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

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Chapter 2.  
*Russian Modernism and life-creation: Observations on the theory of life ⇆ text sign systems with regard to the Lebenskunst.*  

1.0. Defining Russian Modernism

1.1. What is Modernism? The issue of Modernism in European culture

The concept of Modernism might be understood as the totality of aesthetic conceptions that began taking shape from the second half of the nineteenth century onward. The most turbulent period of these aesthetic fashions coincided with the interim years between the two world wars. I propose to trace Modernist culture from its initial genesis related to the activity of the French *poètes maudites* (Rimbaud and Verlaine), including their immediate predecessor, Charles Baudelaire, and in particular, his highly influential and almost “cult” collection of poems known as *Les fleurs du mal* (published in 1857).

As envisioned here, Modernism can be conceptualized as a kind of “mega-period” that encompasses mutually hostile historical movements such as Symbolism and the Avant-Garde. The onset of Modernism can be considered to occur immediately after Realism. Modernism was emerging as a reaction to realist rationalist aesthetics, as a negation of the overall dominance of realism. My approach is partly dependant on the “theory of great styles” developed by Dmitry Likhachev. This approach denies principles of cultural homogeneity, stating instead that “no great style was ever really defined by the “cultural habits” of any epoch or any country”. Likhachev formulated a significant model that assumed that “great styles can exist simultaneously during the periods of transition from one style to another”.  

As Katharina Hansen-Löve remarks, Likhachev’s theory may be compared with the theories developed by an elder scholar, Victor Zhirmunskii, and a younger one, Igor Smirnov. She notes that “All these scholars maintain that literary evolution is characterized by a kind of swing-mechanism, by a continuous alternation of two opposite principles. This form of dialectical thinking seems to be typical for a certain branch of modern Russian literary theory, notably Structuralism and Semiotics”.

Likhachev’s fundamental idea is that a “mega-period” consists of two “styles”, a “primary” and a “secondary” one, and that in such a period there is always a development from simplicity into complexity. “No style is really formulated completely without any external influences, no style is totally self-sufficient… Every style harks back to the preceding ones, seeking the necessary information…, The development of each style, [both] the primary and the secondary, moves from the simpler to the complex; this tendency is very evident in every pair of any two styles (the primary and the secondary). The secondary style, taken as a unit, seems to be

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169 The translations in the chapter as elsewhere, are mine unless indicated otherwise.
more refined and complicated. Ontogenesis is harmonious, therefore, with phylogenesis”. 172

Likhachev notices that “each new style in this evolutionary sequence takes its bearings from preceding styles of the same type; he speaks of “kinship”, (“родственная связь”), that accounts for the correspondences within each category and explains similarities between styles that are separated in time; examples are the orientation of both Renaissance and Classicism towards classical antiquity, or the parallels between Symbolism and Romanticism”. 173 Likhachev considers the “primary style” of Realism as a kind of end-phase in the artistic development. I propose to perceive Realism and Modernism as a unique kind of ‘mega-period’, in which the process of increasing stylistic sophistication advances along a vector from Symbolism to the Avant-Garde. The “connecting element” between Realism and Modernism can be seen in the international Symbolist movement, which combines features from both these styles.

Despite the absence of an all-embracing manifesto wherein the aesthetic program of Modernism might have been stated, the resultant ideology demonstrated a sort of relative consistency as regards both a number of artistic peculiarities and the general method of creation. The central principles of Modernist culture heralded a fundamental revision of all the major philosophical doctrines that had dominated nineteenth-century culture and aesthetic thought. The idea of a vigorous break with the positivist cultural heritage of the nineteenth century can easily be discerned in the programmatic activities of Modernist movements such as Post-Impressionism, Symbolism, Cubism, Imagism, Futurism, Dadaism, and Surrealism. Alongside all the intrinsic contradictions (expressed in manifestoes and declarations) there is also one common foundation seemingly shared by all the Modernist movements. This foundation espouses a peculiar attitude toward the contemporary time as an epoch of unprecedented clashes and cataclysms that destroy previously accepted universal values and humanistic beliefs. These were the basic assumptions responsible for the radical revolutionalizing novelty that combated the realist aesthetics of classical realism.

Thus the first phase of European Modernism reveals itself in Symbolism. The experimental creative work of Stéphane Mallarmé, the renowned French Symbolist, might do justice to this idea. The innovative exploratory conceptions developed in the natural sciences, as well as in other spheres of intellectual life, led to a significant modification of Weltanschaug. This feature of European cultural history was further realized in the art of nascent Modernism, disseminating as one of its principles a new spiritualism and a quest for hidden realities (the a realibus ad realiora principle). It reflected dissatisfaction with the dominant role played by positivist philosophy in the nineteenth century. The evolutionary approach to the history of culture (and of literature, religion, and so forth) was abandoned along with the rigorous empiricism characteristic for the age. All the sensory faculties used previously for detecting empirical data were now directed to and focussed on the invisible spheres of human spirituality.

172 See: Ibid.
173 Ibid.
The work of the American philosopher William James, and particularly his *Principles of Psychology* (1890), greatly influenced the new adepts of Modernism (James was one of the earliest to describe the “stream of consciousness” principle). I should mention here, too, the teaching of Henri Bergson (*Immediate data of consciousness*, 1889; *Creative Intuition*, 1907), which espoused human intuition as a powerful tool for exploring the human mind and its potential creativity. Here also should be noted the revolutionary doctrine developed by Sigmund Freud (*Interpretation of Dreams*, 1908; *Ego and Id*, 1923). The “discovery” of the unconscious and the subconscious produced a long-lasting impression on the entire field of European art and literature. This aspect was evidenced in many representational elements embodied within various products of Modernist visual and literary art.

The theory of archetypes, promoted by Carl Gustav Jung, exerted a very clear influence upon the maturation of Modernist art and thought. A somewhat similar effect was produced by Emile Durkheim’s new anthropological theory of collective representations.

Generally speaking, the entire technological progress (the telegraph, automobile, and airplane, electricity and X rays, etc.), may be considered one of the immediate reasons responsible for the emergence of a new Modernist culture. Many fundamental Modernist philosophical and aesthetic ideas can be correlated to similar trends that originated in the new theories in the natural sciences. The new physics, particularly the theory of relativity advanced by Albert Einstein (1915), proposed different assumptions about our comprehension of the fundamental “time and space continuum” problem. Remnants of this approach might be discovered in Mikhail Bakhtin’s formulation of the “chronotope”. In line with the thinking of many scholars, we can conclude that Einstein’s “Copernican Revolution” in science served as the foundation of cultural revolution in the Modernist period. The philosophical relativist agenda that was more or less universally popular in Modernism, led to a considerable change in the traditional subject/object relationship.

In its historical development, Modernism constantly proposed basic precepts that challenged the traditional principles of artistic mimetic representation. The mode of “reality representation” favoured by Modernism accordingly rejected all the familiar mimetic principles for dealing with surrounding reality as reflected in a work of art. Modernism proclaimed a departure from the canonical mimesis cultivated in art and literature. This feature becomes quite evident in early Symbolist art, with its departure from the iconically correct representation of reality. The major path of Modernism operated on denial of life-imitating techniques and approaches, instead proposing irrationalism and alogism.

Modernism approaches the depicted “facts of life” in terms of a potential “problem” that leads to subtle aesthetic experimentation. This potential axis of life/art/experiment suggests the relevance of a “Lebenskunst” program for a great many Modernist authors. In this context, such pre-Modernist writers as the naturalist Émile Zola, author of *Le Roman expérimental* (1880), with all his interest in studying the relationship between life and art should be mentioned here.

A typical Modernist way of describing reality is based on the idea that man is “alienated” from its immediate social setting. The condition of alienation produced
many quite characteristic works in which the “character” finds itself painfully isolated, almost speechless, in the presence of the surrounding Others (works by Franz Kafka, for example). This phenomenon creates a special complex of “deformed consciousnesses” that is apparent in the inner speech of the character.

This type of context provokes rebellion against everything previously considered “moral” or “righteous.” The Modernist character meditates on his/her own self, seeks to consolidate his/her identity and overcome the multiple splits of this identity. The previous image of a solid and single-meaning identity becomes impossible and inadequate.\footnote{Not to forget here the issue of the Modernist self, it’s “identity” and its relation to the Other.}

Grotesque parody, accompanied by reverse order of values and carnivalesque fashions, should also be listed as a characteristic Modernist device. The most popular objects for parodic and carnivalesque treatment were related to the preceding culture of realism. Such treatment was apparent in the theatrical creations of the early Modernists Alfred Jarry and Guillaume Apollinaire, and it was a core component of the later radical Modernism of Dada and Surrealism.

Many Modernists were re-reading and re-utilizing literary texts written by previously acclaimed authors, in this way maintaining an unfinishable “dialog with tradition”. The Russian Modernist Andrei Belyi was “comprehending” Gogol’ in this manner and one may see how deep the influence of the classic Russian author on him was. The similar thing occurs with Marcel Proust’s interpretation of Flaubert – the younger author absorbs the narrative and stylistic achievements of the elder, borrowing the “new” Modernist idea that literary creation should be free from all ideological and didactical restraints. The literature and culture of the pre-realist period, especially the idealist and metaphysical heritage of German Romanticism, were also relevant to the Modernist canon. What attracted the Modernists was the sense of personal estrangement, of grim and ambiguous irony, that was so characteristic of Romanticism.

Another Modernist interest was related to the innovative work of G.E. Moore, who proclaimed in his treatise *Principia ethica* (1903) a new relativist view of the virtual impossibility of differentiating between the ethical criteria of good and evil that were based on the doctrines of social evolution and on the conventional norms. Many representative thinkers of the new times began to question the traditional nineteenth-century doctrine of empirical sufficiency. Among them, we can mention F.H. Bradley, whose neo-Hegelian treatise *Appearance and Reality* (1893) questioned positivistic empiricism as the sole method of understanding reality. As the perception of reality was dependant on the specificity of each concrete individual’s consciousness, an undivided, universal truth was not possible. T.S. Eliot imbued the concept of Modernism with greater concreteness and precision. He particularly emphasized the idea that the main ideologies behind the artistic practices and skills sanctioned by the previous eras (classicism and realism) had disappeared. With Eliot and such contemporaries as Paul Valéry and Gottfried Benn comes a new confidence in the beginning of a new era. The nineteenth century had been dominated by the rule of positivistic and humanistic ideography. The new system of thought proclaimed by the Modernist cultural heroes championed an active search for new artistic forms, for
more suggestive means of creative expression. The new civilization led to a fierce
critique of traditional humanism and engendered an ardent quest for an entirely new
type of aesthetic product that would fit the demands of what was called (for the first
time in such a context) “the new age”.

A highly important aspect of this process was the appearance of an author
who was no longer restricted by any didactical or moralistic goals. This new author
was supposed to be able to reach previously inaccessible realms of the “superior
being”. The collapse of the traditional anthropocentric “Humanism” of the
Renaissance and the Enlightenment found expression in programmatic works of
Modernist prose. The severe defraction of the fictitious character and his resultant
behavior revealed the phenomenon of a “miserable consciousness”. The literary and
artistic creation becomes, as T.S. Eliot maintained, a sort of resistance to despair,
creativity points to a way out of human and civilizational deadlock.

The main concern of the Modernist culture is oriented toward the principle of
creation seen as a remedy for the catastrophic chaos of a new reality. This trend of
Modernist poetics resulted in a strange fusion of drama, lyricism, parody, and
imagism. One characteristic composition in this respect is T.S. Eliot’s programmatic
“The Waste Land” (1922). A crucial aspect of this approach is “neomythologism”, a
profound reliance on myth and mythical structures, which are responsible for shaping
the final artistic product.

Another important trait of Modernism is linked to the new way of perceiving
the world of human communication. For Modernists, the traditional cohesive
connections among people (“communicative vessels”) were disintegrating, which led
to universal alienation. The human persona as depicted in Modernist fiction felt
helpless and effete in the face of the newly constructed Powerful Nation-State and its
great Apparatus. The classic example of this unbalanced, almost paranoiac outlook is
Franz Kafka’s novel The Trial (Der Process, written in 1920 and published in 1925),
which tells the story of a character named Josef K., who after awaken one morning,
for reasons never revealed, is arrested and subjected to the judicial process for an
unspecified crime. (This same spirit pervaded another “alienation novel” by Kafka
that depicted a high degree of human despair – The Castle (Das Schloß, written in
1922). This “kafkaesque” Modernist notion of an absurd, unbearable reality, of stifled
human life and its tragic path in the new civilization, is fundamental to nearly all the
representative works of Modernist art and literature.

For the purposes of the current study, I will argue that each of the various
successive trends should be discussed within a single general framework of “Great
historical Modernism”. The Avant-Garde, as a kind of complex operating within a
multiplicity of aesthetic trends, should be placed in the Modernist cultural paradigm,
rather than isolated as a separate entity.\textsuperscript{175}

As mentioned above, I consider both Symbolism and Avant-Garde to be part
of one mega-unit of culture which may be termed Modernism. The aesthetic and
cultural trends examined in this study are unequivocally linked to the idea of
experiment, of departure from tradition. They all express the deepest discontent with
the “realist tradition” of art. This “realism” was regarded as a quite inadequate

\textsuperscript{175} That is, the “avant-garde” as opposed (due to its radicalism) to (the milder and more vague)
“modernism”.

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method for dealing with the new realities of the surrounding world. Moreover, “Realism” had espoused a highly paternalist way of “seeing” the human landscape that avoided any possibly “unpleasant” or “inappropriate” detail that might be too harsh for any potential “user”: it failed to depict all the paradoxical and irrational aspects of human attitudes and behaviour. Symbolism and the Avant-Garde constituted a cultural paradigm bent upon uncompromising and courageous probing into the depths of human experience, and thus necessarily acquired many new techniques for verbal and artistic expressive creativity.

Modernism as a peculiar cultural “construct” is sometimes equated to a strange experience in which a human agent is trying to survive successfully under the conditions of the “new reality of life”. According to Astradur Eysteinsson, Modernism is viewed “as a kind of aesthetic heroism, which in the face of the chaos of the modern world (very much a ‘fallen’ world) sees art as the only dependable reality and as an ordering principle of a quasi-religious kind. The unity of art is supposedly a salvation from the shattered order of modern reality”. Modernism, as a distinct phenomenon, was, as Frederick Karl remarked, a “language within language”, a peculiar type of “meta-language” that represented a whole system of new cultural realities. This trait, hinting at the “new textuality” that was born together with Modernism, has relevance for the preoccupation with text-life sign systems as described in the context of Symbolist literary history by the Tartu school (see below).

Sometimes it is stated that the main principles of Modernism are founded on the “Faustian pact”. This is presumed relevant to such characteristic features of the new artistic habits as “relative waning of traditional representation”, “substitution of color-masses to the colder geometrical form/shapes”, “difficulty in filling the entire space of representation”, “loss of traditional narrative lines”, “absence of familiar values”, “emphasis on the marginal, outlaw figures”, “total defamiliarization of character”, “loss of accessibility”, “reliance on pure linguistic resources instead of the human voice”. Probably the chief element among all these is, however, the exploration of new narrative means. This overall stress on “novelty” is apparent in all of the cultural products of the period, and is quintessentially embodied in the synaesthetic musical creations of Arnold Schönberg and, in Russia, in the “sonoric mysterium” of Aleksandr Skriabin’s Symbolist music; it is then developed further by the best representative of Modernism in music – Igor Stravinsky.

The other important characteristic of Modernism that exerts a direct influence on the concept of Lebenskunst is the shift toward the hyper-individualistic “ego,” when everything is subordinated to the dictatorship of a character’s egocentric utterance. This particular trait should in general be regarded as a vivid Romantic feature pushed to its farthest...
The notion of “form” starts to acquire a new integrity, independent and dynamic. As a highlight of the preoccupation with the notion of “form,” one may recall the pioneering essay by the German artist and sculptor Adolf von Hildebrand in 1893, “The problem of form in figurative art (painting and sculpture)” (Das Problem der Form in der bildenden Kunst), wherein he utilized an experimental neoclassical approach to the problem. The Australian cultural historian Bernard Smith, in his monograph on the problem of Modernism, suggested a special term to designate the entire range of Modernist preoccupations with art and its environment – the “Formalesque.” In the same work, he also correlated the life-creational interests of many key Modernists with various occult practices. Smith suggested a connection between the Modernist fascination with the occult and the work of Francois Dupuis (1742-1809), a professor of rhetoric at the Parisian Collège de Lisieux. Dupuis was also a member of the French Academy, a Cavalier of the Legion of Honor, and a renowned mathematician. Relating the study of astronomy and astrology to the various mythopoetical aspects of human thought, he brought the realms of spirits and various esoteric doctrines to the attention of the cultural milieu. The pan-European Modernist fascination with the mysterious world of the stars and their impact on human destiny, centered on the mythology of the Zodiac, also has its starting point in Dupuis. Dupuis can be credited for the modern preoccupation with ancient Egypt: he believed that everything concerning European religion and spirituality originated there. The popular Russian “Egyptomania” manifested in the

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184 I should also mention here the important contribution of Russian Formalism, a critical movement that “invented” the idea of a defamiliarized “estrangement” that would enable the reader/viewer to notice the “stoniness of a stone”. See the monographic study of the “defamiliarization principle” by A. Hansen-Löve (1978).
186 This Modernist “Formalesque,” according to Bernard Smith, manifested itself in “exoticism”, the cult of travelling to “remote lands and cultures” of the farthest places of the “Orient” and “East” (Arabian and Ottoman fashions together with another “rediscovery” of antiquity).
187 The topic of the occult in different Modernist movements is far from unacknowledged. See for instance: Okkultismus und Avantgard (Apke 1995). For the general connection of the erotic and the occult with ‘Lebenskunst’ in the Russian Silver Age see the scholarly articles rendered in the two major collections: Богомолов 1999 and Rosenthal 1997.
188 Quite interestingly, Dupuis was one of the inventors of the modern telegraph, which could perhaps be considered an additional communication “channel” with the spheres beyond the ordinary grasp.
189 The result of Dupuis’s efforts was his magnum opus “Origine de tous les Cultes, ou la Religion Universelle”, published in 1795 in 12 volumes. His philosophical system became widely known among the reading public.
190 Dupuis maintained that the astronomical and religious myths of nearly all known nations formed a unity. This was in accordance with the views of the Enlightenment on the universality of human nature. In his “Mémoire explicatif du Zodiaque, chronologique et mythologique”, published in 1806, he declared a common spiritual provenance for the astronomical and religious systems of the Greeks, Egyptians, Chinese, Persians, and Arabs.
191 Under Dupuis’s influence, Napoleon organized the first serious expedition there.
poetic, occult, and life-creation trends of the Silver Age centered around one of the most exquisite poets of the period – Mikhail Kuzmin.  

Many scholars of Modernism tend to stress the fundamental importance of Charles Baudelaire, whose aesthetic is seen as a major precursor to many Modernist cultural practices. Baudelaire’s dandy theory and the resulting interest in dandyism, which championed the playful use of masks and theatrical roles in “real life,” as well as his concept of the “artificial paradise”, were both extremely influential in subsequent literary fashions. We might suppose, as does Frederic Karl, that by 1890 Baudelaire’s aesthetic agenda was shared by the majority of artistic and literary movements operating in Western Europe. The unique “synthetic” nature of Baudelaire’s art being interspersed with a particular lifestyle led to his central position among fellow artists during his lifetime, as the work of Lois Boe Hyslop has shown.  

Another characteristic aspect of Modernist cultural habits had much to do with the new horizon of sophistication reached by Western civilization. This resulted in the emergence of a “new science” and of new human capacities, new mental and intellectual abilities, including the individual’s creative manipulation of his/her life (as a result of the new modernist paradigm). Elements of modern technical novelty such as railroads, the telegraph and telephone, gas and electric lighting, photography and cinema, X rays, spectrum analysis and other unprecedented breakthroughs like the measurement of the speed of light – these “constructive,” positive aspects of Modernism were for instance absorbed into early Soviet Russian experimental culture, in which the Utopian ideology of “life-building” was dominant.

1.2. Russian Modernism

European Symbolism rather belatedly spread to pre-Modernist Russia, where its most enthusiastic adherent, Valery Briusov, in 1894–95 edited and published an anthology of Russian and French Symbolist poems. These were mostly his own texts and modified translations. The new revival of “experimental” poetry in Russia stemming from this movement had as its philosophical predecessor and spiritual authority the philosopher and mystic poet Vladimir Soloviev. His metaphysical poetry professes a coherent religious doctrine that entails probing the world as a

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192 On the esoteric Egyptomania of Kuzmin, see the recent two-volume study by Lada Ранова: Панова 2006.
193 In his well-known essay about painter Constantine Guys, “The Painter of Modern Life”, Baudelaire defined a dandy as “one who elevates aesthetics to a living religion.”
194 On the phenomenon of “dandyism”, see the general information rendered in: Carassus 1971; Moers 1960; Murray 1998; Nicolay 1998; Prevost 1957; Stanton 1980; see also Archambeau 2008: 139-158.
196 See the chapter “Baudelaire and the World of Art” in Hyslop 1980: 2-68. The “artistic” popularity of Baudelaire was paralleled by his deep interest in musical fashions of his time; see Ibid.: 69-92.
197 There are quite a few scholarly studies that deal with the problem of utopia in Russian culture and civilization. See, for instance such general descriptions as: Геллер, Никё 2003; Чистов 2003. Most recently, see the collection Егоров 2007.
unique system of symbols for certain nonempirical realities. After his death (in the symbolic year 1900, the same in which Nietzsche died) Soloviev was succeeded by another principal theoretician of the Symbolist movement, Viacheslav Ivanov, who was a well-trained specialist in Greek and Roman history and philosophy (like Soloviev) and was much interested in Plato and the Neoplatonist outlook. In this context I will also note the interesting cultural fashion in Russia that advocated a certain degree of imitation of the lifestyles and “famous gestures” of influential Western cultural icons. Many Russians in the late nineteenth century, and then in the Silver Age, “fashionably” copied the life-practices of cultural heroes from the immediate past of Western Europe. This fashion enables the scholar to characterize the culture of the period as overloaded with life-creational behaviour.

The main historical period that I propose to consider in the context of Modernist chronology in Russia is the span of thirty five years from 1895 to 1930. This period includes the early writings of the “elder” or “first-generation” Russian Symbolists (Merezhkovskii, Gippius, Balmont, and Briusov) at the one end, and, at the other, the Russian Revolutionary leftist radical artists and writers (LEFists and Constructivists) of the mid-1920s. Traditionally, in this period the years 1895 to 1910 are allocated to Symbolism and the years 1910 to 1930 to the Avant-Garde.

A prior section has put forth the general reasoning why the Symbolists and the Avantgardists are being described in terms of a single cohesive “whole.” I take the phenomenon of “life-creation” (considering also the apt German word, “Lebenskunst”) in both movements as the main rationale for “grouping” them together.” The “pre-Modernists” of Russian Symbolism, as well as the “canonical Modernists” of the Russian Avant-Garde, all demonstrated a clear interest in “creating life” by means of their “art” and aesthetic programs. Hence, the concept of “life-creation” itself, as exhibited in the overall activities of both the Symbolists and the adherents of the Avant-Garde, should serve to justify discussion of these antagonistic movements as if they had agreed to subscribe to the same cultural pattern.

The other argument for grouping Symbolism and Avant-Garde together in the case of Russia is the peculiar kind of “post-Romantic” affinity that was shared by the key figures of both movements. One can discern from even a first quick glance that Merezhkovsky, Balmont, Briusov, and Blok, on the one side, and Mayakovsky, Khlebnikov, or the manifesto-oriented Kruchenykh on the other, all clearly owe a debt to Romantic “cultus” and “spirit,” even though they make no clear admission of it. Accordingly, “Romanticism” and “life-creation” are the main attributes that

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200 Ivanov studied with Theodore Mommsen, with whom he successfully defended his dissertation. Apart from being a poet, Ivanov was generally acclaimed as an academic and classical scholar. See the recently published volume of Ivanov’s correspondence with the renowned Russian classicist Ivan Grevs: Бонгард-Левин 2006.

201 See the various chapters in Багно 2003.

202 See the introduction in Багно 2003: 4-19.

203 These “pre-Modernists” should include Бальмонт, Merezhkovsky, Gippius and Briusov, all of whom included a particular interest in life-creation among their other complex activities. The “younger” Symbolists such as Blok, Белый, Sologub, Voloshin, Кузмин were of no less cultural importance and also shared the same interest for Life-creation.

204 The corresponding names should be those of Mayakovsky, Khlebnikov, Бурлюк, Larionov, Goncharova, Zdanovich, and some others.
permit the present author to make a cautious generalization and to treat these movements of Russian Modernist history in a somewhat inclusive fashion.

1.3. The Symbolist movement – The first part of the Modernist cultural revolution

Scholars commonly describe “Symbolism” in Europe as a literary and artistic movement originating with a group of French poets in the late nineteenth century, which gradually spread to painting and the theater, and then influenced the literary history of the twentieth century to varying degrees. Symbolist artists sought to express individual emotional experience through the subtle and suggestive use of symbolic, hyperbolized “mythical” and “utopian” language and artistic devices.

Symbolist literary and cultural practice can be traced to the youthful rebellion of a number of French poets, who opposed the traditionalist tastes and regulations that had thereto dominated in mainstream poetry (especially the “Parnassian” type). Symbolism as a movement initially strived to emancipate art (and, in particular, poetry) from the burden of the “dictatorship” of outdated regulative norms, by propagating instead a revolutionary agenda of inner experience and existence. This post-Romantic approach resulted in subject matter replete with many bizarre myth structures and all kinds of obscure mysteries, metaphysical speculations, and playful fantasies, which were introduced to aid perception of supernatural reality.

The young members of the proto-generation of the Symbolists, Verlaine and Rimbaud, were passionate life-creational homoerotic lovers. They had deliberately erased any borderline between their physical bodies and their literary/aesthetic production. These poets were most vividly influenced by the heritage of their already-mentioned older contemporary compatriot Charles Baudelaire, in particular by his verse collection, Les fleurs du mal (1857). The Symbolists embraced Baudelaire’s notion of the correspondances occurring among the different human senses and the morbid spheres of somatic behavior. The Baudelairian ideas operated harmoniously with Wagner’s new monumental art, specifically with his ideal of approaching and achieving a holistic synthesis among the arts, blended together in order to produce previously unforeseen musico-symphonic parameters of poetry. A bit of verse,

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205 On this general topic, see: Balakian 1982 (various chapters passim).
206 Any list of the principal Symbolist poets should include the Frenchmen Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Verlaine, Arthur Rimbaud, Jules Laforgue, Henri de Régnier, and René Ghil; the Belgians Émile Verhaeren and Georges Rodenbach and the Greek-born Jean Moréas. Rémy de Gourmont can be seen as the principal Symbolist critic. Many of these figures were highly influential in the development of Russian Symbolism. For the points of theatricality see Jestrovic 2002: 42-56. Valery Briusov, founder of the movement in Russia, was maintaining personal contacts with many of these figures. See Briusov’s fascinating exchange of letters with René Ghil: Дубровкин 2005.
207 This was also characteristic of the previous movement of Romanticism. For a discussion about the role of occult mysticism in Romanticism, see the various essays published in Messent 1981. For the important bulk of Russian material related to the Silver Age, see the articles rendered in: Богомолов 1999.
208 On the relationship between music and Symbolist poetry in this period, see different materials published with: Weliver 2005; Fairchild 1980; Acquisto 2006; Chapple 1992; Leuschner 2000; Canisius 1999; for the context of Russian modernism, see the following monographs and collections of
accordingly, could be “orchestrated” with sonoric harmonies and the sounds of particular words.

In his “Symbolist Manifesto” (published in Le Figaro, September 18, 1886), Jean Moréas sharply criticized the mechanical, traditionalist and “passively descriptive” tendencies of the French “classical” Realist theater, linking the popular novels of the “Naturalist School” (later affiliated with Émile Zola) to a Parnassian mode of poetry, which he then also condemned. Moréas replaced the term “décadence” (so firmly associated with Baudelaire) with “symbolisme”. Stéphane Mallarmé, another radical Modernist writer, championed verbal experimentation in his texts and became perhaps the most prominent and original of all the Symbolist poets. Internationally, the French Symbolists strongly influenced European culture at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century.

The key element in European Symbolist life-creational philosophy was “Aestheticism”, which was “invented” and introduced into the cultural milieu sometime after Baudelaire’s “dandyism”, and was then expanded into a greater magnitude of “the artistic life-style” and artistic self-fashioning. With respect to the Victorian atmosphere in England, I should mention here Walter Pater, whose various essays published in the late 1860s reflected much of the artistic and literary tastes of that milieu. Pater’s highly influential collection Studies in the History of the Renaissance (1873) proclaimed that life must be actively reshaped by artistic endeavor and, in a Renaissance fashion, should follow the ideal of difficult-to-achieve sensuous beauty. Internationally, decadent authors and artists generally subscribed to the well-known motto, “Art for Art’s Sake” (L’art pour l’art). This important notion was put forward by philosopher Victor Cousin and supported by Théophile Gautier. (Gautier was especially popular in Russian Silver Age culture). The main cultural icons of this “Aesthetic movement” maintained that art may be a source of a powerful gratifying pleasure, breaking with the realist claim that the subject matter of art should contain a concrete moralistic message. The result of this idea was a new “cult of beauty”, which the aesthetes believed to be the foundation of art and culture. The most important factor in the context of our study was Aestheticism’s programmatic notion that “life,” in order to attain a superior outcome, must copy “art,” and not vice versa. This important semiotic notion informs the fundamental ideology that underlies the structure of the phenomenon of Lebenskunst. I believe that Aestheticism should be described as the quintessential factor responsible for the eventual realization of Russian Lebenskunst in all of its specific fashions and configurations. The major thrust of Aestheticism was to redefine the relationship between art and life. This cultural trend regarded art as something that goes beyond the pure traditional mimetic representational medium. As the work of Leon Chai has evidently shown,
Aestheticism (as a nascent *Lebenskunst* ideology) clearly sought to transform the many aspects of physical life into a work of art.

I will use the term “decadent” together with “Symbolist” to denote the entire fin-de-siècle cultural atmosphere, which was intensely felt during the last decade of the nineteenth century. Decadence can be understood as a primarily transgressive phenomenon that aspires to move unrestrainedly beyond all traditional boundaries. According to this view, decadence (and Symbolism) might be perceived as a transitional stage between pure Romanticism and the canonical Modernism of the Avant-Garde. The period from the 1890s to 1917 was characterized by an intellectual “overflow” in which mysticism, Aestheticism, dandyism, eroticism, Marxism, apocalypticism, Wagnerism, Nietzscheanism, and other trends all combined with each other. Let us not forget that one of the most influential figures for Russian Symbolist life-creators was Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche – a poet among philosophers and a philosopher among poets. According to Alexander Nehamas, Nietzsche, as a life-creator, constructed his life as a literary text *par excellence*, as an actual “novel” that bore many of the features of an “artefact” (*consider Ecce Homo*).

In a somewhat similar way, a narratological approach to understanding Nietzsche’s “text of life” is continued in the recent biography of the philosopher written by Curtis Cate – currently the most complete of Nietzsche’s English-language biographies. In his extensive study of Russian mythopoetical symbolism, Aage Hansen-Löve writes: “Undoubtedly, the figure of Nietzsche, albeit not untouched by a great degree of ambivalence, established the paradigm for the symbolist myth of life. On the one hand, Nietzsche was seen as a typical representative of the Decadent movement (Belyi, *Friedrich Nietzsche*, 1907); on the other, he is praised as the true founder of symbolist “life-creation”, even elevating him to the level of a mythic hero (Belyi, *Dionysus-Nietzsche*).”

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212 On Russian Dandyism, see the special chapter in: Вайнштейн 2006: 399-451.


214 There is abundant material that describes apocalyptical interests and attitudes in Russia during our period of interest. See the essays rendered in: Bethea 1989; Asnaghi 1973; Halfin 2000; and the thesis of Steinglass 1990.

215 On Wagner’s reception in Russia, see the introduction presented in Bartlett 1995. See in particular her chapters “Wagner and 19th century Russia” (9-17) and “Wagner and Russian Modernism” (57-72).

216 Many studies explore the extraordinary popularity of Nietzsche among the Russian Symbolists and Modernists. For the main characteristic examples, see the following scholarly collections: Rosenthal 1986; Clowes 1988; Синеокая 2001.

217 See: Nehamas 1986. (In particular see the chapter “A thing is the sum of its effects”; 74-107).

218 See: Cate 2005.

1.4. The Avant-Garde

Symbolism as a historical cultural movement differs in certain important respects from the Avant-Garde. Symbolist artists and writers were, generally speaking, more dependent on the previous cultural milieu of Realism and, particularly, Romanticism. This is clearly evident in one of the major figures of Symbolism, Charles Baudelaire, whose personal creative outlook despite being chronologically located in Realism readily demonstrates some clear Romantic facets. A characteristic “Romantic” concern of the Avant-Garde (and partly Decadence) was to radically extend the boundaries of what was then accepted as “the norm” according to certain conventional definitions of life, art, and culture. This attitude can be seen as relevant to the multifaceted activities of the various groups of intellectuals and artists who were introducing all sorts of radical experimentation into their creative activities.

The Avant-Garde is chronologically the natural and for that reason also logical successor of Symbolism. Just as Symbolism, the Avant-Garde may be linked to movements concerned with the concept of “art for art’s sake”, focusing primarily on expanding the frontiers of aesthetic experience. The term Avant-Garde also refers to the intense promotion of or outright demand for radical socio-political change and communal reform. The Russian Avant-Garde, like many other “national” avant-gardes, was a diverse composite of intrinsically rather idiosyncratic and antagonistic groups, each with its own programmatic, aesthetic, cultural, pragmatic, and poetic aims and agendas.

The first cultural current to propagate the ultimately Avant-Garde idea of a combatant aesthetics was international Futurism (in Italian Futurismo, and in Russian Футуризм), which, together with Cubism, should be seen as the first truly radical phase of Modernism. International Futurism was an early twentieth-century extremist artistic movement that originated in Italy a few years before it appeared in Russia. The main Futurist agenda did much to re-define the problematic areas of the entire artistic field, and championed some of the more vivid (even brutal) traits of the new “technological” age, such as speed, “dynamism”, “energy”, “mechanical strength”, “vigoros vitality,” constant change, and, above all, unprecedented physical activity. On February 20, 1909, the French newspaper Le Figaro published a manifesto written by Italian poet and critic Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, thus giving birth to the “International Futurism” that would later become a coherent movement. The name of the movement itself suggested its preoccupation with and emphasis laid on radical disagreement with the past and combat against it, the vibrant heralding of future

220 Compare the balanced theory developed by Renato Poggioli (1968).
221 If one can judge by the declared aims of its various movements expressed in their public manifestos.
222 However, the original distinct application of this French term (“avant-garde”) to figurative art seems to date from May 17, 1863, when the famous Salon des Refusés was opened in Paris. (This Salon was organized by the turbulent, “unclaimed” painters whose work was rejected by the annual Paris Academic Salon of officially accepted art). For the particular “mythic” context see, also Bergonzi 1986.
times, associated with the dominance of technology, machinery, and energy. This is an important consideration in the study of life-creation, an aspect that highlights the Futurists’ obsessive and jealous fascination with “life”, with changing its natural and traditional developmental flow, and with merging artistic ideas with physiological, biological and social agendas.

Marinetti vigorously celebrated the new technologies of “the machine” (and of the automobile in particular), with their implied aesthetic of speed, power, and strength. Equally important was open propaganda of warlike events, in which physical violence was destined to overcome the diseases of the weak – those destined to perish and eventually to fade away (a sort of Spartan outlook). Marinetti paid a famous and important “historical visit” to Russia. Although it was not received with great warmth, the Italian movement indirectly influenced the historical development of Russian futurism. This influence may be felt in two important poets of the Russian Avant-Garde, the utopian Cubo-Futurists Velimir Khlebnikov and Vladimir Maiakovsky. During the initial phase the Russian Futurists boldly acquired the name “Budetliane” (Будетляне: the Slavic – or perhaps Slavophul – etymological equivalent of “Futurists”), published their own (partly life-creationist) manifesto in December 1912, entitled “A Slap in the Face of Public Taste” (“Пощечина общественному вкусу”), which was more or less dependant on the Italian Futurist proclamations. The Russian Futurists explored a radical agenda in their public activities, aimed at an “épater le bourgeois” mode of behavior. They mocked and rejected the “holy icons” of Russian culture, such as Pushkin, Dostoyevsky, and Tolstoy. Their attitude toward contemporary Russian Symbolist art and poetry was similarly militant and hostile. Obviously, these avant-garde artists were challenging the decadent Symbolists’ right to occupy the niche of public attention and the general interest of the common people. Both the Russian and the Italian Futurist poets rejected the conventionality of the “logical” sentence construction and ordinary grammar with its transparent syntax. The Russian Futurists (who later called themselves “Com-Futy” – Communists-futurists) intended to integrate into the post-Revolutionary milieu and to produce new forms of art that would answer the new demands of revolutionary daily life in the given period of culture.

The other important Russian Avant-Garde movement was “Constructivism”. This name had an obvious Latin root, and was meant to signify the life-creational notion of “construction”, especially technical productive creation. This was a logical and “positive” development of the recurrent Modernist idea obliging the artist

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224 On Marinetti’s scandalous visit to Russia, see particularly: Алякринская 2003: 77-89; Markov 1968: 150-152.
226 On the historical importance of this particular group of cultural “actants” see in this context the famous article by Roman Jakobson, “On the generation that squandered its poets” (Jakobson 1967: 119-125).
227 On the importance of the whole topic of “politics” in Avant-Garde see my forthcoming article that deals with the “phantom-like” nature of Avant-Grade’s ideology.
228 The Ancient Greek term “techne” (τέχνη) literally meant the capacity for craftsmanship.
to “construct” art and to reconcile his art with his lifestyle. Constructivism as an artistic and architectural movement was deeply influenced by European Cubism, and simultaneously by Futurism; its symbolic origin may be traced to the year 1913 when the revolutionary abstract “geometry-inspired” objects of Vladimir Tatlin were created and the “Realistic Manifesto” appeared. Their passionate “futuristic” admiration for machines and technology, functionalism, and all kinds of modern industrial materials, such as newly invented plastic, steel, and glass, led them to be called “engineers of art”. Subsequently the same metaphor was used when the Soviet authors were designated as the “engineers of human souls” (relevant for the “life-building” pathos of the nascent Soviet culture). Other important Constructivists included the photographer and designer Alexander Rodchenko and the painter El Lisitsky. As a recent study by Maria Gough has shown, one of the emphases of this movement was on the new spatiality of forms, on merging artistic ideas with their immediate real-life environment. It is important to mention here the general “consumerist” (“utilisational,” “consumptionist”) aspects of Constructivism, the natural parallels with the Bauhaus and De Stijl movements. The idea of total “experimentation” pervades nearly every aspect of daily life in Soviet Moscow during Constructivist times. The powerful concept of “zhiznestroitel’stvo” (“life-construction”), a Constructivist notion (and generally “leftist”, as originated in Sergei Tretiakov’s LEF organization and in the ideology of Osip Brik and Nikolai Chuzhak), was succeeding the “decadent” (and therefore “bourgeois”) “zhiznetvorchestvo” of the Symbolists. The new domain of the artist can be described in terms of active and pragmatic concepts of life-construction such as “composition”, “construction”, “faktura”, “tectonics”, “economy”, “modularity”, “purpose”, “structure”, “function”, “production”, “creation process”, “object”, etc. One of the major (though less celebrated) Constructivist activists, Nikolai Tarabukin, started a characteristic discussion on the “ugliness” of ordinary Russian surroundings with their traditional objects. Such objects did not have the right form, were not made of a right material and were not quite functional. To replace the clumsiness of previous Russian art design, Tarabukin suggested a new integrity and a genuine clarity, and, above all, advocated a powerful functionality for every piece of art in the experience of everyday life.

An important avant-garde movement in Russia was “Suprematism”, one of the first movements to advocate totally “formless” or purely geometrical abstraction in painting. It was established by the prominent Russian (of Polish descent) painter and

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229 The manifesto was supposed to answer to the new artistic goals of Antoine Pevsner and Naum Gabo.
232 See: Gough 2005: 17-18
233 On LEF’s aesthetic ideology, see Günther 1996: 19-30; as well as the monographs by Добренко 1999 and Заламбани 2006.
234 See: Gough: 2005: 21
235 See: Ibid.
The Suprematist direction in the Russian Avant-Garde seems, however, less relevant to the life-creational pattern that interests us here. In the early 1920s the radical “ascetic” style, together with certain other abstract trends in Russian art, was further popularized by Kandinsky and El Lisitsky, who transposed it to Germany, particularly to the Bauhaus school. The trends of Cubo-Futurism, Rayonism, Suprematism, Constructivism, Productivism, Concretism, and Engineerism all reflected the turbulent community of the Russian experimental artists. The preoccupation with the ideas of “total experimentation” and of the profound reformation of life, shaped by the power of art, was the common ground in all these Russian cultural currents.

2.0. Life-creation and self-fashioning

2.1. An interesting phenomenon in Russian Modernism

My aim here is to describe analytically the formal historical structure of the cultural phenomenon of “zhiznetvorchestvo”, which I believe to be typical for the entire period of Russian modernism. The Russian Symbolist Decadents and their successors in the Avant-Garde extended the existing Western (mostly French and English) aesthetic paradigms of what I’d like to term a “new somatics” that was focused on building up the “Homo Somatikos” of their own culture. The dynamic self-fashioning characteristic of this phenomenon (Modernist life-creation) blurs the familiar traditional boundaries between the body and the text. This is why in recent scholarship it is studied not only in literary history and theory but also from the perspectives of philosophy, cultural studies, and art history.

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236 On the history of Suprematism, see the materials devoted to Malevich in Шатских 2001: 37-71; see also the classic studies by Zhadova 1982 and Douglas 1980. The term itself was taken by Malevich from his native Polish, where the root “suprem” or “suprematia” meant “perfection of dominance”; see the commentaries in the Russian edition of Malevich’s texts published by “Gilea”; with respect to the mystic and partly life-creationist/utopian signs imbedded in Malevich’s art see also: Kurbanovsky 2007: 358-377.

237 Such as the “luchizm” or “rayonizm” of Goncharova and Larionov. For some relevant contributions, see the scholarly collection of Коваленко 2001.

238 On Bauhaus and the Russian Avant-Garde, see the recent collection of materials: Митурич 2006.

239 For the descriptive introduction to the phenomenon see the following general German studies: Schahadat 2005; Rippl 1999; Ingold 1981: 36-63; 2000; See also: Paperno, Grossman 1994.

240 This term is explained in Быховская 2001: 7-9. Bykhovskaya dealt with various aspects of a “corporeal human being” in the socio-cultural space. The scholar was interested in uncovering the mechanisms responsible for the conversion of a “biological” body into some kind of social and cultural construction. The preceding ideas on the subject of human corporeality are being analyzed as well.

241 As expounded in the ideas brought forward by the nascent Russian Revolution, which disseminated the notions of “life-building” (zhiznestroitel’stvo) that were used to facilitate the emergence of a New (Soviet) Man. (These ideas were clearly related to the Russian “god-building” adaptation of Nietzsche’s legacy, not so surprising in the context of writers such as Gorky or Bogdanov; on this topic see Rosenthal 2002: 68-94)

242 This issue puts forward the problems surrounding the “body of the text”. See the below expressed considerations on certain cultural contexts related to “text-as-body”.

243 See the major philosophical standpoints of the phenomenon described in Schmid 1998.
In Russian Modernism there was an unprecedented interpenetration of social and cultural reality, on the one hand, and the personal biographies and identities of writers and artists on the other. In a deliberately conscious way, writers and poets of the period tried to adapt their lives to already existing models or else created new, original biographies – highly aestheticized “artists’ lives” – both in their works and in their real lives. Many of them considered their own lives as actual works of art, dressing in a particular way and changing the places they lived into a kind of theatrical “stages”. Such behavioral patterns may be described in the context of the semiotic idea of universal “play” as a fundamental cultural concept (cf. Johan Huizinga). This implied an idea of the total theatricality that utilizes performative and theatrical “masks” and of a turbulent aesthetic of the “private theater” (as developed by N.N. Evreinov), and some related issues.

I propose to approach the semiotic nature of symbolist and avant-garde life-creation in accordance with its most characteristic way of constructing literary texts. This way of constructing literary texts can be represented by the concept of the “plastic gesture” (“пластический жест”), which suggests the possibility of the creation of a novel, unique modernist poetics.

In the context of the “plastic gesture,” two proponents of Russian Modernism in general (and of Symbolism in particular) deserve special attention – Alexander Blok and Andrei Belyi. The former forms a bridge to the romantic tradition, much in the same way that Baudelaire was a romanticist while at the same time an important part of the modernist canon. The latter – Belyi – already anticipates (and, in many ways, transcends) the characteristic achievements of the Avant-Garde: his prose is often almost more radical than that of the majority of the Avant-Garde writers – consider, for instance, his works Glossolalia, The Christened Chinaman, Kotik Letaev, and Masks, to name but a few. It cannot be denied, however, that both Blok and Belyi belong wholly to the Russian Symbolist literary canon, and specifically to its so-called younger generation. Especially characteristic of the work of these two authors is the semiotically rich “plastic gesture” that transcends traditional textual boundaries. In his article “A Semiotic Radical of Blok’s Semantics” (“Семиотический радикал блоковской семантики”), Savely Senderovich observes: “A sign is viewed as a gesture, resulting in three corollaries with major semantic

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244 See the translated collection of essays devoted to the interaction between the concept of “ethnographic rite” and the “written word of literature”, drawing on several interesting and rather typical cases of modern literature and culture: Bachmann-Medick 1996.

245 On this see Чурсина 1988: 184-201; and also for the theory of art in life-creationist perspective of Russian Modernism see Schahadat 2005: 19-57.

246 For the broader context of the “new theatricality” as expressed in the different creative activities of Evreinov and Meyerhold, see such general studies as Rudnitsky (1988) 2000; Carnicke 1989; Braun 1995, and Bochow 1997; See also general materials related to the Russian Modernist/experimental theater rendered in: Russell, Barratt 1990; Symons 1971; Любомудров 1991; Hoover 1974; Песочинский 1997; Leach 1989; Нинов 1988; Титова 1995; Казанский 1925. Besides that one may consult the recent concise monograph devoted to the theatricality of Silver Age: Вислова 2000; and also, regarding the “synaesthetic” aspects of this entire cultural period in Russia see Азизян 2001.

247 On the corresponding concept of the “semantic gesture” developed by the Prague linguistic school, see Mercks 1983 (el. pub). For the use of ‘gesture’ concept in Russian Symbolism, particularly by Andrei Bely, see the considerations expressed in Langen 2005: 7-24; and 128-148; For the role of gesture in Avant-Garde see also chapter 4 of the current study.
significance. First, it is produced by a persona, and not necessarily a human one: it can be an esoteric, mystical entity perceived as a person or personified as an element. This means that a sign is seen as the means of a living, active communicational strategy. Second, a sign has a dynamic character – it appears and vanishes, one needs to wait for it patiently and grasp it; its existence is closely associated with time, often as brief as a moment. Third, it exists in the visual modality – all the characteristics of its appearance are visual. In this sense, a sign is the opposite of a spoken word and is akin to a pregnant silence. Hence it is challenging, if it is possible at all, to translate it into natural language.  

Senderovich aptly points out that Blok often rhymes znak – “sign” – with zlak – “grain” (злаки also mean cereals). Grain is the manifestation of the earth-based, so to say “terrestrial” life of a sign, its final crown, as well as its primordial symbolic origin:

“The silence of the dying grain
Is but a joyous time:
A dream where everything is a sign
That this day will pass as the one before.
“Stir a stalk of dewy grain,
Open your dead eye,
And give me a quiet sign.”

Speaking on Blok’s use of tropes in this respect Senderovich continues in his observation: “As we can see, maki (“poppies”) and zlaki (“grains”) are not at all interchangeable – for one thing, they belong in different contexts: poppies are being set aflame (beginning to bloom), while grains wilt (die down). This pair of motifs reveals one of the inner dualities of Blok’s ‘sign’: its ability to both provide a subtle reference to some ancient secret and to aggressively impose dreadful apocalyptic revelations. Nevertheless, even in the latter function the sign retains its mysterious esoteric character: ‘Not everyone was reading / The signs at dawn’. In general, no two signs are alike: while sharing many other common features, signs can play two roles, as though oscillating between the two. Changing the motifs (maki – zlaki) within a

248 “<<….>>Знак мыслится как жест, из чего вытекают три следствия обширного смыслообразующего значения. Во-первых его производит личность, не обязательно это человек: это может быть и запредельная, мистическая сущность, мыслимая как личность, или персонифицированная как стихия… Это значит, что знак мыслится как средство живой, актуальной коммуникативной стратегии. Во-вторых, знак имеет динамический характер, он появляется и исчезает, его нужно дождаться и уловить, его существование тесно сопряжено со временем, часто свернутым до мгновения. В-третьих он существует в зрительной модальности, все характеристики его явления визуальны. В этом смысле знак противоположен звучащему слову и родствен красноречивому молчанию. Отсюда следует проблематичность, если вообще осуществимость его перевода на естественный язык”. See: Сендерович 1983: 304-322.

249 “Тишина умирающих злаков –
Эта светлая в мире пора:
Сон, заветных исполненный знаков,
Что сегодня пройдет, как вчера…”.
“Шевельни смолистый злак.
Ты открой свой мертвый зрачок
single semantic paradigm means a partial change in the semantic functions: different situations call for different elements of the paradigm”.  

The “sign” in Blok’s texts is a sui generis, self-sufficient, and independently acting “character.” Especially important is its “plasticity”, its transcendent capacity to belong in “two worlds,” and its overall existential ambivalence. The inner dichotomy of a symbolic “literary gesture” as a “sign” is vividly represented in Blok’s texts.

2.2. Yuri Lotman, the (Moscow) Tartu school of semiotics, and the cultural “text of behaviour”

The Tartu-based school of semiotics, which originated under the guidance of the late Yuri Lotman, extensively studied the relevant sign-structures and hidden meanings in authorial behaviour. Lotman proposes to deal with a person’s “cultural biography” as if it were a common sign-system or, more concretely, a “text” sui generis. In trying to grasp this phenomenon, only certain specific considerations can be formulated with regard to unique cultural “heroes”, such as “codes of conduct”, “reputation”, and the “writer’s biography”. All of these characteristics are bound by their direct relation to the way the creative construction of the author’s personal image is being achieved (self-built). These various creative “literary masks” were very popular among the Russian writers and artists that interest me here.

In her article “The Idea of Text and Symbolist Aesthetics” (“Понятие текста и символистская эстетика”), Zara G. Mintz justly argues that ideas about the nature of the literary text occupy a special place in the views and creative work of the Russian symbolists. She dwells upon the concept of an inclusive “holistic” sort of text that has several distinctive features or “properties”. Being loosely associated with the “outer world” these properties are “imputed to reality itself”. The what she calls “Universal Text” is realized in both the “texts of life” and in “artistic texts”.

In Mintz’ theory, the Universal Text and the personal texts of art are harmoniously correlated. She was one of the first scholars to notice that the Symbolist “picture of the world” is always constructed from two divergent tendencies. One of these tendencies consists of the establishment of a “system of antitheses” that organize the world in terms of space, value, and so on, and the other is directed at reconciling opposites and establishing “a universal isophormism among all of the phenomena of life”. She quoted Blok’s meaningful description of the universe as

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“the world full of correlations”. Mintz’ important notion of the Symbolist world, taken as an “art-like” text in general, explains well the origin of the symbolist idea of “life-building”. According to the scholar the idea of life-building combines “naïve utopianism” with the “pathos of the harmonious persona, historicism and the preservation of culture”. The semiotics of some peculiar forms of “masked behaviour” will frame my discussion of the Lebenskunst of Russian Modernist authors. A theoretical text by Lotman and Piatigorsky that deals with the functionality of the text and the related mechanisms of the “signs of culture” has described the primary semiotic rules responsible for the management of cultural fashions and corresponding behaviour. The degree of operational semiosis may vary considerably among self-conscious individuals engaged in the aesthetic creation of their specific “life-texts”. In their treatise on the corresponding problem Lotman and Uspensky observed: “When we speak of the semiotics of behaviour we might have in mind, on the one hand, the creation of some ‘behavioural text’, which functions as a meaningful sign in relation to some other text, or, on the other hand, gives thoughtful recognition of certain empirical phenomena (of our environment) as sign-constructions”. According to the scholars, this particularly pertains to any conventional sign-system or to any separate reality that in its turn determines the concrete meaning of these phenomena. In each case, we are entitled to speak “about the two models of semiotic behaviour: pro-creational and analytical. In both types the semiotics of behaviour might vary considerably among the different living personalities”. The semiotic nature of one’s behavior depends, therefore, on the culturally suggestive way in which this type of “text” is perceived by much of the potential audience of the cultural hero. In the “real time” of this specifically occurring behaviour, its “reception” and “perception” turn out to be possibly as meaningful as the “action” itself. The way the mask is perceived by its audience is equally as important as the author’s original intention. The principal point is, accordingly, whether the “mask” and its creator can be perceived adequately and correctly. According to most researchers, Symbolist life-creation was based on Western prototypes and examples. The decadent style of writing and living was implanted in Russian soil after it had achieved a certain level beyond which it could no longer

253 Blok used the word “соответствия” ("correspondences"), which bore an obvious allusion to the vocabulary and imagery of Charles Baudelaire. On Baudelaire’s “correspondences”, urbanist “dandy-theory” and Russian Symbolism see Ioffe 2008: 19-40.
254 See: Минц 2004: 101. The philosophy of life-creation, understood in the broader historical sense as “the art of living” (lifestyle), has been discussed in a series of works by the Berlin philosopher Wilhelm Schmid (1998).
256 “Говоря о семиотичности поведения, мы можем иметь в виду, с одной стороны, порождение некоторого текста поведения, который выступает как знаковый по отношению к некоторому другому тексту, или, с другой стороны, осмысление каких-то явлений действительности (вообще - явлений окружающего мира) как знаковых”. See Пятигорский, Успенский 1967: 19-20.
257 “…о порождающей и аналитической моделях семиотического поведения. И в том, и в ином случае семиотичность поведения может быть существенно различной у разных индивидов..” See: Ibid.
grow, making its further development difficult. The elements of life-creating practice can be demonstrated in a large number of examples involving numerous figures of Western art.

When debating the various biographical “constructs” (the so-called “texts of life”), I would like to point out a particular type of original source – specifically, diary prose – and connect this with the theory of memoir writing. In this context mention can be made of diarists as Lidia Ginzburg, Petr Zaionchkovsky, Vladimir Drobizhev, Andrei Tartakovskiy, as well as of the theoreticians Boris Tomashevsky and Boris Eichenbaum, who were the first in their time to recognize the importance of the “biographical element” in the study of literature. Equally important is Yuri Tynyanov’s concept of “literary persona”.

In the West, the subject of “memoirist discourse” has been extensively studied. Hundreds of titles have been written on the subject. In Russia the notion of “human document” has been developed by Lidia Ginzburg. Presently “ego-documents” are studied as a part of the rapidly growing interdisciplinary field of cultural narratology. A group led by the Moscow researcher Vitaly Bezrogov is investigating the gender semantics of ego-documents.

2.3. The problem of “myth” and “mask”: types of conscience vs. cultural semiotics of behavior

Lotman and Uspensky argued that the self-apperception of each concrete authorial/masked deed (“event” or “action”) is dependent upon the way the particular individual perceives his own “I” (“собственное я”) and how he/she is engaged in the self-modelling process of “mask-creation”. The authors give a good deal of thought to the importance of “mask-conscience” (“сознание маски”) in any process of the author’s self-communication in his various environments. In this process “external perception” is of crucial importance. The Soviet semioticians believed that, “the characteristics of different types of behaviour are controlled by a distinctive

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258 See, respectively Гинзбург 1977; Тартаковский 1980; Дробижеv 1987-1994; Зайончковский 1976-1989; Томашевский 1923; Эйхенбум 1927(1976). For the debate on “memoirist” and biography-centred types of discourse as applied to the study of ‘life-creation’, see the preceding chapter. The field of “life-writing” is examined in many interesting works. See passim: Abbott 1984; Swindells 1995; See also the Russian sources introduced and discussed in Гинзбург 1977: 27-109; Житомирская 1976; Беленький 1998. See also: Church 1995; Marcus 1994. It is also important to note the emergence of the “new public sphere” in the period directly preceding Modernism. The figure of the manipulative “Salon Hostess” is highly important for this debate, transforming the “private letter” to play a key role in this new societal development (see the contribution of Jürgen Habermas (1991)). The image of the “letter-writing lady”, the salon or bohemian type of person, seems to be applicable to such life-creational figurines of Russian Modernism as Cherubina de Gabriac, Zinaida Gippius (indeed, a classic “Salon Hostess”), Nina Petrovskaya, Margarita Voloshina, Anastasia Verbistskaia, Anna Mar, Nina Khabias, Irina Serpinskaia, and many others. For this particular topic see the collection of essays rendered in Elizabeth Eger (2001). One might also consult: L’Épistolaire, un genre féminin? (Planté 1998). See also (passim) Jensen 1995; Dowling 1991; and De Pree 1998. The Russian context of this topic is studied in the monograph by Maarten Fraanje (2001); see also the valuable monograph by William Mills Todd III (1999).


260 See the reference above on the French historical provenance of this term.

261 For the bibliography of the debate on this topic, see the previous chapter.
dependence on a concrete individual”. From their point of view, it was “also evident that self-understanding, i.e., the comprehending of one’s own ‘I’, is determining the general sphere where all the areas of analytical behaviour and, moreover, the generation of this behaviour are intersecting and complementing one another”. 262 According to this view, the degree “of self-awareness” may vary considerably from the point of view of a third observer and that of the second or the first. They defined the semiotic nature of this process of the virtual construction of the “I”-image which “gives its foremost explication in the problem of the ‘mask’.” 263

The heterogeneous nature of the mask issue is important for a proper understanding of the essence of Russian life-creation. The duality of the mask and its complex archaic structure should be noted in connection with the mystical interests of certain Russian cultural heroes of the Silver Age.

The importance of an indigenous “mask” rests on how the person’s solid self-image can thereby be created: “Evidently, the ‘mask’ is needed by an individual, first of all, in order to create a stable image of its own ‘I’ (in communication with itself and with others. The ‘mask’, therefore, functions as a sort of stabilized static image, that hides the constantly occurring changes of the ‘I’, just as a once and forever, in endless repetitions, fixed ritual is an image that stabilizes the constantly changing behaviour of a person and of the collective.” 264

Because of this, the mask is used to maintain the generic energy and “statics” of any particular “creative I” of a living author. This complex of ideas has much to do with the problem of the “character” or, to be more specific – that of an author acting as a character. 265 Whatever their specific identity might be, creative masks usually hark back to the primordial or archaic times when they initially appeared. A paramount role of the mask is to give a sense of continuity between the present and the mythical beginnings of time, which is especially important for cultures with no written history. The characters “played” are also prescribed by historic tradition, and they enact certain roles to construct an artificial, genre-centered, fictitious plot. As we know, the mask as a device for theatrical performance first emerged in Western civilization in the religious practices of ancient Greece. For the study of Russian

262 “Очевидно, между тем, что характеристики той или другой разновидности поведения находятся в определенной зависимости от индивида. Очевидно и то, что именно самовосприятие, т. е. восприятие собственного ‘я’, составляет ту область, где сферы аналитического поведения и порождения поведения пересекаются и взаимно дополняют друг друга”. See Пятигорский, Успенский 1967: 19-20.


264 “…Очевидно, ‘маска’ нужна индивиду прежде всего для того, чтобы создать фиксированный образ своего ‘я’ (в коммуникации с самим собой или с другими). ‘Маска’ таким образом, выступает как некоторый стабилизированный статический образ, скрывающий постоянно совершаемые изменения самого ‘я’ человека, подобно тому, как раз и навсегда зафиксированный в бесконечных повторениях ритуал, обряд являясь образом, стабилизирующим постоянно изменяющееся внешне поведение человека и коллектива”. See: Ibid.

265 On the interesting topic of “becoming a character” in the ethnographical drama, see: Philipp Zarrilli’s essay “What does it mean to become a character?” (1990: 131-148).
Symbolism (Viacheslav Ivanov, particularly) it could have been interesting to pay attention to the cultic worship of Dionysus. The participants of the mystery (or Dionysian orgy) were attempting to impersonate the deity by donning goatskins and consuming wine as well as using “speaking” masks meant to portray Dionysus. The mask-identity, therefore, had a high religious significance. The ceremony served the purpose of making the god more “manifest”. The masked participant was inspired to speak in first person narrative, traditionally starting in the very first act of the drama. The ritual drama in ancient Greece manifested itself in highly formalized theatrical representations. The original Greek mask seems to have been designed, as to, most literally, “throw the voice” into the engaged public by means of a primitive built-in “megaphone” device, in order to make clear at a distance the precise nature of the impersonated character. These “playful” and life-inventing qualities of mask-behaviour (which accentuated what Nikolai Evreinov characterized as the “theatrical instinct”) have been particularly significant for Russian Lebenskunst.

This notion of the personal (archaic) mask is relevant in the context of Lotman’s article “The Decembrist in everyday life. Day-to-day behavior as a historical and psychological category” (“Декабрист в повседневной жизни. Бытовое поведение как историко-психологическая категория”), which postulates complex relations between the “deed” (“поступок”) and its author. Lotman’s analysis provides a basic framework for the examination of “meaningful elements” in personal behaviour, i.e. in what way they can be considered as elements of Lebenskunst. According to Lotman, the Decembrists used “private biography” as a form of “myth creation”, leading to “texts of behaviour”. Lotman spoke of a certain “hierarchy” of meaningful elements of behaviour, which forms a kind of sequence: “gesture — action — text of behaviour”. The latter should be understood as a complete “chain of the ‘sensible actions’ between intention and result”. Lotman believed that in the real behaviour of people, complex and dominated by countless factors, the resulted “texts of behaviour” may remain constantly unfinished, gradually change into new ones, or mix with parallel ones. Accordingly, on the level of “ideal understanding” of one’s behaviour, these always form sensible and complete narratives. Lotman asserted that on the level of actions each text of behaviour corresponds with a “specific program of behaviour” on the “level of intentions”.

266 Relevant examples of the Russian Silver Age performative theory, the theatricalization of life that relied on ancient and archaic models are: Иванов 1994 and Евреинов 1923.
268 On the phenomenon of theatricality in Ancient Greece, see the following general surveys: Green 1994; Aylen 1985; Dobrov 2001; Sommerstein 2002; Lonsdale 1993.
269 See Evreinov’s programmatic essay “The instinct of theatricality” (“Инстинкт театральности”), republished in a recent collection of his texts (Евреинов 2002: 39-48); On this topic see also Галоци-Комяти 1989: 393-402; Утехин 2001: 80-84; and Sharon Marie Carnicke (see Carnicke 1989: 5-29).
270 In 1926, theatre-goers in the United States witnessed a memorable use of masks in The Great God Brown, by American dramatist Eugene O’Neill, wherein actors wore masks on their faces to indicate changes in the internal and external lives of their invented characters. On the concept of the “literary” and “dramatic” mask in Bakhtinian theory, see: Осьмухина 1997: 119-127.
Lotman’s idea of “gesture” deserves special attention. He uses this idea in order to understand the initial state of a “cultural event” and, as its result, the “behavioural text”. The appropriate “siuzhet” (“story” or “plot”) of a person’s self-fashioning is behaviour. This “siuzhet” is crucial for conceptualising human behaviour and understanding its semiotic structure. What is important from the perspective of Lebenskunst research is the fact that Lotman’s theory denies the simple dichotomy of fiction and empirical reality. In literature the sign-levels of the “actual” and the “possible” can exist simultaneously.\footnote{273}

Important for an adequate description of the “texts of culture” is the opposition between “myth” and “narrative”, a problem not neglected by the Moscow-Tartu structuralists. Lotman and Boris Uspensky have devoted\footnote{274} much attention to this topic when they defined this opposition as “descriptive versus mythological depiction” (“дескриптивное vs. мифологическое описание”), or, put differently, descriptive narrative versus mythological narrative. By “descriptive” they mean the so-called metalanguage (as in experimental Modernist “literature about literature”), whereas “mythological” (in addition to this meta-textual function) is intended to designate some other text dealing with the same object by certain auxiliary means.\footnote{275}

Lotman and Uspensky believed that the described object and the describing meta-text belong to the same language. A mythological description is principally monolingual, “the objects of this world are described by means of this same world, are built in the same way.”\footnote{276} Reflecting on these notions, they have postulated the idea of the existence of a mono-linguistic character of a primary “mythological narrative”, which offers a foundation for many further scholarly elaborations of aesthetic or “creational” philosophies of culture or art.

The Moscow-Tartu semiologists insisted on the peculiar “poly-linguistic” nature of the non-mythological variants found in any narrative description and its direct relationship to the idea of mere technical “translation”. According to them, the “non-mythological description” is, in a certain sense, poly-linguistic. The reference to a meta-language constitutes an important link to another language (either a purely abstract one or a foreign language: what is important here is the process of translation-interpretation itself). Accordingly, sometimes the understanding is, in one way or another, connected with translation (in the widest sense of the word), in other cases with “recognition” and “identification”. Lotman and Uspensky asserted that in the case of the descriptive texts the information is generally defined by means of translation and vice versa. They also suggest that “in the mythological texts, however,
it is a question of transformation of objects, and the correct understanding of those texts is, accordingly, connected with the understanding of this transformation”.

The methodological and theoretical considerations have led the Tartu semioticians to deal more closely with the complex aesthetic and social functions related to biographies of leading Russian authors. As Lotman has shown in his essay “Literary biography in cultural context. Toward a typological correlation of the text and the author’s identity” (“Литературная биография в историко-культурном контексте. К типологическому соотношению текста и личности автора”), Pushkin’s biography in particular has played a tremendous role in Russian culture. For Pushkin the creation of a biography became the object of the same constant, focused effort as his “literary” work. According to Lotman, the writer’s right to a biography was somehow “earned by Pushkin” and was gradually “accepted by early nineteenth century readers”. This process meant public recognition of the “word as act” and also created the idea “that the most important thing in literature is not necessarily the literature itself, but rather that the author’s biography which is sometimes more important than his work”.

Lotman believed that this condition somehow “forced” the author to realize in his life what he preaches in his art, and also connected all these issues with a deeply-rooted national tradition. This tradition meant “setting the writer apart from all other artists”, entitling him to the right to a biography. It also created a notion that this “biography should be equivalent to a hagiography, prompted by the fact that in post-Petrine Russia, writers occupied a place which in the previous era was reserved for saints, preachers, holy men, and martyrs”. Lotman focuses on the primary importance of studying an author’s biography in order to gain a coherent and potent understanding of a literary artefact. This newly-born critical tradition of researching an author’s biography alongside the “literary byt” is very important in understanding the life-creation phenomena in its totality.

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277 “… в мифологических текстах речь идет о трансформации объектов, и понимание этих текстов связано, следовательно, с пониманием процессов этой трансформации”. See Лотман, Успенский 1973: 283.
278 “…представление о том, что в литературе самое важное, не литература собственно, и что биография писателя в некоторых отношениях важнее чем его творчество”. See Лотман 1992-1993-а.: 374.
280 This idea relied on some relevant assumptions developed by Russian Formalists as Eikhenbaum, Tomashevsky, Vinokur and (partially) Tynianov.
281 The importance of biography and the “human document” (“человеческий документ”) is evident in the Russian critical tradition from the younger Formalists to Lidia Ginzburg. This concept should be differentiated from the now-popular term “egodocument”. In contrast to the newer term, document humain (as first coined in 1876 by Edmond de Goncourt) had certain specific distinguishing features of its historical usage. In La Faustin (1882), de Goncourt asserted his personal “copyright” to this particular expression, which was a sort of “formulac” definition to be applied to his entire literary school, that is, to the trend of “naturalism” that was striving to replace the earlier “Romanticism.” In fact, de Goncourt essentially regarded “his” literary domain as the “school of the document humain.” Accordingly, arranging “collections of human documents” was prescribed to be virtually the only trustworthy approach for literary creation. Émile Zola was further developing this notion, and in his 1880 “Le roman expérimental” he articulated his vision of naturalism and the naturalistic novel with
As Lotman justly stresses, in post-Petrine Russia the concrete life example of a poet (or any other cultural figure) was just as important as that of a religious prophet or spiritual leader whose personal behavioural example was worthy of imitation. In the same article, Lotman characteristically quotes from the poet-Decembrist Ryleev (a friend of Pushkin): “The saintly, sacerdotal posture of a singer / He must redeem by active deed” (“Святой, высокий сан певца / Он делом оправдать обязан”).

This “by active deed” (“делом”) evidently referred to “real life”, with its biographical details. In Western scholarship these issues were addressed by, among others, the literary historian Lawrence Lipking and Gregory Freidin in his book on Mandelstam. In her study *Death in quotation marks*, Svetlana Boym compares Russian Modernist quests for “life-building” and “death-planning” with those of their Western counterparts.

2.4. Philosophical and historical religious parallels of the “word/text as body” problem

The study of the problems raised by the dichotomist symbiosis text/body has a rather long tradition. The question arises: how can a discourse on “somatics of the word” be possible in the light of humanistic concepts, in the context of either the intellectual or folklore-oriented spiritual aspirations of an individual? According to the ethnologist Albert Baiburin, the word is somatic by definition: “its initial locus is a body, it is born out of a body and back into [a body] it returns”. Actually, according to sacral “folk knowledge”, the logos/word is an inherent, physically tangible aspect of reality: in particular, it is absolutely indispensable for incantations and sorcery rituals. A word can be “digestible” as corporeal predicate: in Slavic folklore, verbal empirics is favoured with an astonishingly “tactile”, somatic attitude from the immediate “producers of discourse” – that is, the “primary craftsmen of the word”, the people themselves, the “Adamic potters’ of the vessels of language”. Baiburin maintains that the word penetrates the body “in any case”, “but not necessarily through the ears; a peculiar word seeks a peculiar path. <…> The most widespread method is swallowing (drinking) [the word], letting it into oneself in a literal sense. In this way (through the mouth) a person acquires knowledge and skills”. Even one’s thoughts this concept in mind. He further refined his aesthetic views on the “human document” in “Les romanciers naturalistes” (“The Naturalist Novelists”, 1881). It is noteworthy that Zola had personally visited the locations in which the action of his books took place, closely observed life in them, and took copious notes. Zola’s concept of “naturalistic” theatre is also of great importance here, as it emphasizes the notion of the *document humain*. The text of “Le naturalisme au théâtre: les théories et les exemples” (1881) is available in the Universal Electronic Library: [http://bibliotheq.net/emile-zola/le-naturalisme-au-theatre/index.html](http://bibliotheq.net/emile-zola/le-naturalisme-au-theatre/index.html) and [http://www.philol.msu.ru/~forlit/Pages/Biblioteka_Zola_Naturalisme.htm](http://www.philol.msu.ru/~forlit/Pages/Biblioteka_Zola_Naturalisme.htm)

286 “Слово в любом случае входит в тело, но необязательно через уши; особое слово требует особого пути. <…> наиболее распространенным способом является его [слова – Д.И.] проглатывание (выпивание), пропускание через себя в буквальном смысле. Таким образом (через рот) человек обретает знания и умения”. See: Байбурин 2005: 106.
“can be swallowed”. In this respect, fairly characteristic is the following comment of a woman performing an incantation: *I have eaten myself what I’ve thought, I have eaten it myself* ['Russian Incantations of Karelia’, 2001, No,108]. 287 To initiate into sorcery, “the sorcerer takes you to the bathhouse at dawn; he asks, it will leap out, the frog; this frog you must swallow into yourself. <…> That is, in order to obtain the sorcerer’s knowledge it’s necessary to eat something, too (in this case, a frog). It’s indicative that in folk riddles a *book* is described in culinary terms: One had cooked it, another had poured it, eat as much as you can but for the eager lot it will still last”. [An obvious allusion to “The Revelation” – D.I.] Apparently, “the culinary code is optimal for the description of such concepts as word and knowledge in folk culture. Judging by the comments to incantations and *medicine texts*, word can be digested in a *tactile way*”. 288

The problem of the “shell” in the context of a text’s living reality, assimilating a verbal construct to a somatic one, was partially elaborated in Ilya Utekhin’s essay “Semiotics of skin in the East-Slavic folk culture” (“К семиотике кожи в восточнославянской традиционной культуре”). There emerge intriguing references to the notion of “colour” and, literally, its “physical carriers”, its sensually tangible *incarnations*: “The normal colour of skin is white: compare the recurrent formula of a ‘white body’, from an incantation recorded in the twentieth century: *and let the body be white as white paper, and let the body be white as white bone, and let the body be white as white snow. Amen!* The anomaly of skin coverlets looks and is perceived first and foremost as change of colour, in a literal sense, *florescence of skin*. It is interesting to recall that Alexander of Aphrodisias, as is well known, compares an animated soul, growing and withering, altering its flesh, with a leather hose (*σωληνος*) through which liquids flow… When the matter flowing through the body wanes, *eidos* by this matter lessens like a hose’s external shape, and vice versa”. 289

The main issues of the analytical attitude toward the “human shell” (human somatic identity), and of the organisation and articulation of certain intellectual
reflections in regard to the problems it raises, were not at all “invented” by modern science or Western philosophy of the “somatic” Early Modern Age, from René Descartes to Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The implications of somatics were allotted philosophical attention in Antiquity and Early Christianity. Interesting in this context are, besides the ideas by Plato and Aristotle, the opinions of Saint Augustine and especially of Plotinus, whose views had been in many respects formed and codified as a result of these thinkers’ polemics with the “corporeal negation” of Gnosticism, which was quite influential at the time. The extraordinary importance of somatics in Gnosticism (as well as in the “heretical” systems adjoining it) is widely known. In the context of the “heretical discourse” of late Antiquity, many texts by Origen, directly dedicated to this theme, are especially important. According to a contemporary Russian scholar who dealt with ancient religious traditions in this context, V.V. Petrov, in Origen’s oeuvre we come across actual philosophical topics such as: “somatic eidos”, “seminal Logos”, “chariot of the soul”, “flesh of the World” etc..

Origen’s understanding of the soul as a corporeal being is reminiscent of “verbal substance”. The antinomy of a soul and a word in the broad paradigm of somatics is manifested as an essential contradiction between the “incorporeal” nature of the soul (as well as of text, that is, of a to-be-named word) and the reality of its “embodiment” in the pragmatic circumstances of life. Petrov remarks that a soul is incorporeal by its nature and invisible, nevertheless almost always abides in corporeal location, having each time a physical corpus appropriate to the nature of this location (he mentions the tractate “Against Celsus”). Sometimes, Petrov observes, the soul rejects the body it needed before since it ceased to correspond to its altered state and replaces it with another, and sometimes “accepts a second body, in addition to the previous one”. Remarkable, too, is the description of the neutralization of a corporeal substrate during the apocalyptic End of Times, when there will be no more “bodies of flesh” in the mundane, physical sense, when Astral Ether and its projections will dominate Space. Petrov observes that in the “Commentary to the Gospel of Matthew” (Commentarium in evangelium Matthaei) Origen writes that, after the resurrection from the dead, bodies of the just well become like those of angels – like an ether light-being and radiance. One’s attention is attracted here by the word ‘light-being’ [αύγοειδές], which is a technical philosophical term applied by the Platonists to the pneumatic body of the soul or, more specifically, to the pneumatic chariot, the carrier of the soul”. Return to Heaven (transition from an earthly body into incorporeal state), doesn’t happen all of a sudden.

According to Petrov, it’s impossible to get rid of a corporeal garment ("indumentum corporeum") at once, and corporeal nature is being withheld gradually. Therefore, “the deceased appear in the guise similar to that which they had while in flesh. After the departure from an earthly body, and still before resurrection, the soul “possesses a certain body”. After death, but before the resurrection of bodies, the soul, abides in a light-being body (just as bodies of angels in heavens are ethereal and are light-being). Jesus’ body, soon after the resurrection, when he appeared before His disciples and Thomas put his finger between His ribs (John, 20: 19-28), was in a sort of an intermediate position between the solid body He had before the suffering and the state the soul acquires after having departed from this body. Afterwards, Jesus’ flesh altered its state and became such as to abide in the ether and above the ether”.

The importance of this extensive quotation about the special virtues of Christ’s flesh lies in the concept of Jesus taken to be the incarnated Word, that is, Divine Logos sent down to Earth. Any discussion touching on the complicated interrelations between somatics and the paradigm of “word/text” interacting with it, should take account of Origen’s original ideas. As Origen observes in his fundamental treatise “De origine”: “Our bodies fall as seeds into the ground. Inherent to these bodies is logos (‘insita ratio’) containing corporeal essence. Even if these bodies have died, dissolved and dispersed, this very ‘λόγος’ that is always preserved in corporeal essence will, obeying God’s will, raise them up from the ground, renew and restore them, just like strength (‘virtus’) inherent to a wheat grain, after its decay and death renews and restores grains within the body of stem and ear”.

Similar ideas we find in the words of Apostle Paul in the New Testament (1 Cor. 15:44): “It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body”. Just before that (15:38-39) he says: “And what you sow is not the body which is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed, its own body. For not all flesh is alike, but there is one kind for men, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish. There are celestial bodies and there are terrestrial bodies; but the glory of the celestial is...
one, and the glory of the terrestrial is another”. And further on (line 51), an Apostle says: “I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed”. These canonical texts can reveal a great deal of fundamental information when dealing with Symbolist life-creationist strategies, seen from the perspective of Vladimir Soloviev and Nikolai Fedorov.

Johannes Scottus Eriugena had rather similar notions about the illusionary corporeality of all living things – suggesting, however, that they were heading toward the “eternal flame” of the End of Days. Petrov remarks that according to Johannes Scottus, the return of human nature and of the entire visible world to their origin begins from the resurrection of the human body. As Johannes Scottus himself observes: “When we talk about the return of sensual creation, do we not speak of the resurrection of bodies?” This return “is nothing other than restoration, since resurrection from the dead is a return to the natural state”.

Not all bodies are prone to the damnation of the Last Fire: following Augustine, Eriugena is even ready to believe that “when the saints become immortal and imperishable, even the very fire of conflagration will no longer be perilous to them, since their new bodies will be unconquerable by flame, since in the world’s conflagration the properties of perishable elements of our substance will be destroyed and altered so as to conform to immortal bodies”. What is important for Eriugena is the differentiation and segregation of the saints (the just ones) from the graceless jumble of “sinning humans” who put their carnal bodies to evil uses. According to him, the bodies of the wise and just will after resurrection become ethereal, and sinners’ bodies aerial. As Petrov further notes: “Having declared the body’s ability to change into the incorporeal, Eriugena is not content to refer to authorities, but tries to provide a rational substantiation for this thesis… He attempts to introduce an intermediate reality between the body and the incorporeal… Johannes Scottus confines himself to a ternary scheme, postulating the existence of a ‘body’, an ‘incorporeal’ and an intermediate ‘corporeality’. This triad is named ternaria proportionalitas, that is, ‘ternary proportionality’, whereas a middle term, respectively, is proportionabilis medietas, a ‘proportional middle’. ‘Corporeality’, being neither corporeal nor incorporeal, is perceived, however, only in connection with bodies circa corpora intelliguntur”.

298 According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy Johannes Scottus (c.800 - c.877) is “the most significant Irish intellectual of the early monastic period”.

299 “Согласно Иоанну Скотту, возвращение человеческой природы и всего видимого мира к своему истоку начинается с воскресения человеческого тела. … ‘рассуждая о возвращении чувственного творения, разве мы не говорим о воскресении тел?’ Возвращение это не что иное как восстановление, ведь воскресение из мертвых это возврат к естественному состоянию”. See: Петров 2005: 635.

300 “[К]огда святые делаются бессмертными и нетленными, даже сам огонь пожара им более не будет страшен, поскольку их новые тела будут неподвластны пламени, ведь в мировом пожаре свойства тленных элементов нашей субстанции уничтожаются и изменяются так, чтобы соответствовать телам бессмертным”. Ibid.

301 “Заявив о возможности для тела измениться в бестелесное, Эриугена не удовлетворяется ссылкой на авторитеты и пытается обосновать это положение рационально. … он пробует ввести между телом и бестелесным промежуточную реальность… Иоанн Скотт ограничивается троичной схемой, постулируя существование ‘тела’, ‘бестелесного’ и промежуточной ‘телесности’. Эта триада именуется ternaria proportionalitas, т.е. ‘троичная
or abstract, geometric; an “incorporeal” (such as a “soul”, “life”) has no spatial
dimension; a “corporeality” is a certain attribute of a body, a certain “quality” (for
instance, colour, the physical shape of a body), it can be light, or visual rays, or
primary elements, or perhaps many other things. A “corporeal,” like the incorporeal
and the ethereal, is able to penetrate other bodies and everything that lies within its
reach.

The similarity between a body and a thing of verbal nature was for ages a
focus of attention for Ancient Greek philosophy of life and culture. “Body” (“thing”)
and “word” approach each other at the level of “creation” (= denomination), both
issuing, in the sense of emanation, from the Creator of all nature, following a
universal principle of imitation: “Whether Stoics reckoned that such an imitation of
things occurs spontaneously when ‘first words’ emerge, or, according to the theory of
‘verbal gesture’[^302] stated in Plato’s *Cratylus* (422e-427d); the proximity between
sound and phenomenon is perceived by a ‘wise lawmaker’, who then utilizes
appropriate sounds to ‘create physical words’”.[^303]

2.5. The European forerunners of Russian life-creation. The discursive study of
Lebenskunst

One of the first contemporary scholar to address the problems involved in the
discursive interaction between the “verbal text” and the “events in life” is (the late)
Paul Ricoeur. I am referring to his article, until recently largely overlooked in the
scholarship on life-creation, titled “The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action
Considered as Text”, included in his collection *From Text to Action: Essays in
Hermeneutics*.[^304]

In this article, first published in 1971, Ricoeur examines the critical literature
that discusses the text as a full-fledged “life event”. Ricoeur points out that an “event”
is inevitably an “act of vocal expression,” and even in the sense used by John Austin
and John Searle, an “act of speech.” This contrasts with some of the ideas of Mikhail
Bakhtin, with whose work on the subject Ricoeur was probably not familiar at the
time.

Ricoeur proposes that we consider a “statement” or an “act of speech” as a
part of a life of meaning, or, as Bakhtin would put it, as a valid event. It is important
to stress here that, according to Ricoeur, any event shares the properties of a text in so
far as it is discursive. Setting aside the old structural genre divisions into “narratives”
and “myths”, Ricoeur, as an “underground” pioneer of narratology, proclaims the
unitary character of narrative – the cyclical form of a myth is not any less “narrative”
than the “classical” construction of literature by identifiable authors. In this regard,

[^302]: See the corresponding notions of the “plastic gesture” and the “semantic gesture” mentioned above.
[^303]: See: Петров 2005: 635.
[^304]: See: Ricoeur 1991: 144-167. At approximately the same time, the Swiss Slavic scholar Felix Philip
Ingold was working on the same subjects with reference to Russian culture.
Ricoeur seems to be drawing close to Yuri Lotman’s well-known anthropological views, that establish a connection between the conceptual apparatus of an “object of culture” (or “culture as an object”) and the virtual constructs associated with this, such as “text”, “memory”, and “behaviour”.

Ricoeur claims that an act of speech fully assumes the status of actual life – in other words, the verbal-aesthetical becomes an integral component of the live, systematic world order, subject to historical description. Ricoeur states: “...it is necessary to understand by the meaning of the speech-act, or by the *noema* of the saying, not only the sentence, in the narrow sense of the propositional act, but also the illocutionary force and even the perlocutionary action in the measure that these three aspects of the speech-act are codified, gathered into paradigms, and where, consequently, they can be identified and reidentified as having the same meaning. Therefore I am giving here the word *meaning* a very large acceptation which covers all the aspects and levels of the intentional exteriorization that makes the inscription of discourse possible”.

According to the French philosopher, another trait which is important for the “transposition” of the concept of fixation “from the sphere of discourse to the sphere of action concerns the ontological status of the ‘complements’ of the verbs of action”. He differentiates between the terms “equally existing or non-existing”, which designate “certain verbs of action” and also have a “topical subject which is identified as existing and to which the sentence refers, and complements which do not exist”. Such is the case, Ricoeur believes, “with the ‘mental acts’ – to believe, to think, to imagine, etc.”.

Earlier in this chapter I have suggested that there is a “paradigmatic” change from Russian Realism to Russian Modernism. However, there are, undoubtedly, direct parallels between symbolism and the “romantic view of life”. Romanticism is still distinct in Baudelaire, but it is also traceable in Blok. The Romantic worldview can be found in all the major literary figures of Russian Modernism, from the quasi-Nietzschean Maxim Gorky to his antithesis, Vladimir Mayakovsky (whose “theomachian”, dualist “Manichaeism” was full of hidden romanticism). Explicit romantic motifs can be found in the “life agenda” of Velimir Khlebnikov, much of which (for instance, his passion for the Orient and foreign travel), goes back to the early “romantic” symbolist Gérard de Nerval (as well as to Rudyard Kipling, Lord Byron, and Robert Louis Stevenson). The existential experiences of such figures of Russian modernism as Valery Briusov and Nikolai Gumilev can also be seen as romantic. The obvious connection between Russian symbolist life-creation and the romantic lives of the authors of the European literary canon was argued by Yuri Lotman and Zara Mints in their book “Essays on Russian and Soviet poetry” (“Статьи о русской и советской поэзии” (1989)).

In the theses for her study “On the Third Wave of Romanticism in Russian Culture at the Turn of the Millennium” Eugenia Miliugina (a Russian scholar from Tver’), believes that the symbolic and neo-romantic understanding of the ontological

307 Ibid.
309 See especially the chapter “Modernism in Art, Modernist in Life” (“Модернизм в искусстве, модернист в жизни”): Лотман, Минц 1989: 76-134.
bases of existence is typologically akin to classic romanticism. According to her “it shows the same aspiration towards high spirituality and selfless discipleship, the same understanding of the value of the human self in and of itself”. She then observes that the same kind of “acceptance of responsibility for the actions and sins of the entire world” (thus “the new Gospel” in Mayakovsky’s poem “Ман” (“Человек”)), the same vehement distaste for stagnant ways of thinking and rigid canons of existence (expressed in the new poets’ extravagance of expression”).

Lord Byron can, perhaps, be considered the first “life-creator” in modern literature, for it was he, who, in his private letters and personal notes, presents such important ideas for life-creation as the “myth of the author”; the artificial creation of the author’s legend, the author who himself creates, shapes, and alters his own life, and the important role reserved for the “author’s body.” Byron, with his rather playful gender identity, is the classic romantic “hero-poet” who can become accessible to his audience only through a generally holistic hermeneutical approach in which the author’s biography and actions are as important as his literary text.

For the English and international audience Lord Byron presented a version of the behavioral-creative life pattern, which influenced the formation of an entire complex of life-creational practices and led to the definition of a commonly perceived romantic paradigm (giving birth to a universally accepted “code of conduct” of any future Romantic “cultural agent”).

Apart from Byron, the German romantics, with their profound interest in religion and mysticism, also provided an impulse to life-creating practices in Modernism. The Spanish modernist philosopher Ortega y Gasset, for instance, once pointed out a disappointing “idiosyncratic” discrepancy in the lifestyle of the great Goethe during his Weimar period: on the one hand, Goethe held a post in a ministry, but on the other, he had an inspired, contemplative vocation as a poet, which created a striking dissonance in his lifestyle. According to this view the biography of a romantic poet is no longer the biography of an ordinary author, since his very life turns into a “poem”. Gradually, this attitude led to the formulation of a certain series of actions that a poet was expected to perform in order to fulfil his vocation. At the end of the eighteenth century, the influential stereotype of the “dying poet” was created. A young poet, having failed to overcome the adversities of existence, dies in poverty before his time, without living to see his day of glory, which always arrives too late. A poet’s life always fulfils some kind of literary purpose, and it is this literary biography that the reader finds attractive.

In Romanticism the “code of conduct” became an important structural and phenomenal notion. For the first time in European culture art was able to stand out on its own. To fulfil itself as a valuable and independent form of socially significant and widely accepted libertine activity, fully free of any external pragmatic functionality. The scholars of romanticism have defined their period as a nominal “borderline”, when art achieved a hitherto unseen aesthetic independence as a self-

310 See: Милюгина 2005 (el. pub.).
311 See the complex life-narrative of Byron’s presented in MacCarthy 2002.
sufficient artistic sphere, attempting to transcend itself, and to transgress existing literary conventions, and demonstrating in its ties to reality the relationship of not a vassal but rather of a fully vested suzerain.

This unprecedented “self-assurance” of art, and of artists considering themselves to be aerial concentrations of the most important “high” truths and varied meanings of existence, is apparent in this period. The artist is no longer a skilful mimetic master of artistic illusions of the surrounding real world, but rather a gigantomachic Creator, a Gnostic ambivalent demiurge whom one can expect to act accordingly.

The capacity for vivifying an imaginary “metaphysical event” was valuable for romantics especially because in some way it gave back to mankind the sense of personal “self-willed” significance. The artistically-creative attitude toward surrounding reality eased one’s dependence on it and allowed one to transcend this world; it led to the formation of certain universal “regulations” for romantic and post-romantic life-creation.

According to Yuri Lotman’s typology of the various historical forms of “cultural behaviour”, this obvious habitus (to use the coinage of Pierre Bourdieu) can encompass everything that helps the author “distinguish” his physical life from surrounding humdrum reality. This sort of Romantic behavioural mode always attracted like-minded companions (both inside the artistic sphere and outside it). It also proposed a new complex of norms to be obeyed in family life, pointing the new way for the author to spend his time. Some of the elements were intended to stand for the general “life principle”, to fit this model and to correspond to the author’s daily activities.

A valuable discussion of the historical-cultural significance of the German romantics and their mystical aspirations offers Zhirmunsky’s study German Romanticism and Modern Mysticism ("Немецкий романтизм и современная мистика", 1914). Relying somewhat on a book by Nikolai Lossky, The Intellectual and Mystical Intuition, which came out eight years earlier, Zhirmunsky skilfully demonstrates from the example of the German romantic authors how one becomes a visionary, able to “observe” not only actual reality, but also ideal reality, with the help of intellectual “intuition”.

Zhirmunsky’s study of the romantic mystical experience is especially important in understanding the fascination with the occult among Russian modernists, which has recently been researched by Nikolai Bogomolov. Just as with Russian symbolists, the poetic art of the romantics takes the shape of a kind of logomachia (f.e. the explicit logomachia of Vladimir Mayakovsky who also had a strong romantic slant). This was the constant struggle with “Word-Logos” and with all the ordinary literary practices and conventions, attempting to transcend the traditionally accepted limitations of the Word, as if charging it with more meaning than it is usually able to contain. Following Friedrich Strich, Zhirmunsky debates the significant influence of

313 See this work republished not long ago: Жирмунский 1996.
315 See the studies published in Богомолов 1999.
Jakob Boehme’s theosophy on early Romanticism – in particular, on Ludwig Tieck and Novalis. Zhirmunsky presents Boehme’s philosophy as a sort of a myth-creating constant which unifies many authors of the movement. The remythologization of poetry opens wide pathways for romantic life-creation: mystical-ecstatic worship of the “divine fullness of being”, an enthusiastic rediscovery of ancient religious cults by giving new life to their cultural practices. Zhirmunsky analyzes the elaborate (neo)mythological structures in Tieck and Novalis, demonstrating the merging of mythic images with real daily religious practice. Zhirmunsky linked romantic mystical feelings of ambivalently “sublime” love with the specific pattern of the contextual act of life.

Almost all the “sign-motifs” of German mystical Romanticism mentioned by Zhirmunsky were re-enacted in Russian symbolism, particularly by the Russian decadent life-creators. Apart from the Romantic poets, the French Symbolists, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Verlaine, as well as their semi-deranged precursor (and the inspiration for the surrealists) Isidore Ducasse (Comte de Lautréamont, author of *Les Chants de Maldoror*), all in a certain sense represent a cultural model that became an object of imitation for Russian Modernism. Both the apparent and the hidden aestheticized self-fashioning of Arthur Rimbaud and Charles Baudelaire can be viewed as a semiotically-rich environment that created the spiritual foundation for the subsequent life-creational agendas of all generations of Russian Modernists.

The younger contemporary of the French decadents, Oscar Wilde, once noted that in order for life to become notable, it must end in failure. His life-creating concept of art can be summarized in a formula dear to the Russian Symbolists: “Life imitates art far more than art imitates Life”. Oscar Wilde’s life-creation can be seen as closely related with that of his French predecessors. Though far from claiming that Wilde simply copied the practices and conventions of the French decadents and proto-decadents, I nevertheless am ready to admit the obvious: the English writer belongs to the French Modernist paradigm, structured around “life-creation”, when a special role was assigned to the author’s actual life, behaviour, and the resulted “legendary” biography. Recently, the grandson of Oscar Wilde – the English literary scholar Merlin Holland – published the complete and uncensored text316 of the verbatim report of *The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde* – a sort of a tragic culmination of Wilde’s life-creation. It is quite appropriate that Wilde’s life journey, according to his major biographer Richard Ellmann,317 seems to literally be “programmed” by his vocation, which Ellmann perceives as a trajectory of successes and failures rather than as a steady path of rising to literary success. In this regard, the question of the cultural ritual may arise together with the problem of understanding cultural behavior against the background of the previously conceived mythopoetical models. I will not focus, however, on discussing life-creation in context of “ritual theory”.

318 See: Schahadat (2004: 27-71), where, among other things, the analytical debates concerning Emile Durkheim and Victor Turner can be found.
3.0. The main patterns and representatives of Russian life-creation

As has been discussed above, a good deal of scholarship has been dedicated to the general theme of the “mask” – the phenomenon of a “persona” as an element of ritualized, sign-creating behavior. The fixed mask-image of Viacheslav Ivanov – a priest and a poet thoughtfully fulfilling the role of a Hellenist Pontiff – can be considered as among the most prominent. A theurgist (Mashbitz-Verov) and mystagogue, a refined “Phaedrus” and the leading master of the Symposium at “The Tower”, in his articles “Two Spheres in Modern Symbolism” and “The Symbolist Commandments”, written between 1907 and 1909, Ivanov eloquently provides a comprehensive answer to the question of the nature of life-creation. The omnipotent and all-knowing Tzar’-Baran, as referred to him by his young children, plays an important role in the scheme of the interdependence of life and art. The entire mythogenic life of “The Tower”, which continued to varying extents up to the untimely death of Lydia Zinovieva-Annibal in 1907, can serve as a microcosm for examining the entire complex of Russian life-creative ideas. Ivanov’s philosophically theatricalized “Wednesdays”, represent one of the most valuable and vivid examples of modernist life-creation.

The “Friends of Hafiz Club,” feasting in the symposium-style “Hafiz Tavern”, as described by Vladimir Bogomolov, provides an excellent idea of the Tower’s life-creating “spirit of place”. Grecian masks, chosen by the main characters of this milieu, portray quite vividly the variety of personas reigning there at the time: Kuzmin as Antinous, Berdiaev as Solomon, Zinovieva-Annibal as Diotyma, Ivanov as Hyperion, Bakst as Apelles, Walter Nouvelle as Le Rénoveau and Petronius, Gorodetsky as Hermes, and Auslender as Ganymede. To the mask-centric aspect of the Tower’s life-creating circle one should add the occult aspect as well, personified in the rather mysterious figure of Anna Mintslova.

Another important way of realization of mythogenic masks in Russian symbolist life-creation was the “argonautism” of a circle of young people in the capital that flocked around the figure of the (at the time) rather fashionable literary innovator Andrei Belyi. This phenomenon was studied by Aleksandr Lavrov. The collective effort of the inspired Muscovite youth of the first years of the 1900s, directed on a quest for the healing “Golden Fleece”, whose acquisition signified salvation for humankind, became a focus of symbolist life-creation. The quintessence of this paradigm can be found in the poetic summons from Andrei Belyi, relying on

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319 See the detailed description of the prophetic concept of “vates” and of “the poet as priest” in the context of Khlebnikov’s life-creation, including several notes related to Viacheslav Ivanov in Иоффе 2008-a: 559-564.
320 See especially the chapter on “Symbolists as theurgists” in Машбиц-Веров 1969: 121-145.
322 See the various materials rendered in the recent collection: Шишкин 2006.
323 For an “unbiased” description by a live witness, see the widely quoted in that regard essay by Nikolai Berdiaev, “Wednesdays at the Ivanovs”, published in the seminal historical collection edited and commissioned by Semen Vengerov, Twentieth-Century Russian Literature in two volumes.
324 See the special chapter on the “Hafiz Club” in Богомолов 1995-a: 67-98.
325 See the pioneering work on Mintslova reproduced in Богомолов 1999: 21-75. See also Carlson 1993: 59-91. See this topic elaborated in the text chapter.
his “spiritual brother/enemy” Aleksandr Blok: “Silently we will bind our hands
together// Let us fly off into the blue azure!”.327

Although he was not formally connected with the circle, the young Alexander
Blok was an important figure of inspiration – a “seraphic youth,” a “seeking poet,”
sanctifying a “maiden of rainbow heights” (“дева радужных высот”). Belyi and his
companions (and, more than any other, his nephew Sergey Soloviev) perceived Blok
and his young wife Liubov Mendeleeva as a messianic “Heavenly Bride and Groom”
(although without the couple’s explicit cooperating agreement).

An ideal case of semiotic life-creation can be found in the most prominent
figure of the post-symbolist “Adamism” movement of Nikolai Gumilev. Gumilev’s
entire career and work has a clear romantic element, e.g. The Journey of
Conquistadors, (“Путь конквестадоров”) his numerous exotic travels to Africa, his
deep appreciation of the bohemian Paris, the venture of the magazine Sirius, his
proclaiming himself a “prophet of the rank of Buddha, Christ, and Mohammed” etc.
Gumilev was also a heroic combatant in the First World War, and was awarded the
prestigious “Cross of St. George” for his military exploits. His artistic activity as
“Syndic” of the “Poet’s Workshop” and his death as a martyr in the monstrous hands
of the Bolshevik executioners serves as a “logical suicidal conclusion” of such an
“artificially constructed” poetical career.328

In Russian life-creation the “mask of a mad poet” (or the “image of a neurotic
artist”) has a special role. Many works have been written on the subject of the
connection between insanity and creativity.329 Among the “mad icons” of Russian
modernists, a number stand out as interesting characters. Mikhail Vrubel’ and Vasilii
Komarovskii are the clearest examples (they underwent psychiatric treatment for and
then even died of the consequences of this illness). The label of “insane” was attached
(in both memoirs and letters) to many other Russian modernists: for instance, Liubov’
Blok referred to Andrei Belyi in her memoirs as “crazy as ever”; the parents of
Tatiana Vechorka’s husband were convinced that Khlebnikov, when in danger to be
enlisted in the First World war, was clinically insane, requiring immediate
institutionalization (despite the fact that the Kharkov psychiatrist Anfimov had
officially proclaimed him mentally normal).330 We may mention here also Briusov’s
diary description on how his close acquaintances of that period perceived Argonaut
fantasies of centaurs and unicorns.331 In a letter of Sergei Soloviev of the same period
to Blok: “recently Bugaev made a scene with his unicorns and the like. They almost
called a psychiatrist, and there was much trouble for him and for us”.332

Also considered as mentally handicapped by many were Konstantin Bal’mont
and Sergey Esenin, on the basis of their excessive drinking, and Osip Mandelstam for
his peculiar behaviour. Mental problems are mentioned in discussions of practically

329 For good examples, see (passim): Rothenberg 1994; Nettle 2001; Weeks 1996.
331 On the page 134 of the first edition of Briusov’s diary published by Nikolay Ashukin we read: “Мои
ladies, when they heard us… thought that we had gone crazy” (“Мои дамы, слушая… думали что
мы рехнулись”).
332 “Недавно Бугаев наделал переполох своими Единорогами и т.д. К нему чуть не призвали
психиатра, и много было тяжелого и для него самого и для нас”. Quoted via Lavrov 1994: 89-91.
all the participants of the OBERIU circle, and, above all, of Daniil Kharms; the most vivid evidence of Kharms’s acute depression and a certain pathological malaise is demonstrated in the recently published diary of Iakov Druskin.333

The list of “mad artists” – authors who exploited the general “mask of insanity” on both personal and public levels – can be continued endlessly. Semiotically speaking, the eccentric “mask of a madman” and the label of “mentally ill” proved to be used rather widely and even came to be seen as “necessary” in the whimsical world of Russian Modernism.

The most important method of defining a life-creating paradigm became, as we have mentioned several times earlier, the “utopian-erotic” cultural lifestyle of many Russian writers of our period (1890-1922). This being true, the creation of so-called “love triangles” or ménages a trois was a rather widespread model. The Russian symbolists had such triangles in their lives, in many different constellations:334 Merezhkovsky ↔ Gippius ↔ Filosofov; Ivanov ↔ Zinovieva Annibal ↔ Margarita Voloshina (+ ↔ Gorodetsky); Osip / Lilia Brik ↔ Mayakovsky, and also putatively in the permutations Blok ↔ Mendeleeva ↔ Belyi; Briusov ↔ Petrovskaya ↔ Belyi, and a few others.

The (homo)erotic “constant” proves to dominate the “life myth” of Mikhail Kuzmin, fully narrated with an impressive degree of detail in his pseudo-intimate diary). Kuzmin, the “Russian Oscar Wilde”, gathered around himself somewhat similar “Wildians” such as his cousin G.V. Chicherin, Walter Nouvel, and Konstantin Somov, as well as a plethora of anonymous paramours (youthful men, whose names, unfortunately, cannot always be identified with a great degree of precision).335

The erotic construction of one’s own private life was in many ways typical of the Mir iskusstva circle – as well as, by and large, of the “Diaghilev circle.” Apart from Diaghilev, this latter circle included the aforementioned Somov and Filosofov, and later also Nizhinsky.

Radical eroto-centric Life-creation can be clearly seen in the perplexed lives and life-styles of Anna Mar, Zinaida Gippius, Nina Petrovskaya, Anna Radlova, Nadezhda Sandzhar’, and the mysterious poetess Khabias (Хабиас), as well as those of many other figures associated with the literature of the time.336 Apart of Blok’s “Lady of the Opalescent Rainbowed Heights” (“Дева Радужных Высот”)337 there is the mask of the so-called “demonic woman” with a complex of corresponding behaviour patterns – for instance, as ironically portrayed by the contemporary memoirist Teffi. In the usual satirical mood the author observed that: “a demonic woman stands apart from a normal woman, first of all with her dress. She wears a long black velvet coat, a chain across her forehead, a bracelet on her leg, a ring with a hole… with prayer beads on her elbow and the portrait of Oscar Wilde on her left garter. She also wears the regular female accessories but not on the places designated

334 See the abundant details in Matich 1994: 24-49.
335 See the relevant information in Богомолов 1995 passim.
336 See (passim) Павлова 2004; Matich 2005. For other relevant topics, see the corresponding articles published in Иоффе 2008.
337 A mask related to Liubov’ Blok.
for the purpose. For instance, she will only wear her belt on her head, her earring on her forehead or neck, her ring on the thumb…”.

The culmination of “modernist erotic experimentation” can be seen in the radical female revolutionary Alexandra Kollontai and her “glass of water theory”, in the reduction of the “bourgeois” sexual experience to the “primitive” forms practiced in archaic societies, and in the corresponding experiments of the formation of the (post-Nietzschean) “New Man” during early Soviet history.

The causal basis of such erotic fluctuations could have different origins, but all had one common denominator: the utopian lifestyle. The triangles of the “constellations” mentioned above were intentionally designed to bring the Kingdom of Salvation to mortal Earth, to re-create an “ideal reality” that would enable the conception of a new “ideal human super-being”, which could not have been produced from the monogamous, sinful, corporeally-sexual union of only two people. Such an approach to life-creation is confirmed by many interdisciplinary works by scholars of various cultures in the last few years. As Aage Hansen-Løve puts it: “From the symbolist perspective art is always ‘the art of life’ (‘art is art to live’ – Belyi, ‘Song of Life’ (Песнь жизни), 1908), in the ‘realist symbolism’ ‘an artist himself becomes a work of literature’ (Belyi, Briusov, 1907); poetry becomes ‘a religious personality cult,’ a ‘theurgy’. Theurgical ‘life’ is a series of interconnected ‘experiences’, and is therefore the product of ‘personal creativity’ (Belyi’s Art (Искусство), 1908). In modernism, the actual religious experience has returned into the artistic sphere (Belyi, Symbolism and Contemporary Russian Art, 1908)”.

As Hansen-Løve justly stresses: “A central myth of modernism is the myth of life as art. The artist’s life and work merge in the form of an artistic symbol (Belyi, ‘Emblematic strata of sense’ (Эмблематика смысла): ‘A form of the artistic creation of life is the norms of behaviour’. The ideal incarnation of ‘life-creation’ – the image of the ‘God-man’, the hero of a ‘wondrous life’”.

The strategy of an artificial and aesthetical way of “creating life” is connected with the Nietzschean-Fedorovian line of Russian cultural renaissance, which includes

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338 “Демоническая женщина отличается от женщины обыкновенной, прежде всего манерой одеваться. Она носит черный бархатный подрясник, цепочку на лбу, браслет на ноге, кольцо с дыркой… четки на локте и портрет Оскара Уайльда на левой подвязке. Носит она также и обыкновенные предметы дамского туалета, только не на том месте, где им быть положено. Так, например, пояс демоническая женщина позволит себе надеть только на голову, серьгу – на лоб или на шею, кольцо на большой палец”. See: Тэффи 1995: 33-34.
340 For a good example of such an approach, see Schmid 1992: 50-62.
such diverse names as Soloviev, Gorky, Rozanov, Bogdanov, Malevich, Belyi, Merezhkovsky, Kliuev, and many others. This fascination of Russian authors with Nietzsche was undoubtedly fed by the “new religious consciousness,” the ideology of “common action” (общее дело of Fedorov), and by Gorky’s dreams of the “New Man” who would create a “New Society” (for a certain period did Gorky view Lenin as such a “New Man”).

Utopian elements in Russian Modernism we see in the idea of physical “overcoming death” by means of art and artistic activity (the “salvation myth” described by Irene Masing-Delic), and in the creation of an “ideal man” by means of (an apocalyptic) levelling of the differences between sexes, that were supposed to be eschatologically re-united in the figure if an ideal “androgyny”. They are also apparent in the cosmism of Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, the “father” of Russian space travel, and in the turbulent activities of the Russian Constructivism, which withered under the Stalinist regime’s rigidity without getting a chance to be fully realized. The totalitarian “New Order” of Stalin put an end to the Silver Age’s artistic utopianism.

3.1 Summarizing notes

In order to fully understand the literary and lifestyle practices present in Russian life-creating modernism, there will be need to clarify further such notions as “literary character,” “literary persona,” and “dramatic character”. Following the example of several Western scholars, I would like to put forward the concept of the transgressive “kinetic character”, living and functioning “on both sides of the text” as a literary actor who does not fit into the verbal text (which lives its own “life” according to “textual conventions”) and filling his own independent personal existence with purely aesthetic gesture-meaning. Andrei Belyi was a clear example of such a “living character-author” or “living literary hero,” but was not the only one: Valery Briusov, Aleksandr Blok, Aleksei Remizov, and many other authors of the period can be characterized in the same way.

The semiotic nature of Russian Modernist life-creation can be summed up in the following way:

1) Russian life-creating modernism was a logical continuation and development of the pan-European fin-de-siècle post-romantic movement (international Symbolism as the continuation of international Romanticism). This movement is characterized by a cult of the author, which becomes apparent in artistic personal behaviour and a carefully constructed biography.

2) The primary basis of the life-creating activity of Russian symbolists and post-symbolists was a semiotic “neo-mythologism,” based on the revival of ancient (such as the cult of Dionysus), neo-ancient (“argonautism”), and new

343 See, respectively, the relevant contributions (passim) in Синеокая 2001, and Семенова 2004 See also the next chapter.
344 See the materials presented in Masing-Delic 1992.

345 See chapter 4 of the current study. For some discussions of this concept see Docherty 1983: 222-224; Weststeijn 2004: 53-64; Phelan 1989: 51-54; Михайлова 1990: 43-72; Chatman 1986: 189-204; and Hamon 1973: 85-110, as well as several articles published by Uri Margolin.
(“mystical anarchism”) behavioural and worldview patterns of a literature-centric existence.

3) The ideas of constructing life in accordance with the principles of creative aesthetics and artistic practice (the main postulates of “life-creation”) can be viewed as a “universal semiotic activity” that is relevant to the entire historical process of Russian modernism. It is precisely the life-creating impulse that can be considered the connective element that unifies such remote characters as Viacheslav Ivanov and Vladimir Mayakovsky, Nikolai Gumilev and Velimir Khlebnikov, Andrei Belyi and David Burliuk.

4) In the context of the total “theatricalization” of the lives of the Russian Modernists, there appears a new paradigm of “somatic events”: the “anatomical” theatre, the cult of personal “performance”, the attention to one’s own cultural body, when art is always perceived as all-embracing synthetic totality. The Russian modernist life-creator can be defined as the Homo Somatikos of the new Cultural History.
The second chapter is devoted to a number of distinct topics relevant for my discussion. I start the chapter with an analytical outline reflecting on the nature of “Modernism”, using the approach of D.S. Likhachev as regards his interesting periodization and categorization of Western culture. I propose an approach that considers Symbolism as the “pre-Modernist” stage of culture. Symbolism “prepared” the soil for the radical Avant-Garde of Futurism. I formulate the main characteristic aspects of international Modernism that also directly correspond to the ideas of life-creation. These principal notions are related to the idea of total experiment, of a manipulative attitude to life and of building a work of art by non-traditional means. In this chapter I describe several aspects of Modernist aesthetics corresponding to life-creation. I view Russian Modernism as the logical division of the European tradition that was preoccupied with the same ideas of experimentation with life and aesthetics. I consider Russian Symbolism to be the initial phase of Modernism in Russia, whereas Avant-Garde appears to be its strongest and most “typical” current. In my definition of Russian Modernist life-creation I relied on the Moscow-Tartu school of semiotics with their pioneering way of debating the issue of “texts of behavior”. The semiotic rules responsible for the Modernist behavior are discussed there together with the accompanying issues of the “myth” and “mask” types of creative consciousness – these, according to this approach, should be noted as responsible for the phenomenon of Lebenskunst in Russian culture. Referring to Lotman’s studies I relate Pushkin’s Romantic behavior and the corresponding behavior of Decembrists to the agenda of the later life-creation. A special section of the chapter contains a concise discussion on the philosophical, historical, and religious parallels of the “word/text as body” problem. Captivated by the extraordinary connection that existed between the “verbal” utterance of Russian Modernism and the “behavioral/physical/bodily” one, I intended to demonstrate the historical complex of ideas expressed with regard the corresponding topic. I relate the Church Fathers’ understanding of Christ as “word” that became flesh as a prototypical instance of the studied Lebenskunst. Another special section of the chapter is dedicated to the European forerunners of Russian life-creation and to the discursive study of Lebenskunst. I mention the canonical western life-creationists (like Byron, Rimbaud and Wilde) and analyze the views of Paul Ricoeur on the “meaningful event” of the verbal text. I conclude the chapter with formulating the main typological patterns and semiotical nature of Russian life-creation.