In a 1991 interview, the Moscow Conceptualist Lev Semenovich Rubinstein insisted: "I as a conceptualist maintain that everything has already been written [vse uzhe napisano] and in our native literature everything is already there. And I'm involved exclusively in working with context and regrouping" (Chas Pik, July 8, 1991, p. 11). While perhaps making him a conceptualist, this statement certainly makes him a quintessential post-modernist who ostensibly assembles his material, but does not invent it. However, a close examination of his actual practice reveals something else. I would like to explore this here in detail.

A statement that "everything has already been written immediately evokes Borges' image of "The Library of Babel," in which all possible books already exist. Regardless of Borges' brilliant exploration of the concept, such a library remains, of course, only a theoretical construct; yet it expresses a prospect disheartening for a modern writer hoping to create something recognizably original. With the accumulation of human culture and our contemporary, almost immediate access to most of it, there is a strong likelihood that someone has indeed already said, written or thought just about anything one can come up with. Given the fact that people tend to think in ready-made patterns provided by their native language, the statistical probability that this supposition is literally true must be quite high for short segments of text, though as the segment grows longer the probability certainly decreases. The stock of ideas seems even more limited than that of text segments. Who has not had it happen that what one thought was an original idea turns out to have occurred to someone else, perhaps even in ancient times? Thus the contemporary artist can easily be forgiven for having the impression that the spectrum of possibilities in all the arts has been taken up by predecessors, that nothing new is

possible, and that all that is left to do is reassemble or rearrange existing material. On the other hand, to some extent artists have always been reassemblers, and conceptualists are only highlighting the fact, this being their possibly unique claim to originality.

Rubinstein's works would seem then to be the perfect embodiment of his expressed theoretical orientation. They consist of short segments of text gathered from everyday sources as "ready-mades" of language, written down on index cards and then assembled into a larger composition of around 100 items. His unique card system emphasizes that the units are discrete, self-contained, collected and impersonal. This unusual embodiment for a literary work has created problems for publication, and most of the time the card system is reduced to numbered segments on several pages of a book, newspaper or journal (as here). The following discussion will examine one of Rubinstein's works as an example of his poetic practice.

"A Little Nighttime Serenade" [Malen'kaia nochnaia serenada] (1986), which was published along with the interview quoted above, is notable for its relatively clear-cut structure. It opens with a series of fifteen cards each containing a couplet rhyming solovei (nightingale) with vetvei (branches), e.g.:

1

Solovei moi, solovei
Poivilsia sred' vetvei.

1

Nightingale, my nightingale
He appeared in the dale

2

Slovno prizrak, sred' vetvei
Voznikaet solovei.

2

Like a phantom in the dale
There appears a nightingale.

The hackneyed, monotonously repeated rhyme, the clumsy, quasi-poetic style and the cliched, uninteresting subject immediately suggest a parodic intent, though the target is unclear (badly written, hack poetry?). These couplets


3. First published in Chas Pik (Leningrad) No. 27 (72), July 8, 1991, p. 11. Eng. trans. by G. Janeczek: "A Little Nighttime Serenade," in Third Wave: The New Russian Poetry, ed. Kent Johnson and Stephen M. Ashby (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1992), pp. 139-45. Translations throughout this article are mine and are drawn either from this publication or are made anew to more literally convey the point under discussion. Punctuation in the Chas Pik and "Renaissance" versions differ slightly from the typescript used for the Michigan publication and the "Renaissance" version is adhered to here as the most recent and reliable.