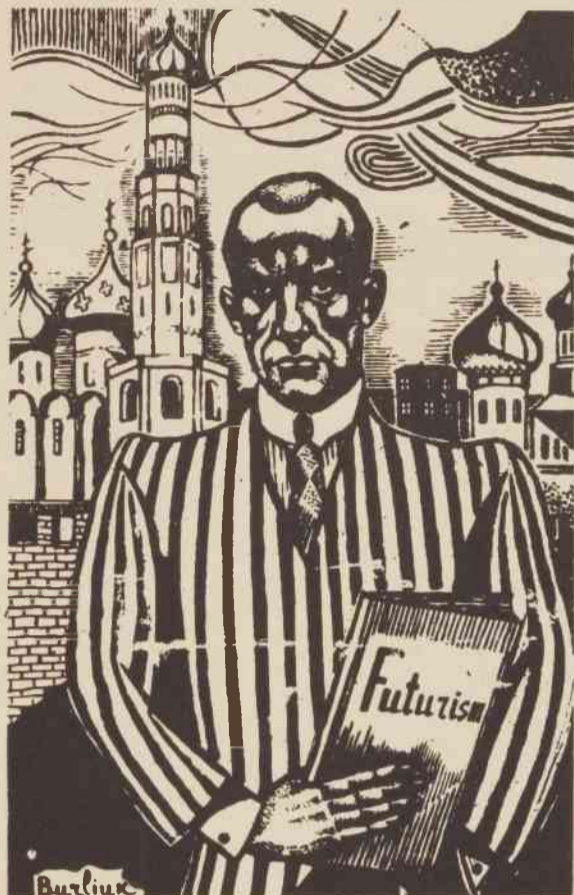


Cubism Matured



Art and Revolution
by John Berger
Pantheon Books 1969
196 pp., \$5.95, PB \$1.95

Russian Futurism: A History
by Vladimir Markov
University of California Press
449 pp., \$12.00

The Moment of Cubism
by John Berger
Pantheon Books
139 pp., \$5.95

By CARTER RATCLIFF

Valdimir Markov is a professor of Slavic Languages and Literature at the University of California. His book on Russian Futurist poetry shows that, in a sense, he knows a lot. He is exhaustive. He has discovered and translated new material from a much discussed and little documented period in literary history and so his book is filled with highlights. One learns that Ego-futurism anticipated Dada, no mean feat considering it meant doing without World War I as an inspiration. Markov shows that Mayakovsky discovered the city as a poetic subject nearly as soon as Apollinaire did. Much of the best recent poetry in America and France has been concerned with re-structuring language. Victor Khlebnikov began on his new "transrational" language in 1913. Markov puts Rimbaud and Mallarme in a new light by showing they influenced Russian Futurism more than Russian symbolism. But these are all bits and pieces. Finally, Markov's academic thoroughness homogenizes. His book is textureless and so shapeless. Its index saves it, making it an encyclopedia one could use in coming to one's own understanding of this period.

The anthology, *Modern Russian Poetry*, is a companion piece to *Russian Futurism*. It covers a greater period of time, but the best works are by poets from the Futurist period. It is thorough and unimaginative—a tool to be used. By whom? By writers like the English critic John Berger, in part. He shows the difference between documentation and understanding. To document is to

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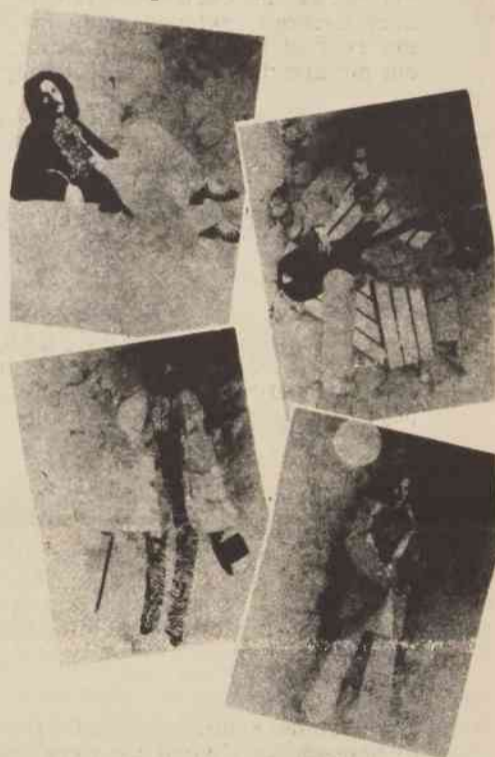
impose Markov's academic apparatus. To understand is to penetrate an apparatus, in Berger's case the cultural structure of the West, with a view to giving shape to one's experience of it and self-consciousness to one's connections with it. Thus Berger is important as an individual who establishes his own terms to set against those imposed upon him. He refuses to manipulate, as one must do to impose a homogenizing scholarly apparatus—or an oppressive political apparatus, for that matter. He prefers discovery. This is what makes him revolutionary (or not) in the lives and work of others. To appreciate his writing this way is not to agree with everything he says. His method is impressive for the leeway it permits the reader in the process of establishing his own terms.

In *The Moment of Cubism*, Berger suggests that the rich, overflowing light in Bonnard's painting is a pictorial expression of the process of falling in love where "the image of the beloved emanates outward from her with such dominance that finally her actual physical presence becomes curiously incidental and in itself indefinable." He says that Bonnard's exercise was to repeat this process over and over in his painting as a response to his life with a difficult, reclusive woman. This injects a socially isolating element of cunning into Bonnard's work which I find missing altogether. And yet, to disagree with Berger requires a closer look at Bonnard than current academic or critical thought ever does, largely because it refuses to deal with the social value of art. Each of his essays in *The Moment of Cubism* is equally demanding. His book *Art and Revolution* introduces the Soviet Sculptor Ernst Neizvestny. Berger's ability to show the importance of an artist "whose idiom is that of 1915 to 1925" has its own revolutionary impact—here in America, at any rate, where styles are subject to the same obsolescence as the styling that comes out of Detroit.

There can be no disagreement with Berger's insistence on the importance of the Cubist Moment. Cubism showed that after 1907 "There was no longer any essential discontinuity between the individual and the general . . . a man was the world he inherited." Thus the Cubist Moment was a moment of prophesy in which the unity of man with himself and the world was envisioned. As Berger points out, that prophesy is now in dire need of being fulfilled. As his example suggests, the Cubist Moment must be lived through by each individual. When it happens, I mean, when one sees the unity now possible and the desperate need for it, he becomes a Cubist grown-up. Berger doesn't say what one must do next. One must decide for himself. But it's clear that the model provided by historians and anthologists is quite useless, and so, by extension, is any action less intelligent, original or committed than Berger's.

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