

Title: Poetry Brought into the Street as a Poster: The Agitational Purpose of Circular Reading in *For the Voice*

Author: Tatyana Gershkovich, Harvard University

In his essay “Our Book,” El Lissitzky lamented the bounded nature of the book: “[W]e still have no new shape for the book as a body; it continues to be a cover with a jacket, and a spine, and pages 1, 2, 3...” The apparently inescapable linearity of our reading process, the unfolding of a text in time, is the obstacle that Lissitzky challenges the book of the future to transcend. In this paper I argue that although *For the Voice*, the collaborative work of El Lissitzky and Vladimir Mayakovsky, might not transcend time and space, it does successfully challenge the linearity of our conventional reading practices by demanding a different, circular kind of reading. The agitational message of each poem and its accompanying design is grasped most fully with reference to one another, and an effective reading of the book requires a back and forth movement between design and text.

Many modernist writers, for a variety of reasons, were interested in creating narratives that defied chronological reading. I propose that the circular reading practice elicited by *For the Voice* originates specifically in the *didactic* aims of its creators. Drawing on Victor Shklovsky and Yuri Tynianov’s analysis of Lenin’s revolutionary rhetoric, I intend to argue that the circular reading practice of *For the Voice* is a response to the demands of oratory. I will consider the aesthetic devices Lissitzky employs in his design (estrangement, emotional inflection by visual means) in the context of agitational oratory. Lissitzky praised the artists of the Revolution for tearing apart the traditional book and bringing it “into the street as a poster.” I suggest that *For the Voice* is similarly a book of poetry brought to the street as a poster.

tgershkovich@gmail.com