper behavior through an example of what not to do is based on a benevolent idea, since it addresses the situation "If a wretched brawler / beats / a weak boy." The moral distaste and didactic condemnation of such a boy is so extreme that the fictional nature of the text suffers a rupture. A large first-person pronoun in red signals the author's entrance into the otherwise mostly black text. This emphasizes his good moral judgment: "I / don't even / want / to put such a one / in [this] book." As mentioned earlier, the illustration appears blotted with black ink. Here the boundaries between fiction and reality are blurred. The supposed anxiety of representation surrounding this supreme example of what is bad itself represents artificially staged metatextual play. Of course, depicting this boy involves no actual threat or hazard, however morally reprehensible he might appear within the framework of this moralizing book.

Yet, the position of the weak boy with respect to the stronger child also parallels the power relation of child and adult, which is an assumed and unquestioned social construct within the text. Accordingly, the adult author's fierce condemnation of the troublemaker child might be equally outrageous when judged by a moral code

that strives to protect the weaker. In a wider perspective, the condemnation might also be juxtaposed to the persecution of the “weak” by the politically “strong,” which was becoming increasingly common in this period and derived from the same rigidity of thinking regarding right and wrong. This book thus illustrates how the revolutionary revolt of the weak against the strong was being supplanted by an oppressive totalizing rigidity of mind. The moralizing “I,” with its oversized red authority, and the towering and large-fisted father figure speaking on the author’s behalf, display a heavy-handed and threatening approach to inculcating the moral system promoted within *What Is Good and What Is Bad?* The question about morality has been replaced by a statement. The adult’s answer to the child’s inquiry leaves no question marks, no gray areas, and no room for independent thinking, deviation, or mistakes.

This particular scene, where the metatextual intrusion into the text signals extreme moral condemnation by blotting out the offending child, also has other associations revealed by a retrospective view on Soviet history. As mentioned earlier, the erasure or blotting out of a person from a photograph or other visual document was a sinister signal that he or she had been purged and eliminated from the ranks of those deemed morally acceptable. Precisely such a rigid and unyielding moral system led to the vilification and persecution of dissenters within Stalinist Russia. This particular metatextual moment in Mayakovsky’s picturebook thus reveals the dangerous and totalitarian potential of the trajectory being laid out for the proper molding of the new Soviet child. Even in this sense, then, Mayakovsky’s books for children might be regarded within the context of the avant-garde movement, which, some would argue, was undergoing decline, transformation, and gradual self-annihilation in this period. Or, as Groys argues, avant-garde extremism, which here holds fast to ideology over aesthetics, may be seen to be evolving into totalitarian art (see Groys 1996: 193–218, cf. Groys 1992).

As these examples show, Mayakovsky’s books for children deserve close attention as complex and uniquely revealing artistic works in their own right, ones that, moreover, illuminate Mayakovsky’s larger aims and aesthetic model. In children’s literature, and through the use of the unique artistic possibilities of the iconotext, Mayakovsky found opportunities to further his avant-garde experimentation with verbal and visual signs and their interplay, engage in metatextual play with the boundaries of fiction and reality, construct images that expand the opportunities for metatextual commentary, and embed his own self as example, author, and illustrator within these varied works for children. As iconotexts, these books exist as illuminating avant-garde artifacts in their own right and reveal much about Mayakovsky’s authorship not exposed elsewhere. Although these avant-garde editions survive only as rare books, they deserve to be acknowledged as indivisible

and whole works of art that employ image and text synergistically in the spirit of avant-garde experimentation and revolutionary ideals.

Beyond their aesthetic sophistication and value as art objects, these picture-books were intended to come alive in the hands of children. As these works show, Mayakovsky, like many of his contemporaries, believed children to be the rising generation of the future, who could realize the ideal visions of revolutionary ideology. Only for this reason did the poet invest so much of his own moral, artistic, and aesthetic values in these picturebooks. If he sought to be “Uncle Lighthouse” for Soviet children, he also expected to inspire an entire generation of beacons who could guide others on the proper path through art and life. The significance that this audience of children represented for him is evident in the fact that only to children did Mayakovsky present himself as “Uncle Lighthouse.” Thus Mayakovsky’s name at once represents a traditional view of children’s literature as a force of enlightenment, a final avant-garde outpost, and a beacon of safety amidst treacherous waters.

Unfortunately, Mayakovsky himself would not survive those treacherous waters. Indeed, by the 1930s, successful adaptation and re-orientation had become a matter of life and death. The next portion of this book, Part 4, bears the title “A Question of Survival: Facing Limitations.” It explores how late avant-garde figures struggled to produce creative works under increasingly severe restrictions. By this point even their existence became threatened, as the repression and purging of writers, artists, and intellectuals reached its peak in the late 1930s. In this period picturebook writers and artists increasingly faced the choice of whether to eradicate all that was avant-garde or subversive within their works or face dire personal consequences.

PART IV

A question of survival

Facing limitations

Metatextual exploits in writings for children

On this page / Strange birds / Fly very strangely! / And there: /
Strange people / Stand very strangely, / And strange palms grow. /
And the strange sun / Shines over the land, / And strangely shimmers the moon, /
But we smile / And say to each other, / This land is made out of paper.
– Daniil Kharms, “Na etoi stranitse...” [“On this page...” 1930s]

In his late writings for children, Daniil Kharms performs remarkable metafictional exploits, if, in Patricia Waugh’s words, metafiction may be characterized as “writing which consistently displays its conventionality, which explicitly lays bare its conditions of artifice, and which explores thereby the problematic relationship between life and fiction” (1984: 4). For example, in the poem above, Kharms estranges the very word “strange [*strannyi*]” itself through euphonious rhythmic repetition and manages to equate this word by sound and sense with the words “page [*stranitsa*]” and “country/land [*strana*]” (Kharms 2000b: 66), which are nearly homophonous in Russian, thereby creating a parallel between life and fiction and thus offering a critique of reality as a land of paper.

In this sense, Kharms’s poem relates to Waugh’s later remarks that “In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text” (40). By blurring the boundaries of reality and fantasy, world and text, Kharms engages his reader in apparently frivolous and certainly creative free play with signification. At the same time, however, he hones the interpretive skills of his audience by delivering a subtle Aesopian critique of the strange totalitarian world that surrounds the reader and parallels that in the text. Having found refuge in children’s literature, Kharms veils serious messages in apparent fictionality and absurd frivolity. Yet, by this point, avant-garde writers like Kharms were facing limitations where their very survival was at stake. Considering his work within this literary ecology reveals that his absurdism and metatextual play in fact amount to societal critiques and existential protest.

Kharms’s metatextual play also displays how the avant-garde experiments and the formalist “baring of devices,” which preceded him, have led squarely to the meta-fictions Kharms offers. These mark one last contribution of the Russian avant-garde before its conclusive elimination by censorship and literary restrictions. This barring

of devices also offers a critique of the environment in which the avant-garde by now was trapped. Seen in a comparative perspective, the modern experiments of the avant-garde, to which Kharms was indebted as a late Russian avant-garde writer, may be seen to anticipate postmodern playfulness. Unfortunately, however, the innovations of Russian avant-garde picturebooks and the final stage of the avant-garde would not have a chance to evolve under the increasing Soviet censorship, resuming only after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991.

In examining this poem more closely, the opening line presents the page of a book and begins to describe its strange and wondrous contents. Until its conclusion, nearly every line of the poem employs the word “strange” in some form. This repetition habituates the reader to such an extent that the word becomes a pure aural experience that loses its meaning, thus reduced to an absurdity just as Viktor Shklovsky describes children doing in their language play in his 1916 theoretical article “About Poetry and Trans-Sense Language” (Shklovsky 1990). He quotes one boy’s distorted reproduction of a poem into a nonsensical sequence of words and comments, “In the process, the boy very much liked it when the incantatory poems had been deprived of any sense of meaning” (53). This process also subjects the word to a kind of estrangement, such as Shklovsky describes in “Art as Device,” that allows it to be perceived more clearly in all its strangeness (1990: 58–72). Kharms thus enacts in poetry the Formalist theorization Shklovsky derives for Futurist poetic experiments, giving it further manifestation in even more self-conscious and self-aware late avant-garde practice.

In Kharms’s poem, the sequence eradicates the differences between the Russian words for strange (“*strannyi*”), strangely (“*stranno*”), page (“*stranitsa*”), and country (“*strana*”). The poem, which begins framed by the edges of a page, concludes with a boundless country that opens into a space that extends beyond the text itself. By the poem’s conclusion, the concrete page before the reader gives way to an evocation of reader and poet together, “But we smile / And say to each other: / This land is made of paper.” Reader and writer are in collusion and share a smile of common understanding, Kharms seems to say, and even speak together as one. The poem thus offers its own interpretation at the end, if the reader is ready to absorb it.

After the mention of the page and the specific imagery that has been conjured, producing a strange and imaginary world, the idea of a “country” would seem to apply to this literary realm. At the same time, however, it might also be read on another level as evoking something else entirely as well, in the real world that is distinct from the poem’s cumulative imagery. The term “*bumazhnyi*,” or literally “paper,” also has a secondary meaning of “bureaucratic” that thus might be applied more figuratively and critically to the real world around the poem. The final line of the poem thus turns itself inside out, to those who would pick up on it, by offering critical implications about the real country in which Kharms writes – it is made of

paper, flimsy, fragile, illusory, and excessively bureaucratic. In confirmation of this, an earlier draft of the poem emphasized this aspect even further by including twice the euphonious phrase “strange country [*strannaia strana*]” (Sazhin 1997: 292). Like an optical illusion or *trompe l’oeil* in reverse, where something that seems to be mere illusion or ornament turns out to be real, Kharms here might also be read as deadly serious, and dangerously so.

Indeed, by 1930, the Soviet Union would brook no critique of its flimsy facades or bureaucracy, if such messages were detected. But when successfully camouflaged by children’s writers, or writers more generally, such Aesopian messages passed under the censors’ radar, while still leading to a shared smile between author and reader. Sometimes, however, such covert communications were intercepted by the censor. As mentioned earlier, Kharms’s poem “From that house there left a man” could sound like a fairy tale about a wandering adventurer and was published by *Siskin*, a seemingly innocuous magazine for very young children (Kharms 2000a). However, the fact that it treats the troubling subject of a man’s sudden disappearance got Kharms into serious trouble, led to his first arrest, and severely limited his future possibilities thereafter. In its concluding stanza, the poem even involves the child in the mysterious disappearance of this man by asking, with a frightening sense of urgency, for the reader to share any information they might come across:

But if somehow you / Should happen to meet this man, /
You better hurry up, / You better hurry up, / Hurry up and tell us too (18)

The simple surface of this “children’s” poem belies its multivalent depth and profound simplicity.

Remarkably, this story of the inexplicable disappearance of someone personally known to the speaker in the poem was published during the Great Terror of 1937. Sadly, it not only foretold Kharms’s own final arrest and disappearance, along with many others’, but also proved fateful for his only means of sustenance. Children’s writer Nina Gernet (1988: 204) recalls that it was the publication of this poem that caused the authorities to recommend that children’s magazines not publish the works of Kharms (Sazhin 2000: 239). Indeed, by the time Daniil Kharms was writing, the game was almost up and the refuge offered by children’s literature was besieged.

This chapter argues that it was on the pages of the avant-garde children’s magazines *Hedgehog* (1928–1935), for young readers, and *Siskin* (1930–1941), for very young readers, that Kharms found a final creative outlet and developed an empowering metatextual voice that he also translated into picturebook form. Originating first in the magazine, his picturebook *O tom kak starushka chernila pokupala* [About How an Old Lady Went Shopping for Ink, 1929] is a metatextual *tour de force* that explains its own origins by creating an eternal loop. These metatextual aspects in

Kharm's work betray the influence of one of his favorite authors, Lewis Carroll, whose books *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass* (1872) provide inspiration for Kharm's own metatextual experiments. This literary connection explains the prominence of young girls in his texts, real versions of which had also served as muses for his earlier avant-garde predecessors (see Khlebnikov 1989: 67–71, Kruchenykh & V. 1913).

Many of the remaining representatives of the artistic, literary, and theoretical avant-garde found a rare publication outlet and final refuge in these innovative journals for young children. Their numbers included Mayakovsky and Shklovsky, who occasionally graced the pages of these children's magazines, and all the writers of the literary group OBERIU (Association for Real Art), who appeared frequently. In short, the remarkable pages of these children's magazines boasted stories and poems by the best writers of the day, including established children's writers such as Korney Chukovsky, Samuil Marshak, and Yevgeny Schwartz and illustrious adult writers Mikhail Zoshchenko, Yevgeny Zamyatin, and Maxim Gorky. The lifeblood of these magazines, however, was provided by the younger members of the late avant-garde group OBERIU, such as Daniil Kharm's.

The success of the children's magazines *Hedgehog* and *Siskin* depended largely upon the creative contributions of members of the OBERIU group to which Daniil Kharm's belonged. Nikolay Oleinikov, who served alongside Yevgeny Schwartz as magazine editor, was a key leader for the magazine and Alexander Vvedensky and Daniil Kharm's were avid contributors. Lydia Chukovskaya recalls how everyone in the publishing headquarters grew silent when the editors of *Siskin* and *Hedgehog* appeared.

Everyone falls silent as two people who always appear together enter the room civilly bowing to everyone: the editor in chief of the magazine *Siskin* Nikolay Makarovich Oleinikov and one of the editors of the magazine *Hedgehog* – Yevgeny Lvovich Schwartz. (The offices of the children's magazines were located in the neighboring rooms.) These two always spoke in quiet tones, their faces imperturbable, but everyone knows: as soon as Schwartz and Oleinikov appear, the laughter is about to begin (1963: 221)

Over time, the members of OBERIU gradually shifted their energies to the magazine for younger children *Siskin*, thus demonstrating their commitment to very young, preschool-aged children as an audience, as well as the increasing pressure being put upon them. Preschoolers now begin to appear in poems and stories sensitive to their disempowerment, even as compared to schoolchildren. At the same time, this shift shows that publishing for the youngest children had become the only remaining outlet for experimental avant-garde work. By this time, the avant-garde had been driven into the final refuge it would find – publishing for preschoolers.

These avant-garde figures thus have personal experience of the powerlessness and voicelessness they sympathetically render from a child's eye view.

The power structure of adult and child typically undergoes a carnivalesque reversal in Kharms's writings for children. This appears in full relief in instances where children masquerade as adults, such as in the story "Professor Trubochkin." The narrative itself takes things at face value and leaves it to the reader to draw his/her own conclusions. Along with the editorial staff, it naively accepts "a man of small size" (Kharms 2000c: 3: 147) with a beard and strange outfit as an adult, rather than a child masquerading as an adult. When his beard falls off and he disappears into thin air, all that remains is "a boy in a gray sweater" (150). The same occurs in the poem "*Strannyi borodach*" ["The Strange Bearded Man," 1940], where a "Citizen [...] With a very long beard" (Kharms 2000f: 75) is immediately granted entrance to the exciting masquerade ball where the preschoolers Kolya and Petya had been denied entrance moments before: "Entrance for schoolchildren / [is] open, / For preschoolers – / [it's] closed" (74). In this example and others, even very young children masquerading as adults, usually through the addition of a symbolic beard, are able to outsmart characteristically dimwitted adults, while adults often resemble puppets. Kharms's focus on the experience of exclusion by the young child and successful ruses to achieve justice prove characteristic.

One story about a creative individual who fails to be understood by his audience is Kharms's "*Pro sobaku Bububu*" ["About the Dog Bububu," 1935], which appeared in *Siskin* accompanied by illustrations resembling silhouettes. It treats the exercise of interpretation and the challenge presented to the viewer by unconventional art, like nonsense or nonobjective modernist art in the avant-garde period. It begins: "There once was a very clever dog. They called her Bububu. She was so clever that she could even draw. One time she painted a painting. But no one could understand what it was a picture of" (*Siskin* 11: 28). A series of animals come to examine the drawing and offer their interpretations (28–29). Finally a well-known artist comes but he cannot make heads or tails of it either: "Finally the famous painter Ivan Ivanych Pnev came. He scratched his head and looked at the picture and finally said: – No, nobody knows what it's a painting of, and I don't know either" (29). Finally the artist, the clever dog Bububu returns: "Then the clever dog Bububu returned, looked at her painting and yells out in surprise, noticing that the painting is not positioned correctly: 'Look now!' And with these words the dog Bububu turned the painting around" (29). The obtuse audience has been duped by the incorrect orientation of the painting and therefore failed to comprehend it. The significance of this act of inverting one's perspective, turning expectation upside down, like a carnivalesque reversal of roles, alters everything. A new perspective suddenly reveals the genius of the painting: "The painting was so remarkable, that we decided to print it in the first issue of *Siskin* in 1936" (29). The

apparently absurd account of the ridiculously named dog whose art is received with failed interpretations until the artist steps in and reorients everyone's view shows an account of authorship. It displays a failure to be understood, a mockery of the act of failed interpretation, and a model for how things, and Kharm's by extension, ought to be read: if viewed from the correct perspective, everything becomes clear. For an Aesopian writer, this exhortation to view art from the correct, even if not at all obvious perspective, also reads as a message to his audience who can recognize that this little children's story offers broader commentary on issues of his day, like the reception of nonobjective or avant-garde art and the relations of artists, critics, and audience, as well as metatextual or metainterpretive clues to how to read Kharm's work properly.

Metatextuality, voicelessness, and voice

The disempowered subject's search for voice finds abundant expression in the children's literature of Daniil Kharm's. Many of his highly experimental writings for children not only explore the child's struggle for power and voice, but also engage the child reader in sophisticated metatextual play that grants the child entrance into the creative process. By using this typically modernist device, Kharm's helps to highlight the autonomy and artificiality of the artistic text in a way that is groundbreaking in children's literature at this early date and derives from his work with the avant-garde children's magazines *Hedgehog* and *Siskin*. At the same time, Kharm's metatextual experiments continue in the playful spirit of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, which also highlights the artificiality of the text and plays with logic.

For example, one of Kharm's most remarkable illustrated books for children, *About How An Old Lady Went Shopping for Ink* (1929), offers a circular metatextual narrative. This book, like many other works by Kharm's, thematizes the voicelessness of marginal figures rendered irrelevant by their environment. Though the book is comic, absurd, and somewhat surreal in ways that recall *Alice in Wonderland*, it is also very much grounded in a particular location. It fictionalizes the heart of children's book publishing in Leningrad in a self-reflexive metatextual moment that circles back to the beginning of the book. In so doing, it also recalls this fleeting moment when children's literature served as a final refuge for beleaguered avant-garde writers. Treating a theme relevant for all avant-garde writers by this time, this book dramatizes the struggle of a marginal figure to gain voice and her lack of the basic means to do so. Though the old lady does acquire ink by the end and has her story published by an author with writer's block, by this time the symbolic ink and publication possibilities of renowned writers, such as Daniil Kharm's and others discussed in this book, were drying up like the old lady's inkwell.

The story *About How An Old Lady Went Shopping for Ink* first appeared in *Hedgehog* at the end of 1928. In its magazine form, the story appeared in six pages with comic drawings by Alexei Uspensky extending down the margin. In the following year, 1929, the story was republished as a twenty-seven page book, with abundant illustrations by Eduard Krimmer that ornament and invade the text. These invite the reader to treat the text itself as a game. For example, underscoring the *Wonderland* or *Looking-Glass* nature of the story, the pages are frequently punctuated by depictions of the central symbol in the text – a bottle labeled “ink,” instead of “drink me.”



Figure 52. Cover design by Eduard Krimmer for Daniil Kharms’s *O tom kak starushka chernila pokupala* [About How an Old Lady Went Shopping for Ink, 1929]

The book’s cover (Figure 52) includes blurry watercolors that depict the protagonist at two stages of her life, with the story itself sandwiched between these. Both show the “little old lady” mentioned in the title holding a pen and focused on a blank piece of paper; but the front shows a hunched “Little old lady of many years” as she writes “A letter to her son,” while the back shows a picture of a young girl with a braid down her back labeled, “Little old lady at 15 years” as she writes “A letter to her grandfather.” The text thus contradicts the images, as it argues, paradoxically, that the protagonist’s nominal identity as “a little old lady” does not depend on her age. Rather, this title instead seems to refer to her existential state – one of irrelevance and impotence to which a censored and beleaguered writer such as Kharms perhaps can relate.

Though life has passed her by, and she has been left without ink, which symbolically represents the means to write, this wizened muse does not accept the initial lack with which her story begins. Instead, she decides to brave the strange new world on a quest for ink that will allow her to write and complete her own story. Marginalized by time and circumstance, the old lady comes to be viewed as “looney” by each person with whom she interacts. Each time the text recounts how people respond to her with the exclamation “Did you fall from the moon, or something!” an illustration of the expression jeeringly looms in the margins as well. In the shape of a stylized exclamation point, a relief print shows a crescent moon and below it an old lady tumbles head-first, as she tightly grasps her upside-down umbrella. All characters regard her as senile until the end of the story, when she encounters a writer with writer’s block. While she has inspiration but no means to write, he has the means to write but no inspiration. Through their encounter, the wizened old lady becomes his muse. She brings him inspiration, he writes her story, and she is given ink. Through this unusual and serendipitous partnership, both superfluous characters, old woman and writer, reach their potential by the means of this metatextual children’s story which, like an ouroboros or serpent eating its own tail, exists to explain its own origins.

Though those the old lady encounters want her to step out of the center and return to the margins, the old lady takes center stage in her own story. As the writer with writer’s block discovers, she proves to have a productively strange and defamiliarized perspective on the world due to her peripheral position in time and space. Since no one seems to know anything about ink anymore – “Haven’t they ever heard of ink or something?” – the old lady resolves to go into a store to inquire.

And the old lady decided to stop in a store to ask about ink. [...] And there nearby was a store, as it happened. The windows were big, filling entire walls. And the windows were all full of books on display. “Aha,” thought the old lady, “I’ll dash in there too. There probably ought to be ink there, since books are on display. After all, books are written with ink.” (18)

Perceiving the literary connection and metatextual implication of symbols like ink and books, the old lady locates a bookstore. Situated on a busy street that must refer to Nevsky Prospekt, the main street in St. Petersburg, as the old lady might call it, or Leningrad to her contemporaries, the enormous bookstore is clearly the famous central bookstore in the city – Dom Knigi, the House of the Book. As it happens, the same building also served as the head of children’s literature publishing in Leningrad.

Lydia Chukovskaya included a chapter on “Marshak-editor” in the second edition of her book *V laboratorii redaktora* [In the Editor’s Laboratory, 1963] which offers a nearly contemporaneous view of the layout and logistics of children’s publishing in Leningrad in this period. This chapter of reminiscences begins, “Leningrad.

The House of the Book, the Children's Department of the State Publishing House. Early 1930s. The editorial offices occupy three rooms on the fifth floor [...] S. Ia. Marshak has been in charge of the department for some years now" (Chukovskaya 1963: 219). Chukovskaya shows the atmosphere and daily routine, "Marshak was to arrive soon. Authors are gathering in the office" (220), and mentions regular figures such as Kharms and his colleagues in *OBERIU*, who were working nextdoor for *Hedgehog* and *Siskin*. Specific details about the building at this time, such as its exact location, number of floors, and revolving door main entrance also appear: "It is empty in the House of the Book, on all of its six floors, in its hundreds of rooms. The main glass revolving door, exiting onto Nevsky Prospekt across from the Kazan Cathedral, was locked already long ago" (223). In short, Kharms's description of the little old lady's destination reflects many of these same features Lydia Chukovskaya describes in her account of the period.

In order to enter the magically metafictional world of this bookstore and building, the real site of children's literature publishing in Leningrad at the time of the book's printing, the old lady must pass through a revolving door and other defamiliarized obstacles. Like a portal to another world, such as the rabbit hole in *Alice in Wonderland* or the mirror in *Through the Looking-Glass*, these doors test the fortitude of the old lady. She is bewildered by these "doors made of glass and very strange somehow." That they are described as strange recalls Shklovsky's estrangement, and the strangeness of the text Kharms celebrates in the poem with which this chapter opens, and their glassy substance recalls Carroll's looking-glass. Much like Alice's initial fall into Wonderland, these doors spin her around and around until she narrowly escapes with her life.

The old lady's head spun. She walked and walked and herself didn't know where she was going. And around, all the time, just doors, doors, all of them spinning and pushing the old lady forward. (20)

That the interminable experience of these spinning doors transports the old lady to a metafictional wonderland is underscored by the description of her state, "exactly like in a dream" (22), just as Alice's experiences in Wonderland conclude with her waking up from a dream.

Inside this strange space, the little old lady has more symbolic encounters with defamiliarized trappings of modern life – a man at a clock, an iron-lattice door, and an elevator that has her completely perplexed. Experiencing the elevator as a "cupboard," she undergoes another magical passage.

The old lady stood, not daring to move, and it felt like a stone had begun to grow in her chest. She stood and could not breathe. Through the door, people's arms, legs, and heads could be glimpsed, and around her was a drone like a sewing machine. (21–22)

The drone of the sewing machines she supernaturally senses here alludes to the history of the House of the Book building as the Singer Sewing Company headquarters. In this way, the defamiliarized and dreamlike description of the fictional world abounds with hints of a very specific and real location. That is, Nevsky Prospekt, a big bookstore with large windows and a revolving door, an iron-lattice elevator, the sound of sewing machines, and a building with six floors: “There you are, we’ve arrived, the sixth floor, there’s nothing above us” (22). These specific features clearly signpost the arrival of the fictional character into the actual headquarters of children’s literature publishing in Leningrad.

The lost thread of the story thus finds its way to the inner workings of the editorial world located in the symbolically named “House of the Book.” In this metatextual mirror, Kharms stages the encounter of the old lady of the story with actual children’s writers, including himself. At first, they lack a determined identity. One is fat and has written an absurd story about a boy who swallowed a frog that then began to speak for him, but the other suffers from writer’s block. He is Daniil Kharms, who is listed as the author of the book, as underscored by the illustration by Eduard Krimmer (Figure 53). A larger man, whose glasses and hair resemble that of the editor in chief Samuil Marshak, reclines on an armchair beside the old lady stiffly seated on a chair. A tall and thin figure with untied shoes who smokes a pipe stands with his back to both, showing a darkened profile that resembles Daniil Kharms. This man has scribbled a drawing of an old lady with an umbrella leaving a house, while above it is written the first line of the book, “On Crooked Street, in House No. 17 there lived an old...” (25). The drawing, as well as the text, thus shows how the old lady protagonist and lost thread of a story encounter a writer with writer’s block.

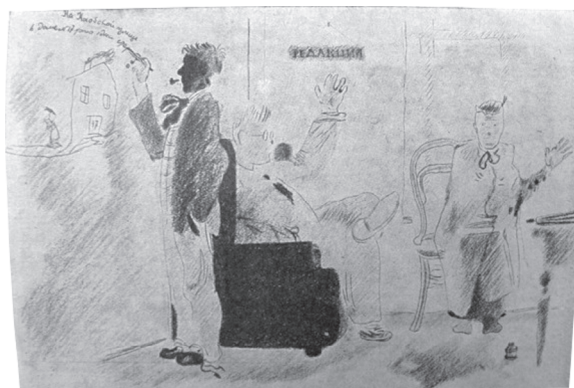


Figure 53. Illustration by Eduard Krimmer for Daniil Kharms’s *About How an Old Lady Went Shopping for Ink* (1929)

The metatextual significance of her quixotic quest for ink is underscored by a highly metatextual passage, where the symbolic importance of ink as a metaphor for inspiration becomes foregrounded.

“And why did you come here?” asked the fat man of the old lady. “Well, I couldn’t find ink anywhere,” said the old lady, “nobody knew anything. But I saw there were books lying here, so I dropped in. Books are written with ink, you know!” (18)

By showing the writer the strange world she sees, the little old lady provides him with the material for a story. Here the symbolic representation of a lost narrative finds a writer with writer’s block and, through him, the ink she needs. By acting as his muse, she is simultaneously and symbolically written into the world of the text. She grants him her estranged perspective,

“I came in the cupboard,” said the old lady. “In what cupboard?” the fat man and thin man asked at the same time. “In the one, that rides up and down in the staircase here,” said the old lady. “Oh, the elevator!” laughed the thin man. (26)

While his larger companion finds it comic and judges her, just as all have before, “You must have fallen from the moon!” (26), the thin man is able to take on her perspective, as symbolically shown when he removes, polishes, and replaces his spectacles.

The thin man took off his glasses, breathed on them, wiped them with a handkerchief, put them back on his nose and said to the old lady: “Tell us about how you went shopping for ink, and we will write a book about you and give you ink.” The old lady thought about it and agreed. And so the thin man wrote the book: ABOUT HOW AN OLD LADY WENT SHOPPING FOR INK. (27)

The symbolically charged story thus contains at its conclusion the supposed metatextual secret to its own origins. In this way, it brings the child reader into the creative space of the writing process, cleverly toying with the idea of inspiration for the story at the story’s end. Kharms thus introduces the child to highly sophisticated metatextual play with the origin and autonomy of the text, which becomes a *mise en abyme*. A metatextual conclusion that shifts one’s perspective on the entire story might be seen as deriving from Lewis Carroll. Yet, in the case of Kharms’s story, this perspective does not undermine the reality of what was experienced by declaring it a dream. Instead, it adds many layers of reality to the story by underpinning the fictional story with real places, real people, and an origin story that provides its own etiology.

To conclude, the metatextual exploits Daniil Kharms accomplishes in his writings for children offer playful approaches to the text, but also engage in a kind of subversive trickery. In addition to the carnivalesque nature of Kharms’s role reversal of child and adult or powerful and powerless in metatextual works for children, these writings show the empowerment of a child, particularly young Alice-like girls, and other disempowered figures, often through metatextual prowess.

Clearly, Daniil Kharms respected the intelligence of his child audience, honoring children's intelligence and ability to take a metatextual view and engage in metatextual games. Not only does the writer respect his child audience, assert their power and intelligence, and allow them to masquerade as adult and author. He even does this at the expense of the adults in his texts, who emerge as a puppet-like mockery of themselves and the world of grown-ups. Adults here represent the authorities, exposing the subversive implications of Kharms's writings for children, which take the side of and empower the underdog as they defy authority, boundaries, and limitations in a display of imagination and irrepressible creative force. On multiple layers of the text, then, from the textual practice of verbal play to the thematic treatment of children's games to the metatextual engagement of his child audience, Kharms engages the mind of his child reader in cognitive logic games and pure aesthetic enjoyment in keeping with the playful and subversive spirit of the avant-garde.

In short, Kharms creates a carnivalesque space by destabilizing the respective positions of child and adult, powerful and disempowered, through textual games involving metatextuality. By rupturing the textual frame and blurring the boundaries within the text, he allows for the strange intermingling of the worlds of play and reality, reader and writer, character and author, and child and adult. In this way, Kharms not only brings avant-garde and modernist experiments to the child, but also empowers his readers, by teaching children (and adults alongside them) to read on multiple levels and beyond the boundaries of the text. Indeed, metafiction generally proves itself to be "committed to the idea of constructed meanings" and "concerns itself above all with a reflexive awareness of meaning-construction" (Currie 1995: 15)

In the unique ecology of Soviet literature for children and adults, however, this awareness of constructed meanings takes on a more distinctive critical cast. On whatever level, and to a truly dual audience, Kharms challenges his reader to engage in playful and subversive interpretation and transcend the boundaries that would confine him or her. This cognitive feat proves particularly subversive in an authoritarian context, since it offers a sobering critique of the fictionality of reality and the strange world of paper. True to the avant-garde spirit to the end, and until his own death in 1942, Kharms voices the subversive spirit of the avant-garde in a courageous critique of the reality that was increasingly imposing its limitations on the Russian avant-garde and threatening Kharms's own survival.

The obliteration of the avant-garde aesthetic

The beginning of the end

If Boris Groys famously argues, if somewhat simplistically, for “The Birth of Socialist Realism from the Spirit of the Russian Avant-Garde” (1996), then such a process can be witnessed through close examination of later, 1930s editions of Soviet picturebooks by Samuil Marshak. Once radically avant-garde in their aesthetic, at the time when revolutionary ideology and avant-garde aesthetics had been closely aligned, these books were forced to adapt to changing times and the turning of the tide. The innovative picturebooks of the avant-garde were becoming unwelcome reminders of a revolutionary era and its avant-garde aesthetics, as the “Total Art of Stalinism” (Groys 1992) took hold. The pages of late editions of the Russian avant-garde picturebooks reveal the accommodations and reluctant self-obliteration artists and writers were compelled to engage in at this time in response to overwhelming ideological pressure and censorship. Some books display the valiant last efforts of the avant-garde to preserve what elements they could, as they were forced to adapt to a new, increasingly inimical literary ecology. The result is a hybrid form, or even a chimera, that existed for only a brief moment but remains preserved in the archival record as evidence of a fundamental shift taking place. Yet, this archeological artifact of synchronic complexity cannot fully communicate the complex ecological forces that act diachronically upon these books and necessitate their responses to censoring forces.

In Groys’s view, this “total art of Stalinism” was inherent in the avant-garde and its totalizing impulses. Yet it is on the basis of the playful, subversive, and fundamentally revolutionary spirit of the avant-garde impulse that it can be distinguished from the ideological and political seriousness of socialist realism. Indeed, though this continuity between the avant-garde and socialist realism here provably exists, the playful exuberance and “Spirit of the Avant-Garde” has been broken as it is shackled by the deadly stakes of the ideologically governed socialist realist aesthetic. Although socialist realism has its own rules and its own historical and religious precedents, which can be fascinating to discern (Clark 1985), it is anathema to the subversive spirit of the avant-garde, which found its fullest manifestation in Russian avant-garde picturebooks. This playfulness arises in part from the fact that, despite the trying times in which they were produced, they were genuinely and

enthusiastically directed to a child audience, even if children did not necessarily appreciate them, as Steiner shows (1999).

Taking such a retrospective glance reveals the beginning of the end of an innovative synergy in word and image and art and ideology that had taken place in the Russian avant-garde picturebook in the 1920s and 1930s. As pressures on writers and artists increased, they were forced to capitulate to the demands of ideology and censorship. Close comparative analysis of different editions written by Samuil Marshak and illustrated by Vladimir Lebedev and Mikhail Tsekhanovsky, who was inspired by him, reveal aesthetic changes necessitated by changing artistic and political circumstances and the sheer force of censorship. The artistic changes and aesthetic adaptations made evident by comparative visual analysis reveal the restrictions being placed upon picturebooks. They thus offer a reverse fingerprint of the censorship and restrictions being imposed on them. The erstwhile refuge children's literature had offered had become increasingly precarious as the avant-garde faced limitations that now threatened their very survival.

Through detailed word and image analysis, this chapter juxtaposes images from early and later editions of famous picturebooks by Marshak to reveal which adjustments were made, thereby reflecting the influence of censorship and new demands being placed on authors and illustrators. It examines three well-known children's poems by Samuil Marshak in their 1930s avant-garde picturebook editions, namely 1925 and 1935 versions of *Vchera i segodnia* [Yesterday and Today] illustrated by Lebedev, 1931 and 1935 versions of *Bagazh* [Baggage] also illustrated by Lebedev, and 1932 and 1937 editions of *Pochta* [The Mail] illustrated by Tsekhanovsky. The aesthetic shifts made evident by such comparative visual analysis offer insights into the restrictions being placed upon picturebooks and what adaptations illustrators made as the avant-garde aesthetic they had championed came under fire at a time when children's literature, like literature for adults before it, began to face increasing censorship.

Finding later and aesthetically uninteresting editions of these stories, after the official adoption of socialist realism had been instantiated throughout children's literature, is not challenging. Lebedev's later illustrations prove wholly unrecognizable, so different are they from the signature style he established in the 1920s, which inspired much avant-garde innovation and imitation in its day. What is unique about the editions examined here, on the other hand, in the concluding chapter of this study, is how they show artists adjusting their avant-garde aesthetic principles in response to the pressures upon them, thus revealing how they attempted to adapt in a time of transition. The differences between these 1930s editions thus show the fingerprints of ideology and censorship, but in an intermediate stage, when a kind of hybridization of the avant-garde was occurring, just before the complete obliteration of the avant-garde aesthetic.

Yesterday vs. today



Figure 54. Cover design by Vladimir Lebedev for Samuil Marshak's *Vchera i segodnia* [Yesterday and Today, 1935]. Art © Estate of Vladimir Lebedev/RAO, Moscow/VAGA, New York

Marshak and Lebedev's picturebook *Yesterday and Today* innocently takes on the task of contrasting the past and the future, a subject that would become more ideologically charged with each passing year. With radical juxtapositions on opposite pages and on the visually striking cover (Figure 54), *Yesterday and Today* displays and celebrates the impact of technological advancements, such as electricity and running water, in the lives of individuals. The cover shows "Yesterday" in black and white with three old individuals bent over under the burden of old technologies like a kerosene lamp, a yoke for carrying buckets of water, and an inkwell and quill pen. Meanwhile, "Today" is written in a bright red color echoed by the healthy faces, arms, and legs of three upright young workers taking large strides toward the future and seemingly unburdened by the new technologies they carry. Rather than mere individuals, these figures represent professions – an electrician, a plumber,

and a typist. Their images are printed in red, blue, black, and gray to a much more colorful overall effect.

The frail individuality of the elderly representatives of bygone times is replaced by a standardized and iconic representation of the new guard of young workers: their legs are not bent but straight, just as their posture is upright, and their faces look straight ahead. Likewise, their caps and kerchief and their practical working clothes in blue are also standardized and comprised of geometric fields, like the oval of the men's caps, the triangular skirt of the woman, and the rectangles of the men's pant legs. This standardization also extends to the human form: their hands have no fingers, but are rounded fists. Their faces lack noses and facial hair and represent a smooth and standardized profile. Even their bodies adhere to a modern and avant-garde aesthetic, which replaces individual variation with standardized geometry. In this sense, they approach the radical avant-garde artist Kazimir Malevich's purely geometric representations of people, if more clearly figurative and representative than Malevich's extreme experiments. The cover of this book, first published in 1925, thus signals that the revolutionary aesthetic of the future is avant-garde.



Figure 55. Illustrations by Vladimir Lebedev for Samuil Marshak's *Vchera i segodnia* [Yesterday and Today, 1925 and 1935]. Art © Estate of Vladimir Lebedev/RAO, Moscow/VAGA, New York

Interestingly, comparative visual analysis of the 1925, 1930, and 1935 versions of *Yesterday and Today* shows that, though most images are still preserved, one striking change is made for the 1935 edition. This particular scene (Figure 55) represents two older individuals seated at a table around a kerosene lamp, a technology of “yesterday” rendered obsolete by the electric lamp of “today.” The original image shows a charming black and white scene of a woman in a blouse and a man in a bowtie seated at a table with a samovar – with tea to drink, bread and salt to eat, and a newspaper to read. At the center of the table stands an ornate kerosene lamp with blue glass, around which multiple moths that actually resemble butterflies are flying.

Overall, this representation of the old days might have seemed too pleasant for the 1935 edition, where it is instead replaced by a new image that is blurred and dark and almost fully shaded. It shows a dark and seemingly smoky room where the seated figures are overweight, considerably less refined and privileged in their dress, and absorbed in drinking from their tea saucers in an outdated practice. The table crowded by the samovar and the kerosene lamp is cluttered rather than inviting. The moths, rendered without detail, as white against the darkness not fully dispelled by the lamp, have no resemblance to butterflies. They instead have the effect of swarming flies or midges and recall the filth or annoyance these entail.

The process of juxtaposing these two illustrations from 1925 or 1930 with those of 1935 reveals how the later one replaces the earlier image's crisp use of contrasting black and white fields of color and the emphasized geometry of shapes, which derive from the avant-garde aesthetics manifest in the picturebook. Its replacement thus eliminates the more striking and positive image of the past, a change that only can be justified by ideological considerations. It would seem that the only mistake to be corrected here is that the past is being represented in too stylized and pleasant a light. Only such considerations could explain why a striking and appealing image is replaced, while all else remains the same. Indeed, this image may have failed in its task to convey *Yesterday and Today* in exclusively black and white tones that, to borrow Mayakovsky's phrasing, show *What is Good and What is Bad*.

Weighed down by cultural baggage

Comparative visual analysis of the 1931 and 1935 versions of Marshak and Lebedev's seemingly innocent children's poem *Baggage*, as shown above (Figure 56), reveals still more changes taking place. The well-known poem describes a lady who delivers an extensive list of belongings to baggage handlers on a train, and the subsequent loss and replacement of her lapdog with a large mongrel. It is rife with repetition and soundplay, such as the repetitive euphonic refrain which enumerates the lady's baggage: "A lady checked her baggage: / A couch, / A suitcase, / A hatbox, / A painting, / A basket, / A box / And a tiny little dog." At the same time, within a politically charged context, the text also can be read on an ideological level. Then the lady represents the upper classes, as signaled by her lapdog and her extensive material possessions, and is opposed to the baggage handlers on the train.

The original picturebook edition of *Baggage* by Marshak and Lebedev is one of their most successful collaborations. Its innovative layout (Figure 57) inventively utilizes the picturebook form to create a cinematic effect that exploits the possibilities of the picturebook medium with its display of sequential compositions of



Figure 56. Cover design by Vladimir Lebedev for Samuil Marshak's *Bagazh* [Baggage, 1931]. Art © Estate of Vladimir Lebedev/RAO, Moscow/VAGA, New York

image and text. By turning the pages of the book, a reader sees train cars depicted from outside and inside on opposing pages and symmetrically placed train cars flashing past with their contents bared and hidden in sequence. In terms of the animated effect of its pages, the book presages the link between Russian avant-garde picturebooks and innovative animation experiments in the subsequent period, such as in works by Mikhail Tsekhanovsky discussed later. The 1935 edition, however, makes significant adjustments that compromise the overall design and sequencing of images that make the original so innovative. Due to the disruption of compositions across doublespreads and sequences of pages, none of the innovative visual effects remain.

Indeed, though the 1935 edition maintains the original cover and final pages, it readjusts the delivery of the story to focus on the vilification of the lady and her actions, as well as the negative outcome for her. In the earlier versions of the book (Figure 58), the lady is plump and short, giving her a comic and diminutive effect.



Figure 57. Illustrations by Vladimir Lebedev for Samuil Marshak's *Baggage* (1931).
Art © Estate of Vladimir Lebedev/RAO, Moscow/VAGA, New York

In this way, her shape cannot be differentiated from that of the baggage handlers, who also have compacted diminutive forms. In the later edition, however, the lady is shown as tall and thin with multiple accessories displaying her wealth – a purse, umbrella, and bountiful fur collar. Her features are individualized instead of being rendered more symbolic or geometric, as may be said of the lady in the original, whose face and head employ round lines and whose bundled up body has a distinctly triangular shape. The lady's vilification renders her more individual, as is the older couple in *Yesterday and Today*, and now differentiates her more from the railway workers, whose shape has remained the same.

The otherwise rapid and rhythmic delivery of the text slows down to dwell on the rage and destructiveness of the lady as she demands the return of her own dog, which has been replaced by a large proletarian mongrel. This large, panting dog, which is displayed simply on the final page of the original for dramatic effect, in the later edition takes on a more active and punitive role. On one expanded doublespread (Figure 59) its lunging large shape and open jaws, canines, and tongue threaten the surprised lady, who is leaning (or falling) backward in terror. These alterations render the later version more overtly ideological and further vilify and threaten the lady, whose caricatured representation no longer reflects avant-garde aesthetics.

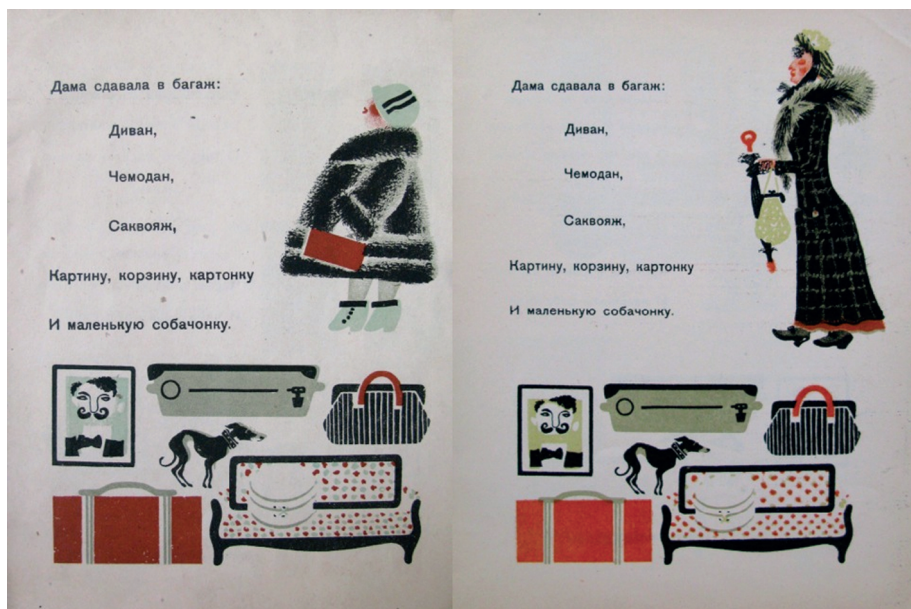


Figure 58. Illustrations by Vladimir Lebedev for Samuil Marshak's *Baggage* (1931 and 1935). Art © Estate of Vladimir Lebedev/RAO, Moscow/VAGA, New York



Figure 59. Illustrations by Vladimir Lebedev for Samuil Marshak's *Baggage* (1935). Art © Estate of Vladimir Lebedev/RAO, Moscow/VAGA, New York

Twisting and turning to adapt

Comparative visual analysis of the 1933 and 1937 versions of Marshak and Lebedev's *Mister Twister*, which was discussed earlier in terms of its content, also reveal the elimination of innovative visual effects and dramatic style and, in certain instances, a move toward a socialist realist depiction of human figures. Although the covers of the books seem similar (Figure 60), the application of color and use of line render the 1937 edition more subtle and realistic than the 1933 version. While the earlier edition uses dark outlines that emphasize lines and features and turn characters into caricatures, the later edition eliminates these outlines to create a more realistic representation. Here similar images undergo an adjustment, such as through the addition of considerable detail and nuance to move away from stylization in order to reflect new socialist realist aesthetic principles. Some interior images remain the same, like black and white pen and ink drawings of characters in motion printed in small size on the pages of the text, but the 1937 version includes many more full plates, focusing particularly on Mister Twister.



Figure 60. Cover design by Vladimir Lebedev for Samuil Marshak's *Mister Twister* (1933 and 1937). Art © Estate of Vladimir Lebedev/RAO, Moscow/VAGA, New York

The 1933 version proves significantly more innovative in its effects, including in the stylized representation of a black man, whose mere proximity provokes the racist outrage of Mister Twister. The composition depicts the mirror's replication and multiplication of the man's reflection across the doublespread. This parody of

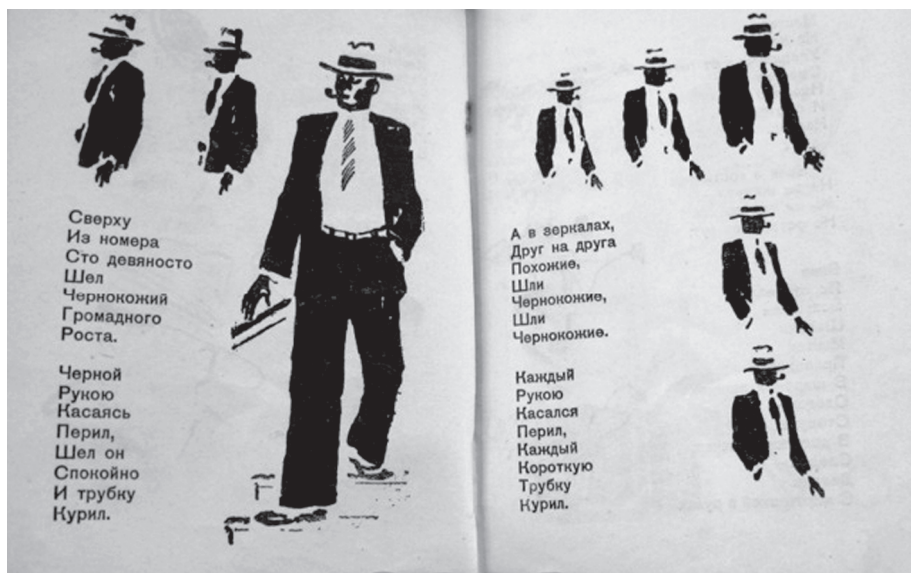


Figure 61. Illustrations by Vladimir Lebedev for Samuil Marshak's *Mister Twister* (1933). Art © Estate of Vladimir Lebedev/RAO, Moscow/VAGA, New York

a xenophobic nightmare achieves a maximally dynamic and avant-garde cinematic effect. In contrast, the 1937 edition shown earlier (Figure 41), simply uses one plate that depicts the man more realistically. There the man's hat, profile, and pipe are reflected repeatedly in the multiple mirrors surrounding the stairs, as described in the book, rather than in the stylized dynamic black and white displays of the earlier edition shown above (Figure 61). Here it is precisely the boldly avant-garde cinematic effects that are changed.

Another instance of a cinematic effect results from the depiction of porters carrying the numerous bags of the Twisters. The accompanying text reads, "Behind / Four / Giants / Are walking / Carrying / Twenty-four bags" (8). In the 1933 version, four porters carrying these many bags extend across four pages without text, thus dwelling longer on the visual display of this procession of material goods carried by each porter in turn, thereby exploiting "the drama of the turning page" in a cinematic and wordless way. The 1937 version reduces this to two pages depicting two porters approaching and departing while carrying multiple bags, thereby losing the innovative visual effect.

The scheming by the porter in teaching the Twisters a lesson receives considerably more emphasis in the illustrations to the 1937 version. In later years, however, Marshak reluctantly removed it from the poem when pressured to do so – in order to not dissuade tourists from visiting (Leving 2011: 282). Tellingly, Marshak writes, "On the whole I do not yield easily. But children's books were so strictly controlled

that one couldn't always have it one's own way" (cf. Leving 2011: 282). The 1937 illustrations oppose the doorman and Twister directly in the imagery of the book. The doorman is depicted in several more images, including pairs of images showing him making several phone calls to ensure that the Twisters would find no accommodation. Opposed, paired images are prevalent in the 1937 book, including also the four porters carrying bags, the family running and the car driving away, and two hotels denying spaces to the Twisters. The 1937 version thus emphasizes oppositional conflict and ideology, while the 1933 version still contains more playful and innovative effects within the ideological tale.

One textual difference between the 1933 and 1937 versions is reflected in the illustrations of the foreigners welcomed by the Soviet Union at the conclusion of the book. The 1933 version shows four stern male visages whose heads are turned threateningly toward the text and villain, it might be presumed, to accompany their enumeration cited earlier. The 1937 version, meanwhile, extends the enumeration of foreigners by an entire stanza: "The opposite room / Is taken by a Caribbean woman, / The room under her – / By a Mongolian man and woman / And near / neighbors / of yours / will be / San, / Tuareg, / and Papuan people" (44–46). The illustrations of six of these figures face the reader quite directly. This added stanza and greater preponderance of images further emphasizes the point about the internationalism of the Soviet Union, which amounts to a critique of American racism. It also includes both men and women in the text and its depiction, thereby showing more diversity and gender equality in the Soviet critique of America as well. Also further underscoring the ideological point in this edition is the inclusion of an epigraph quoting Baedeker, which reads, "Having arrived in a new country, try to observe its laws and customs to avoid misunderstandings..." (3). The irony here is that the Soviet Union had effectively closed its borders and that its own citizens were no longer able to travel freely and challenge the beliefs being inculcated in them at home. Of course, as Loseff notes, despite the official discourse, under these circumstances children were also learning to be skilled Aesopian readers and critical thinkers who silently and internally questioned the ideological messages they were being force-fed.

Finally getting the message

In a final case study, comparative visual analysis of the 1932 and 1937 editions of *The Mail* by Samuil Marshak and Mikhail Tsekhanovsky reveals very subtle aesthetic changes in a state of hybridization. As a result, these show the most directly how ideological considerations and censorship increasingly delimit aesthetic possibilities, regardless of the underlying message, which here remains the same.

Marshak's poem *The Mail* traces the story of a letter traveling the world in pursuit of its intended recipient. The poem praises proletarian postmen around the world and applauds their hard work in delivering mail wherever it must go, concluding: "Honor and glory to all the postmen, / Wearied and dusty, / Glory to the honest postmen, / With a heavy bag on a strap!"



Figure 62. Cover design by Mikhail Tsekhanovsky for Samuil Marshak's *Pochta* [The Mail, 1932 and 1937]

For the 1932 cover (Figure 62), the artist Tsekhanovsky borrows heavily from his mentor Vladimir Lebedev in his visually exciting use of dramatically contrasting blue and orange geometric shapes within shapes. These include rectangles within rectangles and the semicircles that make up the stamp's edge or relevant images of train and ship. The 1937 cover proves much less visually interesting. It uses a plain, unprinted background featuring only the text listing the title and author and a striding postman whose shape recurs also in the text. Unlike the covers of avant-garde picturebooks of the preceding period, which represented a particular art form of their own and advertised the work within, this cover is in no way distinctive as a cover design. It is largely indistinguishable from an interior page, such as a title page or an illustrated page of text.

Compared to the 1932 version, all of the postmen in the 1937 version have become more realistic and comply more with a socialist realist representation of the human body. The 1937 postmen have become more like one other, with less stylization or individual variation than in the 1932 version (Figure 63). Yet, this differs from the 1925 opposition of *Yesterday and Today* where the new standardized forms



Figure 63. Illustration by Mikhail Tsekhanovsky for Samuil Marshak's *The Mail* (1932)

were distinctly avant-garde. Instead the new physical standard being shown here is a socialist realist one. Compared to the 1932 color scheme, the use of color in the 1937 version has become more varied and subtle, minimizing the effect of simple fields of contrasting primary colors. The trains too have become less stylized and urban scenes are altered. For example, the 1932 view of London is visually exciting with abundant advertising text, with two red double-decker buses contrasting with the blue image of a city block and also echoing the postman's red bag as he strides by in the foreground. The 1937 London scene, meanwhile, is drab and significantly grayer. With reduced depth, it offers a narrower view of plain symmetrical buildings without advertising details and shows parts of two incongruously blue double-decker buses. Likewise, as shown below (Figure 64), the depiction of the letter and the stamps upon it, at the end of its peripatetic journey, remains perfectly rectangular in the 1932 version, where avant-garde angularity and geometry predominate over realism. In the 1937 version, however, the letter and the stamps upon it have become rounded and bent and tied up with string in a more realistic, if less striking, representation. Interestingly, the red lines struck through subsequent addresses on the letter in the 1932 version are eliminated in 1937, when censorship considerations, as might also be evoked by red lines, have increased.



Figure 64. Illustrations by Mikhail Tsekhanovsky for Samuil Marshak's *The Mail* (1932 and 1937)

Most interesting of all from an aesthetic perspective, however, is the final scene, when the recipient, children's writer Boris Zhitkov, reads the well-traveled letter once he has returned home, and it finally has reached him. The 1932 and 1937 editions reproduce virtually the same image (Figure 65) – with Zhitkov seated in an armchair, reading the letter beside a desk and a travel bag in a room that also features a cockatoo in a cage and a map on the wall. At the same time, however, significant aesthetic choices have been made and added, thus displaying the artistic changes and compromises necessitated by external considerations. This example thus displays the imprint of ideology and censorship upon avant-garde aesthetics, as Russian avant-garde picturebooks faced insurmountable creative limitations and had no choice but to adapt.

The 1932 version features contrasting blocks of color – red, yellow, black, and blue. The white negative space is also used to maximal effect, such as through the sailboat, monkey, or Zhitkov's white face contrasted with his black hair. The 1932 version employs no outlines, relying instead on boldly contrasting color fields to distinguish different shapes. The 1937 version, on the other hand, adds outlines particularly to the figure of Zhitkov and his armchair, as well as adding numerous details to the cockatoo, bag, map, and posters. Many more shades of color are also employed, like in the posters on the wall or the pink skin of Zhitkov's face and hand. At the same time, however, the colors remain bright and dramatic, such as in the use of red and yellow, which is largely preserved. In this sense we witness the hybridization of avant-garde and socialist realist aesthetics, since some avant-garde elements remain even as new aesthetic accommodations to realism necessarily have taken place.



Figure 65. Illustrations by Mikhail Tsekhanovsky for Samuil Marshak's *The Mail* (1932 and 1937)

The most notable change in the image, however, is the addition of perspective to the scene. This new use of perspective is evident in the stack of books, armchair, and travel bag in the foreground of both images. In the 1937 version, additional angles upon the same basic image have been laboriously added in order to reinstate a conventional use of three-dimensional perspective eschewed by the avant-garde. In the original image, in accordance with avant-garde aesthetics, a flattened use of perspective and virtually two-dimensional imagery predominate throughout the composition. The only exception is the stacked travel bags, which use a flattened or inverted perspective to render two sides of a three-dimensional object in a naively distorted manner. In this example one can witness how the two-dimensional, maximally contrasting, and geometrical world of avant-garde aesthetics is being recalibrated to the conventions of realism. This one scene thus shows the gradual obliteration of the avant-garde aesthetic in process, but during the brief period when avant-garde and new socialist realist principles underwent a fleeting hybridization.

For at this time, in this brief transitional period, these original avant-garde images could still be rehabilitated, rather than be altered completely. The next step, already written on the wall, is the complete obliteration of the avant-garde aesthetic. By this late point, however, it is only a matter of time, for the Russian avant-garde picturebook, which had proved a last bastion of avant-garde innovation, would be next to succumb to the demands of censorship and socialist realism in its strictest interpretation. No longer could artists and writers shelter in the shadow of the child, for the Soviet child had now been fully conscripted, as forecast by Vladimir Mayakovsky's words "when you engage in politics, children" that indicate it was not a matter of "if," but "when."

Ultimately, the works of the avant-garde innovators who survived would prove wholly unrecognizable – with all playful and experimental innovations eliminated. Within a few years, it was as if the avant-garde picturebook of the early Soviet years had never existed. Yet, as the examples discussed within this book show, censorship also met with resistance, as long as it was still possible. Moreover, necessity breeds

invention and adverse conditions sometimes inspire ingenuity. In this respect, in this final body chapter, which concludes the fourth part of this book, one might consider if these Russian avant-garde picturebooks, which appear to have been wholly obliterated and, for a time, nearly erased from the historical record, survived by any other means.

In other words, did any of these figures accomplish a “knight’s move,” as Viktor Shklovsky termed it in a 1923 essay collection entitled in this manner. As Shklovsky explains, “The book is called knight’s move. The knight moves sideways [...] There are many reasons for the strangeness of the knight’s move [...] the knight is not free – he moves sideways, because the straight road is forbidden to him” (Shklovsky 1923: 9–10). Read in the context of restricted artistic freedom, Shklovsky’s “knight’s move” emerges as an act of creative defiance and ingenuity in the face of censorship, like Aesopian maneuvers. The Russian avant-garde picturebook in some senses did accomplish a “knight’s move” that allowed it to proceed in another form, when the straight road was forbidden. For instance, the artist Mikhail Tsekhanovsky, who followed in the footsteps of Lebedev’s radical innovations, represents one line, which ends within the picturebook proper but goes on in another realm. If Lebedev employs cinematic effects in his most innovative books, as early as 1926 in the train cars moving across the turning pages in the first edition of *Baggage* or in the pages of porters with bags he depicts in the 1933 version of *Mister Twister*, then Tsekhanovsky takes up this directive in his own inventive animated films, beginning with the film version of “*Pochta*” [“The Mail,” 1929] that he created during the heyday of the avant-garde picturebook. Indeed, after a prolific few years illustrating picturebooks, Tsekhanovsky shifted mainly to working in animation. In such a figure as Tsekhanovsky and other animators, one witnesses how the innovative influence of the Russian avant-garde picturebook, in some sense at least, transcended the restrictions of its day to find continuation in another avenue. But that is another story.

The extinction of the Russian avant-garde picturebook

An Ecology of the Russian Avant-Garde Picturebook has sought to radically recontextualize Russian avant-garde picturebooks by considering them within the ecological environment in which they originated. This book has argued that an ecological approach, which considers the subject of study within its environment, highlights the synchronic complexities of these works of image and text within the unique constellation of forces in which they arose, existed, and were understood. It also grants a diachronic view of their evolution as a result of the interplay of disparate forces comprising a dynamic system that forced them to adapt and evolve before resulting in their extinction. Close analysis of the use of image and text, and their synergy in the picturebook iconotext, demonstrates not only that these works represent intriguing and valuable aesthetic objects in their own right, but also sheds light on the theoretical complexities inherent within image and text, as well as their context. In short, considering them within their original artistic, literary, intellectual, historical, cultural, and political environment reveals that these books cannot be regarded as mere products of necessity. Despite the conventional wisdom, Russian children's literature did not merely serve as a reluctant refuge for prominent individuals, but offered and accomplished much more.

Quite to the contrary, deeper consideration of the historical, cultural, and political environment of these materials reveals that the child audience of these works was considered paramount in the shaping of a new political subject for the future Soviet state. By the 1920s, children's literature had become a weapon of choice in the ideological fight for the future. Being aimed at the youngest generation, whose minds still offered a blank slate for new ideology, picturebooks had an important role to play in properly socializing future subjects. The early Soviet picturebook thus promised to be a perfect primer for new ideology – and an outlet for a radically new aesthetic adapted to a dramatically different time. Nowhere is this more evident than in the fact that such prominent figures as the foremost revolutionary poet Vladimir Mayakovsky and the radical avant-garde artist El Lissitzky employed the picturebook as medium to engage in the height of avant-garde experiment while delivering ardent revolutionary messages that instantiate the child as the political subject *par excellence*. Their example demonstrates how politics and ideology

completely and dynamically intersected with avant-garde aesthetics in the picture-books of the 1920s. Clearly, then, the early Soviet picturebook was not a reluctant refuge but, in fact, a privileged art form.

At the same time, and in parallel, avant-garde aesthetics in art had pointed to the child as a source of primitivist inspiration and seized on a construct of the child as a source of artistic renewal. Revolutionary and aesthetic considerations thus coalesce around the child as subject in this period and reach their fullest fruition and collaboration in the Russian avant-garde picturebooks of the 1920s and 1930s. Another converging line of influence emerged out of avant-garde poster art and propaganda attuned to the visual and cognitive needs of an illiterate and unschooled audience in ways that transferred easily to the new picturebook medium as a mass-produced educational and socializing tool. Certain images, metaphors, and visual clichés shifted wholesale into picturebooks, particularly through the person of Vladimir Lebedev, who stood at the nexus of these genres and exerted a tremendous influence on new approaches to picturebook illustration in the early Soviet period.

If, by the 1920s, the idea of children's literature as a weapon and the child as a political subject definitively had been born, then the picturebook served as the ideal place to address them. In this early period the combined efforts of individuals, such as those discussed here, elevated picturebooks to the avant-garde forefront of both aesthetic and ideological battles. They intended to reshape society according to a utopian ideal still optimistically construed by revolutionaries in the early Soviet period. By the 1930s circumstances had changed, however. The revolution had receded into the past and the state increasingly acted to secure its interests and political hold, including over the next generation. The ideological restrictiveness of the new socialist realist ideal in the arts proved quite different from the playful spirit of revolt and radical disruption that the avant-garde at one time had shared with revolutionary politics, so these two paths began to diverge. Still, the unique form of the picturebook, with its significant silences and the complementary communicative potential of image and text, also proved ideally suited and adaptive in its diverse responses to conditions of censorship and silencing, such as those that characterized the early Soviet period.

In many cases, Russian avant-garde picturebooks uniquely exploited an Aesopian tradition of ambivalence and subversive signification characteristic of Russian literature over the ages, since literature and censorship long coexisted in Russia. When this sophisticated communicative system meets children's literature, however, something even more complex occurs. These children's books addressing multiple audiences at once achieve not only a dual audience typical of excellent literature for children worldwide, but even a triple audience of child, adult, and censor. Moreover, the addressing of multiple audiences and the strategic use of silence or irony, for example, may take place in image or text, thereby further multiplying the sophistication and dimensionality of these works.

In light of the decreasing publication possibilities, increasing censorship, silencing, and threats to their very existence that writers and artists faced, these picturebooks have a unique story to tell that could not be told anywhere else. Due to the richness of their Aesopian ambivalence and triple audience, these picturebooks sometimes contain encoded messages and allusions that many, including the censors, may have missed, but which still might be intercepted today, if examined closely with a deeper consideration of image, text, and context. In fact, a closer examination often reveals an ocean of subsurface meanings churning below the view of official discourse and demonstrating dialogic and carnivalesque complexity. Unofficially, writers, artists, parents, and other individuals were using Russian avant-garde picturebooks to cultivate future Aesopian readers able to read critically, discern subtleties, and receive covert communications.

Indeed, Soviet children's literature thus evolved unique characteristics not paralleled in the West, although they might also arise elsewhere in the world under conditions of censorship and repression. After all, the presence of censorship exerts a selective pressure that adds to the complexity of the dynamic system of a unique body of literature and its readers – at least in those that manage to meet an audience. Clearly, many layers of meaning await excavation in such books wherever they exist. Though they contain some messages obviously intended for children, others may be perceptible only to an adult audience, and some, in fact, can only be perceived by those who can decipher the Aesopian implications within the text. Sophisticated games thus take place in these picturebooks as regards author, illustrator, reader (whether child or adult), and censor, who has the power to end the game at any point.

Considering the power of censorship and the increasing shadow it casts over the 1920s and 1930s complicates the ecological context of these works. In the case of Marshak and Lebedev's unpublished picturebook *Ellipsis*, directly addressing certain issues of the day such as unspeakable revolutionary violence, was impossible. Yet, at the same time, these picturebooks, which are apparently aimed at the youngest audience, display a desperate, subversive, or unconscious attempt to indirectly address and process traumatizing historical events. These include assassinations, arrests, violence, and the targeting of individuals for punishment, banishment, and even annihilation. Perhaps, in the end, picturebooks proved more able to address these unspeakable subjects than other literary and artistic forms.

In short, no one simple model can explain everything that occurs in the variety of books examined here. Even the conventional notion of Russian children's literature as a refuge proves more multifaceted than it seems. Yes, children's literature offered more opportunities longer to beleaguered writers. But the refuge could also take other shapes, such as in Osip Mandelstam's stated wish to read only children's books and think only children's thoughts. In processing historical trauma,

an author or illustrator might even address a vulnerable child self within, who is still reeling from incomprehensible violence, deprivations, or injustices to which the times necessarily bore witness. By the same token, children's literature also offered a refuge from challenging and problematic topics for writers who could find simplicity there – and perhaps a return to their own childhood idyll, such as it perhaps had never existed in reality.

Readers too exist in vast variety. Though the censor, or implied censor, reigned supreme, child and adult readers were also infinitely varied. Nor were relations with the censor always detrimental, as Lev Loseff notes in his phrase “the beneficence of censorship.” For here the Soviet Union cultivated a uniquely sophisticated body of children's literature and picturebooks that achieved remarkable and unparalleled heights aesthetically – and also in the intricacies of their communicative codes. A writer such as Daniil Kharmis, in the absurdity of his art and its metatextual implications, offered a critique of the fictionality of his society in some of its darkest moments. Such a message was perhaps as revolutionary as the aspirations of earlier factions of the avant-garde, even as they anticipated later absurdism and postmodern experiments with metafiction in the West.

A diachronic perspective on the Russian avant-garde picturebook from the 1920s to the 1930s exposes the overall trajectory of its evolutionary development in this period. It moves from radical experimentation at the apex of avant-garde innovation, when the avant-garde aesthetic and revolutionary ethos coevolved, to a period of increased antagonism and self-annihilation, or gradual adaptation and capitulation, out of necessity, to the state-mandated socialist realist approach to the arts, where ideology took pride of place. Late 1930s editions of some of the most innovative books show artists employing a hybridization of avant-garde aesthetics and more realistic approaches to artistic depiction. This uneasy coexistence of disparate influences thus marks a final, intermediary step before the total obliteration of the avant-garde.

Thus, the picturebook, as an iconotext comprising image and text in sophisticated and varied interplay, proves theoretically rich in general and in ways unique to the Soviet context. As examples discussed herein have shown, picturebook images and text have the potential to both address and sidestep unspoken or unspeakable themes arising organically in this period. Meanwhile, expanding the scope of the study shows how these findings about the ecology of the Russian avant-garde picturebook might apply to children's literature or literature more broadly. For censorship alongside unspeakable subjects, and covert codes alongside sophisticated readers able to intercept them, coexist in a kind of ecological equilibrium wherever we find art and people who live and die for it.

Ultimately, the radical recontextualization of Russian avant-garde picturebooks within the dynamic system of their ecological environment reveals the potential of artistic artifacts to expose the historical and cultural complexities of their time and

the intricacies of their interrelations. Far too much is lost if works are republished or examined without attention to the complex interactions of image and text or of a material object and the unique ecological context in which it arose. The fact that this lamentable fate has plagued these books in the past, however, is perhaps understandable under the circumstances. Yet these literary and artistic creations deserve so much more. In the end, this study underscores how rich the picturebook medium can be, offering kaleidoscopic insight into the multiple minds they engage and the times they reflect, as well as the complex dynamics that surround word and image, art and politics, creativity and censorship. We can no longer afford to ignore picturebooks, neither in a general sense, nor in the particularly complex and illuminating context of the Russian avant-garde picturebooks – with their fraught interrelations between censorship and literature, politics and art.

Future reverberations

Viewing Russian avant-garde picturebooks in a broader international context and along a longer timeline reveals that their influence, as in other cases of censored writings, went on beyond the endpoint being enforced by the authorities. Indeed, the influence of these books was felt in the emigration and all over the world, including through ripple effects after their exhibition abroad, such as in the 1929 Amsterdam exhibition (Stommels and Lemmens 2015: 137–170) or the 1932 Copenhagen exhibition (Christensen 2015: 171–175). New lines of influence were manifest also in the work of Russian artists in the emigration, such as Nathalie Parain in France (Beckett 2015: 224–226) or Russian-born illustrators in America, whose work draws on Russian predecessors. Russian avant-garde picturebooks also influenced German children's literature, such as El Lissitzky's influence on Kurt Schwitters (see Kümmerling-Meibauer 2017). Sometimes radical politics lubricated the translation of aesthetic influences, even in the United States (Mickelberg 2006). Through these means, Russian avant-garde picturebooks inspired innovations that continued in the same vein even once avant-garde experimentation had been stamped out conclusively in the Soviet Union.

Though the originals of these books now exist only in archives, private collections, and special collections of prominent research libraries, they have begun to be reprinted in the past few decades. In the 1970s and 1980s, Russian reprints of *Selected Children's Books by Soviet Artists* appeared, as mentioned in the introduction. Recent exhibitions have brought them to a Western audience at prominent museums, such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York and Tate Gallery in London. As a result, exhibition catalogues have shown some of their features and selected books have been reprinted in facsimile by the Museum of Modern Art

and the Tate Gallery. Today they even are becoming accessible digitally, such as through Princeton University or the Russian State Library, and even remote or hard to access collections are making them available electronically to all. So in this way, these once lost or censored books now enjoy a second, digital life that their creators never could have foreseen, challenged as they were by censorship in the quest to see the light in the first place. Such new developments ensure that the influence of these books, despite a considerable remove in space and time, and the vagaries of history and censorship, continue to be felt more than a century later.

At the same time, however, although these artistic artifacts can be dehistoricized in this way and enjoy a new audience with scholars, the original context of the authors, artists, and audiences involved with these remarkable aesthetic collaborations and achievements should not be forgotten. For many were the decades when the rightful audiences of children and adults were deprived of these books, denied access to this tradition, and fed only on fare deemed ideologically appropriate. Vast were the repercussions for an artistic freedom that was denied and an artistic development cut short. Most of all, it bears remembering that the stakes for the artists and illustrators were high and their sacrifices costly. Considering the harsh history in which they were embedded, they deserve to be viewed with sympathy and recognized for their remarkable accomplishments under trying circumstances.

Some Russian writers and artists, such as Alexandre Benois, continued to work in the emigration, although in a very different setting and divorced from their original audience. Some suffered disillusionment, such as Vladimir Mayakovsky, who felt compelled by circumstance to commit suicide in 1930, although some rumors maintain that he was murdered by the government. Some courageous souls continued to exercise creative freedom and express their protest enshrouded in Aesopian children's literature. Sooner or later, however, most were arrested after living in a fearful climate of repression, and they then suffered unknown and unknowable torments. Osip Mandelstam was arrested and died in a Siberian transit camp in 1938. Daniil Kharms was arrested and starved to death in a prison psychiatric ward in 1942. Others were silenced by circumstances while still at the height of their creative powers, such as Yury Olesha. Here we might think of the words Mandelstam courageously wrote in his 1933 "Stalin Epigram": "We live, but we do not feel the land beneath us, / Ten steps away and our words cannot be heard" (Mandelstam 1981). Mandelstam's private reading of this poem led to his arrest. So the stakes at the time truly were very high.

For all of the figures included in this book, however, children's publishing did offer a place of refuge, even if it proved only a temporary bulwark and a last bastion of an imperiled avant-garde. For a few others, like Samuil Marshak, Vladimir Lebedev, and Viktor Shklovsky, children's literature proved to be a sufficient ark to carry them to safety through the deluges of subsequent years. For this contribution

to the preservation of many, Russian children's literature truly ought to be acknowledged. Mere survival did not come without great cost, however, and those who did survive had to give up much and shed all their baggage to be saved.

In the process, they lost the avant-garde and other aesthetic innovations for which they once had stood. The same was true for Soviet children's literature, which lost much through this sacrifice. Many works, such as those by Osip Mandelstam, were lost completely as a result of the political taint that officially became attached to blacklisted authors. All avant-garde illustrations that made the 1920s and 1930s picturebook collaborations so extraordinary and noteworthy on a global scale were eliminated. Some ideologically correct texts would survive, however, such as Samuil Marshak's satirical "Mister Twister," which was adapted for the stage and made into stop-action animation. Also ideological, Vladimir Mayakovsky's *The Story about Peter, the Fat Child, and about Simon, Who is Thin*, survived, but without its bold original illustrations and in somewhat sanitized variants that toned down the violent conclusion of the original texts and illustrations.

Some works even were canonized by Soviet children's literature and culture, such as Yury Olesha's *Three Fat Men*, which became a striking animated film in 1963 and a popular live-action film in 1966. Clearly it was read as a purely revolutionary fairy tale, without any of the ambivalence close examination of the text reveals. So even in the Soviet Union, the works discussed here were radically decontextualized and the original bond of image and text was forcibly broken. Avant-garde innovations were discarded and the original format of the iconotext whole, which contemporary picturebook research considers crucial, was disregarded. Thus it is no surprise that scholars too, as well as Soviet academic editions of the collected works of authors published in this period, have given little attention to the illustrations. These innovative illustrations were neglected and unknown by subsequent generations and all but lost to history. The bond of word and image was destroyed and the picturebook such as it had existed, as a unique iconotext, was almost irreparably decontextualized.

Thankfully, however, some of these original artifacts were preserved. In this sense, Russia has always observed a reverence for the written word and the art object, which belies the censorship and ideological vagaries of centuries of Russian history. This respect is observed even by the government, censor, and secret police insofar as they value literature and art to the extent that they consider it dangerous and, in fact, do not destroy, but *preserve* what they confiscate. As Mandelstam once said to his incomparable wife, the memoirist Nadezhda Mandelstam, "Only in Russia is poetry respected, it gets people killed. Is there anywhere else where poetry is so common a motive for murder?" (cf. 1970: 159). It would seem that, in Russia, the same is true for children's literature and picturebooks. The avant-garde picturebooks discussed in this book also engaged in the life and death drama, and

trauma, of Russian literature and art. In so doing, children's literature both saved and imperiled many remarkable Russians, such as Daniil Kharms. He spent virtually his entire career unable to publish for adults due to censorship, so his survival, as well as his arrest, imprisonment, and death at the hands of the state, can only be attributed to his writings for children. Indeed, many such souls were silenced before their time. But against this dark and deadly backdrop, the lasting aesthetic achievements of this period shine all the more brightly.

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An Ecology of the Russian Avant-Garde Picturebook takes a new approach to interpreting 1920s and 1930s picturebooks by prominent Russian writers, artists, and intellectuals by examining them within the ecological environment that, first, made them possible and, then, led to their demise. It argues that naturalistic models of the complex interactions of dynamic systems offer effective tools for understanding the fraught interrelations of art and censorship in the early Soviet period. Through illustrative case studies, it mounts a close analysis of word and image and their synergistic interplay in avant-garde picturebooks, while also recontextualizing them within the ecology of their original environment where extraordinary countervailing forces played out a drama of which these books survive as telling artifacts. Ultimately, it argues that the Russian avant-garde picturebook offers a uniquely illustrative example of literary ecology that sheds light on issues of creativity and censorship, politics and art, more broadly as well.

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