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**THE POOR KNIGHT AND THE POETICS OF ALCHEMY:  
THE PHENOMENON OF “CREATIVITY OF THE SPIRIT”  
IN THE WORK OF ELENA GURO<sup>1</sup>**

The aesthetics of the early avant-garde were based on an understanding of the world that differed from the stereotypes of the civilisation of that time, rooted in the ideological neo-Gnosticism and free creativity of the soul that were behind all of the formal discoveries of early Russian futurism. In one of his theoretical articles Aleksei Kruchenykh declared a “new way”: Symbolism cannot sustain the scrutiny of contemporary gnoseology and of the spontaneous soul. The more subjective truth is, the more objective it is. Subjective objectivity is our way. One must not fear total freedom [...] (Lawton 1988, 76).

Evaluating the meaning of the futurist period, another member of the movement, Olga Rozanova, wrote that: futurism is the only example in art – in terms of strength and the sharpness of expression of the confluence of two worlds, the subjective and the objective – which may not be destined to be repeated. [...]

But ideological Gnosticism, futurism, did not touch the stupid consciousness of the majority, which repeats to this day that futurism is a clumsy leap in the course of global art, *a crisis of art* [author’s italics]. As if up to now a single, faceless art had existed and not a mass of peaks of its 110 historical epochs. [...] Futurism expressed the character of modernity with exceptional insight and completeness (Rozanova, 1922, 335).

The entire polyphony of artistic and critical texts of the early avant-garde, which are alike in terms of their ‘unalikeness’, has in common the theme of the *internal freedom* of personality and creativity. It is not so much freedom of choice and the rethinking of traditions as freedom from templates and dogmas, which are inevitably expressed in the creation of models, the canon, in seeing the world as a closed system, a completed, perfect structure.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The text is translated by Ruth Addison.

<sup>2</sup> For example, in the title of Nikolai Kulbin’s article this theme was named “Free Art as a the Basis of Life” (1910) and in B. Lifshitz’s article it was called “the liberation of the word” (1913). In many works Kruchenykh stressed the significance of *zaum* as “free language”.

The aesthetics of the early avant-garde broke with the laws of everyday reason and rational human cognition (following twentieth-century science) and made a Gnostic appeal to other spheres of cognition, in particular intuitive knowledge: [...] leaping from theosophy to socialism, biology to philosophy, mystical anarchism to egocentrism and back and, finally, to ego-futurism, intuitive realisation, intuitive illumination (Ignatiev 1967, 35).

Art will become a struggle for the "new deepening of the soul" (to quote Kruchenykh) or the "creativity of the spirit" (Guro, see Gurjanova 1994) based on an acceptance of the necessity of freedom of creativity and the assertion of its intuitive nature. Art once again gathers strength and, through the energy of action and deeds, will become "the creativity of the new life".

The influence of one of the main principles of this new aesthetics – "the principle of free creativity", as Union of Youth member V. Markov<sup>1</sup> (Waldemar Matvejs) defined it in his article "Principles of the New Art" (1912) – was inherent in the entire early avant-garde movement and was particularly prominent among the *budetlyane*/members of Hylaea and the circle of artists that were close to them: in the ideas of such Union of Youth members as Markov, Nikolai Kulbin, Rozanova and, finally, in the concept of art of Mikhail Larionov and his group. Nevertheless, this tendency, which might be called the romantic line of the Russian avant-garde, could not be a differentiating characteristic between the various artistic schools of the avant-garde of the late 1910s and early 1920s, although its elements are constantly present in the new culture. They either come to the forefront (as in futurism) or virtually disappear, forming only one of a multitude of potential lines of development within the movement and coexisting with tendencies which are completely opposite, such as utopianism, the desire for universalism or the canonisation of schools within the avant-garde.

It was this this worldview which was embodied in the formation of the "principle of chance",<sup>2</sup> the first evidence of the "event of being"; incompleteness and fragmentariness as an aesthetic method provided a truly endless possibility for "meaning",<sup>3</sup> which did not exist in completed, perfect form. The idea of incompleteness also reflected consciousness of the impossibility of rationally recreating the whole or the absolute. Finally, in the appearance

<sup>1</sup> "Free creativity [...] always gives birth to independent principles which wholly originate from it (Markov 1912).

<sup>2</sup> Markov, in his article "Principles of the New Art", pays particular attention to "the principle of accidental creativity", speaking about the lost unbiasedness of gaze and the ability to admire "the accidental" and "the non-constructive".

<sup>3</sup> "Dissatisfaction with form gave me today's denial of form, but here I suffer from [...] a lack of that laconic meaning which make one interpret a book, ask it for a new, half-existing possibility. That which is so wonderful in new quests" (letter from Guro to Kruchenykh, 1913 – Mayakovsky Museum, ф. 7, on. 1, 7900).

of dissonance (*zloglas*) and “mistakes”<sup>1</sup> in painting and poetry, the futurists saw the manifestation of the living, unstoppable movement of art and everyday life. If the symbolists attempted to construct life as a work of art, the futurists-*budetlyane* directly referred to the process of everyday life, subordinating their art to the laws of constant, mutable movement of matter and time: “We were led by the motion of art and love towards life” (Zdanevich, Larionov 1967, 173–174).

Mikhail Matiushin wrote of the “experience of art” as “a step of life itself” (Matiushin 1923). The idea of “the creativity of the new life” and the creativity of the spirit<sup>2</sup> was “predicted” more fully and yet in a more contradictory way in the work of Elena Guro. It was no accident that she became an advocate of the new for *budetlyane* Velimir Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh. Her irrationality, neo-romanticism and anti-positivistic ideas, which could only be reflected in an incomplete, fluid form which mirrored the process of creation – fragmentary sketches, notes, letters, personal contact – were alien to the concept of any kind of absolute. Guro defined the aim of art as the compassionate transformation of all earthly life or, to be more precise, life in everything. For her, art would remain not logically rational knowledge or a means of achieving even the “highest” utilitarian-utopian aim – a tradition arising from the platonic idea of “state art” (for example, Tolstoy’s references to the creation of the “international brotherhood of man”) – but an exaltation, a “re-humanisation» (in the Pasternakian sense) of the world and of art as part of that world: “a poet is a figure and not a remover of life” (Guro 1914, 14). In the compendium *Three* (1913), published in Guro’s memory, Kruchenykh wrote: “Russian readers [...] see in words algebraic symbols, which solve the mechanistic problem of little thoughts”. One might say that the destruction of this “mechanics” was extremely important for Guro’s work and that of her companions.

There were no manifestos or provocations in Guro’s work, but nevertheless it contained a kernel loaded with enormous potential for the destruction of artistic templates and “diagrams”, whether academic or avant-garde. There is nothing which resembles a personal canon. The essence of her late works, which Matiushin defined as “synthetism”, is expressed in the surprising “mobility” and tolerance of her individual style, which often borders on eclecticism.

Any of Guro’s preferred systems may be subject to criticism and partially not accepted while remaining extremely important to the writer (Mints 1991, 9). Continuing Zara Mints’s idea of the “polygenetic” nature (Mints 1991, 11) of Guro’s style, the lack definition of style and genre and the complex symbolism in Guro’s last, unfinished work *The Poor Knight* can be read – and was read by Matiushin – as her spiritual testament, a type of “gospel of Guro”,

<sup>1</sup> “Our aim is only to indicate the means of incorrectness, to show its necessity and importance for art” (Kruchenykh 1967, 70).

<sup>2</sup> “Life is very serious and can be productive apart from success in art even for us [...] we can create neither a book nor an exhibition but life itself” (Guro 1988, 53).

which allows for varied interpretations. This work, which contains many motifs from her oeuvre and is therefore of great interest to researchers, holds the key to her visual metaphors, such as the symbolism of colour and light in her late drawings.

The literature on *The Poor Knight* mentions the influence on Guro of spiritualism, Indian philosophy and the ideas of Nietzsche, Tolstoy, Ivan Kon-evskoy and Aleksandr Dobrolyubov, with reference to theosophist, spiritualist, pantheistic, cosmogonic, hermetic and Christian motifs in her poetry (see Mints 1988, Gum 1988, Toporov 1993, Bobrinskaya 1997; the latter article was the first to present an interesting analysis of the influence on Guro of Aleksandr Dobrolyubov's religious teachings and his theory of "expiation of the earth"). Guro, with her unorthodox, almost heretical (from the traditional theological point of view) interpretation of the Christian idea does not accept Christianity as dogma, but sees in it a constantly changing mystical revelation. This explains the free, eclectic combination of aspects of pantheism, mysticism, Orthodoxy, Protestantism and even nietzscheanism in Guro's ideas. Like many of her contemporaries, in her work Guro was more likely a free interpreter of the religious, spiritualist and philosophical concepts (often from secondary sources) which were in the ether at that time. She had a "mobile" character, which makes nonsense of questions regarding her strict adherence to one or other ideological circle. For example, in support of her idea of the earthly, which is particularly prevalent in the late period when she constructs for herself the image of "mother of the entire earth," "mother of the world", one can see aspects of zoism or hylozoism (a term introduced by Ralph Cudworth in the 17th century), a philosophical teaching regarding the universal living nature of matter, which was typical of early Greek philosophy, including Stoicism, of the natural-philosophical epoch of the Renaissance, and Schelling's school of natural philosophy.<sup>1</sup> It is this latter line, connected to Renaissance natural philosophy and, through it, to hermetic traditions, in particular alchemy, that is of interest in this essay.

Of course one cannot interpret such a complex and eclectic work as *The Poor Knight* as a literal illustration – or even an illustration – of spiritual transformation achieved through the process of alchemical work, unlike a number of more open literary and poetic texts of the 20th century. As always, Guro's style and poetics incorporates numerous influences, styles and concepts. As always, she works "outside the genre", but nevertheless one cannot deny that in this more didactic and, simultaneously, confessional text there are traditional hermetic symbols and this, we consider, allows for yet another possible interpretation of this enigmatic work. Regardless of the fact that there is, as yet, no direct evidence that Guro was acquainted with alchemical literature, it would be illegitimate to deny her knowledge of these ideas. At the end of the nineteenth century, literature on alchemy was not only easily accessible but widely available and popular in intellectual and artistic, particularly symbolist, circles (see Antoshevsky 1911). Nikolai Kulbin,

<sup>1</sup> On natural-philosophical motifs in Guro see Bobrinskaya 1997.

one of the founders of the Union of Youth, was interested in alchemy as was its other founder and chairman, patron of the arts Levky Zheverzheev, who owned a significant collection of alchemical books and manuscripts. The other major patron who supported the avant-garde, A. Troyanovsky, was the publisher of the most popular occult journal of the time, *Izida [Isis]*, which printed excerpts from the works of Paracelsus, Papus and others alongside articles by contemporary Russian writers.<sup>1</sup>

The most direct and weighty evidence for Guro's acquaintance with the entire circle of these ideas are the figurative metaphors of her last book, with their obvious parallels with the symbolism of alchemy. Guro's text begins with "The Tale of Madame Elsa", who spent her evenings in dreams and anticipation: But once, when she was sitting and dreaming, looking into her being, an airy youth, tall and thin, came to her [...] she thought that this was her dream and was not surprised (Guro RGALI, 1).<sup>2</sup>

It is known that the motifs of the dreams, visions, contemplation and meditation are important for Guro. We will not dwell on the symbolist and romantic roots of these motifs, nor on the influence of Nietzsche's poetics on the development of this leitmotif in Guro's work.<sup>3</sup> In the context of this article, we are primarily interested in the definition of creativity as contemplation, the accent on the role of *imagination* (which for Guro is often a synonym for *dreaming*) in the alchemical tradition. In particular, in Paracelsus's conception, who considered imagination a "celestial" human quality, which forms and crystallises within a person their true essence, i.e. the astral man. In his famous *Romrzum*, the following rule is given at the beginning: Check that your door is firmly closed so that which is within you does not disappear. [...] Nature creates in stages and so must you. Let your imagination be ruled by nature. [...] And imagine yourself as a true and not a fantastic imagination (Fabricius 1994, 11).

Elsa's dreams awake in her the internal essence of her being, from which is born the ephemeral image of a son ("For it is my dream. If I do not wish it he will not be on the earth, and if I do he will be with me" – Guro RGALI, 1). In the occult tradition there are three incarnations of the body: the first is the physical, material, earthly body of flesh and blood; the second is the astral body, spiritual, "as light as the sun's rays", which has an intuitive knowledge of nature, the cosmos and the occult that cannot be experienced through physical senses, and which has higher instincts that are formed by thought and feelings, an intermediary stage before the third category; the third is a body

<sup>1</sup> The journal *Izida. Zhurnal okkul'tnykh nauk* [Isis: A Journal of Occult Sciences] was published from 1909 to 1916.

<sup>2</sup> Here and later the text cited is a typewritten version from the Guro archive, prepared by Matiushin after Guro's death according to her plan: Elena Guro, *Istoriya Bednogo Rytsarya* [The Story of the Poor Knight], typescript, Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI).

<sup>3</sup> See Gurjanova 1994.

incarnated in light, "the divine spark", the body after resurrection (Paracelsus 1995, 249).<sup>1</sup> The first two categories are mortal, the third is immortal. The young man appears to Elsa as an astral body not incarnated in heavy matter: "she felt him like a star above her head, as if starry rays pierced her from above"; "she wanted to kiss him and regretted that he was fleshless"; "she saw in the outline of the clouds what appeared to be his temples, his brow [...]. And she was no longer sorry that he had not been incarnated, that he retained his purity and became a soul of joyful moments", but he had not yet attained complete spiritual transformation as he was capable of suffering and, accordingly, mortal: "I did not refuse to be here. I am more incarnate than you think" (Guro RGALI, 1,3,4). He would become Elsa's bridge between the physical and spiritual, her bridge into another world, another stage of incarnation: "They stand in two different worlds and vainly reach out their hands to one another. She did not know that this is a threshold, which must be gradually erased, the boundary between the visible and the invisible, between different forms of flesh" (Guro RGALI, 45).

The genesis of these two images – Madame Elsa and her disembodied son – has its roots in Guro's early work. The image of the disembodied son – the Youth, the Knight of the Earth, the Stork Baron – have echoes in *Autumn Dream* (and particularly in the play's dedication, in which Guro first references the mythologeme of the dead son), in her early short stories and in the miniatures *Heavenly Baby Camels*. The Christian and symbolist sources of this image, as well as the nietzscheian influence on the appearance of this character in Guro's texts, are considered in detail in works by Zara Mints, Maria Tsimborska-Leboda, Kevin O' Brien and the author of this essay. A recently published work on Guro proposes what seems to me a particularly fruitful interpretation of this image as a hermetic Mercury, the central figure in alchemical work, the spirit of earth or, to be more accurate, the spirit of the transformed earth.<sup>2</sup> We will return to this interpretation.

From the position of the hermetic context, the image of Elsa is no less complex and multi-faceted: it is eclectic, like the image of her "disembodied" son. One can hear in it echoes of the archetypal mother earth ("and the earth looked like the holy Virgin Mary, like the Madonna" – Guro RGALI, 22), the divine original mother of many ancient religions and primitive cults ("And she laughed with joy that she had understood him. Through his eyes she saw far distant cities of exalted dreams. And she understood that she was his mother" – Guro RGALI, 22), and the hermetic image of the *anima mundi* as opposed to the Spirit (*spiritus animatus*), Mercury ("He who sees the soul everywhere

<sup>1</sup> According to occult tradition, the elementary physical body becomes water and earth, the astral body slowly dissolves in the air, and the resurrected body rises up to God.

<sup>2</sup> "Probably the most interesting parallels with this subject, which allow us to understand the internal logic linking the philosophy of nature and the philosophy of creativity in Elena Guro's work, can be found in one the central figures of hermetic literature, Mercury. [...] It is with him that the main character of *The Poor Knight* sees a number of parallels" (Bobrinskaya 1977, 169).

and considers everything to be living will never remain in darkness” – Guro RGALI, 3), and the image of the Lady of alchemical tradition (“She wept and rejoiced that he called her mother. He more often called her Madame distantly” – Guro RGALI, 3), the Queen who embodies primary matter, which is transformed in an alchemical marriage with the King, or Spirit. At the same time, the image definitely contains autobiographical characteristics, as seen particularly in the narrative style, which is very close to that of her late, personal diaries, and in the description of Elsa’s room and everyday life: “By the bed were her warm felt boots with socks inside, which she had been given six years ago by her late mother” (Guro RGALI, 14).

The internal development of Guro’s story is built around the metaphysical interrelationship of these two images, broken into prosaic and poetic visionary fragments, which are sometimes entitled and marked out in the text, sometimes smoothly move from one to the other, in which the realism of a detail or episode is suddenly combined with the poetics of dreams, hallucinations and revelations. The central place in the story’s structure is occupied by a vision of Resurrection and Birth, connected to a central theme in Guro’s work: death and resurrection. This time it is presented using the alchemical purification of matter (“And everything that can move from life to death, from perishability, can become imperishable and, for you, death itself will be a sign of immortality. It is but *a movement*”), resurrection as liberation (“Those for whom death itself comes lie and wait and suffer, but those for whom death is an action are free”), victory “over flesh and time”: “For you came to destroy flesh and time”, Elsa exclaims to her son (Guro RGALI, 58, 61, 11).

We recall that the basic aim of alchemical work is not the creation of a particular recipe for transforming lead into gold (this is a late, vulgar interpretation of the alchemical tradition), but the transmutation and purification of incomplete primary matter and its transformation into the philosopher’s stone, symbolic gold, the so-called “sun of the philosophers”, which is invisible to many. The meditative aspect of alchemical work turns it into a psychic process of transformation which is parallel to the chemical process. In one of the precepts of the disembodied Youth, the Knight of the Earth in the second part of the text, Guro almost literally follows this doctrine: “you will be present and create like spirits in all things and all actions. And at the highest step you will attend the chemical unification of substances, change their qualities and give them a new chemical affinity. You will live by the laws of plenty and your flesh will be transformed” (Guro RGALI, 65).

In the alchemical tradition, built on the principle of work (dissolve and unify), the principle of purification is based on the doctrine of renewal as a result of dying, on resurrection through death. This concept is reflected in the basic symbolic stages of alchemical work: *nigredo* (or the black stage, which symbolises descent into a chaotic condition, amalgamation with primary matter, death), followed by *albedo* (the white stage of purification) and the final stage, *rubedo*, which is associated with red and embodies the idea of resurrection.

Often in alchemical symbolism purification through death is metaphorically depicted in the form of an alchemical marriage, the unification of the King

and Queen, an act of metaphysical incest which results in the death of the King and his subsequent resurrection. The King and Queen, the Sun (associated with the symbol for gold) and the Moon (silver) are classical images in alchemical texts and illustrated codes. One cannot but note the constant use of metaphors for gold and the sun in Guro's description of the Knight. In this context, the following details of Guro's narrative are intriguing: awaiting the appearance of the Youth, Elsa dons a green dress with "silver netting" (in the alchemical tradition green is the colour of the Holy Spirit and also of Venus, life and resurrection). Elsewhere she metaphorically compares the image of the son with a golden ray: "a golden ray got caught up in twigs and stayed for a long time" (Guro RGALI, 2, 3). The motif of the mystical marriage is like a metaphysical unification of the main opposing natural principles: matter and spirit, female/earthly and male/celestial. One of the central leitmotifs of alchemical symbolism is present in a veiled manner in Guro's text: "Earth, earth, accept the heart given to you forever... Earth humbled..." exclaims the Spirit, the Knight of the Earth (Guro RGALI, 7).

As a rule, many of the familiar variations of this myth are connected to the act of incest. In most cases this involves brother and sister, while, for instance, in the texts of the anonymous author Delphinus (mid-15th century – Antiqui III, 87) and the medieval English poet George Ripley there are images of mother and son. Ripley's poem was carefully analysed by Jung, who found in it a new religious declaration: God is not only in the body of Christ and the Holy Spirit, but is concealed within everything, in "poor", "contemptible" substances, even in dirt and sewage (Jung 1989, 280). This alchemical idea of God, which grew out of the Gnostic tradition, is considerably more mystical and more connected to magic. According to one Gnostic concept, as well as having a divine soul, humans have a second soul which embodies the unity of nature, having "grown" successively through the mineral, plant and animal stages to the human world (Jung 1989, 280). Dissolution in the mother's womb is dissolution in its natural origin, the *prima materia*, associated with the Moon, Venus, the Virgin, Mater Alchimia, the overall feminine that exists "outside the male" and is simultaneously the essence of all things (Jung 1989, 18–19). Mircea Eliade also examines this concept, which is connected to the archetype of mother earth, nature and its primordial condition. Eliade notes that, according to Paracelsus, "the entire world must enter its original mother", which is the *prima materia*, in order to achieve immortality. Paracelsus repeats this in the following symbolic thesis: "He who wishes to enter the kingdom of God must first enter the body of his mother and die there" (Eliade 1971, 154–155). One can find a reflection of this theme in contemporary hermetic poetry, for example in Helen Ruggieri's poem "The Alchemists Wedding", which includes the following epigraph from Delphinus: "When the mother unites with the son it is not incest because it is directed by nature and demanded by the holy law of fate, and that is not displeasing to God" (Ruggieri, 127).

In the context of this motif, which is not directly expressed in Guro but is definitely present, many unclear, enigmatic fragments of her text – such

as the transformation of Elsa's Son into her Knight, which is difficult to explain from the point of view of logical literary narrative – attain a particular meaning: “Why do you so often call me madame and so rarely mother?” exclaimed Elsa, tearfully. He looked at her with incredible tenderness. “I am afraid that you will recall more than a person is permitted to. You are still weak and I do not wish you to think that you gave birth to a Spirit, as a Spirit can only give birth to itself, it is eternal. Spirit is born of Spirit and happy is the flesh which gives entry to the Spirit, as through the Spirit the flesh shall become immortal. And you are immeasurably happy. But you do not know this and therefore you are weeping once more”. She decided not to ask him of which happiness he spoke, but her tears ceased as a result of a vague trepidation. The night was drawing to a close, the gaps between the peaks were becoming light. It was time for him to leave, but they were not ready. They loved each other, joining hands, weeping and laughing (Guro RGALI, 9).

In another episode, her son is already transforming into a knight (in the text he is called not only her son, but also Madame Elsa's Knight and the Knight of the Earth) and Guro uses a fairly direct allusion which reminds the reader of the myth of Danae: “A strange, enigmatic rain fell on her as night descended on the created world. It was his love” (Guro RGALI, 19).

Later there is a very candid reference to the idea of incest: Trustingly, he fell asleep in her bed, not understanding what he was doing to her. [...] And she was obliged continually to leave that room where he breathed his innocent faith on her in sleep, because otherwise she choked and tears burned her eyes and she was unbearably confused. She was a sinner... (Guro RGALI, 43).

The theme and poetics of sleep, dreams and hallucinations transformed into revelations are important aspects of the internal development of the subject and in the figurative, symbolic structure of *The Poor Knight*. We recall the repeated mysterious images of the seven knights in “shining armour” (the seven metals or seven planets required to complete the great work in alchemical symbolism?), “seven crosses rising to the heavens” and also the numerous mentions of the Holy Grail. We will not dwell on the possible narcotic nature of some of Guro's visions and images, but this could be the subject of a separate article which would enable us to bring together the imagery and logic of the work using the nature of alchemical and initiation rituals, which often incorporate the use of narcotics.<sup>1</sup> According to her notes, Guro practised meditation, contemplating the branches and trunks of fir-trees seen through the window (images of “the lively branches of a fir” can be found in her later diaries). These descriptions of trees, of branches “reaching for the sky” are a leitmotif in all of Guro's late texts. Real, seen and “felt” trees are transformed in her dreams and visions, revealing their symbolic essence, their quintessence. One of the key phrases of the work – “the meaning of a tree is heart and radiance, the Heart united with the depths of the earth, the branches belong to the sun and the air to the sky” (Guro RGALI, 6) – shows the depth

<sup>1</sup> According to Matiushin, during the last months of her illness Guro was prescribed morphine injections for the pain.

of Guro's poetics and the symbolic wealth of her images. The metaphor of the tree open to the earthly and the heavenly reflects not only the duality of the story's main character, the Poor Knight ("he did not simply become a tree, the tree became him" – Guro RGALI, 9) but also the human essence as a whole and the bringing together of the "earthly" mother and the "heavenly" son, the "earthly" bride and the "heavenly" groom. The joining of the physical body and the soul, matter and spirit, the unity of everything – "one spirit in all things" – is one of the basic principles of alchemy, an action concealed in the symbolism of purification and enlightenment: "he entered clouds and animals, in trees, flowers and blades of grass, regardless of size. There was always a tearful enlightenment of the thing" (Guro RGALI, 9, 10).

Accordingly, the symbolic subject of Guro's text is nothing less than an instance of the purification and transformation of *prima materia*, of earth. In Guro, "earth is spirit", "the living spirit is everywhere" through destruction, bodily suffering and spiritual joy: "Everything which is transformed, carried off to spirituality, will soon be freed! [...] Do not call Christ's testament suffering, but call it joy. Not only the sacrament of the flesh is given but also the sacrament of the spirit! I am a transgressor. [...] Through me you too will be enlightened", Elsa is told by her son (Guro RGALI, 4, 12, 11, 28). The Gnostic concept within Hellenistic alchemy of the freeing of a person and their soul from the dark prison of the material world was continued in Christian alchemy, transformed into the image of Christ atoning for our sins. In medieval alchemy, the philosopher's stone was often compared to the suffering of Christ and this image was identified with Mercury (Jung 1989, 222). Alchemy assumes the equivalence of ascension and descent to earth: earth cannot achieve purification until the Spirit has descended to earth. The atonement of the earth occurs only after it has dissolved in the spirit (Jung 1989, 222). This archetype of purification and atonement exists in Indian alchemy, in the tradition of yoga, transformed into the action of being freed from karma (the term karma occurs several times in the second part of Guro's text), the freeing of human spiritual nature through suffering. Jung treats this concept of ascension and descent as the sequence of purification of the soul from the darkness of the unconscious and primary chaos, its ascent and receipt of higher knowledge, after which the soul returns to earth enriched with heavenly power (Jung 1989, 224).

The hermetic nature of Guro's text is strongly expressed in the symbolism of light and colour which pervades the entire text. The Christmas scene is particularly characteristic. It unambivalently refers the reader to the symbolism of Gnosticism and the Cathar church: The winter sun struck with sparks of sapphire and golden and silver rain, playing off the scarlet star on the Christmas tree and filling the celestial cup with a flash of fiery wine [...]. It was that same cup from which the knights of the Holy Grail received communion (Guro RGALI, 41).

Several colours are mentioned more often in Guro's text: blue, the "heavenly" colour; pink, which Guro considers the colour of hope; white, red and gold. In *The Poor Knight*, red or scarlet is always the colour of blood

(“splashes of blood” – Guro RGALI, 32), a holy colour. White plays a similar role, and can be found in many incarnations: “the white joy of Resurrection”; snow “like a christening robe” or “the robe of Christ”; “I am a white flame”, says the light knight to his mother when he is born (Guro RGALI, 25, 33, 42). The symbolism of colour is directly intertwined with the rich symbolism of flowers in the text: “to believe in the spiritual liberation of the whiteness of a drooping snowdrop”; “At New Year there were white narcissi on the table. And it was as if from each star a white, pure flame arose”; “hyacinths and their white curls reminded her of the tender, glimmering body of the spirit”; “white cyclamens, innocent like heavenly lambs” (Guro RGALI, 25, 4, 24, 44). In one of the first episodes, the youth helps Elsa to smooth out a pattern which she is embroidering in wool: “he began carefully to correct the pattern, tracing out flowers and leaves on God’s earth” and the corrected pattern “blossomed with the colours of the meadow” (Guro RGALI, 2). It is interesting that in Paracelsus the beginning of the great work is described metaphorically as the appearance within the hermetic vessel of a wide variety of fantastic plants in all the colours of the rainbow. According to the alchemical idea (like the doctrine of zoism), divine symbolism is poured into nature and transformed equally into the animal, plant and mineral worlds (“and stones (...) have a soul”; “stones will be resurrected and become children” – Guro RGALI, 41, 57).

However, the most frequently mentioned colour in *The Poor Knight* is gold. In her hermetic text, Guro is following an archetype: the divine source is associated with gold and it is the embodiment of light. “The sun shone like gold all day, did you notice?”, the “airy youth” asks Elsa; and in another place there is “the gold of morning” (Guro RGALI 1, 20). Even yellow turns into gold: the yellow flower on a blue tablecloth is like “the sun in the sky”.

In the text false, demonic gold personifies the Prince of Darkness. One of the key episodes at the beginning of the text – Elsa’s dream or vision of a “huge, unbounded spirit” who informs her that her son is a fallen spirit who “fell because of love for humans” and who attacks Elsa demonically, offering her “the strength of angels” – is accompanied by a vision of a golden iconostasis with a shine which is not natural, but “made” (Guro RGALI, 4, 5). And here we directly touch upon one of the most important symbolic motifs in the text, the motif of light, which is central in Guro’s lexicon and in the alchemical code. Paracelsus’s mysterious radiation of natural energy, a natural light which is contained in all creation from the beginning, is the light of intuitive knowledge (Paracelsus 1995, 45, 225). In Guro’s text, rays emanate from a simple couple in love: when the youth looks at Elsa “from his eyes two rays passed through her”, “his love shone” (Guro RGALI, 1, 2).

The spirits of light oppose the spirits of darkness: “they leave wisps of gloom in the room”, says Elsa of the spirits of darkness from the chaos of the abyss; the tortured Knight of the Earth “turned like a lamb towards those lying in wait behind the heavy darkness”. “He who learns everything while alive will never see the hour of darkness and folly” (Guro RGALI, 32, 52). In Elsa’s vision in the episode about the Light Room in the first part of the

work ("The Last Supper"), an "empty, unpleasant chaos" exists outside the window. However, Guro's philosophy denies the dualism of Manicheanism: "It is incorrect to say that one's opposite is necessary in order to develop completely. No, those who think this way are not yet ready to find the connection. [...] A whole person is light with darkness" (Guro RGALI, 17). It is more likely that this is a manifestation of the alchemical concept of the synthesis of the whole through division, the principle of *alloying* primary elements: "Everything is beautiful in its difference and nothing is lost, although it is one" (Guro RGALI, 66).

The symbolism of light acquires particularly meaning in the second part of the work, "From the Precepts of the Light Room". Here light is a synonym for good ("good like the scent of the sun"), which is of equal value in Guro's understanding of the spirit and also embodies the end result of alchemical work, *fusible* gold, the quintessence of spiritual alchemy ("the ingot of sun melted and laughed"; "light and good are very fusible, they are embodied in sleep. [...] For this reason they are omnipotent" (Guro RGALI, 37, 28, 10). According to alchemical doctrine, on earth the heavenly flame acquired the cold, hard form of gold, and with the help of our personal flame we must melt it and make it liquid (Paracelsus 1995, 148). It is the theme of melting matter, the form of things, the melting of the flesh: Elsa "melted into herself and was transformed" (Guro RGALI, 17).

Guro's metaphors are, to a certain extent, decoded in a later text by Matiushin: his article "The New Way of the Picture" figuratively expresses the "alchemy" of constantly changing form, within the coordinates of time and space, a form which is not ossified but mobile: Form is Hercules and a clock organism. Artists, poets and all masters of art fight with Hercules. Clocks are a form of rhythm. Form is Hercules, but if it is victorious over the artist's grief. [...] If one overwinds a clock the spring breaks and the clock stops and constantly shows the same time, as if it and the form are still and become inert. [...] The form of representation of every moment changes and must be ready at the moment of casting. When form constantly changes it is mobile, and that which is constantly one and the same is hardened.<sup>1</sup>

In his work on the origin of the work of art, Martin Heidegger speaks of the "eternity" or "objectness" of artworks, conditioned by the essence of the thing, its matter, by that which lies at its base (see Heidegger 1960). The work of the artist (poet, thinker) on the thing is the second item in the creation of the artwork and consists of overcoming, the "transformation" of its essence. The theory of art of the early avant-garde is based on a similar idea of "transformation". Intuition is combined with exact calculation in the creation of form, this being the first step towards transformation, the submission of the material: "In putting their hands on the material, a person must express their internal concerns through visible forms" (Markov 1914, 32). The second step – the tendency to overcome form and reveal in the work the material itself as an essence – can be seen in conscious anti-constructivism,

<sup>1</sup> See Mikhail Matiushin, *Novy put' kartiny*, manuscript, Mayakovsky Museum Archive, Moscow.

“the refusal of form” in rayonism and futurism, and, of course, in Guro and Matiushin’s ideas of organic art (as the main “coordinate” here is time and not space, which dictates a completely different aesthetic, as occurred in the late avant-garde, in particular in Malevich’s suprematism with its domination by “colour-form”: We are not canonising forms and by coming into contact with eclecticism we have the possibility to constantly broaden our understanding of them (Shevchenko 1989, 68).

The complication of form is accompanied by dissonance. [...] The most dissonant form is that which has living cells, the human form. It is jelly-like, “colloidal” (Kulbin 1967, 16).

According to alchemical tradition, nothing in this world is created as completed. The aim of alchemical art, alchemical work is to bring the initial material, in all its fragmentary form, to completion, to spiritualisation in which “unity in diversity” will occur (Paracelsus 1995, 145).

This hermetic idea finds its logical continuation in the ancestral idea of art of any kind. Art (if it is not a mechanical imitation) transforms the essence of the thing, its foundation, and in this sense any creativity is in opposition to the thingly basis of the object (*opus contra naturam*), opening up space for expression of its hidden, immaterial essence or, to use the language of alchemy, its quintessence. In Russian futurism this ancestral symptom of art occurs in the theoretical principle. It implies the discourse of a change of epoch, a transformation, when words and actions show themselves in such a way that the appearance of their external interaction cannot be confined to any scheme.

This tendency of the early avant-garde is perhaps most clearly expressed in the concept of “art for life”, life “as it is” without the justification of an aim, “without why”: “We are in the power of new themes: unnecessariness, meaninglessness, the secret of authoritative insignificance which we celebrate” (Sadok sudei 1967, 52). With his book *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche was the first to set the aim to look at “science from the point of view of the artist and at art from the point of view of life” (Nietzsche 1990, 1, 50). This idea was the *beginning* of the new art and had an enormous influence on the worldview of the early avant-garde. “And what else? To accept the world, to accept it humbly with all of its insignificant details which are going nowhere. [...] The procession of life. One needs to believe in life,” wrote Guro in one of her later diary entries (Guro, Diary). One can say without exaggeration that it is this, in Khlebnikov’s words, “Hafiz-like affirmation of life” or, to quote Guro, “lively creativity” which is the linchpin not only of Guro’s worldview, but of that entire line of the early avant-garde which was discussed above.

In 20th-century philosophy, a perception of the world based on the traditional division between practical experience and theoretical knowledge will become the main problem: the gap between doing and action and thinking and contemplation which exists in traditional Western philosophy will lead to a crisis in metaphysics. The Russian *budetyane* intuitively sought to solve this problem by relying on the Russian tradition of “integral knowledge”, in which contemplation is equal to doing and the aim of existence is life itself

with its inbuilt potential for understanding the world.

The process of artistic creation, equated with the creative process of life, "spiritualised doing", would become the aim of art for the *budetlyane*: True creativity comes from a much deeper place than is usually thought in the everyday life of writers and artists. It does not happen at the moment of doing, but at the moment of doing nothing and of contemplation, and doing is only the embodiment of that which has been completed in the soul, the body necessary for its life. It is terribly easy, as a result of the prejudice of doing, to frighten off contemplation" (Guro, Letters).

When the completed work of art is like a finished product of labour, the accent shifts to the process of creation itself, including its contemplation. Thought and contemplation are equal to action ("We connect contemplation with action and throw ourselves into the crowd" – Zdanevich, Larionov 1967, 173–174), knowledge is equal to the process of cognition, to existence. Nikolai Berdyaev wrote in the article "The Crisis of Art", which expanded the purely aesthetic understanding of futurism to the sphere of a worldview: One must accept futurism, grasp its meaning and move on to new creativity. [...] Futurism must be passed through and surmounted, in life and in art. Surmounting is possible through immersion, through movement in another dimension, a dimension of depth not flatness, through knowledge, not abstract knowledge but vital knowledge, knowledge of existence (Berdyaev 1990 (1918), 26).

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