

# Nikolay Punin: “War Had its Effect on Us...”

Irina Karasik

Department of Contemporary Art  
The State Russian Museum  
St. Petersburg, Russia  
E-mail: irkarasik@yandex.ru

**Abstract**—This article explores the influence of the First World War on the attitude and outlook of Nikolay Punin. The fact of his participation in Avant-garde and specificity of self-determination in the newest art is connected with this subject.

**Keywords**—Punin; war; revolution; apartment №5; symbolism; Avant-garde; futurism

## I. INTRODUCTION

I first read memoirs by Nikolay Nikolayevich Punin in the mid-1980s and remember the strong overall impression from expanded knowledge. Two points were especially striking:

1. The absolute inherent value of the memoirs from the literary point of view. It was genuine author’s prose – a story not about events as such, but about their meaning, not facts but images, metaphors and nearly aphorisms.

2. The pages dealing with the First World War, which at that time did not exist for us, as it were, overshadowed by the Russian revolution and the Civil War. Perhaps the share of those pages in the entire manuscript was not large, but written with zest and remarkably conveying the atmosphere of the period and the very “sense of the time”, they were memorable and, like pictures, for long got engraved in my mind. Furthermore, he treated the war as a watershed in the fate of the generation, which was young when the war broke out, and in the entire Russian history.

The past impression, which the years have failed to dim, has prompted me to reflect on the following, all the more so since Punin’s memoirs have so far been published only in fragments<sup>1</sup> and do not include the pages that had impressed me in their time. Otherwise, I will draw on the known sources: Punin’s diaries were published in English in the USA in 1999; *Mir svetel ljuboviyu* (The World Lit up by Love), a collection of Punin’s diaries and correspondence prepared by his relations came off the press in 2000; and the

war history of the family scrupulously traced by O.A. Khoroshilova.<sup>2</sup>

It is important to consider the impact of the Great War on Punin’s world outlook and mindset as, in my opinion, that watershed had a bearing on his joining the avant-garde and on the specifics of his identity in modern art. In fact, Punin was unequivocal about it in his memoirs. Let me finish the quote I used as the title of this article. “The war had its effect on us, it formed a divide between our life in apartment No. 5 and “the first Futurist battles” <...> and, having changed the world’s gear, set our lives against an evil background that made everything look at once tragic and worthless”<sup>3</sup> (here and below emphasis mine. – I.K).

## II. APARTMENT №5

Kvartira No. 5 (apartment No. 5) in the Academy of Arts building belonged to Sergei Isakov, stepfather of Lev Bruni and assistant keeper of the Academy of Arts Museum, and thanks to Punin became the name of a creative community that assembled there and broadly designated a certain trend in the Petrograd art of the mid-1910s and early 1920s. In the late autumn of 1915, at the very heat of the war, Punin found there not only new friends (Lev Bruni, Pyotr Miturich, Nikolai Tyrsa, Nathan Altman, Pyotr Lvov and others), but also a new understanding of art. The artist Vladimir Milashevsky, who frequently visited the Bruni apartment, although he stayed slightly aloof, witnessed with his typically scathing irony that Punin “entered the salon being one man and left it an altogether different man. <...> He

<sup>2</sup> *The Diaries of Nikolay Punin. 1904-1953* [ed. S. Monas & J. G. Krupala]. University of Texas Press. 1999; *Mir svetel ljuboviyu. N. Punin. Dnevnik. Pisma* (The World Lit up by Love. N. Punin. Diaries. Correspondence) [Ed., introduction, notes and commentaries by L.A. Zykova]. Moscow, Artist. Rezhisser. Teatr, 2000 (hereinafter MSL). I cite fragments that were not included in the latter publication from the original home archive rather than from the aforementioned American publication. Khoroshilova O.A., *Voiskovye partizany Velikoi voiny* (Army Partisans of the Great War). St. Petersburg, 2002; Khoroshilova O.A., *Vsadniki osobogo naznacheniya* (Special Purpose Riders). Moscow, Russkiye vityazi, 2013. See also Murrey N. *The Unsung Hero of the Russian Avant-Garde*. Leiden-Boston: Brill. 2012.

<sup>3</sup> N.N. Punin, “Kvartira No. 5”. Chapter from memoirs // *Panorama iskusstv 12*. Moscow, Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1989 [Publication and commentaries by I.N. Punina], p. 182.

<sup>1</sup> Punin N.N., “Everyone Remembers that Winter”. Chapter from memoirs // *Iskusstvo Leningrada*, No. 5, 1989, pp. 8-16; Punin N.N. “Kvartira No. 5”. Chapter from memoirs // *Panorama iskusstv - 12*. Moscow, Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1989 [Published and commented by I.N. Punina], pp.162-98; Punin N.N. “Pervye futuristicheskiye boyi” (First Futurist Battles). Chapter from memoirs // *Russkaia mysl*, No. 6, 1999, 13, 20 May, pp. 12-3.

paid his 'tutors' for schooling and put them 'on their feet'.<sup>4</sup> Punin considered the "apartment No. 5" community a new generation precisely because in its fledging period it had undergone a formative influence of the war. He saw himself as an inalienable part of that community and for this reason the common portrait drawn by him has so many individual features of Punin himself. Apparently, aware that such identification was somewhat arbitrary, he repeatedly changed "we" for "I" in the manuscript of his memoirs.

### III. WAR AS A PART OF INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCE

Unlike, say, Alexander Benois, Punin never tried to "drop the curtain" between himself and the war.<sup>5</sup> The war was part of his personal formative experience and he had come into close contact with it. "It is almost 17 years now," we read in his memoirs. "There are already people for whom 'Verdun' is but a historical sign. Fort Douaumont and Fort Vaux, Mort Homme, Belleville, ferme de Thiaumont and the Avaugour forest are half-forgotten names unknown to many: meanwhile, our lives have been tied up in a knot with these names."<sup>6</sup>

Punin outlines a special psychological collision of a "double life" typical of the wartime period and essential to the well-being and self-consciousness of those who were not directly involved in frontline operations. His mindset was to gel into the above formula later on: he called the third chapter of his memoirs "Double Life", that is, a life of "care and nostalgia for those" at the battlefield and "our customary life here already slipping into a fever". However, the motif itself was recorded in earlier entries: "The war – we, lonely and bourgeois, know nothing about that word apart from its spelling and its banal and loud emptiness, but as every one of us has a brother or father on the front – I for one have both my brother and father there – all that makes our situation singular is the sense of loneliness and the awareness that a part of our life is going on somewhere there and that our days here are incomplete, as if every hour of them has no end, as if every hour has been cut short and lost forever <...>. Yes, seriously, for us who were left behind the war means living a half-life..." There is a biographical explanation for the involvement Punin felt during the war: "as every one of us has a brother or father on the front – I for one have both my brother and father there" (soon he had brothers).<sup>7</sup> His father, Nikolay Mikhailovich Punin (1860-1920), a professional medical officer, served in the frontline Guards rifle brigade from August 1914 and after a grave wound in the Petrograd Military District artillery inspector's office from 1916. Brother Leonid (1892-1916), who was four years

younger than Nikolai, a brave combat officer, scout, admirer of Napoleon and Denis Davydov, connoisseur of past military campaigns and true war hero, was the ideologue, founder and chieftain of a special purpose cavalry unit under the Northern Front Commander-in-chief. He had to his name reconnaissance and subversion operations in the rear of the German troops, took part in battles in East Prussia, in the Carpathians, outside Mitava and Riga, sustained wounds and got military awards. The youngest brother Lev (1897-1963), who worshipped Leonid, also had a military calling and training. An 18-year-old graduate of the Pavel Cadet School, he qualified for enrollment in his brother's unit. Alexander Punin (1890-1942) was enthusiastic about natural sciences, attended the university and went on research expeditions. He quit university at the outbreak of the war, enrolled in the same school that his brothers had graduated from and then got himself assigned to the unit under Leonid's command. He reported to his unit two days after a tragic event: on 1 September 1916 Leonid Punin had perished in a scouting operation. Alexander took up where his brother had left off and soon came to command the unit, which was named after chieftain Punin. Chieftain Leonid Punin became a legend: his comrades-in-arms wrote about him in their memoirs and glorified him in songs: "Our fine fellow Punin is father to the entire regiment".<sup>8</sup> Family circumstances promoted a multidimensional picture of the war: its romantically heroic image (duty, honour, risk, danger and courting-death attitude)<sup>9</sup> was matched by the dramatically grim reality (retreat, trenches, explosions, traumas and sacrifices). In the summer of 1915, having been gravely wounded, Leonid Punin received a leave of absence and the brothers had a chance to meet and talk at length. In a letter to his future wife (Anna Ahrens) Nikolay wrote: "Leonid's stories are sheer horror <...> he is tired and with all his heart longs for the war to end. Oh if... If only he could no longer go there! Is it possible that all the best veteran officers have to fall?"<sup>10</sup> At the same time Nikolay Punin most likely felt something like guilt for being the only one of the brothers outside the theatre of operations. Evidently, his self-esteem could not but be hurt by an inscription left by his father on the reverse of a 1917 photograph of him with sons Alexander and Lev: "Children worthy of their parent".<sup>11</sup> Nikolay understood that he had a different mission, that he could not be drafted for health reasons, that, unlike his brothers, he had never dreamed of being at the front and that, last but not least, he had a different, more sober attitude to war as such. Nevertheless, he felt pangs of conscience and accused himself of faint-heartedness: "The more you sacrifice yourself, the better you feel in your soul. Because of this

<sup>4</sup> Milashevsky V. A., *Vchera, pozavchera...* (Yesterday, the Day before Yesterday...), Moscow, Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1981, p. 112.

<sup>5</sup> On 11 January 1915, Alexander Benois wrote in his diary: "I have long wanted to drop the curtain between me and the war" (see Benois A.N., *Dnevnik. 1908-1916* (Diaries. 1908-1916), Moscow, Zakharov, 2011, p. 284.

<sup>6</sup> Here and below, with the exception of the chapter "Kvartira No. 5", the memoirs are cited from the manuscript in the Punin family archive without any further reference.

<sup>7</sup> Punin's sister Zinaida, too, served at the front as a nurse. For the Punins' bios see Khoroshilova O.A., *Vsadniki osobogo naznacheniya*.

<sup>8</sup> Cit. Khoroshilova O.A., *Op.cit.*, p. 238.

<sup>9</sup> A letter (of 13 June 1916) E. Poletaev, Punin's friend and future co-author, sent from the front illustrates this aspect: "In fact, I love war for its tragic air: strength, hazard and death. Heroism and stoic self-control". (MSL, p. 98)

<sup>10</sup> MSL, p. 86. There has survived a photograph of the brothers in conversation, on the reverse of which an inscription in Nikolay's hand reads: "How a young man with a diplomatic career tried to convince another young man of the military profession not to go to war anymore."

<sup>11</sup> Kept in the Punin family archive. Saint-Petersburg.

feeling, I don't have the strength to try and rise. I am afraid. I fear that I will be captured and killed <...>".<sup>12</sup>

#### IV. MEMOIRS: VISUAL SCENES OF THE WAR AS A SYMBOL

Punin's memoirs have wonderful pages recording the wartime sound and colour. One is a landscape sketch from memory: Tsarskoye Selo in the autumn of 1914, when the war had not yet overtaken ordinary life. Punin records a striking change in the natural and social environment: "The war fast emptied Tsarskoye Selo. The town grew quiet, and the parks were deserted. Watchmen alone wandered there in the autumn days of 1914: the noise of their footsteps could be heard from far away. A woodpecker was tapping somewhere above your head – it was a wooden knock on the void. <...> Ducks of passage gathered on Large Lake; now and then they went up with sluggish cries and the swish of their flight could long be heard. Linden-trees slowly shed their leaves; when all of them were gone, one could see the red barracks of the Hussars; there were no soldiers in the windows, the windows were sealed up, one could hear neither songs nor the trumpet-call; the guardhouse sounded no bell for guard mounting. The war... The war has crushed Tsarskoye Selo like Vesuvius did Pompeii. Half of the residents and all the Guards' units left for the front in the early months and nearly nobody came back." Somewhat leaping ahead, it is worth stressing the metaphoric nature of this seemingly visual description. It is obviously a reference to the spiritual landscape rather than an ordinary landscape sketch. Just as it did to Tsarskoye Selo, the war rendered void former notions, stripping them of meaning, abolished the so-called "Tsarskoye Selo world outlook" and made "the defence of beauty", to which Punin together with the Apollo editor-in-chief Sergei Makovsky wholeheartedly devoted himself, absurd, ridiculous and artificial. There is little of the melancholy of the literary epitaph to Tsarskoye Selo in another episode from the third year of the war, when all the romanticism had gone. Summoned for a regular medical examination, Punin returns from the hospital, "after humiliation, dirt, and despair of Russia". He is convinced: "We cannot win this war, we are not capable of any action, not capable of any measured, energetic, responsible, conscious work. <...> There is no trust in anyone, no sentiments about the war; just blind submissiveness, animal humility... They sell everything that can be sold; a place in line, a necessary stamp, a deferment, a berth".<sup>13</sup> Punin gives a detailed "on-the-spot report" in his diary and subsequently includes it in his memoirs as an eyewitness account of, in particular, defeatist sentiments rising inside.<sup>14</sup> The narrative is built on the mesmerisingly mounting and rhythmically arranged "nominative" enumeration of sounds, smells, visual pictures, sensations, thoughts and actions. The result is a stunning cross-section of "the distress of war" and its symbolical image arising from mundane details.

<sup>12</sup> Diary entry of 7 October 1916 (MSL, p. 102). *The Diaries of Nikolay Punin: 1904-1953*, p. 44.

<sup>13</sup> Diary entry of 7 October 1916 (MSL, p. 102). *The Diaries of Nikolay Punin: 1904-1953*, p. 44.

<sup>14</sup> See *Kvartira No. 5*, pp. 196-7.

"...40 berths, lice-ridden, full of bedbugs, clogged mattresses, the smell of straw; filled with tobacco smoke and spattered with spit, it smells of filth, bread, sweat. Two lamps dimly burn under the beams of the ceiling. <...> ...the bitter and acrid smell of a sleeping person, of shoeless soldiers' feet, of boots being aired out; the stuffy and heavy steam of drying spit, uneaten cabbage stew, unwashed glasses, of steaming urine <...>. Night. The unceasing clunking of boots, the bumping of people passing through the ward on the way to the latrine, coughing, dry, uneven, penetrating, heartrending, violent with howling. Dry and wet coughs, some with whistles and with rattles <...>. They curse the war, mock the tsar, hate the 'intelligentsia', harbor dull, envious maliciousness and egoism. God and the holy scriptures. Childish proof, <...> fear and intrigue, coarseness and sentimentality. The war without exception is not popular in these barracks. There is no understanding, no patriotism."<sup>15</sup>

#### V. ATTITUDE TO THE WAR: THE INNER FIGHT

Punin himself had an ambiguous attitude to the developments. Some sentiments had the upper hand only to give way to others in the obviously ongoing inner struggle, although he had never seriously shared jingoistic sentiments.<sup>16</sup> Contacts through his relatives at times led to bombastic national outbursts, however, they bespoke of genuine anguish for his land and desire to find his bearings in the developments. "Mother went to see father in the army in the field," he wrote in his diary on 22 December 1915. "Motherland, accept my humility before your grandeur, forgive your son little worthy of your great name. Take to your bosom the light-minded, depraved and ardent me for there is love and adoration deep in my heart."<sup>17</sup> He is even more definite: "I don't find any wishes here today. They are all there, on the battlefields. <...> I agree to any efforts if only they bring about an issue of hatred and contempt towards the Germans. More and more efforts, people, you cannot be defeated! Blood which boils in our veins will not cool until the hour of glory, of my glory and out glory; the glory of the people has come. <...> We are maturing in the name of your pride. Inexpressibly beloved country!"<sup>18</sup> Right then or later he cuts short his bombastic tirade, adding in brackets: "And this is all garbage!"

One can say that in his mind Punin also leads a "double life", especially as the war goes on: patriotism is wrestling with "love of Germany" in him. He has mixed feelings for both the enemy and the allies. He is with Russia, but "in the chaos, vanity, vaingloriousness of nationalistic sentiments: self-esteem, pride, greed, indeed it is difficult to find peace

<sup>15</sup> Diary entry of 6 November 1916 (MSL, p. 103-4). *The Diaries of Nikolay Punin: 1904-1953*, pp. 45-6.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. him writing in a letter to A.E. Ahrens on 23 July 1914: "England declared war on Germany today. <...> Turmoil in Petersburg has gone to extremes: you may have heard about the routing of the German embassy; I saw it all; the mob is cruel and rough and perhaps as terrifying as any army; something dark and eerie, the devil only knows what it is." (MSL, p. 62)

<sup>17</sup> Diary. The Punin family archive. Saint-Petersburg.

<sup>18</sup> *The Diaries of Nikolay Punin: 1904-1953*, pp. 40-1.

of soul and clarity, and firmness of thought”.<sup>19</sup> He feels the terrible effect of the “cruel eyes” of the mob<sup>20</sup> and at the same time, weaned on the German cultural values, is unwilling to resign himself to its univocal verdict: “Germany is damnation, Germany is barbarism, Germany is the enemy”.<sup>21</sup> He feels Germany to be an inner problem<sup>22</sup> of his (and not only his) self: “Germany! – confusion in every heart, memories, alarm, hatred.”<sup>23</sup> He does not know “What to do about Germany? How can one fight against that which saves you, which defines and ‘liberates’ you”.<sup>24</sup> He had “been possessed by strange ideas for a month now” and “can’t find peace at night”.<sup>25</sup> They must have been painfully “strange” for Punin himself after his brother’s death had deeply upset him. On 16 September he confessed to his notebook a “quiet” rebellion against the opinion of the masses: “In the seclusion of my notebook, however, in the cowardice of my silence, pathetic, mute, completely inaudible, I whisper a word in protest against you. I say: Germany is our future, Germany is the only country worthy to exist <...>. In what political and economic conditions would war not have arisen two years ago? Historically Germany has had only one role in this conflict, the leader of Europe and the revolutionary of Europe’s spiritual order. <...> To cleanse the world of everything virtuous, soft-hearted, of everything past-oriented and burdensome, to make the world new, to give birth to it again, to save it – Germany was called to this <...>. ...she revealed her soul and bared her heart, and humanity rose up against her will and strength with the hatred and surprise of pitiful mediocrity, not understanding the significance of German organized militarism, or the monarchical socialism of her governing system or the futurism of her cultural, her spiritual, her moral ideas.”<sup>26</sup>

Curiously enough, Punin has mixed feelings about his own revelations that may suddenly seem inappropriate to him and he would not “object to irony on the part of my meditations on Germany, especially my shrapnel, my domestic shrapnel, from my office, on the eve of conscription”. He is ready to admit that “the German is quite a beast”.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Entry of 16 September 1916. MSL, p. 101. Cit. *The Diaries of Nikolay Punin: 1904-1953*, p. 41.

<sup>20</sup> “Only a madman or a saint can lift his gaze beyond your cruel eyes, oh, masses. When you turn vulgar, it takes great efforts not to rejoice with you, when you become agitated, only an inhuman force of will or depth of intuition can save one from your nasty eyes. You are agitated and who is safe from you? I am neither madman nor saint, and I am not safe” (ibid.).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Diary entry of 18 September 1916, Punin family archive, Saint-Petersburg.

<sup>23</sup> Diary entry of 16 September 1916 (MSL, p. 101). Cit. *The Diaries of Nikolay Punin: 1904-1953*, p. 41.

<sup>24</sup> Diary entry of 23 October 1916 (MSL, p. 103). Cit. *The Diaries of Nikolay Punin: 1904-1953*, p. 45.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Diary entry of 16 September 1916 (Punin family archive). Cit. *The Diaries of Nikolay Punin: 1904-1953*, pp. 41-2.

<sup>27</sup> Entry of 18 September 1916. Punin family archive. Cit. *The Diaries of Nikolay Punin: 1904-1953*, p. 42-3.

Yet, Punin was neither defeatist nor pacifist. “Should we fight?” he goes on musing. “Yes, we should. We are obliged to fight for the sake of our national life, for the sake of our right to the future.” For the sake of great Futurist Russia, “but not in the name of the loose ideals of wasted France, and not for the sake of hypocritically virtuous England – not for the sake of that true bluestocking<sup>28</sup> should we cast weapons. The trampled rights of Belgium, Serbia, what business of ours?” “To the same extent that Germany heralds victory, we should show her that she is wrong to consider herself unique; she is chosen, she is called, but she is not unique, since we exist. We exist like a colossus on whose shoulders Europe will place a heavy burden, <...> we are barbarians – a great sea of fire. We should fight, beat, and drive away Germany. We should contend with Germany, and the notion that only Germany has the right to the throne.”<sup>29</sup>

The “strange ideas” (now whispered “in the seclusion of his notebook”) are to be elaborated later on (out loud, with conviction, for everybody to hear) in the book *Against Civilisation* written by Punin in collaboration with Evgeny Poletaev.<sup>30</sup> It was a sharply provocative book (even for 1918 when it was published), horrible in parts if we take into account the subsequent historical experience that was to sweep away the authors themselves. The book merits special analysis.<sup>31</sup> I will only make one point now. The book proved

<sup>28</sup> On 13 August 1916 Punin was even more vehement: “How I hate England, I hate it with animal hatred” (Punin family archive, Saint-Petersburg).

<sup>29</sup> Entry of 18 September 1916. Punin family archive. Cit. *The Diaries of Nikolay Punin: 1904-1953*, pp. 42-3.

<sup>30</sup> Poletaev Evgeny Alekseevich (1885-1937, perished in the purges), philologist, translator, bibliographer. For details see Finkelstein K. I., *Imperatorskaia Nikolaievskaiia Tsarskoselskaia gymnazia. Ucheniki* (Imperial Nikolaievskaiia Gymnasium of Tsarskoye Selo. Students), St. Petersburg, 2009.

<sup>31</sup> The book was taken notice of and evoked a strong negative response, thus stimulating intellectual reflection. In April 1920 Punin wrote in his diary: “From intelligent comments on the book “Against Civilization” – I have never seen a more brilliant defense of more repugnant things”. (MSL, p. 128; Cit. *The Diaries of Nikolay Punin: 1904-1953*, p. 63) As an “interesting symptom” the book attracted the attention of Alexander Blok. On 19 September 1918 he presented it to R.V. Ivanov-Razumnik and had a long talk with him “not about the book, of which Blok was of a negative opinion, but about its theme (Ivanov-Razumnik R.V. *Vershiny* (Heights). Cit. Belousov V. *Volfila* (Free Philosophy Association), Moscow. 2005, p. 470). Their conversation continued in correspondence. Blok’s letter has not survived. Ivanov-Razumnik in his letter quoted from the book, for instance, “about the organization of chaos” as a culture objective, a tenet important for Punin. As a result Blok published the famous article *Krusheniye gumanizma* (The Downfall of Humanism, 1919) while for Ivanov-Razumnik the text of Punin and Poletaev became the starting point for work on *Anthropodicy* (Justification of the Goodness of Humanity), the magnum opus of his life (see Belousov V., *Ivanov-Razumnik // Belousov V., Volfila*, p. 485). Polemics with Punin/Poletaev’s forecast for a future progressive social system – “an organised, creative, mechanised, integral, solidary and collectivist whole” – are tangible in Evgeny Zamyatin’s novel *We* (See Doronchenkov N. A., *Russkaia literatura*, No. 4, 1989). In 1922 E. Preobrazhensky wrote his didactic utopia *From NEP to Socialism*, drawing on the ideas of Punin and Poletaev (see Heller, Leonid and Niqueux, Michel. *Histoire de l’Utopie en Russie*. 1997).

a certain link in Punin's mindset and biography between two stages of his life – the war and the revolution. In addition to the conventional past, the war and the aforementioned "strange ideas",<sup>32</sup> it contained acute, nearly physical sensations, such as the drone of evenly tapping "gigantic machines feeding the war" – the first contact "face to face with industrial culture".<sup>33</sup>

## VI. CRISIS. TRANSITION TO THE AVANT-GARDE

So, the war, according to Punin, "had its effect on us", that is, had radically re-formatted the ideas of art in the circle or generation (which Punin called "of the second order of call") for which it was time to look for "its place in history"<sup>34</sup> and with which Punin associated himself.

The general vector of changes was the result of a harsh spiritual experience and agonizing reflection of the war years: "we want to live in real earnest!" That motto defined the principal divides in art life and the basic contours of understanding art. At least, for Punin "earnestness" was to transform from an emotion into a concept or category and to become the main criterion of critical judgement.<sup>35</sup>

The striving after "earnestness" discouraged primarily the hermetic aestheticism of St. Petersburg with its cult of beauty ("neglecting life") and fear "to look into the eye of its time".<sup>36</sup> Time itself that, according to Punin, "had gone by fast and easy" earlier and now "hang over our heads and flowed in a thick outpour"<sup>37</sup> definitively cancelled impressionism, too, that he understood not as a concrete artistic movement but as a type of consciousness: "Nobody agreed to go on living either by an instant or impression".

<sup>32</sup> "The book concept appeared in the summer of 1916 simultaneously at the front and in the rear", reads the foreword. "One of the authors, positioned in Galicia, took the liberty of determining for the first time the true nature and relation of the combatant forces. For him the German idea of culture has ceased to be the allegedly ambiguous formula the clamorously indignant Europe is so sarcastic about. Meanwhile, the other author in St. Petersburg, closely following the ongoing crisis, felt the power of energies thrown by Germany onto the world scene." The authors date the writing of the book November 1916 – May 1918.

<sup>33</sup> Cit. fourth chapter "Myortvye byvali dni" (Some Days Were Dead) of Punin's memoirs, *Iskusstvo i revoliutsiya*.

<sup>34</sup> Kwartira No. 5. *Panorama iskusstv*-12. Moscow, 1990, p. 180.

<sup>35</sup> "I would like to see more earnestness in art, I want to assert that we all have overestimated beauty in the past decades. Art is beautiful, but it is not only beautiful. Anyhow, Russian art is great precisely because it is less beautiful than others and more... what? – heroic, spiritual, dramatic, mysterious than others – no, I'll use none of these words – it is more humane than others and more earnest and sensible than others," Punin wrote to his wife on 19 July 1916 (MSL, p. 98). "Ice had broken up" somewhat earlier. In the well-known *Apollo* article of 1913 *Puti sovremennogo iskusstva* (The Roads of Modern Art) Punin dreamed that "not mood but feeling, not infatuation but love, not gesture but movement" accompany our life that we want to live, after we have played for so long" (*Apollo*, No. 9, 1913, p. 56). However, those were still vague wishes. See also Karasik I.N., "N.N. Punin i 'novoye iskusstvo'" // *Iskusstvo XX veka. Vospory otechestvennogo i zarubezhnogo iskusstva*. St. Petersburg, 1996. Issue 5, pp. 57-68.

<sup>36</sup> Cit. the fourth chapter of Punin's memoirs, *Iskusstvo i revoliutsiya*.

<sup>37</sup> N.N. Punin, *Kwartira No. 5*, p. 174.

That was the invariable keynote of his thoughts of those years.

The self-identification of the generation was especially painful, Punin believed, because it was above all a rebellion against its own youth "carefully packed in aestheticism". He endlessly stressed that the war strongly interfered in those processes: "We rebelled because war demanded that from us;" "the Symbolists were our 'fathers' and, had there been no war, we might have not become 'ungrateful children'."

Punin increasingly drifted away from Sergei Makovsky and the "Apollo course", entered open polemics with Alexander Benois<sup>38</sup> and began to cooperate with Severnyia zapiski, a literary-political journal of the radical intelligentsia, thinking no longer of the "roads of modern art"<sup>39</sup> ("cooled down towards conclusions"), but about the current events of art life. He abandoned Andrei Rublev, Japanese art and Boris Grigoriev<sup>40</sup> and entered the avant-garde related artistic environment,<sup>41</sup> absorbed Cubism and wrote about young artists, "divined by him as the future of art".

At the same time war experience coupled with the St. Petersburg origin influenced self-identification inside the avant-garde. Punin and his friends set themselves off against the foolhardiness of the "first Futurist battles"<sup>42</sup> and "racing tests of the Futurist derby",<sup>43</sup> making exception only for Tatlin and Khlebnikov. The same war-induced desire "to live in earnest" was a watershed here as well. Hence, dislike for the movement's characteristics, such as epatage, attitude to "art as scandal", pursuit of novelty no matter what and catchword mongering. Hence his striving after "strong and simple", comprehensible and necessary art, search for "means of mastering reality" and "getting an iron grip on reality", and the choice of the "direct and only way through material to quality".<sup>44</sup> Linking the "live in earnest" formula with creative behavior and world outlook is understandable, but it is surprising that it was directly linked with form and method there. A cause-and-effect sequence thus formed of war – "life in earnest" – reality – work, job – form/material. "The war demanded from us above all that we work in material. It dealt its first blow at the ideas, views and opinions. It needed qualified specialists. It devoured with fury those who could do nothing, like poorly armed Russian soldiers. Meanwhile, <...> our youth was in many respects an assertion of dilettantism." Under the circumstances form

<sup>38</sup> See Punin N.N., Open letter to A.N. Benois // *Rech*, No. 69, 11 March 1916.

<sup>39</sup> In 1913 Punin published a large article "Puti sovremennogo iskusstva i russkaia ikonopis" (The Roads of Modern Art and Russian Icon Painting) in *Apollo* (No.1).

<sup>40</sup> See Punin N.N., "Andrei Rublev" (*Apollo*, No. 2, 1915); "Japanese Engraving" (*Apollo*, Nos. 6-7, 1915); "Boris Grigoriev's Drawings" (*Apollo*, Nos. 8-9, 1915).

<sup>41</sup> Movement in that direction started earlier, but Punin was then but an outside observer: "I have big trouble with Makovsky," he wrote to his wife on 30 November 1913. "There is more to come: the thing is that I has visited the Union of Youth and am clamouring the world over: 'Futurism is a great art; it is all one should still think about'. You see, within a month or so I will no longer be able to work in *Apollo*" (MSL, p. 54).

<sup>42</sup> The title of the first chapter of Punin's memoirs.

<sup>43</sup> Punin N.N. *Kwartira No.5*, p. 182.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*.

was for the artist the needed professional “ability to make” while material served as a direct channel of communication with reality, without which there could be no art meeting the challenge of war. “Apartment No. 5” did not accept Malevich – “the very thought of objectlessness (that is, ‘ideas and views’. – I.K.) was unbearable”; it cut all the ways and, robbing life of material qualities, deprived it of art<sup>45</sup> – and chose Tatlin for teacher.

Throughout his life Punin retained those priorities: while giving his due to Malevich he would always prefer Tatlin and the line in art he personified.

Describing in his memoirs the changed appearance of “apartment No. 5” in 1916 Punin remarks: “everywhere there lay ‘materials’ (his quotes convey both irony and ‘conceptuality’). Then he abandons himself with some burning delight to their endlessly mounting enumeration (the same method used in the Nikolaevsky Hospital): “iron, tin, glass, cable, cardboard, leather, some putty, lacquers and varnishes; a lathe, saws, files, various pincers, drills, sandpaper, and emery paper of different sorts and grades had appeared from who knows where”. The “list” of actions made “throughout 1916” is just as forceful: “We sawed, planed, cut, ground, stretched, and glued. We almost forgot about easel-painting. We spoke only of contrasts, of links, of tension, of the angle of a cut, of textures”<sup>46</sup>.

His articles of 1915-6 still abound in Apollo meanings and colours. Nevertheless, Punin does his best to combat aestheticism divorced “from the very essence of life”, criticises Petrov-Vodkin for “ignoring life”<sup>47</sup>, holds up the “daring and truly young united under the name of Futurists” as an example for the young of the “World of Art”, singles out and asks to remember none other than Udaltsova, Popova and Pestel.<sup>48</sup> He, who did not appreciate even Cézanne not so long previously, thinks highly of Picasso and states his strong and beneficial influence on Russian art,<sup>49</sup> and notices Malevich and Kandinsky, although without accepting their work.<sup>50</sup> He already writes about “his own” (Miturich, Tyrsa, Bruni and Lvov), who, unlike many others, think about “form as such that really and irrefutably exists in space, self-sufficient and full-fledged”,<sup>51</sup> and about absolute form “outside the chance of light and air”,<sup>52</sup> definitively challenging and overcoming impressionism. He contrasts

such (“real”, “vital”) form with aesthetical – make-belief, fortuitous, superficial, transient and empty – form.<sup>53</sup> He already sees Futurism as a whole as “powerful and rich enough to become a world outlook and to encompass all aspects of human life and laws of human relations”.<sup>54</sup>

The perception experience gained in wartime (“in our minds the war is associated with a new sense of space”) developed in Punin an amazing ability to “read” form. Like no other else, he saw “time and place” in and through it. From now on form for Punin means not only “how”, but “what about” and “what for”, with “scheme” and “method” as its opposites. Two examples: Picasso – “is walking on the edge of the world, having a direct connection with the universe and a radio broadcast to the ages.” “Only in front of Tatlin’s ‘reliefs’ do you feel that the world is insignificant. Pieces of creativity, pieces of beauty, pieces of truth. The era of European aesthetics. The only way. Let soul become a ‘relief’.” “Relief is the true state of a suitable decent soul. All instincts of soul are in dry and elaborated forms.”<sup>55</sup>

## VII. CONCLUSION

To sum up, Punin designated the beginning of his “new life” by late 1915 – it was then that he was “dragged out of a quagmire” and “taught ... new measures, new meaning, new qualities”. “Time and place”, Punin believed, worked that turnover in him. The Great War and small “Apartment No. 5”.

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<sup>45</sup> Punin N.N. *Kvartira No. 5*, p. 183.

<sup>46</sup> Punin N.N. *Kvartira No. 5*, p. 194. Cit. *The Diaries of Nikolay Punin: 1904-1953*, p. 30.

<sup>47</sup> “Life is what art demands in addition to painting. Life, real life, unretouched by the heraldic symbols of the past” (Punin N.N., “Po vystavkam” (Exhibitions Review) // *Severnyye zapiski*, May-June 1915, p. 153.

<sup>48</sup> Punin N.N., “Vystavka sovremennoi zhivopisi” (Modern Painting Exhibition) // *Severnyye zapiski*, December 1916, pp. 24-5.

<sup>49</sup> Punin N.N., “Risunki neskolkikh ‘molodykh’” (Drawings by Several ‘Young’ Artists) // *Apollo*, Nos. 4-5, 1916. Cit. N.N. Punin., *Russkoye i sovetskoye iskusstvo* (Russian and Soviet Art). Moscow, 1976, p. 146.

<sup>50</sup> Punin N.N., “Vystavka sovremennoi zhivopisi”, p. 26

<sup>51</sup> Punin N.N., “Mir iskusstva” (The World of Art) // *Severnyye zapiski*, November-December 1915, pp. 215, 214.

<sup>52</sup> Punin N.N., “Risunki neskolkikh ‘molodykh’”, p. 148.

<sup>53</sup> Punin N.N., “Po vystavkam” (Exhibitions Review) // *Severnyye zapiski*, March 1916, p. 114.

<sup>54</sup> Letter to A.E. Ahrens, 28 July 1916 (MSL, pp. 97-8).

<sup>55</sup> Diary entry of 23 October 1916 (MSL, p. 103).