



“I Whisper Into the Radio Ear”: Radio Sound and Russian Modernist Poetics

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“I Whisper Into the Radio Ear”: Radio Sound and Russian Modernist Poetics

A dissertation presented

by

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“I Whisper Into the Radio Ear”: Radio Sound and Russian Modernist Poetics

Abstract

In 1924, the Soviet “electrification” was followed by “radiofication,” a gradual introduction of broadcast radio that led to novel forms of newscasts, political propaganda, and creative formats. This dissertation is the first study to document the wider cultural impact of radio in the Soviet interwar period; more specifically, it shows how the medium affected Russian modernist poetry both as a theme and as a catalyst for linguistic and poetic innovation. While existing scholarship on radio and literary writing typically addresses genres written for the medium, such as the radio play, I re-examine works by three canonical Soviet writers—Velimir Khlebnikov, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and Osip Mandelstam—to reveal how their views of the poetic word were transformed by broadcasting.

In chapter one, I argue that Khlebnikov’s theory of *zaum* and the sonorous poetics of his later works (1921–22) reflect both the concept and the sounds of wireless communication: its instantaneity, omnipresence, and heightened emotional charge. In chapter two, I trace radio’s role in Mayakovsky’s poetic posturing as the Revolution’s leading orator. Not only do his lyrics written after 1922 thematize their own transmission as sound; Mayakovsky’s theoretical essays accord radio a leading role in the Soviet literary process itself. The third chapter examines Mandelstam’s “Voronezh Notebooks” as a reflection of the poet’s exposure to and work for radio during his exile. By revealing how these writers engaged with radio beyond—and despite—its political and informative uses,

I show that the medium motivated a growing emphasis on the sounded poetic word. In many cases, radio inspired a shift from visual forms of representation toward aural imagery and encouraged a renewed interest in poetry as an oral genre.

Table of Contents

Table of Contents

List of Illustrations

Acknowledgments

Introduction

Chapter 1

“Radio of the Future”: Velimir Khlebnikov’s Poetics of Wireless Sound

Chapter 2

Vladimir Mayakovsky as “Radio Agitator”

Chapter 3

The Radio Poetics of Osip Mandelstam’s *Voronezh Notebooks*

Conclusion

Bibliography

List of Illustrations

Figure 2.1. Vladimir Tatlin, “Monument to the Third International,” 1919–20.

Figure 2.2. Naum Gabo, “Project for a Radio Station,” 1921.

Figure 2.3. Gustav Klutsis, “Radio-Orator,” 1922.

Figure 2.4. “The Joy of Art” (“Schast'e iskusstva”). *Radioslushatel'*, 1928.

Figure 4.1. Telefunken 340W radio receiver, 1931.

Figure 4.2. 9n-4 radio receiver, 1937, front panel.

Figure 4.3. Radio microphone, film still.

Figure 4.4. 9n-4 radio receiver, 1937, full view.

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Introduction

“I Whisper Into the Radio Ear”: Radio Sound and Russian Modernist Poetics

In his autobiography, the Soviet writer Lev Kassil' links his genesis as an author with an infectious obsession with radio that swept Russia along with the first regular radio broadcasts: “[In 1924] I wrote my first short story. Those were the times when radio enthusiasm was spreading tempestuously. We improvised homemade receivers and, with hearts that trembled with excitement at the power of technology, listened through ebony headphones to the measured dictation of TASS: ‘Full stoppp... Let-ter by let-ter: Peter, Anna, Roman, Ivan, Susanna... Pa-ris!..’ And it seemed like a miracle to us. My story was also about the radio.”¹ Kassil’'s account and his story, with the rather silly title “Mr. Kissmequick’s Receiver” (“Priemnik mistera Kismikvika”), are exemplary of radio’s potent effect on the literary imagination at the time. For a few eventful decades, before enthusiasm for the nascent medium of television took over, radio impacted Soviet life with a force that distinguished it from other technological innovations. The duo of satirical writers Ilf and Petrov, whose work abounds with astute observations about radio sound in the interwar period, singled out the medium for its forceful utopian appeal, even as they strongly questioned its validity. In a statement simultaneously earnest and ironic, Ilf noted in his diary in the 1930s: “In fantasy novels, radio was the most important thing. Its arrival

¹ TASS – Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union (Telegrafnoe agentstvo Sovetskogo Soiuza). See Lev Kassil', “Vslukh pro sebja: Popytka avtobiografii,” in *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh* (Moscow: Detskaia literatura, 1965), vol. 1, 13. “Примерно через год я написал свой первый рассказ. То была пора бурно распространявшихся радиоувлечений. Мы мастерили самодельные приемники и с сердцем, замирающим от восторга перед могуществом техники, слушали в эбонитовых наушниках размеренный диктант ТАСС: ‘Точчка... По бук-вам: Петр, Анна, Роман, Иван, Жанна... Па-риж!..’ И это казалось нам чудом. Рассказ я тоже посвятил радио.” Unless otherwise noted, all translations in this chapter are my own.

was expected to bring about universal happiness. Now radio is here, but not happiness.”²

As it did elsewhere in Europe, radio’s arrival in the Soviet Union coincided with the cultural renewal and nation-building following World War I. The sudden ability to communicate instantaneously across large distances made broadcast integral to the Soviet goal of imparting a new set of shared values, a common ideology, as well as a common language to a populace spread across the Eurasian continent. Radio’s auspicious beginnings inspired faith in its ability both to foster an “imagined community” and to physically colonize even the remotest corners with electronic sound propaganda. As Stephen Lovell writes, to the popular imagination “radio was the epitome of modernity: it would accelerate progress from darkness to light, from ignorance to enlightenment. The bearded *muzhik* in headphones or with receiver was one of the iconic images of the 1920s.”³ And in Valentin Kataev’s 1925 children’s book *Radio Giraffe (Radio-zhiraff)*, optimism in radio’s civilizing, transformative qualities even extends to the animals at the local zoo, who “radiofy” their cage by hanging an antenna from the giraffe’s head.⁴ The zoo-goers stand mesmerized as the animals use radio for acts of personal self-improvement, such as ordering a barber, buying carrots or learning to read: “The visitors look surprised / into the cages / instead of wild animals seeing / radio enthusiasts!”

(Удивленно из дверей / Смотрят посетители / Вместо диких зверей / Радио-

² Il’ia Il’f, “Zapisnye knizhki 1925-1937,” in *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh* (Moscow: TERRA – Knizhnyi klub, 2003), 207. “В фантастических романах главное это было радио. При нем ожидалось счастье человечества. Вот радио есть, а счастья нет.”

³ Stephen Lovell, *Russia in the Microphone Age: A History of Soviet Radio, 1919-1970* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 8.

⁴ Kataev proved one of the most insightful chroniclers of sound media’s popular reception in early Soviet literature. His novel *The Embezzlers (Rastratchiki)* depicts ham radio enthusiasts and his production novel *Time, Forward! (Vremia, vpered!)* contains some of the most evocative descriptions of telephone sound.

любители!”).⁵

Radio, then, was a marker of both civilization and modernity. But the medium’s most evocative quality, both to the popular imagination and for many modernist writers, was its ability to transcend temporal and spatial boundaries by simultaneously addressing anyone, anywhere. To some, broadcast virtually abolished the categories of time and space: on May 23, 1910 a time signal was broadcast from the Eiffel Tower via radiotelegraph, traversing the Atlantic Ocean for the first time and allowing maritime traffic to synchronize its chronometers worldwide. In the ensuing months, the signal enabled the standardized measurement of time throughout Europe. And the omnipresence and simultaneity of remote sounds and signals forged the illusion of unified space. The electro-magnetic impulses emitted by radio stations could be multiplied infinitely and received by countless small receivers, an especially important innovation in a country as vast as Russia.⁶

This metaphorical abolition of time and space was eagerly reflected by a number of Soviet avant-garde writers. In a poem written for an early broadcast format known as the “radio-newspaper” (*radiogazeta*), a spoken news digest, Mayakovsky declared, “Today there is / neither time, nor space” (“Сегодня нет / ни времен, ни пространств”), and his

⁵ Valentin Kataev, *Radio-zhiraff* (Moscow: Raduga, 1925), 4.

⁶ As one Russian scientist enthusiastically proclaimed in 1925, “The radiotelegraph and radio telephone are *wireless*, something even the most daring technological dreamers, such as Jules Verne, would not have dreamed of before. Radio has the great advantage that its transmission can be multiplied thousand and hundred thousand fold, i.e. the relay from one radio station can be received *simultaneously* by thousands and hundreds of thousands of radio receivers” (“Радиотелеграф и радиотелефон—беспроволочны, о чем и не снилось раньше самым пылким техническим мечтателям вроде Жюль Верна, радио имеет то громадное преимущество, что передача по нему может как бы умножаться в тысячи и сотни тысяч раз, т.-е. передача с одной радиостанции может восприниматься *одновременно* десятками и сотнями тысяч аппаратов-приемников”). Prof. V. Lobach-Zhuchenko, “Poslednie dostizheniia nauki i tekhniki,” *Novyi mir: literaturno-politicheskii i nauchnyi zhurnal* 1 (1925): 192.

poetry would vividly enact the sense that broadcast sound enabled travel through time and space.⁷ Velimir Khlebnikov, in his manifesto “Radio of the Future,” predicted that “[t]he crests of waves in the sea of human knowledge will roll across the entire country into each local Radio station, to be projected that very day as letters onto the dark pages of enormous books.”⁸ And in his last diary, written during the very peak of radio’s popularity, in 1934, the poet Mikhail Kuzmin, a writer with an altogether different aesthetic and political background from Khlebnikov, also remarks on this quality, which to him signifies radio’s superiority over the gramophone: “Radio is a sense of the instantaneous life of the whole world, a victory over space, distance and time. Always unexpected, interesting and unrepeatable.”⁹ Seventy years later, the media scholar Allen Weiss, musing on the impact of gramophone and radio, would argue that this understanding of sound media even hastened the decline of traditional linear narratives in literary writing: “the ancient *topoi* of time and place are forever transformed, since collage and montage, recording and broadcast, assure that unified time and space are no longer prerequisites of consciousness.”¹⁰

The growing number of studies examining the history of Soviet radio largely focus on technology, on the role of censorship, and on radio’s use for ideological agitation and

⁷ Vladimir Maiakovskii, “Radioagitator,” in “*Velikaia kniga dnia...*”: radio v SSSR: Dokumenty i materialy, ed. T. M. Goriaeva (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2007), 218.

⁸ Velimir Khlebnikov, “Radio budushchego,” in *Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomakh*, edited by R. V. Duganov (Moscow: Dmitrii Sechin, 2014), vol. 6, 191. “Вершины воли научного моря разносятся по всей стране к местным станам Радио, чтобы в тот же день стать буквами на темных полотнах огромных книг.”

⁹ Mikhail Kuzmin, *Dnevnik 1934 goda*, edited by Gleb Morev (St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Ivana Limbakha, 2007), 132-133. “Радио – ощущение моментальной жизни всего мира, победа над пространством, расстоянием и над временем. Всегда неожиданно, любопытно и неповторимо.”

¹⁰ Allen S. Weiss, *Breathless: Sound Recording, Disembodiment, and the Transformation of Lyrical Nostalgia* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), 19.

community building.¹¹ Much of this research is devoted to radio's role during World War II, the Siege of Leningrad, or the ensuing Cold War.¹² Other scholarship has addressed the development of the radio play and other texts written specifically for, or adapted with an ear to, radio.¹³ Studies that explore radio's importance to cultural and literary life in the interwar period have largely been limited to the Anglo-American or German context.¹⁴ Sound media historian Aleksandr Sherel' has covered some of this ground in his wide-ranging study of Soviet audio-culture, which discusses psychological and aesthetic factors in the development of radio art and literary broadcasting.¹⁵ But the most notable exception is Stephen Lovell's wide-ranging history of Soviet radio, which also documents interwar cultural responses to broadcast, such as the development of speech norms and the

¹¹ For instance, T. M. Gorjaeva, *Radio Rossii: politicheskii kontrol' sovetskogo radioveshchaniia v 1920-1930-kh godakh. Dokumentirovannaia istoriia* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2000). A major source for historians of Soviet radio is the excellent anthology of source materials "*Velikaia kniga dnia...* ": *radio v SSSR: Dokumenty i materialy*, ed. T. M. Gorjaeva (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2007).

¹² See, for instance, James von Geldern, "Radio Moscow: The Voice from the Center," in *Culture and Entertainment in Wartime Russia*, ed. Richard Stites (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995). About radio's role in the Siege, see A. I. Rubashkin, *Golos Leningrada: leningradskoe radio v dni blokady* (Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1980). For its significance during the Cold War, see Anna S. Kolchina, *Radio Svoboda kak literaturnyi proekt: sotsiokul'turnyi fenomen zarubezhnogo radioveshchaniia* (Moscow: Izdat. Dom Vysshei Shkoly Ekonomiki, 2014) as well as Richard H. Cummings' broad historical overview from a Western perspective in *Cold War radio: the dangerous history of American broadcasting in Europe, 1950-1989* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, 2009).

¹³ See, for instance, Aleksandr Sherel', *Tam, na nevidimykh podmostkakh... Radioiskusstvo: problemy istorii i teorii, 1922-1941* (Moscow: Rossiiskii Institut Iskusstvovedeniia, 1993) and "Radioveshchanie 1920-30-kh godov: k probleme vzaimnogo vliianiia nemetskoi i russkoi audiokul'tur," in *Sovetskaia vlast' i media*, ed. Hans Guenther and Sabina Haensgen (St. Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 2006), 104-112. On the development of the documentary drama see E. A. Bolotova, "Formirovanie zhanra dokumental'noi dramy v otechestvennom radioteatre (1928-1932 gg.)," *Filologiya: nauchnye issledovaniia* 4 (2013): 376-382.

¹⁴ For two ground-breaking volumes of essays on this topic, see D. R. Cohen, M. Coyle and J. Lewty, eds., *Broadcasting Modernism* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009) and Matthew Feldman, Erik Tonning, and Henry Mead, eds., *Broadcasting in the Modernist Era* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

¹⁵ Aleksandr Sherel', *Audiokul'tura XX veka: istoriia, esteticheskie zakonomernosti, osobennosti vliianiia na auditoriiu. Ocherki* (Moscow: Progress-Traditsiia, 2004).

adaptation of literary texts to radio.¹⁶ For instance, Lovell notes that key representatives of Socialist Realism, including Leonid Leonov, Marietta Shaginian, and Alexander Serafimovich, achieved great popularity by presenting their works on the radio after 1934.¹⁷ Lovell's superbly documented study traces the complex institutional and ideological factors shaping early Soviet radio. Given this historical approach, however, representations of broadcast in literary works of the 1920s and 1930s, as well as radio as a source for new means of expression, are beyond the scope of his study. Jurij Murašov, in his work on radio and Socialist Realism, notes that Khlebnikov and Mayakovsky's radio fantasies are indicative of a struggle against the written text; his work does not extend to poetic representations of sound engendered by the medium, or to the role of broadcast within their larger body of writing.

By contrast, my dissertation argues that literature of the Soviet interwar period reflects a pervasive fascination with radio and its sound as a popular theme or symbol, and, more importantly, as a catalyst for linguistic and poetic innovation. My re-reading of three key Russian modernist writers, Velimir Khlebnikov, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and Osip Mandelstam, pinpoints the phonetic stimulus common to their diverse oeuvres in a shared preoccupation with wireless communications and early Soviet radio. All three employ stylized forms of "radiophonic" language—poetic expressions that self-consciously draw their innovative, expressive potential from a comparison with electronically transmitted speech and sounds. Even as they continue to write texts, they seek to figuratively transcend the limits of written communication—its inwardness and comparative lack of expressive

¹⁶ Stephen Lovell, *Russia in the Microphone Age: A History of Soviet Radio, 1919-1970* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

¹⁷ See the brief overview of radio and literature in Lovell, *Russia in the Microphone Age*, 87-93.

potential—by drawing on the greater immediacy, simultaneity, and omnipresence that wireless sound offers.

This widespread fascination with radio speech and its manifold sounds led to a broad rediscovery of poetry as an oral and aural medium. I argue that one tension that did much to define Russian modernist poetry—that between language and aurality, or between the word's meaning and its sound—can be traced, in part, to radio as a new mediator of language. This was especially true for writers of the Russian avant-garde. For instance, the noisy electrified word, still fuzzy and static-laden in its early forms, complicated the straightforward relationship between sign and signifier in a way germane to Khlebnikov's experiments with *zaum*, a trans-rational language that stretched the meaning of phonemes well beyond any recognizable correspondences. Mayakovsky's poetry after 1922, while typically regarded as less experimental than his pre-Soviet writing, in fact created a written literary idiom that needed to be heard to fully grasp its intonational complexity and its calculated sonic affect. And the freely associative, densely sonorous texture of Mandelstam's "Voronezh Notebooks," written during his political exile in the Soviet province, is distinctly indebted to the poet's engagement with radio.

One aim of my dissertation, then, is to show the specific ways in which the sonic shape of Soviet poetry was defined by electronic sound media such as radio. But I also want to show that radio's significance in the interwar period transcended its use as a tool for political education and ideological control. No doubt, as Tatiana Goriaeva documents, the development of Soviet broadcast coincided with the expansion of Stalin's totalitarian power apparatus, which progressively eliminated alternative, more democratic and

experimental notions of broadcasting.¹⁸ But the rich metaphysical associations of the ether, as well as radio's peculiar sonic qualities, charged broadcast with an immense creative appeal for writers of diverse political backgrounds. Khlebnikov stresses the continuity of the radio word with his own poetic experiments, while largely eliding the medium's connotations of authoritarian control and instead folding it into his imaginative utopian prose. Mayakovsky, who embraced the fusion of poetry and broadcast as a tool for political agitation and was himself seen as the poetic mouthpiece of the Russian Revolution, used this radiophonic poetics for more grandiose and egocentric forms of literary self-fashioning, which decidedly contradicted the ideals of proletarian literature. And Mandelstam, already a *persona non grata* to state functionaries and a literary outsider by radio's arrival, nevertheless fantasized about broadcast as a distribution system for his suppressed literary output. Moreover, in his "Voronezh Notebooks" we can hear him surreptitiously engaging Soviet authority in a radiophonic dialog and provocatively infusing his resonant verse with soundbytes of Soviet discourse. In short, as I hope to demonstrate, radio was more than a propaganda tool of the Soviet state; by extension, the fascination with radio cut across existing political and aesthetic allegiances.

Early Radio in the Soviet Union (1917–1924)

How, and when, did radio come to Russia? As it did elsewhere, modern Soviet broadcasting originated in wireless radiotelegraphy, a way of translating written texts into audible Morse code signals that were transmitted by radio waves, received by headphones,

¹⁸ See T. M. Goriaeva, *Radio Rossii: politicheskii kontrol' sovetskogo radioveshchaniia v 1920-1930-kh godakh. Dokumentirovannaia istoriia* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2000). Stephen Lovell, too, stresses that alternative uses of radio only developed in the post-war and post-Stalin era.

and re-transcribed by a radio station worker. The first workable transmitter and receiver set was built by the Italian inventor Guglielmo Marconi in 1895; by the early 1910s, the word “radio” was largely used to refer to this method throughout Europe. In Russia, the military engineer A. S. Popov successfully conducted a wireless broadcast of electromagnetic waves over a distance of 250 meters in 1896, but the technology developed more slowly than in the West and was generally limited to military and government uses.¹⁹

Radiotelegraphy would later prove integral to the mythologized narrative of the October Revolution: on October 25, 1917, Lenin’s appeal “To the citizens of Russia” (“K grazhdanam Rossii”), which first proclaimed the overthrow of the Provisional Government by the Bolshevik committee, was broadcast from the cruiser Aurora. The signal was reportedly picked up not only by local radio stations, but also in Paris and other foreign locations.²⁰

The need to develop Soviet radiotelephony and to use radio waves for transmitting live speech, rather than written messages converted into Morse signals, was stressed by a 1918 decree by Lenin.²¹ This was seen as a particularly important step given the enduring paper shortage after the war, which kept the print runs of even major newspapers such as *Pravda* extremely low.²² The effort to develop radiotelephony, assigned to M. A. Bonch-Bruevich and V. M. Leshchinskii, two young researchers at the Nizhnyi Novgorod Radio

¹⁹ Because Popov presented a paper on registering electromagnetic waves in April 1895, he, rather than Marconi, came to be viewed as the inventor of radio by Soviet and Russian scholarship. For a compelling resolution of this perennial question that gives both inventors their proper due, see Lovell, *Russia in the Microphone Age*, 16-18.

²⁰ Although with a mandatory mythologizing slant, a detailed overview of other key radio broadcasts during the Soviet revolutionary upheavals is given in V. I. Shamshur, *Lenin i razvitie radio* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo literatury po voprosam sviazi i radio, 1960), 19-33.

²¹ “Положение о радиолaborатории с мастерской.” For the full text of the document, see Shamshur, 104-105.

²² Shamshur, 107.

Laboratory, brought results the following year: in December 1919, the laboratory used an experimental transmission unit to dispatch a radio telephone message from Nizhny Novgorod to Moscow. By December 1920, after developing more powerful generator lamps, the researchers transmitted spoken voice from the Khodyn radio station to a receiving station near Berlin.²³ This transmitter model was developed further and began to be used for communication among receiving stations of the Narkompochtel' (Commissariat for Post and Telegraph); Russia's very first radio speaker was the radio technician I. S. Khomich, who began to broadcast educational articles about radio to other station operators.

Eager to turn radiotelephony from such a point-to-point communication system into a mass medium, Lenin called for the development of radio stations throughout the country in January 1921, demanding larger regional centers as well as a station for transatlantic transmissions. The development of loudspeakers that could amplify a radio reception in a public building or square was also an important goal. By May, Lenin impatiently demanded "an update from Bonch-Bruevich about the progress of his work on manufacturing loudspeakers capable of transmitting to the broad masses that which is being transmitted via the wireless telephone." Lenin believed such efforts to be "of exceptional importance to us in light of the fact that their success [...] would enormously benefit agitation and propaganda."²⁴ But the construction of loudspeakers for group and

²³ For an account of this experiment, see Shamshur, 120-121. Though such descriptions must be taken with a grain of salt for exaggerating the Bolsheviks' role in radio's development, the transmission was reportedly so clear that the Russian researcher listening in Germany could identify the speakers in Moscow.

²⁴ Letter to V. S. Dvoglevskii dated May 11, 1922. In Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 54, 255. "прошу [...] отзыв Бонч-Бруевича о том, как идет его работа по изготовлению рупоров, способных передавать широким массам то, что сообщается по беспроволочному телефону. Эти работы имеют для нас исключительно важное значение ввиду того, что их успех [...]"

mass listening proved difficult; early prototypes, such as those used for a September 1921 broadcast experiment in Kazan, consisted of “outpost” [*forpostnyi*] magnetic telephone receivers and funnel-shaped gramophone horns. Finally, the inventor A. F. Shorin devised a combination of speakers and amplifiers suitable for concert halls and meetings, which was first used in spring 1923, and in January 1924 he introduced a modified version for use in public squares. By 1925, public loudspeakers were already permanent fixtures in places such as Moscow’s Theatre Square and outside the House of the Unions.²⁵ And, while less frequent in rural regions, radio speakers were made available in factories, cafeterias, workers’ clubs, and hospitals.

Two landmark dates in radio’s development in the Soviet Union were October 12 and November 23, 1924, when the Sokol’niki and Comintern radio stations began broadcasting regularly scheduled programs.²⁶ But the years 1921–24 saw numerous other widely publicized experiments with public broadcasts. Newspaper articles were successfully broadcast in Kazan using large megaphone-like horns and in June 1921 the experiment was repeated in Moscow, where speakers were affixed to tram stops and kiosks on at least six public squares.²⁷ The transmissions—information bulletins known as the telegrams of ROSTA, or the Russian Telegraph Agency—were repeated each evening starting on June 17, 1921 and served as the prototype of later regular radio programming.

принес бы громадную пользу агитации и пропаганде.”

²⁵ See, for instance, Prof. B. Lobach-Zhuchenko, “Poslednie dostizheniia nauki i tekhniki,” 193.

²⁶ The first broadcasts consisted of a lecture and technological information, and the first issue of the so-called “radio newspaper” [*radiogazeta*] respectively.

²⁷ A. Sherel', *Tam, na nevidimyykh podmostkakh... Radioiskusstvo: problemy istorii i teorii, 1922-1941* (Moscow: Rossiiskii Institut Iskusstvoznaniia, 1993), 11: “рупоры были установлены на балконе здания Моссовета, а 17 июня 1921 года передачи Центральной радиотелефонной станции начали транслироваться через рупоры, установленные на шести площадях Москвы.” For an account of the Kazan experiment, see Shamshur, 162-163.

Even “radio-mobiles” could be seen driving around Moscow carrying frame antennas, receivers, and cone-shaped speakers.²⁸ On May 27 and 29, 1922, the Nizhnii Novgorod Radio Laboratory, in conjunction with the local conservatory, broadcast the first ever radio concerts, reportedly received at a distance of 3000 versts.²⁹ And on September 15, 1922, the newspaper *Izvestiia* announced a major radio concert including various performers, which was broadcast on September 17 from the courtyard of the Central Radio Station in Moscow and for which cone-shaped speakers were also placed on Moscow squares and on the back of trucks. When the Comintern Radio Station Shabolovka in Moscow began operating on November 7, 1922, it transmitted another concert to commemorate the five-year anniversary of the Revolution, which was broadcast wirelessly on three public squares in Moscow as well as a worker’s club. That same year also saw the construction of the Shukhov radio tower, designed by the architect Vladimir Shukhov (1853–1939), a striking constructivist lattice cone that was enthusiastically received and that visually anchored radio in the Moscow cityscape.³⁰

In mid-1924, Soviet citizens were given permission to freely own and operate radio receivers, but required to register their set in exchange for a steep licensing fee. Steven Lovell notes that by 1927, 115,896 radio sets were registered in the Soviet Union, the great

²⁸ Shamshur, 158.

²⁹ Shamshur, 155.

³⁰ Shukhov’s original design was for a 350 meter construction taller than the Eiffel Tower, yet far less expensive and material-intensive to build. He calculated that three such towers would be sufficient to extend the Moscow station’s signal across the entire Soviet Union. Due to a lack of resources, the tower was built to a height of 150 meters instead. After threats of demolition, the tower is the subject of an ongoing preservationist campaign, which resulted in the decision to preserve the tower in 2014. See, for instance, “Shukhovskaia bashnia na Oke poluchila status federal'nogo pamiatnika,” *Colta.ru*, last modified December 2, 2014, <http://www.colta.ru/news/5620>, and Ross Laurence Wolfe, “The politics of preservation: Shukhov radio tower in Moscow, 1920-22,” *The Charnel-House*, last modified June 22, 2014, <http://thecharnelhouse.org/2014/06/22/the-politics-of-preservation-shukhov-radio-tower-in-moscow-1920-1922/>.

majority of them affordable crystal receivers, which simply consisted of a wire, a crystal detector, and headphones; the rest were more expensive tube radios.³¹ At least in the 1920s, private listening largely remained the domain of the large ham radio community, which was supported by a multitude of amateur radio journals, such as *Radioliubitel'* (*Radio enthusiast*, 1924) and *Radio vsem* (*Radio for all*, 1925). Karl Schlögel notes that we can “speak of a regular movement of radio amateurs with their own associations, clubs and magazines. In 1938 there were over 4,000 radio listening rooms that had been set up especially for evening study and for listening to radio programmes communally. In addition, there were countless radio centres in clubs, culture palaces, reading rooms, libraries, schools and sanatoria.”³² The prolific movement of radio enthusiasts was never completely outlawed—and, in fact, it proved a boon to the medium’s technological improvement—but listening to radio remained largely a public and collective activity throughout the 1920s and part of the 1930s. Given the Bolsheviks’ view of radio “as a technologically extended branch of agitation,”³³ private domestic listening would even be regarded with a certain suspicion. Only in the 1930s did stand-alone radio sets with built-in speakers become more affordable and thus an increasingly widespread fixture in more privileged urban households. In this, the Soviet situation differs markedly from Weimar Germany or the United States, for instance, where lamp and tube radios, with better sound quality and a larger frequency radius than crystal radios, were already appearing in middle-class homes by the mid to late 1920s.³⁴

³¹ Lovell, *Russia in the Microphone Age*, 27.

³² Karl Schlögel, *Moscow, 1937* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), 219.

³³ Lovell, *Russia in the Microphone Age*, 602.

³⁴ For an overview of how radio consumer technology developed in Weimar Germany, see Karl Christian Führer, “A Medium of Modernity? Broadcasting in Weimar Germany, 1923-1932,” *The*

Another distinguishing feature of Soviet radio was the result of economical, technological, as well as censorship concerns: from 1925 onward, broadcasting developed chiefly via a system of cables, rather than wireless transmissions through the ether. Compared to crystal and tube receivers, it was both cheaper and easier to maintain the so-called “radio point” [*radiotochka*], a standard wired radio receiver built both into public spaces, and increasingly also into many private apartments. Crucially, instead of allowing listeners to freely select a station, the *radiotochka* was “fed” content by regional distribution stations.³⁵ It is a strange irony of Soviet radio that the medium’s romantic, and even utopian, connotations—which were based on the unhindered dispersal of radio waves in the air, rather than by means of wires—was curtailed so early by executive decision. In a recent article, Vladimir Khazan has forcefully captured this deformation of the radio dream, stressing the restrictive qualities of wire radio: “the socialist paradise was thus fenced-in with wires not just along the perimeter of its borders on the ground, but also along its aerial borders, creating a hermetic autarchy noteworthy in its own way, which was firmly defended from any kind of external interference and influence.”³⁶

Throughout the 1920s, broadcasts still occurred sporadically, requiring listeners to tune in—or at least turn on—at previously announced times; its contents also varied among various stations. As Steven Lovell notes, it was not until 1929 that the Moscow Comintern

Journal of Modern History 69 (1997): 731-753.

³⁵ See Lovell, *Russia in the Microphone Age*, 34. Lovell notes that in the Voronezh region alone, *radiotochki* had been installed in 64,000 apartments by 1934. James von Geldern argues that the technological improvements were, in fact, negligible and that the transition to wire-fed transmitters was largely to defend against domestic and foreign counter-propaganda broadcasts.

³⁶ Vladimir Khazan, “Tele-radiovlast' i literatura. Zametki k teme,” *Russian Literature* 2 (2007), 180. “Социалистический рай, таким образом, оказался обнесенным проволокой не только по периметру земных, но и воздушных границ, создав замечательную в своем роде герметическую автаркию, надежно защищенную от любого внешнего домогательства и влияния.”

station began to broadcast from 6 a.m. to midnight daily. The early 1930s saw the consolidation of radio schedules Union-wide, in terms of both sending times and content: regional broadcast stations were required to transmit a portion of the Moscow broadcasts.³⁷ Although Soviet radio was affected by technological shortcomings well into the post-war years, by the early to mid-1930s, it was already a far less ephemeral phenomenon and began to command a truly nation-wide audience. On the one hand, this was a function of increased availability of receivers: from the privately owned sets of the urban middle-class, to the crystal detectors of the amateur radio community, and the many opportunities for listening provided to provincial and rural citizens, both in the form of public speakers and affordable *radiotochki*.³⁸ It was also, however, the result of greatly diversified programming, which now included not only spoken news, but also speeches, workers' meetings, and public disputes, musical and theatrical programming, and radio plays, as well as open air broadcasts during public parades, such as May Day celebrations. Increasingly, radio was also able to broadcast live reports from sporting events, explorers' expeditions, or important industrial sites.

Ilf and Petrov's satirical novels *The Twelve Chairs* (*Dvenadtsat' stul'ev*, 1928) and *The Golden Calf* (*Zolotoi telenok*, 1931) capture radio's increasing ubiquity and its psychological impact on the Soviet listener. For instance, they portray the involuntary sonic "irrigation" effect achieved by strategically placing radio speakers where citizens were bound to wait and listen: "Violin music resounded from the beer halls, little restaurants and the 'Great Silent' cinema. A loudspeaker was angrily going on at the tram

³⁷ Lovell, *Russia in the Microphone Age*, 79.

³⁸ Karl Schlögel claims that by 1938, there were over 20 million radios in the Soviet Union. See Schlögel, 219.

stop” (“Из пивных, ресторанчиков и кино ‘Великий Немой’ неслась струнная музыка. У трамвайной остановки горячился громкоговоритель”).³⁹ In a different scene, set at a provincial home for the elderly, radio intrudes into a domestic setting with its strikingly sub-par sound quality and muddled messages:⁴⁰

At that moment the wards’ conversation was interrupted by what sounded like a horn blowing its nose. It even drowned out the ever-continuing song of the fire extinguisher. Then a bovine voice began, “... vention...”

The old ladies hunched over and did not turn toward the cabinet loudspeaker standing on the washed parquet in the corner, instead continuing to eat and hoping to let this cup pass from them. But the loudspeaker energetically continued, “evrokrakkhhhhh in light of ... able invention. A railway technician of the Murmansk railroad, Comrade Sokutskii – Samara, Oryol, Kleopatra, Ustin’ia, Tsaritsyn, Klementii, Ifigeniia, York, – So-kuts-kii...”

The horn wheezily inhaled a great draft of air and revived the program in its nasal, stopped-up voice: “... invented a system of light signals for snowplows. The invention was approved by Transinvimp – Terenty, Raymond, Amur...”

The old ladies glided off to their rooms like little gray ducks. The loudspeaker, hopping up and down from its own might, raged on in the empty room: “And now you’ll hear some Novgorod *chastushki*...”

Far, far away, in the very center of the earth, somebody strummed once on a balalaika, and a black-earth Battistini started singing:

*On the walls the bedbugs sit
Squinting at the sun so bright,
They saw the tax man coming round
And kicked the bucket that same night.*

These *chastushki* excited furious activity in the center of the earth. A terrible roaring could be heard in the speaker. It was either thunderous applause or the eruption of underground volcanoes.⁴¹

В эту минуту разговор воспитанниц был прерван трубным сморканьем, заглушившим даже все продолжающееся пение огнетушителя в коридоре, и коровий голос начал:

– ... бретение...

³⁹ Il’ia Il’f and Evgenii Petrov, *Dvenadtsat’ stol’ev*, in *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, vol. 1, 284.

⁴⁰ The *Starsobes*, short for Stargorod Social Security Administration, located in the fictional city of Stargorod, which is based on Starobel’sk near Lugansk, Ukraine.

⁴¹ Ilya Ilf and Evgeny Petrov, *The Twelve Chairs*, trans. Anne O. Fisher (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011), 96-97.

Старухи, пригнувшись и не оборачиваясь на стоявший в углу на мытом паркете громкоговоритель, продолжали есть, надеясь, что их минет чаша сия. Но громкоговоритель бодро продолжал:

– Евокрррраhhh видусоб... ценное изобретение. Дорожный мастер Мурманской железной дороги товарищ Сокуцкий, – Самара, Орел, Клеопатра, Устинья, Царицын, Клементий, Ифигения, Йорк, – Со-куц-кий...

Труба с хрипом втянула в себя воздух и насморочным голосом возобновила передачу:

– ... изобрел световую сигнализацию на снегоочистителях. Изобретение одобрено Доризулом, Дарья, Онега, Раймонд...

Старушки серыми утицами поплыли в свои комнаты. Труба, подпрыгивая от собственной мощи, продолжала бушевать в пустой комнате:

– ... А теперь прослушайте новгородские частушки...

Далеко, далеко, в самом центре земли, кто-то тронул балалаечные струны, и черноземный Баттистини запел:

На стене клопы сидели
И на солнце шурились,
Фининспектора узрели –
Сразу окочурились...

В центре земли эти частушки вызвали бурную деятельность. В трубе послышался страшный рокот. Не то это были громовые аплодисменты, не то начали работать подземные вулканы.⁴²

This scene is instructive both as a demonstration of radio's omnipresence by the late 1920s, and for the authors' attention to radio's specific sound and its effect on the spoken word. The first half of the broadcast, which scares off the listeners with its grating sound quality, concerns a new invention, whose specifics are garbled by a similarly "sensational" invention, the radio. Comprehension is also impeded by the presence of extraneous sounds and distortions, which ironically require using names to spell out, letter by letter, other proper names: "Comrade Sokutskii – Samara, Oryol, Kleopatra, Ustin'ia, Tsaritsyn, Klementii, Ifigeniia, York, – So-kuts-kii...."⁴³ Here the medium's technological peculiarities in fact make oral speech more cumbersome and prone to misunderstanding,

⁴² Il'f and Petrov, *Dvenadtsat' stul'ev*, 84-85.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 84.

rather than facilitating instantaneous comprehension. And the eclecticism of the words adduced to spell the character's name are a sarcastic jab at the confusingly heterogeneous makeup of radio programming (the use of foreign and Tsarist-era names reflects a frequent criticism, according to which Soviet radio relied too heavily on bourgeois art forms that were alien to its peasant listenership).⁴⁴

Ilf and Petrov anthropomorphize the loudspeaker as a laughably inept public speaker eagerly jumping up and down and clearing his throat. This is a frequent device in Ilf and Petrov's satirical treatment of sound media, which are often contrasted to their pre-technological predecessors—an orator might be compared to a loudspeaker or a written document to a telegraph pole. The citation of the *novoiiaz*-infused “Novgorodian *chastushki*,” finally, underscores the conflicting tastes of different kinds of listeners, such as rural farmers and the urban *intelligentsia*: in response to complaints by peasant representatives that West European classical music was of little interest to the Soviet listener, attempts were made in the late 1920s to adjust programming accordingly.⁴⁵

The communal apartment (*kommunalka*), another increasingly important topos of Soviet culture, was also affected by radio's presence. In Valentin Kataev's 1933 play “Road of Flowers” (“Doroga tsvetov”), broadcast's role ranges from an unsettling revolutionary nuisance to a fully assimilated prop of a petty bourgeois lifestyle. A tirade by the tight-fisted, retrograde character Zav'ialov, who bemoans the loss of his personal freedom, is suddenly interrupted by a broadcast of the May Day Parade, and the

⁴⁴ For some examples, see Lovell, *Russia in the Microphone Age*, 66-67.

⁴⁵ As late as 1936, a well-known Stakhanovite complained that “many of our radio programs are intended for those who finished the seven-year education [*semiletka*]. They should say less and more clearly” (“Многие наши передачи рассчитаны на тех, кто кончил по крайней мере семилетку. Короче надо говорить да проще”). Aleksandr Busygin, “Stakhanovtsy o radioveshchanii,” in *Velikaia kniga dnia*, 741.

outpouring of revolutionary fervor seems unstoppable: “Who permitted you, my dear sir, to put a radio in someone else’s living space? I do not wish to hear this abomination. I have already had enough with the papers! [...] *Zav’ialov tries to silence the loudspeaker with a pillow. Silence! The radio doesn’t quiet down.*” (“Кто вам разрешил, милостивый государь, ставить на чужой жилплощади радио? Я не желаю слушать эту мерзость. Довольно с меня газет! [...] *Завьялов пытается заткнуть громкоговоритель подушкой. Молчать! Радио не унимается*”).⁴⁶ Besides violating traditional notions of privacy and discretion with its sonic pervasiveness, leading Zav’ialov to despair, radio is also utilized in a banal way that suggests its utter triviality. In the play’s final scene, the radio is turned on to drown out the sounds of two lovers in the communal apartment, masking the love act with kitschy “tender music”: “Only I beg you, don’t kiss so loudly. Turn on the radio! *Olia turns on the radio. Tender music. The curtain falls*” (“Только умоляю, не целуйтесь так громко. Включите радио! *Оля включает радио. Нежная музыка. Занавес*”).⁴⁷

Kataev’s flippant treatment of the medium contrasts with more serious concerns expressed by other writers about radio’s invasive properties. The poet Mikhail Kuzmin’s 1934 diary, written during a prolonged lung illness that restricted him to his room in a communal apartment,⁴⁸ describes his neighbor’s radio both as a welcome source of distraction and comfort, and as a disruptive nuisance, a hovering and even threatening presence: “There was a muddled mess in the morning, they were fixing the bathtub, some

⁴⁶ Valentin Kataev, *Sobranie sochinenii v desiati tomakh*, vol. 9 (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1986), 315.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 317.

⁴⁸ For more on the circumstances of the 1934 diary’s creation, see Gleb Morev’s introduction in Kuzmin, *Dnevnik 1934 goda*, 19-20.

drunk peasants from the *kolkhoz* were screaming on the radio, whose muzzle faces our door [...] an unbelievable mess. I even got upset and told the Shpital'niks to turn their radio the other way. They turned it off completely” (“Утром был какой-то кавардак, чинили ванну, орали в радио, поставленный мордою к нашей двери, какие-то колхозные пьяные мужики [...] вообще кавардак невероятный. Я даже расстроился и сказал Шпитальникам, чтобы они отвернули свой радио. Они совсем закрыли”).⁴⁹ Radio interrupts Kuzmin’s thought processes, seems resonant with hints of violence, and sharply jars against the classicist aesthete’s sensibilities: “Radio is shouting terribly, especially when broadcasting those meaningless montages” (“Ужасно орет радио, особенно, когда какие-нибудь бессмысленные монтажи”).⁵⁰

Vladislav Khodasevich, a writer skeptically predisposed toward all forms of technology, even drew a vivid parallel between the pervasive omnipresence of radio waves and a loss of control over both body and self. His poem “Weakened I rise from my bed” (“Vstaiu rasslablennyi s posteli,” 1923), written shortly after emigrating to Berlin, depicts radio sound as invisible waves that violate both the organism and the soul: “Weakened I rise from my bed. / It was not God with whom I fought last night – / But the rays of prickly radios / that secretly flew through me” (“Встаю расслабленный с постели. / Не с Богом

⁴⁹ Ibid., 123.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 122. The word “montage” is curious, as it suggests that creative juxtapositions of voices, noises, and sounds continued to be a staple of Soviet radio even in regular news broadcasts, and after the more expressly experimental radio broadcasts became disparaged as excessively “formalist” in 1934. Kuzmin uses the word to describe radio elsewhere, too, bemoaning “montages” as a particularly Soviet phenomenon and presumably contrasting them to the calmer speech patterns of foreign news speakers or the greater proportion of classical music in the ether: “Что у нас в радио безобразные монтажи, так это уже жизнь наша такая, но можно взять Лондон, Париж, Стокгольм.” Kuzmin, 133.

бился я в ночи – / Но тайно сквозь меня летели / Колючих радио лучи”).⁵¹ In a similar vein, short stories by both Boris Pilniak and Andrei Platonov suggest that radio creates a harmful and demoralizing omniscience, a sudden virtual awareness of a better life in the distance that could lead to depression and psychological stress.⁵²

By the early 1930s, radio gained other, more overtly threatening connotations, as broadcast began to reflect the country’s increasingly polarized political climate. Censorship took a far greater interest in everything from the content of programs, to the manner of presentation and even pronunciation, as they sought to avoid deviations from the party line; speakers could be removed from service for the slightest mistakes.⁵³ Stalin spoke on radio only sporadically, but oratorically skilled members of the upper party echelons, such as Kirov and Kalinin, could be heard frequently by the late 1920s.⁵⁴ As both Steven Lovell and Karl Schlögel suggest, the increasing audibility of these voices pressured intellectuals or former émigrés who were once skeptically predisposed to the Soviet state to view broadcast as a “kind of interlocutor, a partner in the process of self-clarification and integration in the nation as a whole”⁵⁵ in an attempt to achieve some form

⁵¹ Vladislav Khodasevich, *Stikhotvoreniia* (St. Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 2001), 137.

⁵² See Boris Pilniak’s early short stories “The Unborn Tale” (“Nerozhdennaia povest’,” 1925) and “The Telegraph Station Master” (“Telegrafnyi smotritel’,” 1926), in *Prostye rasskazy. Sobranie sochinenii, tom V* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1930). Andrei Platonov’s lengthiest and perhaps most insightful meditation on radio is found in “Among the Animals and Plants” (“Sredi zhivotnykh i rastenii,” 1936), in *Schastlivaia Moskva: ocherki i rasskazy 1930-kh godov* (Moscow: Vremia, 2010).

⁵³ Lovell, *Russia in the Microphone Age*, 39.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 102-104. How often—and, indeed, whether at all—Stalin spoke on the radio in the 1920s has not been documented. His speech at the Seventeenth Party Congress was transmitted and he held speeches at the Eighth Congress of Soviets, for instance, but Lovell notes that he “increasingly ceded his place at the microphone to Iurii Levitan” after 1934 (*Ibid.*, 103).

⁵⁵ Schlögel, 227.

of “communion with the Soviet people and its leadership.”⁵⁶ Ralph Dutli, in his biography of Mandelstam, notes that even the show trials of 1936 and 1937 were heavily publicized using broadcast and could be followed “right on the streets: they were transmitted through loudspeakers. The voice of the prosecutor, Vyshinsky, thundered through the ether. New trials in preparation were being announced. The era of the sadly infamous ‘purges’ began.”⁵⁷ Mandelstam’s poem “The apartment is silent as paper” (“Kvartira tikha, kak bumaga,” 1934), which is set in his final Moscow residence before his exile, a communal apartment equipped with a wire radio, reflects fears associated with hearing political speeches on the radio: “And instead of the spring of Hippocrene / A stream of domestic fear / Will break through the slipshod walls / of this evil Moscow domicile” (“И вместо ключа Ипокрены / Давнишнего страха струя / Ворвется в халтурные стены / Московского злого жилья”).⁵⁸ The poetic act is here seen as irreconcilable with the Kremlin’s propaganda speeches. And yet, as I show in Chapter 3, in Mandelstam’s “Voronezh Notebooks” this relationship between poetic sound and Soviet radio noise is represented in more productive and mutually contingent ways.

⁵⁶ Lovell, *Russia in the Microphone Age*, 69.

⁵⁷ Ralph Dutli, *Vek moi, zver' moi.*” *Osip Mandel'shtam. Biografiia* (St. Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 2005), 307. “Последние новости можно было слышать прямо на улице: они транслировались через громкоговорители. В эфире гремел голос прокурора Вышинского. Было объявлено о готовящихся новых процессах. Началась эпоха печально известных ‘чисток’.” Citing Nadezhda Mandelstam’s memoirs, Dutli adds that the Mandelstams listened to the first show trial on August 19, 1936, the infamous “Trial of the Sixteen.” The fact that the show trials were indeed broadcast on live radio as well as recorded on film is also suggested in Sheila Fitzpatrick’s study of everyday Soviet urban life in the 1930s, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 203.

⁵⁸ Osip Mandel'shtam, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem v trekh tomakh*, edited by A. G. Mets (Moscow: Progress-Pleiada, 2009), vol. 1, 182-183. Boris Miagchev suggests that Mandelstam was specifically reacting to announcements of the upcoming Soviet Writers Congress in 1934. See “Osip Mandel'shtam – radioslushatel’,” *Teleradio EFIR: vsesoiuznyi ezhemesiachnyi zhurnal* 1 (1991): 26-27.

The Search for Soviet Radio Art (1924–1934)

A wide variety of radio sounds might have invaded Mandelstam’s quiet apartment in 1934. Indeed, the medium’s appeal to early Soviet listeners was based not only on its formal characteristics—such as the mysterious, emotionally charged radio voice with its effect of simultaneity and omnipresence—but equally on the various formats, genres, and styles that broadcast inspired. From the early to the late 1920s, Soviet radio primarily amplified existing forms of communication, including official speeches, appeals, and above all printed texts. The words generally used to refer to the first regularly scheduled programs—the ROSTA radio newspaper [*radiogazeta*] or radio press [*radiopechat*]—reveal that the first broadcasts were seen mainly as replicating the printed news on air. In a letter to the pioneering Soviet radio engineer Mikhail Bonch-Bruevich, Lenin himself famously referred to radio as “a newspaper without paper and distance.”⁵⁹ And as Steven Lovell puts it in his overview of Soviet broadcasting genres, “[t]he very term *radiogazeta* [...] suggested that radio speech still had an indeterminate, not to say parasitic, status. It was part-newspaper, part-agitation, but not yet anything in its own right. In the 1920s it was still unclear what the special qualities of the medium might be.”⁶⁰

The authorities viewed broadcast as an extension of print culture, but writers and producers soon began to draw vivid distinctions between print media and non-literary, performative ways of informing Soviet listeners. The “The Blue Blouse” (“Siniaia bluza”) was the first professional organization of so-called “oral newspapers” [*ustnaia gazeta*]—its

⁵⁹ Letter to M. Bonch-Bruevich dated February 5, 1920. In Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 51, 130. “Газета без бумаги и ‘без расстояния’, которую Вы создаете, будет великим делом.”

⁶⁰ Stephen Lovell, “Broadcasting Bolshevik: The Radio Voice of Soviet Culture, 1920s-1950s,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 48 (2013): 83.

members toured the Soviet Union, performing agitational montages of political news reports live. As the organizers note in their first collection of texts intended for such informative theatre, “[t]he material that stares at us with immovable, dead lines from the pages of the daily press or a factory wall newspaper—comes to life in the ‘number’ of the live newspaper in the living human word, in the participants’ dialogs, and in live staged actions.”⁶¹ The work of “The Blue Blouse” would, in fact, guide the first attempts to prepare truly “radiogenic” literary and journalistic material, conceived not by analogy to printed texts, but to pure orality.

Despite this early interest in maximizing radio’s distinctly oral potential, by the late 1920s the “dryness” and lack of emotional urgency of Soviet radio news were a widely acknowledged problem and prompted criticism by average listeners, as well as by high-ranking figures such as Gorky and Lunacharsky.⁶² Some writers and critics, including the formalist Viktor Shklovsky, expressed frustration that broadcast had failed to maximize its potential as a truly oral medium:

One of radio’s tasks is to overcome written language. Radio only restores real speech. We must liberate the word from its graphic form! After all, the grammar and syntax that are created in speech are arbitrary. They do not exist in live speech. In live speech, we have a dialog and a dialog with a nonexistent phrase, which is

⁶¹ *Siniaia bluza: zhivaia universal'naia gazeta kul'totdela MGSPS, vypusk pervyi* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo MGSPS “Trud i kniga”, 1924). “Тот материал, который неподвижными, мертвыми строками смотрит на нас со страниц ежедневной прессы или заводской стенной газеты – в ‘номере’ живой газеты оживает в живом человеческом слове, в диалогах участников, в живом сценическом действии.”

⁶² For instance, in his “Theses on Radio Art” (“Tezisy po radioiskusstvu”) the first Soviet Commissar of Education, Anatoly Lunacharsky, expresses support for an innovative, non-derivative radio art form: “in order for this art form to become effective it must [...] create its own devices and methods, based on the specific conditions of invisible perceptions and creative emotions that have been transformed by mechanic transmission” (“для того, чтобы эта форма искусства была действенной, нужно, чтобы она [...] создала свои приёмы и методы, основанные на специфических условиях невидимых восприятий и трансформированных механической передачей художественных эмоций”). Archival document, cited in Mstislav Mikriukov, “Radioteatr – iskusstvo,” *Teatr: zhurnal o teatre* 12 (1964): 44.

based on intonation. But we use those dead, graphic, literary phrases. It seems to me that on radio the key goal is to quit reading.⁶³

Ridiculing “graphocentric” expressions such as “To which I will return below” (“Об этом я скажу ниже”), Shklovsky calls upon broadcasters and radio producers to approach the medium strictly on its own terms, rather than declaiming printed texts. Shklovsky even suggests that radio should approximate the experience of pre-literate orality, rather than a secondary orality based on the amplification of printed texts.

It became increasingly clear that if radio wanted to shape Soviet sensibilities and establish itself as more than a technological curiosity, programming would have to evolve drastically, and the period of the late 1920s through 1934—after which experiments with radio art were officially condemned as a “formalist” preoccupation—saw numerous attempts at diversifying the content and genre of broadcasts. The full extent of this experimental period is difficult to document, given the scarcity of archival sources, such as scripts, transcripts, and actual sound recordings.⁶⁴ The short-lived and little-known journal *Radio-Decade* (*Radio-Dekada*) is one of the few sources for what a “true” radio art, different from ad-hoc adaptations of literary works or newspaper articles, might have

⁶³ *Velikaia kniga dnia*, 711. “...преодоление письменной речи – это одна из задач радио. Радио только восстанавливает настоящую речь. Нужно освободить слово от графики! Ведь та грамматика, тот синтаксис, которые созданы в речи – это условность. В живой речи ее не существует. В живой речи существует диалог и диалог с несуществующей фразой, которая держится на интонации. А мы пользуемся вот этими мертвыми, графическими, литературными фразами. Мне кажется, что на радио основной задачей является – бросить читать.”

⁶⁴ One of the reasons is that early broadcasts up to 1927, especially those of a literary character, were not documented or even necessarily prepared on paper. Only after 1927 were all broadcasts to be submitted to review by Glavlit, which would then archive them as well. The bulk of this archive was destroyed in 1941 during a poorly supervised attempt to evacuate the Radio Committee’s archive after the outbreak of WWII. The existing sound recordings suffered a similar fate, following the issue of a decree in 1938, which called for the destruction of “ideologically unsuitable” sound documents by the Radio Committee. The earliest transcript of a live-broadcast program in the archive thus dates to September 1941. See Gorjaeva, *Velikaia kniga dnia*, 15-20.

sounded like.⁶⁵ *Radio-Decade* aimed to “publish experimental radio compositions, tonoramas, radio-essays, radio-circus, and the scores of mass songs.”⁶⁶ Its stated goal was to overcome the perception of radio art as a temporary or unworthy substitute for traditional literary writing: “Radio should cease to be a courtyard for passers-by [*perekhodnoi dvor*]. Radio art is not a random activity [...] Down with the passers-by: creative work in radio is a profession, not a coincidence.”⁶⁷

Until the mid-1930s, the full potential of radio sound was explored in a broadcast genre called “radio film,” a term introduced by Aleksandr Afinogenov to describe something more radical than a simple scripted dialogue, because “time and action were dynamic and compressed in a way that conventional theatre did not permit.”⁶⁸ The term was widely used to characterize the heterogeneous radio scripts written in the late 1920s and 1930s.⁶⁹ This genre sought to explore the full creative, emotional, and intellectual potential of a montage of acousmatic sounds—sounds whose visible origin is obscured.⁷⁰ A key example of Soviet radio’s openness to experimental radio formats was the adaptation of a radio play by the German Expressionist writer and activist Ernst Toller,

⁶⁵ Four numbers are recorded (1931), at the Russian National Library and the A. S. Popov Central Museum of Communications (Muzei sviazi) in St. Petersburg.

⁶⁶ *Radio-Dekada* 1 (1931): 1. “В ‘Радио-Декаде’ помещаются экспериментальные радиокomпозиции, тонорамы, радио-очерки, радио-цирк, эстрада, ноты массовых песен...”

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* “Радио должно перестать быть переходным двором. Радиоискусство – не случайное занятие [...] Долой прохожих: творческая работа на радио – профессия, а не случайность.”

⁶⁸ Lovell, *Russia in the Microphone Age*, 83.

⁶⁹ See also the essay on the “radio film” by Mark Aronson, a student of the Formalist critic Boris Eikhenbaum, which is based on his own first-hand experience working at the Leningrad Radio Station: “Radiofilme,” *Slavische Rundschau*, I (1929): 539-542. Like Shklovsky, Aronson stresses the need to overcome written language and a visual orientation in the new radio art.

⁷⁰ For a full study of acousmatic sound—which draws attention to the sound object itself by separating sound from a visible speaker, musical instrument, or other source, and thereby also endows sound with a far greater emotional force—see Brian Kane, *Sound Unseen: Acousmatic Sound in Theory and Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

entitled “Berlin – latest news!” (“Berlin – letzte Ausgabe!”; or “Novosti Berlina”). Written specifically for the radio and produced for the first time on December 4, 1930 by Erwin Piscator, the play evokes the experience of a man reading a newspaper, but it fully utilizes the imaginative potential of sound. Each news item was conveyed through a small tonal collage combining “found” sounds, such as the noises of various cities captured on gramophone disks, with spoken information. The play was adapted for Soviet radio by the famous early radio play director, N. O. Volkonskii, who likewise accorded equal importance to the spoken word and sounds. Even though the technical possibilities in Moscow were far smaller than in Berlin of the late 1920s, the Soviet sound engineers utilized all available means to create a sound montage incorporating both specially produced studio sound, found sound recorded “on site,” and existing sound documents, such as music and voice recordings.⁷¹

Due to this innovativeness, the adaptation was met with great acclaim, including by Viktor Shklovsky, who considered it a true achievement in line with the demands made in his above-cited essay.⁷² Importantly, Shklovsky brings criteria that are central to the formalist method—such as the use of sound not as an emotional emphasis or illustration, but as a poetic device—to his analysis of radio broadcasts, suggesting the medium’s particular salience to the formalist method.⁷³ Aleksandr Sherel’ highlights the fact that such plays truly attempted to maximize radio’s potential as a sound medium and, unlike the

⁷¹ See Sherel’, “Radioveshchanie 1920-30-kh godov,” 109.

⁷² Ibid., 107.

⁷³ This aspect is well worth further inquiry. Numerous members considered close to this school of literary criticism, such as Boris Eikhenbaum and Osip Brik, showed a particular sensitivity to the role of sound in literary styles. See, for instance, Eikhenbaum, *Melodika russkogo liricheskogo stikha* (Petrograd: Opoiiaz, 1922) and Brik, “Zvukovye povtory,” in *Sborniki po teorii poeticheskogo iazyka* II (Petrograd, 1917), 24-62. See also footnote 69 about Mark Aronson.

radiogazety, showed both the potential and the difficulties involved in blind, or so-called acousmatic, listening. Their collage nature sensitized listeners to transitions between different sounds, voices, and intonations and highlighted the evocative and versatile nature of pure sound. With their heterogeneity, they also blurred the generic boundaries of printed literary texts.⁷⁴ Sherel' also suggests that such sound montages introduced an element of ambiguity not contained in the established "radio news": the main character of "Berlin – latest news!" read out loud the newspaper and also expressed his personal attitude toward the events described, "not through additional verbal commentary, but through his personal reception, as expressed in his intonation, in timbral and emotional valuations."⁷⁵ These new emotional possibilities also posed new problems. While the play of sounds was key to making official broadcasts more dramatic and allowing listeners to engage with them more fully, it also harbored the danger of deviations from the official party line through the ambiguity it offered. This, along with its foregrounding of aesthetic form, was one of the reasons why such radio art was disparaged after the Writer's Congress of 1934.⁷⁶

Thus, while Soviet officials largely treated radio as an extension of print culture that would bring literacy to the masses, various writers in the 1920s and early 1930s

⁷⁴ See, for example, E. A. Bolotova, "Formirovanie zhanra dokumental'noi dramy v otechestvennom radioteatre (1928-1932 gg.)," *Filologiya: nauchnye issledovaniia* 4 (2013): 376-382. Bolotova gives a good account of how early radio dramas, or radiofil'my, responded to daily news by combining original writing with documentary material, such as newspaper clips or actual sound recordings.

⁷⁵ Sherel', "Radioveshchanie 1920-30-kh godov," 108. "Герой 'Новостей Берлина' [...] имеет возможность выразить свое отношение – разумеется, не дополнительным словесным комментарием, но через свое собственное восприятие, выраженное в интонации, тембровых и эмоциональных оценках."

⁷⁶ Sherel' notes that this ambiguity eventually led to distrust of radio sound collages by the authorities, who "were looking for the class subtext behind each sound" ("за каждым звуком искали классовый подтекст"). See Sherel', *Audiokul'tura XX veka*, 328. In 1933, the Writers' Union called radio art a "formalist theory," branding the radio play and "radio film" as an undesirable genre (Lovell, *Russia in the Microphone Age*, 87).

followed Toller's lead to create a non-literary "text" that utilized radio's full sonic potential. Other examples include Arsenii Tarkovsky's "Tale about peat moss" ("Povest' o sfagnume," 1931), subtitled a "sound-orama" [*tonorama*] and Erast Garin's "radio film" "The Iron Flood" ("Radiofil'm zheleznyi potok," 1931), two scripts that paid particular attention to "sound as a continuation of the word, both with regard to music and sound effects."⁷⁷

Finally, early Soviet filmmakers took an even more radical interest in radio and sought to bypass *all* textuality by using sounds alone in a purely documentary fashion. In 1925, Dziga Vertov, already known for his attempt at "discovering and revealing the truth" through the revolutionary technology of the Cinema-Eye [*Kino-glaz*] and Cinema-Truth [*Kino-pravda*], wrote a manifesto entitled "Radio-Pravda" that envisions auditory communication not through propagandistic speeches, but by the transmission of Soviet sounds: the noise of workplaces, the clamor of construction sites, and other auditory "facts" of the new way of life: "We defend agitation by facts, not only concerning sight, but also and in the same measure concerning hearing. How could we establish an auditory relationship across the whole frontline of the world's proletariat? [Sound recording mechanisms] record every rustle, every whisper, the noise of waterfalls and the speech of orators, etc. After the organization (montage) of such sound recordings, they may easily be broadcast in the form of "Radiopravda."⁷⁸ Vertov's approach was entirely opposed to using

⁷⁷ Sherel', "Radioveshchanie 1920-30-kh godov," 109. See also Bolotova, 379 on "Povest' o sfagnume." According to a short note in *Radioslushatel'* 3 (1928), 3 ("Pervyi radiofil'm – 'Stepan Khalturin'"), the "radio film represents an attempt to create a special script for radio broadcasts, based on consideration of many particularities of radio broadcasting" ("Радиофильм представляет собой опыт создания специального сценария для радиопередач, построенного на основе учета многих специфических особенностей радиовещания").

⁷⁸ Dziga Vertov, "'Kinopravda' i 'Radiopravda'," in *Velikaia kniga dnia*, 685. First in *Pravda*, no. 160, July 16, 1925. "Мы выдвигаем агитацию фактами не только в области зрения, но и в

radio for bourgeois “creative” formats, such as broadcasts of “Carmen” and “Rigoletto,” or of plays and other forms of radio writing: “While it is not too late, we must save our radio from the enthusiasm for ‘artistic radio programs’ [...]. To ‘artistic broadcasting’ we oppose ‘Radio-Pravda’ and the ‘Radio ear’.”⁷⁹

Radio Sound and Literary Writing

This brief overview of the development of early Soviet radio has outlined the medium’s cultural significance in the interwar period. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, poets both feared and embraced radio; as they scorned its banality and championed its importance to literary life, broadcasting entered their work as a topical theme or motif. And the three writers central to this study each gained personal insight into the medium’s inner works: Khlebnikov briefly worked for the Soviet Telegraph Agency; Mayakovsky repeatedly performed on live radio after 1925; and in the mid-1930s Mandelstam authored numerous scripts and shorter texts for the Voronezh Radio Committee. But to understand how radio influenced Soviet poetry on a deeper level, we must consider its very sound shape and how it altered views of language and the printed word, becoming a catalyst for new literary styles and modes of expression. Above all, radio highlighted the rich

области слуха. Как установить слуховую связь по всей линии мирового трудового фронта? [...] Мы знаем записывающий прибор – граммофон. Но есть и другие, более совершенные записывающие приборы: они записывают каждый шорох, каждый шепот, шум водопада, речь оратора и т.д. Демонстрация этой слуховой записи после ее организации – монтажа, может легко передаваться по радио в виде ‘Радиоправды’.”

⁷⁹ Ibid. “В программе радиопередачи всех радиостанций может быть установлена определенная пропорция между радиодрамами, радиоконцертами и радиохроникой... ‘Радиогазета’ без бумаги и расстояний (Ленин) – вот основное назначение радио, а не передача ‘Кармен’, ‘Риголетто’, романсов и пр., с чего наше радиовещание начало развивать свою работу. Пока еще не поздно, надо спасти наше радио от увлечения ‘художественной радиопередачей’ [...] ‘Радиоправду’ и ‘радиоуху’ противопоставляем мы ‘художественной радиопередаче’.”

expressive potential of sound, largely eclipsed by literacy's "fascination with visual textualities," to borrow an expression from the sound scholar Adelaide Morris.⁸⁰ It conveyed referential meaning, emotions, complex intonations, and hybrid signals that were half word, half noise. Acousmatic radio sound—sound whose source is invisible—enabled a new experience of language through unexpected arrangements of voices, sounds, and noise, both intended and accidental. It sensitized the ear to transitions between auditory data with a collage-like effect that highlighted sound's plasticity and evocative richness. The sounds of radio itself—the sputtering noise of early receivers, its high- and low-pitched distortions, and the adjustments to speech introduced to surmount them—began to appear in literary texts. Moreover, they helped propel the development of key modernist literary devices, such as defamiliarization (*ostranenie*), associativeness, asynchronicity, and montage, which are typically understood in terms of their visual origins, such as cinema and photography.

One of the earliest Russian authors to draw a direct parallel between electronic sound media and transformations of the literary language was Kornelii Zelinsky, the leading theoretician of the literary Constructivists, a short-lived avant-garde group that emerged from the wider Soviet Constructivist movement after World War I.⁸¹ In his introduction to their first joint anthology, *Change of All (Mena vsekh*, 1924), Zelinsky describes modern culture and daily life as a gradual process of dematerialization due to technological progress and industrial production. Because modern technology creates a

⁸⁰ Adelaide Morris, "Winged Words: H.D.'s Phonotexts and the Configurations of Meaning," in *How to Live/What to Do: H.D.'s Cultural Poetics* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 21

⁸¹ Based on analogous developments in architecture and the visual arts, the aesthetic theory of Russian literary constructivism was first articulated in early 1922 (the peak of Khlebnikov and Mayakovsky's radio fantasies) and the group was active until 1930, although Aleksei Chicherin, the poet who formulated its dominant technique, departed in 1924.

steadily greater energetic output with less and less material effort, culture becomes “dematerialized, meaning that the material foundations on which people rely are melting in their hands, as it were, while simultaneously accumulating in themselves greater and greater quantities of energy. Words melt, shorten, become denser; their meaning increases and their effect on man is intensified.”⁸² From this the Constructivists derived the basic aesthetic tenet of their montage aesthetics: the notion that technology exerts a progressive “charging” or “overloading” [*gruzofikatsiia*] of all elements of culture. While the number of individual parts (be they visual forms, architectural elements, or the words of a poem) is reduced, each of them now carries a higher energetic load, and thus a greater potential for meaning-making. It is noteworthy how often Zelinsky’s description of this dematerialization, and the accompanying constructivist “charge” [*gruzofikatsiia*], refers to sound media: “In telephony we see a sharp ‘dematerialization’. The disappearance of the intermediary link, of a hundred thousand pounds of wires. The invention of the radio telephone, which ‘loads’ upon itself the function that was previously carried out by means of large material masses (wires). The radio control of mechanisms and avia-motors without the intervention of heavy ‘material’ contact (airplanes without pilots). The simultaneous widening of the zone of effect.”⁸³ For Zelinsky, radio’s introduction of point-to-point vocal signals paradoxically eliminates the material intermediary, while increasing the emotional

⁸² Kornelii Zelinskii, “Konstruktivizm i poeziia,” in *Mena vsekh* (Moscow: Shkola FZU Gosizdata, 1924), 20. “Дематериализуется – это значит материальные упоры, которыми пользуются люди, как бы тают в их руках, одновременно накапливая в себе все большее и большее количество энергии. Тают, сокращаются, уплотняются слова, увеличивается их смысл, усиливается воздействие их на человека.”

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 20-21. “В телефонии мы видим резкую ‘дематериализацию’. Выпадение посредствующего члена – сотен тысяч пудов проволоки. Изобретение радио-телефона, ‘нагружающего’ на себя функцию, прежде отправлявшуюся при посредстве больших материальных масс (проволоки). Радио-управление механизмами и авиомоторами без посредства весомого ‘материального’ контакта (аэропланы без пилотов). Одновременное расширение зоны эффекта.”

and signficatory effects of speech.

As Zelinsky notes, however, of all cultural elements human language has resisted this dematerialization most strongly: “The above-mentioned process of ‘dematerialization’ turned out to be most retarded in the case of the word. Languages changed, sped up, the alphabet became simplified, stenography was invented, but inasmuch as human speech is connected with the throat, i.e. with an instrument that can only be changed with difficulty, the sonic segments that allow us to exchange thoughts did not become significantly shorter, even though all of surrounding life increased its rhythm immensely.”⁸⁴ According to Zelinsky, only technologically reproduced and amplified speech—through gramophone, telephone, and radio-telephony—allowed poetic experiments with language that departed from its natural articulated sound shape. Words could be slowed down or sped up, slurred, blurred, and overlaid, analyzed into discrete phonemes and synthesized into far more expressive combinations of such sonic units; as they took on additional meaning through this sonic complexity, these words made entire syntactic constructions redundant. The poems of A. N. Chicherin included in *Mena Vsekh*, in particular, use visual elements—in the form of unusual diacritics and lines—to charge customary phonemes with an added sonic burden that readers must first learn to decode: “naturally the work of ‘charging’ the line of verse that A. N. Chicherin and Sel'vinskii carry out, often tears them away from usual conversational patterns. The ear that serves our customary speech does not catch up

⁸⁴ Ibid., 24. “Наиболее замедленным оказался вышеуказанный процесс ‘дематериализации’ над словом. Языки менялись, ускорялись, упрощался алфавит, была изобретена стенография, но поскольку человеческая речь связана с горлом, т.-е. с инструментом, трудно поддающимся изменению, звуковые отрезки, служащие нам для обмена мыслями, значительно не сократились, несмотря на то, что вся окружающая жизнь чрезвычайно убыстрила свой темп.”

to the condensation of speech.”⁸⁵ While the Constructivists’ phonetic “condensation” of speech is related to even earlier experiments with sound in the printed text by avant-garde poets such as Aleksei Kruchenykh and Il’ia Zdanevich, their work first acknowledged the role played by electronic sound and radio in such explorations of language’s sonic potential.⁸⁶

Other Soviet writers reflected on technology’s potential for replacing literary language altogether. The labor organizer and avant-garde poet Aleksei Gastev, whose collections of verse such as *Poetry of the Worker’s Blow* (*Poeziia rabocheho udara*, 1918) and *A Packet of Orders* (*Pachka orderov*, 1921) strove to eclipse language with a rich vocabulary of sounds drawn from the world of factories and construction sites, questioned whether innovations such as the radio did not make proletarian literature redundant altogether. In a preface written in 1925, Gastev wonders whether “in an age when radio is so successful at arguing not only with words, but also with thoughts [...] and when time passes over into space and space into time, when any kid can use any machine to vividly learn what an x-axis and a y-axis are, and when, after doing radio repair work, he can intuitively grasp the meaning of Einstein’s theory,” it might be “a futile provincial affair to give meaning to such a fabricated little problem as proletarian literature.”⁸⁷ The question of

⁸⁵ Ibid., 26. “Та работа грузофикации стиха, какую ведут А. Н. Чичерин и Сельвинский, естественно часто отрывают их от обычных разговорных навыков. Ухо, обслуживающее нашу привычную речь, не сразу осваивается с уплотнением речи.”

⁸⁶ The Russian avant-garde graphic artist and typographer El Lissitzky (1890–1941) diagnosed a remarkably similar process; his response to sound medias’ challenge to the book was an innovative typography that could figuratively depict such qualities as sound and volume: “[T]he correspondence grows, the amount of letters, the paper covered with letters, the used material surges, and the telephone call brings relief. Then the network of wires grows, the material of wires, and then the radio brings relief. Material is reduced, we dematerialize, we displace idle masses of material through calm energies.” El Lissitzky, “The topography of typography,” in *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts* (Greenwich: Conn.: N. Y. Graphic Society, 1968), 357-358.

⁸⁷ A. K. Gastev, *Poeziia rabocheho udara* (Moscow: Izd-vo VTsSPS, 1925), 18. “Может быть, в

literary stylistics seems inconsequential not only because radio is a powerful conveyer of words, but because it even—and here Gastev’s characterization coincides with Khlebnikov’s equally utopian vision of radio—allows for the completely unmediated interaction of thoughts in the form of telepathy.

Such rhetorical rejections of writing and of the printed text, evident in Soviet writing about radio in the 1920s, can also be seen in less predictable places, such as in the printed verse of Khlebnikov, Mayakovsky, and Mandelstam. Khlebnikov’s aurally multi-layered poems celebrate the triumph of the “living word” over the stifling culture of the book, which he rejects not only for its lack of dynamism and expressiveness, but also for its associations with bourgeois laws and religion. For Mayakovsky, too, radio not only contests the leading role of the printed book for literature, but changes the role of literary style in a way that recalls Gastev’s thought: if poetry must be written with an ear to being broadcast, then the dominant aesthetic criteria become audibility and clarity. As a result, both Khlebnikov and Mayakovsky deemphasize language’s symbolic content, instead stressing its ability to convey meaning affectively, emphatically, and even “telepathically” through its sound shape. In Osip Mandelstam’s late poetics, this “rejection” of print looks somewhat different. The turn from writing poetry to composing it out loud—as expressed in Mandelstam’s earlier dictum that “I alone in Russia work from the voice” (“Я один в России работаю с голоса”)—was due to the dangerous repercussions of continuing to write and publish in a repressive political regime fiercely attentive to literature. But during

век, когда не только с словом, а даже с мыслью так удачно спорит радио [...] когда время переходит в пространство и пространство во время, когда каждый мальчишка на любой машине может наяву увидеть, что такое абсцисса и что такое ордината, и может интуитивно, после занятий над ремонтом радиоаппарата, понять, что значит теория Эйнштейна, в это время придавать значение такой оранжерейной проблемке, как пролетарская литература, – просто зряшное провинциальное дело.”

his Voronezh exile, Mandelstam—inspired in part by his fascination with radio—attempted to represent poetic texts as audible sound, and contemplated their potential for being “transmitted” to future listeners rather than readers. This approach, too, is played out phonetically, rather than through figurative imagery.

The terms of this rejection, or enhancement, of the printed word—how it arose and developed over time in the work of three of the best-known Soviet poets—are the subject of this dissertation. This is, of course, an ancient problem. A tension between speech, writing, and the book has run through Western culture at least since Plato denigrated the written over the spoken word in *Phaedrus*. In the 1960s, Walter J. Ong theorized pre-literate, oral culture as radically different from a culture based on writing and printing: because the former placed high demands on memory (in lieu of storage media) and perception (without a visual aid), its narratives and songs were structured very differently than those of print culture.⁸⁸ In oral cultures, for instance, the word was additive, redundant, empathetic, situational, and unbounded; writing, by contrast, introduced greater precision, detached reflection, and the idea of texts as stable, finite objects. Arguably, however, this contrast between literacy and orality could not be truly grasped until the development of sound media. Ong suggests so himself, stating that “[n]either writing nor print are what they used to be before the radio, the telephone, the phonograph and television.”⁸⁹ But orality, too, turned out to be shaped by print media. Ong introduces the idea of “secondary orality” to explain that radio broadcasts are based on literacy, rather than representing a return to pre-literate orality. But he echoes his teacher Marshall

⁸⁸ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Routledge, 2012).

⁸⁹ Thomas J. Farrell, ed. “An Interview with Walter Ong,” in *An Ong Reader* (New Jersey, 2002), 84.

McLuhan's belief by asserting that secondary orality does recover certain aspects of oral culture, such as its "participatory mystique, its fostering of a communal sense, its concentration on the present moment, and even its use of formulas."⁹⁰

These developments underscored the expressive limitations of the written text understood as a visual, rather than auditory medium, such as its lack of emotional immediacy and its ambiguity. As has been argued numerous times, Russian culture has long shown skepticism toward the written word. Secular publishing had arrived centuries after its rise in the West and illiteracy remained widespread well into the twentieth century. Maurice Paléologue, the last French ambassador to the Russian Empire, noted the enduring receptivity of Russians to the spoken rather than written word.⁹¹ And hesitations about literature's mediating role were shared by nineteenth-century writers such as Tolstoy (who, not least, was himself swayed by the gramophone's potential for preserving more vivid 'live' speech).⁹² Jurij Murašov has argued that this "delayed institutional and mental recognition of writing and typography, together with the notorious skepticism towards both of them, explain the unprecedented popularity that new electronic media, especially radio, gained in Russia during the media revolution," echoing similar assertions by Marshall

⁹⁰ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 134.

⁹¹ "No doubt in the last twenty years the police has been slightly less strict with the Press, but it has maintained all its traditions of ruthless severity in dealing with street oratory, public meetings and speeches. From its own point of view, it is right: the Russians are affected infinitely more by the spoken than the written word." Maurice Paléologue, *An Ambassador's Memoirs*, vol. II (London: Hutchinson, 1924), 162-163.

⁹² "The 'oneness' of the literary work with its experienced environment remained ideal for many Russian writers, long after the triumph of the privately authored, privately consumed book. In his final years, Tolstoy provocatively proclaimed a wedding song and a well-timed anecdote to be better than a symphony or a novel." Caryl Emerson, *The Cambridge Introduction to Russian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 60.

McLuhan.⁹³ And indeed, my overview of approaches to radio programming suggests that Russian views were particularly extreme, as exemplified by Shklovsky's call to use radio as an opportunity for "overcoming written language" and Dziga Vertov's desire to replace all narrative by a montage of auditory "facts." This narrative about a Russian distrust of the written word is as abstract and rhetorical as it is pervasive; it is perhaps best seen as a cultural trope that was particularly resilient in the early years of radio.

Nevertheless, for Khlebnikov, Mayakovsky, and Mandelstam, radio not only prompted a return to this motif of the live voice—understood as a pre-literary, bard-like orality—but triggered a broad reevaluation of the role of sound and aurality in their texts. A more recent approach to sound and textuality might prove helpful to understanding this development. Charles Bernstein's 1998 collection of essays on performing poetry introduces the useful distinction between orality and aurality (or even "a/orality"), which also guards against accusations of phonocentrism: while orality emphasizes "breath, voice, and speech" and tends "to valorize speech over writing, voice over sound," aurality "is connected to the body—what the mouth and tongue and vocal chords enact—not the presence of the poet"⁹⁴ In Bernstein's view, approaching poetry as sound does not aim at recuperating the vibrations of an author's vocal cords, but at detecting an audiotext that both precedes and extends it, and that represents a "semantically denser field of linguistic activity than can be charted by means of meter, assonance, alliteration, rhyme, and the

⁹³ McLuhan himself comments on the Russians' affinity for the radio, insisting with a disturbing facility for abstraction that Russia, like some Asian and African countries, is "less permeated with the patterns of literate culture" and suggesting that the "Russians' love of this instrument, so congenial to their oral traditions, is owing to the rich nonvisual involvement it affords." Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964,) 86 and 34.

⁹⁴ Charles Bernstein, ed., *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 13.

like.”⁹⁵ Its effects are evident not only in the voice of the author itself, but in the body of anyone declaiming poetic texts.

Bernstein’s enumeration of sonorous devices illustrates why this dissertation largely concentrates on poetic texts, rather than analyzing short stories and other prose genres. With its historical origin as an auditory medium, poetry also entails a natural affinity for radio sound and can be approached in terms of its defining aspects. On the one hand, radio speech was thought to convey meaning clearly and instantaneously, bypassing the ambiguity of the written word and conveying moods more powerfully. Jurij Murašov has argued that this understanding of sound dominates the “radiophonic” aesthetics of Socialist Realist literature, which “simulat[es] an oral narration by deleting all traces of the text’s written genesis.”⁹⁶ On the other hand, as the debates about radio art of the late 1920-1930s show, many directors, sound engineers and avant-garde writers valorized sound for confounding the smooth surface of Soviet news and propaganda through its richly layered potential for montage, cacophony, and conflicting meanings, and for introducing ambiguity into the straight party line. In this view, acousmatic sound, received without perceiving its source, actually forces the listener to engage much more intensely with a radio program than with a printed text, because such sounds require being interpreted in their own right: listeners must differentiate sounds overlapping in time, distinguishing between “found” sounds and those created in the studio. Elements such as mood and point of view may, in fact, become more difficult to recover on such a reading.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Jurij Murašov, “The Birth of Socialist Realism out of the Spirit of Radiophonia. Maxim Gorky’s Project ‘Literaturnaja ucheba’,” in *Totalitarian Communication. Hierarchies, Codes and Messages*, ed. Kirill Postoutenko (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2010), 188.

⁹⁷ This is acknowledged in an intriguing early theoretical essay on radio, which suggests limiting

Both of these extremes—sound as an unequivocal clarity of message and as an ambiguous aural excess—shaped Russian modernist writers’ attempts to transfer radio sound onto literary texts. Even the works of a single writer can oscillate between these two poles: Mayakovsky’s *agitprop* radio poems aim for instantaneous comprehension when performed, but deny such sonic clarity in their visual representation on the printed page. Khlebnikov’s work, while claiming *zaum* to be instantaneously effective and intelligible, contains complex sonic arrangements that require interpretive work by a close listener. And Mandelstam’s late verse shows an interest in how indeterminate, dissociative sounds block symbolic readings or multiply them exponentially, while also celebrating the instant contact which radio sound affords.

But early radio, I argue, was particularly influential in showing how the sound of poetry is infused with a musicality and aural richness that does not map onto prosody, nor, indeed, onto language itself. The German radio theorist Rudolf Arnheim, writing in the early 1930s, evocatively captures this ability of radio sound—especially in the first experimental radio plays or montages—to introduce a tension between word and sound: “the word is first revealed as sound, as expression, embedded in a world of expressive natural sounds which, so to speak, constitute the scenery. The separation of sound and word occurs only on a higher plane. [...] The ‘expressive characteristics’ of sound affect us in a far more direct way, comprehensible without any experience by means of intensity, pitch, interval, rhythm and tempi, properties of sound which have very little to do with the

radio plays to twenty minutes: “The reconstruction of a holistic synthetic picture by way of a single sensory stimulus (sound) requires far greater work of the brain than perception through many sensory stimuli” (“Воссоздание целостной синтетической картины путем одного наличного раздражителя (звукового) требует от мозга гораздо большей работы, чем восприятие через многие наличные раздражители”). N. Podkopaev, “Radioperedacha s tochki zreniia fiziologii,” in *Velikaia kniga dnia*, 705.

objective meaning of the word or the sound.”⁹⁸ The writers central to my dissertation understood that radio, in spite of being primarily intended as an information medium, immerses us in a far more primordial experience of language. The wider implications of these writers’ return to the word’s sound shape via radio will be the subject of the chapters that follow.

Radio and the Auditory Turn in Slavic Studies

While other areas of cultural and literary studies are fully engaged in the study of sound in its various facets, it seems the “auditory turn” in Slavic studies has only just begun. The transfer of visual aesthetics, inspired by film and photography, onto literary texts is widely examined, but the rich encounters of the recorded, broadcast, spoken and written word in Russian literature still remain largely uncharted. There have been exceptions, such as numerous contributions to the 2015 collection *Zhivoe slovo: logos–golos–dvizhenie–zhest: sbornik statei i materialov*. Robert Bird’s article on the twentieth-century Russian narrative poem also attends to transformations of its sound shape. In work on the nineteenth century, Gabriella Safran has explored how the changing culture of listening was reflected by new genres in late imperial Russian literature, while Alyson Tapp has demonstrated how Tolstoy’s *Sevastopol Stories* make sense of war through its sonic representations.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Arnheim, *Radio*, translated by Margaret Ludwig and Herbert Read (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1936), 27-29.

⁹⁹ *Zhivoe slovo: logos–golos–dvizhenie–zhest: sbornik statei i materialov* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2015). Bird, Robert, “Envoicing History: On the Narrative Poem in Russian Modernism,” *Slavic and East European Journal* 1 (2007): 53-73. Gabriella Safran, “The Troubled Frame Narrative: Bad Listening in Late Imperial Russia,” *The Russian Review* 2 (2013): 556-572. Alyson Tapp, “Earwitness: Sound and Sense-Making in Tolstoy’s *Sevastopol Stories*,” in *Hearing Crimea: Sound and the Unmaking of Sense in Nineteenth-Century Wartime*, ed. Gavin Williams

Perhaps more importantly, however, literary studies of all shades often still disregard the significance of the text's sound shape, even in an area as eminently shaped by it as poetry, as Marjorie Perloff charges in her introduction to the 2009 volume *The Sound of Poetry, The Poetry of Sound*: "however central the sound dimension is to any and all poetry, no other poetic feature is currently as neglected."¹⁰⁰ There have been other important forays into studying literature as sound, such as Charles Bernstein's landmark volume *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (1998), which largely concerns poetry as a performed audiotext. And Garrett Stewart's study *Reading Voices: Literature and the Phonotext* (1990) has demonstrated that texts need not even be performed out loud to manifest an aural dimension that transcends the division of sound versus meaning, and that puts to the test our limited vocabulary (such as assonance and alliteration, euphony and cacophony) for describing how literature actually *sounds*.

Approaches such as these are united by a concerted effort to neither treat sound as something peripheral to the poetic text—such as an added embellishment or illustration—nor to represent poetic language as primarily figurative. They dissolve the dichotomy of sound and sense—the reductive notion that an audible articulation becomes arbitrarily attached to a particular meaning content. And instead of seeing metaphor and other figures of speech as the essence of poetry, they find that sound both shapes and transcends symbolic meaning. The writing of many Russian modernist poets, and Khlebnikov, Mayakovsky, and Mandelstam in particular, is marked by a challenging aurality that calls for new approaches.

(under consideration with Oxford University Press).

¹⁰⁰ Marjorie Perloff, introduction to *The Sound of Poetry, the Poetry of Sound*, edited by Marjorie Perloff and Craig Dworkin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 2.

From the ambiguous counterpoint of Khlebnikov's later long poems, to the deceptive sonic clarity of Mayakovsky's agitational texts, to the highly associative, even aleatoric patterning of Mandelstam's Voronezh verse, the writing central to this dissertation brims with sound. Yet their work has not been studied from a primarily aural perspective. On the contrary, scholarship on the notoriously complex verse of Khlebnikov and Mandelstam has been largely hermeneutic and intertextual; readings of Mayakovsky's poetry, while less focused on its intertexts, usually stress his extreme reliance on metaphor over mimetic representation. I hope to develop a new approach to these three poets by *listening* to ways in which sound serves not as a supplement to visual symbols, but as a key to their works and their larger philosophy of language or "the Word": sounds can be used mimetically or figuratively, but also in ways that are arbitrary or merely add emphasis or emotional affect; they can both aid and undermine the process of meaning making. Combined with a historicizing awareness of sound media, such a listening is particularly revealing. By attending to sound patterns found throughout one author's body of texts, we can, for instance, appreciate the echoes of radio sound in the consonantal clusters of Mandelstam's "Voronezh Notebooks," or the plosive stuttering imitating an early receiver in Mayakovsky's verse.

Such a listening, encompassing both semantics and sound history, shows that these are not merely formal experiments; all three poets viewed sound as an important new category in itself for understanding the surrounding world and their role within it. Khlebnikov, Mayakovsky, and Mandelstam both receive and emit sonic signals; to some extent, all three understand inspiration and literary creativity as an aural event that bypasses the traditional literary process and the circulation of printed works. Hearing

rather than vision, sounds rather than written symbols, are also the terms of how these poets understand their role within Soviet society. The sound theorist Brandon Labelle has recently described this particularly modern understanding of the self in an increasingly sound-dominated environment: “Sound operates by forming links, groupings, and conjunctions that accentuate individual identity as a relational project.”¹⁰¹ Such an understanding of sound in its social dimension, and an attempt to refashion the literary text accordingly, was one of the key results of these writers’ engagement with radio sound.

As a result, they also counteract literary texts’ tendency toward an individual, solitary, and silent reception, implying instead that a communal reception of poetry as sound is required for its proper understanding. Walter Ong’s notion of “secondary orality”—the idea that radio broadcasts, for instance, are based on written texts in spite of their impression of spontaneity—captures this commingling of literary and oral culture. He notes that today “we are groupminded self-consciously and programmatically. [...] Unlike members of a primary oral culture, who are turned outward because they have had little occasion to turn inward, we are turned outward because we have turned inward.”¹⁰² Forms of secondary orality—even when they rely on texts, such as a radio script—are thus a conscious rejection of the inwardness and social sequestration that literacy has produced. Similarly, the writers central to my study consciously seek to overcome the text’s inwardness and aim for auditory social inclusion by incorporating stylistic figures indebted to secondary orality. Khlebnikov not only depicts a polyphony, but seeks the public reception of a listenership; Mayakovsky, likewise, not only sought out large audiences at

¹⁰¹ Brandon LaBelle, *Acoustic Territories: Sound Culture and Everyday Life* (New York: Continuum, 2010), xxi.

¹⁰² Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 134.

his public readings and radio performances, but wrote texts whose effectiveness and meaning are predicated on a broad, simultaneous, and auditory reception. And Mandelstam's late poetry, rather than merely exploring sound's aesthetic role, dares to envision an alternative model of transmission and reception by analogy to the radio.

Plan of the Dissertation

After this introduction to the history of the medium in Russia and the early Soviet Union, as well as key issues relating to sound media, aurality, and printed texts, the dissertation proceeds with close readings of three writers in light of the "radio aesthetics" of their work.

In chapter one I examine Velimir Khlebnikov's project of *zaum*, a trans-rational language based on the discovery of universal vibrations and frequencies in his native Russian. My reading traces his growing concern with sound media in the theoretical writings of 1918–1922, especially the utopian manifesto "The Radio of the Future" ("Radio budushchego"). Based on his last long poem, "Blue Fetters" ("Sinie okovy"), I argue that, while Khlebnikov did not live to see regular radio broadcasts of the mid-1920s, his late *zaum* poetics strives for what the Italian Futurist Marinetti called the "wireless imagination." His "trans-rational" poetic idiom is indebted equally to ancient forms of chants and incantations, and to the charms of modern wireless communication, with its potential to geographically and temporally unite distant listeners in a ritual communion on the ether, and with its ability to create much fuller, more ambiguous, and effective forms of expression than the written and printed word. In tracing this link between radio sound and an increasingly auditory poetics, I also contest the view of Khlebnikov as a silent,

unworldly figure and show that his poetry after 1921 is increasingly cognizant of the social significance that such a sonorous, polyphonic poetry can play.

My second chapter argues that in Mayakovsky's theoretical writings and verse of the 1920s, his interest in *zhivoe slovo*—the spoken and declaimed, rather than written word—gives way to a futuristic vision of a radio-based literary system, rather than one dependent on the printed book. Along with other contemporary thinkers, Mayakovsky not only foresaw that poetry would be increasingly broadcast; however, he also attempted to transfer radio's "sound" to written texts, replacing close reading with close listening, and equally stressing signification and sonic affect. Thus, a poet's aesthetic merit becomes linked to the suitability of his voice for conveying a range of intonations and to address a mass listenership. In Mayakovsky's creative enactment of this theory, the poet figure becomes a cosmic radio station that simultaneously receives and broadcasts; his radiophonic poetry synthesizes the voices of millions, picking up the "social commission" [*sotsial'nyi zakaz*] to re-channel it at the Soviet listenership as optimized sound. My reading also demonstrates that his poetry after 1922—often disparaged for its unabashedly agitational nature—merits a fresh look, as an aesthetically sophisticated attempt to adapt literary writing to new sound technologies.

The third chapter jumps forward to the mid-1930s and examines the impact of radio aesthetics beyond the Russian avant-garde, during Stalin's purges and in the condition of internal exile. To understand the extraordinary aurality of Osip Mandelstam's "Voronezh Notebooks," written after his arrest and isolation in the Soviet province, I argue, we must take into account the poet's sole extant radio script—an imaginative sketch of the young Goethe's development—and the radiophonic aesthetics of his own poetic texts. Despite—

or precisely because of—the constraints imposed by his internal exile in Voronezh, radio was both a recurrent theme and a source of the particular sound qualities of his verse. I trace the poet’s exposure to the Soviet soundscape, which resulted, on the one hand, in a “schizophonia” that further threatened the psyche of the hounded poet. On the other hand, representations of radio in texts such as “Headphones, my little headphones” and “My sleep keeps me sleepy, here on the Don” contradict the official political aims of Soviet radio, by ambiguously refracting propagandistic soundbytes in his sonorous verse and suggesting Mandelstam’s hope for an enduring role in Soviet society. Ultimately, radio further refined Mandelstam’s belief in the poetic word as endowed with radiating sonorous meaning. Despite his increasing isolation and the inability to publish, his “radio fantasies” imbue his final works with an unexpected faith in a future interlocutor affected by the sounding, rather than written word.

Taken together, these three case studies demonstrate a common return to poetry as born from sound and show that radio—as the era’s most prominent source of electrified sounds—was crucial to this rediscovery. Radio not only provided a metaphorical model for how literary texts could unite writer and reader; its sound also turns up in these poems’ sonic makeup. By scanning “highbrow” literary texts for traces of radio—rather than focusing on radio plays or speeches written specifically for the medium—we learn that what one scholar calls “mutually shaping relations among technologies, mass culture, and modernist writing”¹⁰³ abide even in ideologically streamlined Soviet culture, where

¹⁰³ Pamela L. Caughie, “Virginia Woolf: Radio, Gramophone, Broadcasting,” in *The Edinburgh Companion to Virginia Woolf and the Arts*, ed. Maggie Humm (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 333.

“broadcasting modernism” was not an option.¹⁰⁴ Indeed, not only did early radio programs occasionally stray from the party line. Khlebnikov, Mayakovsky, and Mandelstam’s literary texts themselves voice alternative visions of radio’s significance, showing that—in addition to cultural, political, and technological history—modernist writing itself has a say in what radio means, or might have meant.

¹⁰⁴ This phrase refers to the 2009 anthology *Broadcasting Modernism*, which considers the interactions between modernist writing and radio broadcasts in more liberal societies during radio’s “golden age.”

Chapter 1

“Radio of the Future”: Velimir Khlebnikov’s Poetics of Wireless Sound

Sound is not often used as an entry point into the enigmatic work of the Russian Futurist Velimir Khlebnikov.¹ At first blush, his writing contains few allusions to the loud urban lifeworld and technological innovations reflected in the poetry of his peers, such as Aleksei Kruchenykh and Vladimir Mayakovsky, but instead opts for a more abstract and esoteric idiom. While Futurism, in Russia and elsewhere, was often a deliberately public phenomenon, loudly enacted in key disputes and poetic declamations, Khlebnikov’s contemporaries describe the poet as mute, reticent, and wholly uninterested in poetry’s sonic manifestation, especially during the movement’s heyday: “Khlebnikov [...] was a quiet man and contributed almost nothing to the futurist noise of 1913 and 1914. He seldom joined their public parades and when called upon to recite his poetry he did so in a disconcerting mumble.”² Mayakovsky, Russia’s modern poet-orator *par excellence*, was often asked to recite Khlebnikov’s verse in his stead and once reportedly exclaimed in exasperation: “Why, for example, doesn’t he have a voice? [...] is it possible, in our idiotic days, to be a poet without a voice?”³ For Mayakovsky, it was evident that “having a voice”

¹ A noteworthy exception is Marjorie Perloff’s excellent essay, “Khlebnikov’s Soundscapes: Letter, Number, and the Poetics of *Zaum*,” which demonstrates the poet’s interest in the sounds of words in his early as well as later work, but without focusing on sound media. See Marjorie Perloff, *21st-Century Modernism: The “New” Poetics* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 121-153.

² Edward James Brown, *Mayakovsky: A Poet in the Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 61.

³ Vasilii Kamenskii, *Zhizn' s Maiakovskim* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1940), 60. “Почему, например, у него нет голоса? Ну, нет голоса и только. Мурлычет что-то наполовину понятное. Прямо чудотворец! Без голоса. Да разве в наши идиотские дни можно быть поэтом без голоса, когда живешь только глоткой, когда надо орать, драться, таранить.” Unless otherwise noted, all translations in this chapter are my own.

was a requirement for both the political confrontations and the aesthetic disputes dominating Russian culture of the late 1910s. Yet scholarship documents only one known Khlebnikov reading during which he commanded the audience's attention by being "agitated, inspired, declaiming in an enthusiastic and rhythmic manner."⁴ By numerous accounts, Khlebnikov was displeased with his image as an unworldly recluse and struggled to represent himself as a poet figure of great vocal command and public gravitas: "he had a different notion of himself—bold, adept, with a loud voice, leading the crowd behind him—in short, very similar to Mayakovsky."⁵

Khlebnikov's *zaum*⁶—the ambitious project of a trans-rational or beyond-sense language with the goal of uniting humanity, for which he is perhaps best known—is marked by similar contradictions. On the one hand, the manifesto "Artists of the World!" ("Khudozhniki mira!," 1919) downplays the role of vowel sounds in his pseudo-linguistic deductions of the hidden meanings of initial word consonants. In this important theoretical essay, Khlebnikov promotes the idea of universal written characters and blames the divisiveness of post-Babel linguistic diversity precisely on the sonorous discord of the various idioms: "May written language alone be the companion of man's continued destinies... Mute graphic symbols will reconcile the polyphony of tongues

⁴ The reading, of Khlebnikov's poem "Single Book" ("Edinaia kniga"), took place at a local Bolshevik club in Kharkov in 1920, as recounted by Aleksandr Leytes. See Raymond Cooke, *Velimir Khlebnikov: A critical study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 51.

⁵ Sergei Spasskii, *Maiakovskii i ego sputniki: vospominaniia* (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel', 1940), 76. "В своем собственном представлении он был иным – смелым, ловким, говорящим громко, ведущим толпу за собой, – словом, очень похожим на Маяковского, которого Хлебников безоговорочно признавал и любил." Translation cited in Cooke, 50.

⁶ Instead of using the strict transliteration (*zaum*), I omit the soft-sign apostrophe throughout this chapter for ease of reading.

[*mnogogolositsa iazykov*].”⁷ This claim minimizes the significance of articulation and audible speech to *zaum*, a view that was seconded, for instance, by the Soviet scholar Boris Bukhshtab.⁸ And yet, in his most detailed manifesto, “Our Foundation” (“Nasha osnova,” 1919), Khlebnikov characterizes *zaum* language in distinctly aural terms, as “the play of the voice outside of words” [*igra golosa vne slov*] and stresses its similarity to spells and other seemingly indeterminate, incantatory sounds.⁹ An even earlier text entitled “The Philologist’s Ear” (“Ukho slovesnika...”) suggests that Khlebnikov’s *zaum* approach is based on a kind of “philology of the ear”: “The ear of the philologist [*slovesnik*] detects the genealogy of *pot* and *poteiu* and *porokh*, *porosha*.”¹⁰ Here the phoneme *po* is charged with an imaginary, linguistically unverifiable meta-layer of meaning—perhaps the notion of small units of matter dispersing—that reveals an unexpected correspondence between the Russian words for “sweat,” “ashes,” “powder,” and “freshly fallen snow.” Moreover, many of Khlebnikov’s poetic texts themselves, from the iconic “Incantation by Laughter”

⁷ Velimir Khlebnikov, *Collected Works of Velimir Khlebnikov: Letters and Theoretical Writings*, trans. Paul Schmidt, ed. Charlotte Douglas (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1985), vol. 1, 364-365. “Пусть один письменный язык будет спутником дальнейших судеб человека ... Немые начертательные знаки помирят многоголосицу языков.” Khlebnikov, “Khudozhniki mira!” in Velimir Khlebnikov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 6, 154. The word *mnogogolositsa* is of considerable importance for Soviet discussions of sound and meaning. Bakhtin coined a similar term, *raznorechie*, to discuss conflicting viewpoints in literary texts, and Stalin used the term *raznogolositsa* to describe unwanted ambiguities in written texts relating to party doctrine.

⁸ According to Bukhshtab—who likely had not read many of Khlebnikov’s theoretical articles (his study was written in 1929–32) and therefore does not account for the examples I give below—the word’s sound shape, as well as the physiology of hearing and pronouncing, did not matter at all to Khlebnikov, who attempted to “eliminate all real conditions of human speech and, to the extent possible, even to abstract language from the human being” (“элиминировать все реальные условия человеческого говорения и по возможности даже абстрагировать язык от человека”). Boris Bukhshtab, “Filosofia ‘zaumnogo iazyka’ Khlebnikova,” *Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie* 89 (2008): 44-92.

⁹ Khlebnikov, “Nasha osnova,” *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 6, 174.

¹⁰ Khlebnikov, “Ukho slovesnika...,” *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 6, 52. “Ухо словесника улавливает родословную *пот* и *потю* и *порох*, *пороша*.”

(“Zakliatie smekhom,” 1908–09) to the onomatopoeic “bird’s language” in “Zangezi” (“Zangezi,” 1921), are meant to impact the ear. We might well ask, then, exactly what role sound plays in his poetry and poetic theory.

In this chapter, I contest the understanding of Khlebnikov as a mathematician of silent ciphers, prominent both in contemporary accounts of the poet and in later scholarship. My reading contends that Khlebnikov’s poetics is shaped not only by articulated, sounded, and performed speech; it also reveals an early awareness of the communicative potential and a fascination with the very sounds of early radio. However hermetic many of Khlebnikov’s texts are, they should therefore not be approached as a private philological exercise or a form of poetic ‘chamber music’. His reflections about radio and his poetic depictions of wireless sound suggest that he saw his later work as a contribution to the post–1917 effort to develop a distinct Soviet sound, and to shape a new public through radio and wireless communications. In particular, his view of radio informed the concept of *zaum*: for Khlebnikov, radio achieved instantaneous and intuitive synchronicity of understanding across national and temporal boundaries and tapped into subconscious, archaic layers of the mind. His later long poems are early modernist epics of sound that contribute to the wide-ranging creation of a new, distinctly Soviet soundscape, one that unites citizens through sound, rather than print.

Zaum and Electronic Sound

“Beyondsense” language—*zaumnyi iazyk*, literally “a language beyond the mind”—entered the avant-garde’s repertoire with Aleksei Kruchenykh’s 1913 “Declaration of the Word as Such” (“Deklaratsiia slova, kak takovogo”). In 1916, Kruchenykh coined

the abstract noun *zaum*'.¹¹ His manifestos and verse herald an indeterminate language beyond the threshold of rational thought and conventional signifiers. Along with like-minded poets such as Vasilisk Gnedov, Aleksandr Tufanov, and Velimir Khlebnikov, Kruchenykh seeks to capture the essence of objects by rejecting their accepted signifiers and searching for true sonic equivalents in nonsensical sounds, as exemplified in the iconic poem "Dyr bul shchyl" (1912). In his landmark study of this phenomenon, Gerald Janecek proposed the following system for classifying the various forms of *zaum* used in the 1910-20s: "dislocations [*sdvigi*] that produce indeterminacy can occur on a variety of linguistic levels, ranging from the phonetic to various aspects of semantic construction [...] mainly on the level of phonemes, morphemes, and syntax." He speaks of phonetic *zaum*—"a situation in which letters are represented in combinations that do not form recognizable morphemes"; morphological *zaum*, in which recognizable morphemes are recombined in ways that do not result in a recognizable meaning; and, finally, syntactic *zaum*, in which recognizable words, or even whole phrases, are conjoined in a way that is "grammatically incorrect, shifted, or garbled."¹²

While a tendency to privilege sound over meaning and to experiment with linguistic indeterminacy can be found throughout literary history (in onomatopoeic figures, for instance), a distinguishing feature of Russian *zaum* is its systematic and universalizing character. Its representatives heralded the creation of a holistic new poetic language that would have universal and international appeal. We find this sentiment in Kruchenykh's own "Declaration of the Transrational Word" ("Deklaratsiia zaumnogo slova," 1921), for

¹¹ Aleksei Kruchenykh, *Tainye poroki akademikov* (Moscow: Tip. I. D. Rabotnikova, 1916), 25.

¹² Gerald Janecek, *Zaum: The Transrational Poetry of Russian Futurism* (San Diego: San Diego State University Press, 1996), 5.

example, in which he claims that “*Zaum* is the most universal form of art, even though its source and original character can be national, such as: Hurrah, Evan – Evoe! etc.

Transrational works are capable of giving a worldwide poetical language, one that was born organically, and not artificially, like Esperanto.”¹³

This attempt to give indeterminate sounds a universal and international character proved essential to Khlebnikov’s *zaum*, too—although, in contrast to Kruchenykh, his language only appears nonsensical: Khlebnikov, in fact, attempts to reveal the basic sonic “building blocks” of all languages by “peeling” off the etymological layers of Russian words. By finding these minimal meaningful phonemes, Khlebnikov believed, the *zaum* poet could overcome the mutual unintelligibility of natural languages, which he saw as a key cause of discord and military conflict, and unite listeners worldwide. His often arcane theoretical pursuits and the poetic practice of “word-creation” [*slotovorchestvo*] thus, in fact, seek to uncover, rather than produce, sound patterns embedded in all historically developed languages. In “Our Foundation,” he likens this collection of sounds to the periodic table of the elements: “The entire fullness of language must be separated into the basic elements of ‘alphabetical truths,’ after which something like the law of Mendeleev can be constructed for sound-matter.”¹⁴

While one of the primary inspirations for Khlebnikov’s linguistic theory is the archaic realm of spells and incantations, his manifestos also often associate the elemental

¹³ Aleksei Kruchenykh, “Deklaratsiia zaumnogo slova” in *Apokalipsis v russkoi literature* (Moscow: MAF, 1923), 46. “Заумь – самое всеобщее искусство, хотя происхождение и первоначальный характер его могут быть национальными, например: Ура, Эван – эвое! и др. Заумные творения могут дать всемирный поэтический язык, рожденный органически, а не искусственно, как эксперанто (sic! –PSP).”

¹⁴ Khlebnikov, “Nasha osnova,” *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 6, 167. “Вся полнота языка должна быть разложена на основные единицы ‘азбучных истин’, и тогда для звуко-веществ может быть построено что-то вроде закона Менделеева.”

linguistic units comprising *zaum*, which he derived through arcane mathematical and occult exercises, with spectral noise phenomena such as rays, waves, and oscillation patterns. As Johanna Drucker puts it, “Khlebnikov’s *zaum* was constructed according to a mystical interest in understanding (actually revealing) the order of the universe through a nearly Pythagorean understanding of the morphemic units of language as reflections of fundamental vibrations, frequencies, and quantitative reflections of universal qualities.”¹⁵ For instance, in an article that serves to systematize his esoteric theory of numbers, Khlebnikov describes certain letter sounds as emitting steady signals due to inherent oscillation patterns: “A certain Shcherbina has discovered that ‘u’ gives 432 oscillations per second, ‘o’ – 756, ‘a’ – 980, and ‘y’ – 996.”¹⁶

This affinity for electro-acoustic concepts is not surprising: Khlebnikov studied the natural sciences at university and, as Paul Schmidt notes, he “was certainly aware that the course of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century physics had repeatedly demonstrated the wave-form proclivities of nature.”¹⁷ Moreover, like other avant-garde approaches, *zaum* evolved within an increasing ubiquity of audio technology. Notwithstanding the rich metaphorical and intertextual potential of these images, Khlebnikov’s poetic lexicon thus also reflects the anatomy of emerging sound media in words such as rays [*luchi*], pipes [*truby*]—a reference to the cone-shaped telephone, phonograph, and early publicly installed radio speakers—wires [*provoloka*], and, beginning in the late 1910s, the word for

¹⁵ Johanna Drucker, *The Visible Word: Experimental Typography and Modern Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 171.

¹⁶ Velimir Khlebnikov, “Doski sud'by,” in *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 6, 55. “Некто Щербина нашел, что у дает 432 колебания в секунду, о – 756, а – 980, ы – 996 [...]”

¹⁷ Charlotte Douglas, “Introduction: Kindred Spirits,” in Khlebnikov, *The Collected Works*, vol. 1, 186.

wave [*volna*] and its various grammatical derivations.¹⁸ As early as in “Scythian headdress” (“Skuf'ia skifa: misteria,” 1916), for instance, he envisions the phenomenon of remote control by radio waves and coins the Slavic noun *besprovoloka* (from *bez*, without, and *provoloka*, wire) to describe radio and wireless: “Stone robots, standing on a chessboard that embraced both sea and dry land, battled each other to the death, controlled by radio waves [...] Their commanders controlled their movements by invisible pulls on the strings of their own wills”¹⁹ (“Каменные рабы, стоя на шахматном чертеже, охватывавшем часть моря и суши, разрушали друг друга, руководимые беспроволокой [...] Невидимые удары на проволоке воли полководцев руководили действиями железного [...] воина”).²⁰ Khlebnikov also predicted radio’s central role in public life long before his personal encounter with early Soviet broadcasting, in the essay “Opening of the People’s University” (“Otkrytie narodnogo universiteta,” 1918): “We can even begin to imagine a time when a single newspaper-of-the-air will instruct the whole of Planet Earth by radio, broadcasting via gramophone recordings the lectures of the best minds of humanity,”²¹ a thought that Khlebnikov also expressed in a still earlier theoretical sketch entitled “Letter to Two Japanese” (“Pis'mo dvum iapontsam,” 1916).²²

¹⁸ The Khlebnikov scholar V. P. Grigor'ev notes the importance of this latter image for Khlebnikov, and acknowledges its partially scientific origin, but does not account for its association with forms of sound. See the short note “Obraz volny v tvorchestve Khlebnikova,” in *Budetlianin* (Moscow: Iazyki Russkoi Kul'tury, 2000), 725-726.

¹⁹ *The Collected Works*, vol. 2, 95.

²⁰ Khlebnikov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 5, 174.

²¹ *Ibid.*, vol. 6, 145. “Думалось о том времени, когда единая для всего земного шара школа-газета будет разносить по радио одни и те же чтения, выслушиваемые через граммофон и составленные собранием лучших умов человечества.” Translation in Khlebnikov, *Collected Works*, vol. 2, 439-440.

²² Here, describing the international “Higher Instruct of the Futurians,” Khlebnikov posits that “[t]he radio-telegraph will unite each location with the next, and lessons will be transmitted by wire. We must have our own radio-telegraph system. Communication by air” (“Радиотелеграф

How did this preoccupation with wireless communication shape Khlebnikov's understanding of literary language and, in particular, the theory of *zaum*? His most detailed poetic manifestos, "Artists of the World!" and "Our Foundation," both written in 1919, are likewise pervaded by electronic sound, for instance.²³ They devote special attention to initial consonants, which Khlebnikov believed to express an abstract concept shared by most words beginning with this sound. The earliest meditation on this idea, "Oleg and Kazimir: A Conversation" (1914), illustrates it using the metaphor of electrical wiring: "The first sound, in contrast to the others, is a wire [*provoloika*], a channel for the currents of fate [*ruslo tokov sud'by*]." ²⁴ In the later manifestos, Khlebnikov describes the word's historical conduit using an analogy that recalls wireless communication: "[w]ords beginning with the same consonant are united by one and the same concept, and seem to fly from different directions toward a single point of the mind" ("как бы летят с разных сторон в одну и ту же точку рассудка").²⁵ One example of such a "point" is the consonant "ch" (ч), which connects such diverse words in Russian as "cover and cup, chant, vat, canoe, skull" ("чехол и чаша, чара, чан, челнок, череп").²⁶ According to Khlebnikov, all other sounds of these words "cancel each other out" ("все остальные

соединяет их всех друг с другом, и уроки проходят по радиотелеграфу. Иметь свой радиотелеграф. Сообщение по воздуху"). Khlebnikov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 6, 255. Translation in Khlebnikov, *Collected Works*, vol. 2, 326.

²³ Khlebnikov, "Khudozhniki mira!" and "Nasha osnova," in *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 6, 153-158 and 167-181. The word *besprovolochnyi* had entered Russian use in 1914, with Vadim Shershenevich's 1914 translation of Marinetti's manifesto, in which "wires" [*fili*] refer to the conductors of syntax and morphology that keep language from attaining its maximum expressive and emotional potential. See Shershenevich, *Manifesty ital'ianskogo futurizma* (Moscow: Tip. Russkogo t-va, 1914).

²⁴ Khlebnikov, "Razgovor Olega i Kazimira," in *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 6, 289.

²⁵ Khlebnikov, "Nasha osnova," 174.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

звуки друг друга уничтожат”), leaving only the common denominator “ch” (ч), which thus contains the meaning content shared by all of these words: their role as a “cover” or “container” (“оболочка”), or of “one body within the cover of another” (“одно тело в оболочке другого”).²⁷ According to this inventive etymology, a charm acts as a cover of deception, a cup contains liquid, and the verb *chaiat'* (“to hope”) is a “container” for “the waters of the future” (“воды будущего”). And, importantly, Khlebnikov does not limit his imaginative poetic ‘chemistry’ to contemporary Russian; his “domestication” of transrational language transcends both national borders and historical intervals, fusing all of space and time in a single utterance: “After all, *vritti* also means ‘turning’ in Sanskrit, and *khata* also means hut in Egyptian.”²⁸

But despite such elaborate epistemological deductions, *zaum* language is meant to be short and instantaneously understandable. Aleksei Kruchenykh, whose vision of *zaum* differs from Khlebnikov’s in many regards, concurred: “Zaum is the shortest of the arts, both in terms of the distance between reception and reproduction, and in its whole form; for example: Kuboa, [Hamsun], Kho-bo-ro etc.”²⁹ Khlebnikov shared this interest in simplifying the cognitive process of meaning-making: his experiments strip words of all symbolic significance and leave only an indeterminate initial sound that transmits meaning contents almost telepathically, by appealing to subconscious linguistic knowledge.

²⁷ As Robin Milner-Gulland points out, in this case the visual, hieroglyph-like shape of the letter also plays a role for Khlebnikov, “implying by its very shape for him the notion of ‘cupping’ (*chasha*) or of ‘containment.’” See “Khlebnikov’s eye,” in *Russian Literature, Modernism and the Visual Arts*, edited by Catriona Kelly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 204.

²⁸ Khlebnikov, “Khudozhniki mira!,” in *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 6, 157. “Ведь *vritti* и по-санскритски значит вращение, а *xata* и по-египетски хата.”

²⁹ Kruchenykh, “Deklaratsiia zaumnogo slova,” 46. “Заумь – самое краткое искусство, как по длительности пути от восприятия к воспроизведению, так и по всей форме, например: Кубоа, [Гамсун], Хо-бо-ро и др.”

Khlebnikov presents an example of this approach in the manifesto “Artists of the World!,” suggesting that complex sentences in a national language—in this case Russian—can be represented through universally understandable units of *zaum*. Thus, the statement “Intent upon uniting the human race, but meeting the barrier of the mountain chains of languages, the fire storm of our minds revolves around the idea of a communal beyonsense language and achieves the atomization of words into units of thoughts contained in an envelope of sounds and then rapidly and simultaneously proceeds toward the recognition throughout the earth of one single beyonsense language”³⁰ is rendered in *zaum* as: “Ve So of the human race Be Go of languages, Pe of our minds, Ve So SHa of languages, Bo Mo of words Mo Ka of thoughts CHa of sounds Po So Do Lu earth Mo So languages, Ve earth” (“Вэ со человеческого рода, бэ го языков, пэ умов, вэ со ша языков, бо мо слов мо ка разума ча звуков, по со до лу земли мо со языков, вэ земли”).³¹ Khlebnikov has replaced precisely those elements which impede and slow down the interpretive process—symbols and metaphors such as “the mountain chains” and “the fire storm of our minds”—with instantaneously understandable sounds, and leaves intact only concrete nouns such as “earth” and “language.” And these succinct sounds themselves exemplify the passage’s overarching meaning: the ideal of “rapid and simultaneous” communication free of interference.³²

³⁰ In *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 6, 157-158. “Думая о соединении человеческого, но столкнувшись с горами языков, бурный огонь наших умов, вращаясь около соединенного заумного языка, достигая распыления слов на единицы мысли в оболочке звуков, бурно и вместе идет к признанию на всей земле единого заумного языка.”

³¹ *Ibid.*, 157.

³² An interesting sidenote to Khlebnikov’s interest in the efficiency of linguistic communication are his comments on the Soviet phenomenon of *novoiiaz*, a form of ideologically marked “newspeak” created by combining initial letters or syllables, as in the case of the Russian telegraph agency ROSTA, an acronym derived from “Rossiiskoe telegrafnoe agentstvo.” In an earlier version of his

Khlebnikov's goal of communicating internationally using such abstract sonic signifiers may strike us as patently irrational, and there is little, if any, linguistic merit to his etymological deductions. But the interest in reducing complex ideas and images to universally comprehensible, vibrating sonic signals clearly resonates with the utopian ambitions of early radio broadcasting. It draws inspiration, in particular, from one key quality of radio sound and speech: the illusion that it abolishes space and time by simultaneously affecting geographically remote listeners. Describing this utopian fervor surrounding the medium in the early 1920s, the German broadcast theorist Rudolf Arnheim uses words that echo Khlebnikov's project: "This is the great miracle of wireless. The omnipresence of what people are singing or saying anywhere, the overleaping of frontiers, the conquest of spatial isolation, the importation of culture on the waves of the ether, the same fare for all, sound in silence."³³ Another key commentator on early twentieth-century radio culture notes that early listeners often expressed hope for "the establishment of a universal language, instantaneous travel through collapsing space, and the achievement of a lasting global peace."³⁴ And Arnheim, in a turn that also recalls Khlebnikov's *zaum*, even applies the lessons of radio sound to the semantics of individual phonemes: "The

essay "Radio of the Future," he positively remarks on such word formations: "[Man] feels restricted in his 365 days; unable to extend the year, he renounces long-sounding words. In this regard the Russian language has made a daring leap and changed to short artificial words..." ("[Человеку] тесно в его 365 днях; не умея растянуть год, отказывается от долго звучащих слов. В этом отношении русский язык сделал смелый скачок, перейдя к кратким искусственным словам..."). See *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 6, 409. The poem "Confession – awkward style" ("Priznanie – koriavyi slog," 1922) likewise suggests that such transformations did indeed hold appeal to Khlebnikov, even though their artificiality would appear to contrast with his more organic "word-creation" [*slovotvorchestvo*], based on ostensibly historical etymological relationships between roots and morphemes.

³³ Arnheim, *Radio*, 14.

³⁴ Douglas Kahn and Gregory Whitehead, *Wireless Imagination: Sound, Radio, and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 53.

‘expressive characteristics’ of sound affect us in a far more direct way, comprehensible without any experience by means of intensity, pitch, interval and tempi, properties which have very little to do with the objective meaning of the word or the sound.” He goes on to give examples of very different words and things that are nevertheless joined by a similar “sound-character,” such as ‘father’ and ‘hard’, two words united by “the vowel ‘a’, which as a sound has a direct expressiveness.”³⁵ This set of concerns—the use of sound, rather than writing, to communicate globally, and the resulting focus on the affective properties of abstract sounds—is further developed in Khlebnikov’s startlingly prescient essay on the broadcast medium.

Zaum and Broadcast Radio

The clearest expression of Khlebnikov’s fascination with wireless communications is his essay “Radio of the Future” (“Radio budushchego”), written in the fall of 1921. It describes the medium as an omnipotent synthesizer of news, thoughts, lived experience, feelings and knowledge that prefigures today’s virtual internet networks. Khlebnikov’s radio makes accessible to all both everyday life advice and the most refined products of the arts and sciences, serving simultaneously as a brain-like control center and the country’s spiritual beacon. Written during the severe 1921–22 famine, which Khlebnikov witnessed at close hand, the essay even imagines radio’s ability to remotely administer medical aid and to provide nutritional sustenance.

The text’s overt reference to the medium is striking in itself. Not only was Khlebnikov known for ardently substituting Slavic coinages for foreign words; he also

³⁵ Arnheim, *Radio*, 30.

rarely left the confines of his mythopoetic cosmos to describe everyday objects (even the description of the cinema in the poem “Produma putestana” (1920) for instance, is encoded in his poetic idiolect). But in 1921–22 Khlebnikov was unusually engaged with the outside world and attentive to current events and political reality in a way that is reflected in his writing. In late October of 1920 he traveled to Baku, where he quickly became a regular contributor to the wall newspaper (*stengazeta*) produced by the local department of ROSTA, the Soviet telegraph news agency founded in September 1918.³⁶ ROSTA’s role during the Civil War was to transmit news to its regional branches (it boasted nearly fifty agencies by 1922); because public radio speakers were not installed until 1922, it was the responsibility of poets and artists – most notably, Vladimir Mayakovsky and Mikhail Cheremnykh – to convey the news as quickly as possible. In 1919–21, they thus used wall newspapers that were hung in empty shop windows, as well as the famous ROSTA windows [*Okna ROSTA*], large satirical posters with bright drawings and catchy agitational slogans that were duplicated using stencils.³⁷

According to Nikolai Khardzhiev, it was also in Baku that Khlebnikov wrote his first agitational poems, unusually transparent texts such as “From dawn till night, Wrangel knits his mittens white” (“Ot zari i do nochi viazhet Vrangel' onuchi”). Their sudden confrontational, and at times even combative, tone reflects Khlebnikov’s desire to maximally impress on his readers the urgency of current events. P. I. Tartakovskii suggests that Khlebnikov responded to this new task by embracing more conversational and

³⁶ Nikolai Khardzhiev conjectures that, while serving at ROSTA Baku, Khlebnikov wrote simple rhymes and verse to accompany the work of the artist Mechislav Dobrokovskii; none of these collaboratively produced posters appear to have survived. See N. I. Khardzhiev, *Ot Maiakovskogo do Kruchenykh: Izbrannye raboty o russkom futurizme* (Moscow: Gileia, 2006), 324.

³⁷ See Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917-1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 115-116.

folkloric forms, such as the *chastushka*, which left traces in his writing throughout 1920–21.³⁸ And Khardzhiev notes that Khlebnikov began to emulate Mayakovsky’s achievements in the genre of agitational verse.³⁹ A particularly revealing case for comparison are the two poets’ appeals about the 1921–22 Povolzhye famine, both of which thematize the use of amplified sound to somatically impact a callous listener. Very similar to Mayakovsky’s “Bastards!” (“Svolochi!,” 1922), for instance, Khlebnikov’s “Toot, scream, ring out!” (“Trubite, krichite, nesite!,” 1921) peaks in the hysterical command: “Scream, scream, bringing the horn to your lips!” (“Кричите, кричите, к устам взяв трубу!”).⁴⁰

During this period, Khlebnikov also authored propagandistic poems for the cultural section of the Volga-Caspian fleet and read lectures to Red Army soldiers on various topics. In this capacity he was even invited to accompany a Red Army expedition to modern-day Iran. Upon returning, Khlebnikov spent September through early December of 1921 in Piatigorsk, serving as a night guard to the Terek Region’s ROSTA chapter, while continuing to publish agitational poems in the local newspapers, lecturing at the local university, and frequently visiting the local radio station (which, like the ROSTA office itself, was housed at the local Dom Pechati, or Press House).⁴¹ According to Khlebnikov’s biographer, Sofia Starkina, he was especially close to the head of ROSTA in Piatigorsk,

³⁸ Petr Tartakovskii, *Poeziia Khlebnikova i Vostok, 1917-1922 gody* (Tashkent: Izd-vo “Fan” Akademii nauk Respubliki Uzbekistan, 1992), 131.

³⁹ Khardzhiev, *Ot Maiakovskogo do Kruchenykh*, 242-243 and 322-325.

⁴⁰ Compare Mayakovsky’s “Two not entirely common cases” (“Два не совсем обычных случая”): “Oh blare about the hunger into Europe’s ears!” (“Трубите ж о голоде в уши Европе!”), in Maiakovskii, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2, 78.

⁴¹ While in Piatigorsk, Khlebnikov’s agitational poems were publicly distributed in 1200 copies within the province’s network of Rosta Walls. See Dmitrii Kozlov, “Novoe o Velimire Khlebnikove,” *Krasnaia Nov’* 8 (1927), 184.

Dmitrii Kozlov, who captured Khlebnikov's characterization of Walt Whitman as a radio receiver: "this poet is a medium of his age; like a radio receiver, he receives and reflects ideas, feelings, and the volitional waves of humanity"⁴² (a description curiously prescient of how Mayakovsky would begin to depict himself vis-à-vis the broadcast medium one year later). Finally, the presence of radio in Khlebnikov's writing of this period is also suggested by the title of a text from early 1921, "Всем! Всем! Всем!" ("To All! To All! To All!"). This phrase originates from Lenin's titles for the earliest radio transmissions of Soviet resolutions, such as "Radio to all" (1917) or "Radiogram to all, all" (1918), and it quickly became the customary opening formula of early broadcasts.

Not surprisingly, then, Khlebnikov's "Radio of the Future" reflects the widespread enthusiasm for the medium in the period from 1917 to 1924, when broadcasting quickly progressed from radio-telegraphy—the wireless transmission of written words by Morse code—to radio-telephony—the transmission of speech from point to point—and, finally, to public short-wave radio transmissions. Khlebnikov's death in June 1922, from a combination of gangrene and malnutrition, kept him from witnessing the first regular radio programs in late 1924. But the intensified creative output during his final months coincided with numerous widely publicized broadcasting experiments. For instance, after newspaper articles were successfully transmitted in Kazan using large megaphone-like horns, the attempt was repeated in Moscow with ROSTA telegrams in June 1921.⁴³ These broadcasts,

⁴² Sofia Starkina, *Velimir Khlebnikov: korol' vremeni. Biografiia* (St. Petersburg: Vita Nova, 2005), 383. "Этот поэт – медиум эпохи, он, как радиоприемник, принимает и отображает идеи, чувства, волевые волны человечества." See also Starkina's account of Khlebnikov's stay in Baku and Piatigorsk on pp. 346-361 and 378-383 respectively. Dmitrii Kozlov's recollections of Khlebnikov in the winter of 1921-22 were published in "Novoe o Velimire Khlebnikove," *Krasnaia Nov' 8* (1927): 177-188.

⁴³ A. Sherel', *Tam, na nevidimyh podmostkakh... Radioiskusstvo: problemy istorii i teorii, 1922-1941* (Moscow: Rossiiskii Institut Iskusstvoznaniia, 1993), 11: "рупоры были установлены на

which could be heard on at least six public squares in Moscow, were repeated each evening starting on June 17, 1921 and served as the prototype of regular radio programming.

Radio-telegraphy and -telephony were also widely known through their use in government, military, and journalism. The Bolsheviks, after all, were intent on presenting the October Revolution itself as a hyperbolic triumph of wireless communication, having issued their first proclamation of victory by a radio signal from the Cruiser Aurora.⁴⁴

“Radio of the Future” builds on the earlier text “Swanland of the Future” (“Lebediia budushchego,” 1918), which also probes the limitations of the printed word and the potential of emerging forms of sound-based communication. “Swanland” envisions a reinvention of the printed book: its static pages are coopted by a cosmology of live transmissions and inscriptions through clouds, thunder, lightning, and the waves of the ocean. Khlebnikov refers to the resulting composite medium as “skybooks” [*neboknigi*], or “tall white walls resembling white books, spread out in the black sky” on which authors can cast their “shadow writing” [*tenepis'mena*]. Further entwining this medial conception with the natural world, he suggests that clouds, for instance, would convey the most urgent messages: “Some, dying, asked that the news of their death be written on the clouds” (“Некоторые, умирая, просили, чтобы весть о их смерти была напечатана на облаках”).⁴⁵ The conclusion, titled “Paths of Communication. Spark-writing” (“Puti

балконе здания Моссовета, а 17 июня 1921 года передачи Центральной радиотелефонной станции начали транслироваться через рупоры, установленные на шести площадях Москвы.” For an account of the Kazan experiment see Shamshur, 162-163.

⁴⁴ Lenin’s appeal “To the citizens of Russia” (“К grazhdanam Rossii”), proclaiming the overthrow of the Provisional Government by the Bolshevik committee, was broadcast on October 25, 1917 from the cruiser Aurora. The signal was picked up not only by local radio stations, but also in Paris and a few other foreign locations. In spite of the study’s mythologizing slant, a good overview of other key radio broadcasts during the revolutionary upheavals is found in Shamshur, 19-33.

⁴⁵ Velimir Khlebnikov, “Lebediia budushchego,” in *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 6, 139.

soobshcheniia. Iskropis'ma.”), further refines the idea of instantaneous aerial communication, capable of transmitting auditory messages that are, in turn, cast onto the shadow-books: “As the spark voices spoke their messages from the ends of the earth, they were instantly printed on the shadow books” (“Услышанные искровые голоса, поданные с другого конца земли, тотчас же печатались на тенекнигах”).⁴⁶

In these images we can recognize the ROSTA wall newspapers and agitational posters Khlebnikov helped create while in Baku and Piatigorsk.⁴⁷ The essay “Radio of the Future” likewise reflects ROSTA’s primary purpose: here, Khlebnikov fuses the metaphor of the world as a cosmic book with a centralized radio network whose messages are instantaneously projected onto enormous pages throughout the country:

Вершины волн научного моря разносятся по всей стране к местным станам Радио, чтобы в тот же день стать буквами на темных полотнах огромных книг, ростом выше домов, выросших на площадях деревень, медленно поворачивающих свои страницы.⁴⁸

The crests of waves in the sea of human knowledge will roll across the entire country into the local tents of Radio, to be projected that very day as letters onto the dark canvases of enormous books, higher than houses, that have erected themselves in the village squares, slowly turning their own pages.⁴⁹

It is plausible, too, that Khlebnikov wrote his essay, in part, to recruit new workers for the ROSTA network: instead of the word ‘radio’ an earlier draft uses this acronym

⁴⁶ Ibid., 140.

⁴⁷ An argument can also be made that these lines are an eerily prescient vision of televised images (the use of the semantic field of “shadows” is related to Khlebnikov’s poetic responses to cinema screenings, for instance, and television was discussed early on as a possible development of radio).

⁴⁸ Khlebnikov, “Radio budushchego,” 191. The lasting dominance of the book format is due, in part, to the influence of the ROSTA posters, large-scale broadsheets that were created as a visual correlate to urgent telegraph messages, but also related to Khlebnikov’s rather prescient description of televised images in the same text, an idea that became widely discussed only around 1930.

⁴⁹ Khlebnikov, *Collected Works*, vol. 1, 392.

itself, both in the title and throughout the text.⁵⁰ But Khlebnikov's text also far transcends the medium's status quo, imagining a future in which radio will no longer rely only on visual transcriptions, but on sonic emanations. The section entitled "Radioreadingwalls" ("Radiochital'ni") is followed by "Radioauditoriums" ("Radioauditorii"), which predicts public forms of listening: "Surges of lightning are picked up and transmitted to the metal mouth of an auto-speaker, which converts them into loud amplified sound, into singing and human speech"⁵¹ ("Железный рот самогласа пойманную и переданную зыбь молнии превратил в громкую разговорную речь, в пение и человеческое слово. Все село собралось слушать").⁵² Khlebnikov describes in considerable detail how early radio sound might have been perceived, conveying both the miraculous otherworldliness and the 'graininess' of such aural transmissions:

Из уст железной трубы громко несутся новости дня, дела власти, вести о погоде [...] откуда этот поток, это наводнение всей страны неземным пением, ударом крыл, свистом и цоканием и целым серебряным потоком дивных безумных колокольчиков, хлынувших оттуда, где нас нет, вместе с детским пением и шумом крыл?⁵³

The metal trumpet mouth loudly carries the news of the day, the activities of the government, weather information [...] Where has this great stream of sound come from, this inundation of the whole country in supernatural singing, in the sound of beating wings, this broad silver stream full of whistling and clangor and marvelous mad bells surging from somewhere we are not, mingling with the children's voices singing and the sound of wings?⁵⁴

With their religious undertone, these images ("supernatural singing" and "the sound of wings") suggest that radio is far more than a conduit for meteorological or political

⁵⁰ See Duganov's commentary in Khlebnikov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 6, 409.

⁵¹ Khlebnikov, *Collected Works*, vol. 1, 393.

⁵² Khlebnikov, "Radio budushchego," 192.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 192.

⁵⁴ Khlebnikov, *Collected Works*, vol. 1, 393-394.

information. In Khlebnikov's view, broadcasting combines the function of guidebooks and newspapers with the pedagogical role of public schools, universities, and cultural institutions, as well as the spiritual purpose of the church to form a "centralized consciousness" of the people.⁵⁵ Indeed, "Radio of the Future" is one of the strongest expressions of Khlebnikov's vision of a physically and mentally unified space, indebted both to the Silver Age ideal of *sobornost'*—a spiritually bonded ecumenical society—and the communist project of uniting the people around a shared ideology. The radio waves form a new "world soul" capable of uniting listeners through sonic communion in the ether:

В воздухе паутина путей, туча молний, то погасающих, то зажигающихся вновь, переносающихся с одного конца здания на другой [...] Радио решило задачу, которую еще не решил храм как таковой, и сделалось так же необходимым каждому селу, как теперь училище или читальня. Задача приобщения к единой душе человечества, к единой ежесуточной духовной волне, проносающейся над страной каждый день [...] эта задача решена Радио с помощью молнии.⁵⁶

In the air a spider's web of lines, a storm cloud of lightning bolts, now subsiding, now flaring up anew, crisscrossing the building from one end to the other [...]. Radio has solved a problem that the church itself was unable to solve and has thus become as necessary to each settlement as a school is, or a library. The problem of celebrating the communion of humanity's one soul, one daily spiritual wave that washes over the entire country [...] that problem has been solved by Radio using lightning as its tool.⁵⁷

And as the essay's conclusion proclaims: "Radio will weld together the continuous links of the world soul and consolidate humanity" ("Радио скует непрерывные звенья мировой

⁵⁵ In a sense, the radio network can be viewed as another iteration of Khlebnikov's architectural visions that combine edifice and artifice, religious sentiment and modernist traditionalism, what Clare Cavanagh has called "modernist church-building" in "Modernist Church Building: Pound, Khlebnikov, Mandelstam," *Paideuma: A Journal Devoted to Ezra Pound Scholarship* 28 (1999): 149-172.

⁵⁶ Khlebnikov, "Radio budushchego," 191.

⁵⁷ Khlebnikov, *Collected Works*, vol. 1, 392-393.

души и сольет человечество”).⁵⁸

Going further still, Khlebnikov lends radio semi-conscious qualities and personifies it as a “great magician” and an entity that serves as a spiritual rallying point for a nation in revolutionary upheaval. Khlebnikov predicts radio’s essential role not just in human education or political progress, but suggests that it will be to consciousness and thought as power plants are to electricity, warning that even “the slightest disruption of Radio operations would produce a spiritual blackout throughout the entire country, a temporary loss of its consciousness.”⁵⁹

Part poetic reverie, part utopian program, Khlebnikov’s sketch outlines radio’s potential with such imaginative reach that it continues to surface in the work of today’s sound culture and radio art theorists.⁶⁰ What has not been acknowledged, however, is the continuity between this essay and Khlebnikov’s larger poetic aims: those qualities of early wireless sound which fascinate him the most—its instantaneous negation of space, the bypassing of slow interpretation and rational thought, and its affective and emotional intensity—are equally relevant to the poetic theory of his manifestos, as well as to many poetic texts written after this paean to broadcasting. For instance, the idea of a unified humanity is equally often stressed in Khlebnikov’s descriptions of *zaum*: “Zaum language is the embryo of the coming world language. Only it can unite the people.”⁶¹ And, much

⁵⁸ Khlebnikov, “Radio budushchego,” 195.

⁵⁹ Ibid. “[...] малейшая остановка работы Радио вызвала бы духовный обморок всей страны, временную утрату ею сознания.”

⁶⁰ See, for instance, Joe Milutis, *Ether: The Nothing That Connects Everything* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), Allen S. Weiss, *Experimental Sound and Radio* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), and Franco Berardi, *After the Future* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2011).

⁶¹ Khlebnikov, “Nasha osnova,” 175. “Заумный язык есть грядущий мировой язык в зародыше. Только он может соединить людей.”

like *zaum*, the sense of community and mutual understanding that radio is expected to produce will rely not only on conscious and rational thought, but on sounds calibrated to impact the unconscious (we may here again recall Gastev's faith in such telepathic communication as a threat to literature as such). In other words, the modern medium of radio draws on equally archaic, and even primal, roots as Khlebnikov's "incantatory" *zaum* word, which is mirrored by his depiction of broadcast as a "sorcerer" [*charovatel'*]: "The use of beyondsense language in charms and incantations, where it dominates and displaces the language of sense, shows that it has a special power over human consciousness."⁶² Both act through the unconscious, vibrational effects of sound on mind and body. In the present essay, Khlebnikov goes so far as to suggest that radio programs can not only telepathically disseminate images and thoughts, but exert an involuntary kinetic effect through carefully chosen sounds:

Известно, что некоторые звуки, как 'ля' и 'си', поднимают мышечную способность, иногда в шестьдесят четыре раза, сгущая ее на некоторый промежуток времени. В дни обострения труда, летней страды, постройки больших зданий эти звуки будут рассылаться Радио по всей стране, на много раз подымая ее силу.⁶³

It is a known fact that certain notes, such as 'lia' and 'si', increase muscular capacity, sometimes as much as sixty-four times, since they thicken the muscle for a certain length of time. During periods of intense hard work such as summer harvests or during the construction of great buildings, these sounds will be broadcast by Radio over the entire country, increasing its strength many times over.⁶⁴

Although Khlebnikov's prediction—qualified by the pseudoscientific parameter "sixty-four times"—seems outlandish, scholars have convincingly documented that early Soviet

⁶² Ibid., 174. "То, что в заклинаниях, заговорах заумный язык господствует и вытесняет разумный, доказывает, что у него особая власть над сознанием."

⁶³ Khlebnikov, "Radio budushchego," 194.

⁶⁴ Khlebnikov, *Collected Works*, vol. 1, 395.

radio inspired a pervasive interest in sound's psychophysical effects. The sociologist Dmitri Zakharine, for instance, has shown that in early radio broadcasts, as well as in sound film and newsreels, speaker voices were often not chosen at random, or simply transmitted 'as is', but electro-acoustically enhanced to achieve a certain "symbolism of bass-heavy voices." Such voices were seen as suggesting "mass, groundedness, and local ties—a telluric power emanating from the ground."⁶⁵ Even at this early stage, discerning acoustic engineers optimized electronic sound for propaganda purposes, aware of its impact on both mind and body. And recent studies in psychology and physiotherapy suggest a curious correlation—similar to that described by Khlebnikov—between the intensity of musical or verbal stimulation and muscular contractions or the state of the nervous system.⁶⁶

In a further parallel between radio and *zaum*, the instantaneity and omnipresence of radio sound concerns not only the present day, but also the past. Radio—described as a universal storage medium of human data, experience, and feelings in "Radio of the Future"—also implies that all of history and all of space could converge in broadcast's radical "now." This association of radio with the ancient historical past recalls media theorist Marshall McLuhan's assertion that radio "is a profound, archaic force, a time bond with the most ancient past and long-forgotten experience."⁶⁷ Even more evocatively, McLuhan suggests that radio, as a technological memory device, allows us to perceive

⁶⁵ Dmitri Zakharine, unpublished talk entitled "Vocal Cannons-Cannonvoices: The Semantics of Low Voice Frequencies in War und Disaster Reports" (2011).

⁶⁶ See, for instance, Lisa M. Marichal and Molly K. Veen, "The Effect of Verbal Commands on Muscle Performance" (Masters Thesis, Grand Valley State University, 1996) and A. Wigram and L. Weekes, "The Effect of Low Frequency Sound and Music on Muscle Tone and Circulation," *Self and Society: An International Journal for Humanistic Psychology* 1 (1991): 24-29.

⁶⁷ McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 301.

“tradition [in] the sense of a total past as *now*.”⁶⁸ Khlebnikov’s independently developed views echo McLuhan’s ideas, which were inspired by a mythologizing view of sound as capable of uniting and enfolding listeners in a tribal communal consciousness. Khlebnikov, too, sought to unite his interest in ancient forms of culture, such as incantations and spells, with his fascination for radio.

This interest in how sound—especially electronically amplified and transmitted sound—bypasses conscious understanding and appeals to more ancient patterns of experience resembles the idea of “auditory imagination” of T. S. Eliot, another writer famously both captivated by and involved with broadcasting. “What I call the ‘auditory imagination’,” Eliot wrote, “is the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and the end. It works through meanings, certainly, or not without meanings in the ordinary sense, and fuses the old and obliterated and the trite, the current, and the new and surprising, the most ancient and the most civilized mentality.”⁶⁹ Though the product of a different literary tradition, Eliot’s reflections place a similar stress on sound’s atavistic function, on its ability to guide us past the current surface meaning of words to an earlier, more primitive, and universal incantatory function of language.

Despite these parallels between Khlebnikov’s radio fantasy and his poetic theory, scholars have not used Khlebnikov’s “Radio of the Future” to contextualize the intensely aural works written during his last months. The essay is typically read either as part of

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ T. S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism: Studies in the Relation of Criticism to Poetry in England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933), 111.

Khlebnikov's technological and architectural visions, or as an altogether unrelated piece of agitational writing. Thus, Julia Vaingurt suggests that "Radio of the Future" differs drastically from other utopian essays by the poet because it serves to promote the state-run telegraph agency and is marked by an unusual agitational style.⁷⁰ Anindita Banerjee's characterization, by contrast, captures the essay's continuity with similar essays, which combine poetic elements with suggestions for change and are "polymorphous sketches, straddling science fiction, policy initiatives, and architectural projects."⁷¹ There are no indications that the text was in fact written at the request of the ROSTA organization, especially as Khlebnikov was no longer working as a contributing writer, serving instead as a night watchman. Furthermore, not only are other works written at this time, including numerous poems, marked by an "agitational" quality and a clarity quite remote from Khlebnikov's more esoteric *zaum* experiments, but his radio essay also clearly speaks to a broader interest in radio during these months. For instance, the prose fragment "Ah, a mermaid!" ("A, rusalka")—whose title already suggests a highly lyrical and imaginative setting—expresses the same belief in radio's ability to unite humanity: "Thus the spark of thought ended the struggle between the city and the village. And now we are building our community on the laws of sound. The citizens of the residential sails of a sound-city, populated by people of the wave and the whistling of someone's voice, we are flying into universal space" ("Так блеском мысли кончилась борьба города и деревни. И вот мы строим наше общежитие на законах звука. Граждане жилых парусов города-звука,

⁷⁰ Julia Vaingurt, *Wonderlands of the Avant-Garde: Technology and the Arts in Russia of the 1920s* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2013), 125.

⁷¹ See Anindita Banerjee, *We Modern People: Science Fiction and the Making of Russian Modernity* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2012), 80. The fact that the text was indeed written with Khlebnikov's employer in mind is supported by the fact that "ROSTA" is used instead of "radio" in an earlier draft. See Khlebnikov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 6, 195.

населенные людьми волны и свисты чьего-то голоса, несемся мы в мировое пространство”).⁷²

Despite this optimistic and egalitarian vision of radio communication, Khlebnikov’s zeal for radio at times verges on the dystopian. Especially in hindsight, his embrace of radio’s centralizing role and its protean ability to control not only the nation’s thought processes, but also the recipients’ sense of smell and taste, implies a naïve trust in radio’s impartiality. Not surprisingly, scholars have taken Khlebnikov to task for ascribing to radio a disinterested self-sufficiency apart from the exigencies of political power. Julia Vaingurt, for instance, claims that the essay “unwittingly exposes how such vast power over people’s consciousness can be misused, how coveted information can give way to misinformation, manipulation, and indoctrination.”⁷³

Indeed, the essay’s description of radio broadcasting reveals a central ambiguity: on the one hand, the apparatus is depicted as a passive medium that “obeys” the volition of a violinist or a writer. Khlebnikov predicts that poets and musicians, for instance, will be able to freely interact with the medium:

к слову, выношенному в тиши и одиночестве, к его бьющим ключам, причастилась вся страна. Покорнее, чем струны под пальцами скрипача, железные приборы Радио будут говорить и петь, повинуюсь его волевым ударам.⁷⁴

its words, brought forth in silence and solitude, and their welling springs, were shared in communion by the entire country. More obedient than strings beneath a violinist’s hand, the metallic apparatus of Radio will talk and sing, obeying its pulse of volition.⁷⁵

⁷² Khlebnikov, “A, Rusalka!”, in *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 5, 223.

⁷³ Vaingurt, *Wonderlands of the Avant-Garde*, 125.

⁷⁴ Khlebnikov, “Radio budushchego,” 194.

⁷⁵ Khlebnikov, *Collected Works*, vol. 1, 395.

As such an impartial and “obedient” amplifier, radio affords artists a sense of volition that safeguards their creative freedom. It is the poets and musicians themselves who here enchant the country, giving it “the song of the sea and the whistling of the wind” [*dal ei penie moria i svist vetra*].

And yet, the radio is also characterized as an “auto-voice” [*samoglas*], a neologism that suggests an ominously controlling and mechanical voice. For instance, the text compares the main radio tower to an “iron castle” [*zheleznyi zamok*] from which a commander bellows instructions at his iron underlings: “Radio throws the rays of this song to its many metallic singers: sing, iron!”⁷⁶ (“Радио бросило лучи этой песни своим железным певцам: пой, железо!”).⁷⁷ And the image of radio as a great “sorcerer” [*charodei i charovatel'*], able to trick listeners into experiencing sensory hallucinations, connotes deception and trickery.

Despite these contradictions, Khlebnikov—hardly oblivious to the Soviet state’s appetite for propaganda after serving stints at two ROSTA departments and as a Red Army cultural attaché—arguably makes a deliberate choice by situating radio in his own mythopoetic world and bracketing its political role.⁷⁸ Khlebnikov had embraced the popular uprising in 1917, in part because, as Raymond Cooke suggests, the “social and political democratization which the revolution had as its aim mirrored the aesthetic democratization which was associated with the Cubo-Futurist movement.”⁷⁹ But while

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Khlebnikov, “Radio budushchego,” 194.

⁷⁸ A draft of the essay used the word “ROSTA” instead of “radio,” both in the title and throughout the text. Khlebnikov’s replacement also suggests a deliberate move away from the medium’s specific political utility, toward a more abstract and poetically relevant entity.

⁷⁹ Cooke, *Velimir Khlebnikov*, 36.

many of his texts contributed to revolutionary culture, Khlebnikov's writing also retained an ambiguity regarding the state and its authority that made it less suitable for overtly propagandistic purposes (and, in the years after his death, even led to accusations of anti-Soviet sentiments).⁸⁰ We might well say the same of his radio essay, and of related texts touching on the medium. Thus, radio is here not highlighted as a distinctly Soviet achievement, or, in fact, as a technological triumph that emanates from any kind of state power: the "activities of the government" [*dela vlasti*] are one of many transmitted contents. Khlebnikov's lexicon also repeatedly veers into the religious, equivocating radio with a "daily spiritual wave" [*ezhesutochnaia dukhovnaia volna*] washing over the country and describing the future radio performer as giving communion [*prichashchat*]⁸¹—an idea that also recalls the hieratic role of artists Khlebnikov outlines in the essay.

Khlebnikov even envisions a use of radio sound that runs counter to established power relationships, and downplays the medium's centralizing and authoritarian role, a fact that emerges evocatively from an unpublished draft version of his radio essay. Here Khlebnikov proposes adopting auditory stimuli as a freely harmonizing principle that could guide Soviet workers—especially in what he refers to as "higher spheres" of work, presumably the arts and sciences—to equal results without direct coercion and orders:

We must be careful with the word *such and such a decree* [*prikaz takoi-to*]. Because higher forms of work do not comply with commands, and instead the command will bring about an incorrect result from the lower spheres of work. We are witnessing a childish game of commands nowadays. But there is another way. Just as the sounds of one string set ringing another string that is marked by an equal number of vibrations and equally tuned, so the higher working waves of one person can trigger working waves of equal height in his neighbors without a command.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Cooke notes that Soviet critics' attitude toward Khlebnikov shifted between the late 1920s and the early 1930s, the interval that saw the gradual publication of the five-volume *Collected Works*, resulting in accusations of aestheticism. *Ibid.*, 2.

⁸¹ RGALI, fond 157, op. 1, ed. khr. 64, p. 102. Cited in V. P. Grigor'ev, *Budetlianin*, 200.

Here Khlebnikov’s earlier theories about the *zaum* word, which creates mutual understanding through certain sonic vibrations, resurface: the draft passage reveals even more fully that radio sound wields both a neuro-physiological and an intellectual harmonizing effect. This, to be sure, does not excuse Khlebnikov from a certain political naivety. But what I have tried to suggest is that his treatment of wireless sounds—with all the manifold contacts, correspondences, and “tunings” they enable—emphasizes the liberating aspects of sonic communications, while eliding their direct political utility.

Due to his early death, “Radio of the Future” remained Khlebnikov’s only text to overtly discuss broadcasting, and it is all too tempting to speculate about how the introduction of regular broadcasting and artistic programming would have further transformed his poetic theory and practice. Nevertheless, his late verse, and in particular his last long poem “Blue Fetters” (“Sinie okovy,” 1921–22) already reflects the new aurality ushered in by sound media such as radio—and the ensuing need to reach the reader’s ears in a transformed literary idiom.

Wireless Sound in Khlebnikov’s “Blue Fetters”

Khlebnikov wrote numerous long, expansive, and prosodically unconventional poetic works between 1919 and 1922 that implement all manner of *zaum* sounds. Among the last and most significant of these lyrical epics are “Ladimir,” “Blue Fetters,” and “Zangezi,” for which Khlebnikov invented the genre of the “supertale” [*sverkhpovest*].

“Необходимо быть осторожным со словом *приказ такой-то*. Потому что высшие виды труда не подчиняются приказу, и вместо них приказ получает подделку из низшей области труда. Сейчас наблюдается детская игра в приказы. Здесь есть другой путь. Как одна струна своим звучанием вызывает звучание другой, одинакового с ней числа колебаний, одинаково настроенной, так и высокие трудовые волны одного человека своим звучанием могут без приказа вызывать одинаковые по высоте трудовые волны соседей.”

“Zangezi” is particularly telling for how these works explore sound as a formative element: the poem’s prophetic speaker ascends twenty-two planes of human knowledge, each exemplified by a different form of cacophonous, pre-linguistic “language,” such as the onomatopoeic song of birds, the language of the gods, and Khlebnikov’s own *zaum* “star language” [*zvezdnyi iazyk*].

The scholar Vladimir Markov has called these unwieldy examples of the *poema* “encyclopedias” for their effort to encompass a multitude of time zones, geographical coordinates, cultural and linguistic worlds in a roaming odic form.⁸² And Harsha Ram convincingly claims that Khlebnikov’s poetry “can be read as the most ambitious attempt at resuscitating the imperial sublime since the impasse of elegiac romanticism.”⁸³ But the sublime inspiration of Khlebnikov’s poetic personas—their ability to effortlessly “tune in” to diverse points of Russian geography, to vividly combine the real with the imaginary, and to “broadcast” their voice—is equally indebted to the enrapturing qualities of the ether. These poems enact a return to poetry’s historical roots in public oral recitation and chants, but, composed during the peak of Khlebnikov’s fascination with radio and the disembodied voice, they also capture his interest in electronically amplified sounds. Although the word “radio” does not appear in these texts, they echo Khlebnikov’s manifestos through the abundance of concepts from the semantic field of broadcast, such as wave [*volna*], noise [*shum*], wire [*provoloka*], and wireless [*bez provolochek*].

One of the pioneers of literary sound studies, Adelaide Morris, has suggested that

⁸² Vladimir Markov, *The Longer Poems of Velimir Khlebnikov* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962), 195.

⁸³ Harsha Ram, *The Imperial Sublime: A Russian Poetics of Empire* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 233. See also by the same author: “The Poetics of Empire: Velimir Khlebnikov between Empire and Revolution,” in *Social Identities in Revolutionary Russia*, ed. Madhavan Palat (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 209-231.

the modernist epic was generally a noisy, aurally saturated affair that owed much of its resurgence to the growing ubiquity of radio and related sound media. She argues that “the rise, flourishing, and fading of the modernist epic can be calibrated to the rise, dominance, and supersession of acoustical technologies” and notes that the “epic of secondary orality—the modernist epic—engages with the newly energized ear of its audience with a phonotext that is particularly jagged, insistent, and insinuating.”⁸⁴ Morris largely focuses on American Imagist poets such as Ezra Pound and H.D., who were writing during the heyday of Anglo-American radio. But her attempt to devise a descriptive vocabulary for such radio-inspired texts suggests that literary responses to the medium were marked by commonalities that transcend local particularities: writers responded to the novelty of sound regardless of the particular historical shape and uses of early sound media.

Khlebnikov, too, opened his writing to the logic of electronic sound, with broadcast as the dominant influence, because he intuitively understood that it suited his poetic explorations of diffuse, yet connected languages, landscapes, and historical traditions. By absorbing the feel of radio broadcasts and the effects of sound montage into literary texts, his modernist epic attempts to replicate the radical new sense of instantaneity and omnipresence that radio offered.

Unlike Khlebnikov’s other longer works, “Blue Fetters” has rarely been analyzed at length, nor have its aural characteristics been studied. The poem’s biographical subtext is widely known: it pays homage to the family of the merchant Mikhail Siniakov, a patron figure whose five daughters served as free-spirited muses to a whole generation of Russian

⁸⁴ Adelaide Morris, “Sound Technologies and the Modernist Epic: H.D. on the Air,” in *Sound States: Innovative Poetics and Acoustical Technologies* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 34 and 36.

avant-garde poets and artists. From 1909 to 1920, their home in Krasnaia Poliana, near Kharkov, regularly hosted an impressive cross-section of Russian literary circles, including Khlebnikov, Mayakovsky, Pasternak, Nikolai Aseev, and the Burlin brothers; Lilia Brik even referred to it as the place where Russian Futurism was born.⁸⁵ The poem also alludes to a prolonged stay in the Far East by Nikolai Aseev and his wife Oksana Siniakova, one of the five sisters, and was written in March–April 1922, in Moscow, after the couple’s return. Vladimir Markov somewhat overstates the poem’s private subtext by claiming that “the poem should be considered the property of Aseev, for many passages have meaning only to him and his wife’s family.”⁸⁶ Its wide-ranging themes and imagery also reflect Khlebnikov’s own diverse cultural and geographic preoccupations and his wide travels through Russia, the Caucasus, and the Near East in 1916-21. But more importantly, the poem captures the events of the Civil War and celebrates the liberating aspects of the Russian Revolution. Khlebnikov associates the victory over a repressive social order with replacing written, literary language through a sound-based alternative: the poem outlines his vision of a harmonious cosmos based on live, sonic communication across distances.

Throughout “Blue Fetters,” both interpersonal relationships and the workings of the natural world are characterized in distinctly aural terms. The text begins by sonically evoking Khlebnikov’s personal memories of conversations at Krasnaia Poliana: “The blues

⁸⁵ See, for instance, Lilia Brik’s description of the sisters: “Синяковых пять сестер. Каждая из них по-своему красива. Жили они раньше в Харькове, отец у них был черносотенец, а мать человек передовой и безбожница. Дочери бродили по лесу в хитонах, с распущенными волосами и своей независимостью и эксцентричностью смущали всю округу. В их доме родился футуризм. Во всех поочередно был влюблен Хлебников, в Надю – Пастернак, в Марию – Бурлюк, на Оксане женился Асеев.” In Lilia Brik, *Pristrastnye rasskazy* (Nizhnii Novgorod: DEKOM, 2003), 31-32. For more on Khlebnikov’s interactions with the Siniakov sisters and their role in the poem, see L. V. Spesivtseva, “Zhanrovoe svoeobrazie poemy V. Khlebnikova ‘Sinie okovy’,” *Vestnik AGGU* 6 (2005): 281-292.

⁸⁶ Markov, *The Longer Poems of Velimir Khlebnikov*, 194.

in blue caught fly by fly, / Indifferent to it all – Kutia’s voice, // Evening. / Beyond the garden, beyond the street, a murmur to the tune of ‘cha’: / ‘So has the child come flying?’” (“Синие в синем муху за мухой ловили, / Ко всему равнодушны – и голосу Кути, // Вечер. За садом, за улицей, говор на ‘ча’: / ‘Чи чадо сюда прилетело?’”), but also registers his excitement at the return of his close friends: “The bees have woven a wagon! / The swallows sang ‘tsivit’!” (“Пчелы телегу сплели! / Ласточки пели ‘цивить!’”).⁸⁷

Such sound imagery—words that both describe sonorous things and are themselves richly audible—also link the poem’s more private themes (Khlebnikov’s past and present relationships with his friends) to its broader epic aspirations. In the space of a few lines, the text transitions from the hushed sounds of an intimate evening conversation to an auditory vision—a term whose visual genealogy makes it strangely incongruous in this context—of the clamor of liberated nations:

Будет пора, и будет велик
 Голос – моря переплыть
 И зашатать морские полы –
 Красной Поляны
 Лесным гопаком,
 О ком
 Речи несутся от края до края,
 Что брошено ими “у м и”
 Из у м и р а я.
 И эта весть дальше и больше,
 Дальше и дальше,
 Пальцами Польши,
 Черных и белых народов
 Уносит лады

⁸⁷ Velimir Khlebnikov, “Sinie okovy,” *Tvorenniia*, edited by V. P. Grigor'ev and A. E. Parnis (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1986), 363. Compare Khlebnikov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 3, 374-375. For the reading below, I have chosen the text of the 1986 edition by V. P. Grigor'ev and A. E. Parnis, which is based on the handwritten fair copy held at the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI). In comparison to the 2014 edition by R. V. Duganov, which I cite for comparison where applicable, the earlier version retains numerous examples of illogical and ambiguous use of commas, hyphens, and enjambment—deliberate, in my view, given the inherent sonic ambiguity of the poem.

В голубые ряды,
Народов, несущихся в праздничном шуме
Без проволочек и проволочек.⁸⁸

[The time will come and there will be a great / Voice: to swim – through seas / And to shake up the ocean's floors / Of Krasnaia Poliana / In a forest dance, / About which / Talk travels from edge to edge. / That they have taken "umi" / From *umiraia*. / And this news farther and greater, / Farther and farther, / By the fingers of Poland / Of black and of white peoples / Carries harmonies away / Into blue ranges / Of peoples, flying in celebratory noise / Without wires and delays.]

The rapid movements of fingers across white and black keys suggests that these lines are partly anchored in an auditory memory of a piano performance.⁸⁹ This literal reading of hands sliding from edge to edge on the keyboard is deftly overlaid, however, with the meaning of news traveling sonically from one end of the country to the other. The defining event on Khlebnikov's mind, both here and elsewhere in the poem, is the Red Army's victory over the provisional White Army governments in Omsk, Irkutsk, and Vladivostok, which resulted in the execution of General Kolchak. This theme of the Bolsheviks' triumph over their foes clearly emerges from the poem's otherwise associative series of unrelated images, and is linked to its broader vision of liberated, peaceful co-existence. Khlebnikov's interest in the Far East is also motivated by the fact that David Burliuk, Nikolai Aseev, and other Russian futurists lived in the region during the events described.⁹⁰ And with his interest in bridging Slavic and Far Eastern culture, the Red Army revolt in Vladivostok was particularly meaningful for Khlebnikov given the intervention of Japanese military forces. Though he returns to these events later in the poem, they are here

⁸⁸ Grigor'ev, *Budetlianin*, 363-364. See Khlebnikov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 3, 375.

⁸⁹ The Khlebnikov scholar R. V. Duganov suggests that "Polish fingers" are a likely allusion to the pianist N. M. Siniakova-Picheta (1889-1975), one of Boris Pasternak's muses and love interests. See Khlebnikov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 3, 504.

⁹⁰ For an overview of Russian futurism during these historical events, see Nina V. Davitadze, "Futurizm na dal'nem vostokey," *Gumanitarnye Issledovaniia v Vostochnoi Sibiri i na Dal'nem Vostokey* 4 (2009): 82-87.

already encapsulated in a pun: “they have taken “umi” / From *umiraia*.” Extracting the morpheme *umi*—most closely related to the word *um* for “mind” or “intellect”—from the word “umiraia” (“dying,” from *umirat*), suggests immortality and produces the additional sense of “paradise” (Russian *rai*) promised by Communist rule. And *iz umiraia* contains the proleptic echo of a later, more explicit reference to the Japanese support: *prodelki samuraia*.

A further theme goes hand in hand with this imagery of victory and freedom: Khlebnikov’s dream of replacing ossified written language—and the culture of the book as such, as a symbol for a repressive social order—with a new sound-based idiom, the “live word” [*zhivoe slovo*]. Imagining his friends’ gradual journey back to Moscow, Khlebnikov casts their various experiences as ephemeral sound impressions and equates aural transmission with carrying water in one’s palm, metaphorically interweaving sound and water (sky and ocean) in a way that structures the poem throughout:

В ладонях донести, – [...]

Ту синеву залива, что проволокой путей далече

Искала слуха шуму бурь

И взвизгов ласточек полету,

И судей отыскать для вкуса ласточек гнезда морского.

И в ухо всей страны Валдая, –

Где вечером Москва горит сережкой, –

Шепнуть проделки самурая⁹¹

[To deliver in your palms // That blue of the gulf, which, like a wire of paths afar / Sought hearing for the noise of gales / And for the flight of swallows’ shrieks / And to find judges for the taste of swallows of the ocean’s nest. / And into the ear of the whole country of Valdai / Where Moscow glows like an earring in the evening, / To whisper the feats of the Samurai]

A series of natural events are here translated into sound—the “flight of the swallows’ shrieks” and the “noise of gales”—as are numerous historical allusions, such as the

⁹¹ Khlebnikov, “Sinie okovy,” 368. Compare *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 3, 382.

samurai's feats and other figures listed in close proximity to these lines. They themselves demand to be channeled and delivered to the nation's ears. In a way that recalls his radio manifesto, Khlebnikov describes an aural communion through wireless forms of sound and speech that drift across large distances. The poem's speaker conjures a loosely connected sound-montage that reflects the ethnically heterogeneous inhabitants, remote geographic locales and various historical periods of Russia, channeling and returning them into the "country's ear" [*v ukho strany*] as a single wave of sound from the Valdai Hills. In another characteristic feature of the poem, Khlebnikov thus also fuses personal impressions with a public reception, the private with the historical realm.

Khlebnikov favorably compares this kind of public listening within a multi-voiced historical and natural cosmos to the limitations of printed language. Indeed, the book format itself is portrayed as antithetical to lived experience expressed through a "live word" [*zhivoe slovo*]:

Умеем написать слова любые
На кладбище сосновой древесины.
Я верю, многие не струсят
Вдруг написать чернилами чернил
Русалку, божество,
И весь народ, гонимый стражей книг,
Перчаткой белой околоточных.⁹²

[We have learned to write any words / On the cemetery of pine lumber. / I believe that many will not be scared to / Suddenly write with ink of inks / Mermaid, divinity, / The entire nation, hounded by the books' patrol, / As by the white glove of the district policeman.]

Here Khlebnikov depicts the book as a "cemetery of pine lumber," where paper serves as a patient receptacle for dead and senseless language (expressions such as "divinity" or "mermaid"). Worse, paper patiently records reactionary and oppressive ideas that give

⁹² Ibid., 368. Compare *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 3, 383.

books the status of a “guardsman” watching over the nation—an allusion to religious or legal texts. The related metaphor of the “white glove,” another reference to the book, doubles as an allusion to the White Army and heightens Khlebnikov’s association of print culture with conservatism and social injustice. The poem opposes it to a different kind of writing that brings a “living word” into a cosmos animated by sound:

Не в тризне
Сосен и лесов,
Не на потомстве лесопилен
И не на кладбище сосновом бора, –
А в жизни, жизни,
На радуге веселья взора,
На волнах милых голосов
Скоро, споко
Корявый почерк
Начертать
И, крикнув: «Ни черта!» –
В глаза взглянуть городского, –
Свисток в ушах, ведь пишется живое слово,
А с этим ссорится закон
И пятит свой суровый глаз в бока!
Начертана событий азбука –
Живые люди вместо белого листа.⁹³

[Not in the funeral feast / Of pines and woods, / Not in the progeny of sawmills, – /
But in life, life, / In the rainbow of a glance’s joy, / On the waves of pleasant
voices / Quickly, hastily, / To trace / A clumsy script / And, shouting “no way!” – /
To stare into the policeman’s eyes – / A whistling in the ears, for it is the living
word we write, / With this the law disputes / And rolls its strict eyes into the sides!
/ Sketched is the alphabet of events: / Living people instead of a white leaf.]

While this “living word” is uniquely suited for capturing the ephemeral beauty of the world that the poem rhapsodizes, it also implies the potential for dissent and revolutionary upheaval by the masses, as this passage itself suggests. Indeed, lines such as “And, shouting ‘no way!’ – / To stare into the policeman’s eyes –” are reminiscent of some of the agitational verse Khlebnikov wrote in 1921, such as the poem “Toot, scream, ring

⁹³ Ibid., 370. Compare *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 3, 383-384.

out!” (“Trubite, krichite, nesite!”), an incensed outcry about the famine in Russia’s south. There, Khlebnikov uses lines with a similarly violent undertone and likewise highlights the use of sound to physically impact potentially callous listeners: “I know, the skin of your ears is taut like the skin of buffalos, / It can only be moved with the cane. // Scream, scream, raising the tube to your lips!” (“Я знаю, кожа ушей ваших, точно у буйволов мощных, туга, / И ее можно лишь палкой растрогать. // Кричите, кричите, к устам взяв трубу!”).⁹⁴ Yet another example of an image of physically affective sounds is found in the quatrain “Scratch the world’s ear / With a whip of brand-new words” (“Царапай мировой слух / Плеткою свежих слов”).⁹⁵ The two key words *tsarapai* and *pletka* are marked by an onomatopoeic quality reinforced by the subsequent fricatives *zh* and *kh*, suggesting aggression through the semantics as well as phonetics of these lines. The reappearance of these threateningly sonorous intonations in Khlebnikov’s lyrical epic casts further doubt on the assumption that his agitational verse were born of necessity and only a passing preoccupation.

Khlebnikov does not invoke radio directly in the poem; he contrasts the inert and inauthentic book medium primarily with the “temporal dynamism and the spatial diversity” of the living, breathing natural world and a revived folkloric tradition.⁹⁶ Nor does his “living word” refer strictly to articulated speech; it also encompasses the elusive symbolism of flowing rivers, blossoming trees and other signs of natural life: “In the book of noon, just now / A swallow sang ‘tsivit’” (“В книге полдня, сейчас / Ласточка пела

⁹⁴ Khlebnikov “Trubite, krichite, nesite!”, *Tvoreniia*, 155.

⁹⁵ Khlebnikov, “Tsarapai mirovoi slukh,” *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2, 254.

⁹⁶ Cooke, 178.

‘ЦИВИТЬ!’”).⁹⁷ But Khlebnikov’s natural poetic cosmos is also animated by a host of metaphors, which, in sum, point toward electronic transmissions of sounds and speech: the songs of the birds that traverse the countryside, the buzzing of bees, the clouds crossing the skies, the roaring waves of the rivers and oceans. They resemble, for instance, the nature similes Khlebnikov invokes to describe the medium in “Radio of the Future”: “Like the passage of birds in spring, flocks of news from the life of the spirit spread out” (“Похожие на весенний пролет птиц, разносятся стаи вестей из жизни духа”). And their proximity to electronic transmissions is further suggested by the word “wave” [*volna*] and “wave-like”⁹⁸ [*volnuiushchii*], which are used ten times, nearly always in proximity to other sound vocabulary, such as “voice” [*golos*] or “song” [*pesnia*]—themselves used four and three times each—and the sonorous speech of a diverse set of tribes and nationalities. Indeed, these peoples’ liberation from war and oppression itself is encapsulated in a sonic pun that alludes to wireless communications:

И эта весть дальше и больше
 Дальше и дальше,
 Пальцами Польши,
 Черных и белых народов
 Уносит лады
 В голубые ряды,
 Народов, несущихся в праздничном шуме
 Без проволочек и проволочек.⁹⁹

[And this news farther and greater, / Farther and farther, / By the fingers of Poland
 / Of black and of white peoples / Carries harmonies away / Into blue ranges / Of
 peoples, flying in celebratory noise / Without wires and delays.]

These lines connect barbed wire fences or borders (*provoloika*) with the electrical wires or

⁹⁷ Khlebnikov, “Sinie okovy,” 371. Compare *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 3, 385.

⁹⁸ The Russian gerund “volnuiushchii” (from *volnovat'*) has the important secondary meaning of “worrying” or “agitating.”

⁹⁹ Khlebnikov, “Sinie okovy,” 363-364. Compare *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 3, 375.

conduits signified by the Russian word's diminutive form (*provoločka*). Not only are the people no longer physically fenced in; their celebratory sounds are also wireless in the sense of radio speech. The phrase *bez provoloček*, finally, by shifting the accentual stress, means “without delay” and reinforces broadcast's association with instantaneity and simultaneity.

“Blue Fetters” also expresses this radiophonic logic through Khlebnikov's distinctly odic imagery, which adheres to Lomonosov's conception of the ode as the “conjoining of distant ideas” [*sopriazhenie dalekovatykh idei*].¹⁰⁰ Thus, for instance, sound forms an instantaneous bridge between the epic plane of historical events and the resonant body:

Придет пора,
И слухов конница
По мостовой ушей
Несясь, копытом будет цокать.¹⁰¹

[The time will come, / And a cavalry of rumors / Will rush across the pavement of ears / Loudly clattering its hooves.]

In a telegraphically terse style, Khlebnikov here again employs a sonic image to draw together the historical plane—described as the promise of a new era and the coming of a military conflict—and the individual bodies of a listening nation, metonymically depicted as a pavement of ears. The collective's hearing is violently impacted by the news of these historical events—or, more precisely, by noises of these events themselves. A similar passage also endows the “living word” with a stunning effect on listeners that stems not

¹⁰⁰ Iurii Tynianov's formulation, in “Oda kak oratorskii zhanr,” in *Poetika. Istoriia literatury. Kino* (Moscow: Nauka, 1977), 236. Echoing Khlebnikov's affinity for the didactic and odic tone of the eighteenth century, Viktor Shklovsky dubbed him the “Lomonosov of modern Russian literature” (“Ломоносов сегодняшней русской литературы”) in *Gamburgskii schet: stat'i, vospominaniia, esse 1914-1933* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1990), 336.

¹⁰¹ Khlebnikov, “Sinie okovy,” 366. Compare *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 3, 378.

from its ideal meaning content, but from its emotional charge and resulting physical affect: “And spoken words forced their way into their heads, / They are buzzing in the glass of the skull” (“И речи врезались в их головы, / В стакане черепа жужжат”).¹⁰²

Indeed, Khlebnikov’s poem suggests the extent to which such omnipresent and all-pervasive sound can break down all boundaries between our private lives and historical reality. In another passage, it is a listener’s nervously tapping fingers—another allusion to the piano playing of Siniakova-Picheta—that metonymically draw the body into Khlebnikov’s description of an impending military conflict. Precisely what the line suggests—a nervous radio-listener tapping along to the echo of the horses’ hooves?—remains unclear, and the gallop-like rhythm ensures that sound obscures any strictly logical interpretation. But it is once again the aural logic of these lines themselves that drives home Khlebnikov’s point: that the individual body is tied to historical events through the all-pervasiveness of modern (electronic) sounds:

И, выстрелом слов сквозь кольчугу молчания,
Мелькали великие реки,
И бегали пальцы дороги стучания
По черным и белым дощечкам ночей.¹⁰³

[And, like a shot through the chain mail of silence, / Great rivers glimmered, / And fingers ran the knockings of the road / Across the black and white plaques of the nights.]

The river mentioned in this quatrain suggests another key to Khlebnikov’s poem: the connection between moving waters and sonorous speech, as two media carrying messages across large distances. The dual metaphor of bodies of water and the sky, to which the title’s “blue fetters” equally apply, is anchored, for example, in a persistent

¹⁰² Khlebnikov, “Sinie okovy,” 366.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 367. Compare *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 3, 381.

phonetic play on *rech'* (language, speech) and *reka* (river). The text itself—at 636 lines, Khlebnikov’s longest poem—is not subdivided into sections (unlike “Zangezi,” for instance) and features lines of relatively short length, thus resembling an uninterrupted stream or river. The poem also repeatedly describes oceans and rivers with agitated waves, paralleled by a sky in motion, crisscrossed by messages and sound-waves. Extending this analogy, the text can also be seen as a rich “stream” of overlapping sounds in flux. By diverting attention from the text’s graphic layout, Khlebnikov forces readers to attend more closely to the ambiguities of its complex aural orchestration and to make meaning of its montage of disconnected soundbytes.

Indeed, the metric structure and stylistic particulars of the poem underscore the novel effect of a liberated, radiophonic, and sound-based language. Whereas a primarily visual outlook is typically concerned with the logical relationship between things, an acoustic aesthetics reveals illogical links among seemingly unrelated ideas and images. Sounds are rarely ordered and sequential, but vividly overlap and intersect in time. This was especially the case in the early age of electronic sound, where acousmatic listening—exposure to sound without seeing its sources—suddenly placed a far greater interpretive burden on listeners and requiring, to use German radio theorist Rudolf Arnheim’s expression, a “new aural education by wireless.”¹⁰⁴ For Arnheim, radio would require listeners to learn to distinguish between different sounds, such as the hissing of a snake from hot steam; but it also led to the realization that “the word is first revealed as sound, as expression, embedded in a world of expressive natural sounds.”¹⁰⁵ Khlebnikov’s poem embodies this effect by serving up a montage of seemingly unrelated images and thoughts.

¹⁰⁴ Arnheim, *Radio*, 28.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 27-28.

The speaker rapidly transitions between memories, real and imagined scenes, locations both near and far, as well as different historical realities; this ability to “tune in” at will also exemplifies the instantaneity and omnipresence of radio sound.

In Khlebnikov’s “Blue Fetters,” the speed, associativeness, and emotional intensity of radio sound are also emphasized through the spare and idiosyncratic use of punctuation and a general de-emphasis of logical syntactic connections between words. The text proceeds jumpily, from one image to another, often transitioning by way of sonic puns, consonance, and assonance, and faint aural echoes, rather than logical links. The relatively short length of lines, the pronounced use of enjambment to unexpectedly emphasize just one or two words, and the frequent exclamation marks further heighten this effect.

Moreover, the poem’s aural ambiguity is also due to its highly variable rhythm, which is even freer and more diverse than in Khlebnikov’s earlier works. According to Kruchenykh’s apt characterization, “his rhythm is unexpected and asymmetric, by contrast to the rhythm of the classics, where poems resemble a row of matchboxes. Through the fragmentariness and asymmetry of his rhythm Khlebnikov stands out even among the Futurists.”¹⁰⁶ And Duganov characterizes it by analogy to Khlebnikov’s “hypertale” (*sverkh-povest'*) as a “‘hyper-free’ polymetric dolnik.”¹⁰⁷ Coupled with Khlebnikov’s unorthodox use of punctuation (for example, the repeated use of dashes, as though to introduce heterogeneous speech, but without indication of any speaker), this rhythmic

¹⁰⁶ Aleksei Kruchenykh, “Velimir Khlebnikov,” in *K istorii russkogo futurizma: vospominaniia i dokumenty*, ed. Nina Gur’ianova (Moscow: Gileia, 2006), 33-34. “[Р]итмический рисунок Хлебникова неожидан и асимметричен, в противоположность ритмическому рисунку классиков, где стихи напоминают ряд спичечных коробок. Ломаностью и асимметрией ритма Хлебников выделяется даже среди футуристов.”

¹⁰⁷ R. V. Duganov, commentary in Khlebnikov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 3, 501. “По аналогии с хлебниковским жанром ‘сверхповести’ можно говорить о ‘сверхсвободном’ полиметрическом дольнике.”

idiosyncrasy creates the sense that nearly each line carries a different intonation, furthering the illusion of different, unrelated voices brought together within the fabric of the poem. Indeed, Khlebnikov's poem also reveals its epic tendency through an attempt to open the text up to the voices of others and the sounds and slogans of the street. This is done, for instance, by suddenly interjecting rhythmic, repetitive slogans without a clear origin, such as: "The devil's hidden it in his buttonhole? / We'll get it out! We'll get it out! / We'll fish it out! We'll fish it out!" ("Чорт его спрятал в петлицу? / ВЫЛОВИМ! ВЫЛОВИМ! / Выудим! Выудим!").¹⁰⁸ Elsewhere, such 'other' speech is highlighted by quotation marks or even intrudes into a single short line: "Laughter:—ai! ai!—hunting for pesky pushy wasps" ("Смех:—ай! ай!—ЛОВ НАГЛЫХ НАЗОЙЛИВЫХ ОС").¹⁰⁹

The sonic complexity of "Blue Fetters" can also be described using Garrett Stewart's concepts of the "phonotext" and "evocalization," a poetic strategy that readjusts the categories of orality versus literacy to reveal that printed texts, too, can be oriented toward being heard, not just read.¹¹⁰ Beyond the graphic line of text, Stewart situates the "phonotext," a stream of articulated sound that is implied in any syllabic or phonemic reading of a text: below (or above) the textual surface, a series of secondary articulatory possibilities emerge by way of phono-semantic drifts, slippages and dislocations, readings across word boundaries, unintended secondary meanings, homographs and homophones, and similar play on words. As Stewart explains, "the phonotext has precisely that degree of independence from the scriptive aspect of writing which allows for the kinetic, wavering

¹⁰⁸ Khlebnikov, "Sinie okovy," 366.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 374.

¹¹⁰ Garrett Stewart, *Reading Voices: Literature and the Phonotext* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 26.

tensions of phonemic reading—especially in a language of such orthographic irregularities as English.”¹¹¹ Whether the implied reader reads out loud or silently is of little importance. For Stewart, even silent reading can stimulate the speech apparatus: “the ‘inner’ articulation—or ‘endophony’—involved in silent reading not only actuates the whole range of phonemic differentials but latently engages the somatic or muscular activity whose acoustic result phonetics is designed to chart.”¹¹²

While the phonotext is not an achievement of modernist writing alone, it offers a new approach to Khlebnikov’s mature work, especially given the implied discourse of electronic sound reproduction and distribution that I have documented. Khlebnikov’s penchant for anagrams, homonymic puns, and related word games has often been noted. His interpreters have not pointed out, however, that these elements are not playful ornamentation but a deliberate attempt to shift the reader’s focus from the eye to the ear: by forcing a phonetic reading that disregards lexical boundaries and line divisions, this concentrated sonic repertory destabilizes and undermines the written and printed text. Short of abandoning written poetry altogether, Khlebnikov attempts to maximize its potential for a non-linear, auditory perception. Stewart’s phonotext helps explain the particularly sonorous dynamics of Khlebnikov’s verse, which not only make abundant use of rhyme (with various degrees of exactitude), alliteration, assonance, and consonance, but also of the more powerful and deep-reaching “cross-lexical slippages” that Stewart describes. In “Blue Fetters,” the title itself reveals this overarching poetic device: the words “Sinie okovy” contain a reference to the Siniakov sisters (“Siniakovy”); but just a slight adjustment of stress produces an easily understandable neologism with the meaning

¹¹¹ Ibid., 28.

¹¹² Ibid., 7.

of “blue-eyed ones” (“sin'eOkovye,” compare the Russian word “sineOkii”).¹¹³

A similarly dense “phonotext” runs through nearly the entire poem, undermining signification and directly addressing the ear. At times, this disconnect between sound and meaning is overtly announced: “What thoughtful bird / Will retreat from the meaning of lines / Reading these sudden lines: / The fall’s blue and you in Vladivostok, / Where the horse of nights the ridges of mountains” (“Какая вдумчивая птица / Пред смыслом строк отступить на шаг, / Прочтя нечаянные строки: / Осенняя синь и вы в Владивостоке, / Где конь ночей отроги гор” (sin' i vy/sinevy, Vladivostoke/nochei **otrogi**)).¹¹⁴ Because of the poem’s general tendency to elide causal links and punctuation marks, even segments that are not strictly speaking puns are prone to such phonetic “blurring.” For instance, the second line of this couplet, ostensibly a relative clause describing the city of Vladivostok, offers the reader few logical reasons to read the words separately, instead promoting novel, phonetically motivated agglutinations that transcend lexical and syntactical boundaries: *konnochei otrogigor*. Likewise, the above-cited echo that connects *iz umiraia* with *samuraia* across many pages builds a meaningful connection that is based in sound and requires careful scanning back and forth across the poem’s phonotext.

It is a truism, of course, that poetry often privileges sonic experimentation, producing forms of assonance, alliteration, and paranomasia that are both intended and unintended; in Khlebnikov’s longer poems, however, this effect achieves a pervasiveness

¹¹³ Robin Milner-Gulland suggests that Khlebnikov also signals the bifurcated meaning of *okovy* (“fetters”) and *ochi* (“eyes,” singular *oko*) by using noticeably larger letters for the “oko” of the title in the manuscript. While the title’s formatting remains the sole visual clue in the poem, it is worth remembering that Khlebnikov is also attentive to how graphic notation draws out sonic ambiguities. Milner-Gulland, “Khlebnikov’s eye,” 214.

¹¹⁴ Khlebnikov, “Sinie okovy,” 381.

emulated by few of his contemporaries. And the way in which this abundance of sound serves as an arbiter of meaning in this poem, rather than as an illustration or ornamentation, also supports my media-historical reading of these works. Khlebnikov's return to poetry's origins in the audible word was driven by his fascination with electronic sounds, which are both disembodied yet distinctly affect both mind and body.

While he did not personally interact with sound media and his literary practice remained tied to written texts, Khlebnikov intuited ways to inscribe the new aurality into his texts and envisions interacting with an audience on the level of sound. And he foresaw radio's potential to reconfigure the relationship between poet and audience, individual and nation, through waves of sound and in an interactive network. Khlebnikov's lack of publishing opportunities in the late 1910s and early 1920s is surely an important impulse for his figurative "raising of the volume." Khlebnikov's personal longing to be widely received—if not in print, then as actual sonic emissions—also motivates his prediction of radio's significance for the literary word in "Radio of the Future": "And the entire country partakes of the word born out in silence and solitude, of its gushing springs"¹¹⁵ ("И к слову, выношенному в тиши и одиночестве, к его бьющим ключам, причастилась вся страна").¹¹⁶

In this sense, Khlebnikov's late work presents another opportunity for revising the received notion of the poet as an "alchemist" or "mathematician" of the word, turned inward and away from historical reality, and fundamentally unable to make himself heard. Viktor Shklovsky, for instance, framed the idea that Khlebnikov might never reach a wider

¹¹⁵ Khlebnikov, "Radio of the Future," 395.

¹¹⁶ Khlebnikov, "Radio budushchego," 194.

readership in a sound metaphor: “The reader may perhaps never hear him.”¹¹⁷ This myth is reasserted by a recent scholar, who downplays the epic qualities of “Blue Fetters,” calling the poem one of Khlebnikov’s most lyrical works and noting that it exemplifies him as the “master of tenderness, whispers, and moist sounds” (“мастер нежности, шепота и влажных звуков”) as which his contemporaries regarded him.¹¹⁸ But despite the poem’s undeniably lyrical tone, its telegraphic, terse, yet emotionally charged idiom also records the clamor of the Civil War, as well as the sounds of Soviet *agitprop* that preoccupied him in his work for ROSTA. The poem’s unruly, revolutionary gestures, its call to abolish the written letter of reactionary laws, and its overarching faith of uniting mankind through a new social order, draw Khlebnikov’s poetic persona far outside his private orbit and show its proximity to other socially conscious writing of the period, such as Aleksandr Blok’s response to the October Revolution, the long poem “The Twelve” (“Dvenadtsat’,” 1918). However naïve Khlebnikov’s socio-political enthusiasm, it far transcends the mere desire to “demonstrate the tremendous, hitherto untapped generative resources of the (Russian) language,” as Janecek summarizes one overarching goal of the poet’s work.¹¹⁹

None of Khlebnikov’s contemporaries directly continued the sonorous poetics he outlines in his later works, which centered around both the concept and the sounds of wireless communication. Ironically, the reception of these works itself was delayed by several years: the essay “Radio of the Future” was first published in 1927; “Blue Fetters” was printed only in 1928. Nevertheless, in the 1920s the desire to transform print culture in

¹¹⁷ Shklovskii, *Gamburgskii schet*, 337. “Читатель, может быть, его никогда не услышит.”

¹¹⁸ The characterization of Khlebnikov’s poetic style is drawn from a passage in the memoirs of Maria Siniakova, one of the five sisters. Cited in Spesivtseva, 283.

¹¹⁹ Janecek, *Zaum*, 151.

light of a radical new aurality, and to endow written language with a similar effect of speed and emotional immediacy, was in the air. In the following chapter, I examine how Khlebnikov's fellow futurist poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, encouraged by an even greater exposure to and interaction with radio, turned sound as aural and kinetic experience—rather than metaphor, embellishment, or illustration—into a constitutive element of his literary output.

Chapter 2

Vladimir Mayakovsky as “Radio Agitator”

Vladimir Mayakovsky was always a loud figure. Physically, the poet was tall, imposing, unruly, and endowed with an unusually sonorous voice.¹ Metaphorically, these qualities bolstered the Soviet narrative of the poet as a voicer of grievances for the marginalized and oppressed, and as the sonic culmination of the Russian revolutionary movement.² Even before serving as the mouthpiece of the Revolution, Mayakovsky’s work showed a sensitivity to sound that set it apart from the more syncretic depictions of urban life encountered in most avant-garde writing. Mayakovsky frequently singles out the sonic aspects of technological modernity, as in the poem “Ballyhoos, noises and roars” (“Shumiki, shumy i shumishchi, 1913”): “Through the echoes of cities noises are carried / on the whispers of soles and the thunders of wheels” (“По эхам городов проносятся / шумы / на шепоте подошв и на громах колес”).³ And, throughout the 1910s and 1920s, he repeatedly frames his impressions of the city through auditory details, such as during his

¹ In his comprehensive biography of the poet, Bengt Jangfeldt relates an episode that suggests Mayakovsky’s fascination with the effect of his own voice even as a child: “He recited both well and expressively. To exercise his voice he used to creep inside the large wine amphora which lay on its side on the ground and recite poems to Olga, who stood outside playing the part of the public.” *Mayakovsky: A Biography* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 4-5.

² A number of Russian declamation and public speech theorists treated the socio-economic liberation of the lower class in terms of its ability to publicly voice its needs and concerns. See, for instance, a speech held by Education Commissar Anatol Lunacharsky at the opening ceremony of the Institute of the Living Word (Institut zhivogo slova), which describes its purpose—above all, to teach the proletariat to speak well publicly—as the culmination of a process that began with the introduction of open court [*glasnyi sud*] in 1864. In *Zapiski instituta zhivogo slova* (Petrograd: Narodnyi komissariat po prosveshcheniiu, 1919).

³ Vladimir Maiakovskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v trinadtsadi tomakh* (Moscow: Gos. Izd. Khudozhestvennoi Literatury, 1955-1961), vol. 1, 54. Unless otherwise noted, all translations in this chapter are my own.

1925 visit to New York, where he treats urban noise as material that demands to be structured meaningfully: “The sound of American cities is an unorganized, random noise, an accumulation of noises, a roaring, and not an organized motif.”⁴

After the October Revolution, Mayakovsky embarked on a strenuous career of public performances at political meetings, on the Soviet stage, and on live radio, in addition to occasional readings in recording studios. His spontaneous appearances at political protests, too, such as a manifestation against Curzon’s ultimatum of May 8, 1923, were widely noted. A number of Soviet journalists—including Mikhail Bulgakov, writing for the émigré newspaper *Nakanune*—captured the mesmerizing qualities of Mayakovsky’s speech, amplified by the microphone; their descriptions exemplify how his oratorical prowess was extolled during his lifetime, and presage its even greater posthumous mythologization: “He recited his poem ‘The Commune Shall Not Be Under the Entente!’ with a forceful, powerful voice that was heard throughout the entire square”⁵ and “Mayakovsky, having opened his monstrous square mouth, boomed over the crowd with his cracked bass voice.”⁶ The film director Vsevolod Pudovkin later recounted that Mayakovsky himself felt a profound creative and emotional charge during such public appearances: “Once he told me about the feelings he experienced while declaiming his poems in the years of the Revolution on the square, speaking from the balcony of *Mossovet* in front of the enormous gathered crowd. . . There is only one case, he said, in which I

⁴ Ibid., vol. 12, 479. “Шум американских городов – это неорганизованный, случайный шум, нагромождение шумов, рев, а не организованный мотив.”

⁵ “Сильным, мощным голосом, раздававшимся во всю площадь, он прочел свое стихотворение ‘Коммуне не быть под Антантой’” From a report in *Pravda* on May 13, 1923. V. Katanian, *Maiakovskii: khronika zhizni i deiatel'nosti* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1985), 252.

⁶ “Маяковский, раскрыв свой чудовищный квадратный рот, бухал над толпой надтреснутым басом.” From Mikhail Bulgakov’s report for *Nakanune* on May 19, 1923. See Katanian, *Maiakovskii*, 252.

experience such a forceful agitation, if not more, and that is when I get to speak on the radio.... Mayakovsky was not talking about his understanding of radio's significance, but about the direct agitation and uplift that he felt at the sight of a working microphone."⁷ The very prospect of using his voice, amplified by the microphone, led to a powerful affective and creative charge.

Beginning in 1925, Mayakovsky became known for his broadcast performances, which made him one of the few iconic "electrified" voices of radio's first decade.⁸ In the second half of the 1920s, he gave dozens of live readings for broadcast programs such as the "Worker's Radio Newspaper" ("Rabochaia radiogazeta") and "Radio Evening" ("Radiovecher"), in addition to live reports from official Soviet celebrations.⁹

Mayakovsky's association with the medium became so strong that in 1939 fellow Futurist poet Nikolai Aseev would cast his superdimensional literary status in the image of a radio tower: "That enormous, living, walking radio tower, which transmitted to the entire world

⁷ Vsevolod Pudovkin, "Rabota aktera," in *Izbrannye stat'i* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1955), 151: "Однажды он рассказывал мне об ощущениях, которые он испытывал, декламируя свои стихи в революционные годы на площади с балкона Моссовета перед огромной собравшейся толпой... Только в одном случае, говорил он, испытываю я такой же силы волнение, если не большее, это тогда, когда мне приходится говорить по радио... Маяковский говорил не о понимании значения радио, а о непосредственном волнении и подъеме, которое вызывал в нем направленный на него работающий микрофон."

⁸ The most detailed descriptions of Mayakovsky's performance tours are the recollections of his "manager" Pavel Lavut. See P. I. Lavut, *Maiakovskii edet po Soiuzu: vospominaniia* (Moscow: Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1978), 143: "В Киеве Владимир Владимирович побывал на строительстве кинофабрики, встретился с рабочими [...], читал стихи по радио. Он придавал большое значение выступлениям по радио и говорил, что радио с лихвой заменит малотиражные издания его книг." Regarding the larger cultural resonance, for instance, see Viktor Shklovskii's film script for *The Sleeping Beauty* (1930), the first feature film by the Vasiliev brothers, in which the last sequence envisions revolutionary art forms, including "poets whose faces are familiar to everybody reciting their poems on radio," apparently a reference to Mayakovsky: the poet's words, progressing outwardly in an ever-increasing font, conclude the final sequence of the film, likewise suggesting Mayakovsky's connection with radio aesthetics.

⁹ Aleksandr Sherel', *Audiokul'tura XX veka: istoriia, esteticheskie zakonomernosti, osobennosti vliianiia na auditoriiu: ocherki* (Moscow: Progress-Traditsiia, 2004), 274.

the strength and power, glory and joy of the Soviet Union, its government, and its united communist party.”¹⁰ As Aseev’s gloss suggests, many of Mayakovsky’s radio performances, like most of his writing by the mid-1920s, was Soviet *agitprop*, a form of spectacle that combines agitation and propaganda, and presents political information with an entertaining twist.¹¹ And yet, as this chapter seeks to show, a fascination with the burgeoning broadcast medium—and the forms of radiating and pulsating sound it engendered—shaped Mayakovsky’s thinking about lyric texts from the late 1910s onward. Moreover, as a metaphor for the poet figure and his relationship with the world (Aseev’s “radio tower”), Mayakovsky’s literary response to radio exceeded its proscribed political function, serving forms of poetic self-fashioning that sharply contrast with the ideals of a self-effacing proletarian literature.

In particular, radio motivated Mayakovsky’s marginalization of the role of the printed text, while elevating the spoken, sounded word to a key element of his poetic work. Anchored in his personal mythology of the poet as a radio station—a conductor of the nation as sound—Mayakovsky expected radio to change the Soviet literary process itself: he viewed poetry as something not just meant to be read in public, but as an electro-acoustic medium governed by its own laws and standards of transmission. The envisioned

¹⁰ Nikolai Aseev, “Sila Maiakovskogo,” RGALI fond 28, opis 1, edinitsa khraneniia 111. “Эта огромная, живая, ходячая радиобашня, возвещавшая всему миру силу и мощь, славу и радость Советского Союза, его правительства, его единой, ведущей человечество коммунистической партии.” Aseev’s own poetry, too, contains reflections about radio, as in “Radionews” (“Radiovest’,” 1921).

¹¹ An example of a purely agitational radio-text is “Radio-October: a revolutionary grotesque in three sketches” (“Radio-Oktiabr’: revoliutsionnyi grotesk v trekh kartinakh”), jointly authored with Osip Brik in 1926, which depicts a radio tower in an unidentified Western country coming to life on the anniversary of the October Revolution; it inspires the imprisoned workers to revolt by praising the accomplishments of the Soviet State. Beginning in the mid-1920s, Mayakovsky also wrote occasional propagandistic poems for the Radio Center, such as “Verify, comrade, the truthfulness of facts” (“Prover’, tovarishch, pravil’nost’ fakta,” 1929). A cycle of poems devoted to the State Peasant Lottery Loan was aired in 1925 (Sherel’, *Audiokul’tura XX veka*, 273-274).

Soviet “radio poet”—by whom he ultimately means himself—simultaneously receives and emits sound signals, synthesizing the voices of the people, tuning in to their “social commission” [*sotsial'nyi zakaz*], and re-channeling it at the Soviet masses in the form of optimized sounds. At their most ambitious, Mayakovsky’s verse sustain the illusion that they require not close reading, but close listening, and that the sonic affect of his words is equal to, if not greater than, their hermeneutic meaning content.

Radio as a Literary Theme (1915–1925)

Radio first appears in Mayakovsky’s verse years before his personal involvement with the medium. In “The Flying Proletarian” (“Letaiushchii proletarii,” 1915) he introduces the motif in a speculative vein, celebrating radio as an integral element of the future culture of Soviet everyday life (*byt*). The poem conjures an impending military confrontation between the Western capitalist aggressor and Soviet forces, which emerge victorious. Completely displaced into the air, this war is fought using noxious gases and airplanes and with radio at its center: radio broadcasts direct the fighting masses and recommend themselves for the instantaneity with which they transmit both information and calls for action. The words on air are themselves akin to weapons: “phrases / now / on the radio waves” (“фразы / сразу / по радиоволнам”).¹² Ultimately, the Soviets are buoyed to victory over the Western bourgeoisie by loudspeaker voices that form an impenetrable “radio fortress” [*radiofort*], a mighty voice that cannot be bound or captured: “Swaying evenly, / loudspeakers / blew out the voices / of the best / orators of the Comintern. /

¹² Maiakovskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 6, 318. G. S. Bershadsky’s jacket design for the 1925 volume of poems by the same name, pictured following page 321, captures the centrality of radio by depicting the Shukhov radio tower in the center of a squadron of airplanes.

Negative! / No way to either tie / or capture it – / radio” (“Качаясь мерно, / громкоговорители / раздували голоса / лучших / ораторов Коминтерна. / Ничего! / Ни связать, / ни забрать его – / радио”).¹³

The poem goes on to sketch a futuristic Moscow after the Soviet victory, where daily life revolves around a central radio station. An architecturally integrated radio alarm structures time by awakening citizens and exhorting them to go to sleep. To save time, they listen to “radio books” (“чтоб не пропал / ни единый миг, / радио / выбубнивает / страницы книг”¹⁴), and radio orchestrates evening entertainments in a way that resembles the earlier military operation: “right / in the sky / they are arranging dances [...] And on the radio / a storm of quadrilles. / All around / millions / of flying tables” (“прямо / по небу / разводят танцы [...] А в радио / буря кадрили. / Вокруг / миллионы / летающих столиков”).¹⁵ The fighting has been replaced by an evening of dances, and the warplanes by café tables, but Mayakovsky’s sense of radio’s supernatural power, and its central role in organizing human life, is captured even by this relatively innocuous image.

A dictionary of Mayakovsky’s poetic neologisms and nonce words lists eighteen radio-inspired terms, such as “radio book” [*radioknizhka*], “radio gossip” [*radiospletni*], “radio ear” [*radioukho*], and “radio fee dodger” [*radiozaiats*].¹⁶ A poem written for the one-hundredth issue of the “radio-newspaper” [*radiogazeta*], broadcast in May 1925, adds

¹³ Ibid., 336.

¹⁴ Ibid., 353.

¹⁵ Ibid., 357.

¹⁶ V. N. Valavin, *Slovotvorchestvo Maiakovskogo: Opyt slovaria okkazonalizmov. Okolo 3500 slov* (Moscow: Azbukovnik, 2010), 433-435. Not all were, strictly speaking, coined by Mayakovsky. “Radiozaiats” in particular (formed by analogy to *ekhat' zaitsem*, or fair dodging in public transport) became widely used, both humorously and in earnest, in general newspapers and Soviet ham radio journals, to describe someone using a self-made, unregistered detector to avoid the tax for listening to radio. See, for instance, Valentin Kataev’s “Radiofel’eton” in the first issue of the ROSTA “radio newspaper” (November 23, 1924), in Goriaeva, *Velikaia kniga dnia*, 207.

another—“radio agitator” [*radio-agitator*]—and encapsulates the key themes Mayakovsky associated with the medium by the mid-decade:

Преград / человечеству нет. / И то, / что – казалось – утопия, / в пустяк / из
нескольких лет / по миру шагает, / топая. / Была ль / небывалей мечта! /
Сказать, / так развесили б уши! / Как можно в Москве / читать, / а из
Архангельска / слушать! / А нынче / от вечных ночей / до стран, / где солнце
без тени, / в мильон / ушей слухачей / влезают / слова по антенне! / Сегодня
нет / ни времен, ни пространств, / не то что / людской голос – / передадим / за
сотню стран / и как / шевелится волос! / А, может быть, / и такое / мы /
услышим по воздуху / скоро: / рабочий / Америки и Чухломы / спюются
/ одним хором. / Чтоб шли / скорей / века без оков, / чтоб близилась / эта дата
– / бубни / миллионом / своих языков, / радио-агитатор!¹⁷

[There are no limits / to humanity. / And that / which seemed a utopia, / in a trifle /
of a few years / stalks the earth, / stomping. / Was ever there / a more unheard-of
dream! / If one had said it / how they would have listened with wide eyes! / How
can you read / in Moscow / and listen / from Arkhangel'sk! / And now / from
eternal night / to countries / where the sun has no shadow, / words climb / into the
ears of millions of listeners / along the antenna! / Today there is / neither time, nor
space, / it is not / a human voice – / that we transmit / across a hundred countries /
and how our hairs shake! / And perhaps / we will hear something like this / through
the air / soon: / workers / from America and Chukhloma / unite / in a unison choir. /
So that the years / may pass quickly / without restraints, / so that the date / may
grow ever nearer – / boom on / in your millions / of languages, / radio agitator!]

This short *agitprop* text—on its face a catchy advertisement of radio’s political usefulness—captures some ideas key to Mayakovsky’s own understanding of the medium. Foremost among them is the avant-garde’s ideal of augmenting or enhancing the body by technological means, here suggested by the anthropomorphic depiction of radio as a marching tower (an image that also surfaces in “Paris: Chats with the Eiffel Tower,” for instance, on which more below¹⁸). Moreover, Mayakovsky’s description of broadcast implies that future Soviet workers will no longer listen to a “human voice” [*liudskoi golos*], but an amalgam fused in the abstract figure of the “radio agitator.” Yet the text

¹⁷ Maiakovskii, “Radio-Agitator,” in *PSS*, vol. 13, 262-263.

¹⁸ “Parizh (Razgovorchiki s Eifelovoi bashnei),” in *PSS*, vol. 4, 75-78.

already implies a dilemma that complicated Mayakovsky's relationship with Soviet critics and common listeners alike: despite his dutiful use of the first person plural, the "radio agitator"—"stalking the world / stomping"—is a recognizable embodiment of his own loud, physically imposing, and maximalist self. Indeed, although many of the poems I read below, particularly "My May" and "Bastards!," are presented as a non-individualistic conduits for a multitude of voices, listeners criticized Mayakovsky's "voice united in song" ("голосом / в пение сдруженным") as a single voice claiming to speak for the masses, rather than a unified representation of many voices.

"Radio Agitator" succinctly captures the novelty of listening to disembodied language—sounds and words without a clear source or visual correlate—and cheers the immediate reception afforded by such electrified speech: after 1922, Mayakovsky frequently uses the image of words "climbing" or "jumping in" [*vlezaiut slova*] to describe how radio speech bypasses the much slower assimilation of printed words. This implies an automated process that contrasts with the volitional nature of deciphering texts. Speech in its audible form is also presented as richer, more varied, and efficient through added emotional and intonational hues. And furthermore, the poem suggests that radio words also wield a physical effect that somatically impacts the human body.

Mayakovsky's hyperbolic exclamation that "today there is / neither time / nor space" reflects the trope of omnipresence and simultaneity that broadcast entailed in the 1920s: its power to address all listeners at once, without delay, and regardless of physical distances. Given the poem's explicit *agitprop* purpose, the lack of space and time also speak to radio's ability to synchronize the divergent cultural and technological chronologies of Russian city and village, to close the gap of Russian "backwardness," and

to instantly bring a vast and varied Soviet populace “up to speed” with the Bolsheviks’ aims.

The sonic and stylistic particulars of radio broadcasts also increasingly insinuated themselves into Mayakovsky’s poems, while he simultaneously reflected on wireless communications in essays and articles written after 1923. One of the earliest texts to convey the illusion of radiophonic sound in print is “My May” (“Moi mai,” 1922).¹⁹ In this minimalistic ode to Soviet workers gathering on May Day, Mayakovsky vividly shifts the focus of the public celebrations to the realm of sound:

Всем,
на улицы вышедшим,
тело машиной измаяв, –
всем,
молящим о празднике
спинам, землю натруженным, –
Первое мая!
Первый из маев
встретим, товарищи,
голосом, в пение сдруженным [...]²⁰

[To all, / who have come out into the streets, / their body worn out by the machine, – /
To all, / saying their holiday prayers / with spines tired by the weight of the soil, – /
The first of May! / The first of Mays / let us meet, comrades, / with a voice united in
song ...]

Mayakovsky highlights the connection between this oratory and radio broadcasting by deliberately appropriating the dative plural, which reverberates throughout the poem (“To all, / ... / to all”). This direct citation of the iconic opening call of early Soviet radio

¹⁹ Written in 1922, the poem belongs to a group of texts clearly influenced by early radio transmissions. It became part of Mayakovsky’s radio repertoire in 1925, when he read it during a live performance on May 2 that was broadcast to Moscow stations. See Katanian, *Maiakovskii*, 298. “My May” was also one of thirteen poems selected for inclusion in the collection *Dlia golosa* (*For the Voice*, Berlin, 1923). With its striking use of side tabs, El Lissitzky’s design alludes to the telephone book, but the poems’ association with dynamic, audible speech is also stressed through Lissitzky’s innovative typographic design.

²⁰ *Maiakovskii*, *PSS*, vol. 4, 30-31.

broadcasts—“To All! To All! To All! (“Vsem! Vsem! Vsem!”)—is a stylistic device Mayakovsky frequently uses in his “radiophonic” poems written after 1922. The phrase originates from Lenin’s titles for early broadcasts of Soviet resolutions, such as “Radio to all” (1917) or “Radiogram to all, all” (1918).²¹ The text is furthermore divided into three stanzas, each of which begins with the word *vsem*, which turns the poem into an elaborate response to this rhetorical formula that answers the questions: to whom exactly is radio addressed, and on behalf of whom does it speak? Repeated six times—and echoed by the liberal use of the dative plural, as well as related sounds (*vstretim*, *sdruzhennym*) throughout—the plosive *vsem* (“to all”) iconically encapsulates the poem’s content: the gradual intensification of voice, the inclusion of ever more speakers, and its intrusion into increasingly larger spaces. Read in sequence, as a low consonantal rumble broken up only by the repetitive vowel *e*, the word *vsem* itself relays the sound of radio’s early static-laden transmissions, which is also mirrored by the concentration of sibilants (*vyshedshim / telo mashinnoi // moliashchim*).

By the poem’s third stanza, the lyrical speaker has pulled a striking array of voices into this imaginary May Day broadcast: worker, peasant, sailor, and soldier. And the exuberant paean to a world in vernal rejuvenation doubles as a rhetorical demonstration of radio’s power to reach into the far corners of the Soviet Union: “To all / houses, / squares, / streets, / gripped by icy winter, – / to all the hunger-starved / steppes, / woods, / fields” (“Всем / домам, / площадям, / улицам, / сжатым ледяной зимою, – / всем /

²¹ “Radio vsem. Vsem polkovym, divizionnym, korpusnym...” (1917) and “Radiogramma vsem, vsem” (1918). See V. I. Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow: Gosizdat, 1958), vol. 35, 81 and 322. Variations of this title quickly became connected with radio, as can be gleaned from the titles of popular radio journals such as *Radio vsem* (*Radio for all*). See also Shamshur’s account, which suggests that Stalin, too, was present at the birth of this important radio transmission, in Shamshur, *Lenin i razvitie radio*, 28-29, and the reproduction of a painting depicting this scene.

изглоданным голодом / степям, / лесам, / нивам”). This clipped sequence of dative forms gives the impression of a rapid scanning across space, as though the speaker has become giddy with the communicative reach of his radio voice. The concluding image is one of sound begetting more sound; the speaker sets the whole world ringing: “Green of the fields, sing! / Howl of the sirens, rise high! / I am iron – / this May is mine! / I am the earth – / this is my May!” (“Зелень полей, пой! / Вой гудков, вздымай! / Я железо – / этот май мой! / Я земля – / это мой май!”).²² Verging on the hypnotic, Mayakovsky’s radio voice speaks to everyone and on everyone’s behalf, lending voice to the world itself, amplifying some sounds and drowning out others: “Keep still, wailing of rifles! / Become silent, machine gun’s barking!” (“Молкнь, винтовки вой! / Тихнь, пулемета лай!”).²³

With its dense phonetic orchestration, its syncopated rhythmic structure, and its de-emphasis of logical conjunctions and narrative elements, the poem enacts, rather than describes its subject: the power of radio sound. It embodies the early realization that radio fosters a strong psychological bond among physically disparate listeners by its very form, rather than through the contents it transmits. Consequently, Mayakovsky’s text—even on the written page—works through affect and emphasis, rather than semantic decoding, which is made largely irrelevant by its intuitively graspable meaning, consisting of declarations and imperatives. Despite its complexity, the sound structure of this poem is also far clearer than that of comparable poems written before radio’s advent, such as “Our March” (“Nash Marsh,” 1917), in which the ear still “stumbles” over *zaum*-like echoes in

²² A look at Mayakovsky’s editing process reveals that he changed the initial image of the “steam of sirens” (“Пар гудков вздымай”), which combines visual and auditory sensations, into a purely sound-based reflection of the factory setting: “Howl of the sirens, rise high!” (“Вой гудков, вздымай!”). The added comma and exclamation mark, not present in the line’s earlier version, underscore Mayakovsky’s own role in eliciting and amplifying these sounds. See *PSS*, vol. 4, 272.

²³ *Ibid.*, 31.

lines such as “Dnei byk peg. / Medlenna let arba. / Nash bog beg” (“The bull of days is spotted. / The cart of years slow. / Our god is the run.”).²⁴ By contrast, the text of “May May” deliberately reduces the reflexive distance between performer and listener; it places words directly into the latter’s mouth and conjures a form of collective chant that is also meant to be *heard* collectively: “this May is mine! [...] this is my May!” (“этот май мой! [...] это мой май!”).²⁵

Composed in a similar style, and also included in *For the Voice*, the poem “Bastards!” (“Svolochi!”) illustrates how these texts’ intentional effect of “unliterariness” is a question not of style, but of mediation. What matters for Mayakovsky is not how a poem is *written*, but how it is transmitted, which the poem both describes—through frequent commands such as “listen!” [*slushajte!* and *poslushajte!*—and iconically enacts, through the aural sensations encoded in the text, with its many sibilants, hissing sounds, and fricative consonant clusters. In this embittered and vicious rant, Mayakovsky again lends his voice to the multitude as he blames the international bourgeoisie for its complicity in the Russian famine of 1921–22. As the rather unliterary title suggests, all artifice is meant to disappear behind the illusion of spontaneous, raw, and indignant speech. This tension between text and sound is already explicit in the opening lines:

Гвоздимые строками,
стойте немь!
Слушайте этот волчий вой,
еле прикидывающийся поэмой!
Дайте сюда
самого жирного,
самого плешивого!
За шиворот!
Ткну в отчет Помгола.

²⁴ Ibid., vol. 2, 7.

²⁵ Ibid., vol. 4, 30.

Смотри!
Видишь –
за цифрой голой...²⁶

[Hammered by lines, / stand mute! / Listen to this wolf's howl, / barely pretending to be a poem! / Hand me / the fattest, / the most bald-headed! / By the scruff of the neck! / I'll stick him into the Pomgol²⁷ report. / Look here! / You see – / behind the naked digit...]

Like “My May,” it was written in 1922, the year in which written radiotelegraph communiqués were first replaced by the wireless transmission of voices via the radio telephone. Public radio broadcasts still occurred sporadically, on an experimental basis and at short range; telegrams remained the standard of international communications, but were increasingly transmitted wirelessly.²⁸ The language of newspapers and telegraphy, with their graphic “lines” [*stroki*] and “milestone characters” [*tsifry verstovye*], is fundamental to this poem; but Mayakovsky’s interest in surmounting them through a wireless voice able to reach far and wide is already evident. Even as early as 1922, he contrasts the powerful Soviet radio, which frantically transmits Russian calls for help abroad, with the sluggish response of the international capitalist press. The almost spiritistic voice he evokes—one voice speaking for many, and many speaking with just one voice—is juxtaposed to the artifice and moral deficiency of printed words of any sort: newspaper reports, briefs, or parliamentary protocols. This voice does not correspond to any aesthetic categories: Mayakovsky’s radio text verges on abandoning all pretense to premeditated literariness and reveals pure sonic affect: screams, howling, roaring.

«Хлеба!

²⁶ Maiakovskii, “Svolochi!,” in *PSS*, vol. 4, 14.

²⁷ The Pomgol Central Commission, created in 1921 to coordinate relief work during the 1921 Russian famine. The acronym of stands for “Pomoshch golodaiushchim” or “Relief for the Starving.”

²⁸ See the short genealogy of Soviet broadcast in Lovell, *Russia in the Microphone Age*, 14-22.

Хлебушка!
Хлебца!»
Радио ревет за все границы.
И в ответ
За нелепицей нелепица
Сыплется в газетные страницы.

[“Bread! / Some bread! / Bread!” / Radio howls across all borders. / And in return / absurdity after absurdity / pours onto the newspaper pages.]

The poem presents caricature-like synopses of news updates from the West, followed by fierce rebuttals by Mayakovsky, who talks himself into an accusatory, even violent frenzy punctuated by the words “May you be damned!” (“Будьте прокляты!”). In this text, too, the volume metaphorically rises and the poem culminates in the dative plural. However, with its aggressive tone, the radio voice now projects a sense of exclusion rather than inclusion; “To all!” has become “At you! At you! At you! / These words here! / Write down the Volga on the bourgeoisie’s bill / using milestone digits / that barely fit!” (“Вам! Вам! Вам! / Эти слова вот! / Цифрами верстовыми, / вмещающимися едва, / запишите Волгу буржуазии в счет!”).²⁹ Like the enormous “milestone digits” [*tsifry verstovye*] that spell out the number of famine victims, too large for the bill Mayakovsky imagines writing the bourgeoisie, his enraged words—on a mandate from the silent Soviet citizens whose suffering he vents—are too densely affective for the genre of lyric poetry and “barely fit” the written text, too. Accordingly, the poem is patterned on an increasing excess of sound, with an abundant use of assonance and alliteration, unusual for Mayakovsky, that suggests a kind of phonetic violence: a sound that aims to set his Soviet listeners on edge and that serves his agitational goals in an almost militarizing fashion.

²⁹ PSS, vol. 4, 19.

Transcending Writing: The Poet as Radio Tower

The long poem “The Fifth International” (“Piatyi international,” 1922–23) is Mayakovsky’s clearest articulation of how broadcasting and radio sound changed both his poetic persona and his writing style. As its title suggests, this work boldly erects a poetic alternative to Lenin’s Third International, the worldwide communist umbrella organization Comintern, founded in 1919. Mayakovsky had made a similar gesture in his provocative “IV International,” a long poetic fragment completed in 1922 that called for a “third revolution of the spirit” (“третья революция / духа”).³⁰ Both works reveal the poet’s apprehensions about the course taken by the Bolshevik government, and especially its leaders’ cultural policies. Mayakovsky had fervently dedicated his poetic talent to the communist cause in 1917; yet in the first year of the New Economic Policy he sensed an increasingly philistine climate that contradicted his vision of an aesthetic rupture with the past. Even more alarmingly, as Bengt Jangfeldt notes, by 1921 it had become clear that the Bolsheviks strove for total control in literature and the arts, and that many of their leaders viewed futurism with hostility.³¹ That same year, the state publisher Gosizdat refused to publish both Mayakovsky’s *Mystery-Bouffe* [*Misteriia-Buff*] and his proletarian epic “150,000,000”—dismissed by Lenin as an insincere attempt at authorial self-effacement in the name of the masses³²—and an opinion piece in *Pravda* popularized the slogan “Down with Mayakovskery!” (“Doloi maiakovshchinu!”), despite the fact that Mayakovsky’s

³⁰ *PSS*, vol. 4, 104.

³¹ Jangfeldt, *Mayakovsky*, 160.

³² Lenin was famously suspicious of the Russian Futurists and chastized Anatoly Lunacharsky for allowing the publication of *150,000,000*, which he considered to be “rubbish, stupid, utter stupidity and pretentiousness” (“вздор, глупо, махровая глупость и претенциозность”). *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 52, 179. While this particular comment was not made public until 1957, Lenin’s disdain for Mayakovsky’s work was well-known and shaped his Soviet reception during the 1920s.

public readings were generally well received. These events paved the way for a prolonged campaign in the second half of the 1920s by the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP), who were eager to portray Mayakovsky and fellow members of the avant-garde association Left Front of Art (*Levyi front iskusstv*, known as LEF) as “fellow travelers” inimical to their brand of proletarian realism.³³

In response to such conflicts, “The Fifth International” sets out to escape literary writing altogether, defiantly side-stepping such tiresome Soviet polemics about stylistics by replacing the written word with a radiophonic poetics. Though we now read it on the pages of the *Collected Works*, Mayakovsky’s poem was, like most of his poetry by 1922–23, intended for a live reception that would have sonically exemplified his rhetorical flight from the literary establishment.³⁴ So convinced was Mayakovsky of having reformed literature and joined “the ranks of Edison and Einstein,”³⁵ that he intended to send the poem to Albert Einstein with a wireless note reading: “Greetings to the science of the future from the art of the future.”³⁶

³³ For a useful overview of some of the criticisms of Mayakovsky and his ideological maneuvering in the 1920s, see Victor Erlich, “End Game: Mayakovsky and Others,” in *Modernism and Revolution: Russian Literature in Transition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 255-272.

³⁴ The poem was first performed on October 3, 1922 at the Moscow Conservatory. I use the word “rhetorical” because Mayakovsky also continued, of course, to seek out publishers for his work. As Jangfeldt points out, he decided to “make himself independent of the state cultural bureaucracy and seek other ways of publishing his work,” searching for potential publishers both in Western Europe and in Russia’s Far East. See Jangfeldt, 187.

³⁵ Maiakovskii, “Piatyi international,” in *PSS*, vol. 4, 108: “Я статью хочу / в ряды Эдисонам.”

³⁶ Roman Jakobson, *My Futurist Years*, compiled and edited by Bengt Jangfeldt and Stephen Rudy (New York: Marsilio Publishers, 1992), 77. Jakobson did not recall whether the telegram was sent. It is also worth noting that Mayakovsky became fascinated with Einstein’s theory of relativity while writing “The Fifth International,” as Roman Jakobson recalled in 1931: “Maiakovskij made me repeat several times my somewhat confused remarks on the general theory of relativity [...] The idea of the liberation of energy, the problem of the time dimension, and the idea that movement at the speed of light may actually be a reverse movement in time—all of these things fascinated Maiakovskij.” See Roman Jakobson, “On a Generation That Squandered Its Poets,” in

In a Promethean feat inspired by analogous Soviet achievements in the arts and technology, the lyrical speaker—here especially closely identified with Mayakovsky’s bold authorial persona—transforms himself into a living, super-human radio tower. He physically twists and winds his neck to gradually grow taller, a process prompted by the need to “gather one’s wits,” a saying whose Russian equivalent involves pulling oneself by the ear: “Rise / and mentally pull yourself by the ears” (“Вставши / мысленно себя вытягивай за уши”).³⁷ As the title hints, this central image alludes to Tatlin’s “Monument to the Third International” (and perhaps to the Shukhov radio tower built in 1922, too).³⁸ Mayakovsky depicts himself as rising into the sky until he surveys the Soviet state, noting its many improvements, but continuing onward by repeating the command “twist!” [*vinti!*]. He sees important European landmarks, the distant United States, and lingers on the roundness of the earth while continuing onward into the cosmic darkness of outer space.³⁹

Language in Literature, ed. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 285.

³⁷ PSS, vol. 4, 109.

³⁸ The poem can be read as engaging with numerous contemporary proposals for a genuinely Soviet literary and visual aesthetics, and with various attempts to fuse aesthetics, technology, and Soviet ideology, such as Tatlin’s tower (“Monument to the Third International,” 1919–20, see figure 2.1). Tatlin’s model for an enormous tower of twisted steel envisions a telegraph and radio station at the very top; its resemblance to early radio towers, such as the famous Shukhov tower, is clear. Tatlin’s sketch inspired another model that Mayakovsky may have had in mind: Naum Gabo’s “Project for a Radio Station” (1921), whose base alludes to the Eiffel Tower – at the time the international symbol of radio communication *par excellence* (see figure 2.2). Gabo’s project went even further, featuring elements of electric circuitry and a large conic loudspeaker facing into the sky above. Gustav Klutssis’ famous designs and models for radio kiosks (1922) also gesture towards a fusion of man and machine (see figure 2.3).

³⁹ This upward movement bears comparison with Harsha Ram’s description of the Russian Imperial ode, in which the “disorder of lyric afflatus is resolved in a compensatory and transformative identification with imperial power. The uplifted poet, slave to his vision, becomes Russia’s heraldic eagle.” In Mayakovsky’s reinterpretation of this trope, the transformation serves both to liberate the poet from vision and, as I argue below, to escape his artistic entanglement with the state. See Ram, 65.

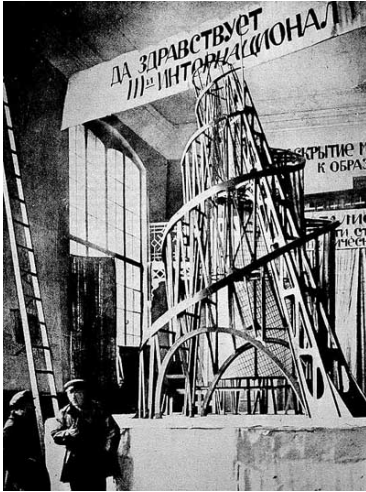


Figure 2.1

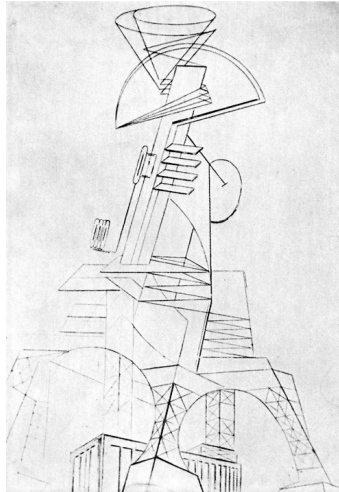


Figure 2.2

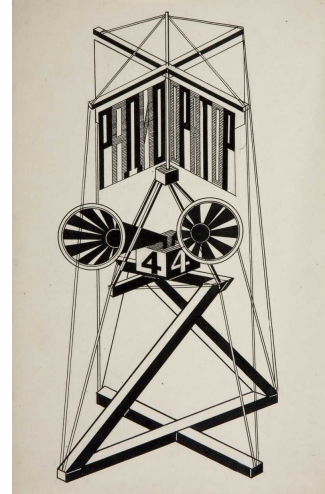


Figure 2.3

This astonishing feat is not only a physiological transformation in space, but also a form of poetic time travel. In addition to observing present-day Soviet life, Mayakovsky metaphorically sees (or, rather, hears) far ahead into the future: he describes the *dacha* colony of Pushkino as seen in 1925–30, surveys Moscow in the 1940–50s, and speeds along to the mid-twenty-first century, where he witnesses an achieved communist society. As Jurij Murašov has pointed out in his analysis of the poem, both Mayakovsky’s physical extension and this peculiar form of “time travel” are enabled by the medium of sound, which dominates the sensory registers to which the poem appeals.⁴⁰ Indeed, once Mayakovsky grows too tall to see the earth, he proceeds by heeding sonic rather than visual stimuli, as suggested by these lushly onomatopoeic lines:

Туманна земля.
Только шумами дальними ухо лижет,
Голоса в единое шумливо смеля.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Jurij Murašov, “Das elektrifizierte Wort. Das Radio in der sowjetischen Literatur und Kultur der 20er und 30er Jahre,” in *Die Musen der Macht: Medien in der sowjetischen Kultur der 20er und 30er Jahre*, eds. Jurij Murašov and Georg Witte (München: Fink, 2003), 92-93.

⁴¹ PSS, vol. 4, 116.

[The earth is hazy. / It licks the ear only with distant noises, / Noisily grinding voices into one.]

Suspended in cosmic darkness, he fully cedes his sense of vision to that of audition. In lieu of sight, the ear becomes a hypertrophied sensory organ, a quasi-functional device that can be detached from the body and used as an instrument:

Штопором развинчивается напрягшееся ухо.
Могу сверлить им
или
на бутыль нацелиться слухом
и ухом откупоривать бутылки.

Винты еще!⁴²

[The strained ear can be unscrewed like a corkscrew. / I can drill with it / or / take aim at a bottle with my hearing / and uncork bottles with my ear. // Keep twisting!]

Hearing itself, hyperbolically described as a twisting and drilling motion, becomes the impetus and the means for the poet's continued metaphorical expansion into space. But importantly, this unusually perceptive hearing also lends the poet access to passing time: freed from visual detritus, Mayakovsky appreciates the resonant air as a medium of time travel, resonant with the future and the past alike: "The air / flutters with basses / of the past's voices" ("Воздух / голосом прошлого / ветрится басов").⁴³ Given this sensitivity to sounds, the poet must fine-tune his sonic receptors, a process phonetically rendered in this passage:

Тихо до жути.
Хоть ухо выколи.
Но уши слушали.
Уши привыкли.⁴⁴

⁴² Ibid., 117.

⁴³ Ibid., 113.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 118.

[It's devastatingly quiet. / You might as well poke your ear out. / But the ears listened. / The ears got used to it.]

In strikingly loose accentual verse, Mayakovsky alternates dark and light vowels, especially *u* and *i*, and the number of hissing consonants increases in proportion to the decreasing length of the lines, resulting in maximum sonic intensity. This effect is furthered by the repetition of identical or similar phonemes in the confined poetic space: *-ikho* and *ukho*, *-oli* and *-ali*, as well as inversions of similar phonemes: *khot' ukho*. Words are also repeated across morphological boundaries and enjambment, creating an even stronger echo effect: “*Tikho do zhuti / khot'.*” Another device in Mayakovsky's sonic repertory is the extraction of short words from longer ones: in this case, the singular and plural forms of the word for “ear” (*ukho*, *ushi*) emerge from semantically related longer words: *slukhom* (“using one's hearing”) and *slushali* (“they heard”). Such devices—vivid examples of Garrett Stewart's “phonotext” discussed in the previous chapter—serve as graphemic illustrations of the in-depth listening activity of the “telescopic ear”:

Сперва не разбирал и разницу нот.
(Это всего-то отвинтившись версты на три!)
Разве выделишь,
если кто кого ругнет
особенно громко по общеизвестной матери.
А теперь
не то что мухин полет различают уши –
слышу
биенье пульса на каждой лапке мушьею.
[...]
Слышу
каким-то телескопическим ухом⁴⁵

[At first I even failed to decipher the difference between notes / (Having only twisted myself three versts away!) / But who's to say / if that's someone telling someone off / especially loudly. / And now / my ears don't just distinguish a fly in flight – / I hear / the pulse beating on every little fly's paw // I hear / with some

⁴⁵ Ibid.

kind of telescopic ear]

Having adjusted and tuned his ears, Mayakovsky finds that he has become a radio station, simultaneously serving as receiver, transmitter, and amplifier of radiowaves, and is now caught in an aural crossfire of signals from Moscow to New York:

Воздух слышу, –
расходятся волны его,
груз фраз на спину взвалив.
Перекидываются словомолниево
Москва
и Гудзонов залив.
Москва.
«Всем! Всем! Всем!
Да здоровствует коммунистическая партия!
[...]
Ловлю долетающее сюда извне.
В окружающее вросся.
Долетит –
и я начинаю звенеть и звенеть
антеннами глаза
глотки,
носа.

Сегодня я добился своего. Во вселенной совершилось наиневроятнейшее превращение.

Пространств мировых одоления ради,
охвата ради веков дистанций
я сделался вроде
огромнейшей радиостанции.⁴⁶

[I hear the air, / its waves disperse, / having shouldered the weight of words. /
A word-lightning-like exchange between / Moscow / and the Hudson Bay. /
Moscow. / “To all! To all! To All!” / Long live the Communist Party! // I pick up
that which reaches me from outside / Having grown into my surroundings. / It wafts
in – / and I begin to ring and ring / with the antennas of the eye / throat, / nose.

Today I had my own way. The universe witnessed a most unlikely transformation.

For the sake of conquering the world’s spaces, / to encompass centuries distances / I
turned myself into something like / a most enormous radio station.]

⁴⁶ Ibid., 120.

While Mayakovsky initially struggles against the evaporation of his physical shape (“Titanically / I / fought against the loss / of our customary / solid body”⁴⁷), his transformation into purely sonic radiophonic being requires the permutation of his bodily parts: half matter, half spirit, the body assumes the qualities of ether. Here Mayakovsky echoes an idea common in the early radio age: that broadcast makes the body disappear in the disorienting effects of a voice divorced from its physical and visual source.⁴⁸

Describing a similar effect utilized in early German radio plays, Michael P. Ryan notes: “Surrounded by sound and still blind, we float through the ether—suspended in space we experience what everybody experiences in outer space, namely, disembodiment.”⁴⁹ By the same token, however, the poem celebrates the creation of a sonically amplified radio body, constituted by sound waves and uniquely suited to Mayakovsky’s role as a cosmic radio station that receives and transmits an endless stream of signals. One might well see this “radio body” as corresponding to Mayakovsky’s understanding of the Soviet body politic. As Clare Cavanagh aptly asserts regarding the poem “150,000,000” (1920), Mayakovsky “emulates [Walt] Whitman’s feat in creating a poetic body designed to incorporate a young and growing state” and locates “the juncture where the poet’s form fuses with the body politic.”⁵⁰ In “The Fifth International,” Mayakovsky’s oversized body does not encompass the masses physically, but by receiving and sending sonic signals from the revolutionary

⁴⁷ Ibid., 117.

⁴⁸ Murašov also notes that the correlation between the recuperation of orality and a technological process of disembodiment is typical for the Soviet avant-garde of the early 1920s. See Murašov, “Das elektrifizierte Wort,” 92.

⁴⁹ Michael P. Ryan, “Fritz Lang’s Radio Aesthetic: M. Eine Stadt sucht einen Mörder,” *German Studies Review* 2 (2013): 267.

⁵⁰ Clare Cavanagh, “Whitman, Mayakovsky, and the Body Politic,” in *Rereading Russian Poetry*, ed. Stephanie Sandler (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 205.

struggle of the Soviet people—although, as we will see below, his posture of selflessly envoicing the international worker must be viewed with some suspicion.

As Mayakovsky ascends into space, the solid matter composing his body becomes elastic, expansive, and even porous⁵¹ and is increasingly pervaded by air and sound: “I strained my substance so much / that the wind / freely / whistled through it” (“Я так натянул мою материю / что ветром / свободно / насквозь свистело”).⁵² Sound studies pioneer Douglas Kahn has theorized such elasticity as an essential quality of sound, noting, for instance, how bodies are distended for slapstick effect in Walt Disney cartoons, along with their corresponding sound effects. Mayakovsky’s stretched “radio body” implies tautness and sensitivity, but also suggests adaptability. It is an image both humble and bombastic: no longer needed by the Revolution, Mayakovsky has dissolved into space. And yet, by transcending the written text and embracing sound, he represents himself as fused with the cosmic expanse and as the world’s hypersensitive inner nervous center: “I pick up what reaches me from the outside / Having grown into my surroundings. / It wafts in – / and I begin to ring and ring / with the antennas of the eye / throat, / nose.” (“Ловлю долетающее сюда извне. / В окружающее вросся. / Долетит – / и я начинаю зневеть и звенеть / антеннами глаза, / глотки, / носа”).⁵³

This line suggests a further characteristic of the radio body: its various functions have been colonized by hearing, which leads to a disorienting conflation of different sensory registers. No doubt, visual and tactile cues continue to play a role in

⁵¹ Douglas Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999), 150.

⁵² Maiakovskii, *PSS*, vol. 4, 117. This image, too, alludes to the latticed constructions of both the Tatlin and Shukhov towers.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 120.

Mayakovsky's radio sensorium, such as when he teases individual words from the cacophonous cosmic soundscape: "A real cacophony! / But here / against this background I / began to feel some little letters. / I hear the air, / its waves disperse, / having shouldered the weight of words" ("Настоящая какофония! / Но вот / на этом фоне я / жесткие, / как пуговицы, / стал нащупывать какие-то буквы. / Воздух слышу, – / расходятся волны его, груз фраз на спину взвалив"⁵⁴). But his sense of hearing is now the poet's primary way of relating to the world, and it even becomes ascribed to other bodily parts, such as the "antennas of the eye, / throat / nose."

Mayakovsky's radio body gives him a unique vantage point: as in "Radio Agitator," he claims to transcend time and space by attending to the immediacy of sound: "For the sake of conquering the world's spaces, / to encompass the distances of centuries / I turned myself into something like / a most enormous radio station" ("Пространств мировых одоления ради, / охвата ради веков дистанций / я сделался вроде / огромнейшей радиостанции"). Indeed, Mayakovsky represents his poetic word as a hinge between present and future constituted through sound: the Soviet advance toward full communist society is hastened by his hypertrophied sense of hearing, which receives the sounds of the victorious future and attempts to embody them in the present moment.

This struggle to collapse the boundary between now and the future is characteristic of the "presentist" streak of Mayakovsky's futurist stance. The historian François Hartog has noted that futurism and presentism were closely entwined early on: "The *Futurist Manifesto* showed [...] how futurism was also (already) a presentism. When Marinetti declared: 'Time and Space died yesterday. We are *already* living in a world of the

⁵⁴ Ibid., 119.

absolute, since we have *already* created eternal, omnipresent speed,' the present became 'futurized,' or equally, there was already nothing but the present. Speed transformed the present into eternity [...]."⁵⁵ In "The Fifth International" Mayakovsky associates this awareness of the future within the present moment with the instantaneous experience of radio sound, which not only marks the passing of time, but serves as a privileged conduit from the present to the future. This grasp of time and space as experienced through sound is demonstrated by the following passage:

Хоть руками щупай в 22 измерения.
Нет краев пространству,
времени конца нет.
Так рисуют футуристы едущее или идущее:
неизвестно,
что вещь,
что след,
сразу видишь вещь из прошедшего в грядущее.
Ничего не режут времени ножи.⁵⁶

[You might as well grope with your hands in 22 dimensions. / There are no bounds to space, / no end to time. / This is how futurists draw something driving or walking: / it is unclear / what is the thing / and what its consequence, / you immediately see the thing from the past into the future. / Time's knives do not cut anything.]

By their very nature, optic impressions are perceived in sequence and framed by our field of vision, giving the illusion of static, physically bounded objects. By contrast, sonic experience is less clearly structured: sounds typically overlap in time and their contours blend together. As an illustration, sound tends to blur the distinction between thing and consequence, cause and effect: it is essentially fleeting, transitioning from past to future, and cannot be captured the way a still image can; sound is flux and temporality itself. By

⁵⁵ François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 108.

⁵⁶ Maiakovskii, *PSS*, vol. 4, 116.

closely associating his poetry with this deep metaphysical experience of radio sound—understood as the very heart of time and space—the text makes the bombastically Mayakovskian claim that other contemporary attempts to capture the truth via artistic, scientific, and spiritual endeavors are irrelevant. Underscoring this point, the first part of the poem ends with a sarcastic litany of various rationalizations for Mayakovsky’s self-stylization as a radio poet. As his derisive reactions show, none of these discourses do justice to his radically new poetic practice:

С течением времени с земли стали замечать мое сооружение. Земля ошеломилась. Пошли целить телескопы. Книга за книгой, за статьей статья. Политехнический музей взрывался непрекращающимися диспутами. Я хватал на лету радио важнейших мнений. Сводка:

Те, кто не видят дальше аршина,
просто не верят:
«Какая такая машина??»
Поэты утверждают:
«Новый выпуск «истов»,
просто направление такое
новое, —
унанимистов».

[As time passed, the earth began to take note of my contraption. The earth was dumbstruck. They set off aiming their telescopes. One book after another, article by article. The Polytechnic Museum exploded with endless disputes. On the fly I picked up radio signals of the most important opinions. A report:

Those who see no further than an *arshin* / simply don’t believe it: / “What sort of machine??” / The poets maintain: / “A new installment of ‘-ists’,” / just some new tendency, / the unanimists.”]

Notably, the first explanation cited is an aesthetic one, which implies that Mayakovsky is simply following the latest avant-garde tendency. Yet as he states in the poem’s prologue, he aims to transcend the bounds of literary style altogether, by replacing “wreaths of alliterations” [*venchiki alliteratsii*] and “poetic stilts” [*poeticheskie khoduli*] with a maximally simplified idiom: “I / only allow / poetry / one form: / the

shortness, / and exactitude of mathematical formulas” (“Я / поэзии / одну разрешаю форму: / краткость, / точность математических формул”).⁵⁷

By giving voice to the Russian mystical and religious tradition, he then dismisses the idea that his transformation is a metaphor for spiritual omnipotence:

Мистики пишут:
«Логос.
Это всемогущество. От господа бога-с».

[The mystics write: / “Logos. / This is omnipotence. From the Lord God.”]

Next, citing the marxist literary critic Petr S. Kogan (1872–1932), a frequent opponent in literary polemics who faulted Mayakovsky’s poetry for its lack of sincerity and dubious “revolutionary” pathos, he deflects potential accusations of self-promotion related to his maximalist rhetoric:

П. С. Коган:
«Ну, что вы, право,
это
просто
символизируется посмертная слава».

[P. S. Kogan: / “Well, now, really, / this / simply / symbolizes postmortal fame.”]

Finally, Marxist critics and politicians offer their own explanation, according to which Mayakovsky’s transfiguration exemplifies the newly-found powers of the working class:

Марксисты всесторонне обсудили диво.
Решили:
«Это
олицетворенная мощь коллектива».
А. В. Луначарский:
«Это он о космосе!»⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Ibid., 108.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 120-121.

[The Marxists discussed the marvel at length. / They decided: / “This / is the personified might of the collective.” / A. V. Lunacharsky: / “He’s talking about space!”]

Mayakovsky’s summary dismissal of these aesthetic, religious, socio-economic, as well as political, explications of his “radiofication” stems from his epistemology, which holds that sound is truthful and authentic, whereas visual information—and, by extension, all written language—is an abstraction. As these reactions to the poem are largely written and printed (“One book after another, article by article” by writers “who see no further than an *arshin*” because they do not *listen*), they fail to grasp the radical nature of Mayakovsky’s transformation. And yet, although Mayakovsky seeks to selflessly hasten a new communist order by relaying the future as sound, his use of radio to stress his individual voice—and the role of his own privileged hearing—compounds, rather than resolves his tensions with the literary establishment, and only deepens the contrast between the poet’s personal voice and proletarian literature’s aim of anonymously speaking for the masses.

Indeed, “The Fifth International” is hardly a paean to the Soviet worker’s state and its technological achievements; nor does its representation of the poet figure abandon individualism in the way the Left Front of Art aspired to. It achieves nothing like the self-effacing aural montage of Khlebnikov’s late texts, for instance; nor are the masses given a voice in any notable way. For a self-avowed proletarian poet, both Mayakovsky’s radio poems and his post-1925 live performances played fast and loose with accepted norms of individualism in Soviet writing. Jurij Murašov suggests in passing that the tension between personal voice and a polyphony of the masses is limited to Mayakovsky’s written works, and was resolved when he began to perform

on the radio; but this thought ignores Mayakovsky's general trajectory of antagonism toward Soviet cultural policy and his consistently imperious self image.⁵⁹ As a contemporary account of the poet's debut radio reading suggests (on May 2, 1925, in a live broadcast of the first May Day Parade to be celebrated on the airwaves), a sense of personal aggrandizement accompanied these readings as well: "He entered the studio and stood at the control panel. 'So, are there many listeners?' he asked, pointing his cane at the microphone. 'The entire world.' 'Well, that's all I need,' Mayakovsky said. [...] When the 'microphone on' signal flashed, he approached and announced: 'Mayakovsky speaking!' and began to read new poems."⁶⁰ By implication, even granting some retrospective embellishment by an admiring contemporary, such self-posturing casts doubt on the speaker of Mayakovsky's radio poems. In the final result, works such as "My May" project a personal voice that contradicts the idealized dissolution of the poet's self in a collective voicing of workers' concerns: "I am a worker – this May is mine! / I am a peasant – / this is my May!" ("Я рабочий — / этот май мой! / Я крестьянин — / это мой май").⁶¹

In "The Fifth International," Mayakovsky openly addresses, but likewise fails to resolve this tension between his role as a self-less "conduit" for Soviet voices and the supposed self-centeredness of his writing.⁶² The prose interlude between parts one and two

⁵⁹ Murašov, 95-96.

⁶⁰ Ivan Rakhillo, *Serebrianyi pereulok* (Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii, 1974), 345-346. "Вошел в студию. Остановился у пульта. – А много там слушателей? – спросил, показывая палкой на микрофон. – Весь мир. – А мне больше и не надо, – заявил Маяковский. – [...] И когда вспыхнул сигнал 'Микрофон включен!' – подошел и объявил: – Говорит Маяковский! – и начал читать новые стихи."

⁶¹ Maiakovskii, *PSS*, vol. 4, 30.

⁶² Only two of the poem's projected eight parts were written, perhaps a tacit admission of the text's irresolvable aesthetic and political dilemma.

predicts the objections of readers and literary critics alike: “Forgive me, comrade Mayakovsky. Here you are, always yelling: ‘socialist art, socialist art.’ And in your poems: I, I, and I. I am radio, I am a tower, I am this, I am that. What’s the matter?” (“Простите, товарищ Маяковский. Вот вы все время орете – ‘социалистическое искусство, социалистическое искусство’. А в стихах я, я и я. Я радио, я башня я то, я другое. В чем дело?”).⁶³ Mayakovsky’s response—intended as a blow at the *Proletkult* group, a mass-organization of writers advocating an entirely class-based literary style—makes light of “small-minded” proletarian aesthetics: “if you will say insignificant things, / however much you exchange “we” for “I” / you will not escape the lyrical ditch” (“если говорить мелкие вещи, / сколько ни заменяй «Я» – «Мы», / не вылезешь из лирической ямы”), a pun on the Russian genitive of “ditch” [*iamy*] and the words for I [*ia*] and we [*my*].⁶⁴

Such hubris hides the fact that Mayakovsky, not unlike Khlebnikov, proved naïve regarding the power network that enabled the prominence of his voice—both literally, in radio broadcasts, and metaphorically, in his literary celebration of a radiophonically enhanced poet-body. His emphasis on the uniqueness and supremacy of his own voice implies an obliviousness to how radio appropriates voice and subjects it to its own laws, especially in a state keen to make radio its ideological handmaiden. Mayakovsky’s attitude toward radio is marked by an exaggerated sense of personal agency and self-determination; his enthusiasm for technologically enhancing his body and voice, moreover, obscures the fact that this is enabled by a more powerful “body” welded together by firm political control. In “The Fifth International,” he invokes radio’s enhancing powers entirely of his own volition, first identifying with and later disentangling himself from the medium:

⁶³ Ibid., 122.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

“Mayakovsky! / Be man again! / By the strength of thought, / nerves, / veins / I, / like a hundred-mile spy-glass, / quietly folded my enormous neck” (“Маяковский! / Опять человеком будь! / Силой мысли, / нервов, / жил / я, / как стоверстную подзорную трубу, / тихо шеищу сложил”).⁶⁵ This avant-gardistic self-determination vis-à-vis radio ignores the fact that Mayakovsky’s technological reverie is enabled not by an indifferent consumer good, but by a form of ideological power that permeated Soviet life, and with which he had, for better or worse, chosen to identify. Indeed, Mayakovsky even fails to treat the radio network as an explicitly Soviet achievement, viewing it as a cosmic phenomenon that exists apart from the business of class warfare and political struggle.

Poetry on the Radio (1925–30)

For Mayakovsky, then, radio inspired a way of writing that sought to fully reflect the polyphony of Soviet voices by stressing the role of the living word and of sonic experience: its effects would be instantaneous, veracious, democratic, and all-encompassing. This rhetorical move, as I have suggested, also allowed Mayakovsky to flee from the myopic polemics of Soviet literary criticism, which—like the forms of bourgeois communication he critiques in his radio poems—are all dependent on the medium of print. Below I will suggest that Mayakovsky’s meditations on radio sound were not just a rhetorical demonstration of the supremacy of sonic speech over the printed text. His essays, I argue, suggest uses of broadcast that would truly transform the ratio of print and sound culture in the Soviet literary institution.

Mayakovsky’s fascination with sound media derives from his view of literature as a

⁶⁵ Maiakovskii, *PSS*, vol. 4, 134.

primarily oral medium and from his long-standing rejection of print media, which he polemically condemns as a relic of the bourgeois past. He portrays book, journal, and paper as formats incompatible with the frenetic pace of events after the October Revolution: “The stage-based character of poetry [...] not only implies a lack of paper, but also the frantic pace of the Revolution, which print technology was unable to chase after [...] The printing press trailed behind hopelessly.”⁶⁶ And Mayakovsky contrasts instantaneously effective live speech with the irrelevant newspaper form⁶⁷, while poems such as “Paper Monsters” (“Bumazhnye uzhasy,” 1927) identify paper as emblematic of an enslaving bureaucracy that wireless speech would abolish with instantaneous precision.⁶⁸

Reflections by Mayakovsky’s contemporaries further reveal how the poet valorized spontaneous speech over premeditated thoughts borne by paper. Before a dispute with the artist Evgenii Katsman (1890–1976), for instance, Mayakovsky is said to have spilled water onto his opponent’s notes, ostensibly by accident, forcing him to crumple them and to engage in an unscripted, improvised polemic.⁶⁹ He was also privy to the first Soviet attempts to return to spoken language a central role in political propaganda: like Khlebnikov, Mayakovsky was employed by the Russian Telegraph Agency (ROSTA) beginning in 1918. He played an integral part in developing the large stenciled ROSTA propaganda posters, which he also characterized in terms of sound, compressing them into

⁶⁶ Maiakovskii, “Tol’ko ne vospominaniia ...,” in *PSS*, vol. 12, 153. “Эстрадный характер поэзии [...] это не только отсутствие бумаги, это бешеный темп революции, за которым не могла угнаться печатная техника [...] станок безнадежно затягивал.”

⁶⁷ In proclamations such as “pull firmly fused phrases out of the dusty paper of newspapers and journals” (“вытащите из запыленной газетной и журнальной бумаги крепко сколоченные фразы”). See Maiakovskii, “Dva Chekhova,” in *PSS*, vol. 1, 294.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, vol. 8, 11.

⁶⁹ See Katanian, *Maiakovskii*, 298.

“flecks of paint and the sound of slogans” [*zvon lozungov*].⁷⁰

Another likely influence on Mayakovsky’s interest in the sonic realization of poetic texts, and on his stubborn belief in the primacy of the spoken word, was his acquaintance with the linguist Sergei Bernshtein (1892–1970) and other members of the Institute of the Living Word (Institut zhivogo slova). Directed by its founder, the actor Vsevolod Vsevolodskii-Gerngross, and backed by the Commissar of Education, Anatoly Lunacharsky, this research collective was active from 1918–23. Its primary goal was to analyze, reinvigorate, and popularize the art of public speech in its various social, political, and aesthetic forms.⁷¹ A lively interest in spoken language and the art of declamation in linguistics, psychology, and other disciplines had taken hold around 1910. At the Institute of the Living Word, Bernshtein created a separate “phonetic laboratory” in 1920, known as the “Office for the Study of Artistic Speech” (Kabinet izucheniia khudozhestvennoi rechi). In order to document the ineffable qualities of speech and to study literary texts, theatrical performances, and language as such in their auditory dimension, he amassed over six hundred wax cylinders containing the voices of Silver Age poets and early Soviet actors and writers. Collected between 1918 and 1924, among these recorded voices were, in addition to Mayakovsky’s, those of Andrei Bely, Aleksandr Blok, Sergei Esenin and Osip Mandelstam.⁷²

⁷⁰ Mayakovskii, “Proshu slova...,” in *PSS*, vol. 12, 205. “Это – протокольная запись труднейшего трехлетия революционной борьбы, переданная пятнами красок и звоном лозунгов.”

⁷¹ For more on the Institute of the Living Word, see Raffaella Vassena, “K rekonstruktsii istorii deiatel'nosti Instituta zhivogo slova (1918-1924),” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 86 (2007): 79-95. See also the substantial anthology, which contains numerous articles on the Institute: *Zhivoe slovo: logos–golos–dvizhenie–zhest: Sbornik statei i materialov*, edited by V. V. Feshchenko (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2015).

⁷² See, for instance, Sergei Bernshtein, “O kamernoi deklaratsii” and “Golos Bloka,” in *Blokovskii*

Bernshtein distinguished between “non-declamatory” [*nedeklamativnyi*] and “declamatory” [*deklamativnyi*] poets, who understand poetry as an inherently aural medium characterized by a sonorous material form.⁷³ He used this binary to contrast poets such as Aleksandr Blok, who reportedly composed his poems silently, to Andrei Bely, for whom the poetic text was indistinguishable from its articulated sound shape and who sought to convey the poem’s “correct” intonational contours by unorthodox punctuation marks and enjambment. Furthermore, Bernshtein strove to scientifically document the polyvalent nature of poetic sound. Based on his analyses of sound recordings, he disputed the existence of a clear, predetermined relationship between a written text and its various “sounded” versions:

We are justified in stating that the ‘law of performance’ is not contained within the poem; and what is more, that no poem contains any single law of performance: for any poem we can imagine an entire series of declamatory interpretations, which do not coincide but are all aesthetically valid. The poem’s work is only the precondition for a certain closed circle of declamatory possibilities.⁷⁴

To Bernshtein and his colleagues, any poetic text was open to a range of meanings, and the divergent interpretations were closely related to the varying “translations” of a text into sound. Put differently, different vocalizations of a single text could lead to very different readings. The task of a stage actor or a declaimer of poetry could no longer be restricted to simply finding and giving the proper “material” form to a particular sanctioned interpretation. On the contrary, Bernshtein realized that the divergent tonalities of spoken

sbornik II (Tartu, 1972), 454-525.

⁷³ Sergei Bernshtein, “Stikh i deklamatsiia,” in *Russkaia rech'* (Leningrad, 1927), 18.

⁷⁴ Sergei Bernshtein, “Stikh i deklamatsiia,” 12. “Мы вправе утверждать, что ‘закон исполнения’ в стихотворении не заложен; и даже более того, что нет единого закона исполнения какого бы то ни было стихотворения: для всякого стихотворения мыслим целый ряд не совпадающих между собой и в то же время эстетически законных декламационных интерпретаций. Произведение поэта лишь обуславливает известный замкнутый круг декламационных возможностей.”

performances could—and should—adjust and influence the interpretation of a written text.

The conclusions of Bernshtein's fortuitous alignment of hermeneutics with sound technology recall Western musicologists' discovery of the phonograph around the turn of the twentieth century. Alexander Rehding notes that sound recording upset "the integrity of the musical work and its complex ontology, which, following the aesthete Roman Ingarden, is lodged as an intentional object somewhere between score and performance. The alternative ontology that the phonograph provided suggested that music was no longer conceivable as only an imperfect representation of the ideal performance, but was rather repeatedly accessible as the site of musical reality."⁷⁵ Rehding continues: "Put simply, with the emergence of the phonograph as a tool for musicological research, musical meaning was no longer thought to be found *beyond* the individual performance, but rather *in it*."⁷⁶ By the same token, the increasing attention that experimental Soviet linguists and philologists paid to sounded and performed language shifted attention away from the printed text as a privileged site of meaning.

Not surprisingly, Bernshtein took a particular interest in Mayakovsky, whose readings he recorded on the phonograph twice, in December 1920 and in January 1926, after Mayakovsky's journey to the United States. (A third reading was arranged for April 1930 but was prevented by the poet's suicide that month).⁷⁷ In a 1936 article for the radio journal *USSR Speaking (Govorit SSSR)*, Bernshtein summarizes some of his findings in

⁷⁵ Alexander Rehding, "Wax Cylinder Revolutions," *The Musical Quarterly* 88 (2005): 134.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁷⁷ For a short description of Bernshtein's recordings of Mayakovsky, his recollections and conclusions about the poet's voice, as well as the holdings at the Mayakovsky Museum's sound library, see Lev A. Shilov, *Zdes' zhil Maiakovskii* (Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii, 1963), 155; Lev A. Shilov, "Ia slyshal po radio golos Tolstogo..." *Ocherki zvuchashchei literatury* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1989), 74-88.

direct reference to Mayakovsky's reading patterns:

In contrast to the static declamatory style of the Symbolists, [Mayakovsky's] manner of reading reveals a dynamic construction of spoken phrases, which reflects, comments on, and elaborates the semantic structure of the poetic text... The creator of a new poetic style that endows his poems with a material vibration inevitably becomes the creator of a new style of declamation.⁷⁸

To understand what Bernshtein means by the "material vibration" of Mayakovsky's poems, let us consider how Mayakovsky described his own creative process in the mid-1920s. Mayakovsky's major aesthetic program "How to Make Verse" ("Kak delat' stikhi," 1926) asserts that his texts are engendered by an external sound source that affects him viscerally, physically, and in a manner not entirely within his powers. He describes his brain as being constantly susceptible to any number of sonic stimuli:

How *is* a poem made? The work begins long before one receives and comprehends a commission from society. The preceding poetic work is conducted ceaselessly. [...] For instance, right now (I am writing only about what came to mind this moment) my brain is buzzing with the great name "Mr. Glyceron", which came about by chance during some interrupted conversation about glycerin [...] Or there is the rhythm of some American tune that I like [...].⁷⁹

Aleatoric soundbytes such as these constitute a repertory from which the poet draws once the initial creative impulse for a new poem arises. This moment is likewise described in terms of an external sonic source: a vague rhythm that the poet never deliberately chooses, but receives through an involuntary tactile affection. Next, Mayakovsky begins to pace

⁷⁸ Sergei Bernshtein, "Problemy russkogo proiznosheniia," *Govorit SSSR*, no. 2 (1936): 12. "В противоположность статичности читки символистов, в его читке мы находим динамическое построение звучащих фраз, отражающее, комментирующее и конкретизирующее смысловую структуру поэтического текста... Создатель нового поэтического стиля, облакая свои стихи в материальное звучание, неизбежно становится создателем нового стиля декламации."

⁷⁹ Maiakovskii, *PSS*, vol. 12, 89. "Как же делается стих? Работа начинается задолго до получения, до осознания социального заказа. Предшествующая поэтическая работа ведется непрерывно [...] Например, сейчас (пишу только о том, что моментально пришло в голову) мне сверлит мозг хорошая фамилия «господин Глицерон», происшедшая случайно при каком-то перевернутом разговоре о глицерине [...] Есть нравящийся мне размер какой-то американской песенки [...]."

agitatedly or to otherwise physically enact a rhythmic pattern dictated by the basic idea of the poem:

I walk, waving my arms and mumbling still almost without words, now shortening my step, so as not to disrupt the mumbling, now mumbling faster to the beat of my pace. This is how rhythm is pared down and takes shape: the basis of any poetic thing, which runs through it like a low rumble. Gradually you begin to form disconnected words from this rhythm.⁸⁰

This inarticulate low rumble gradually produces more discrete and articulate sounds, words, and rhymed phrases. Mayakovsky's contemporaries, too, confirm that he composed his verse out loud, in a manner that closely resembles Osip Mandelstam's approach to writing: "his sentences were worked over using his voice, they rubbed against one another."⁸¹ Like his radio-inspired poems, the manifestos portray Mayakovsky as a sensitive conduit of external sounds who utilizes even the most banal sonic repetition as a springboard for poetic creativity:

It is unknown where this basic rhythmic rumble comes from. For me it is any repetition within me of a sound, noise, a swinging or even generally the repetition of any phenomenon that I perceive as sound. The rhythm can be brought on by the noise of the recurring ocean, or by the housekeeper, who slams the door every morning, and, repeating herself, shuffles on, pattering about in my consciousness...⁸²

⁸⁰ Ibid., 100. "Я хожу, размахивая руками и мыча еще почти без слов, то укорачивая шаг, чтоб не мешать мычанию, то помычиваю быстрее в такт шагам. Так обстругивается и оформляется ритм – основа всякой поэтической вещи, проходящая через нее гулом. Постепенно из этого гула начинаешь вытискивать отдельные слова."

⁸¹ Spasskii, *Maiakovskii i ego sputniki*, 54. "Маяковский 'писал' в голове. Готовые стихи переносились на бумагу. Это не значит, что он добывал их легко. Отбор слов, их пригонка друг к другу осуществлялись с необходимыми трудностями. Но фразы обрабатывались голосом, перетирались одна о другую, когда бродил он взад и вперед, невнятно бормоча их про себя."

⁸² Maiakovskii, *PSS*, vol. 12, 101. "Откуда приходит этот основной гул-ритм – неизвестно. Для меня это всякое повторение во мне звука, шума, покачивания или даже вообще повторение каждого явления, которое я выделяю звуком. Ритм может принести и шум повторяющегося моря, и прислуга, которая ежеутренне хлопает дверью и, повторяясь, плетется, шлепая в моем сознании..."

The initial creative impulse underlying any poem is a sound that seizes on the poet from without, a particular rhythmic pattern that compels him to gradually articulate corresponding words. And, like radio waves, this sonic stimulus at once envelops the body physically and reverberates in the mind.

Importantly, for Mayakovsky this sonic origin of poetry never turns into a self-sufficient principle. His poems after 1917 rarely experiment with a trans-sense language that destabilizes the connection between signifier and signified, as in the experiments of Khlebnikov or Kruchenykh. Nor does he produce writing that is particularly musical or melodious while remaining within the bounds of sensible language.⁸³ Indeed, Mayakovsky stresses the dangers of excessively sonorous verse, in which sound carries no function or is excessively indeterminate.⁸⁴ Rather, sound enters Mayakovsky's poems as a structural component that shapes its form and content down to the most subordinate detail, similarly to what the Czech literary critic Jan Mukařovský called the "motor process" in poetry: a method by which "the phonetical aspect acts not only in parallel with other parts of the text, but [...] operates towards them as a direct influence."⁸⁵ For Mukařovský, a poem was the result of an inner "unidirectional movement" that the poem reflected in each of its components, in order to affect and evoke a similar movement in the reader's mind.⁸⁶

⁸³ For a useful definition of the relationship between "sonorization" and "musicalization" of the poetical line, see Mario Costa, "The Word of Poetry, Sounds of Voice and Technology," *Visible Language* 35 (2001), 7: "[S]peaking of 'musicality in the line,' one means that the relationship between signified and signifier is so closed that the meaning is expected to be suggested also by the sounds of the words; the 'sonorization' breaks, on the contrary, any links between signified and signifier, and it employs only 'the sound signifier' as a self-meaningful material."

⁸⁴ Mayakovskii, "Kak delat' stikhi?," in *PSS*, 112. "The exaggerated use of consonance, alliteration, etc. gives the impression of excessiveness even after a minute of reading" ("Переборщенность созвучий, аллитераций и т. п. через минуту чтения создает впечатление пресыщенности").

⁸⁵ Jan Mukařovský, *O motorickém dění v poezii* (Prague: Odeon, 1985), 86.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

Contemporary Russian theorists of poetic declamation such as Sergei Bernshtein and Sofia Vysheslavtseva apply this idea of a “motor” affect quite literally to the articulatory as well as other muscles in the body: “In a somewhat weaker form, but still more strongly and more vividly than in perceiving the poem only with the eye or the inner ear, [motor-articulatory sensations] are communicated via the declaimer also to the auditors.”⁸⁷ Here the text’s emotional and intellectual reception is aided and augmented by somatic sound affects.

For Mayakovsky, this initial impulse triggers the first poetic articulation and permeates the whole process of composing verse. The description of this sonic stimulus in his theoretical articles shows that the discourse of sound reproduction, with its central concepts of vibration, transmission, and (re)inscription, occupies a central place in his understanding of poetry. Thus, for example, “How to Make Verse” also relates poetic rhythm to forms of electro-magnetic energy and invokes the “electro-technical offices” [*elektrotekhnicheskie kontory*] on Myasnitskaya Street as part of the rich urban impulses that prompted Mayakovsky’s poem about Sergei Esenin’s suicide.⁸⁸ Furthermore, he defines rhythm as a fundamental energy form: “Rhythm is the basic force, the basic energy of the poem. It cannot be explained, one can only talk about it the way one does about magnetism or electricity.”⁸⁹ As with Mukařovský’s theory of the “motor process,” the basis of all verse is here an indivisible energy form, mysterious and unspeakable, but simultaneously endlessly nuanced and variable. As Mayakovsky writes—and one might

⁸⁷ Sofia Vysheslavtseva, “O motornykh impul'sakh stikha,” *Poetika: sbornik statei III* (Leningrad: Akademiia, 1927): 47, translation by Olga Peters Hasty, in “Dancing Vowels: Mandelstam in the Mouth,” *Slavic and East European Journal* 2 (2015): 215.

⁸⁸ Maiakovskii, *PSS*, vol. 12, 100.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 101: “Ритм – это основная сила, основная энергия стиха. Объяснить его нельзя, про него можно сказать только так, как говорится про магнетизм или электричество.”

well apply his words to electromagnetic waves—“rhythm can be the same in many poems, and even in a poet’s entire *oeuvre*, but this does not make his work monotonous, since rhythm can be extremely complex and difficult to realize [...]”⁹⁰

As laicistic as his understanding of the scientific particulars was, Mayakovsky’s description of the infectious nature of sound, and of the infinite adaptability of nuanced rhythmic patterns, maps onto contemporary concepts of electromagnetic radiation. Since the first equations of James Clerk Maxwell (1861), later confirmed by Heinrich Hertz, electromagnetic waves were thought to be the result of accelerated particles. These could impact other charged particles, making them resonate in ways similar to the originating source of the energy: “The surface of a body that intercepts the electromagnetic wave receives a certain amount of energy, momentum, and angular momentum. The received momentum is equivalent to a radiation pressure on the body and the received angular momentum may set the body in motion.”⁹¹ Mayakovsky overtly mentions one such characteristic of electromagnetic waves—its original charge and the resulting momentum—further in the text: “magnetic energy induced in a horseshoe will attract iron filings and is useless for any other purpose.”⁹²

From this notion of poetry as the incarnation of a sonic impulse it was not far to Mayakovsky’s ideas about radio as the ideal medium for lyric verse. His hyperbolic account of poetic practice in “How to Make Verse” stresses his interest in the forms of

⁹⁰ Ibid.: “Ритм может быть один во многих стихах, даже во всей работе поэта, но это не делает работу однообразной, так как ритм может быть до того сложен и трудно оформляем [...]”

⁹¹ Tamer Becherrawy, *Electromagnetism: Maxwell Equations, Wave Propagation and Emission* (London: ISTE and Wiley, 2012), 302.

⁹² Maiakovskii, “Как delat' stikhi?,” 102. “Так, например, магнитная энергия, отпущенная на подкову, будет притягивать стальные перышки, и ни к какому другому делу ее не приспособишь.”

poetic production and dissemination, rather than in its ideal content, insisting that the “poetic environment” is closely tied up with the forms of technology available to poets: “the best work of poetry will be written according to the Comintern’s social commission [...] it will be conveyed in new words that are expressive and clear to all, worked out on a table equipped according to NOT⁹³, and delivered to the editors via airplane [...] the poetic environment is also among the most important factors of our production.”⁹⁴ The notion of “poetic environment” [*poeticheskii byt*] in this account of a technologized system of poetic production alludes to “literary environment” [*literaturnyi byt*], a concept by the Formalist critic Boris Eikhenbaum, who studied literary evolution as an amalgam of socio-economic conditions that enable the production and distribution of literature.⁹⁵ For Eikhenbaum, the social transformations after the October Revolution have also shifted the focus of literary studies from “how to write” to “how to be a writer.” While Eikhenbaum’s theory lacks Mayakovsky’s emphasis on technologization, it likewise envisions a change in the literary system that privileges the direct relationship between writer and readers over the niceties of literary style.

⁹³ An acronym for “Nauchnaia Organizatsiia Truda” (Scientific Organization of Labor), a form of workflow optimization based on F. W. Taylor’s labor management techniques in the manufacturing industries.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 89. “Лучшим поэтическим произведением будет то, которое написано по социальному заказу Коминтерна, имеющее целевую установку на победу пролетариата, переданное новыми словами, выразительными и понятными всем, сработанное на столе, оборудованном по НОТу, и доставленное в редакцию на аэроплане [...] поэтический быт это тоже один из важнейших факторов нашего производства.”

⁹⁵ See Boris Eikhenbaum, “Literature and the Writer” (“Literatura i pisatel”), *Zvezda*, 5 (1927): 121-40, and “Literature and the Literary Environment” (“Literatura i literaturnyi byt”), *Na literaturnom postu*, 9 (1927): 47-52. Вопрос о том, как писать, сменился или, по крайней мере, осложнился другим – ‘как быть писателем’. [...] кризис сейчас переживает не литература сама по себе, а ее социальное бытование. Изменилось профессиональное положение писателя, изменилось соотношение писателя и читателя, изменились привычные условия и форма литературной работы – произошел решительный сдвиг в области самого литературного быта.

By the mid-1920s, then, for Mayakovsky the answer to the question “how to be a writer” lies, at least partly, in the radio waves; like Eikhenbaum he wants to replace the question of literary style (“how to write”) with a new form of literary transmission. Many of Mayakovsky’s poems also thematize the fact that its messages are transmitted via acoustic and electronic sounds, rather than through printed texts. As a result, Mayakovsky paradoxically suggests that a poet’s literary merit must be judged based on the suitability of his physical voice for radio broadcasts. In printed texts, a poet’s facility for language corresponds to his ability to make written words evoke their live sonic equivalent. With the performed and broadcast poetic text, comprehension is ensured by the proper microphone equipment and the poet’s clear and well-tuned vocal instrument, on the one hand, and the listener’s properly trained ear, on the other. In another key literary manifesto, “A Broadening of the Verbal Basis” (“Rasshirenie slovesnoi bazy,” 1927), Mayakovsky summons an entire network of newly-trained specialists capable of literally measuring and cultivating poets’ voices:

The critic will need to know a thing or two. He will need to know the laws of radio audibility [*radioslyshimost'*], he will need to be able to critique a voice that relies not solely on the diaphragm, and to admit that a dreadful vocal timbre is a serious *literary* flaw. [...] The formalist critic should oversee the work in our universities, where literary craft is studied. The physiologist critic should measure the pulse on the stage and the voice on the radio, but he should likewise care for the physical improvement of the breed of poets.⁹⁶

Like the frightening radio-centered world he envisioned in “The Flying Proletarian,” this idea of a literary system structured around radio, while ostensibly promising more

⁹⁶ Maiakovskii, *PSS*, vol. 12, 163-163: “Критику придется кое-что знать. Он должен будет знать законы радиослышимости, должен будет уметь критиковать не опертый на диафрагму голос, признавать серьезным *литературным* минусом скверный тембр голоса. [...] Критик-формалист должен вести работу в наших вузах, изучающих словесное мастерство. Критик-физиолог должен измерять на эстраде пульс и голос по радио, но также заботиться об улучшении физической породы поэтов.”

egalitarian possibilities for aspiring poets, has overtones of technocratic control and vocal eugenics that Mayakovsky accepts as part of Futurist bravado. The passage also strikes another blow at “slow-witted” Soviet literary critics capable of analyzing only written texts. Mayakovsky demands that they learn to judge their sound shape and to optimize it by physically preparing a new “breed of poets.” A writer’s literary merit will be coextensive with his vocal organ: a good radio poet’s voice should modulate and project with ease, Mayakovsky implies, conveying a range of subtle intonations and shifting swiftly from addressing intimate gatherings to a mass listenership.

This theory once again reveals an individualist slant that contradicts the goal of lending voice to proletarian poets. Given how immensely Mayakovsky valued his own talents as a reader and performer of his poetry, these manifestos above all imply the suitability of his own vocal skills for radio. And although his own poetry was ostensibly intended to be recited by the masses, the pervasive mythology of Mayakovsky’s own “correct” or “proper” intonations further underscores his egocentricity. Mayakovsky continued to seek the ability to publish his works throughout the 1920s, but the stress both he and his contemporaries placed on his declamation skills implied that the silent printed text was somehow deficient. Viktor Shklovsky, for instance, confirms this myth, reflecting on the importance of Mayakovsky’s performances and proclaiming his written works lifeless after the poet’s suicide: “The written poem is Mayakovsky’s tragedy. Only those who heard him read were able to read his verse.”⁹⁷

⁹⁷ Viktor Shklovsky, “Preodoleem pis'mennuiu rech',” in *Velikaia kniga dnia*, 712. “Записанное стихотворение – это трагедия Маяковского. Его стих мог читать только тот, кто слышал его.” Lev Shilov describes a unique attempt to preserve knowledge of Mayakovsky’s distinctive reading style through a group of close acquaintances. Somewhat later, in the mid-1930s, Sergei

Sergei Bernshtein was among the first to analyze Mayakovsky's innovative style of reading and noted his idiosyncratic use of intonational stress, which serves to “emphasize logical relations between words and phrases and to express human emotions with intonations of live conversational speech.”⁹⁸ The proper intonations, drawn from everyday speech, are the key to resurrecting Mayakovsky's printed texts. The futurist poet Nikolai Aseev and other contemporaries, such as Osip Brik, used the term “intonational verse” [*intonatsionnyi stikh*] to describe the need for considering conversational speech patterns in elucidating the logical connections in Mayakovsky's texts.

Despite the deceptive simplicity of many of Mayakovsky's poems, they are in fact constructed around a tension between graphic notation and vocal articulation. Furthermore, Mayakovsky frequently modified the intonations of his poems during performances, allowing for differing or altogether new interpretations depending on the audience and context: “Based on the audience it is necessary to choose a persuading or a pleading intonation, a commanding or an inquiring intonation.”⁹⁹ The Russian historian of radio and sound culture, Aleksandr Sherel', likewise asserts that the microphone was an important tool for Mayakovsky. Not only did the poet write some of his key lyrical works—such as “About This” (“Pro eto,” 1923)—with the microphone in mind, but he also used public readings to alter such texts' meaning through intonational variations: “It is not true that [Mayakovsky] began his career at

Bernshtein would lead an effort to preserve the literal voice of the poet by copying the fragile wax cylinders to more durable sound media. See Shilov, “*Ia slyshal po radio golos Tolstogo...*,” 78.

⁹⁸ Sergei Bernshtein. “подчеркивающая логические отношения между словами и фразами, выражающая человеческие чувства интонациями живой разговорной речи.”

⁹⁹ Maiakovskii, “Kak delat' stikhi,” *PSS*, vol. 12, 113. “Надо в зависимости от аудитории брать интонацию убеждающую или просительную, приказывающую или вопрошающую.”

the microphone with his Mosselprom advertisements, or even with the poem ‘Vladimir Il’ich Lenin’; he began with his ‘Pro eto’ and other lyrical poems [...] And his microphone readings were a special way for him to continue working on a poem.”¹⁰⁰

One of the devices used to embed this ambiguity is the visually disjointed stepladder pattern (*lesenka*) Mayakovsky introduced in 1923, which adds unexpected pauses and emphases into the text.¹⁰¹ Some readers have aptly noted that this way of formatting often has little to do with metric innovation and is used even to break up lines of iambic pentameter.¹⁰² At times, this is taken as a sign that the stepladder is a form of trickery obscuring a more conventional system of versification, or, as Karabchievskii suggests, even a crutch to compensate for Mayakovsky’s poor grasp of punctuation.¹⁰³ But the *lesenka*’s purpose is a slightly different one: it serves to approximate the text’s vivid auralty—with the intonational and rhythmic counterpoint customary of Mayakovsky’s verse—even on the printed page. By visually separating out single words or short phrases, it requires the reader to imagine the intonations used

¹⁰⁰ Sherel', *Audiokul'tura XX veka*, 273. “[Маяковский] начинал у микрофона вовсе не с рекламы Моссельпрома и даже не с поэмы “Владимир Ильич Ленин”, а с “Про это” и других лирических стихов [...] Причем чтение у микрофона было для него своеобразной формой продолжения работы над стихотворением.”

¹⁰¹ Michael Wachtel concisely glosses this format as a “construction, in which a single verse is split over a number of lines (generally two, three, or four), with each respective segment beginning spatially where the previous one left off.” For more on the *lesenka* format, and on the way this seemingly visual element impacts the aural effect of Mayakovsky’s verse, see Michael Wachtel, “Heirs of Mayakovsky: the poet and citizen,” in *The Development of Russian Verse: Meter and Its Meanings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

¹⁰² See, for instance, Margo Shohl Rosen, *The Independent Turn in Soviet-Era Russian Poetry: How Dmitry Bobyshev, Joseph Brodsky, Anatoly Naiman and Evgeny Rein Became the ‘Avvakumites’ of Leningrad* (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2011), 74.

¹⁰³ “[Е]сть серьезное подозрение, что строй ‘лесенкой’ был им придуман специально для замены традиционной системы пунктуации, которой он так и не выучился. При наличии знаков, расставленных Бриком, эта система становится не только ненужной, но и лишней, мешающей чтению.” In Karabchievskii, 139.

in a live reading of these texts. And as we read across Mayakovsky's rapid stepladder indentations, our ears are forced to remember and match rhyme and rhythm with preceding lines more diligently than in linearly formatted lines of verse.

Indeed, Mayakovsky's rhythm was often unpredictably irregular. While occasionally relying on traditional verse meters, he primarily relied on a free form of accentual verse with as many as four or five unstressed between stressed syllables. At other times, he would replace measured lines altogether with "sharp, staccato rhythms involving spondees and strings of semantically charged, monosyllabic words."¹⁰⁴ And a further element of Mayakovsky's verse that calls for a vocal enactment are his highly assonant rhymes—sounds whose congruence emerges not immediately from their graphic representation, but requires sonic realization.

While these formal elements suggest that the poem can be read or performed in many different ways, Mayakovsky himself often suggested the opposite. In the manifesto "Broadening the Verbal Basis," he provides an example of how the combination of natural conversational speech and his poems' complex visual shape—based on enjambment, hyphens, ellipses, and the *lesenka* pattern—can necessitate an authorial voicing. He boldly asserts that any author's reading is "good" not due to any added "dramaticism" [*akterstvo*], but because only he can read the text correctly despite a lack of definite textual cues. Mayakovsky compares how Vasily Ivanovich Kachalov (1875–1948), one of Stanislavsky's most popular method actors, applies his own intonational patterns to the lines of Mayakovsky's poem:

В. И. читает:

¹⁰⁴ James H. McGavran, "Introduction," in Vladimir Mayakovsky, *Selected Poems*, translated from the Russian by James H. McGavran III (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2013), xvii.

style single out his own unique approach, while disparaging other performers' attempts to perform his works. The memoirs of Mayakovsky's manager, Pavel Lavut, abound with nuanced descriptions of such "authorized" readings. Despite the caveat that he does not wish to disparage alternate interpretations, Lavut repeatedly stresses both the unique "grain" of Mayakovsky's "velvety bass voice" [*barkhatistyi bas*] and his talent for rapidly transitioning between intonations within a single stanza or line of text. Among the vocal modulations in Mayakovsky's reading of the long poem "Good" ("Khorosho," 1927) alone, Lavut lists "muffled-remote" [*priglushenno-otdalennyi*], "abrupt" [*otryvisto*], and "tensed" [*napriazhenno*] speech. The poet is described as shifting from a "rich bass" [*gustoi bas*] to a "cracked contralto" [*sryvaiushiisia kontral'to*]; "drawn-out wailing" [*protiazhno zavyvaia*] is followed by an "exclamation with a deep sigh" [*s glubokim vzdokhom vosklitsal*] and rounded out by a "restrained, slightly hoarse whisper" [*sderzhannyi shopot, chut' khriplovato*].¹⁰⁸ And Lavut, too, stresses how the stepladder pattern requires particularly important intonational decisions, noting, for instance, that Mayakovsky "almost dropped" the last word [*kak by 'otbrasyvalos'*], or how the preposition "for" [*za*] was "broken off" and emphasized [*rezko otryval ... nazhimaia*].¹⁰⁹ Lavut's account thus also reenforces the myth of Mayakovsky's authoritative sonic renderings of his own poems.

Mayakovsky's representation of the printed text as deficient and incomplete—in spite of all assertions to the contrary—must be seen as a deliberate textual strategy intimately related to his radio-inspired privileging of sound over text. In a sense, he thus inverts Bernshtein's findings: for him, the printed poem is not intended to suggest or

¹⁰⁸ Lavut, *Maiakovskii edet po Soiuzu*, 82-83.

¹⁰⁹ Maiakovskii, "Rasshirenie slovesnoi bazy," 163.

stimulate a multiplicity of interpretations, but to demonstrate their foreclosure to the reader and to remind him of the absence of the author's voice. This was not only a device aimed at posterity, but served a protective purpose during Mayakovsky's own lifetime, especially in the context of the burgeoning Soviet soundscape.

The question of the intelligibility and mass appeal [*massovost'*] of a literary work tied in to Mayakovsky's view of literature as primarily sound-based, as well as his attempt to make public readings and radio broadcasts central to Soviet literary distribution. For him, literary works *qua* written text cannot guarantee inherent intelligibility to any reader based on certain particulars of form and content: "One should not try to make things that will function in a vacuum."¹¹⁰ Rather, every text requires a certain form of public distribution and must be carefully articulated, intoned, and modulated dependent on context: "Mass character [*massovost'*] is the overall result of our struggle, not a shirt in which the lucky books of some literary genius are born. One must be able to organize the intelligibility of a book."¹¹¹ This notion that the poet must "orchestrate" his own texts after they have been written is another echo of Bernshtein's view that meaning is not readily contained within a text, but that the latter serves as a score.

This claim also made for convenient subterfuge: although Mayakovsky talks of poetry as a proletarian discipline and outwardly rejects the notion of literary genius, with its implication of uniqueness, he repeatedly defends his privileged powers of articulation, and thus the role of the exceptionally gifted "radio poet" within the Soviet

¹¹⁰ Mayakovskii, "Kak delat' stikhi?," 113. "Нельзя работать вещь для функционирования в безвоздушном пространстве [...]."

¹¹¹ Maiakovskii, *PSS*, vol. 12, 166. "Массовость – это итог нашей борьбы, а не рубашка, в которой родятся счастливые книги какого-нибудь литературного гения. Понятность книги надо уметь организовывать."

literary system.¹¹² But Mayakovsky also invokes this primacy of voice in the literary process—and of his own voice in particular—to guard against the above-mentioned charge of being incomprehensible to the Soviet masses and ill-suited for fulfilling so-called “social commissions” [*sotsial'nyi zakaz*].¹¹³

Mayakovsky’s article “A Broadening of the Verbal Basis” describes how poetry, understood as an oral medium, was meant to interact with broadcast. Writers, he states, should be allowed to engage with the full range of available technological media, rather than only printing their works in books and journals: “I am not voting against the book. But I demand fifteen minutes on the radio. I demand, louder than the violinists, my right to the gramophone disk.”¹¹⁴ This conciliatory statement hides a more radical futurist pathos, however; Mayakovsky arguably seeks to dismantle the established literary process in order to maximize broadcast’s potential for reinvigorating the poetic word:

The book will not destroy the stage [*tribuna*]. At a certain moment the book already destroyed the manuscript. The manuscript is only the beginning of the book. The podium and the stage will be developed and broadened by radio. Radio is the next

¹¹² Intriguingly, Mayakovsky also used the discourse of electronic diffusion to rebut demands for absolute clarity in proletarian writing. For instance, he defended the work of Khlebnikov, who was widely considered an obscure futurist within proletarian writer circles, using the image of subordinated, sequential energy relays: “If a book is directed only toward a few individuals, the way the energy of *Volkhovstroï* is directed just toward a few transmitting substations, which in turn distribute the transformed energy among electrical lamps, then such a book is useful. This kind of book may only be directed toward a few individuals, but to generators rather than end receivers” (“Если книга адресована к немногим так, как адресуется энергия Волховстройа немногим передаточным подстанциям, с тем чтобы эти подстанции разносили переработанную энергию по электрическим лампочкам, – такая книга нужна. Эти книги адресуются немногим, но не потребителям, а производителям”). “Vas ne ponimaiut rabochie i krest'iane,” in *PSS*, vol. 12, 165.

¹¹³ This was a charge frequently leveled at Mayakovsky in the 1920s, when he was often forced to clarify and defend his aesthetic and political stance during live readings. See, for instance, P. S. Kogan, *Nashi literaturnye spory: k istorii kritiki oktiabr'skoi epokhi* (Moscow: GAKhN, 1927), 98. For an important statement defending the Soviet futurists against such accusations of incomprehensibility, see Sergei Tret'iakov, “Tribuna LEFa,” *LEF* 3 (1923): 154-164.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, vol. 12, 163: “Я не голосую против книги. Но я требую пятнадцать минут на радио. Я требую, громче чем скрипачи, права на граммофонную пластинку.”

development of the word, of the slogan, and of poetry. Poetry has stopped being only that which can be seen by the eye. The Revolution gave us the audible word, audible poetry. Today the entire world partakes of the joy of the few who got to listen to Pushkin read.¹¹⁵

Radio has turned poetry into an intermedial art form that combines writing with sound, and thus has the potential to communicate with a wide listenership. This new possibility is also illustrated by the poem “The Joy of Art” (“Schast'e iskusstva,” 1928, see figure 2.4), which dramatizes the contrast between the intimacy of nineteenth-century salon culture, and the amplification and broad public exposure to the arts enabled by radio. Using two literary examples (Pushkin reading into the ears of Russian noblewomen in a salon; and Alexander Herzen’s “weak”—because unamplified—political pronouncements) and a musical one (a domestic concert by Musorgsky, the sounds of which barely reach beyond the dining room), Mayakovsky celebrates radio’s substitution of a media distribution system for antiquated forms of engagement between artist and audience, which he characterizes as “parlor dwelling” [*salonov zhil'e*]. Going further still, Mayakovsky once again links radio and the auditory to the ability to bridge past, present, and future, and even invokes the discourse of rebirth through sound:

Человечьей / отсталости / жертвы – / радуйтесь / мысли-громаде! / Вас / из
забытых и мертвых / воскрешает / нынче / радио! / [...] / Долой / салонов
жилье! / Наш день / прекрасней, чем небыль... / Я счастлив, / что мы / живем
/ в дни / распеваний по небу¹¹⁶

[Victims of human backwardness – rejoice at the thought-colossus! Today radio
will resurrect you from the dead and forgotten. [...] Down with parlor dwellings!
Our day is better than fairy tales... I rejoice that we live in the days of singing

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 162: “Книга не уничтожит трибуны. Книга уже уничтожила в свое время рукопись. Рукопись – только начало книги. Трибуну, эстраду – продолжит, расширит радио. Радио – вот дальнейшее продвижение слова, лозунга, поэзии. Поэзия перестала быть только тем, что видимо глазами. Революция дала слышимое слово, слышимую поэзию. Счастье небольшого кружка слушавших Пушкина сегодня привалило всему миру.”

¹¹⁶ Ibid., vol. 8, 296.

across the sky.]



Figure 2.4

For Mayakovsky, however, radio's primary purpose was not to amplify works of literature that were written based on traditional, obsolete poetic standards. Just as the revolution, with its demand for new rapid and sonorous forms of communication (such as the slogan, or *lozung*) had already changed literary writing, the laws of broadcast were now expected to enter into the writing process. Just what such a literature inspired by, and written for radio, would sound like became the subject of lively debates among literary scholars and radio enthusiasts alike. What most could agree on, however, was that if radio was to remain relevant to Soviet culture, the quality of programming—whether in news, literary, or theatrical broadcasts—would need to evolve drastically. As Mayakovsky notes, “We know that the future belongs to the *radio feuilleton*, but there will be expanded

variants of those cultural forms, which will differ from today's radio-Zharovs in the same way that the fine print of the fire brigade newsletter differs from 'What is to be Done?'"¹¹⁷

The formalist critic Viktor Shklovsky echoed this notion, demanding that radio speakers and writers approach the medium strictly on its own terms:

One of radio's tasks is to overcome written language. Radio only restores real speech. We must liberate the word from its graphic form! After all, the grammar and syntax that are created in speech are arbitrary. They do not exist in live speech. In live speech, we have a dialog and a dialog with a nonexistent phrase, which is based on intonation. But we use those dead, graphic, literary phrases. It seems to me that in radio broadcasts the key goal is to give up reading.¹¹⁸

To break with the habit of reading, Shklovsky asserts, radio must not only innovate new genres of broadcast, but its speech must be cleansed of its graphocentrism, expressed in phrases such as "To which I will return below" ("Об этом я скажу ниже"). Like Mayakovsky, Shklovsky insists that radio must restore the literary potential of conversational speech, stripping it of redundant information and "emotional" adornment. He demands, moreover, that poetry become an essential part of radio programming:

Poetic language should enter radio as one of its elements. This raises a big question: people in general do not know how to read verse! The poem on paper is

¹¹⁷ Maiakovskii, "Tovarishchi," in *PSS*, vol. 12, 204. "Мы знаем – будущее за [...] радио-фельетоном [...] но это будут углубленные виды и формы этих культур, отличающиеся от сегодняшних [...] радио-Жаровых так, как петит пожарных известий отличается от «Что делать?»" Mayakovsky is presumably referring to the Soviet poet Aleksandr A. Zharov (1904–1984), who wrote numerous revolutionary poems and mass songs, and whom he frequently accused of a banal, over-wrought, and superfluously melodious literary style. Valavin glosses this word as "Выступления по радио А. А. Жарова и других поэтов – членов РАПП" (Valavin, *Slotovorchestvo Maiakovskogo*, 433). See also Maiakovskii, *PSS*, vol. 12, 424.

¹¹⁸ Viktor Shklovskii, "Preodoleem pis'mennuiu rech'," 711. "...преодоление письменной речи – это одна из задач радио. Радио только восстанавливает настоящую речь. Нужно освободить слово от графики! Ведь та грамматика, тот синтаксис, которые созданы в речи – это условность. В живой речи ее не существует. В живой речи существует диалог и диалог с несуществующей фразой, которая держится на интонации. А мы пользуемся вот этими мертвыми, графическими, литературными фразами. Мне кажется, что на радио основной задачей является – бросить читать."

the tragedy of Mayakovsky. Only those who heard him could declaim his verse. But this is not only the case with Mayakovsky. In order for the poem to come to life, a new tradition of versification must appear. I think that the printed poem is only the libretto for the real sound of the poem, which will exist on the radio.

Radio art should be created by talented poets who create the best, so to speak, selective poems. These poems should be included in radio art, so that radio can transform them and they, in turn, will transform radio.¹¹⁹

Mayakovsky's major aesthetic program "How to Make Verse" ("Kak delat' stikhi," 1926) also describes his creative process by analogy to radio transmissions and, more broadly, the discourse of sound reproduction. Here Mayakovsky responds to the recurring question posed to the new Soviet poet about how his verses are made, how they differ from the canonized and codified *techne* of traditional poetry. As one of the key reasons for formulating new poetic guidelines Mayakovsky cites the soundscape, which has changed both quantitatively and qualitatively: "the revolution has thrown out into the streets the crooked dialect of millions, the jargon of the outskirts has flooded the central avenues."¹²⁰ Mayakovsky argues that this sonic consequence of historical changes must be reflected within the poetic text. How can one write intimate lyric poetry in times of revolution, he asks, deriding the efforts of Zinaida Gippius in his characteristically generalizing tone: "It is hopeless to set the head-splitting rumble of the Revolution in amphibrachic tetrameter, which was invented for whispers. [...] No! Grant the new language full citizenship right

¹¹⁹ Viktor Shklovskii, "Preodoleem pis'mennuiu rech'," 712-713. "Стихотворная речь должна войти в радио как один из элементов. Встает большой вопрос: люди вообще не умеют читать стихотворений! Записанное стихотворение – это трагедия Маяковского. Его стих мог читать только тот, кто слышал его. Но это относится не только к одному Маяковскому. Чтобы стихотворение засуществовало, должна появиться стихотворная традиция. Я думаю, что напечатанное стихотворение – это только либретто к реальному звучанию стихотворения, которое будет существовать в радио. В радиоискусстве должны принять участие талантливые поэты, которые создают лучшие, так сказать, селекционные стихотворения. Эти стихотворения должны быть включены в радиоискусство, чтобы радио их изменило, и они, в свою очередь, изменяли радио."

¹²⁰ Maiakovskii, *PSS*, vol. 12, p. 84. "[Р]еволуция выбросила на улицу корявый говор миллионов, жаргон окраин полился через центральные проспекты."

away: to the outcry instead of melody, to the racket of the drum instead of the lullaby.”¹²¹

Mayakovsky did not believe, however, that literary texts should embody these new and historically significant sounds mimetically, by sonorously depicting or reproducing the outside world. His poems do not seek to describe the revolution, with its belligerent or jubilant noises, as an object for detached contemplation or as documentation of an epoch. Nor was Mayakovsky’s interest in the audible versus the readable word merely based on a desire to reach a wider listenership. Instead, he believed that poetry itself could be a form of political action that works through a physically affective voice in addition to its meaning content. He characterizes proper poetic texts as a combination of “tendentiousness” and certain agitational properties. “Poetry begins where there is a tendency,”¹²² he argues, and insists that it must carry an “ideological charge” [*ideinyi zariad*].¹²³ The poem’s agitational message consists in equal parts of an intelligible demand or thesis, and a physically compelling, agitating sonic stimulus. In Mayakovsky’s political marches, for instance, a genre found throughout his repertoire, the text both describes the cause—such as the need for violent revolution in “Left March” (“Levyi marsh,” 1918), or for an increase of productivity in “March of the Shock Brigades (“Marsh udarnykh brigad,” 1930)—and sets the process itself in motion through a kind of sonic propulsion (true to the origins of march music itself as an aid for the movements of a military regiment). If properly written and performed, a poem should simultaneously describe a cause and trigger proper action. As a

¹²¹ Ibid. “Безнадежно складывать в 4-стопный амфибрахий, придуманный для шопотка, распирающий грохот революции! [...] Нет! Сразу дать все права гражданства новому языку: выкрику — вместо напева, грохоту барабана — вместо колыбельной песни.”

¹²² Maiakovskii, *PSS*, vol. 12, 86. “Поэзия начинается там, где есть тенденция.”

¹²³ Vladimir Maiakovskii, “Stikhi s primechaniiami,” in *PSS*, vol. 12, 175. “Стихотворение должно иметь в себе полный политический идейный заряд. Надо, чтоб этот заряд неся по всей новейшей технике, обгоняя прошлые стрелятельные возможности.”

result, sound is rarely illustrative and never ornamental in Mayakovsky's texts; instead it urges and compels, pushes and prods.

Contagious Orality: Sound and Agitation

As we have seen, radio's amplified, intensified sounds shaped Mayakovsky's poetic practice in a way that especially applies to his agitational verse. In his understanding, the task of agitation [*agitatsiia*], which emanated from the Bolshevik Party's cultural objectives and was also central to the poetics of LEF, was not just about conveying Soviet propaganda in a maximally intelligible form. In contrast to propaganda, agitation involved mobilizing Soviet workers to actively enact the Party's precepts and to participate in shaping the new state. Building on Plekhanov's original use of the term, Lenin had described agitation as the inculcation of a single idea in the masses; by using a particularly vivid example, such as an anecdote about an exploitative landlord, he suggested, one should strive to excite discontent and anger. Importantly, Lenin already saw propaganda and agitation as appealing to different senses and working in different media: "The propagandist thus acts primarily *through print* [*deistvuet pechatnym*], whereas the agitator uses the *living word* [*zhivym slovom*]." ¹²⁴ And in 1929, in a striking passage that salvages some sense of the exalted for proletarian art, Lunacharsky expands the goals of agitation to a "beautiful excitement" [*prekrasnoe volnenie*]. ¹²⁵

¹²⁴ Vladimir I. Lenin, "Chto delat'? Nabolevshie voprosy nashego dvizheniia," in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 6, 66-67.

¹²⁵ A. V. Lunacharskii, "Aktual'nye voprosy," in *A. V. Lunacharskii o massovykh prazdnestvakh, estrade, tsirke* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1981), 166. "Это есть такой способ выражения идеи, который направлен на то, чтобы волновать, возбуждать, заставляя переживать других людей, чтобы действовать на их чувства и приводить их в плодотворное, длительное, прекрасное волнение."

In Mayakovsky's early Soviet verse, the Italian Futurists' idea of physically infectious noise thus encountered the Bolshevik stress on oral agitation, leading to a novel poetic experiment with sonic activism. Mayakovsky's understanding of agitation via sound also recalls contemporary theories about the "embodied" nature of publicly declaimed speech and its potential for interpersonal affect. Sergei Bernshtein and the linguist Sofia Vysheslavtseva both suggested a link between the local movements of the speech apparatus and the motoric behavior of the entire human body: the former, they believed, could amplify the latter. Put simply, reciting poetry could physically affect not only the mouth and the respiratory system, but the body at large. And moreover, according to Olga Peters Hasty's apt encapsulation of Vysheslavtseva's findings, "the motor-articulatory sensations (*motorno-proiznositel'nye oshchushcheniia*) that spread from the articulatory apparatus to the entire body of the declaimer communicate themselves also to the audience [...] Those listening to the sonic realization of a poem, as Vysheslavtseva describes, thus come to share in the motor sensations experienced by its declaimer, which brings the poem into their mouths and bodies as well."¹²⁶ Thus, the goal of declamation was not only to convey thoughts and feelings on an ideal plane, but to compel through physical vibrations that trigger a response in listeners analogous to that felt by the poet himself. Mayakovsky's poems rely on a similar, if more intuitive, theory of affect: the basic sonic "drive" of the poem—that which sets Mayakovsky's declamatory apparatus into motion—is passed on to his listeners through the "material vibration" of his poem, to use Sergei Bernshtein's term.

Mayakovsky was aware that collectively experienced sonic affect could rally listeners around a common cause, inspiring them to move physically closer and to act in

¹²⁶ Olga Peters Hasty, "Dancing Vowels: Mandelstam in the Mouth," *Slavic and East European Journal* 2 (2015): 215-216.

unison.¹²⁷ But if sound could synchronize, unite, and positively charge his listeners, creating a sense of community and solidarity, it could also enervate and disperse. Indeed, Mayakovsky used the affective potential of his poetic style not so much for peaceful marches, but in a way that suggests militarization and even hints at sonic warfare. Iurii Karabchievskii provocatively notes that, by the time of the Revolution, Mayakovsky was the only poet for whom “blood and violence were not only a theme and motive, but the very material of his verse, its texture.”¹²⁸ And Maksim Maksanov has documented Mayakovsky’s consistent equation of words with weapons.¹²⁹ But Mayakovsky also describes war and retribution as contiguous to the effects of amplified and intensified sound; noise, conversely, is ascribed bellicose properties. As defined by noise historian and theorist Steve Goodman, the concept of sonic warfare encompasses “the use of force, both seductive and violent, abstract and physical, via a range of acoustic machines (biotechnical, social, cultural, artistic, conceptual), to modulate the physical, affective, and libidinal dynamics of populations, of bodies, of crowds. [...] Sound has a seductive power to caress the skin, to immerse, to sooth, beckon, and heal, to modulate brain waves...”¹³⁰

¹²⁷ It is worth recalling that Khlebnikov made similar assertions about certain sounds and their effects not only on the mood, but also on the physical stamina of listeners: “Известно, что некоторые звуки, как ‘ля’ и ‘си’, поднимают мышечную способность, иногда в шестьдесят четыре раза, сгущая ее на некоторый промежуток времени. В дни обострения труда, летней страды, постройки больших зданий эти звуки будут рассылаться Радио по всей стране, на много раз подымая ее силу.” Velimir Khlebnikov, “Radio budushchego,” in *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 6, 194.

¹²⁸ Iurii Karabchievskii, *Voskresenie Maiakovskogo* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1990), 16. “К семнадцатому году молодой Маяковский оказался единственным из известных поэтов, у которого не просто темой и поводом, но самим материалом стиха, его фактурой были кровь и насилие.”

¹²⁹ M. Iu. Maksanov, “‘Militaristskaia’ metafora Maiakovskogo,” *Kritika i semiotika*, no. 7 (2004): 191-202.

¹³⁰ Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 10.

Goodman further distinguishes between a spectrum of “audiosocial radiation” that results in a centrifugal sonic force aimed at “the dissipation of a collective energy, to repulsion and dissolution of clusters,” and a centripetal movement that results in a “heightening of collective sensation [...] a force that sucks bodies in towards its source.”¹³¹

In the verse of the 1920s, Mayakovsky experiments with poetic forms of sonic agitation, simultaneously directed inward, at the Soviet listener, and outward, both at the sympathetic proletariat abroad and at the hostile international bourgeoisie. In the above-cited “Bastards!,” an implied radio announcer disperses sound in a two-fold manner, threatening the complacent foreign capitalists who refuse to combat the Russian famine, while simultaneously mobilizing Soviet listeners against them. The poem’s countless threats are laced with an aural excess that signifies Mayakovsky’s anger, while also lending him a demiurgic quality. His words are so full of sonic affect that they themselves verge on actions: “Let it be so, / that each swallowed / gulp / shall burn your bowels! / That the juicy beefsteak turns into scissors, / scolding the intestine’s walls!” (“Пусть будет так, / чтобы каждый проглоченный / глоток / желудок жѐг! / Чтоб ножницами оборачивался бифштекс сочный, / вспарывая стенки кишок!”).¹³² Such a threat carries meaning that must be interpreted, of course—the implicit idea, for example, that Mayakovsky is powerful enough to make inert objects revolt—but it also manifests through physiological affect alone: the compressed sequence of fricatives aims to instill a commensurate effect in the Soviet listener: a gritting of the teeth, a clenching of the jaw, and an urge to act.

Mayakovsky illustrates the intended outcome of his sonic bursts with a striking

¹³¹ Ibid., 11.

¹³² Ibid., 18.

final metaphor: his speech incends the workers, who will demolish the bourgeois world with a force akin to gunpowder [*porokh mira*]. This comparison also conjures the image of a vibrational ripple effect: set loose by Mayakovsky's poetic word, it penetrates to the molecular level and hastens the physical dissolution of the world:

Это слово не к жирному пузу, / это слово не к царскому трону, – // Вам, / несметной армии частицам малым, / порох мира, / силой чьей, / силой, / брошенной по всем подвалам, / будет взорван / мир несметных богачей! / Вам! Вам! Вам! / Эти слова вот! / Цифрами верстовыми, / вмещающимися едва, / запишите Волгу буржуазии в счет!¹³³

[This word is not for the fat belly, / this word is not for the Tsar's throne, // It is for you, / an infinite army of small particles, / the gunpowder of the world, / by whose power, / power, / dropped into every basement, / will explode / the world of infinite rich men! / At you! At you! At you! / These words here! / Write the Volga onto the bourgeoisie's bill / using milestone digits / that barely fit!]

In “Paris: Chats with the Eiffel Tower” (“Parizh: Razgovorchiki s eifelevoi bashnei,” 1923) Mayakovsky gives another, if somewhat more rhetorical, example of his ability to trigger the world's socio-economic and physical disintegration through his vibrating radio voice. Here, sound is treated less in terms of its somatic effect on the listener, but in its ability to transgress literal and ideological boundaries. The poem reflects Mayakovsky's impressions from his 1922 visit to Paris and recalls a lonely night-time stroll through a capital which he perceived as inhospitable and repellently bourgeois. At the same time, the text anticipates the motif of Mayakovsky's radio voice penetrating into the European airwaves and manipulating the enemy both ideologically and physically, through affective electronic sounds. While Mayakovsky depicts himself as being physically present in Paris—“I furrow Paris – / Horrifyingly alone” (“Я борозжу Париж – / до жути одинок”)—he also forges a remote sonic connection with the Eiffel Tower

¹³³ Maiakovskii, “Svolochi!,” 19.

during their sudden encounter, speaking as a Soviet radio tower to the most infamous international symbol of radio communications:

ко мне, / к большевику, / на явку / выходит Эйфелева из тумана. / – Т-ш-ш-ш,
/ башня, / тише шлепайте! – / увидят! – / Я вот что скажу / (пришипился в
шепоте, / ей / в радиоухо / шепчу, / жужжу): / – Я разагитировал вещи и
здания. / Мы – / только согласия вашего ждем. / Башня – / хотите возглавить
восстание? / Башня – / мы / вас выбираем вождем!¹³⁴

[Out of the fog the Eiffel comes / to me, / to the Bolshevik, / for a secret meeting. /
Ps-s-s-t, / tower, / shuffle more quietly! – / you will be seen! – / Here’s what I’ll
say / (hushing below my breath, / I whisper / murmur / into her / radio ear): / I have
agitated things and buildings. / We / are only waiting for your consent. / Tower – /
would you like to lead an uprising? / Tower – / we / elect you as our leader!]

Mayakovsky’s agitating voice, with its self-proclaimed ability to shake loose entire cities, here modulates to an almost mollifying tone to entice the greatest of radio towers to join the Soviet project. By addressing himself to the radio tower, Mayakovsky seeks to indirectly tempt all French citizens to turn their back on capitalist society and embrace the Bolsheviks’ aims. The text’s tone runs the remarkable gamut from confidential tenderness towards the tower: “We will meet you more tenderly, / than first lovers meet their beloved” (“Мы встретим вас нежней, / чем первые любимые любимых”), to latent aggression toward the unrepentant bourgeois: “the Metro is with me – / they // will use blood to wash / off the walls / posters of perfumes and powders” (“метро со мною – / они // кровью смоят / со стен / плакаты духов и пудр”), as well as toward those who refuse to heed his call—possibly even the Eiffel Tower itself, should it resist: “Decide, tower, / now rise up all, / having smashed Paris from top to bottom” (“Решайтесь, башня, – / нынче же вставайте все, / разворотив Париж с верхушки и до низу”).¹³⁵

Mayakovsky once again metaphorically transcends the border between Europe and

¹³⁴ Maiakovskii, *PSS*, vol. 4, 75-76.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 78.

the Soviet Union through a violently agitating “radio voice” in “The Voice of Red Square” (“Golos krasnoi ploshchadi,” 1927), a poetic outcry against the assassination of the Soviet envoy Petr Voikov (1888-1927) in Warsaw on June 7, 1927, at the hands of a White Russian émigré. The poem describes Voikov’s funeral in the Mausoleum on Red Square, an event accompanied by numerous speeches and directly broadcast via radio:

В радио / белой Европы / лезьте, / топот и ропот: / это / грозит Москва / мстить / за товарища / вам. / Слушайте / голос Рыкова – / народ его голос выковал — / стомиллионный народ / вам / «Берегись!» / орет. / В уши / наймита и барина / лезьте слова Бухарина. / Это / мильон партийцев / слился, / чтоб вам противиться. / Крой, / чтоб корона гудела, / рабоче-крестьянская двойка. / Закончим, / доделаем дело, / за которое – / пал Войков.¹³⁶

[Jump / into the radio / of white Europe, / clatter and clamor: / this / is Moscow / threatening / to avenge / its comrade. / Hear / Rykov’s voice – / which the people have forged in steel – / a people of one hundred million / is yelling / at you / “watch yourself!” / Jump into the ears / of the hireling and his master, / Bukharin’s words. / This / is a million party members / fused / in order to oppose you. / Raise hell / until the crown resounds, / workers and peasants. / We will finish, / we will complete the task / for which / Voikov fell.]

Infiltrating European homes by broadcast, Mayakovsky attempts what he fears the papers will fail to do: to stir an outcry about the diplomat’s murder among the listeners. The poem suggests that the orators’ mouths serve to channel the fury of the Soviet citizens (and their names themselves serve as a threatening onomatopoeic proof: from the victim, Voikov—*voi* meaning moan or groan, to Bukharin—*bukh* connoting a boom or explosion, and Rykov—the word *ryk* meaning roar. This sonic fury is further amplified by the radio medium, whose transmissions are directed not at listeners already sympathetic to the Soviet cause, but at the ears of the Polish nobility. Mayakovsky’s use of the word “revenge” [*mstit’*], as well as the poem’s setting, allude to the gruesome Soviet response to

¹³⁶ Maiakovskii, *PSS*, vol. 8, 139.

the assassination: on June 10, the day before Voikov's funeral, twenty Polish aristocrats were executed on Red Square without trial as part of the government's retribution.

As my reading of these poems has tried to show, their detailed descriptions of how radio sound affects its listeners (“Jump into the ears,” “Raise hell until the crown resounds,” and “It just wrecks / the ears. / A radio tornado”) are not only metaphors for radio's efficient distribution of the communist idea among friend and foe; they also gesture toward an understanding of sound as a weapon. This element of military conflict was arguably always present in Mayakovsky's verse: the early poems about World War I, for example, clearly reflect Italian Futurists' celebration of warfare. But beginning in the early 1920s, Mayakovsky established a connection between the semantics of metal—with its connotations of weaponized conflict—and sound; the “voice forged in steel” by the Soviet populace is here as physically threatening as the bayonets and Mausers Mayakovsky championed in the 1910s. And his descriptions of the poetic craft—that struggle for ever greater concision and directness—likewise echo this militaristic subtext. In “The Fifth International,” he presents his novel, unliterary poetic idiom as a combination of terseness and sonic aggression: “if / I say: / ‘A! – / then this ‘a’ / is a horn for humanity at war. / If I say: / ‘B!’ – / it is a new bomb for the human struggle” (“если / Я говорю: / «А! – / это «а» / атакующему человечеству труба. / Если я говорю: / «Б!» – / это новая бомба в человеческой борьбе”).¹³⁷ As a result, when Mayakovsky exclaims, “I view the constructed poem [*sdelannoe stikhotvorenje*] as a weapon,” he also alludes to this element of sonic violence, which he phonetically embeds in his poetic texts and which their

¹³⁷ Ibid., vol. 4, 108.

performance on the radio would serve to actualize.¹³⁸

* * *

I have attempted to show that Mayakovsky's abiding interest in the "live" word (*zhivoe slovo*), spoken and performed, rather than written or printed, guided his approach to literary texts as auditory transmissions. But Mayakovsky not only transferred radio sound, and the demands it poses to speech, to written texts; he also argued that poetry should increasingly be a part of radio art and predicted a radio-centric Soviet literary system. As a result, his criteria for evaluating literary texts shifted dramatically: a writer's aesthetic merit, for instance, became tied to the suitability of his voice to convey intonational complexities and speak to a mass listenership. In his "radio poems," Mayakovsky draws on the figure of a cosmic radio station that simultaneously receives and emits sonic signals, synthesizing the voices of millions, 'picking up' the "social commission" [*sotsial'nyi zakaz*], and re-channeling it at the Soviet masses as optimized sound. The proper "radio poem" would both carry a political message and thematize its own aural transmission; sonic charge was seen as equally important as the ideas it expresses using graphic symbols.

The chapter's secondary aim has been to show that the oft-derided "agitational" nature of Mayakovsky's verse after the Revolution, and especially after the early 1920s—almost universally seen as a betrayal of his own talents—is an aesthetically nuanced response to electronic sound transmissions. Rather than being less experimental than his early Futurist writing, this body of work strives for an intonationally complex and somatically affective literary idiom that must be heard, rather than silently read. It does not

¹³⁸ Vladimir Maiakovskii, "Nashe otnoshenie," in *PSS*, vol. 12, 196.

restrict itself to conjuring a new literary sonority thematically, by using the theme of radio and telephone communications, but embodies them within the texture of his works.

Moreover, despite pledging his oratory talents to the Bolshevik cause, Mayakovsky's understanding of broadcasting was not eclipsed by its agitational role. He also used his "radiophonic" poetics for egocentric and grandiose forms of literary self-fashioning that sharply contrast with the ideals of proletarian literature.

Chapter 3

The Radio Poetics of Osip Mandelstam's *Voronezh Notebooks*

The two preceding chapters have shown how two distinct poetics, those of Khlebnikov and Mayakovsky, were affected by the novel and arresting sounds of radio in the late 1910s and 1920s. By the early 1930s, radio sound was increasingly assimilated into a rich sonic tapestry in both enclosed spaces—restaurants, workers' clubs, offices and factories, and the outdoors—busy urban intersections, public parks, and entire villages. As it became more pervasive, the reception of radio sound also grew more ambivalent. Gone was the avant-garde's utopian enthusiasm for radio's unifying and life-changing force, which had inspired Khlebnikov's lyrical broadcast fantasies and Mayakovsky's grotesque escape from literary debates by morphing into an incarnate radio tower. Furthermore, as preliminary censorship was imposed on radio stations, and the authorities' ideological demands for radio programming became increasingly stringent, opportunities for listening to experimental radio broadcasts grew fewer and fewer. The Soviet Writer's Congress in 1934 officially put an end to the era of innovative radio formats, declaring such works "formalist experimentation" by analogy to the stylistically innovative prose of the 1920s. On its face, the "black dish" [*chernaia tarelka*], as the round wire speakers were known in the Soviet vernacular, was increasingly a one-sided outlet of political propaganda. Indeed, its primary purpose by the 1930s was arguably not even to convey facts and information, but to relay emotionally charged "signs of belonging to the Soviet world."¹

¹ A. I. Kuliapin and O. A. Skubach, *Mifologiya sovetskoi povsednevnosti v literature i kul'ture stalinskoi epokhi* (Moscow: Iazyki slavianskoi kul'tury, 2013), 52-53. "[В] эфир попадают не столько вербальные сообщения, сколько признаки причастности к советскому миру." Unless otherwise noted, all translations in this chapter are my own.

But not only the triumphs of Soviet society—its sporting victories, military parades, and successful scientific expeditions—were relayed as sound. Toward the mid-1930s, news of the Trotskyist “conspiracy” and of the first show trials, which vividly demonstrated supposed threats to the regime, also claimed airtime. In *Moscow, 1937*, Karl Schlögel thus aptly suggests that “the violence of the 1930s is inconceivable without the thirties’ sound. The Great Terror was accompanied by a peculiar ‘Noise of Time,’ to quote the title of a volume of poetic essays by Osip Mandelstam. The Soviet Union of the 1930s would be a particularly revealing subject for a study of the transformation of the acoustic cosmos.”² In fact, Schlögel’s passing comment broaches an important phenomenon that my readings below will also reflect: the increasing propensity of Soviet citizens to “think history” in terms the Soviet “soundscape”³—the environment constituted by the sounds around us and the technological media that create or amplify them.⁴

This chapter re-examines Osip Mandelstam’s oft-noted sensitivity to sound, and his particularly sonorous later verse, against these transformations of the Soviet acoustic environment. His case offers a rare opportunity for approaching poetic texts through a

² Schlögel, *Moscow, 1937*, 433.

³ The term “soundscape” was coined by R. Murray Schafer in his seminal work *The Tuning of the World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977). The sound historian Emily Thompson updates the concept for cultural history as “simultaneously a physical environment and a way of perceiving that environment; it is both a world and a culture constructed to make sense of that world [...]. A soundscape’s cultural aspects incorporate scientific and aesthetic ways of listening, a listener’s relationship to their environment, and the social circumstances that dictate who gets to hear what.” Thompson, “Sound, Modernity and History,” in *The Sound Studies Reader*, edited by Jonathan Sterne (New York: Routledge, 2012), 117.

⁴ Such a study of the early Soviet soundscape, which considers sound media, urban and industrial noises, and other related stimuli, has yet to be written. For more on how city life, work environments, and important historical events of the 1920–30s were increasingly experienced in terms of sound elsewhere, see *Hearing History: A Reader*, edited by Mark M. Smith (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2004) and *Sounds of Modern History: Auditory Cultures in 19th- and 20th-Century Europe*, edited by Daniel Morat (New York: Berghahn, 2014).

history of sound media: not only does the sonority of his verse continue to fascinate and confound scholars; Mandelstam also overtly acknowledges the evocative world of electrified music, noises, and voices and reflects on the relationship between sound, time, and memory. A prominent interest in technologically reproduced sounds unites his meditations on the disembodied voice from the first published volume of poems, *Stone* (*Kamen'*, 1913), to his sole surviving radio play, “Goethe’s Youth” (“Molodost' Gete,” 1935), and the fragmentary, haunting “Voronezh Notebooks” (1935–1937). The latter works, in particular, show a reliance on the modern soundscape and a “radio aesthetics” that have not been previously documented: Mandelstam’s celebration of the intangible telephone voice of the 1920s returns with particular poignancy in these poems of the mid-1930s, which are akin to broadcasts channeled through the distorting mechanism of an early radio receiver.

As in the chapter on Khlebnikov, my approach contests the understanding of Mandelstam’s exile as a sealed echo chamber and shows how the poet’s engagement with Soviet sound media—above all, the radio—became a source of the rich aurality of his later verse. On the one hand, Mandelstam’s immersion into the 1930s soundscape, resonant with alarming signals, nostalgic transmissions, and the noisy static of Soviet propaganda, resulted in a “schizophonia” that further strained the already fragile psyche of the hounded poet. On the other hand, the “sonorous architectonics” of his late verse is unthinkable without the figure of radiating sonic meaning. His meditations on the images of breathing, sounding out, and the sky reveal radio-inspired “fantasies of transmission, of sonic emanation, of airy imagination, and the possibilities of making concrete such projections

through ideas of nation and community,” to borrow Brandon LaBelle’s apt formulation.⁵ As a result, despite his increasing isolation and inability to publish, his “radio fantasies” imbue Mandelstam’s final works with a surprising faith in a future interlocutor based on poetry’s survival as sound, rather than as printed text.

The Poetics of the Telephone Voice

Beginning with his first collection of verse, Mandelstam’s poems depict the concrete properties of sounds, noises, and voices and consider the more abstract qualities of acoustic phenomena, such as their ephemerality and emotional charge. Moreover, sound and aurality shape even his early works: by Mandelstam’s second book of verse, *Tristia* (1922), a central figure of his poetics is the “blessed, senseless word” [*blazhennoe, bessmyslennoe slovo*], which privileges indeterminate sound over clear meaning.⁶ Meaning never dictates the poet’s choice of predictable words; their sound itself shapes the text’s significance, as Joseph Brodsky reminds us: “a poem begins with a sound, with ‘a sonorous molded shape of form’.”⁷ Indeed, Mandelstam ascribes a great deal of autonomy to the sounded word, famously relying on the metaphor of selfhood or the soul (*psikheia*). In his seminal essay “The Word and Culture” (*Slovo i kul'tura*, 1922), the inner sense of poetic language and its articulated sounds (*zhivoe slovo*) are described as mutually constitutive: “The word is a Psyche. The living word does not designate an object, but freely chooses for its dwelling place, as it were, some objective significance, material thing,

⁵ LaBelle, *Acoustic Territories*, 207.

⁶ Osip Mandel'shtam, “V Peterburge my soidemsia snova,” in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem v trekh tomakh* (PSSP), vol. 1, 111.

⁷ Joseph Brodsky, “The Child of Civilization,” in *Less Than One: Selected Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986), 140.

or beloved body.”⁸

In his “Notes on Poetry” (“Zametki o poezii,” 1923), Mandelstam characterizes the historical development of poetic speech dialectically, in terms of a “turbulent morphological flowering, on the one hand, and petrification of the morphological lava under the core of meaning, on the other hand.” Such bursts of creativity are driven by consonants, whose power he describes in a way that recalls Khlebnikov’s *zaum* theories: “Poetic speech is enlivened by a wandering, multi-conceptual root. The multiplier of roots—the consonantal sound—is the indicator of its vitality [...] The word multiplies not through vowels, but through consonants.”⁹ Strikingly, Mandelstam’s description of this lively consonantal din prefigures his mimetic incorporation of radio sounds into the verse of the 1930s, allegedly justified by the inherent guttural density of the Russian language: “The Russian poem is saturated by consonants, which make it clatter and clack and whistle [*i tsokaet, i shchelkaet, i svistit imi*].”¹⁰ And Mandelstam’s praise for Pasternak’s verse associates poetic invention with sensitivity to sounds and disparages poets who have become “deaf to the noise of language, hard of hearing and [...] miss the surf of sound waves”¹¹ (“стали глохнуть к шуму языка, становились тугими на ухо к прибою

⁸ Osip Mandelstam, “The Word and Culture,” in *Critical Prose and Letters*, edited by Jane Gary Harris (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1979), 115. Osip Mandel'shtam, “Slovo i kul'tura,” in *PSSP*, vol. 2, 53. “Слово—Психея. Живое слово не обозначает предметы, а свободно выбирает, как бы для жилья, ту или иную предметную значимость, вещьность, милое тело.”

⁹ Osip Mandel'shtam, “Vulgata (Zametki o poezii),” in *PSSP*, vol. 2, 141. “[...] буйное морфологическое цветение и отвердение морфологической лавы под смысловой корой. Поэтическую речь живит блуждающий, многосмысленный корень. Множитель корня – согласный звук, показатель его живучести [...] Слово размножается не гласными, а согласными.”

¹⁰ Mandel'shtam, “Slovo i kul'tura,” 115.

¹¹ Osip Mandelstam, “Notes on Poetry,” in *Critical Prose and Letters*, 166.

ЗВУКОВЫХ ВОЛН”).¹²

Discussions of Mandelstam’s views about the nature of meaning often justifiably stress his sources in classical mythology and contemporary intertexts.¹³ The goal of my reading, by contrast, is to show that his interest in sound cannot be explained fully without considering Mandelstam’s keen awareness of acoustic, and especially electronically mediated noises and voices. Scholars have noted the recurring motif of the telephone in his early verse, for instance.¹⁴ In her study on the telephone in Russian literature, Irina Lazarova traces the medium’s symbolic association with death, fate, and power in Mandelstam’s poems. She demonstrates that his early poems employ telephone conversations as an element of plot and to thematize dialogicity, while it merely serves as a metaphor in the works of the 1930s.¹⁵ But by focusing on texts that explicitly name the medium, and by treating phone conversations only as symbols or elements of plot, her insightful reading misses how the telephone, along with other sources of electronic sound, underlies Mandelstam’s exploration of visual versus audible words and helps transform the very phonetic texture of his poems. For instance, in “The Telephone” (“Telefon”) and “Your wonderful pronunciation” (“Tvoe chudesnoe proiznoshen'e”), both written in 1918, Mandelstam incorporates electronically amplified speech both on the thematic and the mimetic level. Beyond associating the telephone with fate and death, these texts reflect

¹² Mandel'shtam, “Vulgata (Zametki o poezii),” 142.

¹³ The foundational texts about the inter- and subtexts of Mandelstam’s works, which first demonstrated the extent to which readers needed to “assimilate his culture,” are Kiril Taranovsky, *Essays on Mandel'shtam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976) and Omry Ronen, *An approach to Mandel'shtam* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1983).

¹⁴ See Irina Lazarova, “*Hier spricht Lenin*”: *Das Telefon in der russischen Literatur der 1920er und 30er Jahre* (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2010), 131-144; and Roman Timenchuk, “K simvolike telefona v russkoi poezii,” in *Zerkalo: semiotika zerkal'nosti*, ed. Z. G. Mints. *Trudy po znakovym sistemam*, vol. 22 (Tartu: Tartuskii Gosudarstvennyi Universitet, 1988), 155-163.

¹⁵ Lazarova, 144.

Mandelstam's growing concern with the "grain" of disembodied and technologically mediated voices—a result of the increasing ubiquity of the gramophone and telephony during those years:

Твое чудесное произношенье –
Горячий посвист хищных птиц,
Скажу ль: живое впечатленье
Каких-то шелковых зарниц.

«Что» – голова отяжелела.
«Цо» – это я тебя зову!
И далеко прошелестело:
Я тоже на земле живу.

Пусть говорят: любовь крылата,
Смерть окрыленное стократ.
Еще душа борьбой объята,
А наши губы к ней летят.

И столько воздуха и шелка
И ветра в шепоте твоём,
И, как слепые, ночью долгой
Мы смесь бессолнечную пьем.¹⁶

[Your wonderful pronunciation: / The dry call of a predatory bird / Or, rather, the living image of / Silken sheets of lightning. // "What?" Your head grew heavy. / "Vot?" I am calling to you. / From a distant voice: / *I, too, live on this earth.* // Let them whisper: If love has wings, / Death has a hundred more. / The soul fights its embrace / Even as our lips race to it. // So much air and silk / And whispering winds. / As if blind, we drink / The sunless potion of long night.¹⁷]

The poem describes the experience of a telephone conversation; the interlocutor's voice is miraculous and highly evocative: the speaker's inability to see the other is treated as a blindness that stimulates the auditory and tactile senses. Lines such as "Goriachii posvist khishchnykh ptits" ("The dry call of a predatory bird") convey both pitch—through the preponderance of the high-pitched vowel *i*—and the "grain" of the telephone voice—

¹⁶ Mandel'shtam, "Tvoe chudesnoe proiznoshen'e," in *PSSP*, vol. 1, 99.

¹⁷ Osip Mandelstam, "Your wonderful pronunciation," in *Tristia*, translated by Kevin J. Kinsella (Los Angeles: Green Integer, 2007).

through the accumulation of fricatives and plosives—marked by the early receiver’s crackling noise and other mechanical distortions. In addition to how the telephone voice impacts the imagination, triggering a sequence of vivid images, the poem conveys physical affect through images of lightness and heaviness (“Chto – golova otiazhelela”), and through metaphors of lightning, silk, and wind. At the same time, the hot hissing sound described by the speaker suggests ephemerality and connotes something menacing, capable of bereaving him by taking away both voice and the life it signals. This tenuous nature of communication is further emphasized by playful phonetic banter, such as “What” – “Vot” (“Chto” – “Tso”), another allusion to the limits of early telecommunications, which blurred and swallowed sounds, requiring constant clarification: “It’s me calling to you” (“Это я тебя зову!”). And this telephonic dialog is immediately recast as an experience that affirms the individual self: the indeterminate rustling [*shelest*] of the voice stands as a marker of subjectivity. The exchange can also be read as a monolog: the speaker’s awareness of his voice leaving the body and venturing forth establishes a sudden sense of existential self-awareness: “And it rustled far away: / I, too, live on this earth” (“И далеко прошелестело / Я тоже на земле живу”).

Mandelstam is keenly aware of the relationship between the telephone voice’s transcendent immateriality and its physical existence—as it disappears, the voice travels through the air and physically affects others. Sound and space are conjoined: the adverb *daleko* (“into the distance”) suggests directionality and speaks to Mandelstam’s interest in how sound enables communication across space, which he further explores in the Voronezh poems.

As in much of his oeuvre, presentiments of death dominate Mandelstam’s

experience of the telephone voice. Hearing the voice—both the echo of his own speech and the sounds of another—is invigorating, but the speaker also senses that the intervening technology filters the body out and momentarily places his physical being into question. In the third stanza, the voice that was initially likened to birds is related to death through a contiguous image (birds – wings): “Death has a hundred times more wings” (“Смерть окрыленное стократ”). The entire stanza serves as a phenomenological record of the telephone voice, conceived as a meeting of two lovers’ voices in the ether. The soul [*dusha*—etymologically related to “breathing” [*dyshat*] and “breath” [*dykhanie*—is the voice in its lingering auditory manifestation, to which the lover responds (“А наши губы к ней летят”). But these lines also comment on sound as an eerie harbinger of death: a phenomenon that fades and dies away despite the fact that we are still alive. Indeed, the words “to her” [*k nei*] in the stanza’s final line refer both to love [*liubov*] and death [*smert*], both of which are feminine. Thus, the speaker’s desire to share his love by speaking words into the ether also implies being drawn toward death: “The soul is still held in struggle / Even as our lips race to it” (“Еще душа борьбой объята, / А наши губы к ней летят”).

The fourth stanza shows that Mandelstam treats electronic speech not only as a form of disembodiment, but as something characterized by physical affect: the speaker’s perception of the ethereal voice is here infused with material substance. The forms of matter he enumerates are light and airy (air, wind, silk); not purely transcendent, but still composed of discrete particles and retain some physicality. Returning to the lover meditating on the voice of the beloved, the speaker continues to read material elements into the transcendent sound of the voice (air, wind, silk—all light, but physical in some

way, containing particles, not purely spiritual), which once again evokes also the gritty, distorted mechanism of the telephone receiver. The telephone voice—or what is left of it—does not operate on the level of information, but affects through attendant noises and vibrations passed through the membrane: “the individuating tones and accidents of speech and even the non-verbal sounds of the body,” to borrow an expression by Steven Connor.¹⁸ Finally, the last lines acknowledge the medium’s effect of acousmating listening—the notion of receiving sound without being able to see its source—which Mandelstam compares to the double restriction of being blind at night.

Although Mandelstam’s verse of his Acmeistic period often invoke “non-poetic” objects, such as the telephone and the “cinematograph” [*kinematograf*], little he wrote establishes a direct relationship between sound media and his aesthetic views. Many of his contemporaries, however, were keenly aware of Mandelstam’s special interest in sound and its various sources. In the early 1960s, when Anna Akhmatova suggested that Emma Grigor’evich Gershtein (1902–2002), a close acquaintance of the Mandelstams throughout the 1920s and 1930s, document her relationship with the poet, Gershtein recalled intriguing details about his sensitivity to radio and the telephone; some of the most stirring episodes of her narrative concern Mandelstam’s reaction to sonic stimuli.¹⁹

Describing the sanatorium in Uzkoie, on the outskirts of Moscow, where Gershtein first encountered the couple, she notes the radio fixtures adorning the walls: “We first met

¹⁸ Steven Connor, “The Modern Auditory I,” in *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Renaissance to the Present*, edited by Roy Porter (London: Routledge, 1997), 205.

¹⁹ Gershtein’s memoirs, which abound with information about Osip and Nadezhda Mandelstam’s sexual preferences, and reveal numerous other previously private details, caused a stir when first published (in *tamizdat*-form in 1986 and again, in Russia, in 1998). For a nuanced discussion of the text that makes a case for its usefulness in relation to Nadezhda Mandelstam’s more canonical recollections, see the review essay by Galina S. Rylkova in *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 1 (Winter 2000): 224-230.

in the library, which was also the living room. Along the walls were sockets for the radio, but there were no loudspeakers—to listen, one had to put on headphones.”²⁰ Whereas the telephone’s ring, even in those relatively calm days, was a worrisome signal full of unpredictability and urgency (“Я, как щенок, кидаюсь к телефону / На каждый истерический звонок”²¹), Mandelstam embraced radio’s comforting effect: “This was Osip Emil’evich’s favorite activity. If it weren’t for a tuft of hair sticking out from underneath the headphones’ frame, he would have resembled a woman wearing a bonnet. But that didn’t concern him in the least. He sat on the ottoman like the Turks do, with his legs crossed, and listened to music with extraordinary seriousness.”²² Gershtein reflects on such details as the relatively poor transmission quality of early radio receivers: “I did not hear him complain once about the dismal sound quality of the mechanical transmitter. He was in love with radio!”²³ As documented in the correspondence she cites, during Mandelstam’s work for the radio committee in Voronezh he would later praise radio’s curative powers in a letter to the convalescing Sergei Rudakov: “Tell the doctors to set up radio headphones for you. It’s beneficial for anyone recovering from an illness. And I will see what I can do at the Radio-Committee.”²⁴

²⁰ Emma Gershtein, *Memuary* (St. Petersburg: INAPRESS, 1998), 8. “Познакомились мы в библиотеке, она же гостиная. На стенах розетки для радио, но репродуктор отсутствовал – слушали, надевая наушники.”

²¹ Osip Mandel'shtam, “Eshche daleko mne do patriarkha,” in *PSSP*, vol. 1, 165.

²² Gershtein, *Memuary*, 8. “Это было любимейшим занятием Осипа Эмильевича. Если бы над ободком от наушников не торчал его хохолок, он был бы похож на женщину в чепце. Это его несколько не заботило. Он садился на тахту с ногами, по-турецки, и слушал музыку необычайно серьезно.”

²³ *Ibid.* “Ни разу я не слышала от него жалоб на мертвящий тембр механического передатчика. Он был влюблен в радио!”

²⁴ Letter to Sergei Rudakov dated December 17, 1935, in *PSSP*, vol. 3, 529. “Скажите врачам, чтобы наушники радио у вас устроили. Это для выздоравливающих полезно. А я похлопочу в Радио-К<омите>те.”

Mandelstam's early affinity for radio was largely due to its many opportunities for enjoying classical music—"Today Chopin is on'," he would remark, or "I'm off to listen to Mozart',"²⁵ but the late 1920s and 1930s also made him attentive to educational programs, news, and live political speeches. Albeit laced with a hefty dose of sarcasm, a 1929 film review commends foreign radio broadcasts as one way to exchange dull, gray Soviet reality for more exotic latitudes: "Now, kindly put on the radio headphones and listen to Hawaiian guitars hum like bees."²⁶ The telephone, too, remained an ever-present source of information. Apart from being crucial to the Mandelstams' increasingly onerous routine of securing a day-to-day existence, Gershtein also describes Mandelstam's rapport with the telephone as a personal obsession leading to histrionic scenes: "After a little while again—eloquent accusatory tirades, running from the room to the telephone in the corridor: fussing, complaining, demanding an answer... He would return, seek advice, and run back to the telephone and exhaustedly fling himself onto the sofa."²⁷ The poet's growing creative, economic, and social frustration—and, indeed, desperation—in the late 1920s is increasingly interwoven with an array of aural clues, both sent and received using sound media. Simultaneously, the act of listening changes: one the one hand, deliberately listening to a musical broadcast, often using headphones, offered a sense of privacy and comfort. But Mandelstam was also forced to attend to disruptive and unpredictable signals, such as urgent phone calls from Moscow and the forcible inundation with propaganda

²⁵ Gershtein, *Memoary*, 8. "“Сегодня – Шопен’, или: ‘Иду слушать Моцарта’.”

²⁶ Osip Mandel'shtam, "Doloi 'Kuklu s millionami'!," in *PSSP*, vol. 3, 234. "А есть другой мир, куда в профсоюзной толстовке и на порог не пустят. Вот извольте надеть наушнички радио, послушать, как пчелкой гудит гавайская гитара"

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 16. "[В]скоре опять – красноречивые обличительные тирады, беганье из комнаты в корридор к телефону: хлопотать, жаловаться, требовать ответа... Возвращался, советовался, бежал назад к телефону и кидался в изнеможении на диван."

sounds from a wire speaker, strikingly captured in the poem “The apartment is quiet as paper” (“Kvartira tikha, kak bumaga,” 1934).

A curious discrepancy between the first version and a later edition of Gershtein’s memoirs reveals how intently her original version stresses the auditory dimension of her portrayal of the poet. Following a passage about the exhaustion due to Mandelstam’s daily litany of phone calls, the text of the 1986 edition depicts him thus: “He was lying on one side, with his arm under his head and his knees bent, and all of his joints took on a special lightness. His hand, agile, yet that of a working man, and his suddenly refined facial features, and even his hips, which were wide like those of a woman, all were transformed into a single hearing organ. He did not at all resemble a person lying down, it was more as though he were swimming in a blissful calm and listening.”²⁸ In her revised 1998 version, the striking auditory metaphor has been softened, making the description far less expressive: “and even his strange bodily frame was subject to some mysterious harmony.”²⁹

As embellished and provocatively impious as they occasionally are, Gershtein’s recollections are an important source of the received notion of Mandelstam’s poetry as primarily sound-driven, engendered by and based on sound. She notes, for instance: “I will always remember certain lines of Mandelstam’s poems as they sounded in his voice, for example, the deeply resonating melodious sound ‘o’ in the word *soprirodnye*, which is

²⁸ Emma Gershtein, *Novoe o Mandel'shtame. Glavy iz vospominanii. O. E. Mandel'shtam v voronezhskoi ssylke (Po pis'mam S. B. Rudakova)* (Paris: Atheneum, 1986), 31. “Он лежал на боку, подложив руку под голову, согнув колени, и все его члены приобрели особую легкость. Как будто и нервная, но рабочая кисть руки, и утончившиеся черты лица, и даже его расширяющийся как у женщины таз, – все преобразилось в единый орган слуха. Он совсем не был похож на лежащего человека, а будто плыл в блаженном покое и слушал.”

²⁹ Gershtein, *Memuary*, 16. “[...] и даже его странное телосложение подчинилось какой-то таинственной гармонии.”

supported by the initial monosyllabic *tak*. In Mandelstam's reading the verse sounded as though it were framed by two vowels: the staccato 'a' and the drawn-out 'o'.³⁰ In Gershtein's memoirs, as well as the letters and recollections of Nadezhda Mandelstam, Semen Lipkin, Sergei Rudakov, and Natal'ia Shtempel', such descriptions of Mandelstam's sonorous recitation are framed by memories of the poet's receptivity to sound media, both in private and in public, suggesting their interrelatedness.³¹

Not surprisingly, given his heightened awareness of sound, Mandelstam's first longer poem reflects the contrasting modalities of the visual and the auditory more thoroughly than his voice-centered poems about the telephone. "The Horseshoe Finder" ("Nashedshii podkovu," 1924), written around the advent of public radio broadcasts in Moscow, contains allusions to gramophone and radio and employs metaphors of the dispersion, inscription, and retrieval of sounds. Catriona Kelly rightly notes that poems such as these were part of a discernable shift toward the auditory in Modernist writing: the "revolt against realism that was a primary motivating factor in the Russian modernist

³⁰ Ibid., 31. "Некоторые строки стихов Мандельштама я запомнила навсегда звучащим его голосом, например, резонирующий певучий звук 'о' в слове 'соприродные', поддержанный первым односложным 'так'. В чтении Мандельштама строфа звучала как обрамленная двумя гласными: стаккато 'а' и растянутым 'о'."

³¹ In a letter to his wife, Rudakov captures the poet listening to music at his home: "Дивно слушал Девятую симфонию" (Gershtein, *Memoary*, 178). Emma Gershtein further describes a special gathering of acquaintances arranged to jointly hear Bach's *Passion*: "Добрые слоны' обещали угостить Осипа Мандельштама пластинкой 'Страсти' Баха. Он никак не мог пропустить такой вечер [...]. За ужином Осип Эмильевич как полагается витийствовал. [...] За столом было несколько приглашенных: одна молодая девушка, затем работник из Радио—он-то и принес патефон и пластинки—и худенький Бонди, известный пушкинист Сергей Михайлович. 'Страсти от Матфея' были записаны в исполнении иностранных певцов и оркестра. Слушать их было таким торжеством для Мандельштама, что он почти не замечал пояснительных слов, которыми товарищ из радио сопровождал каждую смену пластинок" (Gershtein, *Memoary*, 34). Mandelstam did not appreciate the medium's advantage of replaying the recording; when the group insisted on listening again, he protests against having to relive the experience once more: "we are now masturbating!" ("Мы сейчас занимаемся онанизмом!") (Gershtein, *Memoary*, 35).

movement was often also a revolt against the visual,” she notes. “Like Eliot’s *The Waste Land* or Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*, Blok’s *Dvenadtsat’* (The Twelve), Tsvetaeva’s *Poema gory* and *Poema kontsa* [...] or Mandelstam’s ‘Nashedshii podkovu’ (The Horse-Shoe Ode) are poems of the ear rather than the eye. They do not seek to counterfeit an alternative tangible world, but rather to evoke voices; they are [...] polyphonic rather than referential texts.”³² But the poem’s prominent reflections on the ambiguity of sonic echoes and reverberations are also referential in the sense that they depict the transforming soundscape.

A long reflection on poetry as a transmission through time, “The Horseshoe Finder” alludes to the deafening roar of the age, which poses a challenge to poetry’s future relevance: “Where to begin, with what? / Everything chirps and rocks. / The air quivers with comparisons. / No word is better than another word, / the earth honks with metaphor”³³ (“С чего начать? / Все трещит и качается. / Воздух дрожит от сравнений. / Ни одно слово не лучше другого, / Земля гудит метафорой”).³⁴ In the lines that follow, Mandelstam develops what was first sketched out in his “telephone poems”: a metaphysics of earth and sky as the media in which sound comes into being and travels. In addition to the masts of future ships, the noisy forest also evokes the radio towers [*radiobashni*] and masts [*radiomachty*] that had begun to crowd city skies, with their implied connotations of conquered distances. This striking conflation of the natural and the technological realms is echoed in another poem from this time, which is equally concerned

³² Catriona Kelly, *Russian Literature, Modernism and the Visual Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 58.

³³ Osip Mandelstam, “Whoever Finds a Horseshoe,” in *Complete Poetry of Osip E. Mandelstam*, translated by Burton Raffel and Alla Burago (Albany: State University of New York Press 1973), 132.

³⁴ Osip Mandel'shtam, “Nashedshii podkovu,” in *PSSP*, vol. 1, 129.

with its own historic moment: “Gardens hum like a green telegraph”³⁵ (“Шумят сады зеленым телеграфом”).³⁶

Not only does the hybrid, constantly evolving metaphor for the poetic word mirror the polyphonic modern soundscape, but the poem directly alludes to modern methods of inscribing and reproducing sound: what remains of the poet’s song is merely the cast of voice—the image of lips that have fallen silent develops into the oval shape of the horseshoe, which is itself a cast of a different metaphor for the poetic word: “And as he speaks his face perfectly mirrors his voice. // The sound’s still ringing, though what made it has gone”³⁷ (“И лицо его – точный слепок с голоса, который произносит эти слова. // Звук еще звенит, хотя причина звука исчезла”).³⁸ The written, or recorded, word is the poet’s death mask (*slепok*) not unlike the way gramophone records were vividly associated with the departed; this “gramphonic” concept of sound is also suggested by the images of scratching surfaces present throughout this poem and the earlier, yet closely related, “Slate Ode” (“Grifel’naia oda,” 1923), with its imagery of inscription and retrieval: “Only the voice will tell us / what was scratching, fighting over there” (“Мы только с голоса пойдем / что там царапалось, боролось”).³⁹

Toward the late 1920s, a time of increasing distress and personal hardship for Mandelstam, the images characterizing sound transmission as a dispersive, freely roaming phenomenon grow fewer. Where radio and telephone do surface in his works, sound is associated with a frightening, invisible realm of power. In “Fourth Prose” (“Chetvertaia

³⁵ Osip Mandelstam, “Midnight in Moscow,” in *Complete Poetry*, 212.

³⁶ Osip Mandel'shtam, “Polnoch' v Moskve. Roskoshno buddiiskoe leto,” in *PSSP*, vol. 1, 163.

³⁷ Osip Mandelstam, “Whoever Finds a Horseshoe,” in *Complete Poetry*, 133.

³⁸ Mandel'shtam, *PSSP*, vol. 1, 130.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 135.

proza,” 1929–30), Mandelstam’s clearest expression of discontent with the Soviet regime and with literary life in the capital, references to sound media heighten the speaker’s sense of helplessness and isolation before an arbitrary, irreproachable authority. The text, in part, responds to the false accusations of plagiarism leveled at Mandelstam’s adaptation of *Till Eulenspiegel* for the “Zemlia i fabrika” publishing house. The people he describes, all harried by the possibility of repression, struggle to stay tuned to the telephone’s unpredictable signals and are humiliated by this pressure to constant answerability: Kagan “allowed himself to be shaken from his professor’s cell, answered the telephone at all times, did not deny, did not refuse anything” (“Он позволял вытряхивать себя из профессорской коробки, подходил к телефону во всякое время, не зарекался, не отнекивался”).⁴⁰ Describing his work at the newspaper *Moscow Komsomolets*, Mandelstam notes the malfunctioning headphones, most likely used for listening to radio news bulletins: “There were twelve pairs of headphones, almost all broken, and a reading room, converted from a church, without books” (“Там было двенадцать пар наушников, почти все испорченные, и читальный зал, переделанный из церкви, без книг”).⁴¹ The damaged headphones in the church forcefully emphasize how this former place of worship has been stripped of its connection with the realm of spirit. Instead, the telephone now establishes a link to an ominous, unreachable, but ineluctable caste of decision makers.⁴²

⁴⁰ Osip Mandel'shtam, “Chetvertaia proza,” in *PSSP*, vol. 2, 345.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 349.

⁴² The replacement of church liturgy with radio broadcasts is a frequent theme in the late 1920s and is described, for instance, in one of Andrei Platonov’s tales for peasant radio broadcasts, “The tale of the militant atheist” (“Rasskaz o voinstvuiushchem bezbozhnike”), in “*Strana filosofov*” *Andreia Platonova: problemy tvorchestva*, vypusk 5, iubileinyi (Moscow: IMLI RAN, 2003), 716. Another parallel can be seen in the symbolic replacement of the Holy Trinity by the iconic threefold radio horns in public spaces (as seen in the film *Odna*, for instance). And Stephen Lovell notes that the heavy carpets used to minimize reverberation in early radio studios were largely

The secretary is described as occupying the threshold of power—her office and the telephone booth are separated by a door—and conveying visitors’ requests via a telephone located nearby: “The secretary, frightened and compassionate [...] does not serve, but lives in the vestibule of the office, in the telephone waiting room” (“Секретарша, испуганная и жалостливая [...] не служит, а живет в преддверьи к кабинету, в телефонном предбанничке”).⁴³

The increasing presence of technologies for transmitting and amplifying the spoken word in Mandelstam’s writing forcefully underscores the gradual silencing of his own poetic voice. After the scandal surrounding his alleged plagiarism and other public accusations by Soviet critics, Mandelstam’s potential readership began to dwindle. Although the final publication during his lifetime appeared as late as May 1933, he could no longer hope to see controversial works such as “The Fourth Prose” in print and they were recited only to a small group of sympathetic listeners. And although Mandelstam would hold occasional readings until shortly before his arrest in 1934, they were barely advertised and his poetry was, by then, a frequent target of denunciations in the press.⁴⁴

The poem “The apartment is quiet as paper” frames this predicament in a way that will resound throughout the “Voronezh Notebooks”: Mandelstam’s unbearable poetic silencing is here inversely proportional to the sounds of radio propaganda streaming from the wired speaker in his apartment. Mandelstam wrote this poem in December 1933, after moving into his last Moscow residence before his forced exile, a large communal

confiscated from churches (*Russia in the Microphone Age*, 23).

⁴³ Mandel'shtam, *PSSP*, vol. 2, 353.

⁴⁴ See, for instance, Clarence Brown, *Mandelstam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 129-130.

apartment in the Writers' House in Nashchokinsky Pereulok, which he obtained with the help of influential Party theoretician Nikolai Bukharin. The poem has been called a poetic version of the "The Fourth Prose"⁴⁵ and was prompted when Boris Pasternak, upon visiting Mandelstam's new abode, made the insensitive, if well-meaning comment, "now you have an apartment—you'll be able to write poems."⁴⁶ What makes the resulting poem particularly compelling is both the sardonic rejection of such idle domestic comforts and the ridicule Mandelstam heaps on this particular "slipshod dwelling," and the relationship between sound and inspiration that he charts:

Квартира тиха, как бумага,
Пустая, без всяких затей,
И слышно, как булькает влага
По трубам внутри батарей.

Имущество в полном порядке,
Лягушкой застыл телефон,
Видавшие виды манатки
На улицу просятся вон.

А стены проклятые тонки,
И некуда больше бежать,
А я как дурак на гребенке
Обязан кому-то играть.

Наглей комсомольской ячейки
И вузовской песни бойчей
Присевших на школьной скамейке
Учить щебетать палачей.

Пайковые книги читаю,
Пеньковые речи ловлю

⁴⁵ Oleg Lekmanov, *Osip Mandel'shtam: zhizn' poeta. Zhizn' zamechatel'nykh liudei* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 2009), 246.

⁴⁶ Nadezhda Mandel'shtam, *Vospominaniia*, in *Sobranie sochinenii v dvukh tomakh* (Ekaterinburg: GONZO, 2014), vol. 1, 229. "Своим возникновением они обязаны почти случайному замечанию Пастернака. Он забежал к нам на Фурманов переулок посмотреть, как мы устроились в новой квартире. Прощаясь, долго топтался и гудел в передней. 'Ну вот, теперь и квартира есть – можно писать стихи,' – сказал он, уходя."

И грозные баюшки-баю
Колхозному баю пою.

Какой-нибудь изобразитель,
Чесатель колхозного льна,
Чернила и крови смеситель,
Достоин такого рожна.

Какой-нибудь честный предатель,
Проваренный в чистках, как соль,
Жены и детей содержатель,
Такою ухлопает моль...

И столько мучительной злости
Таит в себе каждый намек,
Как будто вколачивал гвозди
Некрасова здесь молоток.

Давай же с тобой, как на плахе,
За семьдесят лет, начинать –
Тебе, старику и неряхе,
Пора сапогами стучать.

И вместо ключа Ипокрены
Давнишнего страха струя
Ворвется в халтурные стены
Московского злого жилья.⁴⁷

[The apartment is quiet as paper / Empty, without any ornamentation / And one can hear the water bubble / Through the radiator tubes. // My belongings are completely in order, / The phone squats still like a frog, / And my scandalized rags and possessions / Beg to get out like a dog.⁴⁸ // And these cursed walls are thin / And there is nowhere else to run, / And I am forced like an idiot / To play for someone on the comb. // And, coarser than a Komsomol cell / And cruder than songs students sing, / I teach hangmen how to babble / Who barely sat on the school bench. // Ration books are what I read / And I catch demagogues' speeches, / A lullaby of threats is what I sing / To teach the Kolkhoz landowner to fear. // Some kind of dauber / A heckler of kolkhoz flax, / A blender of ink and blood / Is worthy of this kind of mess. // Some kind of honest traitor, / Steamed and cleansed like salt, / A keeper of wife and children – / Does in this kind of moth... // And how much agonizing spite / Every allusion contains / As though Nekrasov's hammer / had here driven in the nails. // So let us both, as though on the chopping block, / Begin even

⁴⁷ Mandel'shtam, "Kvartira tikha, kak bumaga," in *PSSP*, vol. 1, 182-183.

⁴⁸ The translation of the second stanza is cited from Peter Zeeman, *The later poetry of Osip Mandelstam: text and context* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1988), 102.

at seventy years – / It is time for you, slovenly old man, / To stomp around in your boots. // And instead of the spring of Hippocrene / A stream of domestic fear / Will break through the slipshod walls / of this evil Moscow domicile.]

The silent, lifeless apartment, which Mandelstam blames for his lack of creativity, sensitizes the poet to muffled sounds such as the water bubbling in the pipes, but also to anticipated sounds, such as those of telephone and radio. This eerie calm, and the paper-thin walls, imply the threat of being listened to and surveilled, another factor impeding the process of writing.⁴⁹ But Mandelstam’s poem also anticipates the sudden intrusion of a sonorous stream from without: the “Demagogues’ speeches” [*pen'kovye rechi*] transmitted through the radio and compressed to the metaphor of a “stream of long-held fear.” Like most inner-city Moscow flats by the mid-1930s, the new apartment would have featured a wire radio speaker [*radiotochka*] that flooded its rooms with news and speeches, contaminating any domesticity with the increasingly charged political climate. The use of the word “to pick up” [*lovit'*]—related to the expressions *lovit' zvuki* and *lovit' radio* (to “pick up” sounds or radio waves)—further confirms the poem’s radio subtext.

Mandelstam may well have heard the celebrations for the fifteen-year anniversary of the Komsomol League, which were prominently covered in the press at the time, as Oleg Lekmanov shows⁵⁰; both Emma Gershtein and Boris Miagkov note that early announcements about the upcoming Writer’s Congress in 1934 were also being aired, a subject even more personally relevant to Mandelstam.⁵¹ The radio’s “stream of long-held

⁴⁹ For an analysis of other socio-spatial factors at play in the Soviet communal apartment, see Katerina Gerasimova, “Public Privacy in the Soviet Communal Apartment,” in *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc*, edited by David Crowley and Susan E. Reid (Oxford: Berg, 2002), 207-230.

⁵⁰ Lekmanov, *Osip Mandel'shtam: zhizn' poeta*, 247, esp. footnote 3.

⁵¹ Boris Miagkov, “Osip Mandel'shtam – radioslushatel',” *Teleradio EFIR: vsesoiuznyi ezheemesiachnyi illiustrirovannyi zhurnal* 1 (1991): 26. Emma Gershtein, “O grazhdanskoi poezii

fear” can thus be seen as referring both to the abstract threat of the Soviet rulers and to their concrete measures to exclude the poet from literary life. The poem represents such menacing radio rhetoric and the act of poetry (the “spring of Hypocrene”) as mutually exclusive. Admittedly, this rhetorical claim is couched in a work of poetry, albeit one that does not aspire to the aesthetic beauty of Mandelstam’s typical work, being “coarser than a Komsomol cell / And cruder than songs students sing.”⁵² Indeed, the poet is not exactly silent, but he describes a kind of sonic contamination by Soviet rhetoric—including the speeches on the radio—which he is powerlessly regurgitating, as the propulsive phonetic patterning of these lines suggests: “A lullaby of threats is what I sing / To teach the Kolkhoz landowner to fear” (“И грозные **баюшки-баю** / Колхозному **баю** пою,” emphasis mine). And tellingly, the poem’s final image is one of violent destruction, rather than creation. All the more striking, then, is the fact that Soviet radio, in fact, played a role in *breaking* Mandelstam’s initial silence after his arrival in Voronezh, and is an integral part of the content and style of the poems written in 1935–37.

“Headphones, my little headphones!”: Listening to Radio in Voronezh

As I have tried to show, Mandelstam’s writing prior to his first arrest was marked by a keen interest in audio media and electronic sound that has not been previously acknowledged. In the increasingly hermetic works written during his three-year exile, which were mostly spent in Voronezh, his awareness of sound reached new heights. In 1933, Mandelstam’s fraught relationship with Soviet authorities reached a scandalous

Mandel'shtama,” in *Zhizn' i tvorchestvo O. E. Mandel'shtama*, 352.

⁵² For more on the intrusion of deliberately “ugly” poetics in the poems of 1933–34, its association with the socially engaged nineteenth century realist poet Nikolai Nekrasov, and some contemporary listeners’ negative reactions, see Gershtein, *Memuary*, 129.

climax that would have meant a certain death sentence, had it not been for protection by high-ranking sympathizers such as Nikolai Bukharin and Boris Pasternak. In November of that year, Mandelstam recited to a group of friends what has become known as the “Stalin Epigram,” a short poem that overtly denounces the leader’s iron-fisted rule. After his arrest in May of 1934, Mandelstam was initially exiled to Cherdyn in the Ural Mountains. But after his health continued to decline and he attempted to commit suicide, he was allowed to move to Voronezh, where he lived from late 1934 to 1937, until shortly before his second arrest and the fatal deportation to a forced labor camp in Eastern Siberia.

In spite of outside threats, his frail health, and financial hardship, Mandelstam’s Voronezh exile is often characterized as a time of unprecedented creativity. Aligning his assessment with that of Anna Akhmatova, Vadim Kreid notes that “space, breadth, deep breath appeared precisely in the poems of the Voronezh cycle. The contrast between the creative achievements and the mundanity during this period is striking.”⁵³ Nadezhda Mandelstam refers to the period as their “Voronezh breathing spell” [*voronezhskaia peredyshka*] and notes Mandelstam’s positive reaction to his new surroundings.⁵⁴ From April to June 1935, Mandelstam composed what would later be published as the first “Voronezh Notebook” with such furious energy that Sergei Rudakov characterized him as a “working mechanism of poetry.”⁵⁵ The second and third “notebooks” were written in

⁵³ Vadim Kreid and E. Necheporuk, editors, *Osip Mandel'shtam i ego vremia* (Moscow: L’Age d’Homme – Nash Dom, 1995), 16. “Простор, широта, глубокое дыхание проявились именно в стихах воронежского цикла. Контраст художественных достижений и повседневности в этот период разителен.”

⁵⁴ Nadezhda Mandel'shtam, *Vospominaniia*, 221.

⁵⁵ Gershtein, *Memuary*, 140. “I haven’t seen anything like it in my life... I am standing before a *working* mechanism (or perhaps an organism, which is the same) of poetry” (“Я такого не видел в жизни... Я стою перед *работающим* механизмом (может быть, организмом – это то же поэзии”).

December 1936–February 1937 and March–April 1937 respectively.⁵⁶

Given the extreme degree of isolation Mandelstam experienced there, the prominent role of sound media in his poetics during the Voronezh exile is not surprising. Unable to publish and no longer mentioned in print, he was now also deprived of the small supportive listenership that had still attended his occasional readings in Moscow. The resulting vacuum was filled, in part, by radio, which became an important source of news and pleasant distractions, such as broadcasts of classical or contemporary music. A paid part-time position at the local radio committee also provided Mandelstam with a much-needed opportunity for work and a modest source of income.

Apart from the memoirs of his wife and other contemporaries, many details of our knowledge about Mandelstam's daily life in Voronezh derive from the letters of Sergei Rudakov (1909–1944), a young acolyte and aspiring poet who helped Mandelstam write his biography and edit his poems. Despite its brevity, and a certain tendentious slant regarding other topics, Rudakov's correspondence convincingly captures the importance of sound media to the exiled poet. As in the earlier period described by Gershtein, the telephone is now a constant fixture in Mandelstam's life; with each day he becomes further aware of his isolation through the need to run back and forth to accept important phone calls, and equally by moments of communication thwarted by a malfunctioning line. Such mishaps are documented incessantly in the letters written during those years: "The conversation with Lina Samoilovna yesterday did not take place because of a faulty telephone line"⁵⁷ or "Do not count on the telephone. You almost can't get through to

⁵⁶ For more on the genesis of the "Voronezh Notebooks" see the comments by A. G. Mets in Mandel'shtam, *PSSP*, vol. 1, 627-633.

⁵⁷ Letter to Sergei Rudakov dated December 1, 1935, in *PSSP*, vol. 3, 528. "Разговор с Линой

Moscow. Every call is a coincidence.”⁵⁸ Or, when the line is responsible for false information: “Forgive me for the distress. The telephone girl—a worthless brat—said ‘per instruction’ that *mistakes do not happen*. Fool that I am, I believed her.”⁵⁹ Gershtein even suggests that the telephone became a medium for dramatic self-stylization and bold proclamations. Thus, Mandelstam allegedly would answer the phone and introduce himself as “writer” [*pisatel'*] or “the poet Mandelstam” to unknown officials or a nurse at the hospital where Rudakov was staying in early 1936.⁶⁰ Such telephone conversations often leave the poet enraged, screaming, and on the brink of nervous exhaustion.

These moments suggest the prominent role sound media would play in Mandelstam’s negotiation of his position in Soviet society, which led to interesting modifications of his earlier thoughts on the role of the interlocutor (expressed in his essay “On the Interlocutor”). As Clare Cavanagh writes, “Mandelstam had never entirely reconciled himself to his loss of an audience, and the yearning to make peace with the Russian public, even at great cost to himself, recurs throughout the ‘Voronezh Notebooks’: the Mandelstam who vows in one lyric to ‘live on, breathing and bolshevizing’ (#312) might well have envied Chaplin’s fame.”⁶¹ Natal'ia Shtempel', one of the Mandelstams’ closest friends in exile, even suggests that in Voronezh the poet’s compulsion to

Самойловой вчера не состоялся из-за порчи линии.”

⁵⁸ Letter to Nadezhda Mandelstam dated April 22, 1937. *Ibid.*, vol. 3, 560. “Не рассчитывай на телефон. Москвы почти не дают. Каждый звонок – случайность.”

⁵⁹ Letter to Nadezhda Mandelstam dated late May, 1935. *Ibid.*, vol. 3, 525. “Прости за тревогу. Телефонистка – буйная дрянь – сказала ‘по инструкции’, что *ошибок не бывает*. Я, дурак, поверил.”

⁶⁰ Gershtein, *Memuary*, 162. This is also suggested by Semen Lipkin’s reminiscences of Mandelstam, which describe a call by Mandelstam to Central Committee member Avel Enukidze, during which he likewise referred to himself as “Poet Osip Mandelstam.” See Lipkin, 28.

⁶¹ Clare Cavanagh, *Osip Mandelstam and the Modernist Creation of Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 300.

communicate became irresistible, which supposedly led to a bizarre and irrational violation of decorum:

And another case. Osip Emil'evich was reading some new poems, he was in a state of excitement. He rushed across the street from his house to the municipal phone booth, dialed someone and began to read his poems, then he angrily exclaimed at someone: “No, you listen, I don’t have anyone else to read to!” I stood nearby and didn’t understand anything. It turned out he was reading to an NKVD investigator.⁶²

Shtempel' mentions that this telephone booth was one of only a few in Voronezh at the time, noting that it frequently served as a vital link to Moscow: “Soon the Mandelstams moved to another apartment [...] Across the courtyard and the street, in the corner building of a former women’s gymnasium, there was then a long-distance telephone station and the local phone booth. There were very few of them in Voronezh at the time. A number of times we waited for hours, usually in the late evening, sitting and waiting for Moscow.”⁶³

The telephone, already associated with existential angst and fate in his early work, now became a vital link to the outside world and its decisions about Mandelstam’s future.

But radio also figures prominently in recollections by his contemporaries, suggesting that Mandelstam’s interest in the medium intensified in his new surroundings.

⁶² Natal'ia Shtempel', “Mandel'shtam v Voronezhe: vospominaniia,” in *“Iasnaiia Natasha”*. *Osip Mandel'shtam i Natal'ia Shtempel'. K 100-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia N. E. Shtempel'. Zapiski Mandel'shtamovskogo obshchestva*, tom 15 (Moscow – Voronezh: Kvarta, 2008), 32. “И еще случай. Осип Эмильевич написал новые стихи, состояние у него было возбужденное. Он кинулся через дорогу от дома к городскому автомату, набрал какой-то номер и начал читать стихи, затем кому-то гневно закричал: ‘Нет, слушайте, мне больше некому читать!’ Я стояла рядом, ничего не понимая. Оказывается, он читал следователю НКВД, к которому он был прикреплен.” This particular episode does not seem corroborated in any other recollections about Mandelstam in Voronezh, but his pressing need to read out loud newly composed verse is reflected not only by Shtempel', but also by Gershtein and Rudakov. Viktor Shklovsky also remarked on Mandelstam’s tendency to “compose” new poems “na glazakh u liudei” and Shtempel' recalls that he frequently recited his poems in public during their walks through Voronezh (Shtempel', 44).

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 34. “Вскоре Мандельштамы перешли на другую квартиру [...] Через площадку и дорогу в угловом здании бывшей женской гимназии в то время находились междугородная телефонная станция и городской автомат. Тогда их в Воронеже было очень мало. Мы не раз часами, чаще всего поздно вечером, просиживали на станции в ожидании Москвы.”

Shtempel' notes that “in Voronezh, longing for Moscow, he never parted with his headphones and constantly switched on the wire speaker.”⁶⁴ Mandelstam occasionally records his listening activity in personal correspondence.⁶⁵ Nadezhda Mandelstam does not explicitly stress radio’s prominence in their daily life, but mentions it throughout the memoirs in a casual tone that suggests its assimilation into their daily routine. Discussing the poem “Not I, not you—they have” (“Ne u menia, ne u tebia – u nikh,” December 1936), she suggests radio as a source for the unusually complex phonetic patterns of the poem: “[O. M.] was listening to Spanish broadcasts on the radio. But his Spanish phonetics were probably quite fantastical.”⁶⁶ Commenting on the poem “I’m down in a lion’s ditch” (“Ia v l'vinyi rov,” February, 1937), she protocols: “O. M. was listening to Marian Anderson on the radio.”⁶⁷

The conditions for regular exposure to radio broadcasts were good even in relatively remote Voronezh, located some three hundred miles from Moscow. By all accounts, the larger Central Chernozym Region was at the forefront of the evolving Soviet broadcast infrastructure. In 1932, the city of Voronezh became the site of an

⁶⁴ *Osip Mandel'shtam v Voronezhe. Vospominaniia. Fotoal'bom. Stikhi. K 70-letiiu so dnia smerti O. E. Mandel'shtama*, edited by P. Nerler (Moscow: Tvorcheskaia masterskaia, 2008), 107. “Мандельштам любил радио. В Воронеже, тоскуя о Москве, он не расставался с наушникам и постоянно включал радиоточку.”

⁶⁵ For instance, in a letter to E. E. Popova dated June 26, 1937, “listened to ‘The Nutcracker’” (“слушал Щелкунчика”), in *PSSP*, vol. 3, 570. Or, about Shostakovich being broadcast: “His fifth symphony is rumbling here” (“Здесь гремит его 5-я симф<ония>”), in a letter to B. S. Kuzin dated March 10, 1938. *Ibid.*, 576.

⁶⁶ Nadezhda Mandel'shtam, *Tret'ia kniga* (Moscow: Agraf, 2006), 373. “О.М. слушал по радио испанские передачи. Но испанская фонетика была у него, вероятно, самая фантастическая.”

⁶⁷ Nadezhda Mandel'shtam, *Vospominaniia*, 264. “Незадолго до этого он слушал по радио Мариан Андерсон, а накануне посетил другую певицу—высланную из Ленинграда. Для нее О.М. вольно перевел неаполитанские песни, чтобы она выступала с ними по радио, где они оба тогда прикармливались.”

advanced radio receiver factory, the “Elektrosignal.”⁶⁸ And an article in the radio journal *Radiofront* mentions that, in February 1934, the town entered a competition with Tula, Yaroslavl', and Gorlovka to improve the quality of everyday life, with a special focus on expanding the availability of receivers: “the Voronezh town committee VLKSM is giving pride of place to radio work.”⁶⁹ Particular attention would be given to repairing, improving the quality, and generally increasing the number of radio speakers, by widely distributing wired radio outlets [*radiotochki*] in workers' clubs and other public spaces.⁷⁰ By 1934, officials proclaimed the Region's “radiofication” to be complete.⁷¹

Mandelstam was not only an avid listener of radio broadcasts, however. He also began to work for the Voronezh Regional Radio Committee (*Oblradiokomitet*), probably in late winter of 1934 or early 1935, where he was sometimes assisted by his wife, Nadezhda Mandelstam. The bulk of their work for the Committee consisted of adaptations of literary works for broadcast.⁷² Collectively, they authored numerous radio plays and

⁶⁸ *Govorit SSSR* 16 (1934): 28.

⁶⁹ N. Golovin, “Sorevnovanie chetyrekh gorodov,” *Radiofront* 2 (February 1934): 9. “В своих мероприятиях [...] в выполнении обязательства по соревнованию, воронежский горком ВЛКСМ значительное место отводит радиоработе.”

⁷⁰ Many of these results are corroborated by Marina Tsukanova's dissertation. See Marina I. Tsukanova, “Stanovlenie i razvitie voronezhskogo radioveshchaniia 1925-1991 godov (na primere VGTRK)” (Kandidatskaia diss., Voronezh State University, 2007).

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁷² Radio appears numerous times in the couple's correspondence around this time, suggesting that Mandelstam was working for the Committee (if only intermittently) from Spring to at least December of 1935 or early 1936. In a letter dated May 25 or 26, 1935, he asks his wife for more material in order to resume work on the radio play “Goethe's Youth”: “Gee, the radio is being neglected! Help me. Send materials...” (“Ай радио запущено! Помогите. Дайте материалы [...],” *PSSP*, vol 3, 524). In December, he notes, “I gave a consultation at the Radio Committee” (“Дал консультацию в Радиокomite>,” *Ibid.*, 530). And just a day later, writing from a sanatorium in Tambov, he factors radio into his plans for joint life in Voronezh and playfully suggests his involved personal attitude toward such work: “I will return to the theater [...] and to my dearest radio (a little bit), and you will find a bit of work” (“Я вернусь в театр [...] и на мое родное радио (чуть-чуть), а ты возьмешь работку,” *ibid.*, 533). Evidently his writing for radio was

dialogs, though only one script has survived in full: “Goethe’s Youth” (“Molodost’ Gete,” 1935), subtitled “a radio composition” [*radio-kompozitsiia*].⁷³ Another piece commissioned from the Mandelstams, but not preserved among their papers, was a radio composition based on Nikolai Ostrovsky’s *How the Steel Was Tempered* (*Kak zakalialas’ stal’*), written together with Rudakov. Other perished works for radio apparently included an abridged version of Aleksandr Korneichuk’s 1934 play “Platon Krechet” (“Platon Krechet”), a children’s broadcast entitled “Gulliver in the Land of Giants” (“Gulliver u velikanov”), a piece on Alexander Blok, a program entitled “Gulliver for Children,” and an introduction to Gluck’s opera “Orpheus and Eurydice.”⁷⁴

According to Rudakov, their joint work on Ostrovsky’s *How the Steel Was Tempered* led to a heated disagreement, an event that suggests Mandelstam’s aesthetic commitment to his work for the radio.⁷⁵ Allegedly not satisfied with creating a mere

largely approved by the censors and his engagement only ended due to his deteriorating health after Spring of 1936. Nadezhda Mandelstam also mentions that the Voronezh Radio Committee was dissolved in fall of 1936, when radio broadcasting became even more centralized, making it impossible to find any work in Voronezh (cited in Shtempel’, 59). Sergei Rudakov’s memoirs and letters capture further details about the couple’s joint work for radio, whereas Nadezhda Mandelstam limits herself to a few short references to their collaboration (see *Vospominaniia*, 220). At one point, work for the Radio Committee paid nearly as much as the theatre did, between 200 and 300 rubles. See *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem v trekh tomakh. Prilozhenie. Letopis’ zhizni i tvorchestva*, edited by A. G. Mets, S. V. Vasilenko, L. M. Gidgova, et al. (Moscow: Progress-Pleiada, 2014), 452.

⁷³ Rudakov mentions that for much of July 1935 Mandelstam was occupied with writing and revising this piece (presumably, after his wife had sent the needed translations of Goethe), and notes on July 7: “M. is immersed in radio (Goethe, whom they have asked to revise some more; which means three weeks of work by Nadia and O. nervously jumping around” (“M. погружен в радио (Гете, которого просят еще переправить; это три недели работы Надин и О. пляска вокруг),” cited in Gershtein, *Memuary*, 154).

⁷⁴ See Gershtein, *Memuary*, 156-157 and Mandel’shtam, *PSSP. Prilozhenie*, 445-453 and 461.

⁷⁵ Sergei Rudakov’s account suggests that Nadezhda Mandelstam, too, feared repercussions for deviating from the official party line by adapting and modifying a key work of Socialist Realism: “N. is worried about the political clearness of the broadcast and is scaring Osia into thinking there will be an ideological failure” (“Н. боится за политическую четкость передачи и страшает Осю, что будет идеологический провал”), in a diary entry dated October 11, 1935, in Gershtein,

montage of citations from Ostrovsky’s novel, he insisted on paraphrasing—and “improving”—many sections in his own style (whereas Rudakov’s section was written as officially called for): “[It consists of] a montage of its parts. But since they do not satisfy Osia artistically, he rephrases many of them in his own free style, enriching the untalented author in his own manner and lending him his own beauty, so to speak.”⁷⁶ When Mandelstam presented his version at the studio, he caused a minor scandal and the scheduled program was cancelled. Much to his chagrin, this may have been among the reasons why he received fewer work assignments for radio broadcasts in subsequent months. But Mandelstam, at least according to Rudakov’s version of events, was bothered most of all by the suggestion that his creative personality was somehow ill-suited to radio: “One of the radio workers in the assistant director’s office tried to comfort him: ‘It’s just not your line of specialization.’ He began to shout: ‘I do not and never have had a line of specialization...’”⁷⁷

Despite this avid personal engagement, we have only scant evidence of how Mandelstam judged his radio writing and how he reacted to hearing it broadcast. A note by Rudakov describes listening to a text by the Mandelstams in March 1936, ostensibly their lost work on Mozart and Salieri: “I’m at M’s now. They’re on the radio. The introduction

Memuary, 157.

⁷⁶ Gershtein, *Memuary*, 157-158. “Монтаж из его кусков, но т. к. они Осю не удовлетворяют художественно, он многое пересказал в своем вольном стиле, приукрасил бедного автора своей манерой, так сказать, подарил ему свои красоты. II часть сделана мною. Честный сбор цитат. Сегодня он читал свою первую часть на радио. Там испуг. ‘Книгу, одобренную правительством, признавать негодной стилистически?!...’ Передача снята. Деньги идут только под первую главу. Похоже, что на радио (не наверно еще) не будут больше давать работу. О. горд: ‘Опять я не смог принять чужой строй, дал себя, и меня не понимают’ (я-де гений)... Там один из радиоработников в кабинете зава стал его утешать: ‘Это не ваше амплуа’. Он раскричался: ‘У меня нет и не было моего амплуа...’ (т. е. я молод и много обещаю и безграничен). Все буффонство...’”

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

is ‘not bad’, but naïve. Will be amusing to hear O’s opinion when he returns. His speaker read him and she brutally mangled the poems about Gluck (from ‘Mozart and Salieri’).”⁷⁸ Mandelstam’s wife recounts the poet’s pleasure at hearing his work publicly transmitted: “O. M. often wrote short introductions for concerts, among others for Gluck’s *Orpheus and Eurydice*. He was overjoyed when he was walking on the street and his story about the dove Eurydice resounded from all the speakers....”⁷⁹ Rudakov, too, intimates that Mandelstam held his radio work to a high standard, and a personal care for his assignments for the Radio Committee shows through in a letter to Nadezhda: “there is a tendency here to make well-meaning cuts to my work. I said: I won’t change another letter. All or nothing.”⁸⁰

This impassioned attitude produced results: Mandelstam’s radio script “Goethe’s Youth,” far from being paid hackwork, shows a sophisticated grasp of the interplay of narrative and sound elements required by radio plays.⁸¹ And the work turns its very subject into a meditation on the creation and distribution of poetry by analogy to aerial transmissions, demonstrating the particular openness of Mandelstam’s ear that I have attempted to trace, as well as his notion of the poet as a sound self. The play’s

⁷⁸ Ibid., 176. “Сейчас сижу у М. Они на радио. Введение ‘ничего’, но наивно. Забавно мнение О., когда он вернется. Читала его дикторша, дико коверкая стихи, цитируемые о Глюке (из ‘Моцарта и Сальери’).”

⁷⁹ Cited in Mandel'shtam, *PSSP. Prilozhenie*, 452. “О.М. часто писал вступительное слово к концертам, в частности к ‘Орфею и Эвридике’ Глюка. Его обрадовало, что, когда он шел по улице, из всех рупоров несся его рассказ про голубку-Эвридику...”

⁸⁰ Letter to Nadezhda Mandelstam dated early June 1935, in *PSSP*, vol. 3, 525-526. “Тут есть тенденция благожелательно снижать мою работу. Сказал: ни буквы не изменю. Всё или ничего.”

⁸¹ For an overview of the text’s creation, see Nadezhda Mandelstam’s account in *Vtoraia kniga*, in *Sobranie sochinenii v dvukh tomakh* (Ekaterinburg: GONZO, 2014), vol. 2, 257-258. “В Воронеже мы вместе делали радиопередачу о юности Гете, положив в основу автобиографическую повесть Гете. Нейтральные куски и скрепы, которые делала я, выброшены, и в напечатанном только текст Мандельштама.”

heterogeneous structure alternates between narrative prose, short dialogs (sometimes for a number of voices), musical interludes, short instructions for pre-recorded sound effects (such as the postman's horn or a knock on the door), excerpts from lyric poems, as well as pauses and subdivisions into episodes. The text is stylistically volatile, especially in response to sonic stimuli: mimetic descriptions of sound effects trigger passages of great rhythmic density and with heightened use of assonance. This rich auralty can be gleaned from the concentration of sound-related verbs in a three-line passage describing Goethe, still a child, joyfully smashing clayware: "What a splendid clanging sound the crockery made as it crashed to the ground!... The boy clapped his hands, laughed and shouted. [...] his neighbors heard the clatter of the broken dish and shouted: 'Come on, do it again!'"⁸² ("Как она славно разбилась, как зазвенели черепки! Мальчик хлопал в ладоши, кричал и смеялся. [...] соседи – услышали звон разбитой тарелки и крикнули: – А ну-ка еще!").⁸³

Mandelstam's grasp of writing *for* radio—as well as the conceptual issues at stake: orality versus literacy, hearing versus sight—is demonstrated in subtler passages that deftly mediate between visual and auditory images, guiding the listener to the former through the latter: "[...] fresh pastries from our dear baker Handel—note that the sign over his shop soothes the ear recalling the splendidly sonorous and tranquil music of his namesake"⁸⁴ ("Свежие пирожные нашего доброго булочника Генделя—заметьте, что его вывеска ласкает слух, напоминая о широкой, спокойной и прекрасной музыке одноименного

⁸² Osip Mandelstam, "Goethe's Youth," in *Critical Prose and Letters*, 453.

⁸³ Mandel'shtam, "Molodost' Gete," in *PSSP*, vol. 3, 281.

⁸⁴ Mandelstam, "Goethe's Youth," 460.

композитора”).⁸⁵ Even more striking is the way he evokes a visual image and a brief psychological characterization of Goethe in the final passage—the auditory culmination of the radio script’s various themes—by asking the listener to attend to the sound of Goethe’s steps (presumably, a corresponding sound effect would have been cued to overlap with both of these passages in the script):

Listen closely to the foreigner’s footsteps along the deserted, sun-warmed stone embankment of the Great Venetian Canal. He does not resemble a man waiting for a rendezvous. The area he covers in his stroll is too large and he turns too decisively and abruptly after having measured off 200 or 300 paces.⁸⁶

Прислушайтесь к шагам иностранца по нагретому камню уже опустевшей набережной Большого венецианского канала. Он не похож на человека, который вышел на свидание: слишком велик размах его прогулки, слишком круто и решительно он поворачивает, отмерив двести или триста шагов.⁸⁷

Most pertinent to my argument, however, is the way Mandelstam clusters Goethe’s formative moments as a writer around auditory impressions, crucial events that impacted his sound self. Leading up to, but especially in the ninth and final episode, an impressionistic sketch of Goethe’s sojourn to Italy, sound is everywhere endowed with meaning and metaphorical depth: “The raucous vagabond barrel-organ is better than concert music. The mooing of fattened Tyrolean cows seems full of meaning and life, as if the earth itself had found a voice”⁸⁸ (“Хриплая бродячая шарманка лучше концертной музыки. Мычание упитанных тирольских стад кажется полным смысла и жизни, как будто сама земля обрела голос”).⁸⁹ The amphitheatre, too, though designed with an eye to visual impressions, is presented as the locus where the people converge to feel a sense of

⁸⁵ Mandel’shtam, “Molodost’ Gete,” 297.

⁸⁶ Mandelstam, “Goethe’s Youth,” 466-467.

⁸⁷ Mandel’shtam, “Molodost’ Gete,” 309.

⁸⁸ Mandelstam, “Goethe’s Youth,” 465.

⁸⁹ Mandel’shtam, “Molodost’ Gete,” 307.

unity through shared auditory sensations: “When the people see themselves assembled, they must be astonished—so many voices, so loud and excited”⁹⁰ (“Увидев себя собранным, народ должен изумиться самому себе—многогласный, многошумный, волнующийся”).⁹¹ The young poet is deeply affected by the infectious nature of the arts and the proximity between artist and crowd, which are almost entirely represented through sound metaphors: “the liveliness of its responses [...] and receptivity”⁹² (“живость ее откликов [...] восприимчивости”⁹³). Furthermore, various forms of the word “wave” (*volna*, *volnuiushchiisia*), which are also frequently encountered in Mandelstam’s Voronezh verse, appear throughout this text. The dominant metaphor of sound signals is most fully realized in the closing scene, which enacts a grand lyrical fantasy of transmission along spatial and temporal lines, with young bargemen chanting verse by Torquato Tasso into the evening’s atmosphere:

In the resilient night air you inevitably hear ahead of you as well as behind you, the sound of men’s voices exchanging melodies. They sing on and on, seemingly unable to bring their quivering story in verse to an end. Each time Goethe encounters a new, fresh melody, he turns back to the singer who has just grown silent and, pursued by the melody, retreats from it toward the new, anticipated wave of its continuation. Boatmen sing of the ancient poet Torquato Tasso, exchanging verses with one another.⁹⁴

В упругом воздухе ночи попеременно – сзади и спереди – звучат мужские голоса. Они передают друг другу мелодию, они продолжают и никак не могут закончить какой-то трепещущий рассказ в стихах. Каждый раз, наталкиваясь на свежую волну напева, Гете сворачивает обратно к другому, только что умолкшему певцу и, провожаемый мелодией, удаляется от нее – навстречу новой, ожидаемой волне ее продолжения. Перекликающиеся лодочники поют

⁹⁰ Mandelstam, “Goethe’s Youth,” 466.

⁹¹ Mandel’shtam, “Molodost’ Gete,” 308.

⁹² Mandelstam, “Goethe’s Youth,” 466.

⁹³ Mandel’shtam, “Molodost’ Gete,” 309.

⁹⁴ Mandelstam, “Goethe’s Youth,” 467.

стихи старинного поэта Торквато Тассо.⁹⁵

In Mandelstam's version of Goethe's biography, a key moment in the young poet's life is this revelation about how the sound of poetry transmits and commemorates voice. He dwells on the texture of the air, the medium of this communal song, which moves through it in waves that resemble the waters carrying the barges. The bargemen's voices are described literally—they surround the poet in the darkness—but they also metaphorically depict transmission through the ages: the poet continues a never-ending song, conscious of who came before and who will follow. This lush passage also reflects Mandelstam's own affinity for sonic stimuli and their constitutive role in his work of the Voronezh period. Moreover, the text serves as a surreptitious autobiographical sketch of Mandelstam, with numerous allusions to his own predicament, such as the description of Tasso's fate: "The magnanimous poet [...] went out of his mind from fear that both the Church and State would declare him a heretic"⁹⁶ ("Великодушный поэт [...] помешался от страха, что церковь и власть объявят его еретиком").⁹⁷ Mandelstam's wife, too, pointed out that he chose episodes characteristic of the development of all poets—as well as those which only paralleled Mandelstam's life, and not that of Goethe.⁹⁸

Finally, the nexus between poetry and sonic transmissions suggested by the radio play, as well as the implied overlap between Goethe's life and Mandelstam's own autobiography, is even more relevant in light of Mandelstam's attempt to send four lines of his own poetry onto the airwaves. The script's seventh episode concludes with part of a

⁹⁵ Mandel'shtam, "Molodost' Gete," 309-310.

⁹⁶ Mandelstam, "Goethe's Youth," 467.

⁹⁷ Mandel'shtam, "Molodost' Gete," 310.

⁹⁸ Nadezhda Mandel'shtam, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 1, 257.

poem written in 1933–34: “And Mozart on the water, and Schubert in the avian twitter” (“I Motsart na vode, i Shubert v ptich'em game”).⁹⁹ It is not known whether this radio play was transmitted as intended.¹⁰⁰ Regardless, the text parallels the concerted attempt in Mandelstam’s late work to not only privilege the spoken word and the logic of sound in poetic creativity, but also to represent personal and poetic commemoration in terms of an enduring sonic presence, rather than through the primacy of the printed word.

Mandelstam’s involved relationship with broadcast in Voronezh—both as an eager listener and as someone privy to radio’s production—resulted in radio’s clearly-felt presence in the first “Voronezh Notebook” (April–June 1935). The second poem of the cycle, entitled “Earphones, my little earphones!” (“Naushnichki, naushniki moi!”¹⁰¹), overtly meditates on the medium:

Наушнички, наушники мои!
 Попомню я воронежские ночи:
 Недопитого голоса Аи
 И в полночь с Красной площади гудочки...

Ну как метро?.. Молчи, в себе таи...
 Не спрашивай, как набухают почки...
 И вы, часов кремлевские бои, —
 Язык пространства, сжатого до точки...¹⁰²

[Earphones, my little earphones! / I will remember these dear Voronezh nights: /

⁹⁹ Mandel'shtam, *PSSP*, vol. 3, 303. Nadezhda Mandel'shtam also realized that the radio script included furtive autobiographical elements, especially regarding the formation of the poet’s personality and the role of sound: “Я заметила, что он подбирает эпизоды из жизни Гёте, которые считает характерными для становления каждого поэта, поскольку и сам он пережил нечто подобное” (*Vtoraia kniga*, 257).

¹⁰⁰ The interwar documents of the Voronezh radio appear to have suffered a similar fate to those at the Moscow radio archive. To this date, no surviving recordings of any of Mandelstam’s radio broadcasts have been discovered at the Voronezh archives (confirmed by Oleg Lekmanov in e-mail message on January 30, 2016).

¹⁰¹ The poem was completed around April 15, 1935 and was initially entitled “Wire radio” (“Radiotochka”).

¹⁰² Mandel'shtam, “Naushnichki, naushniki moi!,” in *PSSP*, vol. 1, 197.

the unemptied voice of Ai / and at midnight the little hoots from Red Square... /
Well, how's the subway?.. Don't tell, keep it to yourself.. / don't ask how the buds
are swelling, / and you, strokes of the Kremlin clock, / are the speech of space
shrunk to a point.^{103]}

The poem describes Mandelstam's Voronezh nights in terms of the radio broadcasts from Moscow that he listens to—by them will these lonesome nights be remembered, for better or worse. The lines of the first stanza describe a visual cue (earflaps or headphones)¹⁰⁴ but already mirror radio sound on the phonetic level, too: the dominant 'o's evoke the low, muffled transmission of a voice amplified by the microphone, interrupted by occasional 'i's and fricatives denoting high-pitched interference and other distortions common at the time. Mandelstam further anchors the text in radio sound through the allusion to the Kremlin Chimes in the fourth line, a sonic event that had gained an almost mythological status in early Soviet broadcasting since its first live transmission in 1926.¹⁰⁵

Characteristically for Mandelstam's "radio poems," the text depicts broadcast as a

¹⁰³ Translation by Peter Zeeman, with a few corrections. Zeeman, *The later poetry of Osip Mandelstam*, 113-114.

¹⁰⁴ Omry Ronen has suggested that Mandelstam's image of "airy-oceanic horseshoe" [*vozdushno-oceanskaia podkova*] in the poem "Mne kazhetsia, my govorit' dolzhny" (1935) also goes back to the "horseshoe-shaped radio earphones through which the poet hears the voice of Moscow" in "Headphones, my little headphones." See Omry Ronen, *An Approach to Mandel'stam* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1983), 87.

¹⁰⁵ See Aleksandr L. Mints's account of the origin of this important radio topos: "Поставили микрофон в слуховом окне на чердаке одного из зданий Наркомата обороны, которое ближе всего располагалось к храму Василия Блаженного и Спасской башне. Я вместе со своими сотрудниками находился в одной из комнат на первом этаже этого здания. Отсюда сигналы, после усиления, поступали по проводам на Никольскую улицу в дом №3, где размещался Центральный узел акционерного общества 'Радиопередача', занимавшегося в ту пору вопросами организации передач. Заняв пост на контроле, я начал слушать примерно с десяти часов вечера. В контрольном телефоне слышались звуки вечерней Красной площади. Тогда по ней еще ходил трамвай, мчались извозчики [...]. Я слышал звон цепей, которые связывали моторный вагон с прицепом, цокот копыт лошадей. Слышны были шаги людей по площади, их голоса. Разобрать слова было невозможно – чувствовалась лишь общая тональность. И вдруг, после одиночных ударов, раздался мелодичный звон колоколов, исполнявших 'Интернационал'. Так родилась не только трансляция боя Московских курантов, но и неповторимая передача с Красной площади." L. Mints, "Nachalo puti," *Radio: ezheimesiachnyi nauchno-populiarnyi radiotekhnicheskii zhurnal* 8 (1974): 30.

filter between the capital and the periphery, between an active group of people and one isolated listener, between home and exile, and even between the poet and the crowd. In his study of Soviet diaries, Jochen Hellbeck notes that private written reflections about radio in the 1930s often expressed such nostalgia, a sense of separation, and a longing for unity:

A recurrent image in several diaries is that of the radio providing a surrogate connection to society for lonely individuals bypassed by the ‘general stream of life.’ As a transmitter of the festive sounds of Soviet holiday parades, or of the evening news with its proclamations of the Soviet people’s most recent exploits, the radio became an embodiment of the collective. The more its broadcasts infused solitary listeners with enthusiasm, the more they described a sense of belonging in the Soviet historical universe. Yet the very picture of the lonely diarist, unable to create a feeling of connection other than through the crackling sounds of the radio [...] evokes isolation and despair, the unstated obverse to intensely described scenarios of belonging.¹⁰⁶

Mandelstam’s poem goes further, implying that radio creates the illusion of communication, but forecloses it through its inherent unidirectionality. Broadcast thus inherits the themes of disconnectedness and helplessness developed in Mandelstam’s “telephone poems.” The essentially private and potentially very lonesome activity of listening through headphones—as opposed to the loudspeakers of a standalone receiver or those encountered in city squares—deepens this sense of isolation. And, as in Mandelstam’s early poems about the telephone, the effect of acousmatic listening—without a visual illustration of the sound source—is intensified by the poem’s nocturnal setting. The curious parallel between listening and the image of drinking a voice (*nedopitogo golosa Ai*, literally “the voice of Ai that has not been drunken”) suggests a kind of sonic “starvation” and recalls the telephone poem “Your wonderful pronunciation,”

¹⁰⁶ Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on my Mind: Writing a Diary Under Stalin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 350.

which contains the line “we drink a sunless brew” (“пьем смесь бессолнечную”).¹⁰⁷ P. M. Nerler has suggested that “Ai” onomatopoeically alludes to a disrupted, or distorted, broadcast of Verdi’s *Aida* (this sense of truncation is supported by the lack of punctuation at the end of this line, in contrast to the other seven).¹⁰⁸ Read by itself, the phoneme *Ai* also alludes to French champagne from Aÿ, invoking connotations of youthful excess that run throughout nineteenth-century Russian literature. The ether thus evokes lost youth, adding a temporal dimension to the speaker’s nostalgia. Finally, Aleksandr Mets astutely suggests that the champagne motif itself has a sonic origin: the fizzing sound of its bubbles alludes to the crackling noises heard during breaks in radio transmission, which at the time still filled the airtime pauses between radio programs.¹⁰⁹

In his long essay about Mandelstam’s relationship to another medium, the daily newspaper, Oleg Lekmanov convincingly suggests that this poem should be considered in the context of an article entitled “The Language of Space” (“Iazyk prostranstva”) by one V. Shostakovich, published in *Izvestiia* on May 29, 1934, a year before the poem was completed.¹¹⁰ Lekmanov shows that Mandelstam was an avid reader of *Izvestiia*; it is

¹⁰⁷ Mandel'shtam, in *PSSP*, vol. 1, 99.

¹⁰⁸ Osip Mandel'shtam, *Sochineniia v dvukh tomakh*, edited by P. M. Nerler (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1990), vol. 1, 540. Kiril Taranovsky makes the important observation that those who recall listening to these broadcasts know that “the din of the city, including automobile honks, comes from Red Square for a few seconds before the clock begins to chime,” in Taranovsky, “Mandel'shtam’s Monument not Wrought by Hands,” *California Slavic Studies*, vol. 6, ed. Robert P. Hughes, Simon Karlinsky, and Vladimir Markov (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 45.

¹⁰⁹ Mandel'shtam, *PSSP*, vol. 1, 634. “Образ отразил потрескивание в наушниках радио, отчетливое во время пауз и напоминающее звук лопающихся пузырьков в бокале шампанского.”

¹¹⁰ Oleg Lekmanov, “Ia k vorob'iam poidu i k reporteram...” *Pozdnii Mandel'shtam: portret na gazetnom fone*,” *Toronto Slavic Quarterly* 25 (2008). Accessed June 21, 2016. <http://www.utoronto.ca/tsq/25/lekmanov25.shtml>. For the original text, see V. Shostakovich, “Iazyk prostranstva,” in *Izvestiia*, May 29, 1934, 1-2.

likely that he took note of Shostakovich's sketch on Soviet radio communications. Shostakovich does not elucidate the evocative notion of a "language of space," letting it stand as the kind of semantically charged phrase Mandelstam so valued about the *noivoiaz-* neologisms in Soviet media.¹¹¹ In some detail, Shostakovich outlines radio-related achievements in the Soviet Union ("a powerful broadcast network has been created, radio listening is growing incessantly").¹¹² He is frank about its shortcomings, however, including the lack of local lines of communication among provincial centers and villages; Moscow, he complains, remains the nerve center of broadcast in the Soviet Union, a fact also echoed in Mandelstam's poem and which heightens the distance felt between capital and periphery.¹¹³

In the early 1930s, the pages of *Izvestiia* were littered with news about radio technology and scientific discoveries concerning sound waves. Broadcast received particular attention beginning in January 1934, due to its ten-year anniversary in the Soviet Union that same year. But as Lekmanov documents, articles on other subjects, too, help shed light on the present poem. The April 15 issue of *Izvestiia*—the most likely day of the poem's completion—contains an article entitled "The Moscow Plan at the Mossovet plenary session" ("Plan Moskvy na plenumе Mossoveta"), with a detailed report on the Moscow city administration's discussions regarding civil planning. It describes an excursion by the committee's members through the recently inaugurated Moscow Metro

¹¹¹ Ibid., 1. "Радио вошло в быт трудящихся нашей страны, завоевав себе не только прочное признание как совершенная форма связи, но и как выразительный 'язык пространства', массовый агитатор и пропагандист в эфире."

¹¹² Ibid. "Создана мощная сеть вещания, непрерывно растет радиослушание."

¹¹³ Ibid., 2. "Магистралы радиосвязи работают еще неудовлетворительно. Количество линий недостаточно. Крупнейшей радиотелеграфный центр Союза—Москва имеет всего 10 международных радиотелеграфных связей и 9 внутрисоюзных, в то время как например радицентр Американской корпорации обладает 45 линиями."

(on February 6, 1935 the distance between Sokol'niki and Smolenskaia station was first traversed by train car), which adds further depth to the poet's imaginary dialog with the city: "After the meeting, the deputies left for the Metro. On the *Okhotnyi Riad* station four trains awaited them. Before the eyes of the Moscow leaders appeared one of the accomplished projects of the socialist reconstruction of Moscow in marble and electric gleam."¹¹⁴ Reports such as these, which would also have been broadcast, prompted Mandelstam's exclamation "Well, how's the subway?" ("Ну как метро?").

Far from merely voicing nostalgia, however, Mandelstam's attention to broadcasts from the center and to recent developments in Moscow is perhaps best seen as a form of creative resistance to the terms of his internal exile. Despite the authorities' intentions, the poet continues to include himself in the evolving Soviet project. His "eavesdropping" on the center of Soviet power is overtly provocative, given the word *naushnik*'s older, pre-technological meaning of informant and traitor. In the Soviet context, this term referred to those who covertly denounced fellow citizens to the NKVD, or Soviet secret police (another frequently used synonym, *stukach*, from Russian *stuchat'*, to knock, is likewise based on an auditory metaphor).¹¹⁵ The double entendre was immediately understood:

¹¹⁴ *Izvestiia*, April 15, 1935, 1. "Свой доклад т. Булганин начинает с краткого обзора итогов 1934 г. [...] [К]огда он говорит, что нынешний пленум Моссовета совершит прогулку в поездах метро, Колонный зал оглашается бурной овацией. [...] По окончании заседания депутаты Моссовета отправились в метро. На станции Охотный ряд их поджидали 4 поезда. Перед хозяевами пролетарской Москвы возник в мраморе и электрическом сиянии один из воплощенных замыслов социалистической реконструкции Москвы." The newly built Metro was also the subject of radio broadcasts, such as S. P. Zlobin's "Skazka pro moskovskoe metro [...]," in *Velikaia kniga dnia*, 301-309.

¹¹⁵ Vladimir Dal's dictionary gives the meaning "secret defamer, spy, gossip" ("тайный клеветник, лазутчик, наговорщик"). The ambiguity of the poem's first line is reflected in varying choices by Mandelstam's translators, such as Nancy Pollak's rendition as "My little informers, my earphones," *Mandelstam the Reader* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 172, or "Ear-flaps, my little ear-flap whisperers," which overly privileges the word's third meaning of the ear-flaps on a fur coat. In *Complete Poetry of Osip Emilevich Mandelstam*, translated by Burton

Mandelstam sent a collection of new verse to the Moscow Writers' Union in 1935 that included the present poem; it caused considerable outrage once other members learned of the implicit accusation against them.¹¹⁶ But Mandelstam goes even further in his poem, imaginatively reversing the existing power dynamic and listening in on those responsible for his silencing and exile: the words "So, how is the subway" are addressed at his informers and jailors, rather than friends and relatives in the capital. Indeed, because Mandelstam continued to work on the poem from April to June, Stalin himself qualifies as a likely addressee: on May 14, the leader's speech to mark the opening of the Moscow Metro was transmitted via radio from the Hall of Columns.¹¹⁷

However, Mandelstam's attempt to associate radio broadcasts with an imaginary dialogicity, his "back talk" at the Soviet power center, symbolized by the Kremlin chimes, is brief and tentative. The fact that radio is a unidirectional medium preventing real exchange surely reminded the poet of his lack of a readership.¹¹⁸ More importantly, after Mandelstam gets briefly carried away by buoyant radio, he recalls, mid-line, that writing remains a dangerous exercise: "Well, how's the subway?.. Don't tell, keep it to yourself.." ("Ну как метро?.. Молчи, в себе тай..."). Indeed, this paraphrase of Fiodor Tiutchev's "Silentium!" (1830)—the Romantic poet's famous lyric which begins: "Be silent, hide away, and keep / your thoughts and longings to yourself" ("Молчи, скрывайся и тай / и

Raffel and Alla Burago (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1973), 237.

¹¹⁶ Mandelstam's wife tersely notes: "The headphones caused an uproar in the Union" ("Наушники вызвали бешенство в Союзе"), in Nadezhda Mandel'shtam, *Tret'ia kniga* (Moscow: Agraf, 2006), 342.

¹¹⁷ Mandel'shtam, *PSSP. Prilozhenie*, 445. For the full text, see I. V. Stalin, "Rech' na torzhestvennom zasedanii, posviashchennom pusku metropolitena imeni L. M. Kaganovicha 14 maia 1935 goda," in *Pravda*, May 15, 1935.

¹¹⁸ It is worth noting that Bertold Brecht in the 1920s also criticized this unidirectional quality of radio and proposed refashioning the medium as a two-way communications channel.

чувства и мечты свои”)¹¹⁹—is less about the Romantic trope of inexpressibility than about the real existential threat facing the poet. As in “The apartment is quiet as paper,” radio’s sonic backdrop poignantly highlights his inability—or the unadvisedness—of continuing to write. In this case, he rhetorically aborts the process of committing to paper a fantasy of communication inspired by a Moscow broadcast. As a result, the poem itself formally connotes truncated and compressed speech, rather than the expansive odic forms which radio inspired in Khlebnikov and Mayakovsky’s verse.

Despite Mandelstam’s frustrated desire to be heard, these lines, along with other verse written in 1935–37, also exude a sense of revelatory wonder about radio.¹²⁰ As in Mayakovsky’s celebration of the poet as a hyper-sensitive radio receiver, Mandelstam’s text signals that broadcast has changed his notion of inspiration to encompass external auditory signals. Rather than channeling an abstract muse, the poet has become the recipient and processor of electronically mediated sounds. That which is ethereal and

¹¹⁹ Fiodor Tiutchev, “Silentium!,” in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel', 1987), 105-106. “Молчи, скрывайся и тай / И чувства и мечты свои – / Пускай в душевной глубине / Встают и заходят оне / Безмолвно, как звезды в ночи, – / Любуйся ими – и молчи. // Как сердцу высказать себя? / Другому как понять тебя? / Поймёт ли он, чем ты живёшь? / Мысль изречённая есть ложь. / Взрываая, возмутишь ключи, – / Питайся ими – и молчи. // Лишь жить в себе самом умей – / Есть целый мир в душе твоей / Таинственно-волшебных дум; / Их оглушит наружный шум, / Дневные разгонят лучи, – / Внимай их пенью – и молчи!..”

¹²⁰ Mandelstam’s unpublished, but apparently orally distributed, radio poem even served as a literary filter for the experience of another exiled writer: in a letter to Lilia Popova by her second husband, M. A. Tsvetaev (both of whom were close to the Mandelstams), Tsvetaev writes from a Vorkuta prison camp on April 21, 1937: “I was listening to the latest news on the radio (“Headphones, my little headphones” and so on), I marvel at your spring, in my thoughts I wander among the trees, the rain is patting against the rim of my hat, there is the scent of some kind of flower, words, words, eternally elusive words and unfulfilled wishes” (“Слушал последние известия по радио (“Наушники, наушнички мои” и т.д.), я поражаюсь вашей весне, мысленно брожу между деревьев, дождь стучит по ободу шляпы, пахнет какими-то цветами, слова, слова, вечно недосказанные слова и неутоленные желания”). Here, too, the radio poem framed the longing for Moscow and the experience of a lack of voice (“eternally elusive words”). Cited in Leonid Vidgof, “*No liubliu moiu kurvu-Moskvu.*” *Osip Mandel'shtam: poet i gorod. Kniga-ekskursiia* (Moscow: Astrel', 2012), 385.

transcendent and cannot be verbalized in Tiutchev's poems, the springs [*kliuchi*], has become the miraculous sounds transmitted through the poet's headphones. Whereas outside sound [*naruzhnyi shum*] distracts the speaker from authentic interior experience in Tiutchev's poem, the mysterious external sounds transmitted from Moscow in Mandelstam's poem, so evocative and resonant, are in fact akin to the inner sources Tiutchev exhorts his reader to attend to: "Harken to their song—and be silent" ("Внимай их пенью – и молчи"). For Mandelstam, inspiration comes simultaneously from without and within, given the private nature of listening using headphones. This conflation of exteriority and interiority, as well as distance and proximity, is another meaning of the poem's striking final image of the "language of space" that has been compressed to a point (quite literally, the *radiotochka*, or wired radio receiver).¹²¹

Shortly after completing "Headphones, my little headphones," Mandelstam wrote the poem "After long-fingered Paganini" ("Za Paganini dlinnopalym," April–June 1935) inspired by a performance of the violinist Galina Barinova on April 5. In this text, he superimposes the memory of a radio broadcast onto a live violin concert attended in Voronezh. In addition to reflecting the sensations of live sound, the poem likewise associates nostalgia with the experience of listening to broadcast:

За Паганини длиннопалым
Бегут цыганскою гурьбой –
Кто с чохом – чех, кто с польским балом,
А кто с венгерской чемчурой.

Девчонка, выскочка, горячка,
Чей звук широк, как Енисей,

¹²¹ This word, which was also the original title of the poem (see *PSSP*, vol. 1, 634), denotes the wired radio receiver installed in most Soviet apartments by the mid-1930s, when broadcast became primarily channeled through wires rather than short wave transmissions, in an effort to increase the state monopoly on the medium.

Утешь меня игрой своей –
На голове твоей, полячка,
Марины Мнишек холм кудрей,
Смычок твой мнителен, скрипачка.

Утешь меня Шопеном чалым,
Серьезным Брамсом, нет, постой –
Парижем мощно-одичалым,
Мучным и потным карнавалом
Иль брагой Вены молодой –

Вертлявой, в дирижерских фрячках,
В дунайских фейерверках, скачках
И вальс из гроба в колыбель
Переливающей, как хмель.

Играй же на разрыв аорты
С кошачьей головой во рту!
Три чорта было – ты четвертый,
Последний чудный чорт в цвету!¹²²

[Behind long-fingered Paganini / they run in a Gypsy hullabaloo: / some Czechs with tics, some Poles with polkas, / and now Hungarians galore. // Jane-come-lately, stuck-up girl, / With a tone as wide as the Yenisey, / Comfort me with the way you play... / Marina Mniszek's curly hillock / Is piled on your head, you Polack girl, / And your fiddlestick is sickly, too. // Comfort me with horsey Chopin, / With somber Brahms – no, wait – / With animal-Paris, wild. / With sweaty, mealy carnivals, or / With fresh-brewed Vienna beer – // Nervous-prancing Vienna, in conductor's tail coats / and Danube fireworks, horse-races, / Or waltzes poured like wine / From grave to cradle. // So play until the aorta snaps, / Play with that cat's head in your mouth. / There used to be three devils – but you're the fourth, / The last blossoming wonderful devil!¹²³]

The evening's program triggers a flight of the imagination that transports the speaker away from the concert and into the private experience of an imagined radio concert (or a multitude of concert fragments). (One indication that the speaker is no longer describing a real concert by the third stanza is the fact that Chopin wrote no pieces for

¹²² Osip Mandel'shtam, "Za Paganini dlinnopalym," in *PSSP*, vol. 1, 205.

¹²³ Osip Mandelstam, "Behind long-fingered Paganini," translated by Clarence Brown, in *Mandelstam*, 226-227.

individual violin).¹²⁴ The rapid transitions from program to program, which follow the whims of the listener (“no, wait”—*net, postoi*) resemble the use of a scrolling radio dial to jump from Chopin to Paris to a broadcast from Vienna. And the striking use of fricatives (now plosive: *s chokhom – chekh*, now hushing: “Утешь меня Шопеном чалым”) once again suggests the hissing distortions of a contemporary radio receiver. On such a reading, the poem’s addressee is both Barinova, the live performer, and the radio receiver, an almost mythological creature that obscures the musician, partakes of her infernal, devilish, yet also miraculous qualities, and whose mouth-like loudspeaker opening holds a cat’s head (“Играй же на разрыв аорты / с кошачьей головой во рту”). Radio has become the symbol through which the otherworldliness of all musical performance—an uncanny emanation that also connotes the distant European continent—is best captured and understood.

The image of the cat’s head in, or close to, the performer’s mouth has long puzzled readers, who have read it as a simile for the violin’s coiled end or as an allusion to the eloquence-stimulating stone of Demosthenes.¹²⁵ Two other possible readings require some familiarity with the visual “look” of contemporary sound media. First, the cat’s head brings to mind a radio receiver model introduced the early 1930s: officially known as Telefunken 340W, this device was popularly called *Katzenkopf* for the shape of the dial in the center of

¹²⁴ The choice of the name Chopin itself, given the inconsistency pointed out above, suggests Mandelstam has given in to the logic of (radio)sound, presumably choosing the name Chopin for the sonorous properties of the initial fricative sound.

¹²⁵ Kiril Taranovsky suggests that the image refers to the violin’s neck, seen from Mandelstam’s seat at the concert hall: “речь идет об изображении кошачьей головы на конце скрипичного грифа, который в определенном ракурсе может показаться наблюдателю находящимся во рту у исполнителя.” Cited in B. Kats, “V storonu muzyki,” in *Literaturnoe obozrenie* 1 (1991), 72.

the front panel (see figure 4.1).¹²⁶ Reports on radio receivers both domestic and foreign were abundant in Soviet newspapers, the radio amateur press, as well as contemporary advertising; Mandelstam may also have been exposed to the latest models through his work for the Voronezh Radio Committee.



Figure 4.1



Figure 4.2



Figure 4.3

¹²⁶ This type of receiver did not feature built-in speakers, but headphones or stand-alone speakers could be connected to it. The dial of the first Soviet superheterodyne receivers, the 9n-4 (first built in 1937), also resembles a cat's head, due to the two triangular upper corners of the metal casing covering the dial (see figure 4.2). For an overview of standalone tube radios available in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, see "Virtual'nyi muzei i spravochnik Otechestvennaia Radiotekhnika XX veka," last modified May 1, 2016, <http://rw6ase.narod.ru>.

A radiophonic reading of the poem is also supported by the fact that Barinova was a well-regarded performer whose name became associated with radio from her earliest appearances, which were broadcast from the studio at the House of Unions in Moscow. During her guest performances in Voronezh, she was involved with concerts organized and broadcast by the local Radio Committee and Mandelstam likely encountered her there. If the concert he attended was indeed broadcast, Barinova would have stood near a standing microphone, many of which also resembled a cat's head in those years (see figure 4.3). In "After long-fingered Paganini," then, the experience of broadcast is superimposed onto a live concert performance, suggesting that Mandelstam's longing for culture was closely affiliated with his exposure to the medium, while also underscoring radio's implications of distance and transcendence.

A musical concert is also given a radiophonic interpretation in Mandelstam's "I'm down in a lion's ditch, under a fort" ("Ja v l'vinyi rov i v krepost' pogruzhen"), which was written during his last winter in Voronezh (February 12, 1937) and concludes the second "Voronezh Notebook."

Я в львиный ров и в крепость погружен
И опускаюсь ниже, ниже, ниже
Под этих звуков ливень дрожжевой –
Сильнее льва, мощнее Пятикнижья.

Как близко, близко твой подходит зов –
До заповедей роды и первины –
Океанийских низка жемчугов
И таитянок кроткие корзины...

Карающего пеня материк,
Густого голоса низинами надвинься!
Богатых дочерей дикарско-сладкий лик
Не стоит твоего – праматери – мизинца.

Не ограничена еще моя пора:

И я сопровождал восторг вселенский,
Как вполголосная органная игра
Сопровождает голос женский.¹²⁷

[I'm down in a lion's ditch, under a fort, / Going down, down, down / under the yeast-storm of these sounds – / stronger than lions, more powerful than Moses and his Five Books. // Your summons: how close, how close – / Before childbirth's commandments, and first-born's, which came before all / commandments – / a string of ocean pearls and Tahitian women's gentle baskets. // Approach, continent of punitive singing, / with the deep bottom-places of your voice! / The shy-sweet icon faces of all our daughters / is worth – less than your littlest finger, oh Ur-mother. // I still have time without end, time, all time, / and as a background organ / accompanies a woman's voice / I too accompany this universal rapture.¹²⁸]

The text reflects on the broadcast performances of Marian Anderson (1897–1993), the celebrated African-American contralto who had gained a large following in the Soviet Union by the early 1930s. In 1934–35 she went on tour in Moscow before continuing to Odessa and Kharkov, and many of her popular songs, accompanied by the Moscow Symphonic Orchestra, were also issued on vinyl records. Anderson's repertoire was wide-ranging, but Soviet audiences were especially receptive to her renditions of African-American spirituals, an enthusiasm one of her biographers relates to the political climate in 1937: "Once the audiences heard Anderson sing, they could not fail to be moved by these songs of an oppressed people. The first of Stalin's purges had begun the previous year, and had intensified in December [...]. Russian audiences heard in Anderson's singing the struggles of their own lives."¹²⁹ As the poet's wife points out, for the Mandelstams these spirituals also recalled the case of a personal acquaintance affected by the events of 1937:

O. M. was listening to Maria Anderson on the radio, who was then on tour in Moscow. He has seen her portrait somewhere. But this poem is not only about Maria Anderson. In those days we learned that a singer from Leningrad, who had

¹²⁷ Osip Mandel'shtam, "Ia v l'vinyi rov i v krepost' pogruzhen," in *PSSP*, vol. 1, 227.

¹²⁸ *Complete Poetry of Osip Emilevich Mandelstam*, 279-280.

¹²⁹ Allen Keiler, *Marian Anderson: A Singer's Journey* (New York: Scribner, 2000), 146.

also worked on the radio, had fallen ill... Someone whispered that she was not sick, but that they had arrested her husband, an engineer who had already managed to do quite a bit of time in the camps. We went to see her and learned the details of the arrest. She hoped that her husband would not be sent to the camps a second time, that they would exile him; she would join him and make a living singing... The next day O. M., completely exhausted by work at this time, was lying on the bed during the day and I thought he was half asleep. Suddenly he read me these lines.¹³⁰

Here, too, the presence of radio—never explicitly mentioned, but contextually evident—establishes a purely auditory connection to the outside world, while suspending spatial and temporal boundaries, and even bracketing death: “I still have time without end.” The singer’s voice metaphorically lowers the listener into the biblical lion’s den, reenforcing Mandelstam’s association of radio sound—in this case, broadcast music—with his status as an abandoned outcast. But it also prompts a vicarious experience of the pain and suffering of others (the young friend from Leningrad and the tribulations of African Americans). Mandelstam continues to depict sound in its phenomenological complexity; the poem’s aural quality has a hypnotizing effect characterized by repetition—“lower, lower, lower” and “close, close” (“ниже, ниже, ниже,” “близко, близко”)—and, as in the earlier poems, he dwells on sound as having a spatial quality and serving as an interpersonal link. The poem also shows that Mandelstam’s Voronezh texts use different registers to depict sound: whereas the text about Barinova’s performance is dominated by unvoiced hushing sounds, these lines are characterized by voiced *zh* and *z*.

After an imaginative excursion through the associations of this voice, the poem

¹³⁰ Nadezhda Mandel'shtam, *Tret'ia kniga*, 244. “О. М. слушал по радио Марию Андерсон, гастролировавшую тогда в Москве, видел где-то ее портрет. Но в этом стихотворении не только Мария Андерсон. В те же дни мы узнали, что певица-ленинградка, работавшая на радио, заболела... Кто-то шепнул, что она не больна, а у нее арестовали мужа, инженера, уже успевшего отсидеть немалый срок в лагерях. Мы пошли к ней, узнали подробности ареста. Она надеялась, что вторично муж в лагерь не попадет, его сошлют, она поедет за ним и всюду прокормится пением... На следующий день О. М., совершенно к тому времени изможденный работой, днем лежал на кровати – мне казалось, что он дремлет. Внезапно он прочел эти стихи.”

returns to Mandelstam's personal situation and circumscribes his role in the world and as a poet in terms of a hushed organ accompaniment to a greater voice, personified as female beauty. Once again, his bitter realization of a disbalance between continued inspiration and the increasing inability to respond through his poetic craft becomes focalized through radio, now a potent symbol for his asymmetrical engagement with the world: Mandelstam is no longer a voice in the chorus singing the world's praises, like the organ accompanying Barinova, but someone who merely "accompanies" life by 'tuning in' and following along.¹³¹

The "Sound Self" of the Voronezh Notebooks

These examples of Mandelstam's preoccupation with radio during the Voronezh exile all bear evidence of what has been called the "sound self," a set of mental characteristics typical of acoustical modernity. The psychologist Robert Romanyshyn, for instance, distinguishes between the categories of consciousness characteristic of the age of print culture and the state of mind specific to the television age. In this account, the reading mind is primarily determined by the rational perspective of someone attempting to grasp and interpret what is read: "Our trying to make sense of the text is a means of mastery and control, the perspective of an ego consciousness in the stance of a detached observer of the world."¹³² By contrast, Romanyshyn argues, image-based media such as film, photography, and television fundamentally question "values of linear rationality,

¹³¹ I am indebted to Daria Khitrova for many astute observations about Mandelstam's Voronezh poems, but especially about the relationship in the late verse between speaking and silently listening, between expelling and sucking in air, and its relationship to the metaphor of useful bees versus wasps.

¹³² Robert Romanyshyn, "The Despot Eye," in *Modernism and the Hegemony of Vision* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 344.

contextual coherence, narrative continuity, infinite progress, individual privacy, productive efficiency, detached comprehensiveness, and neutral objectivity.”¹³³ While he distinguishes between two visual media, his assertions equally apply to auditory media, which are even more adept at disrupting the Cartesian process of detached, rational meaning-making by immersing the listener in an ocean of voices, sounds, and noise.

Indeed, countless other thinkers about sound and selfhood have noted that consciousness dominated by auditory rather than visual information is potentially endangered. In “The Modern Auditory I,” Steven Connor writes that “sonorous experience, though it is of vital importance in early infantile life, represents a particular threat to selfhood; it is at once the ego’s source and its jeopardy.”¹³⁴ Where auditory experience dominates, he asserts, applying some of Ong’s characteristics of primary orality to the age of secondary orality, the linear, rational mind supported by our customary visual orientation is disabled: “singular, perspectival [experience] gives way to plural, permeated space. The self defined in terms of hearing rather than sight is a self imagined not as a point, but as a membrane; not as a picture, but as a channel through which voices, noises and musics travel.”¹³⁵ Understood in this way, sound implies a loss of control and objective distance; the cogent self has traditionally been understood in terms of a visual perspective that implies distance from its object, rather than immersion into overlapping sonic signals.

Although recent work in sound studies has challenged such transhistorical binaries

¹³³ Romanyshyn, “The Despot Eye,” 345.

¹³⁴ Connor, “The Modern Auditory I,” 214.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 207.

about sound and sight—what Jonathan Sterne calls the “audiovisual litany”¹³⁶—the concept of the “sound self” aptly captures the receptivity to sound of Mandelstam’s late poetry. It expands our understanding of the poet as a powerful processor of written texts by accounting for his equal, if not even greater, receptivity to auditory data in his final months, and showing ways in which the latter was not always within his control. The poems written during this time show the disorienting effects of being immersed in pure sound—on the phonetic, syntactic, and compositional level—and suggest a lyrical subject dissolved in a montage of soundbytes. The Voronezh poems not only combine textual reminiscences, but serve as “echo chambers” of unrelated utterances present and past, remembered fragments of conversations, barely consciously received bits of radio broadcasts, as well as a vast range of other sounds to which Mandelstam was exposed.

A particularly challenging poem that depicts such uncontrolled receptivity to sound is entitled “Little Steamboat with Roosters” (“Parokhodik s petukhami,” July 3, 1937). The text is among Mandelstam’s last known works, a group of three surviving poems written near Moscow after his return from Voronezh. Barred from living in the capital itself, Mandelstam chose the village of Savelovo, near Kimry, just outside the Moscow region, but close enough to reach the city if needed. Galina von Mekk, a friend of the Mandelstams who was herself a camp veteran, notes the role of sound in choosing a temporary refuge: “Settle down in any hole [...] but do not cut yourself off from the railroad: as long as you can hear those sounds.”¹³⁷ The poem vividly describes a different,

¹³⁶ Jonathan Sterne, “Sonic Imaginations,” in *The Sound Studies Reader*, 8. For a fuller introduction to this problem and Sterne’s attempt to counter generalizations of listening as a “pure interiority”—by historicizing the perception of sound—see Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 10-19.

¹³⁷ Nadezhda Mandel'shtam, *Vospominaniia*, 385. “Селитесь в любой дыре [...] но не отрывайтесь от железной дороги: лишь бы слышать гудки.”

but related auditory connection between the Soviet capital and its periphery:

Пароходик с петухами
По небу плывет,
И подвода с битюгами
Никуда нейдет.

И звенит будильник сонный –
Хочешь, повтори, –
“Полторы воздушных тонны,
Тонны полторы”...

И, паяльных звуков море
В перебой взяв,
Москва слышит, Москва смотрит,
Зорко смотрит в явь.

Только на крапивах пыльных –
Вот чего боюсь –
Не изволил бы в напильник
Шею выжать гусь.¹³⁸

[A steamboat with little roosters / Swims across the sky, / And the cart led by *bitiugs*¹³⁹ / Is going nowhere. // And the sleepy alarm-clock rings – / If you want, repeat, / “One and a half tons of air, / one and a half tons”... // And, having taken in / the interference of a sea of soldered sounds, / Moscow hears, Moscow watches, / Vigilantly watches the day. // Except that on these dusty nettles – / This is what I fear – / That the steel file might wish / To crush the goose’s neck.]

In opaque and fantastic imagery, this poem captures the break of day, with the speaker still half asleep. The distance between the capital and the province is bridged by a sound-inspired reverie: as Oleg Lekmanov notes, the setting of Savelovo reflects an “amorphous, semi-fairy tale” realm of dreams interrupted by the drowsy alarm and the voice of a radio announcer broadcasting the weather report.¹⁴⁰ The poem’s speaker takes in these sounds and instinctively reproduces them: “If you want, repeat, / ‘One and a half tons of air, / one

¹³⁸ Osip Mandel'shtam, “Parokhodik s petukhami,” in *PSSP*, vol. 1, 248.

¹³⁹ A breed of Russian cart horse from the Voronezh region introduced by Peter the Great.

¹⁴⁰ Lekmanov, “Ia k vorob'iam poidu.”

and a half tons' ...” (“хочешь, повтори, – / ‘Полторы воздушных тонны, / Тонны полторы’”). This turn of phrase itself represents sound as distorted, echoing, languorous, and slow. As these Moscow sounds wash over him, the speaker is suddenly caught up in the city’s energy, conveyed by the clipped and clichéd language of the radio broadcast: “Moscow is listening, Moscow is watching” (“Москва слышит, Москва смотрит”). The evocative use of the word *paial'nyi* (from *paial'*, to solder) to characterize the sounds carried from the center to Savelovo suggests the “welding” quality of sound in urban settings: its ability to draw together a community of listeners that includes the poet on the fringes. At the same time, it implies that Mandelstam is transfixed by these sounds: not liberated, but conscious of being held in place. And, as Lekmanov plausibly suggests, the word also refers to an already mentioned technological peculiarity of Soviet radio: the cables along which sound travels from Moscow to this provincial wire speaker.¹⁴¹

Finally, as though realizing that he is not, in fact, in Moscow but in Savelovo, the poem’s speaker begins to register his provincial surroundings. Filtered through his somnolent state, the village is depicted through the semantics of fear and negativity: as Oleg Lekmanov notes, the poem concludes with a premonition of violence: the crushing of a goose’s neck. Its source becomes clearer if we consider the line “And, having taken in / the interference of a sea of soldered sounds” (“И, паяльных звуков море / В перебои взяв”), which alludes to the Kremlin Chimes transmitted by radio (the *boi* in *pereboi*, which has the additional meaning of armed combat). The following line thus refers not only to alert Moscovites, but to the Kremlin’s political vigilance: “Moscow is listening, Moscow is watching” (“Москва слышит, Москва смотрит”). As in “Headphones, my

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

little headphones,” the verb denoting auditory action (*slyshat'*) acquires the ominous connotation of auditory surveillance. Once again Mandelstam is surreptitiously “listening in” on the center, but now the center is also alertly tracking the recently pardoned poet’s every move.

Read as a poem about the radio, the text becomes emblematic of the associative and illogical ways in which sound can enter the mind and guide our thought patterns. The images of the first and last stanza, complex and surreal in themselves, may allude to the content of a specific radio broadcast. Unlike the newspaper texts used in Oleg Lekmanov’s deft contextualizing work on the Voronezh poems, these auditory sources are largely lost to scholarship.¹⁴² Lekmanov suggests one possible reading of the first line’s image of a steamboat floating across the sky, which shows it to be more than a blurred simile for a cloud (“A steamboat with little roosters / Swims across the sky”): in his radio address during the 1937 May Day Parade, Soviet writer Lev Kassil' uses a sonic sample of the Volga steamers’ sounds, figuratively releasing them into the sky: “Red Square speaking! Steamboats are travelling along the Volga-Moscow Canal.”¹⁴³ Another potential reminiscence stems from a commonly sung *chastushka* of the Russian Civil War: “The steamer swims, making waves / We’ll feed the volunteers to the fish” (“Пароход плывет, волны кольцами / Будем рыбу кормить добровольцами”), which appears in a popular musical radio montage in 1936 (and which corresponds to the poem’s threatening overtones).¹⁴⁴ Given this clear sonic orientation of the text, other words and images, too,

¹⁴² For an overview of the archival situation, as well as some of the places where rare survivals may be audited, see the introduction.

¹⁴³ Lev Kassil', “Govorit Krasnaia ploshchad'. Zametki u mikroфона,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, May 5, 1937: 1. “Говорит Красная площадь! Идут пароходы по каналу Волга-Москва.”

¹⁴⁴ Sung to Russian folk tune of “Ekh, iablochko!,” these lines are featured in “Pervaia Konnaia,” a

must be considered in terms of the sounds they imply, including “ocean” [*more*] and “steel file” [*napil'nik*], whose implied “roaring” and “rasping” metonymically characterizes radio’s particular sound.

In addition to news and musical broadcasts, the Voronezh poems also reflect the Soviet culture of auditory mass celebrations and commemoration. Aside from enshrining important Soviet leaders and events through statues and commemorative places—a process that intensified in the early 1930s—the state increasingly opted for live audio events that captured not reified achievements of the state, but the heroic present moment.¹⁴⁵ As Steven Lovell remarks, “[r]adio stood out from the other mass media of the 1930s (cinema and the press) for its capacity to serve up collective events that unfolded in real time.”¹⁴⁶ From the mid-1930s on, reports from military parades and state celebrations, such as on May Day and Revolution Day, were used to “bring almost the entire population together in a communal real-time experience.”¹⁴⁷

Beyond broadcasts from Red Square, radio’s ritual function was also served by reports on the icebreaker *Krasin*’s rescue of General Nobile in 1928 and the astonishing recovery of the stranded Chelyuskin crew by plane in 1934. Moreover, the new practice of sonically documenting geographic and scientific discoveries via live radio also played an

1936 radio montage directed by Aleksandr V. Aleksandrov. A recording can be accessed at http://www.sovmusic.ru/sam_download.php?fname=s13863 (accessed August 2, 2016). Many variants exist, some of which feature the word *idet* after *parokhod*, while others use *plyvet*.

¹⁴⁵ Jonathan Platt has described the cultural mechanism underlying the Pushkin centennial celebrations in 1937 as bifurcated between exactly such a reaffirmation of a historicized, reified symbol of the past and an eternally present image, forming “a paradoxical union of being and becoming, static immortality and living, earthly motion.” Platt, *Feast in the Time of Terror: Stalinist Temporal Paradox and the 1937 Pushkin Jubilee* (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2008), 102.

¹⁴⁶ Steven Lovell, “How Russia Learned to Listen: Radio and the Making of Soviet Culture,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 3 (2011): 609.

¹⁴⁷ Lovell, *Russia in the Microphone Age*, 61.

important role. Given our knowledge about his exposure to radio, we must assume that Mandelstam heard many of these broadcasts; others were summarized or reprinted in the daily newspapers, such as an attempt by three radio reporters to use a mobile shortwave transmitter for broadcasting live from Mount Kazbek in the Caucasus.¹⁴⁸ A different article in *Izvestiia*, published April 10, 1935, describes attempts to record sound on the bottom of the ocean.¹⁴⁹ Oceans, mountains, the icy polar regions, and the skies—even the furthest reaches of the Soviet empire were being fathomed, documented, and shared by Soviet radio signals.¹⁵⁰

As Oleg Lekmanov shows, and as my own readings of texts such as “Headphones, my little headphones” have further documented, Mandelstam’s Voronezh poems often allude to Soviet broadcast genres, specific programs, or even particular sounds of the mid-1930s. However, the noises of these radio formats also shape the increasing aural density of Mandelstam’s poems in 1935–37 on a more profound level. Their clear orientation toward ear and larynx—rather than toward a silent reception—can be seen as an involuntary effect of the poet’s immersion into the schizophonic soundscape. Arguably,

¹⁴⁸ “Radioperedacha s vershiny Kazbeka,” in *Izvestiia*, April 14, 1935: “Зимующие на вершине Казбека научные работники расскажут, как проходит зимовка [...]”

¹⁴⁹ F. Kamenskii, “Golos moria,” in *Izvestiia*, April 10, 1935.

¹⁵⁰ This use of radio to stage Soviet achievements is captured in a radio broadcast from Red Square on the twenty-year anniversary of the October Revolution. Led by the socialist realist writer Vsevolod Vishnevskii (1900–1951), the program included live spoken word from the Cruiser *Avrora*, appeals by delegates from various Soviet republics, and climaxed in a virtual exchange with four scientists on an expedition to the North Pole: “Hello, North Pole! Hello, Ivan Dmitrievich Papanin and comrades Krenkel', Shirshov and Fedorov! Listen, Moscow speaking, Red Square! [...] We will await your answer: hello, North Pole! Hello, comrade Krenkel'. Give us your answer in the Morse alphabet. (Krenkel’s radiogram follows).” Next in the broadcast, the telegraphed response is sonically relayed to millions of Soviet listeners and Vishnevsky triumphantly reports back to the North Pole: “Hello, comrades Papanin, Krenkel', Shirshov, Fedorov! Your radiogram was heard by everyone!” See V. V. Vishnevskii, “Radioperedacha s Krasnoi ploshchadi 7 noiabria 1937” (autograph). Russian State Archive of Art and Literature (RGALI), fond 1038, opis' 1, ed. khr. 1168, 20-22.

however, Mandelstam also deliberately appropriates the outwardly communicative aspect of these transmissions for his poetic practice.¹⁵¹ The semiotician Iurii Levin has shown that the Voronezh poems increasingly reflect and embody communicative processes; he even uses the term “reportage by a participant” [*reportazh uchastnika*].¹⁵² Often addressed directly to someone or something, their phrasing becomes increasingly appellative: “Very frequent are questions, imperatives, appeals (including the especially characteristic peculiar ‘greetings’ such as ‘Well hello, black earth’).”¹⁵³ As the most extreme example of such reportage-like Voronezh poems, Levin cites texts that progress from a conditional sign of a communicative act into communication that happens here and now, as it were: “the poem itself transforms from [...] the sign of an event into the event, from a literary fact into a fact of life. Such poems as “Oh how afraid we are,” “We’ll sit together in the kitchen,” and “No, I don’t hide behind” and many others do not describe situations, but their actual presence, which presupposes not a fictive, but a real contact.”¹⁵⁴

This communicative immediacy is amplified by the poet’s rejection of manuscripts

¹⁵¹ Lev Kassil’s above-cited report about the 1937 May Day parade demonstrates the remarkable montage-like quality of these celebratory broadcasts: “Наш микрофон, помещенный в фокусе огромного вогнутого слухового зеркала, вбирает в себя слова приветствий, такты оркестра, веселые возгласы, песни и наш рассказ о празднике. Диковский включает канал Волга-Москва, и с Красной площади кричат пароходы [...]. Затем я включаю пленку, записанную накануне по телефону из Мадрида, и с Красной площадью говорит Мадрид [...] и потом включаем поезд, увозящий шумных, поющих комсомолок на Дальний Восток...” Kassil, “Govorit Krasnaia ploshchad’,” 1.

¹⁵² Iurii Levin, “O nekotorykh osobennostiakh poetiki pozdnego Mandel'shtama,” in *Zhizn' i tvorchestvo O. E. Mandel'shtama*, edited by O. G. Lasunskii (Voronezh: Izdat. Voronezhskogo universiteta, 1990), 413.

¹⁵³ Levin, 412. “Очень часты вопросы, императивы, обращения (в том числе, что особенно характерно, своеобразные ‘приветствия’ типа ‘Ну здравствуй, чернозем’).”

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.* “Стихотворение из [...] знака события само превращается в событие, из литературного факта – в факт жизни. Такие стихи, как “Куда как страшно...”, “Мы с тобой на кухне посидим...”, “Нет, не спрятаться мне...” и мн. др. дают не описание ситуации, а актуальное ее присутствие, предполагающее не фиктивный, а реальный контакт.”

during this period (Rudakov was amazed at the lack of written drafts when the two began to work on Mandelstam's poems¹⁵⁵) and by Mandelstam's frequent denigration of print, quite understandable from someone who was unable to publish: "Why are you all attaching such importance to Gutenberg's machine?"¹⁵⁶ But whereas the oft-cited dictum "I alone in Russia work from the voice [*s golosa*]" was a hyperbolic and defiant rejection of Soviet literary institutions and its officials when first uttered in "The Fourth Prose" (1930), it actually describes Mandelstam's poetic process in Voronezh, where he increasingly represents his work as that of an oral bard.¹⁵⁷

A poem that exemplifies this radio-inspired aural quality, and whose imagery itself is driven by an aleatoric indeterminacy, is "My sleep keeps me sleepy, here on the Don" ("Oboroniaet son moiu donskuiu son'," February 3–11, 1937) from the second "Voronezh Notebook."¹⁵⁸ The text is both highly associative—subordinating literal meaning to the self-sufficient qualities of phonemes and the associative links they inspire—and anchored in concrete sounds and numerous identifiable radio "intertexts." Most immediately recognizable is the reference to the Kremlin Chimes contained within the first line, as well as to the choral chanting of the Internationale that customarily followed:

Обороняет сон мою донскую сонь,
 И разворачиваются черепах маневры –
 Их быстроходная, взволнованная бронь
 И любопытные ковры людского говора...

¹⁵⁵ Gershtein, *Memuary*, 142.

¹⁵⁶ Semen Lipkin, "'Ugl', pylaiushchii ognem...' Vospominaniia," in *Vospominaniia o Mandel'shtame. Stikhi, stat'i, perepiska* (Moscow: Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi gumanitarnyi universitet, 2008), 16. "И почему вы все придаете такое значение станку Гутенберга?"

¹⁵⁷ Mandel'stam, "Chetvertaia proza," in *PSSP*, vol. 2, 350. "У меня нет рукописей, нет записных книжек, нет архивов. У меня нет почерка, потому что я никогда не пишу. Я один в России работаю с голоса, а кругом густопсовая сволочь пишет. Какой я к черту писатель!"

¹⁵⁸ Osip Mandel'stam, "Oboroniaet son moiu donskuiu son'," in *PSSP*, vol. 1, 226.

И в бой меня ведут понятные слова –
За оборону жизни, оборону
Страны-земли, где смерть уснет, как днем сова...
Стекло Москвы горит меж ребрами гранеными.

Необоримые кремлевские слова –
В них оборона обороны;
И брони боевой – и бровь, и голова
Вместе с глазами полюбовно собраны.

И слушает земля – другие страны – бой,
Из хорового падающий короба:
– Рабу не быть рабом, рабе не быть рабой, –
И хор поет с часами рука об руку.

[My sleep keeps me sleepy, here on the Don, / And the maneuvers of the turtles
unfold – / Their quick-armor motion, / and curious carpets of human noise. / And
clear words lead me into battle, / defending life, defending / country – a land where
death will sleep like a day-time owl, / and Moscow-glass burns between cut-glass
ribs. / Impregnable Kremlin words: / the defense of defense / and of armor and of
eyebrows and of the head, / yes and the eyes – all cheerfully gathered. All. / And it
listens, this land – and other lands listen – / beating, breaking, a battle rhythm: / –
Slaves are not to be slaves, whores are not to be whores! / And so the choir sings,
hand in hand, by the clock.¹⁵⁹]

The first line is punctuated by the deeply voiced *son* and *son'*, which are echoed further in the text by contiguous phonemes, such as *boi* and *brov'*—a syncopated rhythmic skeleton that sonically mirrors the slow, deep tolling of the *kuranty*.¹⁶⁰ They also evoke the echo-filled low transmission quality of such public speeches, which were simultaneously amplified by speakers along Red Square, resulting in high reverberation.¹⁶¹ Out of this

¹⁵⁹ *Complete Poetry of Osip Emilevich Mandelstam*, 280.

¹⁶⁰ Kiril Taranovsky suggests that the poem's penultimate line, too, "contains an onomatopoeia of the Kremlin chimes (*bu—by—bom* || *b'e—by—boj*)" (Taranovsky, 48).

¹⁶¹ To gain an idea about the sounds of a similar parade, see the *Soiuzkinokhronika* film of the November 7, 1937 parade on Red Square, "1917-1937. Prazdnovanie dvadtsatoi godovshchiny Velikoi Oktiabr'skoi sotsialisticheskoi revoliutsii v SSSR." YouTube video, 11:57. Posted June 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OT5KPvMK0eE>. See also the speech held by the Socialist Realist writer V. V. Vishnevskii on this occasion, a striking example of a text both written for radio and about sonic community-building: "Radioperedacha s Krasnoi ploschadi 7 noiabria

sound emerges the poem's plot, which relies on the illusion of synchronicity and unfolds simultaneously to that which it depicts: "And the maneuvers of turtles unfold" ("И разворачиваются черепах маневры"). The poem uses verbs strictly in the present tense, and the first two (*oboroniaet* and *razvorachivaiutsia*), which are particularly long, "unfold" slowly, increasing the poem's effect of a gradually progressing real time and a reporter's now-perspective. This sense is further underscored by the additive logic of the text, a feature Adelaide Morris highlights as a vital component of a sound-based writing style, aided by the predominant use of the conjunction "and" [*i*] to propel the poem's descriptive sequence.¹⁶²

The poem's imagery serves a dual role: it refers both to an imaginary visual order and to the radio sounds the speaker hears. Thus, the expressions "excited armor" [*vzvolnovannaia bron'*] and "curious carpets" [*liubopytnye kovry*] describe a phalanx of Soviet soldiers, the demonstration of military equipment, and the agitated, noisy spectators on Red Square, but are equally rooted in sound. The word "vzvolnovannyi"—Russian for 'excited', based on its root *volna*, or 'wave'—is characteristic for this period of Mandelstam's verse. It also appears, for instance, in the poem beginning with the line "Wave runs after wave, breaking the other wave's crest" ("Bezhit volna – volnoi khrebet lomaia"), in which Mandelstam invokes Moscow as "The unabating capital of waves" ("Неусыпленная столица волновая"), another barely veiled allusion to radio.¹⁶³ The image of "carpets of human talk" is consistent with Mandelstam's frequent descriptions of

1937," RGALI fond 1038, opis' 1, ed. khr. 1168.

¹⁶² "Additive rather than analytic, the poem moves by means of formulas and clusters, parallel terms, phrases, and clauses. Its hinges are paratactic rather than hypotactic: 'and' and 'then,' not 'however,' 'because,' or 'therefore'." Morris, "Sound Technologies and the Modernist Epic: H.D. on the Air," 48.

¹⁶³ Osip Mandel'stam, "Bezhit volna – volnoi khrebet lomaia," in *PSSP*, vol. 1, 209.

sound as something spreading throughout space, both acoustically, through the open air, and electro-acoustically, by way of the nation’s advanced radio network. Finally, this stanza superimposes a visual image related to the radio onto what appears to be an architectural reminiscence: “Moscow-glass burns between cut-glass ribs” (“Стекло Москвы горит меж ребрами гранеными”). Mandelstam may have had in mind the famous hotel Moscow adjacent to Red Square, completed in 1935, or a similar architectural object. But the line just as likely alludes to the lit glass dial of a mid-1930s receiver such as the 9n-4, which was framed by a curved metal plate (see figure 4.3).¹⁶⁴ Such a literal reading is further motivated by the image of the “choral case” [*chorovoi korob*] in the last stanza, which also suggests the literal presence of such a large standalone receiver (see figure 4.4).¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁴ Modeled after the American RCA Victor, both the 9n-4 and the 6n-1 were wooden case tabletop receivers with glass dials that went into production in January 1937 and were produced by the Voronezh radio factory. Especially the 6n-1 was one of the first truly mass-distributed radio receivers and would be remembered as one of the most iconic Soviet pre-war devices. See <http://oldradio.onego.ru/SETS/6n1.htm> and <http://oldradio.onego.ru/SETS/9n4.htm> (accessed May 20, 2016).

¹⁶⁵ The word *korob*, meaning “case” or “basket,” also resurfaces in the poem “Where Shall I Turn This January?” (“Kuda mne det’sia v etom ianvare?”), which was completed around the same time, on February 1, 1937. Here, too, the term should be seen as related to the radio receiver: “А я за ними ахаю, крича / В какой-то мёрзлый деревянный короб: / – Читателя! советчика! врача! / На лестнице колючей разговора б!,” see *PSSP*, vol. 1, 221.



Fig. 4.4

The poet derives a soothing consolation from these familiar sounds; its hypnotic, at times even surreal degree of aural associativeness hints that the speaker is being lulled into a dream state (recalling Mandelstam's above-quoted Savelovo poem, which also associates radio sound with a hypnagogic condition). This pacified mind starkly contrasts with the overtly militaristic and threatening connotations of the "Internationale," which the poem paraphrases: "And clear words lead me into battle" ("И в бой меня ведут понятные слова").¹⁶⁶ Some of the poem's key words, however (such as the dominant *oborona*, or "defense") are not elements of the proletarian hymn, suggesting that Mandelstam's reverie also refers to political oratory by a military general, a political figure, or even Stalin himself.¹⁶⁷ Indeed, a likely intertext are the speeches held at the Eighth Congress of

¹⁶⁶ Compare: "Кипит наш разум возмущенный / И в смертный бой вести готов // Это есть наш последний / И решительный бой."

¹⁶⁷ For an exhaustive list of possible texts that Mandelstam may have had in mind, see Lekmanov, "Ia k vorob'iam poidu."

Soviets, which took place from November 25 to December 5, 1936, a few weeks before this poem was completed.¹⁶⁸

But while Mandelstam appears to drowsily reiterate official state discourse, he subjugates the Soviet political message to the aleatory logic of a poetics driven by sound. Moreover, by refracting and transmuting the sounds of Soviet leaders and their ideology through his private “sound self” Mandelstam lends the poem a subversive quality, suggesting that the “invincible Kremlin words” [*neoborimye kremlevskie slova*] are, in fact, not entirely unassailable. The text appropriates words and phrases from official Soviet discourse, as well as the socialist hymn, and immerses them into a private poetic “echo chamber.” It thus performs its own “jamming”—as the deliberate interference with radio signals would be called in the Cold War era. The text’s resulting sonority aestheticizes the Kremlin’s words about the Soviet defense system, while its *zaum*-like texture brackets their political significance (the word “defense” [*oborona*] is a possible citation from one of the broadcasts that inspired the poem; to underscore its importance, the text’s sonic patterning relies heavily on it, with its entrancing use of *bo*, *br*, and related phonemes).¹⁶⁹

But the word is also a double entendre: the very invocation of Stalin’s words also serves as

¹⁶⁸ A letter to Nikolai S. Tikhonov dated December 31, 1936 indicates that Mandelstam followed the Congress via radio: “I heard your wonderful, courageous greeting to the congress on the radio” (“я слышал по радио ваше прекрасное мужественное приветствие съезду”), in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 3, 544. The Congress famously resulted in the adoption of the Soviet Constitution and was opened by a long speech by Stalin that was transmitted via radio, another likely subtext of this poem, dated some weeks later. For the full text, see I. V. Stalin, “O proekte konstitutsii Soiuzna SSR: Doklad na Chrezvychainom VIII Vsesoiuznom S”ezde Sovetov 25 noiabria,” in *Sochineniia* (Moscow: Pisatel’, 1997), 117-147. Excerpts from speeches about the constitution by Stalin and Kalinin can be heard at *Staroe Radio*: <http://www.staroeaudio.ru/>. Additionally, the Congress featured addresses by cultural workers, such as the actress Ekaterina Korchagina-Aleksandrovskaiia, whose speech is documented at *Staroe Radio* and worth listening to against these poems from early 1937.

¹⁶⁹ Stalin’s speech at the Congress contains the phrase “дело обороны нашей страны” as well as two instances of the word *oboronnyi* (“defensive”), see Stalin, 143.

a “defense” for the reprobate poet, an uneasy cover—*vzvolnovannaia bron'*—behind which he cautiously dared to keep writing even in 1937.

If we return now to the 1933 poem “The apartment is quiet as paper,” we may be struck by the contrast to these later poems, especially “Headphones, my little headphones” and “My sleep keeps me sleepy, here on the Don.” Whereas the former posits radio’s “stream of fear” and the apartment’s paper-thin walls as antithetical to poetic inspiration, in the Voronezh verse the lush range of Soviet sounds has become a key impetus for Mandelstam’s continued lyric output. In a sense, these poems lend a deeper meaning to the poet Seamus Heaney’s encapsulation of Mandelstam’s aesthetic priorities: “Mandelstam had no immediate social aim. Utterance itself was self-justifying and creative, like nature. [...] He was the vessel of language. His responsibility was to sound rather than to the state, to phonetics rather than to five-year plans.”¹⁷⁰ In the Voronezh exile, radio had not only become a source of linguistic fascination like the Soviet newspapers he read with alacrity, as Oleg Lekmanov persuasively shows.¹⁷¹ As a source of sounded language, radio complemented Mandelstam’s reception-based understanding of the poet as a vessel for language; he incorporated words based on their phonetic suitability to continue shaping the Russian language, transforming words in ways that resist their political significance.

Indeed, we would be remiss to discount the socio-political role these Soviet soundbytes play in Mandelstam’s poems. Scholars remain divided on the question of

¹⁷⁰ Seamus Heaney, “The Interesting Case of Nero, Chekhov’s Cognac and a Knocker,” in *The Government of the Tongue: Selected Prose, 1978-1987* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988), xix.

¹⁷¹ Lev Gorodetskii also notes that Mandelstam was unusually fixated on the information as well as the language of the daily papers. “Мандельштам, вообще, ориентирован, настроен на абсорбирование новостей о происходящем вокруг него, пусть препарированных цензурой.” Lev Gorodetskii, *Kvantovye smysly Osipa Mandel'shtama: semantika vzryva i apparat inoiazychnykh interferentsii* (Moscow: Targum, 2012), 141.

Mandelstam's stance toward Soviet politics in his final years: some see his "Stanzas" ("Stansy") and "Verses about the Unknown Soldier" ("Stikhi o neizvestnom soldate," both 1937) as paying lip service to the regime, while others claim that these poems aspire to the ideal of "civic poetry" [*grazhdanskaia lirika*], the Russian term for civic-minded, socially conscious verse.¹⁷² Even the latter term is ambiguous: for Emma Gershtein, it applies to the defiant verse of 1933–34, including the "Stalin Epigram," which she reads as a deliberate political act. By contrast, Mikhail Gasparov highlights the civic theme in Mandelstam's final works, such as the "Ode to Stalin," and calls them "poems about the acceptance of Soviet reality," guided by a genuine desire to embrace Soviet reality and state rhetoric, despite the improbability of a belated rehabilitation.¹⁷³ Certainly, writing poems as imaginary radio transmissions, endowed with the figure of resonant sound and orality, was a way for the poet to bridge the distance between himself and an imagined listenership, as well as a strategy for continuing to project some relevance to Soviet society. Yet the tenor of poems such as "My sleep keeps me sleepy, here on the Don" is hardly one of reconciliation and acceptance. As I have tried to suggest, these poems, with their insubordinate speech acts toward the Kremlin and the subversive potential of their sound "montages," which fuse the private and the public in a deliriously sonorous idiom, are a *sui generis* expression of creative resilience.

Approached through the idea of the "sound self," the Voronezh poems also show that, even during the height of Stalin's terror, sound media were not an exhaustively streamlined tool of the authoritarian regime. Mandelstam's treatment of

¹⁷² See, for instance, E. G. Gershtein, "O grazhdanskoi poezii Mandel'shtama," in *Zhizn' i tvorchestvo O. E. Mandel'shtama*, 346-355.

¹⁷³ M. L. Gasparov, *O. Mandel'shtam: Grazhdanskaia lirika 1937 goda* (Moscow: Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi universitet, 1996), 18.

radio evocatively confirms Joe Milutis' maxim that "even though radio is omnipresent, the radiophonic eludes psychic as well as institutional organization."¹⁷⁴ As a space for fantasies of communion and exchange, radio transmissions affected even those who had been excluded from the Soviet narrative; it held consoling and even redemptive connotations unintended by the regime's ideologues. The media theorist Douglas Kahn confirms this idea of sound as a relational quality, noting that sound is ill-suited for conforming to the direct linearity of a power relationship. Having no autonomy, he argues, sound as vibration and transmission is "always relational, being somewhere or something else, a constant deflection that ultimately stretches out to spiritually organize everything from essence to cosmos."¹⁷⁵ Brandon LaBelle's evocative reflections on the instability of sound make a similar point, suggesting that it "carries information that is inherently temporal and evanescent—it can only communicate by always already disappearing into the environment. It thus supplies communication with a vital medium—to truly hear the world and each other—while unsettling signification with instability—to listen is also to confront the voluptuous richness of ambiguity."¹⁷⁶

The notion of a shared sonic space inhabited at once by the fantasies of modernist writers and the emissions of oppressive regimes promises to be an important adjustment for future approaches to authoritarian audio propaganda. The nuanced and all-encompassing communication medium of sound conveyed far more information than party-approved communiqués and propaganda materials; what was intended as a

¹⁷⁴ Joe Milutis, "Radiophonic Ontologies and the Avantgarde," in *Radio: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies*, ed. A. Crisell (New York: Routledge, 2008), 422.

¹⁷⁵ Douglas Kahn, *Wireless Imagination: Sound, Radio and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1992), 15.

¹⁷⁶ LaBelle, *Acoustic Territories*, 200.

political tool also accidentally captures all the world's richness. The montage-based experimental radio formats of the 1920s and early 1930s highlighted the epistemological problems associated with sound; the technological reality of early broadcasting—competing and unstable frequencies, inevitable distortions, static, and outages—further heightened the anarchic qualities of the modern soundscape. All this, coupled with the early realization that radio sound was always fleeting and ahistorical, hindered the transmission of a straight party line and explains the increasing regulation of radio broadcasts toward the late 1930s.¹⁷⁷ The liberating ambiguity of the soundscape, however, may also explain why radio remained a source of solace to Mandelstam and others in his situation. By focusing on these redemptive and uplifting qualities, Mandelstam's late poetry figured the subject as an auditory self, a concept that, according to Steven Connor, "provides a way of positing and beginning to experience a subjectivity organized around the principles of openness, responsiveness and acknowledgement of the world rather than violent alienation from it."¹⁷⁸

During the Great Terror of the 1930s, then, broadcast denoted a zone of separation, rather than inclusion in a common project, for exiled writers such as Mandelstam. Yet Soviet radio also was a considerable influence on Mandelstam's enduring sense of a Soviet identity, his contemporary relevance, and his poetic duty to the Russian language. The discourse of radio sound is evident in his many images of vibration and transmission; in his increasing emphasis on communication and spontaneous live speech; and in the

¹⁷⁷ By the mid-1930s, both German and Soviet commentators publicly disparaged what Nazi ideologue and media theoretician Richard Kolb called "racket pieces" (*Radaustücke*)—programs availing themselves of a range of sound effects and a montage approach—for which they substituted prerecorded pieces, preferably narrated by a single male dictator.

¹⁷⁸ Connor, "The Modern Auditory I," 219.

alliterative, sibilant-heavy graininess of the “Voronezh Poems” itself. As I have attempted to show, this “radio aesthetics” also motivates an imaginary dialog with Soviet power that is, at times, strikingly defiant and provocative. But Mandelstam’s attentiveness to radio also implies his faith not only in the future of his country, but in reaching a future audience if not through written texts, then through oral and electro-acoustic transmissions. This relationship between “radioactive” sound and memory lends an element of resilient hope to these verse, written during Mandelstam’s darkest years.

Conclusion

This study has uncovered ways in which literary “radio aesthetics” offered new poetic devices to three Soviet writers of the interwar period, allowing them to appropriate the communicative connotations, vivid immediacy, and sonic affect of wireless speech. Radio’s utopian promise and its very sounds inspired Velimir Khlebnikov, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and Osip Mandelstam to divest literary language of the qualities of finitude, linearity, and silence often associated with the text as a visual medium. These writers not only dwell on radio’s larger cultural significance, but incorporate electronically transmitted sound into their texts through numerous devices and strategies. In Khlebnikov, we can detect radio’s influence in his theory of the *zaum*, or beyonsense, word, whose semi-telepathic immediacy reflects his exposure to early news broadcasts. The aurality of his final poems, as we have seen, can likewise be traced to this concern with wireless speech and the ways it does justice to both beauty and truth. Mayakovsky not only took pains to represent himself as the (radio)voice of the Revolution; his transition from an earlier avant-garde poetics to a much clearer idiom relates to his radio-inspired denigration of printed texts in favor of the sounded and instantaneously intelligible word.

With its ancient origins in spontaneous oral and musical transmissions, poetry is particularly suited to an analysis in the context of radio and related sound media.¹ The tendency of poetic texts to foreground numerous devices that stress language’s sonic form—assonance, alliteration, paranomasia, and rhyme, to mention but a few—is one of the reasons this dissertation has focused largely on poetic texts, rather than the novel and

¹ Marjorie Perloff reminds us that “the coupling of words and musical accompaniment has been a hallmark of lyric from ancient times,” in *The Sound of Poetry, The Poetry of Sound*, 5.

other prose genres. Moreover, we can approach radio in terms of a paradox central to what Roman Jakobson termed the “poetic function”: the fact that lyric poetry draws on our everyday utilitarian language, while transfiguring it in ways that undermine its referential function. Soviet broadcasting, while developed with the aim of conveying information—and to extend the reach of the printed news—reveals a similar tension between sense and sound: it immediately began to privilege an “autotelic” sonic richness and emotional depth that did not always aid its stated goals. It also reminded writers, to invoke German radio theorist Rudolf Arnheim’s incisive depiction of radio sound, that “the pure sound in the word is the mother-earth from which the spoken word of art must never break loose, even when it disappears into the far heights of word-meaning.”² And in their various ways, the authors I have analyzed all applied this insight to their written texts, too.

Needless to say, my reading of these poetic texts via a history of Soviet radio and the soundscape of the 1920s and 1930s has not merely aimed for a fuller and more accurate description of their aural particulars. Rather, by uncovering the stimuli behind certain sonic patterns—such as early ROSTA reports in Khlebnikov’s verse about the Volga famine; Lenin’s radio decrees in Mayakovsky’s May Day chants; and popular musical montages in Mandelstam’s Voronezh poems—I have also tried to reveal a broader tendency in Russian modernist poetics: namely to privilege metonymy and sonic “citations” over metaphor and other forms of figurative language, with their implications of greater subjectivity.

At times, this attempt to bring sonic reality into the poetic text leads to a suspension of its “literariness” and suggests new ways of understanding such writers’ socio-political commitment to the world beyond the text. Khlebnikov’s cacophonous “encyclopedias,”

² Arnheim, *Radio*, 28.

Mandelstam's Voronezh poems, whose sonic fabric is deliriously entwined with Moscow broadcasts, and Mayakovsky's rousing and hypnotizing *agitprop* all break with the lyric's tendency toward an individual, solitary, and silent reception. They imply that poetry as sound can speak for a community in unheard of ways, and that poetry demands a collective reception for proper effect. Mayakovsky's lyrics do so by introducing an ambiguity into the scripted text that calls for being read out loud, while Mandelstam's lyrics of the mid-1930s, ostensibly hermetic and solipsistic mumblings, demand to be juxtaposed to the clamorous Soviet soundscape to show their close affinity with the contemporary world.

Indeed, many of our established binaries for understanding the poet figure are challenged by the new aurality I have traced: individual versus collective, the solitary disgraced or dissident poet versus the tribune of the masses, and the independent versus the court poet. To a large extent, these differences are anchored in a visual worldview that confirms boundaries and hierarchies, and that is challenged by the forms of "auditory" subjectivity that I have traced. Radio also reinforced divisions of the private and the public, the official and the unofficial: Mandelstam was painfully aware of the division between writers allowed to speak on radio and those forced to listen mutely; and the rising "volume" of Khlebnikov's last works also parallels his frustrated efforts to find a publisher. Yet my sound-based readings reveal a degree of involvement in public concerns rarely stressed by scholarship on Khlebnikov and Mandelstam. Conversely, the radio aesthetics of Mayakovsky's poems brings into focus qualities that limit his suitability to being a proletarian bard—despite his commitment to the Revolution—such as an individualistic stress on the particular merits of his own voice. As a literary motif and a set of devices, aurality therefore cuts across these established binaries and complicates

accepted readings of these poets. Furthermore, it has become clear that our historical, political, and technological accounts of Soviet radio do not suffice; we must also listen—figuratively and literally—to how writers themselves explain and “implement” these new technologies.³

I have bracketed for future iterations of this work an important set of questions about the relationship between sound, time, and commemoration. The “rejection” of the print medium by these writers also implies that their posthumous memory would depend not only on hermeneutic readings of their texts, but on their enduring sonic efficacy. Khlebnikov was interested in broader historical patterns, which he approached through a theory of eternal recurrence that ascribed corresponding and harmonizing (radio) frequencies to major events or leaders. For Mayakovsky and Mandelstam, the connection between (radio) sound, memory, and individual survival was more personally pressing. As I suggest in Chapter 2, Mayakovsky’s emphasis on the necessity of reciting his own texts, and his futuristic insistence on a poetics of the “now,” was ultimately successful: posthumous accounts by his contemporaries treat these texts not as conduits to the author’s mind, but as connoting the latter’s absence through their sonic deficiency. Finally, the endurance of the spoken, sounded word, which reverberates through the universe like a physical sound wave, is a key feature of Mandelstam’s Voronezh verse. It is particularly evident in one of Mandelstam’s last poems, “Perhaps this is the point of madness” (“Mozhet byt', eto tochka bezumiia,” 1937), a conceit for dispersal and convergence that

³ Lisa Gitelman’s excellent study on the phonograph and typewriter in the late nineteenth-century drives home this point, suggesting that the “underlying sense that technology is enmeshed with textuality, that machines are discursively and physically constructed, is a view garnering surprisingly little direct attention.” Gitelman, *Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines: Representing Technology in the Edison Era* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 8.

equally concerns light and sound, vision and the spoken word.⁴ Mandelstam's idealistic orientation toward the word's future as sound entails a shift from the paradigm of inscription, still dominant in his earlier poems, toward the figure of dispersed and received sound waves.

Of course, concern with radio as a cultural trope and an impulse for stylistic innovation is by no means limited to the writers I have analyzed. As Mayakovsky's praise of the roving, international radio voice suggests, the medium also revised poetic representations of presence and absence, East and West, Communist and Capitalist territory. Particularly fertile ground for a study of this phenomenon is the work of Russian émigré writers such as Vladislav Khodasevich and Boris Poplavsky; in their poems, radio and other sound media resonate as figures of their continuing engagement with an inaccessible motherland. In Soviet Russia, the work of Andrei Platonov and Boris Pilniak, for instance, prominently reflect on radio's role and significance. For these two writers, the urgency of wireless lies less in its sonic particulars, than in the experience of virtuality and the notion of distantly shared thoughts and experiences. The work of the OBERIU, as well as other successors to *zaum*, likewise merits a closer analysis in light of these writers' affinity for wireless sounds. And, while radio's novelty and utopian appeal was most clearly sensed in the two interwar decades, its literary significance extends to Soviet chroniclers of World War II, such as Lev Kassil, to poets writing during the Siege of Leningrad, as well as into the postwar period. When sound began to pervasively tug at the iron curtain in the mid-1950s, via the activities of American-funded stations such as Radio Free Europe, foreign sounds were reflected, for instance, in the texts of Soviet unofficial

⁴ Mandel'stam, *PSSP*, vol. 1, 235.

poets.⁵

Not least, nearly a century after its invention, and despite its swift displacement by television and, eventually, the internet, the radio voice lives on even in contemporary Russian culture. Perhaps because today's media have largely lost their participatory immediacy and communal mystique—similar to how print media were seen in the early 1900s—the medium once again prompts nostalgic reflections and emotional reactions.⁶ Although the contemporary media landscape is transforming more rapidly than ever before, its various formats, whether voice-, image-, or text-based, are bundled by the internet in ways predicted by the media theorist Friedrich Kittler: ubiquitous glass-fiber cables have leveled the differences between heterogeneous signals and made them technologically interchangeable. Moreover, today's media have largely lost their event-structure: whereas early radio broadcasts were happenings that sharply counteracted the isolated reception of silent printed texts, print, radio, film, and live broadcasts alike are now consumed independently—we ourselves choose when and how.⁷ While live

⁵ To give but one example, Margo Shohl Rosen has shown that the jazz rhythms of Willis Conover's famous night-time musical broadcasts influenced Thaw-era Leningrad poets. See *The Independent Turn in Soviet-Era Russian Poetry: How Dmitry Bobyshev, Joseph Brodsky, Anatoly Naiman and Evgeny Rein Became the 'Avvakumites' of Leningrad* (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2011).

⁶ The Russian filmmaker Aleksandr Sokurov has also expressed an enduring affinity for the medium: "This is true art, sincere, ascetic. I am still astonished that those distant voices affected my soul, the soul of a normal schoolboy from a typical family, where nobody had any particular affinity for culture" ("Это настоящее искусство, искреннее, аскетичное. Я до сих пор удивляюсь, почему эти далекие голоса действовали на мою душу, душу обычного школьника из обычной семьи, где к культуре никто никакого отношения не имел," in Aleksandr Sokurov, "Chto so mnoi proiskhodit, proiskhodit zasluzhennno," *Novoe vremia* 3 (2006): 34-35. Sokurov's 2009 film *We Read the Book of the Blockade* (*Chitaem blokadnuiu knigu*) commemorates radio's role in the Siege of Leningrad and is set entirely in a St. Petersburg radio station.

⁷ This development was aptly summarized by Norbert Bolz, who notes that "the era of broadcast in its classical sense is long gone, namely that the idea that a central station offers a single program to all recipients at the same time." Bolz, "1953 – Auch eine Gnade der späten Geburt," in

broadcasts and talk radio continue to demand a considerable audience, radio's original mystique has largely disappeared. As I write this conclusion, analog radio signals are quickly going extinct in favor of digital radio, forever silencing the many short-, medium-, and long-wave receivers still in existence.⁸

Several newer texts—to say nothing of a plethora of contemporary sound artists working on “radio after radio”⁹—capture how resiliently radio is associated not with political power or information genres, but with the kind of sonic enchantment I have traced, as well as its complication of linguistic meaning and epistemology as such. The poet Igor' Pomerantsev, who worked for Radio Free Europe in the 1980s, extols radio's utopian qualities in his epitaph to analog radio, “The Age of Radio” (“Vek radio,” 1998): “The language of radio is more plastic, richer, and orotund than any other language. It can be used to express our melancholy at dawn, the chill of aging, the ‘damp charm of life’.”¹⁰ Whereas Pomerantsev praises radio's emotionally affective nature and its range of oblique overtones, the philosopher Boris Paramonov goes further, championing wireless speech as a non-referential discourse that does not correspond to any visual order, but is self-sufficient and hyper-real:

Mediengenerationen (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1997), 61.

⁸ For a good overview of this phenomenon, see Ian Burrell, “Tuning out: Analogue radio to disappear by 2018,” *The Independent*, October 24, 2013, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/tuning-out-analogue-radio-to-disappear-by-2018-8859731.html> (accessed August 2, 2016).

⁹ I will limit myself to mentioning the work on “re-enchanting” radio by media scholar and radio artist Anna Friz, which also occasionally criticizes radio utopias and their fascination with sound for their tendency to disregard inherent political implications. See, for instance, Anna Friz, “The Radio of the Future Redux: Rethinking Transmission Through Experiments in Radio Art” (PhD diss., York University, 2011).

¹⁰ “Язык радио пластичней, богаче, полнзвучней любого языка. На языке радио можно выразить предрассветную тоску, зябкость старения, ‘сырую прелесть мира.’ [...] Вот какой источник информации у вас всегда под рукой: источник животрепещущий, пульсирующий, утоляющий.” Igor' Pomerantsev, “Vek radio,” in *News* (Kiev: Fakt, 1998), 64-65.

Radio is not the proverbial “window to the world,” but the world itself. But some other kind of world, the authentic one, if you will. The expression “thing in itself” has been begging to be used. In this case, what matters is the conversation about it, any conversation, round and round; the world is nothing but a conversation. Words? Yes, but also something else: sound. Even more: sound doesn’t add to the word (heresy: the former is self-sufficient even outside linguistic systems), but presents something else: itself. Any radio conversation, radio sound is, in its idea, *zaum*.¹¹

Paramonov’s thoughts recapitulate pertinent issues raised by the writers I have analyzed, such as Mayakovsky’s association of instantaneous sound signals with greater truthfulness or Khlebnikov’s understanding of *zaum*’s sonic efficacy (his invocation of *zaum* stands as yet another recent allusion to “Radio of the Future”).

Attempts to reclaim radio’s intimacy and its somatic affect, while highlighting the ways it both augments and interferes with communication, are also found in contemporary poetry. I will close with the “Radio-Poem” (“Radio-Stikh,” 2004) by Sergei Biriukov, a scholar and theorist of sound poetry, as well as today’s closest poetic successor to the *zaum* tradition:

Внимание!

Передаем радио-стих – и –
фьюч – вач – крч
к-р-р-р р-р-р-к
ветерок веет
für wenig

врт-твр-рвт
бдр-т-дрб-д
lirik krank

КЛИНГ-КЛАНГ

¹¹ “Радио – не пресловутое “окно в мир,” но сам мир, причем какой-то другой; если угодно – подлинный. Давно просится на язык выражение “вещь в себе.” Но вещь в себе по определению несказуема. Значит, важен самый разговор о ней, разговор вообще, вокруг и около, мир – это и есть разговор. Слова? Да, но и еще нечто – звук. Даже больше: звук не прибавляет к слову (ересь: таковое самодостаточно и вне системы языка), но что-то другое являет: самого себя. Всякий радиоразговор, радиозвук, в идее, – заумь.” Boris Paramonov, “Radio,” *Zvezda* 12 (2014): 226-229.

ШШШШШШШШШШ

то есть Ш
то есть хен-
рике
то есть Ш
то есть ми
дт

дтш-дтш-дтш
медленный поворот
регулятора громкости
осторожное угасание
звука¹²

[Attention! // We are transmitting a radio-poem – and – / fyooch – vahtch – krch /
k-r-r-r-r-r-k / a little wind blows / für wenig // vrt-tvr-rvt / bdr-t-drb-d / lirik krank
// kling-klang / shhhhhhh / that is, Sh / that is, hen- / rike / that is, Sh / that is mi / dt
// dtsh-dtsh-dtsh / a slow turn / of the volume control / the careful fading-out / of
sound]

This is a striking evocation of a garbled poetic message, a text that treats the poetic act as a radiophonic emission caught between switching on and off the receiver. In his playful proximity to their work, Biriukov reveals the radio subtext implicit in the *zaum* of Kruchenykh, Khlebnikov, and Tufanov, who similarly de- and reconstruct words phonetically, exploring the nexus between concept, sound image, and pure noise. Like Mayakovsky's texts it demands to be declaimed to appreciate its uncannily accurate mimicking of broadcast static. And not unlike Mandelstam's lyrics, it captures the very cusp of articulation and rethinks inspiration through a radio metaphor. Thus, even today, after nearly a century of radio-inspired verse, we continue to attend to the radio voice, with its mystifying otherworldliness, its hyper-reality, and its ability to reveal more about our oldest forms of communication: the written and the spoken word.

¹² Sergei Biriukov, "Radio-Stikh," in *Poesis = Poezis = Poesis* (Moscow: Tsentr sovremennoi literatury, 2009), 44.

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