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STEPPE SON: DAVID BURLIUK'S IDENTITY

Scholarship has recognized David Burliuk as the force behind Futurism's crystallization within the boundaries of the Russian Empire. It is generally accepted that he "largely gave Futurism its ideological orientation: to bring art and poetry to the streets and thus yoke art and life, to reject the art and poetry of the past, to see art and poetry as an unending quest for novelty and the creation of new forms."¹ It is also agreed that he provided much of the organizing drive behind the early Futurist movement in the Russian Empire, its landmark exhibitions, its publications and public engagements, and that he often supplied the "promotional" strategies that made it famous. Without him, Markov has written, there would have been no Futurism in the Russian Empire.² Yet, he is perhaps the least researched and understood among the major figures of the twentieth-century avant-garde. Scholars have had relatively little to say about him as a writer or artist. Barooshian has written that "The sad irony of Burliuk's life is that he organized an avant-garde movement of the first magnitude while himself failed to achieve significant recognition."³ Bowlit has also commented that the artist "enjoys an uncertain position in our contemporary appreciation of the avant-garde. Little serious research has been undertaken on Burliuk's career, few publications have been devoted to him, and leading specialists in Russian Cubo-Futurism at best communicate equivocal opinions as to the artistic worth of Burliuk's output."⁴

There are several reasons for the neglect. For one thing, politics intervened to prevent a full, dispassionate account of his life and art. Burliuk escaped the revolution by travelling through Siberia to Vladivostok and Japan, and then emigrating to the USA in 1922. By the mid-1920s, when "heroic" (later called "Socialist") Realism became the mandatory style, Futurism was treated as an embarrassment in the Soviet Union. Whereas a suitably edited and sanitized Maiakovsky was appropriated by the Soviet regime, Burliuk's legacy

1. Vahan D. Barooshian, *Russian Cubo-Futurism 1910-1930: A Study in Avant-Gardism* (The Hague-Paris: Mouton, 1974), p. 72.

2. Vladimir Markov, *Russian Futurism: A History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1968), p. 9.

3. Barooshian, *Russian Cubo-Futurism 1910-1930*, p. 78.

4. John E. Bowlit, "David Burliuk, the Father of Russian Futurism," *Canadian-American Slavic Studies*, 20, nos. 1-2 (Spring-Summer 1986), 26.

and biography proved less tractable. After all, he had deliberately left the country, choosing to live and create in the USA until his death in 1967. The circumstances of his leaving were interpreted, quite correctly, as flight: the threat of persecution by the Cheka hung over him because his brother Nikolai, who had served as an officer in the White army, had been executed by the Bolsheviks in 1920 simply because he was considered suspicious and a potential enemy.⁵ The Burliuk family, moreover, were no proletarians. This alone would have been enough to have them executed during the revolution. On one of his lecture tours through Siberia in 1917-18, Burliuk was told to avoid certain towns because sudden, unannounced inspections of hands had been held there. The artists' son, in an unpublished account based on his father's reminiscences, has written: "The entire village would be told to stand up in a single line with their palms up. . . . The commissar and his committee had the citizens shot if their palms and fingers were not as rough with callouses as the bark of a tree."⁶ Moreover, Burliuk was temperamentally opposed to regimentation. In 1919 in a poem dedicated to "the Chuzhaks" (Chuzhak was a leftist critic), he compared the demand that poetry be completely politicized and serve the needs of the day to the practice of whipping peasants in the lord's stables.⁷ In general, his relationship with bolshevism remained uncomfortable, even though in the USA through the twenties and thirties he remained close to communist circles, writing for the Soviet organs *Russkii golos* (Russian Voice) and *Novyi mir* (New World).

In the second place, his enormous artistic and literary legacy, which he once calculated as 17,000 paintings and about the same number of watercolours and drawings,⁸ has never been brought together in large or representative enough scope to be adequately studied. Most of his paintings are scattered throughout various cities in Ukraine, Russia, Japan, the USA, and Canada, and there has never been an opportunity to view a substantial number of his works from each period: some 200 works belong to his Ufa (Bashkiria) period from 1915-1918; another 200 were produced in his tours and exhibitions across Siberia in 1918-1920; over 125 works were bought by collectors and museums while he exhibited and lived in Japan in 1920-1922; the works produced when he lived in East Side New York from 1922-1939 and in Hampton Bays, Long Island from 1940-1967 are housed in many private col-

5. Andrei Krusanov, "Norbert Evdaev. David Burliuk v Amerike: Materialy k biografii," *Novaya russkaia kniga*, 2 (2002), 2; http://magazines.russ.ru/prk/2002/2/krusan_pr.html

6. Nicholas Burliuk, "The First Hippie: David Davidovich Burliuk." Mary Holt family archive, p. 175a.

7. Norbert Evdaev, *David Burliuk v Amerike: Materialy k biografii* (Moscow: Nauka, 2002), p. 51.

8. Nicholas Burliuk, "The First Hippie: David Davidovich Burliuk." Mary Holt family archive, p. 274b.

lections and museums, a result of the fact that in the last period of his life he received recognition in North America and was sought after by some prominent collectors. His poetry, prose and critical essays have also rarely been anthologized or given critical attention. Markov, in his landmark study of Russian Futurism, dismissed Burliuk's early poetry as "lacking in poetic maturity or vitality . . . terribly boring and cliché-ridden."⁹ The lament over critical neglect would over the decades become a refrain. Postupalsky also wrote: ". . . extremely little has been written and said about Burliuk's literary creativity . . . and most of what has been written and said is wrong."¹⁰ And Bowlt complained that Burliuk's reputation as a "showman, charlatan, and self-seeker" had deflected commentators from a deeper investigation of his personality and artistic innovation.¹¹

Another difficulty in assessing Burliuk's artistic achievement stems from the fact that he went through a rapid and puzzling evolution, both intellectual and artistic, experimenting with a number of styles – a story that has not yet been adequately explained. Finally, there is the unexplored issue of his sense of identity, which throws additional light on his legacy and creative inspiration.

Norbert Evdaev's recent biography, traces Burliuk's life through critical reviews, letters and articles in the journal that he published in the USA from 1930 under the title *Color and Rhyme*. It brings to light many "forgotten" episodes in the life of the writer and artist, capturing some of the complexity of the man. However, it also has a marked interpretative slant. Evdaev's post-Soviet "rehabilitation" of Burliuk is linked to the affirmation of the artist's Russian patriotism. At various points he is described as longing for his homeland, pining over his lost connections, and making every attempt to support the people and country he has left. Some of this is, of course, quite correct, but the sense of identity that lay at the root of his creative inspiration was altogether more complex.

Burliuk worked for the leftist *Russian Voice* from 1923-1939, proofreading and writing articles on cultural events, and supported disaster relief in the USSR. Throughout his life he felt himself to be on the side of the oppressed, the broad masses. In the first two decades of his life in the USA he moved in left-leaning, Russian-speaking circles among emigres who might be Jewish, Armenian, Ukrainian or Russian. However, Burliuk's pro-Soviet views cannot be taken at face value. The artist was supported by affluent admirers like Robert Chandler, Mrs. Harriman-Romsey, and Katherine Dreier. The last, in-

9. Markov, *Russian Futurism*, p. 24.

10. Igor Postupalskiy, *Literaturnyi trud Davida D. Burliuka* (New York: Izd. Marii Burliuk, 1931), p. 4.

11. Bowlt, "David Burliuk, the Father of Russian Futurism," p. 26.

cientally, who also became his first biographer, was of German background and remained a great supporter of Hitler until 1939. Burliuik's endorsements of Soviet rule also represented the typical paying of tribute by emigres who still wanted to return for a visit. They feared the regime, particularly for what it might do to relatives still in the USSR. While living as an impoverished artist and working for a left-wing newspaper in the twenties and thirties, Burliuik was aware of the required reverences towards the Bolshevik revolution, international working-class solidarity, and communism. While making these gestures, he could not have been unaware of the repression of avant-garde art in the Soviet Union, or, for example, of Maiakovsky's strained relationship with the authorities, which eventually contributed to the poet's suicide. The great Futurist poet visited his old friend and mentor in New York in 1925. Burliuik knew of the banning of Futurist literary and artistic works in the Soviet Union, and of the fact that none of his Futurist friends could exhibit either in Soviet galleries or abroad. Even in the sixties, after the post-Stalin "thaw," Khrushchev bulldozed an open-air exhibition of modernist works, declaring that they could have been painted by a donkey's tail – the same jeering expression that half-a-century before had greeted Futurist canvases, and that in 1910 had been adopted to designate one Futurist group. It was this kind of attitude that compelled Burliuik, from around 1927, to begin claiming that pre-revolutionary Futurism had been a harbinger of the Bolshevik Revolution. In these articles, he now identified himself as the "father of *proletarian* Futurism in the Russian Empire," defended the movement, his friends, and tried to clear his own reputation with the regime. Nonetheless, in spite of the fact that most of his writings from this period read today like uninspired propaganda for the Soviet cause, they were treated with suspicion by Soviet commentators. These writings were also a far cry from his pre-revolutionary publications, which were dashed off with great verve, made almost no mention of politics, and aimed in the first instance at a destruction of aesthetic cliché.

Eventually, in 1956-57, Burliuik was allowed to visit the Soviet Union. By that time, he was aware not only of the repressions conducted by the Cheka, from whom he had fled in 1919, but also of the famine of 1933, and of Stalin's concentration camps. His sons had grown up Americans and fought in the Second World War. In the latter part of his life he moved among the rich and connected. None of this experience allows for the adoption of a naive pro-Soviet perspective.

Critics have also downplayed Burliuik's pronouncements concerning his cultural identity. In simple terms, he might be described as a Russian who was proud of his Ukrainian origins. His favorite description of himself, one that he placed on many of his publications and used as a moniker, was "otets rossiiskogo futurizma" (the father of Futurism in the Russian Empire). Critics

have sometimes altered the phrase to "otets russkogo futurizma" (the father of Russian Futurism). These were not necessarily the same thing. "Russia" (Rossiia and its derivative "rossiiskii") of course, can simply be shorthand for the entire territory of the former Russian Empire, in which the Russian language was dominant and most cultural figures were dubbed "Russian," whatever their actual origins or national-cultural allegiances. Most critics use the terms "rossiiskii" (meaning "of the Russian Empire") and "russkii" (by which they mean "ethnically Russian") interchangeably, calling Burliuk the father of Russian Futurism, a Russian writer, a Russian patriot, and a man educated in Russian culture. To a degree, he was all of these things. However, all his biographers also affirm his Ukrainian identity, although only his son Nicholas attributes significance to it, using it to explain a number of personal convictions, habits and traits:

My father, David Davidovich Burliuk was a Ukranian. [sic]¹²

No one meeting my father in America, with his gentleness, kindness and his great sense of humor, which almost every Ukrainian possesses, could ever picture the gaiety which was part of his tremendous power and charm when he was a young man.¹³

In his youth, my father was very fond of visiting the little cemetery near Riabushki [the family estate near Sumy, where he was born and grew up]. Surrounded by the solitude of the steppes, under massive oak crosses, his beloved ancestors rested. The aroma of wild flowers added to the melancholy beauty of the sacred place. He would stand and listen to the sighing of the wind in the pines and willows.

"There they lie," he would say. "From them I received the spark of life to carry to the world and be, myself, a living connecting link between the past and the future."¹⁴

His life has no implication of doom or expressive failure, for he was a true Ukrainian: a man of joy and laughter.¹⁵

It was difficult to imagine wintering in Japan and trying to warm one's shivering body by a minute hibachi [sic] stove standing on straw mats. Surrounded by walls, doors, and windows made of paper – everything resembling some sort of stage setting – was too much for a Ukrain-

12. Nicholas Burliuk, "The First Hippie: David Davidovich Burliuk." Mary Holt family archive, p. 1.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 194.

ian accustomed to the crackling of a stove, wind-proof heavy walls and windows with storm frames.¹⁶

Nicholas also recalls that on their famous expeditions to archaeological sites in the Crimea, the Burliuk brothers would listen to the stories of local people and to the songs of bandura-players.¹⁷ Even Burliuk's habit of wearing one earring in the right ear was, he writes, "in the style of a Ukrainian Cossack."¹⁸

The artist Aristarkh Lentulov also affirmed Burliuk's Ukrainian identity. He is recorded as saying: "I was a guest at their place and stayed with them. They were real Ukrainians, although the mother was Jewish."¹⁹ In his early writings in particular, Burliuk himself consistently uses "Russia" to mean the whole Russian Empire (declared by Peter the Great in 1721) and "Rus" as a term that includes the cultural and historical identities of Russia and Ukraine from medieval times. In one poem "Rossiia pod krasnym flagom: Rus – Rossiia – SSSR," he likened the Zaporozhian Cossacks to the powerful flow of the Dnieper, suggesting that like the tempestuous waves passing through turbines, they provided the "electrical power" of revolution.²⁰ This image, like those of Taras Shevchenko and Petro Sahaidachny, occur in Burliuk's poetry as representations of elemental force.

The discounting of this cultural dimension is not untypical. Examinations of the life and work of Malevich, too, have frequently ignored or downplayed his self-identification as a Ukrainian. The mothers of Tatlin and Khlebnikov were also Ukrainian, and these two artists also expressed their national-cultural allegiance in a more complex way than is generally acknowledged. Perhaps the root issue here is the presence of competing interpretations and definitions. Burliuk can be viewed as a Russian radical who sympathized with Marxism, as an assimilated Ukrainian who turned his back on his people, or as a Ukrainian who found in this identity a creative tension that sustained his art.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 275.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 111.

19. The quotation is from a conversation that the literary scholar V. O. Pertsov recorded having with A. Lentulov on January 6, 1939. The latter was reminiscing about his friendship with Maiakovsky and Burliuk. It is quoted in Evdaev, *David Burliuk v Amerike: Materialy k biografii*, p. 34. Nicholas Burliuk is also under the impression that Burliuk's grandfather and Liudmilla's father, Iosyp Mikhnevych, was "a lawyer and barrister of Jewish faith." (p. 18) Evdaev, however, provides a footnote that no documentation confirming that L. I. Mikhnevych was Jewish has been found. (p. 57)

20. *Desiatyi Oktiabr* (New York: Izdanie Marii Nikiforovich Burliuk, 1928), p. 14.

Although most studies refer to St. Petersburg and Moscow in the years 1910-12 as the birthplaces of Futurism in the Russian Empire, passing over the importance of the 1908 Link exhibition in Kyiv and the Ukrainian background on the formation of the Hylaea group, the evidence suggests the need for a more nuanced assessment of influences.²¹ For one thing, David Burliuk consistently identified himself as a Ukrainian and attached importance to this self-definition. Three documents written by Burliuk himself and one by his sister, are particularly interesting.²² We learn from them that Burliuk's ancestors served as secretaries in the Zaporozhian Sich prior to 1775, and that oil paintings of these ancestors hung on the walls of his great grandfather's home. All who knew Burliuk's father were convinced that the latter had served as the model for the enormous, half-dressed Cossack sitting on a barrel in Repin's famous painting "Zaporozhians Writing a Letter to the Sultan of Turkey."²³

One of Burliuk's autobiographical statements dwells on the Cossack ancestry of which he is so proud, attributing his own character and view of life to this background. His upbringing in Ukraine influenced not only his intellectual formation (the reading of Gogol and the prohibited Shevchenko, and the viewing of Kotliaevsky's *Natalka-Poltavka*)²⁴ but, he tells us, his art also. Since this statement is rarely made available, it is worth quoting some sections:

I could write a whole book about my ancestors. And I will write it some day, when I have more time. Now I am writing in Russian, but

21. Livshits' memoirs contain a wonderful chapter of Hylaea (Benedikt Livshits, *The One and a Half-Eyed Archer* (Newtonville, MA: Oriental Research Partners, 1977), pp. 35-68) and he states that the Link exhibition, which was held in Kyiv from November 2-30, 1908 and to which David, Liudmyla and Vladimir (Volodymyr) Burliuk, Exter, Bohomazov, Prybylska, Goncharova, Larionov and others contributed in some ways may be regarded as the first Futurist exhibition in the Russian Empire, especially since the participants issued a collective manifesto. (p. 65)

22. Two of these are attached to Evdaev's book. They are "Lestnitsa moikh let" by David Burliuk (pp. 297-304) and "Fragmentsy semeinoi khroniki" by Liudmila Kuznetsova-Burliuk (pp. 305-13). The latter appeared as "Fragmentsy khronologii roda Burliukov" in *Color and Rhyme*, 48 (1961-62): 43-47. Two further documents are attached to Dmytro Horbachov, ed., *Ukrainskyi avanhard 1910-1930 rokiv: Albom* (Kyiv: Mystetstvo, 1996). They are "Predky moi" (pp. 373-74) and "Frahmenty zi spohadiv futurysta (Za sorok rokiv 1890-1930)" (p. 373). They are given as being in the State Public Library in Saint Petersburg, Manuscript Section, f. 552, no. 1.

23. Liudmila Kuznetsova-Burliuk, "Fragmentsy khronologii roda Burliukov" in *Color and Rhyme*, 48 (1961-62), 43

24. Nicholas Burliuk, "The First Hippie: David Davidovich Burliuk." Mary Holt family archive, pp. 26, 51.

later maybe I will turn to my native Ukrainian, for I was born in Ukraine.

Ukraine was and remains my homeland, because I was born in Ukraine, . . . the bones of my ancestors, free Cossacks, who fought in the name of glory, power and freedom are buried there. . . .

What unites them [my ancestors] into one general type? Determination, character, the desire to obtain a set goal.

All my life I have felt these traits within me. . . . However, my determination was aimed at overcoming an old, outdated taste and at introducing a new art, a wild beauty into life. . . .

My father wrote poetry in Russian and Ukrainian (although he did not write much in his native language). . . .

In 1915, I painted the picture "Sviatoslav" in the style of ancient Ukrainian painting. As far as the dominance of one or another color scheme in my work, I have to say, that in my person Ukraine has its most faithful son. My color schemes are deeply national. Orange, greenish-yellow, red, and blue tones gush like Niagaras from beneath my brush. When I paint, it seems to me, that I am a savage rubbing the stick of one color against another in order to obtain a certain color effect. The effect of flames. The effect of passion, the sexual arousal of one color's characteristic features and peculiarities by another. . . .

A child of the Ukrainian steppes, I have always been most partial to horizontal formats. . . .

It would be a good idea to transfer a part of my paintings to Ukraine, my beloved homeland. . . .²⁵

In the post-Second World War years, critics like Malaniuk, Hryshko and Dyvnych (Lavrinenko) branded many in the "Russian" emigration to the US who were of Ukrainian origin as "American *malorosy* [Little Russians – a term of abuse, signifying individuals with a cultural identity that had no political dimension] and largely refused to recognize them as Ukrainians. Most of the charges thrown by these critics against the American *maloros* can be applied directly to Burliuk. Often, in fact, the criticisms sound as though they were written with Burliuk in mind. The above quotations demonstrate, however, that the artist not only held a positive idea of what he considered to be Ukrainian attributes, but introduced these into his definitions of Futurism and modern art. In fact, the very understanding of what Futurism was or should be was shaped by Burliuk's sense of the Ukrainian identity.

25. David Burliuk, "Predky moi." State Public Library in Saint Petersburg, Manuscript Section, f. 552, no. 1. Ukrainian translation in Horbachov, 373-74.

In the first decades of the twentieth century both David Burliuk's poetry and art demonstrate qualities that have made him famous: intensity, brutal strength, an almost physiological cult of vitality, *joie de vivre*, and eroticism. The last trait was proverbial: he once confessed that he found all women up to the age of ninety attractive.²⁶ Burliuk counterposed these qualities to what he perceived as an effete, decadent Symbolism. He described Futurism's exuberance as a desire to portray the future liberated human being, and the image of this liberated human being was inspired by popular creativity. Throughout his artistic career, Burliuk depicted the daily existence of ordinary people enjoying life. His art abounds in scenes of tea parties, picnics, village and town streets, and taverns, pictures that display a life-affirming energy, a bustling activity and activism, and implicitly hold out the promise of a rich and harmonious future for humanity.

It was the cult of vitality that drew him towards "primitivism," a rediscovery of the forceful, simple and direct in popular art, which he found both in the ancient past and in folklore. The Scythian artifacts collected during architectural digs around his home in the Kherson area inspired much of his early art, as did examples of peasant art. Markov has written some of these influences: meandering ornamental patterns on houses, Scythian arrows found in mounds, and ancient stone sculptures, the "Stone maidens," that can be found throughout the steppe.²⁷ In the years 1907-12, the Burliuk brothers excavated some fifty ancient tombs in the Crimea, and many found their way into the Kherson Museum or into what they called their "Family Museum" in Chornianka. Before long, besides numerous artifacts, there were some seventy complete skeletons and two hundred skulls in the collection.²⁸ Burliuk also had an enormous collection of hand-painted signboards, on which he spent all his money.²⁹ Out of these and other sources of inspiration, he developed a powerful primitivist art.

The Scythian forms he appropriated include the symbolic depictions of animals, especially horses, and the integration of multiple possible viewing points – a device used by the Scythians to depict movement. Scythian art reveals new subjects as it is rotated and viewed from various sides. The art of the Burliuk brothers also employs "a similar lack of fixed orientation: animals and other figures are depicted upside down, at ninety-degree rotations, and running in various directions along the borders of an image. . . . David Burliuk combines the principle of rotation with the Scythians' tendency to

26. Livshits, *The One and a Half-Eyed Archer*, p. 41.

27. Markov, *Russian Futurism*, pp. 33, 35.

28. Nicholas Burliuk, "The First Hippie: David Davidovich Burliuk, p. 84.

29. Livshits, *The One and a Half-Eyed Archer*, p. 53.

place disparate images in dense arrangement."³⁰ These features, like his repeated painting of the Cossack Mamai figure, his bright colours and strong outlines, can be seen as part of the turn to a "primitive" art of local provenance.

Linked to this is Burliuk's democratic attitude to artistic creativity. His entire life was devoted to kindling creativity in those around him, often by drawing attention to the artistic power in everyday objects, the products of popular creativity. He found praise for the work of folk artists, children, friends and family members – all of whom he encouraged to paint. In fact, his mother also participated in the Link exhibition of 1908 under her maiden name Mikhnevych.³¹ Livshits informs that:

Among the many inhabitants of Chernianka who used to come and stare at the "boss's little ones" was a man who was much enticed by the Burliuk's painting and saw it as his own vocation.

He was a bearded man, not young, either a merchant or a carpenter, who served in one of the estates. His surname was Kovalenko. The Burliuks furnished him with canvas, brushes and paints and made him into a second Rousseau, exhibiting his paintings alongside theirs.³²

Burliuk's paintings, like much folk art, demonstrate a fascination with surface texture. Art for him was a "tactile, sensuous experience."³³ Livshits has famously described how the Burliuks would drag a new canvas outside and fling it into the liquid dirt, then paint over the bits of clay and sand, so that the landscape would "become the flesh and blood of the Hylaeian land."³⁴ Allied to this is a deliberate cultivation of crudity, which can be seen as another way of challenging Symbolist refinement, but was probably also due to Burliuk's attraction to the down-to-earth, the immediate and the close-up, which he saw as grounded and true-to-life. In the name of these desiderata, he revolted against what passed for sophistication, but was, in his opinion, stylization and aestheticization. He railed against the World of Art group, Andre Benois, and the salon public of the capital cities, which set the tastes of the collectors and dilettantes. In the name of primitivism he embraced dissonance, disproportion, asymmetry. Reports of his early speeches make it clear

30. Jared Ash, "Primitivism in Russian Futurist Book Design 1910-14," in Margit Rowell and Deborah Wye, eds., *The Russian Avant-Garde Book, 1910-1934* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2002), p. 37.

31. Evdaev, *David Burliuk v Amerike*, p. 32.

32. Livshits, *The One and a Half-Eyed Archer*, p. 53.

33. Bowlit, "David Burliuk, the Father of Russian Futurism," p. 31.

34. Livshits, *The One and a Half-Eyed Archer*, p. 51.

that these were the qualities that consistently upheld; they were also the qualities he always extolled in Van Gogh.³⁵

Burliuk's primitivism, as expressed in the early, pre-revolutionary period can all be linked to a constructed local history and mythology, an invented identity, that he would adhere to throughout his life, and that flows from two main sources: the Scythian and the Ukrainian.

Hylaea was the original name of the Futurist group, first formed in 1910 at the Burliuk family home in Chornianka, not far from the city of Kherson. This was where Burliuk's father managed an enormous estate belonging to Count Mordvinov. The name Hylaea is based on the Ancient Greek word for the Scythian lands at the mouth of the Dnieper. It is mentioned four times in Herodotus and is the setting for some of Hercules' feats. The group used this name until they began calling themselves Futurists in 1913. Benedikt Livshits has written in his memoirs that "In retrospect, Chernianka proved to be the intersection of those co-ordinates which brought forth the movement in Russian poetry and painting called Futurism."³⁶ To Livshits, Hylaea evoked the writings of Hesiod and Homer. To Burliuk it suggested wild energy, revolutionary enthusiasm and barbarian power. The term came to stand for the nihilistic pathos, the overturning of established values and customs that dominates the early Futurist manifestoes, all of which were inspired by and often written by David Burliuk. In his imagination, "Hylaea" merged with the Cossack identity, which also stood for life-affirming vitality, physical strength and spiritual optimism, and in which he saw the suppressed energy of the steppe peoples who had for centuries been denied exit through the Dnieper delta to the Black Sea. His evocations of both Scythia and Zaporozhian Cossackdom suggest explosive and hidden power hibernating in the steppe.

Much of Burliuk's art was rooted in the emotional and subconscious. He believed in invisible realms outside our normal sphere of perception, realms which could be sensed and shown by artists, but which did not submit to rational analysis. This faith appears to have originated from his encounters with soothsayers, miracle-workers and gypsies whom he met on his archaeological expeditions and which have been described by Nicholas Burliuk.³⁷ In his youth he visited and asked to be allowed to spend the night in haunted houses,³⁸ and in the 1920s he painted radio waves, convinced that they could be seen. His view was that as human beings freed themselves of their over-weening rationality, their sense perceptions would develop and these realms

35. Andrei Krusanov, *Russkii avangard: 1907-1932 (Istoricheskii obzor). V trekh tomakh.* Tom. 1. *Boevoe desiatiletie* (St. Petersburg: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 1996), p. 99.

36. Livshits, *The One and a Half-Eyed Archer*, pp. 58-59.

37. Nicholas Burliuk, "The First Hippie: David Davidovich Burliuk," pp. 86-93.

38. *Ibid.*, pp. 93-95.

would become accessible to them. Other contemporary artists from Ukraine – Kazimir Malevich, Alexander Archipenko and Oleksander Bohomazov among them – had similar intuitions.

Burliuk also revealed a desire to see the world holistically. This expressed itself as a strong ecological consciousness: he practiced conservation and recycling long before most North Americans had considered the concept. Even in his youth he lived frugally. None of this, of course, appealed to Soviet critics, who have rarely mentioned it, and when they have done so, have expressed displeasure with what they described as his mystical tendencies and his Naturphilosophie.³⁹

As with other artists, Burliuk's motivation for refusing to follow the beaten path, and for not repeating himself in art, stemmed not only from the desire to surprise or shock, but also from the effort to articulate an authentic, personal view of life. One way of doing this was to paint against convention, against the expected image. Another was to deliberately include the ugly, or "brutal" detail. In a similar way, the avoidance of sentimentalism can be seen as a way of reaching for the authentic through negation. So, too, can his desire to simultaneously see several sides of a picture: this latter can be understood as an attempt to break down accepted patterns of thinking and to construct a more "dynamic" and personal model of perception.

It is clear that the closely observed, the spontaneous and the paradoxical were for Burliuk ways of overturning any controlling, overarching schemes and rationalizations. It was as though he profoundly distrusted rational constructs, that deadened perception or obstructed an honest and close-up viewing. In the end, rather than repress the anarchic, direct and impulsive, he preferred to embrace it.

Burliuk's work, however, reveals a search for transcendence. He finds it, as has been argued, in a profoundly sensed, almost mystical union with the vitality of common people. His art explores and celebrates both psychological and cultural vitality, and also biological. In his later works he turned to painting summer landscapes full of brilliant sunshine and bursting energy, and to flowers. The many still lives with flowers that he produced in the last decades of his life are his final tribute to natural beauty and to the mysterious powers of the earth that so fascinated him.

It is these underpinning beliefs and this sensibility that his contemporaries often had in mind when they referred to him as a Ukrainian. Gollerbakh mentions his "khokhol goodnaturedness" and "stubbornness."⁴⁰ Lentulov and Livshits saw the atmosphere of abundance and the family hospitality in

39. Postupalskyi, *Literaturnyi trud Davida D. Burliuca*, p. 15.

40. E. Gollerbakh, *Iskusstvo Davida Burliuca* (New York: Izdanie M. N. Burliuk, 1930), p.

Chornianka as evidence of the Ukrainian background. Burluk himself drew inspiration from the strength and determination of his ancestors. When these qualities are placed alongside the evidence provided by his art (the fascination with popular vitality, the mystical union with the energies of the natural world, the myth of the steppe Ukraine as an Arcadia – an unspoiled, fertile land overflowing with irresistible energy) one immediately recognizes the elements of a core identity myth of Ukraine that has been centuries in the making.

It is unfortunate, therefore, that the condemnation of the *maloros* identity as a kind of apostasy or creolization by Malaniuk, Dyvnych, Hryshko and more recently Riabchuk has tended to place figures like Burluk outside the purview of "Ukrainian" studies.⁴¹ Dyvnych makes the point that the emigre *maloros* had often not witnessed the cultural renaissance of the 1920s and was therefore less sympathetic toward Ukrainian nation-building efforts. For Malaniuk's the *maloros* phenomenon was not simply a problem of political and cultural illiteracy, a lack of information or education. He saw it in military and political terms as a Conradian loss of nerve in the intelligentsia: it was not just a case of cultural hybridity, a "national hermaphroditism," but also part of a mood of "national defeatism,"⁴² a capitulation in the face of a powerful enemy and a paralysis of the political will.⁴³

The term need not, however, be viewed through such a negative lense. In imperial times many Ukrainians, who first acculturated and then assimilated to imperial Russian culture, retained a personal sense of identity that included a strong Ukrainian component. This kind of individual often, in fact, maintained a multiple or layered identity, and his or her entire world-view often remained connected at a deep level to a positive sense of Ukrainianness. Such was the case with Nikolai Gogol' and Kazimir Malevich. Jewish writers in Germany or Russia found themselves in a similar situation. Ignoring Heine's Jewish origins, it has been argued, overlooks the connection of his beliefs with Judaism.⁴⁴ In similar fashion, by ignoring the Ukrainian background of Gogol', Malevich or Burluk, critics risk overlooking currents that fed the

41. See Malaniuk, "Tvorchist i natsionalist (Do problemy malorossyzmu u mystetstvi," and "Malorosiistvo"; Vasyl I. Hryshko, *Maloukrainske skhidniatstvo (studia odniiei provokatsii)*; Iurii Dyvnych [Lavrinenko], *Amerykanske malorosiistvo (Publitsystychnyi reportakh)*; and Mykola Riabchuk, *Vid Malorosii do Ukrainy*.

42. Ievhen Malaniuk, "Malorosiistvo," in his *Knyha sposterezhen*. Vol. 2 (Toronto: Homin Ukrainy, 1966), p. 233.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 234.

44. Jost Hermand, "One Identity is not Enough: Heine's Legacy to Germans, Jews, and Liberals," in Peter Uwe Hohendahl and Sander L. Gilman, eds., *Heinrich Heine and the Occident: Multiple Identities, Multiple Receptions* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1991), pp. 19-20.

spiritual and artistic development of these writers and artists. David Burluk's attempt to construct, out of the idea of a Scythian and Ukrainian past, both a personal identity and an inspiration for Futurism, deserves a more careful review.

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