The poetics of personal behaviour: the interaction of life and art in Russian modernism (1890-1920)

Ioffe, D.

Citation for published version (APA):
Introduction

The central concern of my analysis is the cultural concept of “life art” (which may be traced back to the Latin expression *ars vivendi*) as embodied by the leading exponents of Russian Modernism. I was interested to understand the peculiar mechanisms behind the ways and actions of people committed to the radical formation of their personal lives as works of art. Many prominent figures of Russian Modernism were in fact styling their life according to the primordially stated principles of their aesthetical agendas and interests. The subsequent pages will show how they “programmed” their lives according to the proclaimed principles, shaping their biographies in accordance with the curriculum of their playful Modernist experimentation. Behavioral “stylization” and interpretation of life as a sort of artificial narrative constitute therefore the conceptual core of the studied phenomenon.

I was determined to examine how “an artistic craft of life” was realized in and corresponded to the widely-known cultural output of the discussed authors. I consider the idea of “art” not just as a traditional mimetical representation of any objective phenomena (as suggested by the philosophy of Aristotle). Following in some way Tolstoy’s definition of art as “using indirect means” of communication “from one person to another”, I rather subscribe to the “semiotic” approach to art. Aided by the apt semiological term of “sign-vehicle” we can conclude that work of art as any other artificial sign, always stands for something else as a substitute of carefully contrived expression and aims at a certain resulting communication. What is actually being communicated depends largely on the intention of the creator (i.e. ideology of the creation). It comes as no surprise that such a commonly accepted resource as Encyclopaedia Britannica also provides a semiotically-oriented definition of art emphasizing the “communicated” and “sign-sharing” essence of the phenomenon, referring to art as: “the use of skill and imagination in the creation of aesthetic objects, environments, or experiences that can be shared with others”. The *aesthetic experiences* that can be shared with the “other/s” constitute the adequate understanding of art as is assumed by this study. Understanding art as communication agrees with Russian Modernism perfectly since it echoes the major concern of its exponents about appealing to others through the means of any chosen, particular event of their “unusual” lives. In many cases such an event contained, as I will demonstrate, some hidden “utopian” components. This utilization of art for conveying new utopian “messages” suggests that the communicative and semiotic apprehension of aesthetic function can be especially relevant in this case.

---

1 Additional terminological definitions of this phenomenon are “life-creation” (offered by Michael Wachtel and Irina Paperno) and “Lebenskunst” (used by Wilhelm Schmid and Schamma Schahadat).
2 I.e. a certain skill which was employed in order to produce an aesthetic “result” of any sort.
3 For the variety of scholarly ways of defining art see for example: Hatcher 1999; Davies 1991.
4 A succinct and useful discussion of this Tolstoyan view may be found in Levinson 2003: 4-5.
5 For the semiotic understanding of art see series of essays by the Amsterdam theorist of culture Mieke Bal: Bal 1994; Bal 1998; Bal, Bryson 1998-a (and 1998-b).
6 For the overview of this topic see the various corresponding chapters in the volume *Creating Life: Aesthetic Utopia of Russian Modernism* (Paperno, Grossman 1994). See also Matich 2005.
My understanding of “life-creation” (“life art”) is not associated with the pragmatic historical conceptions searching for the correct or best form of life conduct or modified lifestyle that emerged in the classical antiquity. The “life art” of the classical antiquity that reached us through several didactical treatises by some of the philosophers (namely Socrates, Plato) was mainly preoccupied with providing the most useful and justified framework for reasonable living behavior and, as it might seem, less interested in the creative aesthetics per se. Didactically oriented instructing practices of life conduct developed by the ancient philosophy lie obviously beyond the stated interest of my study.

Below I will try to recapitulate the major ideas contained in the main text of my study. My discussion starts with theoretical exposition that relates to the main textual sources of my analysis, the primary foundation of the research. In order to restore the corresponding details of events taken from lives of the studied authors I was obliged to rely heavily on one certain kind of historical information. I call it “mnemocentric” textuality, which is also known as “life-writing”, or “self-writing” (speaking about materials that in Dutch are usually referred to (e.g. Van Dale) as “ego-documents”). Accordingly, I refer to a large amount of “openly personal” materials that are available in autobiographies, diaries, memoirs, private letters and reminiscences of all sorts that were composed either by the main representatives of Russian Modernism or by their less known contemporaries.

The most important thing I wanted to emphasize in my opening chapter is the problematics of unrestrained reliance on self-writing sources. Many scholars regard this type of texts as not quite legitimate in any empirical historical research. I do not subscribe to the “pessimistic” and skeptical view that dismisses autobiography (and diary) as a totally unreliable source. In the first chapter of my dissertation I try to show the complexity of major theoretical attitudes that exist with regard to the self writing, demonstrating that this kind of texts is just “another” sort of available “primary sources” and we should not discard it. From the methodological point of view, I suggest, the question is never “what” is described, but rather “who is describing, and why”. I needed the theoretical exposition presented in the first chapter (which is entirely devoted to self-writing) in order to draw attention to the unsettled nature of this category of my sources, the self-writing texts on which I make an extensive use in my dissertation (especially chapters three and four). The theory of life writing is destined to demonstrate that, after all, we are allowed in my opinion to use these self-written texts with a due caution so as to be able to gain our knowledge of the respective matters.

In addition, there is another feature that makes bringing the “ego-documents” into discussion of Russian Lebenskunst particularly attractive. Since the experimental life-creation has always been with necessity focused on the “self”,

---

7 On this see the two relevant German studies: Hadot 1991 and Horn 1998.
8 This frame of mind has numerous devotees. See for instance the recent article by James B. Mitchell dealing, by the way, with the well known “reality effect” of “infusing” the narrated stories with a sense of (misleading) “verisimilitude” (introduced by Roland Barthes). See Mitchell 2003: 607-624. On the subject of the characteristic post-modernist skepticism focused on the impossibility of “telling the truth” in autobiography see the influential essay by Paul De Man: (De Man 1984: 67-81).
9 On the historical idea of the “self” which has been so important to the international Modernism see the scholarly contributions by Michael Mascuch and Jerrold Siegel: Mascuch 1996 and Seigel 2005.
of ways this “self” organizes its creative operation in both inward and outward fashion, the corresponding descriptive self-writing can be considered just another particular instance of the studied phenomenon per se. In my view, the “self writing” is a general metaphor of life-creation, its most palpable textual result. The Lotmanian notion of “life text” indeed symbolizes the memoir as its closest kin among the written genres. It is unsurprising then that Yuri Lotman widely used historical memoirs (and epistolary materials) in his studies of the Decembrists’ and Pushkin’s “historical conduct” and codified behavioral patterns. This approach seems correct if we develop a certain attitude toward the self-writing as a realistic imprint, as veritable mould that adequately reflects and re-presents the mental/physical inner self-image of its author. We do not have any other source of the author’s image that would be “closer” or more “intimate”, after all. Self-writing is therefore our “best companion” in fulfilling this difficult task of analytical evaluation of the “personal past” that exists in no other form readily available to us.

The first major notion that I start my theoretical discussion with is the concept of “autobiographical pact” (Le pacte autobiographique) introduced by Philippe Lejeune. Dealing with the trickiest nature of authorial intention Lejeune postulated the existence of the symbolical “covenant” – a kind of virtual agreement between the writer and the reader. According to this course of thinking the reader accedes to regard the proposed narrative as “non-fiction”, something that actually did take place in the real life of the speaking person. It is always a matter of complete voluntariness on behalf of all the parties involved: the narrator consents that his intention is “to tell the true story” and the reader chooses to accept it and believe it. It is crucially important therefore to be able to characterize the author’s intention with regard to the story told. In all the sources that I bring in my discussion the “non-fictional” genre of writing is explicit and is strengthened by the author’s unambiguous determination to tell the “real events” as he or she saw it.

It was important to emphasize the corresponding view expressed by Lejeune on the presumed opposition of “two pacts” – those of fiction and autobiography. In the same way that we “believe” in the fictitious nature of Briusov’s prosaic or poetical narratives, we also regard his diary fiction as empirically “real”. One of the most notable traits of Lejeune’s approach was his stress on the names of self-writing texts. It is usually possible, according to this scholar, to discern the non-fictional, memoirist intent of the author if we base our assumption on the title of the oeuvre. In this sense, the main title itself always makes it clear for the reader what mental attitude is to be chosen (a priori) in regard to the narrated events. Exactly in the same way, the “beginning” and the “ending” of the diary are very telling and functional. Both the beginning and the ending serve as good indicators of the true nature of the author’s intention to make his or her text publicly available, and therefore they provide information on the degree of intimacy involved. The more “secret” the discussed text can be, the greater credit of genuinity can be given to this work. I needed to mention this approach in order to motivate my broad use of the Symbolist

10 This necessarily implies that unlike some post-modernist philosophers I believe that “empirical truth” is to be separated from the “invented fiction”, and it is still possible to approach them as disjointed entities.
intimate diaries as valid descriptions of their correlative “historical reality”. These diaries (especially the shockingly revealing diary of Briusov’s) were clearly composed with no traceable presumption of public access and therefore may be regarded as acceptable testimonies of their authors’ personal past.

Philippe Lejeune’s elder colleague, a philosopher and epistemologist Georges Gusdorf offered an additional theoretical insight into our comprehension of the nature of autobiography. Paying greater respect to the role of human memory involved in the production of a veritable memoir he brings us back to the basic problem of its generic nature. According to Gusdorf, the virtual “success” of any biography depends largely on every writer’s physical ability to memorize the particular reconstructive events of the more distant past. While attributing empirical value to the studied sources one must be mindful of the natural limits of human mind, including its well-known aspects of “unreliability” and potential “black-outs”. The careful approach offered by the French theorist helps evaluating the information contained in all the numerous reminiscences that I debate in my dissertation, especially in chapter 4, where plenty of “memoirs” are quoted in order to reconstruct the life-creationist landscape of the Russian Avant-Garde.

Gusdorf’s disciple, the eminent scholar of self-writing, James Olney once contended about the essential impossibility to provide a discrete all-embracing definition that would conform with all the relevant aspects of “autobiography” and its derivatives. This impossibility alerts us of the quintessentially troubled character of this kind of “document”. Being unable to provide a clear-cut denotation, Olney attempted to work with autobiography through naming its several “concealed” “sub-varieties” that promote the principal mechanics of its operation. Several of these (like *autosociography* and *autopsychotherapy*) seem to be useful in coping with the life-creationist texts of self-writing. In addition to that, Olney pursues his point with regard to understanding autobiography as an original way of “self-saviouring”, a kind of substitution available for “accomplishing” life’s object through writing. Proceeding this way we can assume, for instance, that the later memoirist texts of Andrei Belyi betray his final effort to conclude indirectly (and maybe, even “unconsciously” for his own part) his youthful “life-creation” in an alternatively elaborated shape. In acknowledgment of this I propose to recognize some of the discussed memoirs of the Russian Modernists as a sui generis continuation of their earlier life-creationist agendas and interests, performed in writing rather than in a manner of physical action. By re-creating their past in their written-down memory, by rearranging the accents they were finalizing and sharpening the semiotical message of their previous Lebenskunst activities. Such was their artistic method of communication with the “posterity”, and it may not be justifiable to try to ignore that.

The Hungarian philologist István Dobos left several elucidating considerations substantiating the detachment of life-writing from any other “literary” genre. By stressing this I arrived at a more “documentary” kind of attitude towards the self-writing texts. In their essence they aren’t like “fiction” and therefore they should be treated differently. Dobos emphasized the lack of “real literary freedom” in self-writing. This reason alone dictated the closer (than in “literature”) attention to the concrete empirical reality narrated. Accordingly, the autobiographies and memoirs

\[\text{11 Let me remind once again that I suggest understanding art as “communication” in the first place.}\]
are tightly “bound” to the respective realities they convey. They can’t really “make them up” since the discrepancies may be easily revealed by the “cross-marked” sources of their contemporaries. We are well aware of the fact that the “fictitious” memoir or any published reminiscence that is not corroborated by other sources, or more importantly is in fact contradicted by other major texts describing the same set of events, is by no means an impossible thing. In Russian Symbolism we have a famous memoir written and published in Paris by Georgii Ivanov who, for the sake of provocation, was openly interested in distorting and falsifying the real state of affairs of his pre-revolutionary past. The “intentional fallacies” of Ivanov had been exposed by his contemporaries already in his life-time, and the nature of his memoirs gradually became more or less obvious. The controversy of Ivanov’s self-writing prevented me, for instance, from using his memoir in my dissertation. It is important to define the entire context surrounding each particular piece of self-writing and clarify through all the available means whether this text can be contradicted by any legitimate witnessing contemporary.

The American literary scholar Paul John Eakin offered another useful idea to be employed for understanding life-writing in terms of life-creation. According to him, nearly each autobiography is an integral part of a “lifelong process of identity formation”, which means that creating this kind of texts also inevitably shapes the mental self-apperception, constantly modifying the resulting image of the self. The “memorizing self” creates its own “narrative identity” and attributes to it all the relevant aspects of the real life. The person engaged in self-writing experiences his life in two ways: one of them being writing. In agreement with Eakin any successful memoirist and autobiographer somehow “reshapes” his or her inner identity while composing the text. The plain “narrating of the true fact” may be allotted with a new interpretative meaning and alternative signification that will correspond to the “new” constructed self of the acting writer. The boundaries between the “textual” and the “physical”, therefore, evolve to seem particularly shady.12

The general topic of self-writing that includes memoirs and diaries became exceptionally popular among Slavic scholars in recent years.13 One of the most characteristic contributions in this field is an essay by the Berkeley scholar Irina Paperno.14 In this essay she strives to highlight the outstanding discoursive position of life-writing in general and “diary” in particular. The diary-writing has been “anchored” somehow between the shores of pure observational “history” and inventive “literary narrative”. Such a “half-way” genre disposition allows for a promising extent of vision this type of narration can offer: being always stuck in between the traditional borderlines of subjectivity and objectivity, the realms of public and private, and mainly between the self and the interacting others. The hybrid and “elastic” character of the diary empowered it to reflect human reality in a suitable way; the diary functioned to a certain extent as a mirror imitating its master. All this process is supposedly executed according to the Bakhtinian theory of the “memory of genre”. Paperno reinforces the assumption that “the genre” itself by some means independently dictates form and even content to its writer. She perceives the diary as

---

12 On this see also an essay by Adolph Urban: Урбанны 1977: 192-208.
13 See for example, Harris 1990: 3-34, and also Vatnikova-Prizel 1978.
a first person narrative that is focused on the private, intimate, sometimes even secret daily observation of one particular life, sometimes in relation to the surrounding others. What was particularly important for me in my scrutiny of life-creation was the diary’s unique ability to “turn life into text”; the diary is then perceived as a textual equivalent of life and must be called to account by any scholarly effort bearing the related subject matter in its scope. In line with other scholars Paperno emphasizes the “paradoxical” nature of diary-like narratives that may be considered in terms of a “private” ⇔ “public” basic opposition.

The two canonical European authors that are usually held responsible for creating the “self-writing canon” are St Augustine and Rousseau. Their texts (each of them is entitled “Confession” either in the plural or in the singular) also reveal a certain life-creation effort bent on their interests, as long as they were “shaping” their lives in accordance with their spiritual or aesthetical views. The stories of their perplexed biographical quests and wonderings are fully covered by their self-writing. It was important to bring in the discussion on the life-writing of these two major authors in order to exemplify the immediate basic reasoning for recruiting the self-writing genres, and especially the “confession”, so as to epitomize the method of studying Russian life-creation. To my mind the genuine confession is very close to the diary-type of self-exposing statement. The Modernist Lebenskunst is usually associated with highly private matters of one’s life narrated through the available personal texts. For that reason, understanding how the codification of “private life” into “text” operated, as well as defining its obvious “literary” antecedents was quite desirable. James Olney’s analysis of the major texts of the Western “confessional” canon contributed to my understanding of the Russian “self-revealing” discourse in general. The common “rhetoric of disclosure”, supplied to create the overall atmosphere of intimacy, was very characteristic of the main habitual practices of the Silver Age. The “confessional” diary of Mikhail Kuzmin is perhaps one of the best examples of “intermingling” that occurred between the self-writing genres of diary and confession in Russian Modernist Lebenskunst. For Olney, the dominant aspects of Augustinian “comprehension” of confession are “narration”, “self”, and “memory”; the latest is of particular importance for the Western culture, just as the excellent studies by Frances Yates and Mary Carruthers have demonstrated.

The “confessional” case of Jean-Jacques Rousseau should have been, in all probability, even more important for the Russian life-creation: as well as his “self” and his unorthodox personality should have been particularly attractive for the next generations of European authors. The central point of interest for me here was Olney’s expository engagement with a problem of complexity of rousseauvian relations between the “writing self” and the “perceiving others”. The French writer had been constantly “re-inventing” his multiple “selves” in the process of creating the text of his Confession. The resulting written artifact demonstrates the extreme measure of self-divulgement (at times even shocking) that may be compared to

---

17 Some of the life events mentioned by Rousseau may be even paralleled to the Avant-Garde tradition of disturbing behavior (described in the chapter 4) – like the astonishing episode from the author’s childhood when the main character of the Confession peed into the cooking pan of his old lady-neighbor.
some of the most intimate diaries and letters of the Russian Modernists. I found it especially important to learn Rousseau’s method of reconciling the different “voices” of narration for the sake of compiling the single whole of the “confessing author”. The text of Confessions shows its author as a definite antecedent of the modernist life-creation for the virtue of having declaratively subdued his life to the general principle of artificial “ideology”; as far as we can judge from the text, Rousseau shaped his life, his behavior and his biography in accordance with the pre-conceived artificial configurations of existence that were to be further harmonized with his concrete life-affairs. The partial implementation of philosophical concerns into the reality of Rousseau’s physical life can by all means be considered a part of the same international tradition of life-creation I mention in chapter 2 of my dissertation (Byron, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Verlaine, Wilde, etc).

The summarizing discussion on the Russian tradition of “Confession” begins with Tolstoy. Revealing conceptually the problematic events of his life Tolstoy placed himself within the rousseauvean tradition of the “repentant” self-narration. His Confession contributed to the notable atmosphere of intimacy and “biographical poetics” that influenced the Modernist attitudes of the Silver Age in Russia. It is important to mention Tolstoy’s self-writing, since in principle I consider this author an immediate predecessor of Symbolist and Avant-Garde life creation. The whole movement of “Tolstovstvo” can be regarded as a natural antecedent of Lebenskunst: the life of those who were part of the author’s milieu, those who openly shared his ideas, was supposed to be shaped, modified and “established” anew in accordance with the ideological, aesthetic and “creative” standpoints stated in the relevant writings. The vector of the Modernist “life art” was the same: from the “idea” or “theory” => to the (daily) “behavior”. Although Tolstoy was not always happy with the particular shapes and paths this life-creationist movement was taking in front of his eyes, he could not stop it spreading. His teaching, as a novel ideology of “life-shaping”, acquired a wide audience, especially in rural Russia.

Another very influential representation of Russian “confessional” life-creation may be found in the autobiographical trilogy of Maksim Gorky. The three books of Gorky’s autobiography that in the Soviet times became a part of the “new canon” of the Socialist realism, were already widely read and very popular when they were first published (in the “Silver Age”, the first phase of Russian Modernism). Gorky devotedly explored the traditional self-writing genre in order to “re-create” his public self-image by means of his writing. The emerging picture of “adjusted reality” was rather intended to serve as an instructive model for his readers, and thus potentially influence them to shape anew their own lives. The tricky position of the “writing self” or the “main narrator” vis-à-vis the “empirical history” has been exhaustively described by Evgeny Dobrenko in a special essay dedicated to that topic.

Characterizing Gorky’s method of writing the British Slavist pointed at the striking

---

18 The previous tradition of Russian religious “Confession” is of course also very important. On this see: Корогодина 2006 and Уваров 1998.
19 See in this regard his characteristic protest: Толстой 1906.
20 See: Пругавин 1911. For the later appreciation see: Ярославский 1938 and Edgerton 1993.
21 On this see: Barrat 1996: 24-42.
22 “Gorky’s trilogy is in this sense a sort of limit of the genre aphasia of autobiography: a text about the self becomes the story of the ‘Other’”. See: Dobrenko 1996: 43-67.
affinity between the writer’s method and the ideology of life-creation. Dobrenko remarks: “this is neither a story about the self nor a story completely about the ‘Other’. It is an attempt to make Other out of oneself: the peculiar inner side of Gorky’s life-creation (zhiznetvorchestvo)”. The other aspect of Gorky’s interest to the “confessional genre”, as Barry Scherr has convincingly shown, was related to his God-building philosophy. I apply this aspect in order to establish an additional connection between the “confession” employed for defining Gorky’s God-building life-creationist strategy and the chronologically parallel principles of God-seeking (the circle of Merezhkovskys) that were preoccupied with Lebenskunst in their own right.

I conclude my first chapter with a general overview of the most important example of Russian historical “quasi-memoirs” written by Aleksandr Gercen. His “Past and Thoughts” have always been acclaimed by the Russian educated reading public even though its full text was published only many years after the author’s death. In my view Gercen’s text represented a sort of model autobiography for the generations of Russians, since it contained not only the details of the author’s personal past (at times as brave and shocking as Rousseau’s), but also endeavored to encourage the audience to join a sort of common action by imparting a clear political message to the narration of his personal events. This intention to “break the boundary” of the literary text, to penetrate into the physical course of action of Russian (future) history may be constituting a curious link with the utopia of Modernist Lebenskunst (which was also somewhat political in its universal interests).

I conclude the first introductive chapter trying to formulate the ruling “discursive strategies” that may be regarded as most dominant for the diverse varieties of Russian self-writing. By establishing a preliminary “typology” of the Russian life-writing I intended to decipher the ways in which my primary sources were initially codified and created. Residing widely on Russian self-writing in my next chapters necessitated this theoretical exposition that made me aware of many possible scholarly risks this sort of work may entail.

The second chapter of my dissertation deals predominantly with Russian Modernism and its place among the European tradition. It was necessary to define Modernism in terms of tracing the continuity of relations between the major European movements that are traditionally associated with it and the corresponding Russian movements. I propose to see Symbolism in Russia as “pre-Modernism”, as an initial phase of the Modernist experiment that continued within the Avant-Garde. It was necessary to bring Russian life-creation in correlation with the preceding cultural fashions, most notably, the ideas of “aestheticism”, “decadence”, “dandyism”, “Nietzscheanism”, concepts of “art for art’s sake”. I strived to illustrate my point of view by suggesting that the “experiment with life” is a characteristic feature of the

---

23 See: Ibid.: 52.
24 See: Scherr 2000: 448-469.
25 While technically forbidden, it nevertheless widely circulated in the tsarist Russia; let’s remember that the provincial teacher Peredonov could easily have “banned” Gercen at his disposal.
26 Among many other things I can mention here Velimir Khlebnikov’s life-creationist idea of organizing the society of the “Chairmen of the Globe” accompanied by writing a letter to the American President Woodrow Wilson.
Modernist experience in culture. Modernism, in my opinion, presumed constant experimentation with life, seeing art as a transgressive phenomenon that breaks many limiting boundaries. I proceeded with detailed examples of some additional moments that make life-creation one of the useful diagnostic traits of modernist self-fashioning.

The Moscow-Tartu school of semiotics developed a concept of the cultural “text of behavior”. In the second chapter I describe how this theoretical notion evolved into being and try to explain its relevance for the life-creation of Russian Modernism. In the course of my discussion I argue that the “biographical text” may be used as one of the crucial terms in dealing with the studied phenomenon. The seminal ideas expressed by Yuri Lotman, Aleksandr Piatigorsky and Boris Uspensky proved very productive for my understanding of Russian Lebenskunst. Lotman was one of the first scholars who studied the “biographical text” of the particular cultural heroes of the 19th century (the Decembrists) and proposed a distinct theory that utilized it into a coherent “whole” of sign-system. The “biographical poetics”, according to Lotman, started with Pushkin, and we may trace the origin of Modernist life-creation back to the turbulent activities of the great Russian poet.

Dwelling upon the problem of biography inevitably led me to analyze the issue of the author’s “body”: how it was perceived and what was the nature of relations between the “text” (“word”) and the “corporeal identity”. In the text of this chapter I have mentioned briefly a philosophical approach developed by Paul Ricoeur who proposed considering “text” as sui generis “meaningful event” of reality. This is how the problem of “physicality” of word and utterance came into the focus of my discussion. Russian Futurists were equalizing words with “things”, and this was far from incidental. There was an entire cultural tradition that dealt with the materiality of the “word” (“Logos”) and I wanted to bring into my debate some of its most characteristic and vivid historical descriptions. I perceive the Russian life-creationist “hero” as “homo somatikos”, as a unique type of author that writes/creates/operates not only with his verbal language, but also with his physically contrived body-appearances. The corporeal behaviour of the author in this sense is logically supplemented to the general codified aesthetics known from the “written texts” of his or her oeuvre.

The ideas of equalizing Logos (word) with human flesh have a long and interesting history to which I refer as the “word/text as body” problem. I was interested to examine some of the texts of Russian Modernists from the standpoint of their unusual corporeality. The provocative suggestion of Vladislav Khodasevich who remarked that the literature of Russian Symbolism was written as if it existed in two media – in the realm of words and in the corporeality of somatics of real life, served as the point of departure here. In the second chapter I provide a brief outline on historical conceptions of the “living word”, of Logos that became flesh. I believe that these original philosophical notions about the relations between word and human body were by all means familiar to Russian Modernists, minding in particular the distinct mystical, “Christological” bias some of them were taking. According to certain Slavic folk beliefs, the “word” was physical, it was possible to “eat” it and manipulate with it as with a physical entity. I appended to this Origen’s ideas about the material aspects of the “spirit” and his views on the ephemeral bodies that exist within the human consciousness and soul. It was most important, by all means, to
mention the ancient Christian concept of understanding Christ as “incarnated Word/Logos”.

Many of Russian Modernists, most notably Andrei Belyi and Vladimir Mayakovsky were interested in comparing their poetical “self” with the figure of Christ-the-Saviour. The possibility of “word becoming flesh” should be considered one of the strongest fascinations of the Symbolist life-creation. These “intimate” relations between the “body” and “the word” may be listed among the most essential issues of the Modernist Lebenskunst. Some ideas of Eriugena dealing with the “incorporeal bodies” and the very possibility of “word” or “spirit” to gain physics of the flesh are also mentioned in this chapter, as well as the related interest of the ancient Greek philosophy to cogitate upon the similarities between the “physical body” and the verbal utterance.

The way the Church Fathers defined the human body, its physical behavior, and the relations between the written text and the somatics seems to have had a certain influence on the mystical life-creation of some of Russian Symbolists (Gippius-Merezhkovskii, Viacheslav Ivanov, Belyi and Blok), and maybe some of Avant-Gardists as well (the “fighting”-with-God Mayakovsky, who was in a way comparing himself to God). The entire subject of corporeality in (Mediaeval) Christianity is researched in the seminal studies by Peter Brown and Caroline Bynum. For the same reasons I bring in the “discursive study” of life-creation that may be stipulated from Paul Ricoeur’s treatise on the verbal text that can be considered a kind of “meaningful” event itself.

The concept of the (artificial) “life event” turned out as central in the process of understanding the remote cultural roots of the phenomenon of life-creation. I use the idea of the “Third Wave of Romanticism” in Russian Culture at the “Turn of the Millennium” proposed by Evgenia Miliugina in order to point at the principal affinity between the purely Romantic biographical poetics of Lord Byron and the self-fashioning of Russian Symbolism. I therefore proposed the “Romantic connection” to be discerned in the works of Russian Modernists (to name Blok from Symbolism and Mayakovsky from the Avant-Garde). The “life-creationist” Romanticism is also visible in the works of Oscar Wilde who followed more or less the same lines to conduct his biography. I conclude the second chapter of the dissertation with a typological overview of the phenomenon. For the purpose of dealing with the semiotics of Russian life-creation I pointed out several distinct traits that pertained to this matrix of Russian culture and could be summarized in a schematic form.

The third chapter of my dissertation contains the principal description of the initial, “Symbolist” phase of Modernist Lebenskunst. The chapter starts with the exposition of a memoirist text composed by Vladislav Khodasevich who outlined the entire topic of the creative behavior of Russian Symbolists and suggested that in order to grasp Russian Symbolism in its entirety, not only the literary works of Symbolists ought to be examined, but their lives as well. I open my discussion with the scrutiny of the philosophical contribution of Nikolai Fedorov who is usually seen as someone who has had some influence on the Russian Symbolists. Indeed, one may find many “life-creationist” passages in Fedorov’s oeuvre. The philosopher suggested to shape

---

28 And the same poetics of Charles Baudelaire and Arthur Rimbaud.
life in accordance with his artificial utopian ideology, as expounded in his elaborated theory of the “common task”. This corresponded to the main stream of the Symbolist aesthetics of life-creation which addressed more or less the same issues and ideas. The same is true for the philosophical legacy of Vladimir Solov’ev who is also usually mentioned with reference to the utopian and mystical Symbolists. I discuss several characteristic ideas of Solov’ev that relate to life-creation and also quote Blok’s essay that postulated the immediate importance of this philosopher for the “younger” generation of Russian Symbolists. The solovievian image of “Sophia” and the Eternal Feminine are directly related to the first book of Blok’s lyrics and his hymnopoetics of the Divine Maiden. The solovievian ecstatic beliefs of the ideal love and mystical “theurgy” were supplemented by Andrei Belyi’s theoretical treatises that I examine in this respect. All these matters were by all means of obvious importance for the Lebenskunst attitudes of Russian Modernism.

I open the discussion on Russian Modernist life-creation with the case of Valerii Briusov. Reciting from Briusov’s text “The Holy Sacrifice”, I bring in his programmatic appeal for a life-creationist way of life. Demanding from a poet to create not only his books, but rather his life as well, Briusov declared his vision of the life of a “new” poet and suggested how it must be conducted. I have focused on Briusov’s erotic behavior as it is reflected in his intimate diary. Briusov meticulously narrated many day-to-day events that had to do with his youthful interest in lechery, lewdness and in general the most radical libertine kind of behavior. His diary offers us numerous descriptions of his sexual experiences; some of them may be regarded as pornography. This behavior was accompanied during the early years of his poetic career by his friendship with Bal’mont. Both poets were actively visiting brothels and had many “erotic” acquaintances. I attribute this life conduct to the imitation of the French “decadent” model known from the biographical poetics of Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Verlaine and Wilde. Briusov and Bal’mont were obviously emulating the pre-existing modes of “poetical” “accursed” behavior and this self-fashioning is directly related to the general model of Lebenskunst. The “emulated decadence” of Briusov’s and Bal’mont’s behavior in their early years has been “performed” twice: it took place both in their real lives and in the texts of their poetry that was created during that time. This poetry mimicked the European Decadent patterns and depicted most obscene sexuality. With reference to this I bring in and translate a whole series of their poems which were notably obsessed with feminine genitalia and cunnilingus that both poets chose to celebrate in their art.

Another topic related to the erotic life-creation of Briusov is his perplexed love-affair with Nina Petrovskaia which I discuss in detail, aided by the surviving fragments of their life-writing (the memoirs of Petrovskaia, their letters, Briusov’s diary). The “mythopoetical” fight with Briusov’s life-creationist “rival” Andrei Belyi, as reflected in the novel The Fiery Angel, is also mentioned in this context. Some additional life-writing materials from contemporaries referring to Petrovskaia are also examined.

Turning from Briusov to the other “elder Symbolists” I debate the life-creationist aspects of Merezhkovskii’s and Gippius’ “union”. First of all I address the difficult question of Gippius’ gender identity, her understanding of the “body”, and the way the body is reflected in her art and writing. The ambiguous sexuality of
Gippius casts a distinct shadow on her writing, starting from the self-invented virtual masculine identity of her poetry / prose and proceeding with some of her reported lesbian experiments. I quote some memoir accounts of this topic.

The last of the eminent “elder” Symbolists I introduce into my discussion is Fedor Sologub. I mention some of his strange and “gloomy” life-habits, his very unusual sexuality, and make use of some of the life-writing accounts left by his contemporaries. A number of excerpts are quoted from Sologub’s most important Symbolist novel *The Petty Demon* that contains many interesting episodes in this respect. This novel offers a valuable insight into the concept of “accursed physicality” developed by Sologub in his writings.

I begin my discussion of the younger generation of Symbolists with Andrei Belyi, referring to his theoretical views on “art (Kunst)” that he interpreted as “the art of living”, which is illustrated by several of his major essays. The first studied case of Belyi’s “practical” Lebenskunst is known by the name of “Argonautism”; its description is given in this chapter. This issue has been already studied by Aleksandr Lavrov, so that I merely summarize his research with addition of missing (in Lavrov’s work) details concerning the possible sources of Belyi’s knowledge about the “historical” and mythological Argonauts.

The next life-creationist episode being mentioned with respect to Belyi is his “mystical” love-affair with the rich Moscow lady Margarita Morozova. I provide the necessary information and quote some of the life-writing addressing this issue. The entire story of Belyi’s real-life interest in the “sublime” image of Morozova corresponds directly with the text of his new “Symphony” and therefore offers us another distinct example of the inversive and inter-dependant vectors of life ↔ text sign system. Belyi’s behavior in regard to Margarita Morozova was shaped by his literary “mask” that he assumed shortly before that.

The other important occasion of Modernist Lebenskunst of Russian Symbolism is a story of Belyi’s relations with the newly-wed Blok couple. I narrate their story relying on the primary research conducted by Vladimir Orlov. Expanding on that I bring in all the relevant life-writing materials and sources available today that help us to create a coherent picture of what actually happened between the two of the most prominent Russian “younger symbolists”. Belyi identified Blok’s wife as the symbol of the “Heavenly Lady”, the passionately craved divine maiden expected to arrive on Earth. Having gradually fallen in love with Liubov’ Blok he pursued a “corporeal” personal affair with her, aided by the fact that Aleksandr Blok himself was in fact equating his wife with the same “Beautiful Lady” of his first book of poetry and therefore was not prone to have any “carnal” relations with her. As a consequence, Liubov’ Blok stayed constantly “unsatisfied” by her husband (she confessed about this fact in her memoirs). I describe the tragic story of their triple interconnection in much detail, matching it with the corresponding fragments of the life-writing by Blok and Belyi (their letters, diaries, memoirs). Following the dramatic quarrel with the Blok couple Belyi depicted their immediate past in a grotesque and allegorical form in his literary text “The Bush”. At the same time Blok expressed his frustrated disillusionment with the early “mystical” ideas of his youthful lyrical life-creation in his satirical drama “The Puppet Theatre”. One of the central issues of this entire story

---

is the problem of reconciling “flesh” with “spirit”, “carnal love” and the “divine Bride”. The ideas of the influential predecessor of the young Symbolists, Vladimir Soloviev, are being discussed in this context. The final life-creationist stage of Belyi’s life was related to his anthroposophical interests. He participated in the construction of the *Goetheanum* and generally tried to shape his life in accordance with Steiner’s teachings. I perceive Steiner’s philosophy in general as a life-creationist enterprise as well. The “Steinerian” topic, via Anna Mintzlova, was accompanying yet another phase of Belyi’s life-creation, namely the “occult” one. The occult, anthroposophy-related life-creationist interests of Belyi have been researched in a number of studies. The summarizing discussion of that subject is also present in this chapter.

I start my examination of Aleksandr Blok’s life-creation with the initial topic of “deification” of his wife Liubov’. I reinforce my debate with all the principal sources reporting about Blok’s conceptual attitude toward his wife, during the first phase of their relationship. Blok’s wife had been the prototype of his “Beautiful Lady” character, his real life was explicitly shaped in accordance with the utopian and mystical aesthetics expressed in his poetry. I also ponder the issue of Blok’s self-fashioned “masks” that he used at various stages of his career. The mask of the “seraph-youth”, the “Romantic knight” serving his Heavenly Lady corresponded to his first book of lyrical poetry. The issue of Blok’s artificial “mask” always had to do with his “lyrical self” – his recurrent “I” that had been first studied by Yuri Tynianov. Tynianov argued that “Blok” himself was the main subject of his own poetry, and that he was in a way re-creating his own self in the series of his lyrical writings. This approach gained support from another eminent Formalist scholar, Boris Tomashevskii, who spoke about the “biographical lyricism” of the symbolists, referring to Blok as well.

I pay special attention to the topic of erotic life-creation of Blok. Apart from the aforementioned issues related to the opposition of the “carnal” and the “divine” that Blok shared with Vladimir Soloviev, I also speak of the new theme that is a result of my own research. I believe to have discovered a hidden meaning in one of Blok’s longer poems “The Night Violet”. Using several life-writing specimen left by Blok’s contemporaries (Nikolai Valentinov, Roman Gul’ and Andrei Belyi) I reconstruct the iconography of Blok’s poem and compare it to the general life-creationist ideas of his art. Developing his earlier philosophy that prescribed “mundane” earthly sexual relations to be conducted only with the “fallen”, “profane” women as opposed to the “blessed” Divine Maiden (the eternal Bride of the poet), Blok cultivated many years a certain addiction to the purchasable sex of the urban prostitutes. Moreover, and still more shockingly, he was particularly consumed with imagining and depicting their genitalia. The metaphorical description of these genitalia can be found in the text of

---

33 This entire topic curiously corresponds to a “post-Wildean” notorious “decadent” scandal in Great Britain. In 1919 in Britain there was a public controversy related to a female dancer Maud Allan who was accused in press (by a notorious “Rightist” politician of that time Noel Pemberton Billing) of
his poem. The same interest, has been already noticed in the poems of Briusov and Bal’mont, also devoted to the “intimate flowers” of women. I bring in several important fragments of self-writing that confirm this way of interpreting Blok’s “strange” poems. The intricate color symbolism that was developed in a series of essays by Blok contributed to the same mode of understanding his life-creationist art.

The erotical preoccupation of Briusov and Blok, their *eroticism* itself corresponds to the life-creation as we define it, bearing a distinct influence of “aesthetical” French Decadence. This life-creation had been realized to a large degree by imitating the routine life-events of the better known French cultural “heroes”. Russian Modernists were clearly “implementing” explicit erotical aspects of behavior in their own life. We find the perplexed erotica clearly reflected in both their *life* and in their *texts*. I propose to call this situation of a definite “correspondence” between these two realms *the condition of life-creation*. At this point I wish to stress again the importance of *diary/memoir/epistolary/ self-writing* as it constitutes the main medium by which means relevant information is conveyed to posterity.\(^\text{34}\) It is through Briusov’s diary that we learn about his erotic “decadent” behavior, and my scrutiny of the autobiographical theories has only strengthened my conviction in regard to a diary as a most legitimate source of our knowledge. The same appears to be true for the sexual agenda of Blok when we find the relevant descriptions in other memoirs telling about Blok’s perplexed and perverted sexuality. I also bring in the poetical texts of both Briusov and Blok in order to demonstrate the direct correspondence between the lives of the poets, narrated through the consonant self-writing of their own or by their contemporaries, and their literary texts. The process of this direct (or indirect) correspondence I propose to call *life-creation*.

I proceed with summarizing the peculiarities of life-creation by yet another “younger” Symbolist author (Viacheslav Ivanov). Concluding the preceding research I name the most notable life-creationist activities that have occurred in the Ivanov’s Tower. Ivanov’s “Wednesdays”, the “Hafiz Club” and the “Fias”-group represented the most characteristic instances of life-creation in the Symbolist Sankt-Petersburg of the day. Theatricality of life, antique masks, mythopoetical self-fashioning were among the most dominant features of these gatherings where Ivanov played the host. I mention several important life-writing materials describing these events. The orbit of the activities conducted in the “Tower” was particularly notable because of a huge number of “outsiders” being invited and occasionally involved in this sort of “collective effort”.

The concluding section of the third chapter is “The communal life-creation of Maksimilian Voloshin”. In this context I use the apt notion of the “Crimean text” (just like the “Petersburg text” or “Moscow text”), exploited to a great extent by Voloshin. Having created a unique resort “community” of artists, poets and writers Voloshin promoted yet another distinct form of Russian Lebenskunt. The creative way of life the inhabitants of Voloshin’s Koktebel house cultivated clearly corresponded to the main route of experimental reformation of living proposed by modernist life-creation.

---

34 And cultural historians are by all means part of this posterity.
I analyze all the major pieces of self-writing memoirs addressing this issue and proceed with the additional one: the topic of Voloshin’s life-creationist relations with Cherubina de Gabriak. The mystifying element of universal play that was so obvious in that case is very characteristic for the entire sphere of Symbolist Lebenskunst.

I begin chapter four with delineating Avant-Garde pragmatics of action, its preoccupation with the “poetics of shock”. The approach of defining Avant-Garde through the pragmatiical message of behavior had been suggested for the first time by the late Moscow philologist Maksim I. Shapir. I discuss his ideas concerning the semiotical nature of Avant-Garde while bringing in the additional materials addressing the issues of the “pragmatics of utterance” and “speech act”. This debate embraces my understanding of art, in one of its most crucial aspects, as communication and a constant process of conveying messages. I also examine in this regard the corresponding issue of a “suggestive gesture” that is related to the problem of the overall expressiveness of experimental art. I debate the “transgressive nature” of this gesture. This topic also includes the idea of a “kinetic character”, a literary hero that exists beyond the traditional boundaries of verbal text. This contributes to our understanding of the “gestural aesthetics” correlated to the Modernist Lebenskunst.

I proceed with my examination of the shocking/eccentric behavior of one of the leading Russian Avant-Gardists Aleksei Kruchenykh who belonged to the first generation of Russian radical Modernism. In my opinion the striking eccentricity of this kind of conduct corresponds to the same “violent” qualities of the literature reckoned to pertain to the Avant-Garde. To my mind, the “Avant-Garde” text was conceived in two realms: in the verbal plane of their writing and in the sphere of physical action. Both realms were clearly focused on the pragmatics of shock, attracting the public’s attention by means of transgressing the “conventional” rules of art and life. Subordinating life to the goals of aesthetics may serve as the crossing point between the two currents of Russian Modernism – the Symbolism and the Avant-Garde. It is exactly this preoccupation with the ideology of experimentation, subduing life to the needs of art that I call life-creation. This modus operandi was extremely characteristic for the discussed authors within the ranks of both Symbolism and the Avant-Garde.

I bring in all the major life-writing accounts by the contemporaries of Aleksei Kruchenykh describing his deviant, artistic behavior. The memoirist materials I discuss result into a coherent portrait of Kruchenykh as a deliberate eccentric who wanted to extend the unconventional literary art by means of his daily habits, deliberately breaking all the accepted rules and prescriptive boundaries. Another case of unusual everyday behavior is represented by the great poet of Russian Futurism, Velimir Khlebnikov. In this chapter I discuss some of the behavioral eccentricities of Khlebnikov as recounted in the life-writing of his contemporaries. During his “Iranian” period the Russian poet intentionally lost the dividing line between his written literature and his physical life. He produced texts emerging from his real-life experience as a “wandering dervish” in Persia. He deliberately conducted his life according to the ideas that may be found in some of his poetical theories. His unusual behavior was shaped by his aesthetical conceptions and his life was clearly continuing and implementing his creative ideology of existence.
The topic of creative behavior is continued with Vladimir Mayakovsky. Relying on the available sources of the numerous life-writing samples I discuss his eccentricity that corresponded to his pragmatics of “poetic action”. Special attention is paid to Mayakovsky’s ways of showing up in public, and to his famous “yellow blouse” in particular. The poet’s behavior constituted the same “pragmatics of Avant-Garde shock” that was described by Maksim Shapir. Mayakovsky’s life-creation was directly connected to his vibrant and provocative eroticism. I briefly mention the topic of his transgressive “phallicism” that can be found in some of his poetical texts as well as in his documented life-behavior.

The concluding episode of the Avant-Garde life-creationist systems of eccentric behavior has to do with Daniil Kharms. I analyze the scattered life-writing accounts describing his extraordinary behavior that obviously corresponded to his literary texts. In the case of Kharms, exactly as it was with the other Avant-Gardists as well as some of the discussed Symbolists, the outward features of his private conduct were intended to harmonize and comply with his art. The physical behavior “continued” his verbal texts, and the self-fashioned eccentric image of Daniil Kharms was firmly associated by his contemporaries with his literary art. Dealing with Kharms’ eccentric “playfulness”, his “ludism” of conduct I quote the respective notions of the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga who spoke about the idea of play as the universal component of human culture. I also mention the parallel concept of the “private theater” and “theatrical instinct” developed by Nikolai Evreinov. Life-creationist teasing theatricality became the principal working ground of Kharms’ Lebenskunst. The kharmsian eccentric notion of “chudak” (a crank) seems to have played an important role in his life-creation.

I conclude the fourth chapter by debating the “transgressive” fluid aesthetics of Avant-Garde life-creation where so much depended on the extra-verbal components of “dance”, “theater”, “gesture” and related categories. Russian Avant-Gardists clearly realized the impossibility of getting the necessary public attention and recognition by means of traditional art alone. As a consequence, the physical “behavioral” patterns played the central role in Avant-Garde pragmatics, constituting what I propose to call their “experimental life-creation”. The “physical behavior” of all the most typical Russian avant-gardists was structured in accordance with the same sign-system as their verbal texts. One of the most dominant positions was reserved there for the pragmatics of “shock”. I discuss in this context the life-creationist topic of the “painted faces” of Russian (Cubo)Futurists and the related manifesto as well. What seems to be the most vital conclusion of this chapter, is that the Avant-Garde “texts” or “artistic objects” must always be considered in association with the personal behavior of their authors. The way the Avant-Gardists behaved corresponded directly with their art, and vice versa, their art is directly related to their lives.