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Anna SHVETS

“NOT A SINGLE EPITHET, METAPHOR, OR A DESIRE  
TO BE REFLECTED IN A SYMBOLIC MIRROR”:  
A WHITMANESQUE ECHO IN IGOR TEREENTIEV’S POETRY

**Abstract:** The paper explores a Whitmanesque influence on Igor Terentiev, a Tbilisi-based minor Futurist poet, Alexei Kruchenykh’s disciple. While residing in Georgia with Zdanevich and Kruchenykh (that’s from 1917 up until the 1920s), Terentiev would write books of poetry exhibiting an unusual typographic design as a means of enhancing the poetic effect. In one of these books (“17 Non-Sense Tools”), Whitman’s name is invoked, and the paper investigates the connection between the poets further. The paper focuses on Whitman’s and Terentiev’s approaches to the issue of poetic signification. Whitman not only works with the nature of the signifier modifying it but also tries to render it inseparable from its signified, equating names and objects with each other. Such a semiotic approach could be interpreted through the lens of the opposition “presence effects” / “meaning effects” coined by H.U. Gumbrecht. Presence effects are interpreted as “[m]aterialities of communication... are all those phenomena and conditions that contribute to the production of meaning, without being meaning themselves” (informational content. — *A. Sh.*) [Gumbrecht 2004: 8]. Whitman tries to integrate both “meaning effects” and “presence effects” into the body of a poetic sign. Terentiev identifies that poetic orientation of “objectifying” signifiers and tries to devise an original poetic program on its basis. Terentiev engages Whitman’s poetic semiotic so that it informs his poetics to the extent that he designs creative writing techniques aimed at a direct communication of meaning, without relying on semiotic substitutes.

**Keywords:** avant-garde, experimental poetry, presence effect, Walt Whitman, Igor Terentiev.

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Анна ШВЕЦ

## «БЕЗ ЕДИНОГО ЭПИТЕТА, БЕЗ МЕТАФОР, БЕЗ ЖЕЛАНИЯ СИМВОЛИЗИРОВАТЬСЯ ПЕРЕД ЗЕРКАЛЬНЫМ ШКАФОМ»: ЭХО УОЛТА УИТМЕНА В ПОЭЗИИ ИГОРЯ ТЕРЕНТЬЕВА

**Аннотация:** В центре статьи — влияние У. Уитмена на И. Терентьева, тифлиского футуриста второго ряда, ученика А. Крученых. Во время пребывания в Грузии с И. Зданевичем и А. Крученых (с 1917 по 1920 гг.) Терентьев писал сборники стихов, которые отличаются необычным типографским оформлением, призванным усилить поэтический эффект. В одной из этих книг («17 ерундовых орудий») упомянуто имя Уитмена, и статья сосредоточена на раскрытии этой связи. В статье обсуждаются подходы Уитмена и Терентьева к проблеме означивания в поэзии. Уитмен не только видоизменяет природу поэтического означивающего, но и стремится сделать его неотделимым от означаемого, уравнивая объекты и имена. Подобный семиотический подход можно истолковать через призму оппозиции, предложенной Г.У. Гумбрехтом («эффект присутствия» — «эффект значения»). Эффект присутствия трактуется как «материальные условия коммуникации...все феномены и условия, способствующие возникновению значения (смысла), но не являющиеся значением сами» [Gumbrecht 2004: 8]. Уитмен пытается интегрировать и «эффекты значения», и «эффекты присутствия» в тело поэтического знака. Терентьев вычленяет эту поэтическую установку, нацеленную на «овеществление» означивающего, и пытается разработать оригинальную творческую программу на основе этой установки. Терентьев использует уитменовский поэтический семиозис так, что семиозис определяет поэтику футуриста: поэт создает техники творческого письма, нацеленные на прямую коммуникацию смысла, в обход семиотических субститутов.

**Ключевые слова:** авангард, экспериментальная поэзия, эффект присутствия, Уолт Уитмен, Игорь Терентьев.

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Whitman's reception in Russian poetry appears to be quite widespread [Rumeau 2019], including first-order writers (such as V. Mayakovsky)<sup>1</sup> along with lesser-known poets. The latter category would include Igor Terentiev, Aleksey Kruchenykh's disciple and ardent follower, the member of "41 °C" Tbilisi-based group in 1919–1920. We know for a fact that Terentiev had read and studied Whitman based on his poetry collection "17 Non-Sense Tools" ("17 ерундовых орудий", 1919). An explicit reference to Whitman could be found on the first pages of the book, in what might be defined as a preface and a theoretical introduction to the collection of poems.

"What is the difference between poetry and prose!" («Чем проза отличается от стихов!») [Терентьев 1919: 9], the poet asks his reader. In the attempt to answer this question, Terentiev dismisses traditional, conventional poetic criteria, such as rhyme and regular meter, or more or less uniform sonic patterning of speech. There is the last criterion to be discussed, and this criterion pertains to the realm of linguistic devices:

Tropes? Simply put, attributing other names to things? As old as "a kitty"! Whitman created verses by enumerating objects, and this was poetry without a single epithet, metaphor, or a desire to be reflected in a symbolic mirror! (made verses out of a sheer enumeration of objects. — A. Sh.) (Тропы? Т.е. попросту называние вещей не своими именами? Старо как «кошечка»! Уитмен делал стихи из одного перечисления предметов, и это была поэзия без единого эпитета, без метафор, без желания символизироваться перед зеркальным шкафом!) [Терентьев 1919: 10].

Whitman's summoned in the preface to the book as an ally of Caucasian Futurists ("Eastern Dada" [Foster 1998]), the founder of experimental poetry. In Terentiev's view, deploying a trope means linking a meaning (a signified) to a signifier, or "attributing names to things". Trope is construed as a semiotic tool, yielding a poetic sign. Such a sign, in its turn, could become a signified for the next trope and spawn an endless

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<sup>1</sup> Speaking of links and circulations, we could assert that there had been a fact of Whitman's reception in Russia in the case of Terentiev. First, Balmont's and Chukovsky's translations had already been in place, and within the context of futurism Chukovsky was the primary mediator of Whitman's legacy. There is evidence of several public lectures offering a comparison between Whitman and futurism that Chukovsky delivered in 1914 and 1915. It has been documented that Kruchenykh attended these lectures, mostly to gall the lecturer, which was achieved by boasting a carrot in the lapel pocket. We can speculate that Terentiev must have learned about Whitman from Kruchenykh.

chain of signification. Instead of relying on tropes as endless signifying containers for meanings, Whitman expressed meanings directly, as it were, by including the very objects into a poetic utterance.

Terentiev's engagement with *semiotique à la Whitman* [Швец 2015] informs his poetics to the extent that he designs creative writing techniques aimed at a direct communication of meaning, without relying on semiotic substitutes. In that line of thinking, my paper is going to focus on Whitman's and Terentiev's approaches to the issue of signification. The subject of how Terentiev came to read Whitman will remain beyond the scope of the paper.

In fact, the problem of poetic semiotics remains central to the very definition of poetry since, in R. Jakobson's phrase, the poetic function of language "by promoting the palpability of signs, deepens the fundamental dichotomy of signs and objects"<sup>2</sup> [Jakobson 1960: 356]. In R. Tsur's clarification of that quote, "the poetic function forces readers or listeners more than other linguistic functions to attend to the signifiers in linguistic signs, away from the signifieds" [Tsur 2010: 2]. Poetry theorists insist that poetry tends to enhance the signifier (often to the detriment of the signified), rendering it autonomous and tangible, redefining the relationship between objects and their semiotic names (sometimes discarding the objects).

Whitman not only works with the nature of the signifier but also renders it inseparable from its signified, equating names and objects with each other [Швец 2019]. Terentiev identifies that poetic orientation of "objectifying" signifiers and tries to devise an original poetic program on its basis. Such a semiotic approach could be interpreted through the lens of the opposition coined by H.U. Gumbrecht. The scholar opposes "presence effects" and "meaning effects", or the semantic import of an utterance and its pragmatic effect in a particular context. For Gumbrecht, "...aesthetic experience as an oscillation (and sometimes as an interference) between "presence effects" and "meaning effects" [Gumbrecht 2004: 2]. While the latter could be defined as semantic import of the utterance, the linguistic message, the former might be construed as "[m]aterialities of communication...are all those phenomena and conditions that contribute to the production of meaning, without being meaning themselves" (informational content. — *A. Sh.*) [Gumbrecht 2004: 8]. Whitman and Terentiev try to integrate both "meaning effects" and "presence effects" into the body of a poetic sign.

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<sup>2</sup> «Эта функция, усиливая осязаемость знаков, углубляет фундаментальную дихотомию между знаками и предметами» [Якобсон 1975: 202–203].

Whitman as one of the promoters of a new ideology of poetic sign articulates a provisional statement of his poetic program when juxtaposing old, conservative, English poetry (in Whitman's view) with a new, innovative, Whitmanesque American poetry. "Poetry, to Tennyson and his British and American *élèves*, is a gentleman of the first degree, boating, fishing, and shooting genteelly through nature, admiring the ladies" [Whitman 1996: 24], says Whitman describing a poetic "decorum" expected from a poet. The "decorum" of conservative poetry lies with "the terrible license of men among themselves", a social pact dictating "dandified forms" [Whitman 1996: 24] to all poets alike.

"Dandified forms", or established conventional signifying structures for poetic expression, enable a poet not to "ignore courage and the superior qualities of men" [Whitman 1996: 24] and make it the subject of poetry. Yet relying on an array of such forms leads to a bland uniformity in terms of poetic writing and to a rewriting of reality through the lens of the gentleman's limited language. "The models are the same both to the poet and the parlors" [Whitman 1996: 24], laments the American bard. Here it might be inferred that the realm of phenomena beyond a limited view of a gentleman (beyond ladies, parlors, boating and fishing) remains forever inaccessible for poetry. If made accessible to a poet, these phenomena will not be represented for what they are, rather, they will be subsumed by the semiotic ideology of "dandified forms".

Treating a poetic utterance as a string of signifiers, Whitman singles out ready-made, accessible models, licensed by men, suited for parlors: forms as uniform as articles of clothing. In Whitman's view, signifiers here function as an extension and embodiment of well-accepted conventions. At the same time, Whitman suggests an alternative way of poetic expression based on the contingency between the "soul" and the "language", without the mediation of a conventional "idiom", an already established code. In one of Whitman's notebooks, titled "Talbot Wilson", Whitman elaborates upon the idea of every soul having its own individual language presumably predicated by experience:

Every soul has its own individual language, often unspoken, or lamely <sup>feebly</sup> spoken; but a perfect <sup>true</sup> fit for [illegible] that a **and** man, and perfectly adapted **forto** his use. — The truths I tell <sup>^</sup> to you or any other, may not be **apparent** <sup>plain</sup> to you, <sup>or-that-other,</sup> because I do not translate them **well** <sup>right</sup> fully from my idiom into yours.—If I could do so, and do it well, they would be as apparent to you as they are to me; for they

are ~~eternal~~ truths.—No two have exactly the same language, ~~but~~ <sup>and</sup> the great translator and joiner of ~~all~~ <sup>the whole</sup> is the poet, ~~because~~ He enters into ~~th~~ has the divine grammar of all tongues (all corrections and revisions are reproduced according to the original. — *A. Sh.*) [Whitman 1847–1854].

A language of a soul does not lend itself to translation easily as it is not translatable into a common idiom. Rather, as it is intimated here, a soul language could only be reproduced by the means of expressive gestures and actions, enabling the reader to attend to the process of meaning-making. That preformative aspect is not only stated in the notebook but is also physically embodied in numerous revisions, insertions, strikethrough effects, slips of pen clearly visible on the page. All these peripheral traces of a poet revising his own text serve as expressive gestures indicating the poet's bodily presence. The effect of poetic presence ensures the possibility of accessing the author's individual idiom indistinguishable from his physical being.

In the preface to "The Leaves of Grass" (1855), it is argued that a poetic idiom is formed by "equivalents out of the stronger wealth" [Whitman 1855: 10] of the poet, of his experience. In such a way, the poet indicates the path between reality and people's soul. No ornaments, no decorative forms of speech are to be allowed, only those "conforming to the perfect facts of the open air and that flow out of the nature of the work and come irrepressibly from it and are necessary to the completion of the work" [Whitman 1855: 12], or those directly shaped by the experience lived by the poet.

In Whitman's view, signifiers equal objects and actions. He states that "[a] perfect writer would make words sing, dance, kiss, do the male and female act, bear children, weep, bleed, rage, stab, steal, fire cannon, steer ships, sack cities, charge with cavalry or infantry, or do any thing, that man or woman or the natural powers can do" [Whitman 1904: 44]. The performative aspect of poetry is underscored here, demonstrating the interdependence of poetic expression and experience. Words (signs) here function as an extension of "a man or a woman or the natural powers", a virtual avatar rendering their presence in writing. Actually, Whitman could go as far as interpreting a poem (as a sign object) as a verbal and material equivalent of a body, a place: "A true composition in words, returns the human body, male or female...To make a perfect composition in words is more than to make the best building or machine" [Whitman 1904: 55].

Whitman's object-oriented semiosis could be explored when analyzing one of the stanzas in "Leaves of Grass" (1855). In one of the sections, a

child approaches the speaker and asks him what is the grass ("A child said, / What is the grass? / Fetching it to me with full hands" [Whitman 1855: 20]). The speaker shares his surprise with the reader and ventures a number of suggestions ("it must the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven"; "it is the handkerchief of the Lord" [Whitman 1855: 20], etc.). In the poem, a communication between the poet and the child is happening here and now, as we read. Within that communicative process, the marker, "it", denoting the grass, figures prominently. If we rely on the definition of deixis as "[t]he use of linguistic structures and other signs that might be interpreted only in light of physical coordinates of a speech act, its participant, time and place", and deictic expressions as "the said linguistic structures"<sup>3</sup> (my translation here and below. — A. Sh.), "it" becomes a deictic element. This deictic marker refers to the object situated both between the interlocutors and us and the speaker. That marker corresponds to a series of signifiers. The speaker lists all the possible explanations of what a blade of grass could be: "a handkerchief of the Lord", "a flag of my disposition", "a child", "a produced babe of the vegetation" [Whitman 1855: 20]. What we have here resembles an enumeration of objects through metaphors. These suggestions are forms of objectified knowledge (although not entirely "dandified") and therefore tend to be dismissed by the poet. As we go from one signified to the other, the deictic marker "it" shifts its meaning, losing the link to the previous definition while assuming a new one. That shift of reference is clearly indicated by numerous "I guess" framing the utterance not as an ultimate act of naming but rather as a provisional attempt at knowing, failing to achieve its goal.

In projecting a sign grid onto a blade of grass, the poet tries not opt for ready-made codified structures but rather to rely on experiential equivalents. As a result, the blade of grass, a *Ding an sich*, turns into a sign, "a uniform hieroglyphic" [Whitman 1855: 21]. The meaning of this universal sign is articulated as "[s]prout[ing] alike in broad zones and narrow zones" [Whitman 1855: 21], manifesting the omnipresence of life and the omnipotence of death: "giving the same" to all the dead and "receiving the same" from them [Whitman 1855: 21]. The blade of grass could not be described by a metaphor ("a handkerchief of the Lord") but rather is an

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<sup>3</sup> «Использование языковых выражений и других знаков, которые могут быть проинтерпретированы лишь при помощи обращения к физическим координатам коммуникативного акта — его участникам, его месту и времени. Соответствующие вербальные средства именуются дейктическими выражениями или элементами» [Кибрик 2022].



has not yet been attained. It is the matter of regular stops, occurring each minute (a tram.), it is the matter of impulsive slowdowns (an airplane), it is the matter of temporal coordination, precise to a second<sup>4</sup>.

We see a number of "materialities of communications" ensuring the emergence of presence effect. A tram, with its specific rhythm, informs the texture of a poem. The stops and halts of a vehicle mark the physical form of a poem, its ragged rhythm. These physical phenomena ensure the bodily presence of the speaker in the utterance the reader produces with vocal cords (and, by extension, his whole body). The poem exists as an artistic object, an installation of poet's bodily state (an installation in the meaning of Duchamp's and Dada experiments).

Improvisation thus becomes a critical poetic practice for a poet allowing to integrate components of presence, of experience into poetry: "Futurism has prepared an opportunity for improvisation: it demanded a lot from the reader yet nothing from the writer... everything has been debunked [опровергнуто] by the futurists! But they have not refuted [опровергли] themselves, they stand hyper-focused on the 'I'"<sup>5</sup>. Terentiev suggests that the writer should become focused not on himself but on the effect of presence embodied by the poem and reconstructed by the reader through improvisation. The "presence effect" as an intersubjective phenomenon enables the reader to recreate and appropriate it, become privy to creative experience of writing.

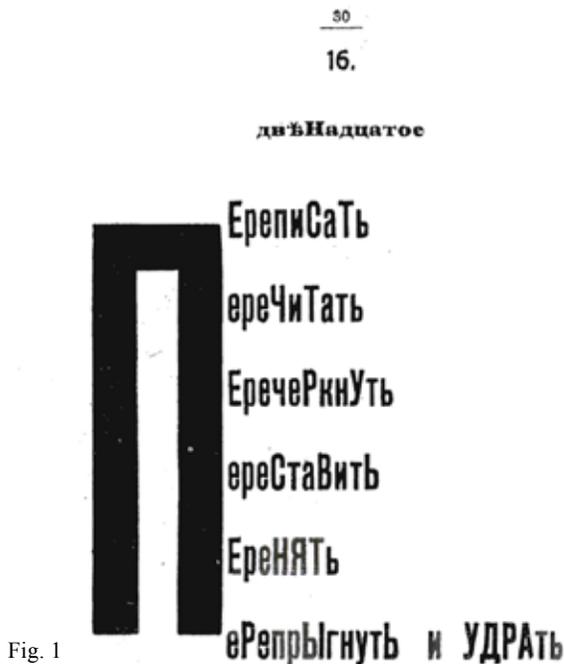
The poems following the preface demonstrate that premise in action. The book "17 Non-Sense Tools" is comprised by several so called tools of poetry, providing an instruction on how to write poems. Mostly they consist on short, concise imperatives. One of the most illustrative examples, the sixteenth poem, consists of five verbs, sharing a common prefix, re- (fig. 1). When translated literally, it could be read like this: in order to write a poem, you need to rewrite it, reread it, to cross out,

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<sup>4</sup> «Обрубленные носилки, старая карета, колесница — арба или еще гекзаметрическая кабыла Пегас, доскакавшаяся до ям-ба... совсем не похожи на трамвай! Средства передвижения много влияют на ритмическую природу стиха. И не только в быстроте дело: абсолютной быстроты ещё не найдено. Дело в остановках ежеминутных (трам.), замедлениях порывных (аэроплан)... дело в размеренности по секундам!» (the spelling and punctuation of the author are preserved. — A. Sh.) [Терентьев 1919: 8–9].

<sup>5</sup> «Футуризм подготовил возможность импровизации: он требовал очень много от читателя и ничего от писателя... Но они еще не опровергли самих себя: так и стоят за-я-канные» [Терентьев 1919: 12].

apparently, some sentences, to swap, presumably, one word with another, adopt, most likely, someone's writing technique, then jump over, overcome someone's influence and flee. The set of actions is prescribed to a reader as a pragmatic strategy necessary to implement in a poetic text.



Pragmatics-wise, the text reinforces this strategy, or embodies it physically. When we read the second line, we *reread* it at the same time, implementing the action the line suggests. The third line revises, crosses out the second line. The fourth line prompts us to go back to the previous lines and change the order of reading, thus adopting the strategies outlined by the poem, until we leave its space, overcoming its pull. Speaking of “presence effects”, we could say that graphic deictic markers also point to the circumstances of communicative situation, for instance, bold capital “П”, shared by all the words. It connotes the process of sifting through words when composing a poem in order to arrive at a precise equivalent, so that the poet writes this letters and then jots down all possible options to choose from, to look through and to critically evaluate. “П” points to a field of possible choices existing in the poet imagination. Choosing between the words is what the reader does while reading the poem.

Passing onto the next apt example, "the 13th tool" (the 17<sup>th</sup> poem — fig. 2), we see that again the pragmatics of the utterance dominating over its semantics, and "presence effect" integrating "meaning effects". The poem is aimed at giving an instruction on how to compose verses yet it explicitly mentions that the tool is never used ("НИКОГДА НЕ УПОТРЕБЛЯЕТСЯ"). Instead of denoting a meaning, it connotes a ban on the use of a tool; instead of merely communicating the message, it calls to action (never to use the tool). At the same time, it points to the circumstances of the communicative situation, to the actual use of tool that is never supposed to be used. Deictic markers here include linguistic references to the tool ("тринадцатое орудие") and graphic elements. For instance, "ТСЯ" in bold, large letters connotes the ban graphically resembling a paragraph from a textbook on Russian (the rule on "тсЯ/тьсЯ" forbidding the spelling of "тсЯ/тьсЯ" in certain cases).



Fig. 2

Finally, we pass on to the 6th tool (the 10<sup>th</sup> poem — fig. 3), also placing the emphasis on the pragmatic dimension. The poem reads as an instruction on how to fabricate poems relying on techniques resembling

Dadaist practices of experimenting with ready-made objects. Terentiev urges the reader to collect typesetters' and readers' mistakes and exemplifies the case of a productive mistake in the text of the poem "обруч" (hoop) turned into "обуч" ("sav", a shorthand for savant and the opposite of "ignoramus") due to a minor oversight. Not only does Terentiev suggest that mistakes and misreadings contribute to poetic quality of the text but he also enacts the process of putting a mistake inside the text so as to invite the reader to improvise. The text again incorporates presence effects, deictic materialities of communication, the mistake committed by the speaker. If we consider the graphic level, we might also see a number of mistakes inadvertently seeping into the text (seemingly random typographic choices such as "ошибки наборщиков" etc.).

24

10.

### шестое орудие

Собирать ошибки  
наборщиков  
читателей перевирающих  
по неопытности  
критиков которые  
желая передразнить  
бывают гениально глупы  
так у меня однажды из  
дурашкаго слова „обруч“  
вышел по ошибке набор-  
щика **ОБУЧ**<sup>®</sup>  
то есть обратное неучу  
и похожее на балда  
Или обух очень хорошо

Fig. 3

In conclusion, we might say that Terentiev is definitely in dialogue with Whitman as far as Whitman's engagement with the signifier and its relation to the problem of presence is concerned. Whitman is one of the early adopters of the aesthetic ideology suggesting that presence effects, rendered by deictic structures, should predominate the poem. That orientation prompts the poet to create verses simply by enumerating objects, without having to resort to tropes, codified forms of poetic speech. Terentiev bases his poetic experiment on that intuition, stressing the critical importance of presence effects and embodying those both on the linguistic and graphic level.

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