

The Steppe as Inspiration in David Burliuk's Art

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Literary myths of the steppe have played a fundamental role in defining Ukraine, its historical origins and cultural characteristics. Depictions of a wild, beautiful, and dangerous borderland appeared in Polish literature as early as the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries but were particularly prominent in Polish romanticism. In the 1830s and 1840s Ukrainians who wrote in Russian, such as Nikolai Gogol (Mykola Hohol) and Evgenii Grebenka (Ievhen Hrebinka), reworked this myth into that of a colourful and vigorous frontier land settled by a sister-nation to the Russians. Shortly thereafter, several classics of Ukrainian literature, notably Taras Shevchenko and Panteleimon Kulish, again refashioned the literary image of the steppe into a foundation myth of a subjugated people and a colonized land. And in the post-revolutionary "cultural renaissance" of the 1920s, Mykola Khvylovy, Volodymyr Vynnychenko, Valerian Pidmohyl'ny, Ievhen Kosynka, Geo Shkurupii, Maik Iohansen, and Iurii Ianovsky reinterpreted it either as an anarchic zone of conflict or a fertile and mysterious realm that incubates rebellious natures. These constructs were reflected in paintings, notably by artists such as Shevchenko, Ilia Repin, Arkhyp Kuindzhi, Serhii Vasylykivsky, and Fotii Krasysky. Their iconic images of the steppe, reproduced countless times, are deeply ingrained in contemporary popular consciousness.

It is less widely known that in pre-revolutionary years, the futurists grouped around David Burliuk aligned themselves with the Ukrainophilic aspect of this literary and artistic myth by counterposing a positive image of wildness to the negative one found in Russian literature in works such as Anton Chekhov's *Step* (Steppe) and Ivan Bunin's *Derevnia* (Country-

side). Bunin elaborated a particularly frightening and depressing picture of superstition, violence, and poverty. Moreover, neither he nor Chekhov attached any importance to the Ukrainian identity of the steppe. Burliuk, however, did: by challenging the symbolist aesthetic his literary and artistic mythologizing of the steppe played an important role in defining pre-revolutionary futurism. In the ensuing decades it inspired a number of experiments, and it is a key to understanding the artist's evolution.

There is almost universal agreement that Burliuk is the crucial figure in the rise of the futurist movement in the Russian Empire. He was the stimulus behind its first exhibitions and publications, and its tireless promoter. He participated with relish in the performances and public interventions that scandalized polite society and brought notoriety to the group. Markov goes so far as to assert that without him there would have been no futurism in the empire¹ and draws attention to the crucial importance of the early Hylaea (Gileia in Russian) cohort, which formed around him in 1907–13: the "history of Russian futurism is actually the history of the Gileya group."²

The literary and artistic myth of the steppe that played such a prominent role in this group had been nurtured by Burliuk since the first years of the twentieth century. At the time his father was managing Count Sviatopolk Mirsky's estate at Zolota Balka, by the Dnieper River. David tells us that he decorated the walls of old Zaporozhian homesteads, and in the summer of 1902 painted portraits of villagers and hundreds of canvases of "Zaporozhian *mazanki* [cottages of daubed wood], azure horizons and willows, black poplars and steppe kurgans [burial mounds]."³ After spending some time in Munich as a student of Anton Azhbe and Willi Dietz, he returned to the estate and continued to paint. In 1904 he found himself in Paris but was soon back in Ukraine again, first in Kherson and then at an estate near Konstantynohrad in Poltava Gubernia, where he painted landscapes and portraits of local people, including peasants. In 1906 he spent time on an estate in Romen County, Poltava Gubernia, and then in Novomoskovsk County, Katerynoslav

1. Vladimir Markov, *Russian Futurism: A History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), 9.

2. Vladimir Markov, "Predislovie," in V.V. Khlebnikov, *Sobranie sochinenii* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1968; reprint of 1928–33 ed.), 1: 8.

3. David Burliuk, *Fragments iz vospominanii futurista: Pisma, stikhotvoreniia* (St. Petersburg: Pushkinskii fond, 1994), 113.

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Gubernia. By 1907, when his father began supervising Chornianka, Count Aleksandr Mordvinov's huge estate near Kherson, which bordered on the Askaniia-Nova Nature Reserve, Burliuk had produced hundreds of impressionist steppe landscapes and portraits.

Between 1907 and 1913 many noted artists, writers, and cultural figures were invited to and visited Chornianka, including Aleksei Kruchenykh, Velimir Khlebnikov, Benedikt Livshits, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Vasilii Kamensky, Wassily Kandinsky, Vladimir Izdebsky, Aristarkh Lentulov, and Mikhail Larionov. The Hylaea group, which formed in 1910–11, consisted of the three Burliuk brothers (David, Vladimir, and Nikolai), Livshits, Kamensky, Khlebnikov, Elena Guro (whose St. Petersburg home became a second base for the Hylaeans), Mayakovsky, and Kruchenykh. Sojourns in Chornianka were often long; for example, Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh stayed several months each year. A number of exhibitions were conceived there, to be realized later in St. Petersburg, Kyiv, Moscow, or Odesa. Boris Lavrentev has noted that several books were also organized there and then published in Kherson or Kachovnia.⁴ The word "Hylaea" was derived from the Greek term for the Scythian territories by the mouth of the Dnieper, which are mentioned by Herodotus in connection with Hercules's feats. The idea of calling the group by this name may have been inspired by drawings on old maps in the estate library that showed Hercules resting by the Dnieper after his victories. The Burliuks, who were all tall and well built, would have identified with this figure. Aleksei Remizov, for example, jokingly advised Vladimir to go about covered only with a tiger skin around his loins and carrying a club. David took the remark as a supercilious reference to the "simple and savage life, so inimical to the lords and the effeminate tsarist gentry."⁵

The literary depiction of this south Ukrainian territory in Grigorii Danilevsky's (Hryhorii Danylevsky) popular Russian novels might have influenced the Burliuks. Described as a land of dramatic clashes between escaped serfs and ruthless landlords, it was also held out as a frontier where enormous fortunes were being made and where old, conservative traditions were being supplanted by a new ambitious and enterprising farming-business class. Hercules's strength and Danilevsky's vision of a

4. Boris Lavrentev, "Avtobiografiia," *Novyi mir*, 1959, no. 4: 62–3.

5. Burliuk, *Fragmenty*, 25.

self-confident entrepreneurial class may have contributed to Burliuk's image of the southern steppes as a new world in the process of formation. Benedikt Livshits's chapter on Chornianka/Hylaea in *Polutoraglazi strelets* (The One and a Half-Eyed Archer) presents a new world of vast fields worked by giants with insatiable appetites, which is superimposed on a heroic ancient world associated with Hesiod and Homer.

Burliuk appropriated the idea of barbarian vitality and strength from the Hylaeans, who after 1913 began calling themselves futurists. A Hellenized Black Sea littoral that incorporated the imagery of Hesiod, Homer, and Herodotus served as a foil to the Russian symbolists' identification with Greek culture. Viacheslav Ivanov, for example, represented the marriage of Russian symbolism with Greek tradition. His Hafiz salon of 1906–7 was a meeting place for the erudite and cultivated, who discussed Platonic love, homosexuality, Dionysian ecstasy, and art. Visitors assumed pseudonyms, wore classical attire, and, imitating characters from Plato's *Symposium*, drank wine as they reclined on couches. The Hylaeans viewed this sophisticated world of the St. Petersburg symbolists as artificial and treated its metaphysical and religious concerns with suspicion. By contrast, Burliuk's coterie identified with the robust Greek civilization that constantly interacted with the war-like Scythians. Moreover, it had an immediate and direct link with that ancient world. In 1907–12 the Burliuk brothers conducted archaeological research in Crimea, excavating about fifty kurgans containing Scythian artifacts, which they deposited in the Kherson Museum, their family museum in Chornianka, and their house in Mikhaleve near Moscow. They also brought back stone female figures (*kamiani baby*), ancient fertility symbols, which could be found throughout the steppe. Scythian forms, such as the symbolic depictions of horses, appeared in the art of both David and Vladimir, and the stone *baby* seem to have influenced David's depictions of nudes. The brothers continued their archaeological excavations during the First World War. Vladimir, for example, conducted a dig in Salonica and died in battle there in 1917. In his last letter he described a hundred antique marble pieces he was sending to the old house their mother had bought in Mikhaleve. The family lived there from 1914 until 1918 and turned it into a family museum. When it had to be evacuated after the Revolution, it contained 250 icons, paintings by Kandinsky, Natalia Goncharova, Alexei Jawlensky, Franz Marc, Lentulov, Alexandra Exter and others, as well as Scythian relics, including seventy skeletons and two hundred skulls.

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As I have suggested elsewhere, Burliuk's imaginary steppe also drew heavily on family history and identity.⁶ My argument here is that this myth had several interrelated components: primitivism; Greek, Scythian, Kyivan, and Cossack history; the folkloric; the emotional-intuitive; and the textural. In different periods of his life David drew to different degrees on each of them, and in this way the construct of the steppe served him as a constant source of inspiration.

Burliuk always associated primitivism with biological and psychological health. On different occasions he used the terms "simple," "laconic," "coarse" (*gruboe*), and "minimalist" to describe this ideal and summarized it, perhaps most memorably, as "a wild beauty."⁷ His pre-revolutionary poetry and art demonstrate the intensity, vitality, *joie de vivre*, and eroticism that he associated with primitivism and extolled throughout his life. Futurism in this broad sense, as he himself said, was "not a school, but a new world perception (*mirooshchushchenie*). The futurists were new people ... cheerful (*bodrye*), not dejected (*ne unyvaiushchie*).... And the new generation could not feel creative until it had overthrown, ridiculed the generation of its 'teachers,' the symbolists."⁸ Burliuk often translated these "primitivist" qualities into an art of clear outlines, combinations of bright colours, and a deliberate, shocking coarseness in texture and imagery. These features of his art were counterposed to what he perceived to be effete and decadent in symbolism. David even saw the juxtaposition of colours as a kind of erotically charged primitivism: "When I paint, it seems to me that I am a savage rubbing the stick of one colour against another in order to obtain a certain colour effect. The effect of burning. The effect of passion, the sexual arousal of one colour's characteristic features and peculiarities by another."⁹

Against the backdrop of symbolist refinement, the impact of these ideas and Burliuk's personality itself were dramatic and memorable, as Shklovsky testifies:

He had been abroad. His drawings were powerful and he knew anatomy to perfection.... Skill had deprived academic drawing of any authority for him. He could draw better than any professor and now had become

6. Myroslav Shkandrij, "Steppe Son: David Burliuk's Identity," *Canadian American Slavic Studies* 40, no. 1 (2005): 65-78.

7. Burliuk, *Fragmenty*, 104.

8. *Ibid.*, 63.

9. *Ibid.*, 142.

indifferent to academic drawing.... David Burliuk had grown up in the Steppe.... They even had their own sculpture gallery: a Scythian idol, found in a burial mound. When David's father subsequently lost his position, the family took this idol to Moscow.... This Scythian idol, which had traveled to Moscow by mistake, somehow came to rest ... near a barn where students of the art school gathered.¹⁰

Shklovsky describes David's impact on Moscow's art world as that of an elemental force:

In springtime, when the water is going down and the rafts are running aground, the willow branches that tie the logs together are cut apart. Loose tree trunks, racing after one another, jostling one another, drenched by the waves, take off from the sandbanks and float toward the sea. One-eyed Burliuk had set everything in his pictures adrift long ago. This is what he brought to Moscow.¹¹

When Burliuk initiated Mayakovsky into art, this impact was immediately magnified. Shklovsky sees the latter's poetry, which employed "declarations, and fragmentary, dislocated and distorted images" and thrust "image into image," as analogous to "the methods of contemporary painting" that he had learned from Burliuk.¹² The primitive and elemental were employed in a deliberate assault on established taste. New forms, Burliuk mused later, "appear absurd," and it takes courage to defend them "against critics from around the whole world who know and love only the old, already dried-out, mummified."¹³

The Greek-Scythian element in steppe history was overlaid in Burliuk's imagination by the Ukrainian Cossack element, which had also contributed to the creation of a physically and psychologically resilient people. Leaders of peasant rebellions and Cossack statesmen like Petro Sahaidachny appear in Burliuk's poetry as reminders of the once active and presently dormant energies of the steppe. He derived his knowledge of Ukrainian history from Shevchenko's and Gogol's works, the oral tradition, and family history: the Burliuks traced their ancestry to the Ukrainian Cossacks and beyond that to the Crimean Tatars, as the family tree drawn by David's brother-in-law, the Czech artist Václav Fiala,

10. Viktor B. Shklovskii, *Mayakovsky and His Circle* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1972), 19–21.

11. *Ibid.*, 22–3.

12. *Ibid.*, 35.

13. Burliuk, *Fragmenty*, 152.

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indicates.¹⁴ It is clear from David's passionate attachment to the family heritage that it inspired not only a literary-artistic program but an entire approach to life. In his memoirs he continually expresses respect for the Zaporozhian liberties (*volnosti*) and contempt for the narrow-minded values of the bourgeois (*meshchanin*). In a spirited essay entitled "Moi predki" (My Ancestors),¹⁵ he speaks of his forerunners with admiration and points out that the Cossack settlers and pioneers lived in freedom and prosperity, enjoyed good harvests and were surrounded with apiaries and windmills on clear streams. "Serfdom ... had not put down such deep roots in Ukraine and was not so evident to the eye; it had not reduced the people to misery. In Ukraine there were many descendants of the recently free Zaporozhians whose families had avoided the wretched fate of serf dependency."¹⁶ David was particularly proud of the endurance, stubbornness, and industriousness of his forefathers and felt that these qualities nurtured his own determination to inject "a new art, a wild beauty" into contemporary culture.¹⁷ His ancestors' fort-like settlements, built out of oak to withstand the elements and enemy attacks, suggest an ethos and aesthetic that was in conflict with the refinement cultivated by many Russian symbolists.

In his well-known poem "Burliuk" (1919), Khlebnikov, whose mother was Ukrainian, describes the impression made by David's self-identification as a Cossack type. After mentioning the fact that in Munich Azhbe had called him "a wild mare of Russia's black earth," a definition Burliuk proudly accepted and often repeated, Khlebnikov goes on:

Russia is the enlarged continent of Europe
And she greatly amplified the voice of the West,
As though a monster's roar
Increased a thousand times did reach,
You fat giant, your laughter rang through all Russia.
And the stem of the Dnieper's mouth squeezed you in a fist,
A fighter for the people's right in the art of titans,
You gave Russia's soul a sea coast.
A strange break-up of painterly worlds

14. Syracuse University Archives, the David Burliuk Collection, box 6.
15. Burliuk, *Fragmenty*, 98–104.

16. *Ibid.*, 101–2.

17. *Ibid.*, 104.

Was the forerunner of freedoms, a liberation from chains...

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And the ear of the Dnieper's mouth,
Clay lumps of people
Were obedient to you.
With a giant heartbeat
You moved the depths of the cast iron's will
With your fat laughter alone.
Songs of revenge and sadness
Sounded in your voice,
Across the kurgan of cast-iron wealth
And a hero you came out of the kurgan
Of your ancient native land.¹⁸

The interest in Cossack history surfaces continually in David's biography and art. His archive, now housed at Syracuse University, reveals that he spoke at various functions on Shevchenko and tried to obtain the works of the Ukrainian émigré writer Iurii Kosach. Both had written on the Cossacks. Burliuk's interest in Ukrainian literature was perhaps deeper than critics have suspected. We know, for example, that in the early thirties he and his wife read Vasyl Stefanyk, Ivan Mykytenko, Arkadii Liubchenko, and Ostap Vyshnia.¹⁹ Throughout his life he painted many versions of the Cossack Mamai figure, a popular subject of Ukrainian folk painting, the earliest examples of which date back to the seventeenth century. Mamai is always portrayed as a Zaporozhian Cossack sitting on the ground with his horse and sword nearby, and food and drink in front of him. The figure represents independence, self-sufficiency, and rugged individualism. The artist also incorporated the

18. "Rossiia – razshirenni materik Evropy / I golos zapada gromadno uvelichila, / Kak budto by donessia krik / Chudovishcha, chto bolshe v tysiachi raz, / Ty zhirnyi velikan, tvoi khokhot prozvuchal po vsei Rossii. / I stebel dneprovskogo ustia, im ty zhat byl v kulake, / Borets za pravo naroda v iskusstve titanov, / Dushe Rossii dal morskii berega. / Strannaia lomka mirov zhivopysnykh / Byla predtecheiu svobod; osvobozhdeniem ot tsepei... / / I kolos ustia Dnepra, / Komia gliny liudei / Byli poslushny tebe. / S velikanskim serdtsa udarom / Dvigal ty glyby voli chuguna / Odnim svoim zhirnymi [sic] khokhotom. / Pesni mesti i pechali / V tvoem golose zvuchali, / Cherez kurgan chugunnogo bogatstva / I, bogatyr ty vyshel iz kurgana / Rodiny drevnei tvoei" (V. Khlebnikov, "Burliuk," *Color and Rhyme* 55 [1964–1965]: 30).

19. Marussia Burliuk, "Stranitsy zhizni v Amerike: Dnevnik 1930 g.," *Color and Rhyme* 48 (1961–1962): 23.

medieval or princely era of Kyivan Rus' into his art. For example, he stated that the painting *Sviatoslav Drinking His Own Blood* (1915), conceived as a protest against the horrors of the First World War, was done "in the style of ancient Ukrainian painting."²⁰

Burliuk's positive idea of the steppe's "wildness" was communicated to other Hylaeans, notably Khlebnikov, whose poetry also contained images of stone *baby*, Kyivan Rus', Cossack rebels like Ostrianytsia and Morozenko, and numerous Ukrainianisms. His "Lesnaia deva" (The Forest Maiden) and "I i E" (I and E), which are set against prehistoric backgrounds, are examples of primitivism in literature, and they may have been written in Chornianka. Like many other cultural figures who studied and worked in a predominantly Russian-language environment, David wrote exclusively in Russian, while he retained strong Ukrainian sympathies and frequently identified himself as a Ukrainian. His memoirs, which naturally dwell on his time in Russia, particularly the "futurist" years of 1912–18, nonetheless tell us a great deal about his early life in Ukraine and the Hylaeian episode, both of which played a large role in his self-imaging.

Along with a number of other avant-gardists of the day, Burliuk showed respect for folk, naïve, and children's art, collected hand-painted signboards, encouraged friends and family members to paint, and occasionally arranged exhibits of their work. His mother's paintings appeared at one of the first avant-garde exhibitions, the Link exhibition of 1908 in Kyiv.²¹ A painting by his five-year-old son was shown at the First Exhibition of Russian Paintings in Japan in 1920. The attraction of folk creativity was overlaid by a number of considerations. For one thing, Burliuk was fascinated by the prolific. He associated it with the irrepressible creative impulse that drives popular art, but also related it to nature's own mysterious powers of generation and regeneration. Proud of his own prolific artistic productivity, he lauded it in others. He commented favourably that Khlebnikov "wrote ceaselessly. He was a great graphomaniac.... Every external impulse stirred him to a stream of words."²² Each rewriting by Khlebnikov became a new variation; the poet was in a constant creative relationship to his environment. Both Burliuk and

20. Burliuk, *Fragmenty*, 124–5.

21. N. Evdaev, *David Burliuk v Amerike: Materialy k biografii* (Moscow: Nauka, 2002), 32.

22. Burliuk, *Fragmenty*, 44.

Khlebnikov produced innumerable works that have been lost, forgotten, or destroyed. However, the sheer abundance of their works guaranteed that many would survive.

Another attraction of folk creativity lay in its coarse, rough, and unpolished character. This too was more than a foil to what was judged to be the excessive refinement of symbolist art. Sometimes David extended this criterion to personal deportment and appearance, writing rather approvingly of Khlebnikov's unkempt honesty and altogether disparagingly of Igor Severianin's affectation and controlled acting.²³ From his memoirs we learn that Khlebnikov visited a number of prominent writers, including Dmitrii Merezhkovsky, Aleksei Remizov, and Viacheslav Ivanov, who, according to Burliuk, met him with condescension: "the symbolists found him 'vague' [*nechetkim*], un-groomed.... No one could groom Vitia, he was grandly tousled by nature." He describes Khlebnikov as a "wild, phenomenal organism continually creating words ... with all the voraciousness of fecundity."²⁴

Burliuk's interest in popular creativity was connected with a fascination with vitality in social life. This aspect of his art became very prominent in the late thirties when he began to paint Long Island fishing ports, village and town scenes, focusing on the relaxed, cheerful interaction among people. From 1949, as he travelled through the United States, Mexico, and Europe, he captured similar scenes in these countries. However, he practiced this kind of ethnographic naturalism, as it has been called, at the same time as he began to paint reminiscences of his early life in Ukraine. American critics who began to take a closer look at Burliuk during the Second World War immediately drew favourable attention to these works. In 1942 George Baer voiced his protest that the American art world had neglected Burliuk and that the jury of the "Artist For Victory" exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum had rejected his work. Baer praised the vitality and humanism of his "folk art" paintings and the fact that Burliuk had "never given up his identity with the folk art of his native land": "But most dear to the hearts of true Burliuk enthusiasts are the small pictures of farm life with animals—the gnome-like peasants with blue, yellow, green or red cows and horses. The sensuous textures of the lavish pigments are in remarkable harmony with

23. Ibid., 58, 64–73.

24. Ibid., 57–8.

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the luxury and joy of these segments of folk fantasy."²⁵ Herman Baron also wrote that "Burliuk is a folk painter fundamentally. His native ability glows very bright whenever he touches any subject that is related to the soil."²⁶ Even Michael Gold, a leading member of the Communist Party and a firm proponent of revolutionary art, expressed the view that the "best of Burliuk" were his peasant paintings: "Here he returns to the green fields and whitewashed thatch-roof villages of his Ukrainian childhood. This is the deepest core of the man."²⁷ These works, full of bright colours and a profound sense of tranquility, show Burliuk tapping into his earliest sources of inspiration.

In the 1920s and 1930s Burliuk worked for the pro-Communist newspaper *Russkii golos* as a proof reader and art editor. Although he occasionally produced propagandistic paintings, his revolutionary enthusiasm sits rather uncomfortably alongside a reverence for the land and agricultural labour. *Lenin and Tolstoy* can serve as an example. The painting exists in two versions (1925–40 and 1944). The first was exhibited at New York's Independents in 1930. Renamed *Unconquerable Russia* by Katherine Dreier, it was displayed in New York's ACA Gallery in 1943, at a time when the United States and the Soviet Union were war-time allies. The allegorical meaning, even given Burliuk's explanation, remains rather obscure. He interpreted the painting as follows: Russia in the first two decades of the twentieth century is expressed best in two names, Tolstoy and Lenin. Tolstoy is the "symbol and mirror" of old, pre-revolutionary Russia, while Lenin is the "ploughman" of the new era. The figure of Tolstoy, the "titan of the past," is bathed in moonlight, which symbolizes the reflected light of the past, of romanticism, religion, and goodness. Lenin, the "titan of the future," has the sun in his pocket. This is the light of the approaching, as yet unknown, day. The new government is merciless and cruel. This interpretation immediately raises the problem of Lenin's ambiguous characterization. Tolstoy, whose anarchism and pro-peasant stance Burliuk admired and whose doctrines of non-violence, equality, and innate divine reason inspired many followers, seems to be demoted to a beast of burden in the painting: he

25. George Baer, "Brave and Adventurous Painter," *New York Herald Tribune*, 31 December 1942.

26. Herman Baron, "Introduction," in Michael Gold, *David Burliuk, Artist-Scholar: Father of Russian Futurism* (New York: ACA Gallery, 1944), 2.

27. M. Gold, *David Burliuk, Artist-Scholar*, 8.

is pulling a plough driven by Lenin. The painting can be interpreted in other ways with equal plausibility. Burliuk's own sympathies seem to have been closer to Tolstoy's. In his memoirs he describes his early enthusiasm for Tolstoy's and Thoreau's "simplicity."²⁸ Among the many jottings in his archive at Syracuse University are Tolstoy's words on man's powerful drive for happiness, which moves outside known rules and tries, like a spider, to enwrap everything around itself in threads of love. In the end, Tolstoy's message was far more congenial to him than Lenin's bolshevism. His attempt to conjoin the two figures in the painting is therefore incoherent in ideological terms but revealing of Burliuk's inner struggles. His persistent fascination with Tolstoy is all the more interesting because in 1912, when the futurists had scandalized St. Petersburg society with their performances at the Brodiachaia Sobaka restaurant denouncing the art of the past, Burliuk had described Tolstoy as a "society gossip" (*svetskaia spletnitsa*). The comment caused an uproar; an elderly lady fainted and had to be carried out.²⁹ In 1929 Burliuk published a long poem entitled "Velikii krotkii bolshevik" (A Great Gentle Bolshevik) in which Tolstoy emerges as a shepherd caring for the poor and preaching a simple life. He is seen as an early expression of "the bolshevik breed ... A MOST GENTLE BOLSHEVIK" (*bolshevikov poroda ... KROTCHAISHII BOLSHEVIK*).³⁰

Like other avant-gardists, the futurists were interested in using artistic intuition to uncover hidden forces and invisible energies. Kruchenykh wrote "We began to see right through the world" (*My stali videt mir naskvoz*).³¹ Burliuk was deeply fascinated with nature's hidden processes taking place outside the normal sphere of human perception. In 1910–12 he painted a whole series of abstract works that show the motions of atomic parts.³² In the 1920s he painted radio waves and energy forces. However, his pre-revolutionary, impressionistic paintings of the steppe already suggest an attempt to capture things invisible to the naked eye.

28. Burliuk, *Fragmenty*, 107.

29. A.V. Krusanov, *Futuristicheskaia revoliutsiia 1917–1921* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2003), 1: 105.

30. David Burliuk, "Velikii krotkii bolshevik," in his *Tolstoi, Gorky: Poemy* (New York: Izdatelstvo Marii Nikiforovny Burliuk, 1928–29), 12–13.

31. Aleksei Kruchenykh, *Troe* (St. Petersburg, 1913), 34.

32. Volodymyr Popovych, "Davyd Burliuk (1882–1967)," *Notatky z mystetstvoznavstva* 20 (1980): 21.

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These works pulsate with energy generated by the interaction of millions of living particles. They typically depict a summer scene under the mid-day sun. In his earliest works the technique is pointillistic, and in the later ones it is reminiscent of Van Gogh's intense juxtaposition of colours. In all cases he produces a shimmering surface teeming with activity and suggesting countless intricate patterns. The viewer senses the presence of an endlessly creative and mysterious natural world. Later, in his landscape paintings done in Japan in 1920–22 and then in some of the early paintings in the United States, he reproduced the same impressionistic patterning.

Burliuk's attempts to describe his intuitions were not always helpful. A bemused reporter for New York's *Sun* reported that the artist, who wore a "twelve-colour waistcoat" and sported a bright red "five-legged, chicken-headed bull" on his left cheek, explained that

art ... will express the soul, not gross, material things. It is the soul that counts, always. This is the very heart of Mr. Burliuk's credo.

Like the Hindu yogis he has been able, by contemplation, to throw himself into such an ineffable state of mind that he can perceive the imperceptible, vision the invisible, behold the unseeable and put down upon canvas that which not only does not exist but never did exist. This is the fourth dimensional idea in the new art, and it takes a rattling good man to get away with that stuff.

[...] "Man's organism embraces the world through his senses," Mr. Burliuk continued, "but the hypothesis of five senses is incorrect. There are more. There are physical and metaphysical objects. Between two 'real' physical skyscrapers there exists a third created at the intersection of the mentally prolonged surfaces of the 'real' structures. Between two living beings there is always a third—the abstract and metaphysical."³³

A more lucid explanation is contained in Burliuk's *Fragmenty*. He rejects the idea that art copies nature and proposes that art is analogous to musical expression, highlighting the elements of rhythm, movement, colour, special construction, and texture.³⁴ Art, he assures us, requires a special sensitivity and it can be revolutionary only in the novelty of its forms. He categorically rejects Nikolai Chernyshevsky's, Dmitrii Pisarev's, and the critical realists' utilitarian views of art, thus indirectly criticizing socialist realism.³⁵ In contrast to these approaches he defends

33. Edwin C. Hill, "Burliuk Paints What Isn't There," *Sun*, 25 March 1929.

34. Burliuk, *Fragmenty*, 131.

35. Burliuk, *Fragmenty*, 136.

modernism and the vision of the individual artist. After making these points he immediately turns to a discussion of Tolstoy, and this suggests that his impressionistic paintings of a living, breathing steppe are inspired by a Tolstoyan sense of awe at the infinite complexity and intricacy of nature's designs.

All Burliuk's work exhibits a remarkable sense of texture. Livshits recalled how Vladimir dragged his painting through the mud in Chornianka.³⁶ David Burliuk had a habit of slamming just completed, undried paintings on the ground, thus enlisting nature in the creation of fortuitous patterning. In his memoirs David points out that nature is a vast archive of marvelous forms, which can be read in minute details as much as in panoramas: in the patterns left by the tides on the flat sand banks, the surface patterns of trees and lichen, the shadows of leaves and branches on the white walls of daubed cottages, the frosting on windowpanes.³⁷ Every puddle contains the scent of the ocean, every stone the breath of the desert, he writes. "In painting the simple can express the infinitely complex."³⁸ By studying these forms, artists try to grasp the macrocosm encoded in the microcosmic and to understand the possibilities within nature: "Imagination essentially is creative in character, it creates new forms. It is an apprehending [*postizhenie*] of the world. It is a widening of horizons. In this lies the irreplaceable educational role of art."³⁹

The role of the artist is to create new forms. These forms can be imaginatively represented, as in Burliuk's attempts to depict the motions of atoms, but he preferred to describe the process of creating new forms as the product of intuition guided by the observation of nature. He seemed to feel that the surest way to understand existence was through the study of elements, details, simple forms closely observed. By scrutinizing the "microcosm," one can grasp the chaotic, constantly moving macrocosm. All life, in fact, "depends on the freedom of creativity in art."⁴⁰ New discoveries in art, he suggested, are inescapably linked to new discoveries in the sciences and other fields. Great changes were imminent: "We stand before doors that are opening into a century

36. Benedikt Livshits, *The One and a Half-Eyed Archer*, trans. John E. Bowl (Newtonville: Oriental Research Partners, 1977), 51.

37. *Ibid.*, 154.

38. Burliuk, *Fragmenty*, 151.

39. *Ibid.*, 155.

40. D. Burliuk, *Entelekhizm* (New York: Izdanie Marii Nikiforovny Burliuk, 1930), 11.

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when the legend of the philosopher's stone (artificial intelligence) will become a reality. It is hard to foresee the discoveries of the future, but they will be unexpected and will radically change the lives of the next generations."⁴¹

Burliuk loved and theorized about the tactile, textural quality of painting probably as much as any other painter. Blind in one eye as a result of a childhood accident, he often arrived at insights by studying the details of texture. He once wrote:

Let your eyes rest upon the surfaces, faces of my pictures.... I throw pigments with brushes, with palette knife, smear them on my fingers, and squeeze and splash the colors from the tubes.... Visual topography is the appreciation of paintings from the point of view of the characteristics of their surfaces. The surfaces of my paintings are: laminated, soft, glossy, glassy, tender as the female breast, slick as the lips of a maiden or the petals of a rose, flat and dusty, flat and dull, smooth, even and mossy, dead, sand, hairy, deeply shelled, shallow shelled, shell-like, roughly hewn, faintly cratered, grained, splintery, mountainous, rocky, craterous, thorny, prickly, camel-backed, et cetera. In my works you will find every kind of a surface one is able to imagine or to meet in the labyrinths of life.⁴²

In the end, Burliuk did not bring a "wild beauty" into art simply in order to scandalize accepted taste. He was an artist who at an early age had been enchanted by the earth's abundance and beauty. All his life Burliuk drew upon this early inspiration.

His nature poems include some moving literary works. One of them is named "Nezabvennaia vesna" (Unforgettable Spring):

I dreamed of silent steppes,
Away from railway lines,
Where we wandered in the golden years,
Our youthful excitement with glorifying.
....
I remember the ancient home that sheltered us,
The shadow of the green lampshade, –
A picture dear to my heart:
Peaceful daily life and the labour of the countryside.

41. Ibid., 9.

42. *Color and Rhyme 17: Burliuk in 1947–48. 8th Exhibition at ACA* (Hampton Bays, n.d. [1949]), 8.

....
 I shall not forget how you said to me
 Quiet! Listen how the grass grows!
 Here is the urge for living ideals,
 This is the new head of life!⁴³

Like Antaeus, who needed to touch the earth in order to regain strength, Burliuk kept returning to the mysterious powers he had first sensed in the steppe. The memory always rejuvenated him. Even towards the end of his life, on 22 June 1959, he wrote:

I have reached seventy-eight today.
 And I stand at the threshold of discoveries.
 The most stubborn Cossack, ever ready to campaign
 For the sake of another pole of achievement!⁴⁴

Few critics have linked Burliuk with the symbolists. Although the artist would have denied any mysticism in his views, his understanding of the role of the artist as someone who uses intuition to penetrate life's mysteries approaches their ideas. As Postupalsky has suggested, even his archaisms and his "eighteenth-century" syntax appear to imitate Viacheslav Ivanov.⁴⁵ However, his art and his poetry, even when they deal with urban themes, maintain an anti-urban stance. Burliuk appears to be drawing on the outsider's viewpoint. Postupalsky has explained the artist's turn to the archaic and his appeals to "nature" in terms of his drawing on subconscious impressions formed during childhood and far from capital cities.⁴⁶ The ability to constantly stand in wonder at the world always gives his art a freshness and vigour that has appealed to many. Henry Miller wrote to Burliuk on 15 November 1954 from Big

43. "Mne prigrezilis stepi glukhie, / V storone ot zheleznykh dorog, / Gde bluzhdali my v gody zlatye, / Svoi mladoi slavosloviiia vostorg. / / Pomniu dom, nas iutivshii, starinnyi, / Abazhura zelenogo ten, – / Doroguiu dlia serdtsa kartinu: / Byt pokoinyi i trud dereven. / / Ne zabudu kak ty mne skazala / Tishe! Slushai rastet kak trava! / Zdes stremlenie k zhivym idealam, / Zdes – noveishaia zhizni glava!" (Syracuse University Archives, the David Burliuk Collection, box 7).

44. "Mne semdesiat vosmoi poshel segodnia god. / I ia stoiu na grani otkrovenii. / Uporneishii kazak, vseгда gotov v pokhod / Vo imia poliusa inogo dostizheniia!" ("Stikhi Davida Burliuka," *Color and Rhyme* 55 [1964–1965]: 6).

45. Igor Postupalsky, *Literaturnyi trud Davida D. Burliuka* (New York: Izdanie Marii Nikiforovny Burliuk, 1932), 7.

46. Ibid.

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Sur, California, that he himself had "often stood enraptured" before the artist's canvases, particularly his *Southern Scenes*, which "were orgiastic in color and rhythm."⁴⁷ In fact, Burliuk's ability to capture nature had been noticed by his earliest critics. In 1909 Andre Benois wrote: "His pictures ... are full of a great feeling for nature and portray with originality the august despondency of the steppe expanse."⁴⁸

These considerations lead one to think that the interpretation of Burliuk's art has been focused too narrowly on an aesthetic of rupture, a "futurist" desire to surprise or shock. This indisputable feature of his work has often deflected attention from his cult of vitality in all its forms—biological, psychological, and cultural—which sustained him through a long career. Not only his early steppe paintings but also his Japanese landscapes, Mexican street scenes, and Long Island villages convey a universe alive with countless life forms. In these pictures people melt into the landscape, becoming part of the natural universe. Individuality is de-emphasized, as though humbled and dwarfed against the vastness of the sky and the open plain. The original inspiration for this art and the key to understanding the painter's evolution lie in his feeling for the steppe as an Arcadia, an unspoiled, fertile land with links to ancient cultures. Burliuk once said that the "road to the future lies through the understanding of the past" and, as though providing an example, continued: "The kurgan is a symbol of the female breast. It sleeps under the bosom of mother earth."⁴⁹ Contemplation of the steppe provided Burliuk with a repertoire of ways to make art new, and to stimulate in himself an intense excitement while remaining faithful to this modernist desideratum. The turn to primitivism first appeared in the Hylaeian period, and it remained an inspiration throughout his life. He took elements of the steppe "myth" that already existed in Polish, Russian, and Ukrainian cultures, and refashioned it with an eye to both affronting and enlightening the contemporary public.

47. Syracuse University Archives, the David Burliuk Collection, Correspondence.

48. Andre Benois, "Rech," 22 March 1909; quoted in Nikolai Khardzhiev, *K istorii russkogo avangarda* (Stockholm: Hylaea Prints, 1976), 79, and in Elena Basner, "The Phenomenon of David Burliuk in the History of the Russian Avant-Garde Movement," in *David Burliuk, 1882–1967: Exhibition of Works from the State Russian Museum and Museums and Private Collections of Russia, USA and Germany* (St. Petersburg: Palace Editions, 1995), 24.

49. David Burliuk, *Reikh: Cherti ego zhizni i tvorchestva, 1918–1930* (New York: Izdatelstvo Marii Nikiforovny Burliuk, n.d. [1930]), 26.