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

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The dissertation consolidates previous research and provides an analytical survey of the cultural phenomenon of “zhiznetvorchestvo” (“Lebenskunst” in German – literally “life-creation” or “life art”), which was typical for Russian modernism. By clarifying the theoretical and historical basis of the phenomenon of “life-creation” in Russian modernism, the project contributes to a better understanding of the relevant cultural output of this important period in Russian culture. Since “life-creation” blurs the boundaries between body and text, it pertains not only to the domain of literary history and theory, but has also can be studied in the perspective of philosophy, cultural studies and art history alike.

The four chapters of the dissertation give an interpretation of the structure of the convergence of life and art, of the intertwining between the public-social and personal-cultural realities in the investigated “chronotope” of Russian modernism. It was the goal of the dissertation to discover and determine the mechanisms of the gradual disappearance of the distinguishing traits of the modernist’s private life, the progressive mutation of his/her personal artistic identity into a general and public socio-cultural model.

The study of the phenomenon of “life-creation” entailed a detailed examination of the structure of the creative behavior and gender identities of the “heroes” active in the cultural field during the time discussed.

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

The most important thing I wanted to emphasize in my opening chapter is the problematics of unrestrained reliance on self-writing sources. The first major notion that I start my theoretical discussion with is the concept of “autobiographical pact” (Le pacte autobiographique) introduced by Philippe Lejeune. Dealing with the trickiest nature of authorial intention, Lejeune postulated the existence of the symbolical “covenant” – a kind of virtual agreement between the writer and the reader. According to this course of thinking the reader accedes to regard the proposed narrative as “non-fiction”, something that actually did take place in the real life of the speaking person. It is always a matter of complete voluntariness on behalf of all the parties involved: the narrator consents that his intention is “to tell the true story” and the reader chooses to accept it and believe it.

Philippe Lejeune’s elder colleague, a philosopher and epistemologist Georges Gusdorf offered an additional theoretical insight into our comprehension of the nature of autobiography. Paying greater respect to the role of human memory involved in the production of a veritable memoir he brings us back to the basic problem of its generic nature. According to Gusdorf, the virtual “success” of any biography depends largely on every writer’s physical ability to memorize the particular reconstructive events of the more distant past. In addition to that, I discuss James Olney’s understanding of autobiography as an original way of “self-savouring”, a kind of substitution available for “accomplishing” life’s object through writing.

The Hungarian philologist István Dobos left several elucidating considerations substantiating the detachment of life-writing from any other “literary” genre. By stressing this I arrived at a more “documentary” kind of attitude towards the self-writing texts. In their
essence they aren’t like “fiction” and therefore they should be treated differently. Dobos emphasizes the lack of “real literary freedom” in self-writing.

The American literary scholar Paul John Eakin offered another useful idea to be employed for understanding life-writing in terms of life-creation. According to him, nearly each autobiography is an integral part of a “lifelong process of identity formation”, which means that creating this kind of texts also inevitably shapes the mental self-apperception, constantly modifying the resulting image of the self. The “memorizing self” creates its own “narrative identity” and attributes to it all the relevant aspects of the real life. I also discuss an essay by the Berkeley scholar Irina Paperno where she strives to highlight the outstanding discursive position of life-writing in general and “diary” in particular.

The two canonical European authors that are usually held responsible for creating the “self-writing canon” are St Augustine and Rousseau. Their texts (each of them is entitled “Confession” either in the plural or in the singular) also reveal a certain life-creation effort bent on their interests, as long as they were “shaping” their lives in accordance with their spiritual or aesthetical views. It was important to bring in the discussion on the life-writing of these two major authors in order to exemplify the immediate basic reasoning for recruiting the self-writing genres, and especially the “confession”, so as to epitomize the method of studying Russian life-creation.

My summarizing discussion on the Russian tradition of “Confession” begins with Tolstoy. Revealing conceptually the problematic events of his life Tolstoy placed himself within the rousseauvean tradition of the “repentant” self-narration. His Confession contributed to the notable atmosphere of intimacy and “biographical poetics” that influenced the Modernist attitudes of the Silver Age in Russia. It is important to mention Tolstoy’s self-writing, since in principle I consider this author an immediate predecessor of Symbolist and Avant-Garde life creation. The whole movement of “Tolstovstvo” can be regarded as a natural antecedent of Lebenskunst: the life of those who were part of the author’s milieu, those who openly shared his ideas, was supposed to be shaped, modified and “established” anew in accordance with the ideological, aesthetical and “creative” standpoints stated in the relevant writings.

Another very influential representation of Russian “confessional” life-creation may be found in the autobiographical trilogy of Maksim Gorky. The three books of Gorky’s autobiography that in the Soviet times became a part of the “new canon” of the Socialist realism, were already widely read and very popular when they were first published (in the “Silver Age”, the first phase of Russian Modernism). I conclude my first chapter with a general overview of the most important example of Russian historical “quasi-memoirs” written by Aleksandr Gercen. His “Past and Thoughts” have always been acclaimed by the Russian educated reading public even though its full text was published only many years after the author’s death. In my view Gercen’s text represented a sort of model autobiography for generations of Russians.

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

The second chapter of my dissertation deals predominantly with Russian Modernism and its place among the European tradition. It was necessary to define Modernism in terms of tracing the continuity of relations between the major European movements that are traditionally associated with it and the corresponding Russian movements. I propose to see Symbolism in Russia as “pre-Modernism”, as an initial phase of the Modernist experiment that continued within the Avant-Garde.
The Moscow-Tartu school of semiotics developed a concept of the cultural “text of behavior”. In the second chapter I describe how this theoretical notion evolved into being and try to explain its relevance for the life-creation of Russian Modernism. In the course of my discussion I argue that the “biographical text” may be used as one of the crucial terms in dealing with the studied phenomenon. The “biographical poetics”, according to Lotman, started with Pushkin, and we may trace the origin of Modernist life-creation back to the turbulent activities of the great Russian poet.

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

The third chapter of my dissertation contains the principal description of the initial, “Symbolist” phase of Modernist Lebenskunft. The chapter starts with the exposition of a memoirist text composed by Vladislav Khodasevich who outlined the entire topic of the creative behavior of Russian Symbolists and suggested that in order to grasp Russian Symbolism in its entirety, not only the literary works of Symbolists ought to be examined, but their lives as well. I open my discussion with the scrutiny of the philosophical contribution of Nikolai Fedorov who is usually seen as someone who has had some influence on the Russian Symbolists. Indeed, one may find many “life-creationist” passages in Fedorov’s oeuvre. The philosopher suggested to shape life in accordance with his artificial utopian ideology, as expounded in his elaborated theory of the “common task”. This corresponded to the main stream of the Symbolist aesthetics of life-creation which addressed more or less the same issues and ideas. The same is true for the philosophical legacy of Vladimir Soloviev, who is also usually mentioned with reference to the utopian and mystical Symbolists. I discuss several characteristic ideas of Soloviev that relate to life-creation and also quote Blok’s essay that postulated the immediate importance of this philosopher for the “younger” generation of Russian Symbolists. The solovievian image of “Sophia” and the Eternal Feminine are directly related to the first book of Blok’s lyrics and his hymnopoetics of the Divine Maiden. The solovievian ecstatic beliefs of the ideal love and mystical “theurgy” were supplemented by Andrei Belyi’s theoretical treatises that I examine in this respect. All these matters were by all means of obvious importance for the Lebenskunft attitudes of Russian Modernism.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The other important occasion of Modernist Lebenskunst of Russian Symbolism is a story of Belyi’s relations with the newly-wed Blok couple. I narrate their story relying on the primary research conducted by Vladimir Orlov. Expanding on that I bring in all the relevant
life-writing materials and sources available today that help us to create a coherent picture of what actually happened between the two of the most prominent Russian “younger symbolists”.

The final life-creationist stage of Belyi’s life was related to his anthroposophical interests. He participated in the construction of the Goetheanum and generally tried to shape his life in accordance with Steiner’s teachings. I perceive Steiner’s philosophy in general as a life-creationist enterprise as well. The “Steinerian” topic, via Anna Mintzlova, was accompanying yet another phase of Belyi’s life-creation, namely the “occult” one. The occult, anthroposophy-related life-creationist interests of Belyi have been researched in a number of studies. The summarizing discussion of that subject is also present in this chapter.

I start my examination of Aleksandr Blok’s life-creation with the initial topic of “deification” of his wife Liubov’. I reinforce my debate with all the principal sources reporting about Blok’s conceptual attitude toward his wife, during the first phase of their relationship. Blok’s wife had been the prototype of his “Beautiful Lady” character, his real life was explicitly shaped in accordance with the utopian and mystical aesthetics expressed in his poetry. I also ponder the issue of Blok’s self-fashioned “masks” that he used at various stages of his career.

I pay special attention to the topic of erotic life-creation of Blok. Apart from the aforementioned issues related to the opposition of the “carnal” and the “divine” that Blok shared with Vladimir Soloviev, I also speak of the new theme that is a result of my own research. I believe to have discovered a hidden meaning in one of Blok’s longer poems “The Night Violet”. Using several life-writing specimen left by Blok’s contemporaries (Nikolai Valentinov, Roman Gul’ and Andrei Belyi) I reconstruct the iconography of Blok’s poem and compare it to the general life-creationist ideas of his art.

The erotic preoccupation of Briusov and Blok, their *eroticism* itself corresponds to the life-creation as we define it, bearing a distinct influence of “aesthetical” French Decadence. This life-creation had been realized to a large degree by imitating the routine life-events of the better known French cultural “heroes”. Russian Modernists were clearly “implementing” explicit erotic aspects of behavior in their own life.

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

The concluding section of the third chapter is “The communal life-creation of Maksimilian Voloshin”. In this context I use the apt notion of the “Crimean text” (just like the “Petersburg text” or “Moscow text”), exploited to a great extent by Voloshin. Having created a unique resort “community” of artists, poets and writers Voloshin promoted yet another distinct form of Russian Lebenskunst. The creative way of life the inhabitants of Voloshin’s Koktebel house cultivated clearly corresponded to the main route of experimental reformation of living proposed by modernist life-creation. I analyze all the major pieces of self-writing memoirs addressing this issue and proceed with the additional one: the topic of Voloshin’s life-creationist relations with Cherubina de Gabriak. The mystifying element of universal play that was so obvious in that case is very characteristic for the entire sphere of Symbolist Lebenskunst.
I begin chapter four with delineating Avant-Garde pragmatics of action, its preoccupation with the “poetics of shock”. The approach of defining Avant-Garde through the pragmatical message of behavior had been suggested for the first time by the late Moscow philologist Maksim I. Shapir. I discuss his ideas concerning the semiotical nature of Avant-Garde while bringing in the additional materials addressing the issues of the “pragmatics of utterance” and “speech act”. This debate embraces my understanding of art, in one of its most crucial aspects, as communication and a constant process of conveying messages. I also examine in this regard the corresponding issue of a “suggestive gesture” that is related to the problem of the overall expressiveness of experimental art. I debate the “transgressive nature” of this gesture. This topic also includes the idea of a “kinetic character”, a literary hero that exists beyond the traditional boundaries of verbal text. This contributes to our understanding of the “gestural aesthetics” correlated to the Modernist Lebenskunst.

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

I bring in all the major life-writing accounts by the contemporaries of Aleksei Kruchenykh describing his deviant, artistic behavior. The memoirist materials I discuss result into a coherent portrait of Kruchenykh as a deliberate eccentric who wanted to extend the unconventional literary art by means of his daily habits, deliberately breaking all the accepted rules and prescriptive boundaries. Another case of unusual everyday behavior is represented by the great poet of Russian Futurism, Velimir Khlebnikov. In this chapter I discuss some of the behavioral eccentricities of Khlebnikov as recounted in the life-writing of his contemporaries. During his “Iranian” period the Russian poet intentionally lost the dividing line between his written literature and his physical life. He produced texts emerging from his real-life experience as a “wandering dervish” in Persia. He deliberately conducted his life according to the ideas that may be found in some of his poetical theories. His unusual behavior was shaped by his aesthetical conceptions and his life was clearly continuing and implementing his creative ideology of existence.

The topic of creative behavior is continued with Vladimir Mayakovsky. Relying on the available sources of the numerous life-writing samples I discuss his eccentricity that corresponded to his pragmatics of “poetic action”. Special attention is paid to Mayakovsky’s ways of showing up in public, and to his famous “yellow blouse” in particular. The poet’s behavior constituted the same “pragmatics of Avant-Garde shock” that was described by Maksim Shapir. Mayakovsky’s life-creation was directly connected to his vibrant and provocative eroticism. I briefly mention the topic of his transgressive “phallicism” that can be found in some of his poetical texts as well as in his documented life-behavior.

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

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