History, and its demonstrable facts, imposes scruples upon interpretation. The initial fact here is that the publication in December 1912 of the Futurist manifesto, *A Slap in the Face of Public Taste*, caused no uproar, no scandal. But what did catapult David Burliuk, his friends, and their cause into public prominence was a fortuitous event that occurred the following month. On 13 January 1913, one Avram Balashev, an icon painter, mentally de- ranged, entered the Tret’iakov Gallery in Moscow and slashed Il’ia Repin’s painting, *Ivan the Terrible*. The essence of that canvas is melodrama: in a fit of rage, Ivan has just dealt his son a mortal blow, and, stricken with remorse, Ivan clutches the blood-stained body. The painting, executed in 1884, exemplifies the historical genre of that era. Three decades later, this picture had been enshrined by many art historians, critics, and the general public as a masterpiece of Russian Realism.

It must be noted at the outset that the Realist school was not regarded by the Russian public as just another trend in the continuum of art history. Since the 1870s, Russian Realism had been cherished not only for its intrinsic appeal but also for other reasons: it liberated artistic expression from dependence on West European exemplars and infused it with a readily identifiable national idiom. Bolstered with patriotic pride, Realism held stage center in St. Petersburg and the provinces much longer than elsewhere in Europe. Given these circumstances, Repin’s painting was not merely a symbol of the ensconced public taste. It was also a venerated secular icon, a symbol of Russian achievement. Hence the slashing was a desecration that created the opposite occasion for an all-out battle concerning the respective merits of tradition and innovation.

As far as the Futurists were concerned, Balashev could not have chosen a better target. Their December manifesto announced “an insurmountable hatred for the language” that preceded them, and Il’ia Repin, at age seventy, had contributed enormously to codifying that language in painting. His artistic grammar and vocabulary were the full antithesis to David Burliuk’s advocacy of arbitrariness, dissonance, spontaneity, intuition, and the rejection of academic training.

In contrast to Burliuk’s credo, Repin insisted on exact and faithful representation of the visible world—with a good dose of temperament to be sure; but still, verisimilitude was basic. It was to be attained not only through rigor-
ous training in draftsmanship, but also through meticulous research and observation. Small wonder, then, that, while painting *Ivan*, Repin read volumes on Russian sixteenth-century history and outfitted a room in his apartment with the furnishings of the period. Moreover, when his young son had a nosebleed, the painter prevented his wife from tending the boy so that he could capture the graphic detail on canvas.

As a professor at the Imperial Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg for many years, and its Rector for a short while, Repin had inculcated the younger generation with these esthetic principles. One is even tempted to use the word "enforce" rather than "inculcate," in view of the role that the Academy played in Russia's artistic life. It was not only a conservative institution, as Academies have always been per definition, but also an extremely powerful organization in a country where plurality in patronage and training was as yet very poorly developed. In Russia, compared with the rest of Europe, there were far fewer opportunities for alternate schooling, exhibitions, and commissions outside the Academic network—hence its stranglehold on artistic life and expression.¹

After breaking with the World of Art group in 1899, Repin became a vocal and popular critic of all new trends that departed from traditional representational art. His objections to innovation not only were transmitted through intemperate interviews and reviews in the press, but also were conveyed in action—by throwing either fits or objects while attending some avant-garde exhibition. These antics were of course reported by the newspapers with much relish and considerable detail. In short, Repin's esthetic credo, his professional activities, his writings, and his temper tantrums contributed significantly to formulating the public taste that Burliuk and company set out to challenge.

Two aspects of Repin's anathematizing the innovators should be noted. On the one hand, the authority of his position in the art world nurtured and legitimized the philistine attitudes that the Futurists were combating. But on the other, Repin was the one who first brought extreme emotional commitment to Russian artistic polemics. Though their styles in art were antithetical, the old master and the young rebel acted on a similar (and quite primitive) emotional level when expressing their convictions. Ironically then, although Burliuk was challenging tradition—so well personified by Repin—with outrageous proclamation and behavior, his manner in carrying out his mission was in keeping with the style—the sense of emotional personal outrage—that Repin had introduced into Russian artistic discourse.