

Title: Iconic stepladders: The origins of Boris Slutsky's visual poetry  
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The stepladder — i.e. a typographic arrangement of one verse line into several split levels — is associated in the Russian consciousness with Vladimir Mayakovsky. This graphic method was imitated in the USSR by numerous poets (Wachtel 206–38), including Boris Slutsky, who claimed to be a student of Mayakovsky. However, analyzing Slutsky's collection "Memory" [1957], I find that Slutsky stepladders are distinct from Mayakovsky's, with Slutsky's "stepped" text standing as a subtly masked figure-poem, whose graphic shape represents the meaning of its lines. For example, the poem "Памятник" [Monument] describes a monument erected on the mountaintop site of a soldier's death. The numerous words indicating height (height, high, to get up, to rise, to grow, etc.) tend to appear in stepladder (75% of all height words) rather than regular one-level lines (25% of all height words). The disparity seems particularly noteworthy in that stepladder lines themselves constitute only 44.1% of this poem's lines. That is, height words tend to gravitate toward stepladders, and not because such lines represent some predominant type in Slutsky's poem; moreover, the observed pattern is statistically significant, the probability (p) of its arising by chance being only 0.0002.

What is the source of Slutsky's iconic stepladders? Figure-poems have been a marginal type in Russian verse history (Janecek 7–9), but appeared in the verse of Slutsky's teacher Semen Kirsanov. Although superficially Slutsky's method looks like Mayakovsky's, in reality, it had alternative origins, stemming from the legacy of Kirsanov. Moreover, some aspects of Slutsky's experiment are best explained by his Jewish heritage. In the "Monument", the words "grow" or "get up" are placed on the lower step of the stepladder, suggesting movement from a lower point to a higher one, which is indeed what the stepladder represents if we view it from right to left. Thus, Slutsky's iconic experiment provides additional support to his own claim that he must be read "Jewishly, right to left" (Grinberg 2011).