Embodied Word, Disembodied Woman: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Elena Guro

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EMBODIED WORD, DISEMBODIED WOMAN: THE ETHICS AND AESTHETICS OF

ELENA GURO

by

Shelby Wardlaw

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*Embodied Word, Disembodied Woman: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Elena Guro*
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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
Russian poet, painter, and playwright Elena Guro builds on the Futurist concept of the liberation of the word, extending it to the sphere of meaning construction. She points out that the current construction of meaning demands a humanitarian and moral price. Modernity affirms hierarchical constructions that privilege the strong over the weak, the visible over the invisible, the man-made over the natural. Guro locates the potential for subversion in the subjective gaze of the dreamer, the scatterbrain, the mentally ill, the feminine, and the natural. These categories are not equivalent, yet they share one important feature: they are overlooked by the mainstream narrative because they are considered marginal and “weak”. By tracing the visual in Guro’s oeuvre, I will reassemble the ethical project behind her aesthetic work, demonstrating her belief in the revolutionary potential of the poetic gaze.
I would like to extend my sincerest gratitude to Professor Mark Leiderman for his guidance and wisdom in the creation of this thesis. Thanks also to Elena Mathys and Julia Gerhard for their help and advice regarding the Russian poetry translations. Thank you to Heli Jaervikylae for assistance deciphering the Finnish inspiration for Guro’s zaum language in the poem, “Finland.” Thanks to Professor Ferris for his support of the Comparative Literature Department at the University of Colorado. And finally, I am grateful to the entire Slavic Languages Department, which has always been welcoming and supportive. I am in awe of this faculty’s brilliance and warmth.
“All things, it is said, are duly recorded. All things of importance, that is. But not quite, for actually it is only the known, the seen, the heard and only those events that the recorder regards as important that are put down, those lies his keeper kept his power by.”
-Ralph Ellison, *The Invisible Man*

“Visibility is a trap.”
- Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*

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CHAPTER I

FUTURISM, GURO AND THE PROJECT OF MEANING CREATION

Early in the twentieth century, a small group of painters and poets gathered together to express their discontent with the direction of Russian art. They rejected the trends of Symbolism and Impressionism. In fact, they despised all arts movements that had come before them. None had gone far enough; none was capable of bringing about the social and artistic revolution that the modern age needed. These artists felt themselves to “be on the verge of a new age that would be more exciting, more promising, more inspiring than any preceding one” (Perloff 36). They adopted a name that reflected the ideals of youth, vitality, upheaval and a radical break with the past. They called themselves the Futurists, and their movement would spark a wave of avant-garde activity in Russia that thickened the pre-Revolutionary landscape, making the Silver Age one of the most dynamic artistic time periods in Russian history.

Technically, Futurism began in Italy, when Italian artist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti wrote the Futurist Manifesto in 1909. Marinetti celebrated the speed, industry, and violence of the modern era. He wanted to give artistic expression to the "intense and tumultuous life" of the newly industrialized world (Perloff 5). Marinetti called for a complete rejection of the past. He hastened to destroy the old order so that a new one could be built in its place. To this end, Marinetti’s manifesto proclaims to “glorify war” as “the world’s only hygiene” (Perloff 6). Physical violence was a way to “overcome the diseases of the weak – those destined to perish and eventually to fade away” (Ioffe 12). Caught up in the rapid industrialization of Italy, Marinetti put his faith in the “dynamism and national expansion associated with capitalism in its early phase” (Perloff 36). He reviled weakness as a vulnerability that would hold society back
from progress. In order to bring about a revolution, the Futurist movement sought to artistically manifest industrialist values such as productivity and utility. It glorified a social hierarchy that favored the strong over the weak as a way to cleanse society of its burdens.

Though the Russian Futurists appeared later than their Italian counterparts, they declared themselves to be an independent movement. Russian Futurism began in 1910 with the publication of an ‘almanac’ entitled Sadok Sudei, or Trap for Judges (Markov 8). The Russians took the name but rejected any further labels that marked them as derivative of Marinetti’s ideas. In fact, Marinetti himself was famously ill-received when he came to visit Russia in 1914 (Ioffe 12). The Russian Futurists pursued a “radical agenda in their public activities, attempting to shock the middle class into social and political change. They mocked and rejected the most sacred Russian cultural figures, such as Alexander Pushkin, Fedor Dostoyevsky, and Lev Tolstoy” (Ioffe 13). The signatories of the original Sadok Sudei almanac became the primary members of the movement: brothers David, Vladimir and Nikolai Burliuk; Vasily Kamensky; Velemir Khlebnikov; and Elena Guro. David Burliuk was a wealthy artist and writer who acted as the organizer and rallying point for the movement. His estate in Southern Russia later became the namesake for the Futurist sub-group Hylaea. Vasily Kamensky, author of “The Mud Hut,” enthusiastically supported the movement’s revolutionary goals. Viktor Khlebnikov added his signature experimental style to the almanac. A few later additions included Vladimir Mayakovsky and Alexander Krushchenykh, as well as Mikhail Larionov and Natalia Goncharova, although the latter two broke with the Futurists to begin their own avant-garde style. Mikhail Matiushin was not one of the original signatories but he helped edit the almanac. Matiushin was an artist, musician, and composer (Markov 22). He signed on along with his younger wife (sixteen years his junior), the talented painter and poet, Elena Genrikhovna Guro.
Elena Guro was born in St. Petersburg in 1877. Her Northern upbringing set her apart from many of her Futurist peers. At a young age, she was “preoccupied with nature and the essence of youth” and had “deep ties to the forests and shores of the Baltic Sea area around the northern border of Russia and Finland” (Apkarian 385). Her family owned a dacha in Finland, and the forests and landscapes of that country constitute a common theme in her work. At thirteen Guro enrolled in the Petersburg art school, The Society for the Encouragement of the Arts, and later worked in the studio of impressionist painter Ian Tsionglinskii from 1903 to 1905. It was there that she met her future husband, Mikhail Matiushin. Matiushin and Guro left Tsionglinskii’s studio together in 1905 and became associated with the artists of Hylaea (Apkarian 386). Guro lived a short life. She died in 1913 of tuberculosis at the age of 36, “after suffering for many years from pernicious anemia and neuritis of the heart” (Markov 14). She was buried in Finland near her dacha, laid to rest amid the landscape that inspired her (Markov 21).

Scholars of the avant-garde debate whether Elena Guro should be accepted as a Futurist. Guro was “the only woman among the men, most of whom tried to be as masculine, loud and colorful as possible both in their verse and in their lives” (Markov 14). Her style is more impressionist than her male peers and thematically she rejects urbanism, preferring nature and the countryside. She does not ascribe to the view of violence as cleansing for society and while she does experiment linguistically, she is not a syntactical pioneer in the same way as Khlebnikov or Khrushchenyk. The critic Juliette Apkarian describes the scope of Guro’s work best when she attributes her style to multiple influences:

Her work exhibits the intricate move from turn-of-the century impressionism and early twentieth-century Russian symbolist aesthetics to an expressionist dimension fundamental to futurism. For Guro, this dimension draws significantly upon parallels with Russian folklore and
religious art, and it reflects a special sensitivity to a youthful merging of the physical and the
spiritual through a process of embodiment (Apkarian 385).

Guro exhibits an affinity with the Futurist values of youth and revolution, as well as linguistic
and semantic experimentation. In addition, the Russian Futurists were very exclusive and after
1911 “accepted no new members” (Markov 24). Given the exclusivity of the group and Guro’s
own self-awareness, there should be no doubt that Guro is indeed a Futurist. Furthermore, this
paper will argue that Guro’s work and ideas were integral to the Russian incarnation of the
movement. Her oeuvre challenges the commonly held belief that Futurism reflected a purely
‘masculine’ literary voice. In fact, “the feminine concepts in Guro’s writing offer insight into
some complexities of futurist dynamics and strategies of Russian modernism” (Apkarian 385).
Guro should not be seen as aberrant because of her femininity; rather her singularity in this
movement should further emphasize her importance and influence. Guro’s feminine voice
testifies to the complexity of the Futurist agenda. She proves that the ideals of radical social and
artistic upheaval can be applied beyond the scope of masculinity.

After the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, the fledgling communist government curtailed the
momentum of the Russian avant-garde. By the mid-1920s, “a crackdown on liberal trends in the
arts was already underway” and “a policy of artistic political subservience was being
formulated” (Janecek 4). The avant-garde was soon marginalized. The cult monopoly of Socialist
Realism suppressed the Futurist legacy for many years. Writer and scholar Vladimir Markov
revived Futurism as a subject of inquiry in his foundational study, *Russian Futurism: A History*,
published in 1966. Markov examines the key figures, themes and works of the movement,
analyzing both the movement’s original composition and its subsequent repression:
Despite the resurgence of interest in the Russian avant-garde since the 1960s, Elena Guro remains one of the least-studied figures. Much of her work has not been translated from the Russian, and there are no significant biographies aside from shorter essays in anthologies and collective works. This relative obscurity may be the result of many factors, yet the fact remains that Guro’s artistic project must be revived and examined if a comprehensive and accurate depiction of the Russian Futurist movement is to take place.

Futurism was always a distinctly visual undertaking. In addition to Elena Guro and her husband Mikhail Matiushin, Futurists Mayakovskiy, Kruchenykh, Bobrov and Burliuk worked as painters. They incorporated visual elements into their written work including “different typefaces,” “offbeat illustrations,” and snippets of “the author’s handwriting” (Markov 3). Guro herself experimented with overlapping the visual and the verbal. She often drew small pictures in the margins of her poems and inserted breaks such as stars or lines between verses. Near the end of her first collection entitled Sharmanka, or Hurdy-Gurdy (1909), Guro anticipates “Futurist realization of form” by hand-drawing “an oval immediately after a section of typed text of four letter o’s in Russian” (Apkarian 395). The insertion of pictoral, hand-written elements was later also used by the Hylaea Futurists to blur the boundaries between illustration and text. Guro’s mother was a daughter of Mikhail Christiakov, a well-known pedagogue who wrote children’s stories. Christiakov published the Journal for Children (1851-1865) and edited Pictures from the History of Childhood of Famous Painters, which became a favorite book of his granddaughter Elena. Elena “began to draw and to record her ‘impressions and fantasies’ at an early age”. Her adult work was often accompanied by “a variety of miniaturized childlike sketches” and other bits of “organic imagery” such as borders of leaves and plants (Apkarian 385). This proclivity for organic imagery was also reflected in the work of Futurists fascinated by Primitivism and Russian
folk art, such as Khlebnikov and Pavel Filonov (Apkarian 398). However, the influence of painting on Guro’s work goes deeper than these small markings. The visual as a concept formed the foundation of Guro’s aesthetic and ethical philosophy.

Vladimir Markov’s understanding of Guro’s work as purely maternal and feminine leads him to underestimate her aesthetic and ethical philosophy. Markov describes Guro as a “quiet, introverted person who shunned people and was preoccupied with soft nuances” (Markov 14). One should note that while perhaps this is true psychologically, Markov uses stereotypical descriptors to sketch Guro as a quintessentially feminine and ‘soft’ writer. Rather than investigating her commentary on gender relations, scientific epistemological dominance, and the force of the visual in society, Markov limits Guro’s sphere of influence to her personal life. One of her books, Osennii son (“The Autumnal Dream”), published in 1912 is dedicated to the memory of her son who died as a child. Markov describes how Guro continued to think of her son as alive, “so much so that she bought toys for him and made drawings of him as she imagined he would have looked at various stages in later life” (Markov 17). He emphasizes this preoccupation with fertility well past the scope of this one work.

Markov describes Nelka, the heroine of Guro’s most famous short story, “Thus Life Goes” (1909), as “man-crazy teenager, mistreated by her stepfather,” adding that this creates a semblance of a plot “but the story never materializes” (Markov 15-16). After describing what sounds like a plot (teenager abused by stepfather, young girl obsessed with men’s power), Markov undercuts his comments by deciding that this narrative is neither linear nor important enough to constitute a plot. His dismissive description of Nelka as a “man-crazy teenager” indicates his complete ignorance of the revolutionary power inversion that Guro proposes. Nelka is not “man-crazy,” rather she is a keen observer of the social hierarchy to which Markov also
appears blind. Nelka studies men as emblems of power. In addition, Nelka’s father does not simply “mistreat” her: he savagely beats her and forces her to be a prostitute. What Markov fails to understand is that the voyeuristic obsession of Nelka, and indeed the voyeurism of many of Guro’s characters, indicates a perceptiveness to the workings of power. He overemphasizes the influence of Guro’s life in her work, thereby limiting the scope of her project to personal catharsis. By tracing the visual in Guro’s oeuvre, I will write against Markov to uncover Guro’s sweeping ethical and aesthetic intentions.

Guro builds on the Futurist concept of the liberation of the word, extending her defiance to the sphere of meaning construction. She points out that the current construction of meaning demands a humanitarian and moral price. Modernity affirms hierarchical constructions that privilege the strong over the weak, the visible over the invisible, the man-made over the natural. New technologies and modes of thinking are deployed to reify old systems of power that favor the victors. Guro locates the potential for subversion in the subjective gaze of the dreamer, the scatterbrain, the mentally ill, the feminine, and the natural. These categories are not equivalent, yet they share one important feature: they are overlooked by the mainstream narrative because they are considered marginal and “weak”. Guro tries to rectify this imbalance. By tracing the visual in Guro’s oeuvre, I will reassemble the ethical project behind her aesthetic work, demonstrating her belief in the revolutionary potential of the poetic gaze.
CHAPTER II

ENSTRANGEMENT AND THE LIBERATION OF THE EMBODIED WORD

The Russian Futurists did not want to be beholden to antiquated forms of literature. They intended their art to “answer the demands of daily life within a revolutionary culture” (Ioffe 13). The avant-garde broke “the boundaries between ‘world’ and ‘text,’ between the reality out there and the art construct that re-presents it” (Perloff xvii). The Futurists embraced the speed and movement of modernity because they saw art as fundamentally interwoven into the social fabric of reality. Overemphasis on the old literary canon holds artists back from representing reality as it takes shape in the current moment. In their second avant-garde manifesto, “A Slap in the Face of Public Taste” (1912), the Futurists declare that “he who does not forget his first love will not recognize his last” (Markov 46). They contend that “the past is crowded” and that “the Academy and Pushkin are more incomprehensible than hieroglyphics” (Markov 46). Like hieroglyphs, Pushkin, Dostoyevsky and other revered writers have lost their meaning over time, becoming increasingly irrelevant. Writers who fashion themselves after these first “loves” will not recognize the potential of new art and will refrain from innovating. In other words, if art clings too tightly to the past it will strangle its future.

The Futurists called on artists and writers to embrace revolution. Modernity, they said, necessitates new forms of language, grammar, syntax, and style in order to remain influential. Their manifesto claims that only the Futurists are “the face of [their] time” because only they are willing to “throw Pushkin, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, et al., et al., overboard from the Ship of Modernity” (Markov 46). The image of Modernity as a ship aligns with two common Futurist themes: first, Progress as a linear forward movement like a boat sailing towards a horizon line; second, the Futurists conceived of modernity as an industrial product, a machine engineered to
empower man to move more quickly and efficiently, symbolizing mankind’s increasing dominance over nature. The Futurists propose throwing the Old Guard overboard this Ship of Modernity, relieving it of the metaphorical burden of influence. The manifesto ends with a list of poet’s rights that the Futurists believe must be fulfilled in order for art to take its next steps. The manifesto states that modern poets have the right “to feel an insurmountable hatred for the language existing before them” (Markov 46). Poets have the right to despise tradition because if writers continue to use old codes of expression, they will be doomed to recycle old ideas. The form restricts the content. Therefore poets have the right to “enlarge vocabulary in its scope with arbitrary and derivative words (creation of new words)” (Markov 46). Antiquated and stagnant modes of meaning-creation have to be torn down in order to make room for new meaning. Derivative words give artists license to play outside the lines of syntactical codes. While new expression may seem arbitrary, its very arbitrariness indicates a productive break with stalled modes of expression.

The Futurists worked to divest words of automatic meaning so that they could use the enstranged word as a tool of semiotic revolution. This aversion to the automatic was later encapsulated and encoded by the Russian theorist Viktor Shklovsky in his essay, “Art as Technique” (1925). In this essay, Shklovsky outlines his theory of enstrangement, or the intentional defamiliarization of language in order to provoke a reader’s emotional response. Shklovsky believed that automatic perception inhibited an individual’s ability to critique or analyze: “After being perceived several times, objects acquire the status of ‘recognition.’ An object appears before us. We know it’s there but we do not see it, and, for that reason, we can say nothing about it” (Shklovsky 6). The automatic perception of an object dulls the capacity of the mind to understand it and diminishes the individual’s ability to develop new thoughts. The object
becomes normalized but, more importantly, we become mute. The Futurists expounded upon the danger of automatically accepting words as invisible units of meaning. Language must be constantly reconstructed, repaired and sharpened so that it can remain an incisive instrument for constructing meaning.

“A Slap in the Face” declares that art is the solution to this problem. The hallmark of the artistic, according to Shklovsky, is that it creates “an artifact that has been intentionally removed from the domain of automatized perception.” Works of art force the perceiver to pause and dwell on the text: “This is when the literary work attains its greatest and most long-lasting impact. The object is perceived not spatially but, as it were, in its temporal continuity. That is, because of this device, the object is brought into view” (Shklovsky 12). Art snags the flow of automatized perception. The reader is forced to linger in order to understand what he or she is seeing. Now the word-object takes up time as well as space. It inserts itself into the viewer’s mind in a new way. What was passed over is now visible; what was accepted is now questioned. It is in this forced process of perception that the Futurists located the revolutionary potential of art.

The Futurists believed that linguistic snags, pauses and interruptions spark new ideas. They “rejected the conventionality of logical sentence structure and ordinary grammar with its transparent syntax” because the automatic flow of language numbs the reader, making it difficult for him to extricate himself from the loop of recycled and irrelevant ideas (Ioffe 13). The Futurists even apologized for the comprehensibility of “A Slap”: “And if for the time being even our lines are still marked with dirty stigmas of your ‘common sense’ and ‘good taste,’ there tremble on them for the first time the summer lightnings of the New-Coming Beauty of the Self-Sufficient (self-centered) Word (Markov 46). “Self-sufficient” in this sentence can also be translated as “autotelic.” Thus, they advocate a word that contains its own telos, one that is the
end goal of itself. The self-sufficient word breaks up monotony, flashing in the consciousness and sparking analysis. The idea of an embodied, self-sufficient word gave rise to several sub-genres of Futurist linguistic experimentation, many of which were used by Elena Guro to forward her own aesthetic and ethical agenda.

One of the “the most extreme of all futurist achievements” according to Markov was the Russian Futurist language *zaum*. The term originated in Kruchenykh’s book *Pomada* (“Pomade”), published in January 1913. Kruchenykh devoted several manifestos and statements to practical and theoretical explanations of the “transrational” language of *zaum*. He claimed that *zaum* utilised raw verbal material and treated “the word as an object in itself devoid of any referent” (Lawton 13). *Zaum* involved the configuration of various phonemes, letters, and sounds to create an auditory/visual work of art devoid of conventional meaning. Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov were the primary proponents of *zaum*, however several Futurist manifestos profess a desire for phonetic entities possessing their own ontologies. In the manifesto of the second edition of *Sadok Sudei*, the Futurists declare that they have “ceased to regard word formation and word pronunciation according to grammatical rules.” Words will be endowed “with content on the basis of their graphic and phonetic characteristics” (“Untitled” 54). It is important to note that Elena Guro signed this second manifesto, indicating that she agreed with other Futurists in highlighting the visual aspect of language. Words were no longer invisible containers of meaning, rather their graphic appearance was used make language visible as a constructor of meaning.

With *zaum* the very idea of a word is enstranged. The Futurists wanted their works of art to be “more uncomfortable than…a truck in the living room (не удобнее…грузовика в гостиной)” with “a splintery texture, very rough (занозистая поверхность, сильно
шероховатая)” (“Slovo Kak Takovoe” 137). The Futurists wrote poetry that was intentionally difficult to comprehend, much like an automobile (symbol of a new industrial era) in a living room (symbol of comfort). According to the express intentions of the Burliuk brothers in their essay, “Poetic Principles” (1914), the Futurists enstranged the word by treating it as a “living organism” that has “not only aural but visual properties” (Lawton 14). Embodied words prick the sleeping consciousness of the reader.

This synesthetic understanding of language was common among the avant-garde. In the second edition of the almanac Sadok Sudei, Guro and the Futurists write that they conceive of “vowels as time and space (a characteristic of thrust), and consonants as color, sound, [and] smell” (“Untitled” 54). Transrational and defamiliarized words then are words that burst from the page and take on texture and temporality. They blur the line between text and world, becoming animated and embodied. The reader is forced to “restructure his mental processes, from rational to intuitive, in order to grasp the message” of this strange new linguistic form (Lawton 13). The messages of zaum poetry are not universal. The artist and the reader engage in a mutually creative act of constructing new meaning using the building blocks of language. Zaum therefore fulfills the highest purpose of art according to Shklovsky’s definition. It forces the reader to exercise her agency as a constructor of meaning rather than simply a consumer of it.

Old forms of language are too familiar to be used as artistic tools. In “The Letter as Such,” Kruchenykh describes traditional language as if it were an oppressive regime enforcing conformity and normative semantics on a population of letters: “You have seen the letters in their words – lined up in a row, humiliated, with cropped hair, and all equally colorless, gray – these are not letters, these are brands!” (“The Letter” 63). Here Kruchenysk personifies the letters, enstranging them by giving them human characteristics such as hair and bodies. He
embodies the word in order to reiterate its independent life. If the word is alive, then forcing it to conform to restrictive standards is tantamount to exploitation. This is why the Futurists rejected “normal orthography” in “the name of the freedom of individual caprice” (Lawton 54). Freedom is the base concept behind the Futurist’s linguistic project. They were looking for methods, such as transrational language, to liberate the word.

In “The Word as Such,” Khruchenkh and Khlebnikov actually cite Guro as the only other person besides themselves who writes poetry that is “singing splashing dancing, scattering of clumsy constructions, oblivion («пение плеск пляска, разметывание неуклюжих построек, забвение») (“Slovo Kak Takovoe” 137). They quote Guro’s poem “Finland” as an example of zaum. Indeed, Guro’s use of transrational language in her poetry represents her commitment to the liberation of the word. In her archives, she defines her creative method this way: “To speak the words, as if they did not coincide with the meaning, but are provoking certain images…” (Banjanin 9). Words for Guro are most potent when they provoke fresh images. Kruchenykh echoes this sentiment in his essay, “Declaration of Transrational Language” (1921):

“Transrational speech generates the transrational protoimage (and vice versa) – something not precisely defined (“Заумная речь рождает заумный пра-образ (и обратно) – неопределеный точно”) (“Декларация Заумного Языка” 193). Zaum puts the visual properties of words front and center. The shells of words, their linguistic wrappings, produce a purely auditory and visual experience. They provoke new images and expand the understanding of what language can do.

Guro identified with this connection between aesthetic linguistic liberation and the ethical liberation of meaning. Her poem “Finland” embodies Kruchenykh’s idea but takes it one step further. In this groundbreaking poem, Guro uses semi-nonsensical syllables to hint at meaning without poaching it directly from previously used forms. She creates the neologism “шуять»
(shuyat) rather than the usual «шуметь» (shumet – to make noise, to rustle) to represent the sound of the pines in the wind. «Щуя» (shuya) is the Russian word for pine needles, so the amalgam word becomes an etymologically precise term for the noise that pine needles make. Kruchenykh admired this linguistic innovation. He wrote that she captured “the sound of coniferous trees” which precisely shuyat, “whereas deciduous ones shumyat” (Markov 19). Guro however “goes beyond onomatopoeia” with this linguistic invention. She confronts “the word itself as physical object.” By omitting an m, Guro “literally removes the noise (the word shum in Russian means ‘noise’) and leaves the sibilant hushing sound of the trees...The new word-object gives voice to a sound masked by traditional language” (Apkarian 390). Guro’s word embodies its meaning; ontology merges with formation. In creating a derivative word, Guro unmasks a signifier that was hidden by the restrictions of prescribed, pre-used words.

Another futurist, Sergei Bobrov, “saw in the same poem an imitation of the sounds of the Finnish language, and much of the Russian zaum was later written to imitate the sound of foreign tongues” (Markov 19). Indeed, the made-up words in the line “Холе-кулэ-нэээ” sound like transcriptions of the Finnish words for “to listen” or “to hear” in the imperative form: “Listen!” It’s as if the pines are exhorting the reader to pay attention to the sounds of nature. The sound of wind in the trees is usually ignored as backdrop noise, but Guro points to it through semantic enstrangement. Her alingual syllables represent a quick brushstroke of language, unattached to any particular nationality. She paints words as sound-strokes in a larger image, creating “a kind of ‘sound picture’ in an attempt to suggest that the word is an object in its own right” (“Looking Out” 7). One verse of the poem consists almost completely of nonsense sounds that do not make sense in either Finnish or Russian: “Лулла, лолла, лалла-лу, Лиза, лолла, лулла-ли” (Guro). These syllables imitate Finnish as it is heard by a non-native speaker. The syllables could also be
nature noises or the waves of the lake. Either way, this approximation represents language divorced from meaning. Transrational language helps Guro illustrate the natural landscape of her beloved Finnish countryside.

One of the few comprehensible parts of the poem “Finland” is a series of three women’s names: Anna, Maria, and Liza. These names could be either Finnish or Russian and may allude to neighbors near Guro’s dacha. The women’s names appear as a beacon of clarity amid the neologistic descriptions of the pines whispering in the ephemeral forests. It is no accident that Guro places three female figures in the impressionistic space of transrational language. While Kruchenykh uses zaum simply as an end unto itself, Guro populates the space of the transrational with female figures who represent the “irrational” in society. Apkarian describes the connection between the transrational and the feminine in Elena Guro’s poetry:

While the language of babies and young children as well as foreign languages were examined – features reflected in Guro’s poem ‘Finland’ – as a contrast to the vehicles of conventional logic and rational thought, Futurists also sought the ‘language of impetuous modernity’ in the unleashed energies of spontaneity and intuition. Because these features in many cultures have been identified with women’s thinking (in contrast to male ‘reason’), the Futurist focus upon the spontaneous and intuitive might be understood as part of a general modernist strategy of challenging accepted categories and recouping the marginalized (Apkarian 390).

As Apkarian points out, Guro emphasizes the transrational in an attempt to invert the patriarchal paradigm. She used the Futurist focus on spontaneity and intuition in art to recoup the irrational, the nonsensical, the childlike, and the feminine. Thus her transrational language can be seen as an intentional break with the current semiotic hierarchy. If society can be persuaded to let go of the rational in terms of language, it may be able to let go of the hierarchy the values masculine rationality and marginalizes irrational femininity.

Guro’s work presaged Shklovsky’s assertion that the automatization of perception led to the exclusion of people in society. In his essay, Shklovsky states that automatization “eats away at
things, at clothes, at furniture, at our wives, and at our fear of war” until, “held accountable for nothing, life fades into nothingness” (Shklovsky 5). In this grim depiction, Shklovsky shifts from the automatized perception of objects (things, clothes, furniture) to people (wives) to feelings (our fear of war). He extends the negative effects of automatization well past the realm of art to the very epistemological and ontological constructions of society itself. We become accustomed to not noticing the daily objects in our lives and eventually this translates into a neurological habit that automatizes how meaning is created. We ignore objects, then people, then feelings. Shklovsky says that eventually violence and our fear of violence becomes so mundane that we cease to perceive it. The more unconsciously we live, the greater the spaces where exploitation is allowed to fester.

Guro reflects this philosophy in the excruciating attention she pays to the construction of her poetry. She “considers that whether one draws or writes one has to exhibit the same type of attentiveness that would require that ‘not a single dab (stroke) of paint-brush or writing pen should be done without thinking’ (‘что бы ни одного мазка (черты) не делать не думая’)” (Banjanin 10). Guro understood that “not a single stroke” of the pen or brush should be made without conscious recognition. Both Shklovksy and Guro see art as a way to point out social blindspots: “And so, in order to return sensation to our limbs, in order to make us feel objects, to make a stone feel stony, man has been given the tool of art. The purpose of art, then, is to lead us to a knowledge of a thing through the organ of sight instead of recognition” (Shklovsky 6). Shklovsky states that our sensory perceptions have been numbed by fulfilled expectations. We have already mentally digested, categorized and dismissed certain objects, people and experiences before we even interact with them. The process of perception, Shklovsky says, should therefore be “long and ‘laborious’” and “ought to be extended to the fullest” in order to
maximize its effectiveness (Shklovsky 6). The artist should examine each aspect of creation just as the reader or perceiver should notice each word. The revolutionary potential of art can only be realized when it is given this level of careful consideration.

It is important to note that the concept of enstrangement is described in terms of the visual: it employs the “organ of sight” to heighten perception and make us take notice. Shklovsky states that the purpose of an image is not to stand for something, “but rather to allow us to perceive the object in a special way, in short, to lead us to a ‘vision’ of this object rather than mere ‘recognition’” (Shklovsky 10). Shklovsky makes the turn then from vision to thought. This brings to mind the Cartesian phrase: “The mind cannot do without the eye in order to see, but it is the mind that sees” (Kofman 52). A change in what people see can lead to a change in what they think. Art forces us to practice truly seeing and this has the potential to effect profound change in the hierarchy of weak versus strong.

Using Shklovsky’s theories, we can see that in creating alienating forms of poetry (zaum, lack of rhyme scheme, neologism, etc.) Guro actually reincorporates the alienated. If Guro’s poems were immediately clear, her reader would be deprived of the opportunity to ponder and draw conclusions. Instead, Guro creates a fragmented experience that compels the reader to engage in a process of perception. In her poem “Скрипка Пикассо» or “Picasso's Violin,” Guro linguistically replicates the cubist imagery of Picasso's painting. The syntax of this poem in Russian is packed with neologisms and a strange entanglement of cases that makes linear sentence structure difficult to parse out. The images of the poem slice into one another like fragmented shapes in a cubist painting. A portion of my translation of this text reads:

In the name of the happy half-sufferer, all upliftedness of suffering was manifested on the little wooden plaque with golden shimmering lines the kingdom of shadow through nervous angles.
And the long torso of the musician, carved up with his cinched vest, was a continuation and a curve of the weary fingerboard. The hidden parts of the spirit and the land of white walls was charmed by that genius little twist of the violin, and became the mist of white music that, having sunk into a muted world, leads away from objects. (Guro)

The painting is described as a “kingdom of shadow” with “nervous angles”. The terms “angles” and “shadows” suggest visuality because the painting frames something that was shadow-like or hidden. Instead of trying to hide the two-dimensionality of visual art, Picasso rebels and inserts shadows and angles in odd, conspicuous places that call attention to the two-dimensional format. These angles are transgressive in the medium of painting. They make the illusion of artistic representation apparent: this is not the real world, nor is it an attempt to capture it. Thus Picasso manifests artistically the linguistic project of the Futurists. His art is an explicit attempt to interpret and enstrange the world, not represent it. Perhaps it is their very newness or unexpectedness that makes the angles appear “nervous”. They defy automatic perception and because of this they are personified as if they have agency.

Guro in turn intentionally enstranges her description of Picasso’s art, linguistically manifesting his cubist painting. A man, a musician, a torso, a violin: all become clearer in the warped light of Picasso’s arresting work. The music of the violin sinks into “a muted world.” This calls to mind Shklovsky’s statement that after being perceived several times, an object ceases to be seen and so we can say nothing about it (Shklovsky 6). The world can say nothing because it is numb to experience. However, the “white” music of Picasso’s violinist sinks into this muteness, interrupting it. Here we have a synesthetic description: just as the transrational words of Guro and Kruchenykh have texture, the music of Picasso has a color, which means that it takes up space and asserts an unfamiliar physical presence. Guro says that the music “leads away from objects” and charms “the hidden parts of the spirit”. Guro may here be referring to the
manner in which Picasso leads us away from objects as we know them, away from objects as invisible footholds for a world that we take for granted. The defamiliarized objects in Picasso’s paintings are not objects; they are representations of perspective. Thus Guro meditates on Picasso’s painting as a radical and productive shift away from automatized vision.

Fragmentation was an obsession of Guro and the avant-garde. In “Picasso’s Violin,” the musician’s torso in this poem is “long” and “carved up.” Similarly, in “The Word As Such”, Kruchenykh describes how Futurist painters “love to use parts of the body, its cross sections,” while Futurist writers use “chopped-up words, half words, and their odd artful combinations (transrational language)” in order to achieve “the very greatest expressiveness” that “annihilated the previous frozen language” (“Slovo Kak Takovoe” 140). By highlighting the awkward and entangled human body, glorifying the pieces rather than the whole, the Futurists hoped to release the body - and the embodied word - from normalized forms.

Guro felt an affinity for Picasso’s bisected and awkward objects. Picasso trains his artistic gaze on something broken and aberrant and in so doing, rescues the broken and aberrant from invisibility. In a similar way, Guro’s poetry pays attention to the small details of form that are often overlooked, hidden by traditional perspectives. An entry in her archive describes her artistic technique: “And what else? To accept, to accept the world humbly with all its going nowhere insignificant details […] Life’s procession consists of the slightest nuances (fragments) barely visible, barely felt’ (‘И что же еще? Еще принять мир, принять мир смиренно – со всеми, словно никуда не идущими, незначущими подробностями' 1988: 28)” (Banjanin 3). Guro’s artistic expression incorporates these fragments, these “going nowhere insignificant details.” She finds meaning in them expressly because they go nowhere. They do not prescribe to the whole, pre-packaged forms of language and so open up new avenues for meaning.
In one of Guro’s paintings (pictured below), she depicts the bust of a female mannequin in the window of a barbershop.

The mannequin consists of a woman’s face and upper torso. She is just a fragment, flanked on both sides by wigs on stands. The building itself is half-represented, off-center so that the lower portion of a drainpipe is visible against the alleyway. The mannequin sits in a window with bars around it, cut off from the world. These carefully chosen visual elements create an impression of the fragmentation of modern city life. The barbershop focuses on pieces of the human body (hair, wigs). Everything in the scene is frozen, unmoving, and the painting is dominated by the mundane color gray, representing stagnancy. The drainpipe suggests amenities and efficient construction, however it is not glorified but segmented. Divorced from the comfort it supplies, the drainpipe is just an intrusive shape in the corner of the drawing. In focusing on these small details, Guro represents the eeriness of fragmentation. The discomfort of this painting is productive in forcing us to reconsider this average scene, provoking analysis about the way society is constructed. Guro uncovers hope for new ideas in the details that rest outside the mainstream gaze, the “going-nowhere” specifics that are often ignored.
CHAPTER III
SUBJECTIVITY AND THE INVERSION OF BEAUTY

The concept of a subjectively created world, designed and reified by a subjective observer emerged in the early 19th century. In his book, Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century, Jonathan Crary argues that subjective visuality is “both a product and constituent of modernity” (Crary 69). Modernity was both shaped by and comprised of the very subjective visuality that it engendered. Physiological discoveries about the eye suggested that sight is contingent upon the individual and his or her unique biological structure. Modernity is therefore inextricably tied to “an observer…as the active, autonomous producer of his or her own visual experience” (Crary 69). Instead of the classical paradigm of the internal/external, the observer and the observed, modernity is characterized by an “undemarcated terrain on which the distinction between internal sensation and external signs is irrevocably blurred” (Crary 24). The shift in vision in the nineteenth century represents much more than simply a reconfiguration of ideas about the sense of sight. It signals a fundamental shift in the epistemological framework of society. If reality is in some measure relative depending on the observer, then reality is subject to manipulation. God is no longer the only being who acts upon the world and shapes it; the individual can do this as well. Thus Crary argues that the break with classical models of vision in the early nineteenth century was “inseparable from a massive reorganization of knowledge and social practices that modified in myriad ways the productive, cognitive, and desiring capacities of the human subject” (Crary 3). If everyone’s vision is different, then there is no objective reality: “The guarantees of authority, identity, and universality…[were] of another epoch” (Crary 24). Vision becomes a site of power that must be controlled and directed in order to maintain the social status quo.
The subjective observer emerged as a means of social and political power in the modern era. When vision was discovered to be a subjective sense, modernity constructed “a plurality of means to recode the activity of the eye, to regiment it, to heighten its productivity and to prevent its distraction” (Crary 24). New forces such as capitalism and industrialism required the modern subject be trained towards specific economic and political goals: “The imperatives of capitalist modernization, while demolishing the field of classical vision, generated techniques for imposing visual attentiveness, rationalizing sensation, and managing perception” (Crary 24). Capitalism and the demands of an industrialized economy necessitated worker attention because a lack of focus could result in economic and social collapse. Subjective vision therefore needed to be managed so that it maintained the power hierarchies between classes, genders, and races that kept society stratified and organized. Elena Guro’s work criticizes the modern subjective observer as a lackey of exploitative hierarchies. Yet at the same time, she recognizes that the very mutability of the subjective experience offers an opportunity for sweeping change and social justice.

Guro integrates the subjective experience as a foundational principle in the structure of her work. She frequently uses the verb «казаться» (kazat’sia - to seem) “and a number of verbs of perception, particularly in The Hurdy-Gurdy” that “underline the subjective quality of the ambiguous and tenuous reality that often ‘appears’ rather than ‘is’ in Guro’s poetic world” (“Looking Out” 12). The verb “to seem” implies a viewer. The world is always constructed according to how it appears to the person watching it. Reality in Guro then is contingent. Her particular and variable reality undercuts the idea of a universal and objective one. Guro acknowledges the illusory quality of reality as a part of her greater ethical project meant to undermine the narrative of the powerful.
In her most famous short story, “Thus Life Passes,” Guro explores the subjective gaze as a method of power and control. The story’s protagonist is a young girl named Nelka. Nelka understands her subjugated position as a woman in society:

There are books in the store windows – no place for her – technical – this is some significant, deep word, you most likely will never understand it. Men with wise, noble brows go in there: they can learn everything scientific and know the whole mystery of life…this life, organized in such a civilized manner, so elegantly and beautifully by men. How wonderful it must be to draw the lines for blueprints, with their key importance – fine lines, serious, clear, and neat…Walking-sticks and cigarette holders decorated with figures of women’s bodies in degrading poses, sweetened in an old man’s way, were for sale in the display cases. Elegant small whips with handles made of delicate ivory, yellowish-green, and of walrus tusks, with a rosy tint of life, were for sale…Elegant, cruel toys for pampered, power-loving hands (“Thus Life” 140).

In this passage, Guro identifies two primary methods of control: the unequal distribution of knowledge and the objectification of human subjects. Both of these methods allow the powerful to see while keeping the weak in the dark. Guro points out that science and technology have not brought about the revolution of knowledge that they claim. Rather they simply continue the disparity between strong and weak, reserving “the whole mystery of life” for those who are wealthy, male, and able-bodied. Women are prevented from taking part in new discoveries; their subjective gaze is limited and they are made blind by a lack of access.

Guro blurs the lines between internal motivation and external manifestation. The objects in the passage are masculine talismans, some of which are disciplinary, such as the whip. These “small whips” and “cruel toys” are made for “pampered, power-loving hands” (“Thus Life” 140). In other words, these items are not innocuous; they carry traces of the men that employ them. The toys are themselves “cruel,” personified as if they have merged with the subjective consciousnesses of the men that carry them. The traditional binaries between internal and external do not hold up in the world of the subjective observer. In her archives, Guro indicates that she understands the “secret of objects” as subjectively created entities in the world: “I
believe that objects, once created and thrown into the world, already interact like independent entities. Each object has its own soul, either put into it by its creator, the author, or received from later deposits […] upon it, from surrounding life. Something of glances of the eyes remains; touches of fingers, layers of epoch and time […]” (Banjanin 7-8). Guro says that “something of glances of the eyes remains,” that is, vision indelibly leaves its mark. Even when divorced from their creator or owner, objects act as proxies for the subjective entities that made them. In the above passage, Nelka notices that all of life is constructed according to a blueprint drawn by those in power. No thing is created in a vacuum. The world of objects reflects a specific design, and Guro invites us to examine our context to find clues as to how power operates in society.

Guro’s art blends internal subjectivity with external objects to expose the human cost of objectification: “For Guro and other Futurists, the Cubist merger of interior and exterior, and dismemberment of traditional forms are tied closely to a heightened sense of re-objectified body” (Apkarian 392). Cubists like Picasso do not attempt to mimic an objective world, representing exteriority while preserving interiority as a separate sphere. Instead, the cubists present objects as compilations of perspective, making clear their subjective construction. Thus, art responds to the objectification of the human body with fragmented figures that illustrate the absurdity and violence of objectification.

Similarly, Guro uses Nelka’s distinct and sympathetic first-person perspective to show the absurdity of female objectification. The masculine subjective observer is responsible for the objectification of women. In the passage above, Nelka shifts from thinking of men’s power to talking about “walking-sticks and cigarette holders decorated with figures of women’s bodies in degrading poses” that are for sale in “display cases.” She makes a connection between the degradation writ upon these masculine accessories and the fact that the objects are on display,
subject to constant visibility. The visual exploitation of women’s bodies defines these talismans: the women are demystified, exposed to the male gaze. Yet the fact that it is a female protagonist that notices this and a female author who wrote the story, further points to the ways in which this objectifying gaze is violent and misguided. Women are clearly not objects, because the subjective consciousness that points out this objectification is female. In noticing these power dynamics through the lens of a subjective female gaze, Guro defies the hierarchical structure that paints women as objects.

In his seminal text, *Discipline and Punish*, French theorist Michel Foucault presents his thesis on visuality as a modern disciplinary technique. He asserts that in modern society, systems of control have moved away from scenes of physical violence towards the more subtle control of constant visibility. Crary and Foucault agree that in the new industrial urban landscape, power is no longer consolidated in a single entity. Instead, authority is disseminated throughout the population. The collective mass of humanity is endowed with a mutually regulating, disembodied gaze that exerts social pressure on the individual to follow certain social norms.

In her essay, “Foucault, Femininity and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power,” Sandra Lee Bartky uses Foucault’s theory of visual discipline to understand the ways in which modern women are disempowered. Like prisoners in a Panoptic prison, like soldiers marching in unison without a conductor, the “disciplinary power that inscribes femininity in the female body is everywhere and it is nowhere.” Foucault tends to identify specific institutions as regulators of bodily discipline, however, Bartky points out that “discipline can be institutionally unbound as well as institutionally bound. The anonymity of disciplinary power and its wide dispersion have consequences which are crucial to a proper understanding of the subordination of women” (Bartky 142-143). Women feel pressure to live into a socially constructed idea of femininity.
However this pressure cannot be pinpointed on a specific individual, which is precisely why it is so difficult to ignore.

In “Thus Life Goes,” Guro demonstrates how disembodied visuality disciplines women. After being beaten, Nelka goes out into the street and feels the pressure of men covering her “with hot, heavy glances.” They look “Nelka over with hostile bewilderment” and their “hot glances” stick “to her like hot pain.” Nelka has just been brutalized by her step father, and yet it is the glances that cause her pain. She cannot locate one particular masculine gaze, yet she feels the collective power of these looks that rob her of individuality. Under such watchfulness, she can only think of one word to describe herself: “woman” (“Thus Life” 135-136). The “hot glances” of unknown men flatten Nelka’s individuality into a nameless gender representative. This perception of constant looking enacts a sort of disciplinary function upon the female body, keeping it vulnerable and disassociated from a sense of complete selfhood. The disembodied gaze creates women as separate from themselves, fractured and never fully endowed with the power of the subjective observer.

When Nelka returns from her sojourn into the street, the text becomes especially loaded with visual imagery, as she comes under the disciplining gaze of her step father:

Trying not to raise her eyes above his feet, she offered the cigarettes to her stepfather. Trying not to see the walls…whip intentionally laid out in sight caught her attention. She did not want to notice his playful, scrutinizing look as well. But something bent her low and she took a long look…He beat her with the beautiful whip…the walls watched greedily and thirsted for humiliation…And she made a point of debasing herself, and now there was boundlessness, as though by doing it she were giving herself to all those out on the street. In the male study, all the austere furniture, with every piece of brass shining, fixed its eyes on her (“Thus Life” 137).

During the scene of violence, Nelka feels connected to “all those out on the street,” indicating that her story is emblematic of a web of power. Her story is the result of a network of hierarchical relations that disenfranchise her and others like her. In this moment of pain, Nelka’s
character becomes “boundless”. Guro’s objective then is not to shed light on one person’s pain in isolation, but rather to indicate how one person’s pain is related to the suffering of all people who are victimized. Subjugation is not one woman’s problem; rather it is the result of a system of disciplinary practices.

Her stepfather’s “look” signifies his intent, his will, and his forcefulness. Nelka, by contrast, tries not to see, probably closing her eyes in fright and pain, and this blindess symbolizes of her lack of power. She is both deprived of sight and she deprives herself of sight as a defense mechanism. Bartky relates how “feminine faces, as well as bodies, are trained to the expression of deference. Under male scrutiny, women will avert their eyes or cast them downward; the female gaze is trained to abandon its claim to the sovereign status of seer” (Bartky 135). He who sees has the power in our modern, visually controlled society. Women’s downcast eyes demonstrate submission and self-regulation. By closing her eyes, Nelka has given up her ability to act on her world as a modern subjective observer.

A very complex psychological insight occurs when Nelka turns from an object of resentment and shame to the creator or subject of her own shame. In the passage, she “[makes] a point of debasing herself” as her stepfather beats her (“Thus Life” 137). After the gaze of men has been “branded” upon her, Nelka starts to take her circumstances on as a part of herself, even a beloved part of herself. She describes how men on the street peered into her “humiliated eyes” after the beating. Her eyes appeared “beautiful from pain and embarrassment” (“Thus Life” 135). Guro is not saying that being wounded and abused is beautiful. Rather Guro sees beauty in the weak and in their methods of survival. Instead of rejecting her fractured self, Nelka incorporates it as a part of her identity. Nelka creates a representation of herself that is like a Cubist painting in that she
uses fragmentation as the foundation of her self-image. Instead of being fragmented by others, Nelka tries to reclaim some measure of power by doing it to herself.

Guro’s story therefore illustrates how subordinate gender roles become ingrained. A key element of Foucault’s theory of disciplinary visuality is the internalization of social norms: “[Some institutions] aim to have their commands internalized, producing an individual who habitually does what is required without need of further external force” (Garland 852). The system runs itself because subjective observers (rather than just the authorities) also enforce the demands of mutual observation. Under the collective gaze, the downtrodden begin to self-regulate and self-discipline, incorporating subservience and fracturedness into their very understanding of selfhood.

Guro’s artistic rendition of the phenomenon of fragmentation is therefore a way to incorporate it into a productive creation of expression. By seeing this oppression and giving an artistic manifestation, Guro hopes to lift up those who are fractured by the modern power hierarchy: “In many respects, then, Guro brings woman – and art – from the world of symbols and impression to one of reconsidered body and expression. In this regard, Guro also confronts traditional concepts of art inspired by beauty/Beauty, for her work celebrates the awkward, clumsy and inarticulate” (Apkarian 392). Guro was intimately aware of the world-building power of the subjective gaze and its ability to affect the construction of the world. Be it trees or women or the mentally handicapped, the strong visually create and regulate weakness. Guro lifts up and artistically replicates fragmentation in order to re-incorporate the fragmented as seeing subjects. She gives them voice and in so doing rewrites fragmentation as a new incarnation of beauty.
CHAPTER IV
THE INVERSION OF BEAUTY

Guro’s aesthetic project therefore is intimately intertwined with her ethical objectives. Unlike science or technology, art offers a possibility of real revolution because it embraces the subjective perspective. Art does not attempt to unaffectedly render an objective world. Instead, it uses individual perspective to chip away at systems of oppression. Crary states that the observer is “one who sees within a prescribed set of possibilities, one who is embedded in a system of conventions and limitations” (Crary 6). Forces of power and convention manipulate the collective gaze, however, the very fact that the gaze is prone to manipulation also offers hope for justice. Guro believes that the modern subject can be trained to value a wider range of beauty. She sees the artist as a rebellious force, capable of enstranging the ruling concepts of beauty and strength and twisting them to value the weak and unnoticed. The modern subjective observer is thus both the means of exploitation and its remedy.

Beauty, in Guro’s philosophy, is the artistic equivalent to strength. Art that subscribes to norms of beauty is lauded, while art that does not is cast aside. People who are beautiful are given more power in society than those that don’t. Guro therefore understands beauty not only as an aesthetic, but also as an ethical category. In a letter to her friend Nadezhda Fedotovna, Guro wrote that her artistic principle reveals “new beauty” as a worthwhile entity: “First, [it] teaches the observer to respect and love the given object; second, it provides the observer with a delight in life, having taught him/her to enjoy that by which he might have passed without noticing its beauty and; third, having increased the person’s love for the living world, makes him/her, because of that love, kinder and more joyous” (Banjanin 11). Guro’s art aimed to reveal unremarked beauty to the human eye, believing that these enstranged objects would awaken a
natural human compassion. Throughout her oeuvre, Guro’s “perception is not neutral and she educates us to being more responsive to the world we live in, to a different vision” (Banjanin 12). Paying attention to new forms of beauty will bring about a new vision of the world.

Subjective visuality means that beauty isn’t just something that can be beheld, but something that can be created by the beholder. Guro’s poetic observer inverts what is considered beautiful in order to expose the damage caused by the collective gaze. Subverting the concept of beauty was not new to the Futurist movement. David Burliuk, during the second Jack of Diamonds debate gave a lecture on “Evolution of Beauty and Art”, claiming that because the truth in art changed every twenty-five years, beauty was relative and temporary: “Art for Burliuk was not a copy of life, but its distortion, and he posited three artistic principles, which he called disharmony, dissymmetry, and disconstruction” (Markov 30). Burliuk claims that art should not be mimetic but abrasive in order to push people towards a new vision of the world. Instead of upholding harmony and symmetry, art should warp these values in order to expose them as normative and restrictive.

Guro takes Burliuk’s ideas a step further, examining how the concept of beauty is used to enforce not only aesthetic norms, but norms of meaning and value in society. In her final poetry collection, “Little Camels in the Sky,” there is a male poet whose diary entries form the framework of the book. The poet describes his social agenda: “My songs will make people better…I hope they’ll become sincere, honest, good – and braver…If you really love some slender treetop, can you then deceive someone?” (Little Camels 54). If one can appreciate the fragile, wind-torn treetop, then one can extend that appreciation to all disenfranchised and vulnerable people. They key is to expose beauty as a naturalized concept that is limiting to art and society. Strength and beauty are both restrictive categories that glorify some and marginalize
others. The more compassion a person cultivates, the more likely it is that he or she will defy the hierarchy that privileges the strong over the weak.

In his famous treatise, “On the Concept of History” (1940) German theorist Walter Benjamin states that history favors the victor: “Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate” (Benjamin 120-1). Rulers step over their subservient citizens, carrying with them the cultural spoils of victory and claiming credit for cultural achievements. Beauty is one of those cultural spoils. It threatens to go the same way as history, becoming an ideological “tool of the ruling classes” (Benjamin 120). The concept of beauty was written by the victorious to favor themselves. In Guro’s mind, we cannot lift up the weak until we give up praising the strong. Benjamin points out that “empathy with the victor invariably benefits the rulers” (Benjamin 120). This is Guro’s feeling exactly. Holding on to the cultural victors reifies their importance and recapitulates the scene of dominance over and over again. Guro trains her empathic, artistic gaze onto the beauty of the weak and conquered so that, in an inversion of Benjamin’s principle, history may notice the weak.

Beauty as a limited concept is used as a tool of social control. In her poetry, Guro explicitly talks about the creation of forgotten beauty: “What do we know about beauty?..We consider hunchbacks unbeautiful, but in our crudeness we’ve simply overlooked their beautiful hour. And for want of warmth, their beauty went away. Thus we ourselves create forgotten beauty, and then it pursues us, stings us and demands the warmth it was denied” (Little Camels 64). Guro points out that it isn’t the hunchbacks who are devoid of beauty; we deprive them of it. Beauty is relative and yet always constraining. Beauty may be culturally contingent and temporary, but it is the very presence of the preference that oppresses, rather than its specific
qualifications. The concept requires victors and victims, the pretty and the ugly. It is always a competition, no matter the standards. Overlooked, failed beauty then haunts the mainstream as a shadow. Pained by a normative gaze that ignores it, forgotten beauty “pursues us, stings us, and demands the warmth it was denied” (Little Camels 64). Guro warns that the concept of beauty comes with consequences, both for those who are denied it and for those who are given it. The dreamers, poets and women that Guro illustrates intrude upon and puncture the highly regulated society that modernity tries to construct. Because they are excluded, they hold the possibility of revolution and an inversion of power.

Guro shows how beauty as a limited concept is vulnerable. It draws its own borders, and in so doing, established a barrier that can then be breached. In one poem (included in my translation), Guro establishes a familiar scene: a vain Queen asks her magic mirror who is the fairest of them all. But in this poem, the mirror offers an unexpected reply:

Ah, strict Queen, do not punish me,
Do not sentence me to death!
My snowy cloud
My snowy fairy tale,
Edelweiss from the mountain,
Is much fairer than you! (Guro)

Here we see the confluence of power and beauty: the Queen is a ruler, a victor in every sense of the world and so she believes it is her right to be beautiful. Yet, a mere flower can put the vain Queen’s construction of beauty to shame. Like a kingdom, the walls of beauty must be maintained in order for it to continue to signify. Both beauty and power are social constructions that require exclusion in order to exist. Thus, this poem suggests that it is not the strong Queen but the fragile edelweiss, with its scarce and short-lived bloom, that is actually most beautiful. Guro tries to open up the concept of beauty in order to divest it of its power of exclusion.
Guro draws a parallel between nature and her undervalued human protagonists. In her poem, “At a Sand Mound”, nature empathizes with the poet dreamer: “Look how nice the world is – washed clean by the sun, it already believes in your feeling and your future writings, and looks at you with gratitude” (*Little Camels* 19). Publishers and the public may not appreciate the poet’s work, but nature supports it. Nature is also sympathetic to the “gentle fool” in Guro’s poem of the same title (see my translation). The gentle fool takes a bath and the “water [caresses] his skin”. He wonders what the wind talks about. Nature reciprocates his consideration:

The spruces said: “We’ll nod at him in the window. He is like a child.”
He, for whom they swayed in front of the window on a dark autumn night, has dreams. He has had them all his life.
He was often alone. He very much loved people, became too attached to them, his tuft of hair was too gentle and it happened that he was left alone.
Ah, to whom the crowned peaks nodded in the window! (Guro)

The “gentle fool” in this poem has trouble connecting to people. He is too soft in a society that values the strong. He comes across as unworthy of people’s time. Yet the spruces nod their heads in companionship and understanding. Nature, increasingly marginalized in an urban, industrial society, develops a comradery with Guro’s marginalized, unseen humans.

In his treatise on history, Benjamin links the exploitation of nature to the exploitation of humans. He describes the “vulgar-Marxist conception” that only recognizes “progress in the mastery of nature, not the retrogression of society” (Benjamin 122). Progress, narrowly defined as scientific and technological domination over nature, simultaneously entails the “retrogression of society” through the scaling back of human rights and the acceptance of profiteering practices. Benjamin “passionately and obstinately rejected” the “dangerous myth that technological development in itself would improve the human social and moral condition…Moreover, he was increasingly convinced that capitalist industrial ‘progress’ had produced considerable social
‘regression’ and made of human life exactly the contrary of the lost paradise: namely, hell itself” (Lowy 155). Capitalist industrial progress justifies the desecration of nature in the name of moving forward. Benjamin sees the underlying theory behind this idea: the weak may be exploited as long as they contribute to the survival of the strong. This exploitation still constitutes movement forward. Progress then continually produces scenes of violence that validate and perpetuate the hierarchy of social power.

In her poetry, Guro personifies nature in order to reveal how exploitation is a constituent part of the modern concept of progress. She animates nature, giving voice to a competing sense of agency outside of man’s own. In one poem, she describes “a thawed patch of rosy sky” that “lived among the black birches – and breathed” (Little Camels 14). She portrays nature as an independent consciousness. In the final stanza in her poem “At a Sand Mound on a Sky Blue Day”, the narrator’s hand lifts a stone and hurls it. The poet watches the stone spiral, tracing “an arc above the edge of the forest, in the blue land”. She wonders how the stone must feel, now that it is unmoored and free: “All its life it was on the earth, and suddenly my hand gave it flight…Did it feel bliss, flying through the blue?” (Little Camels 19). By endowing the stone with feelings Guro makes us consider it in a new light. As Shklovsky indicates, the stoniness of a stone becomes invisible to one who has experienced it several times. But in Guro’s poetry, we realize that the stone has indeed been weighed down and stepped on all its life. She ensouls natural objects and estranges them, prompting a meditation on the downtrodden.

Guro posits nature as an antidote to the harsh realities of the modern city. In this way, she inverts Benjamin’s assertion that increased domination of nature leads to a reduction of human rights. If we cease to exploit nature, perhaps we can also scale back on human exploitation. Guro therefore upholds the binary relationship between city life and nature, but uses
it to show the possibility for change. The interaction between urban and rural landscapes is the focus of one poem: “And tiny twigs stirred in that sky, troubled and touched by the city’s nearness. The twigs watched tram after tram fly past” (Little Camels 14). Guro highlights the most fragile part of the tree, not its trunk or branches but its twigs. These delicate twigs are “troubled” by the city’s proximity. They are affected by it. Urban dwellers have the privilege of ignoring nature, but nature cannot ignore mankind. The twigs contrast with the powerful steel trams speeding by with all the force of modern industry. The verbs Guro uses for nature bear a sense of foreboding and cautious observation. The twigs “stir” and “watch” while the trams “fly”. By personifying nature, Guro shows the violence that urban life enacts on the environment. She offers up nature as an antidote to modern power hierarchies that proliferate in industrial spaces.

Urban man-made beauty has forced nature into the category of “forgotten beauty.” In “At a Sand Mound,” the narrator rages against hunters: “And I promise to make no bones about telling elegant hunters – no matter how attractive they are – that they’re villains, villains!” (Little Camels 19). No matter how “elegant” these hunters appear, the narrator asserts that their cruelty and brutality towards nature makes them villains. Their type of beauty is exploitative and cruel; it is the beauty of the victors. This stanza could be understood to mean literal animal hunters, however the previous line claims that the poet is “the giver of life, but not an aggressor, the taker” (Little Camels 19). Therefore these hunters may also be social hunters. They may be publishers, taste-makers, bureaucratic leaders that “take life” away from poets and dreamers in a more metaphorical sense. At any rate, these are the people who establish hierarchies based on the strong, and Guro represents them as both beautiful (in the generally understood sense) and violent.
Guro lifts up the dreamer as another example of someone marginalized by modernity. Often Guro juxtaposes the voice of the dreamer with another voice that seems to represent society or the mainstream. In one poem, a child asks: “Mama, was Don Quixote kind?” (Little Camels 32). The child persists in questioning her mother about the motivation behind unjust persecution, until her mother threatens to punish her: “You’re interrupting my sewing, get to bed…Lyolya, look out or I’ll punish you. I won’t put up with senseless chatter” (Little Camels 32). The child’s morality champions the downtrodden. However, the mother cannot see this and focuses only on her practical, productive goals, such as sewing and bedtime. The child’s compassion is labeled as “senseless chatter.” A society that focuses on only the strong and productive cannot see the purpose behind compassion.

Another poem focuses on the dreamer as the locus of change. The poet is often represented as a rebel fighting against a pragmatic and constricting world. In one poem in Little Camels of the Sky, a masculine poetic narrator wants to use his artistic talent to change the world: “I’m talented! I want to serve people!” Another voice responds to him: “That’s another matter – forget your thirst and your fantasies” (Little Camels 51). The poet’s humanitarian and artistic impulses are one and the same. However, he is cut down by another voice that labels this aesthetic-ethical vision as a “fantasy.” This same construction is mirrored in another poem in the collection. The dreamer in the poem “Sunbath,” states that he “can’t do without dreams.” It is the poet’s destiny to dream, but the poet seems to recognize that this is aberrant behavior. He asks: “What is to be done?” A second voice enters and replies to the dreamer’s question: “Be economical” (Little Camels 35). Both dreamers try to express their idealism, but are met with materialism and practicality, what Benjamin might call a “vulgar-Marxist” cynism. Perhaps this is the disembodied voice of mainstream society. However, because it is disembodied, this
interlocutor could also be seen as the dreamer talking to himself. The dreamer has been taught to
self-regulate, just as Nelka does. He incorporates doubt and self-deprecation into his personality
because this is what society tells him is the appropriate response to softness and idealism. In yet
another poem, a writer tries to have a conversation with someone about his dacha’s awning flaps.
They are “like sails…filled with a salt-sea smell.” The interlocutor yells at the writer to “cut it
out” because proof sheets for the literary magazine are needed by the eleventh of the month. The
poet shouts back: “Oh why don’t you just go to hell!!” (Little Camels 52). These regulating
voices indicate social imperatives that restrict the poet, the child, the woman, and the dreamer.
But because they are disembodied, unnamed, and included side-by-side with poet-narrators, we
could also examine them as the voices of self-regulation. At any rate, the aesthetic and ethical
projects of these protagonists are bound up together. Both are summarily dismissed by the voices
of reason.

Guro implicated herself in her poetry. This is a representational practice that affirms the
poetic observer as both a constructor of meaning and an entity affected by the meaning
constructions of others: “Vision and its effects are always inseparable from the possibilities of an
observing subject who is both the historical product and the site of certain practices, techniques,
institutions, and procedures of subjectification” (Crary 5). Especially as a woman in society,
Guro is acutely aware of being both a producer and a product of knowledge production. Far from
being a flâneur (as Banjanin argues in her article, “Transfer: From the Visual to the Textual”),
Guro’s poetic narrator intimates herself in the phenomena she observes, creating a blurred
perspective between the active and the acted upon. Guro’s husband Mikhail Matiushin stated in
his memoir “that he had never seen 'such a complete merging of the creator with what she is
observing' as he found in Guro” (Banjanin 7). In one poem, the narrator expresses a desire to
meld with her surroundings: “Separation is only for those who hang back like cowards…O, to fly somewhere together and leap and choke down shining spray…” (Little Camels 16). The observer-poet merges seamlessly with her environment, expressing a desire to “fly somewhere together”. Both images – flight and the ocean – symbolize freedom. Separation is thus represented as an act of self-preservation that indicates cowardice, while the blending of the observer-poet with her surroundings expresses liberation. The merging of internal and external realms is an act of bravery that sets the oppressed consciousness free. No longer is the “weak” female poet simply an object of a social, disciplining gaze. She has torn down the boundaries between internal/external, subjective observer/object of gaze, poet/protagonist. Both linguistically and in terms of content, Guro tries to do away with conventional forms that restrict art and artists, binding them to old hierarchies and means of expression.

Guro counts herself as one of her overlooked protagonists, downtrodden and doubtful: “I’m dumb, I’m untalented, I’m clumsy” (Little Camels 18). Guro probably criticizes herself too strongly, but her self-indictment is a way of undercutting her authority and distance as the artist. Indeed, Guro insists that she is intimately integrated into the flaws of the rest of the society, and this is why she understands and has compassion for them. At first her lack of self-confidence seems antithetical to the bombastic self-aggrandizement of the rest of the Futurists. However, upon further reflection one sees that it is actually a deeply intellectual understanding of how meaning is created. Guro’s style accomplishes the same goal as the rest of the Futurist movement: that of revolutionizing the hierarchy of meaning-creation.

Elena Guro’s poetry points out the holes in Modernism’s vision of unerring progress. She demonstrates that these promises of a brighter tomorrow are unevenly applied. One of her poems issues a rallying cry: “Tomorrow is the goal of today” (Little Camels 50). This statement seems
to encapsulate the Futurist movement. However, we can compare this sentiment to a statement Nelka makes in “Thus Life Goes” when she describes a morning scene in St. Petersburg: “At this hour the Mashkas, Sashkas, Muzetkas were waking up, beginning life without ‘tomorrow.’ And cares, and free will, and difficult choices were not made for them, not for them – but the whip and wine, laughter and squeals, were…” (“Thus Life” 139). The women of St. Petersburg are waking up without the promise of tomorrow, as the dreamers, the unproductive, the mentally disabled, the impractical and the nonconforming. Guro’s poetic observer writes about these outcasts not usually considered victorious, strong, or beautiful. She places her faith in the artist’s subjective gaze to construct a new world order that challenges exploitation. In this way, Guro represents a vital and important part of the Russian Futurist movement. She is the moral heart of Russian Futurism and a key figure in its revolutionary potential.
Before beginning my translation, I researched theories that could guide and ground my work. My intention was to find a method that would not mar or distort Guro’s linguistic project. I identified three primary translation theorists whose projects parallel that of Elena Guro: Walter Benjamin, Charles Bernstein, and the translation activist group Antena.

In “A Manifesto for Discomfortable Writing”, the language justice collective Antena lays down some basic parameters for what they call “discomfortable” translation. Discomfortable writing unsettles complacency and in so doing opens up “the unexpected, the real and the hyper-real and the sub-real: the conditions of the world as it is and the potentials of the world as it might be” (Antena 4). Discomfortable writing exposes the interconnected collusion of comfort with power. To be uncomfortable is a political action in the same way that being comfortable is always an expression of one’s context – time, place, country, gender, ethnicity, class etc. Comfort is both passive and active: comfort passively allows power to continue to operate in exploitative ways without interference. When writing is created under these conditions, it actively reinforces and repeats exploitative, stagnant systems of power.

Discomfortable writing, by contrast, “rejects assimilation, preferring to linger in moments of rupture, to dwell in the snags, seeing what we would not, could not see, seeing our own seeing” (Antena 5). Antena affirms art’s ability to critique and examine itself. Just as Guro insists that she is both a producer of knowledge and a product of it, Antena asserts that there is no un-predetermined artistic space that remains untouched by society or precedent: “If our work does not question the terms of the status quo, it is the status quo” (Antena 5). The norms of
society overtake us when we don’t conscientiously struggle against them. When we read a comfortable or fluid text, we do not stretch. We do not grow. We are not aware of the mechanism of our seeing, because the forces that make us comfortable are invisible until they are taken away or twisted. Antena’s manifesto is therefore suspicious of language that is too fluid or easily understood because “without the snags…we slide into so-called comprehension without pausing to question or remember how much we do not know” (Antena 4). By pausing the automatic process of comprehension, discomfortable writing makes us analyze the function of language, its purpose and execution. Antena’s manifesto mirrors Shklovsky’s idea of enstrangement and follows the Futurists’ project of linguistic experimentation, applying both of these concepts to the art of translation in order create politically conscious cross-cultural literary dialogue.

In his essay “The Task of the Translator,” theorist Walter Benjamin states that the task of the translator differs from that of the poet in that the translator’s effort is “directed at the language” rather than “at specific linguistic contextual aspects” (Benjamin 79). In focusing more specifically on the “mode of signification” (language), translation forces the reader to examine the fragmentary and imperfect nature of language as a medium of communication. Benjamin warns the translator against trying to relay a fluid or comprehensive meaning. This method misses the point entirely. Meaning is always hidden inside any language. Fragmentation is inherent in the process of communication. Translation, “instead of resembling the meaning of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original’s mode of signification, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language” (Benjamin 81). Attempting to relate meaning just drags readers further from the realization of language’s limits. Writing that is too fluid dangerously attempts to disguise what can never be eradicated,
that is the disparity between what we want to express in any language and what we are able to. Benjamin’s text therefore parallels the linguistic project of the Futurists who aimed to overthrow stagnant language as an inadequate system of meaning. Like the Futurists, Benjamin asserts that language should always be understood as a fragmented medium. It must be recognized as imperfect in order for it to be responsibly wielded.

Like the Futurists, Benjamin treats language as a living, embodied entity. He posits translation as one of the life-stages of great literature. In “The Task of a Translator”, Benjamin speaks against the idea of static language. He asserts that the “mother tongue of the translator is transformed” by translation (Benjamin 78). Languages are stretched and challenged by their interactions with one other. The result of smashing together two linguistic masses is not depletion but expansion: “Translation is so far removed from being the sterile equation of two dead languages that of all literary forms it is the one charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own” (Benjamin 78). The target language matures and opens itself up to new possibilities when productively exposed to another. Benjamin’s theory then connects with the Futurists’ image of the living word.

I hope that my translation of Guro’s Futurist poetry constitutes a revitalization of her living work, extending its lifespan by bringing her work into contact with the English language. I kept in mind for this project Walter Benjamin’s theory of the afterlife of a work of literature: “Just as the manifestations of life are intimately connected with the phenomenon of life without being of importance to it, a translation issues from the original – not so much from its life as from its afterlife” (Benjamin 76). Guro’s beautiful poetry has been buried for too long, both in
Russia itself and in the English-speaking world. I hope that by translating this text I have contributed to the ongoing vivacity of her work and reinvigorated it for modern day readers.

Discomfortable writing, in acknowledging the political implications of language and exposing the seams of social construction behind it, forces the reader to take responsibility for his own interaction in the cultural exchange. Fluid writing reinforces the passivity of the reader. Charles Bernstein describes a writing style that “calls upon the reader to be actively involved in the process of constituting” the meaning of a work of literature. Discomfortable writing forces the reader to become “aware of herself or himself as producer as well as consumer of meaning” (Bernstein 233). Every time the reader is allowed to forget herself as a creator of meaning, she becomes disempowered as a political entity. Translated texts that are too comfortable displace the burden of cultural connection onto the translator. If the reader cannot easily understand a text, then it is presumed to be the translator’s fault as an ineffective mediator. Texts with carefully considered snags, however, endow the reader with agency: I can accept this discomfort and sit in it, or I can reject it, but I can’t not see it. In my translation, I have therefore elected to leave in certain moments of discomfort as reminders of the intersecting borderlines between literary styles. Discomfortable translation is an opportunity. It invites us to inhabit the liminal space of mutual cultural exchange where all language is flawed and therefore, because of this realization, where true communication can take place.

Most of the poems in my translation are from a collaborative chapbook entitled “The Three” or «Трое» in Russian. «Трое» features poetry and short prose from three prominent Futurists: Khlebnikov, Khruchyonykh, and Guro.
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