

Past, Future and the  
Problem of Communication  
in the work of  
V V Khlebnikov

\*

Thesis submitted for the degree of Master of  
Philosophy at the University of Sussex, Dec-  
ember 5 1975.

C.D. Knight.

---

## C o n t e n t s

Summary	iv
A Note on Sources	viii
Chapter 1: Khlebnikov's Early Life	1
2: Symbolism and the Idea of Death and Rebirth	9
3: Symbolism and the Conquest of Time	15
4: "Incantation by Laughter" and the Rebirth of the Tribal "We".	23
5: Khlebnikov and the Primitivist Inspiration	31
6: Futurism and the Concept of "byt".	36
7: The Cubist Revolution in Painting	44
8: Cubism and Khlebnikov—"Objectlessness" and the Creation of a New World	56
9: Futurism as the Destruction of Art	62
10: A Language to Unite Mankind	76
11: All the World's Knowledge in a Formula	83
12: The President of the Terrestrial Sphere	88
13: The World as a Light-Ray: Khlebnikov and the Electronics Revolution	97
14: The Contradictions of Khlebnikov— Real or Imagined?	105
15: The Electronics Revolution: McLuhan	108
16: Khlebnikov: The Revolt Against Literacy	114
17: Khlebnikov's Poetry as Anti-Literacy	121
18: Sound, Time, Language and the State	136
19: A Child's View of the World	158
20: Khlebnikov, Science and the Spirit of the Revolution	162
Appendix A: A Note on Khlebnikov and Symbolism	180
Appendix B: Khlebnikov and the 'Slap' Manifesto	185
Appendix C: Some Notes on Italian Futurism	191

---

### Summary.

The thesis is primarily a study not of Khlebnikov's poetry but of his ideas. An attempt is made to make sense of the poet's lists of historical dates, his mathematical formulae, his Utopian declarations and related materials. The first part of the thesis is biographical in structure. The aim is to show the way in which Khlebnikov's unusual concepts and preoccupations originated. It is argued that his yearning to encompass the historical process in mathematical formulae stemmed in part from a reaction against the Symbolists' fatalism and historical sense of doom. The aim of his formulae—like that of his literary "formalism"—was similar in nature to the "magical" aims of pre-literate forms of art. Khlebnikov yearned to master human fate, to change the external world rather than merely reflect it. Khlebnikov's "primitivism", his "formalism" and his "magical" or "world-changing" aims are discussed in the context of similar tendencies characteristic of the wider European artistic revolution of the period, particularly that represented by French Cubist painting.

The biographical narrative is taken only up to the year 1912, when the main features of Khlebnikov's world-view had been formed. The remaining chapters develop the central theme of the thesis to which the title refers: the relationship between the past and the future in Khlebnikov's thought, and the bearing of this relationship on the question of language and communication. By "the problem of communication" is meant the question whether language can really overcome the loneliness of the individual "ego", the separation of one "I" from another. The Symbolists were pessimistic

---

on this score, resigning themselves to isolation within the confines of the "I". Khlebnikov's extreme optimism—expressed in his affirmation of the victory of the "We"-principle over the "I"—was bound up with his peculiar view of the nature of Time. Khlebnikov sensed a kinship between the tribal collectivism of the pre-literate past and an "electronic" collectivism of the "post-literate" (to use a term of Marshall McLuhan's) age of Radio. He saw the Russian revolution as a gigantic "shift" (sdvig), a sudden joining together of the pre-literate past and the electronic future—both of which periods were characterized by language-forms which "united people".

(375 words).

"There was a time when languages united people. Let us transport ourselves back to the Stone Age. It is night. There are fires. Men are working with black stone hammers.

Suddenly footsteps are heard. Everyone rushes to arm himself. They stand threateningly. But what is this? From the dark comes a familiar name, and at once all becomes clear. They are our people coming. "Ours!"—floats the sound from the darkness, spoken in words of the shared language. Language united people then just as did a familiar voice."

Velimir Khlebnikov, Nasha Osnova,  
Sobranie Proizvedenii, Moscow, Vol V p 230.

"Proud skyscrapers plunging into the clouds, a game of chess between two people located at opposite ends of the globe, a lively conversation between a man in America and a man in Europe...

Thus the Radio will forge the unbroken links of the world soul and fuse together all mankind."

Velimir Khlebnikov, Radio budushchego,  
Sobranie Proizvedenii, Moscow, Vol IV p 293.

\* \* \* \* \*

"...the memories of the past and the hicnuncs  
of the present embellishing the musics of  
the futures from Miccheruni's band..."

James Joyce, Finnegans Wake.

### A Note on Sources.

The thesis is a study of Khlebnikov's published writings. The primary source in this respect is the five-volume Sobranie proizvedenii edited by N. Stepanov and published in Leningrad between 1928 and 1933. To this must be added two other collections, Neizdannyye proizvedeniya and Nesobrannyye proizvedeniya, both of which are included (in Vols. IV and III respectively) of the four-volume reprint of Stepanov's collection published by Wilhelm Fink-Verlag in Munich, 1968-1973.

References in the thesis to French Cubism, Russian modernist painting, James Joyce, Russian historical events, Symbolism, and biographical details concerning Khlebnikov are treated as background material of some use in throwing light on Khlebnikov's writings. No attempt has been made, however, to do original research in any of these fields. The sources consulted have been almost entirely secondary ones, convenience having been the main consideration. It is hoped, however, that in some respects an original contribution has been made in relating certain important but little-known writings of Khlebnikov to modernist currents and works which are likely to be familiar to the Western reader.

\* \* \* \*

## Chapter One:

### KHLEBNIKOV'S EARLY LIFE.

This chapter touches on some aspects of Khlebnikov's childhood and early life which have significance in relation to the themes later to be discussed. These include: 1) the clash between Eastern and Western cultural influences; 2) the combination of artistic and scientific interests; 3) the poet's personal inarticulateness and shyness; 4) his anarchistic or revolutionary leanings; 5) his early fondness for the Symbolist poets.

VIKTOR VLADIMIROVITCH KHLBNIKOV was born on October 28, 1885, in a small village near the ancient city of Astrakhan.<sup>1</sup> His family was to live in Astrakhan for most of his life, and it would remain the poet's spiritual home. D S Mirsky has described it as:

the most naked and the most ontological city in Russia, a Tartar capital surrounded by the elements of desert and water; a junction of Russia, Turan and Iran.<sup>2</sup>

A clash between East and West (and between oriental, oral culture and the culture of literate civilization) would form an essential ingredient of Khlebnikov's art.<sup>3</sup> A "junction" of another kind—between the arts and the sciences—was embodied in the differing interests of the poet's parents. His father was an ornithologist and natural scientist. As the poet later wrote himself:

Father was an adherent of Darwin and Tolstoy. He was a great expert on the bird kingdom, having studied them throughout his life...<sup>4</sup>

A fascination with science, with evolution (linguistic) and with bird-songs (and flight) were all later to become reflected in Khlebnikov's poetry. His mother was educated as an historian, and this interest too may have found expression in the poet's love of historical subjects, his search for the laws of history,

- 
1. This and most of the following details of Khlebnikov's early life are largely based (following the precedent of Barooshian, Markov and others) on Stepanov's sources and research—in the present case in particular on his introduction to Izbrannye stikhotvorenia, (Moscow 1936).
  2. Quoted by V Markov, The Longer Poems, p 110.
  3. Compare with Picasso, who "was nourished on that art born of the clash of two civilizations, the Arab and the Lombard, on the remnants of the Iberian and the Roman", (P. Daix, Picasso London 1965, p 25).
  4. SP V p 279.

and his tendency to range artistically over the entire time-span of human existence on earth.

A strong atmosphere of literacy and learning seems to have characterized the Khlebnikovs' home. Perhaps to the future poet in his early years, the intellectual pressures seemed too strong.<sup>1</sup> Viktor Vladimirovitch was taught to read at the age of four, and instructed in drawing and languages while still only a young child. The family possessed an enormous library containing (amongst other things) the works of Spencer, Diderot and Kant. Later, Khlebnikov would yearn "for a bonfire of books"—and would single out in particular Kant.<sup>2</sup>

In 1903 Khlebnikov went to Kazan university. His studies here—in accordance with the inclinations of his father—were in physics and mathematics. The student struck others as unusual. He apparently experienced extraordinary difficulties in communicating. Although he could write, he was so shy that to others it almost seemed that he was incapable of speaking at all. An acquaintance recalls:

I got to know Khlebnikov in Kazan, eighteen months or two years prior to his departure to St Petersburg. At that time he was a natural science student and often stayed at our place. He was shy, modest, keeping almost no acquaintances, virtually without friends at all. We were very probably the only family with whom he felt he could just be himself. He used to come every day and sit down in a corner, staying all evening without uttering a word. He would just sit there, wringing his hands, smiling

- 
1. Much of Khlebnikov's later poetry and thought can be interpreted as a revolt against literacy, bookishness and growing-up. However, he remained emotionally close to his family throughout his life.
  2. SP V p 183.

and listening. He was considered something of a crank. When he spoke, it was in a very quiet voice, almost a whisper—which seemed strange in view of his large size. There were times when he did talk loudly, so it must have been mainly out of shyness that he whispered. He was clumsy and stooped; even in summer he wore a long, black overcoat.<sup>1</sup>

The struggle for the human voice—and against the experience of inarticulateness—was to be central to Khlebnikov's poetry and his experiments with the written word.<sup>2</sup>

Almost immediately on entering University, Khlebnikov became involved in a student demonstration. The occasion was a protest against the ill-treatment of a student social-democrat who had committed suicide while under arrest. The poet's mother writes:

On November 5 there was a student demonstration. The police dispersed the participants. Father went up and tried to persuade Vitya to go away but he stayed. When arrests began to be made, many ran off, almost under the hooves of the mounted police. Vitya would not run; he stayed put. As he explained afterwards: "Well, somebody had to answer them!"<sup>3</sup>

It was the start of a life-time's attempt to answer what he would later describe as "the states of space".<sup>4</sup> The experience left its mark. Khlebnikov's mother explains:

They took his name and the following day led him to prison. He spent a month inside... From that time on he underwent a change which transformed him beyond recognition. All his cheerfulness vanished and he attended lectures with disgust, or missed them altogether.<sup>5</sup>

- 
1. Quoted by Stepanov, IS p 12.
  2. It could be that Khlebnikov attempted to overcome the sensation of inarticulateness in part by actually embodying it in his poetic language. It was in relation to this that Vinokur wrote of the "bottomless abysses and gloomy chasms of Khlebnikov's inarticulateness" (G. Vinokur, "Khlebnikov", Russkij Sovremennik, No 4 1924, p 222; quoted by Markov, The Longer Poems, p 31).
  3. Quoted by Stepanov, op cit p 10.
  4. V. Khlebnikov, Choix de poemes, Paris 1967 p 102.
  5. Quoted by Stepanov, loc cit.

He was sent down from University in February 1904, although he was re-admitted in July of the same year. It was at about this time that Khlebnikov began writing poetry, some of it in imitation of Russian folk-lore.

Khlebnikov was deeply affected by the sinking of the Russian fleet by the Japanese at Tsushima, and made a pledge, which he carved into the bark of a tree, to discover the mathematical laws which he felt lay behind this event. He was impressed with the idea that a new force was arising in the East. He was also aroused by the ensuing 1905 Russian revolution, becoming, according to Stepanov, enthusiastically involved in meetings, in protecting Jews from pogroms and in the work of an unknown revolutionary-terrorist circle. His sister recalls:

I remember how joyfully he first went to university. Everyone looked inquisitively at this blue-eyed lad in his brand-new student's uniform. But that was only at first. The lectures began to dissatisfy him, he began skipping them, preferring to read books instead. Then, probably around the year 1905, he began taking an interest in politics, and then in the revolutionary movement. I remember how he once locked the door of his room and solemnly took out from under the bed a gendarme's coat and sabre. According to him, it was into such dress that he and his comrades had to change in order to hold up some mail coach. But the thing was called off. And one day, with my childish assistance, he sewed it all up in his mattress, far from our parents' eyes!<sup>1</sup>

Khlebnikov's delving into revolutionary politics had not, it seems, been very serious or practical, but it had set a pattern in his sympathies which he was never to lose.

In the autumn of 1908 Khlebnikov enrolled at the University of St. Petersburg, where he was to study biology and

---

1. V Khlebnikov, Stikhi, Moscow 1923, pp 59-60. Quoted in: Stepanov, op cit p 11.

sciences. From the start of his new university career, however, he showed a much stronger interest in literature than in these subjects. In October he wrote to his father of seeing various prominent Symbolists (including Sologub and Gorodetsky) at a poetry-evening he had attended. Before long, as he put it in a subsequent letter (to his mother), he was leading the life of a literary Bohemian.<sup>1</sup> To the disgust of his father, Khlebnikov attempted in the following year to drop science and to study Sanskrit and Slavic philology. He succeeded in changing his course of studies, but soon resolved to leave the University altogether. However it was not until June 1911 that he actually left—sent down for his failure to pay the fees outstanding for the previous autumn term.<sup>2</sup>

Khlebnikov had been fond of Symbolist poetry for some time, having been seen carrying copies of the journal "Vesy" in his Kazan student days.<sup>3</sup> He had been particularly attracted by Sologub—whom he would single out in 1912, however, for especial condemnation.<sup>4</sup> Early in 1908 he had met Vyacheslav Ivanov—who had become the leader of Symbolism in its final phase—while holidaying in the Crimea.<sup>5</sup> Then in March, 1908, he had sent fourteen poems to Ivanov for perusal. In the accompanying letter, Khlebnikov had associated his own use of words with a "pan-slavic language" of which he was beginning to dream. The "shoots" of this language were to "sprout through the thickness of contemporary Russian."<sup>6</sup> Ivanov by all accounts appreciated the poems,<sup>7</sup> and became Khlebnikov's first poetic tutor in St. Petersburg, inviting the young student regularly

- 
1. SP V 284.
  2. Stepanov, op cit p 13.
  3. Ibid p 12.
  4. SP V pp 179-81.
  5. Stepanov p 13.
  6. Neizdannye Proizvedenia, Moscow 1940, p 354.
  7. B. Livshits, Polutoroglazyy Strelets, Leningrad 1933; SP V p 286.

to the poetic gatherings which took place every Wednesday at his famous "Tower".

In this way, Khlebnikov's arrival in St. Petersburg proved the start of a temporary but close personal association with many of the leading Symbolists of the period. Among others to influence him was probably Gorodetsky, whose primitivistic volume "Yar" was much in fashion.<sup>1</sup> Khlebnikov's own love of Russian folk-lore, however, had begun much earlier. In the Autumn of 1909 Ivanov's group began calling themselves the "Academy of Verse". In October they published the first issue of "Apollo", their luxuriously-printed and expensively-illustrated journal which brought together the European-oriented "elite" of Russian writers and artists and survived until 1917. With its reproductions of paintings and drawings tending heavily toward Grecian columns, fauns, nymphs, satyrs and classical nudity<sup>2</sup>, it would be hard to think of a publication more different in appearance or content from those in which Khlebnikov's future works would appear. But in letters to his family written in October and November, the student repeatedly expressed his anticipation that his own works would be published in Apollo.<sup>3</sup> On several occasions he read his verses to the

- 
1. Nadezhda Mandel'stam writes that the upper-class intelligent-sia was acutely aware "of the sickness of the age" and "was desperately anxious to find a remedy for the crisis, for the weakness that was debilitating it. All kinds of ideas were put forward, a particularly popular one being that the present could be revitalized by paganism as embodied in the ancient Russian gods such as Perun. It was taken for granted that pagans were strong and handsome, exuding power and health. An earlier attempt to bring back the Greek gods had hardly been a success, yet the people who now dragged out the ancient Russian ones were welcomed with open arms. In such an atmosphere, Gorodetsky, with his wife Nympha and his "Yar", hit the bull's-eye. The first to give his blessing was Vyacheslav Ivanov; it was at the "Tower" that Gorodetsky met Khlebnikov"; (Hope Abandoned, London 1974, p 37).
  2. Clarence Brown, Mandel'stam, Cambridge 1973, p 42. This description applies particularly to the later editions of the journal, however, when it had become the central organ of the 'neoclassical' Acmeist school.
  3. SP V pp 286-88.

assembled poets at the "Tower". Poetically, Khlebnikov was writing with assurance, but he had yet to realize how far from his audience's world he already was. Late in October he wrote:

"I am going to join the 'Academy' group of poets".<sup>1</sup>

---

1. SP V p 287.

Chapter Two:

SYMBOLISM AND THE IDEA OF DEATH AND REBIRTH.

This chapter introduces the theme of Khlebnikov's reaction against an aspect of the Symbolist outlook. Khlebnikov personally experienced the feeling of spiritually "dying"—a recurring Symbolist theme. But, as he came into contact with the Symbolists, the poet recoiled from the idea of death. In later years, he would accept the inevitability of the death of the "I", but only as a prelude to re-birth as a "We".

IN HIS ST. PETERSBURG STUDENT DAYS, Khlebnikov's apparent psychological problems and speech-difficulties remained as severe as ever. The composer Matyushin met him in the autumn of 1908 and became one of Khlebnikov's few relatively-close friends. He recalls:

He was extraordinarily quiet and in a permanent state of concentration. His forehead seemed contorted with a stupendous inner labour (even when in fact he was composing the merriest of jokes). When spoken to, he became embarrassed and responded incoherently and in a whisper. In his relations with his comrades he was extraordinarily reserved, and livened up only in a discussion over some new publication or common enterprise... In his everyday life V. Khlebnikov was as helpless as a child, and terribly absent-minded. During dinner he would raise to his mouth a box of matches instead of his bread, and in leaving he would forget his hat. He was so quiet and shy that one often forgot he was there at all...

Working days on end on his numerical researches in the public library, Khlebnikov would forget to eat or drink and sometimes came home so exhausted—looking grey from hunger and loss of sleep—and yet in such a deep state of concentration, that it was only with difficulty that one could tear him from his calculations and sit him down to eat.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, the young poet was apparently going through a personal crisis. His letters to his parents throughout the second half of 1909 speak repeatedly of his feelings of "tiredness", "deathly boredom" and "age".<sup>2</sup> To Ivanov he wrote on June 10:

---

1. Quoted by Stepanov, p 18.

2. In a letter dated October 16 to his mother he wrote that many of the "Academy" group prophesied that he would go far; he added, however: "But I have grown very tired and old" (SP V 287). See also letters dated 28 December, 1909, 30 December 1909 and a letter to the poet's father which is undated but probably written in 1910 (SP V pp 291-2).

...if it is true that we start dying from the day we are born, then I have never died so strongly as I do these days. It is as if a whirlwind were sweeping from my roots the life-giving, needed soil.<sup>1</sup>

A little later he wrote to his father that his mood throughout 1909 had been one of "tiredness, unconcern, recklessness."<sup>2</sup>

It may be imagined that to begin with such feelings would have harmonized well with (and perhaps even have been to an extent modelled upon) the dominant Symbolist mood, which grew more melancholy with the passing of each year. Khlebnikov's idea of "dying", of being "without roots"—detached from the "life-giving soil"—was certainly not original. It was a general feeling among the Symbolists that they were in a sense rootless, cut off, rejected and misunderstood by their age. Such feelings, combined with an escapist interest in "inner voices" and "the soul", had characterized aspects of Symbolism even before the traumatic experience of the 1905 revolution and the period of reaction which followed. But after this event the note of escapism became exaggerated and morbid. Communication was abandoned as impossible, loneliness accepted as fate. The experience of spiritually "dying" became one of the principal poetic themes.<sup>3</sup>

1909—the year of Khlebnikov's closest association with the Symbolists—was not only one of personal crisis for Khlebnikov. It was also, as it happened, the year of Symbolism's own supreme crisis, after which it steadily fell apart. The Symbolists had lost their way. Khlebnikov's membership of the 'Academy' group was short-lived. In fact it seems that even as he wrote to his father about joining, he was already aware of something wrong

---

1. NP p 355.

2. SP V p 289.

3. Georgette Donchin, The Influence of French Symbolism on Russian Poetry, pp 126-132.

and expressed an unwillingness to commit himself. The group had offered to publish a prose-piece of Khlebnikov's—probably "Zverinets"<sup>1</sup>—in "Apollo". "I pretended to be very glad", wrote the young author, "but didn't care".<sup>2</sup> When eventually the work was not published after all, the indifference was only underscored.

What was it which caused Khlebnikov to drift away from the Symbolists? It would be a mistake to look to particular Symbolist innovations in technique as grounds for his disagreement. Even many of the Symbolists' most distinctive philosophical ideas and themes would have seemed valid to Khlebnikov at this time.<sup>3</sup> There is hardly an outstanding feature of Khlebnikov's futurist and subsequent work which, taken in isolation, cannot be found in some form or in germ among the Symbolists. Khlebnikov's unease was on more general—and at first only vaguely identified—grounds.

Much though Khlebnikov admired and learned from the techniques, themes and speculations of his "teachers", the overall implication of their work began to disturb him. In a few years' time, his articles would make it clearer what concerned him. In their acceptance of silence, their retreat into solitude and their melancholy resignation to fate, Khlebnikov sensed in the Symbolists a death-wish which he could not share.

Admittedly, Khlebnikov experienced feelings of "dying", as we have seen. And there is evidence that he thought it was necessary for the poet to "die" in order to bequeath to the world his art.<sup>4</sup> This was a familiar Symbolist idea. Blok, for

---

1. V. Markov, Russian Futurism, p 12.

2. Letter dated October 23, 1909. SP V p 287.

3. See Appendix "A".

4. Letter to Petnikov, early 1917. SP V pp 313-14.

example, had written as recently as in 1908:

...only that literary creation in which the author burned himself to ashes can achieve greatness. If the soul immolated thus is enormous, it will move more than one generation, one people, one country.<sup>1</sup>

However, Khlebnikov had not any wish for death—spiritual or physical—as such. He may have thought of death as a door through which it was necessary to pass. But unlike Zinaida Hippus, who wrote "I die, I die" without seeing anything beyond,<sup>2</sup> Khlebnikov insisted on re-birth on the other side. In a poem of his own, his "I" dies—but only to reveal a "We" in its place:

Я волосы зажег,  
Бросался лоскутами колец,  
Зажег поля, деревья—  
И стало веселей.  
Горело Хлебникова поле.  
И огненное я пылало в темноте.  
Теперь я ухожу,  
Зажегли волосами,  
И вместо Я  
Стояло— Мы!  
Иди, варяг суровый!  
Неси закон и честь.<sup>3</sup>

This gives a very new twist to Blok's theme of burning oneself to ashes. Death now appears not as the end of everything, but only as the death of a particular state of consciousness or form of existence. It is the death only of the individualistic ego or "I". But this death is at the same time a re-birth into a new form of existence—that of the collective "We". This new mode of existence of the poet is also associated with the distant past: the "We" is collective in a tribal "Varangian" sense. As a "we", the poet marches proudly into the future.

- 
1. A. Blok, Letters on Poetry, 1908, Sobranie sochinenii, Moscow-Leningrad, 1962, V, p 278. Quoted in: Erlich, The Double Image, p 101.
  2. Z. Hippus, "Pesnya". Quoted in: Pomorska, op cit p 59.
  3. SP III p 306.

For Khlebnikov, the road to a higher wisdom lay through this process of death:

We will die  
And having become wiser, will see all!<sup>1</sup>

With the coming of the Russian revolution, the death-process was associated with the death of an outlived way of life, while the vision of a life-beyond-death merged with the image of a post-revolutionary world in which all difficulties in human communication had been overcome.<sup>2</sup>

Early in 1910, Khlebnikov wrote to his father:

For two week I have not been to the Academy of Verse.  
I am preparing to rise again from my ashes.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps one could describe the rest of Khlebnikov's life as the story of this preparation for rebirth. It was a personal striving which found support not only in the Cubist and Futurist rebirth in art but also, later, in the wider social rebirth which seemed promised by the Russian revolution.

- 
1. Night in a Trench, IS p 178.
  2. See Khlebnikov's "Liberty for All" ("Volya Vsem"), SP III p 150. See also Poggioli, Russian Futurism, Khlebnikov, Essenin; The Slavic and East European Journal, Spring 1958, Vol XVI No 1, p 12. Khlebnikov's letter to Petnikov in 1917 is also relevant (SP V 313-14). Here Khlebnikov writes: "We intend to die, knowing the instant of our second re-birth and bequeathing the end of the poem". The "end of the poem" is the transformation of the world through a terrible world-wide insurrection. Mayakovsky likewise wrote of the world revolution as "the day of our second re-birth" (quoted by Stahlberger, The Symbolic System... p 131).
  3. SP V p 290.

### Chapter Three:

#### SYMBOLISM AND THE CONQUEST OF TIME.

The Symbolists were oppressed by a historical sense of doom—what Blok called "the tooth of history" or "the condemnation of time". This chapter introduces the theme of Khlebnikov's mathematical attempts to conquer time, showing how they originated in a reaction against the Symbolists' fatalism, and against the "death-wish" discussed in the previous chapter. Mention is made of Khlebnikov's 'calculation', in 1912, of the date of the 1917 revolution.

THE IDEA OF DYING AND BEING REBORN implies a transcendence of the normal laws of time. In later years this would become a central theme of futurist poetry, and particularly that of Mayakovsky.<sup>1</sup> In the cases of both Khlebnikov and Mayakovsky, personal experiences as well as political or philosophical considerations were instrumental in germinating the theme of the struggle for time.

On August 8, 1909, Khlebnikov wrote to Kamensky of his mood—which he had experienced earlier that summer—of dissatisfaction with "that world and that century into which, by the grace of good providence, I have been thrown..."<sup>2</sup> He declared that he was now more reconciled with this world, but nevertheless wanted to write a work which would express his feelings:

I have thought of a complex work, 'Across times', in which the logical laws of time and space would be destroyed as many times as a drunkard can bring his glass to his lips in an hour.<sup>3</sup>

In January 1909 he had already written to Kamensky along similar lines, outlining a plan for a great novel whose ideal was to be "freedom from time, from space", and "co-existence of the willed

- 
1. Stahlberger, op cit p 112-125.
  2. Neizd. P. p 358. Khlebnikov's sense of "belonging to other times" has often been commented upon. Vyacheslav Ivanov wrote: "He is like the author of the Slovo, who, by some miracle, continues to live in our age" (quoted by Markov, The Longer Poems, p 22). Osip Mandel'stam wrote: "Khlebnikov does not know what a contemporary means. He is a citizen of all history, of the whole structure of language and poetry. He is an idiotic Einstein who cannot make out what is nearer, a railroad bridge or the 'Igor Tale'" Burya i natisk, Collected Works of Mandel'stam, (ed G.P. Struve and B.A. Filippov N.Y. 1966) I p 390.
  3. Neizd. P. 358. Compare with Louise Bogan's comment that, as Joyce was writing his Finnegans Wake over seventeen years, "Something unheard of and extraordinary was happening to language, history, time, space and causality..." Nation, May 6 1939, Denning, op cit pp 533-5.

and the willing." It was to depict "the life of our time, bound up with the time of Vladimir the Red Sun", and to be composed of dramatic and other fragments "all united in a single time and sculptured into a single piece of flow in one and the same time."<sup>1</sup> This was to be the start of an obsession with the "conquest of time" which would remain with Khlebnikov until the end of his life. One of the very last written expressions of this aim was to be a letter to P V Miturin written on March 14, 1922. By this time he had completely re-arranged his earlier systems and come to the conclusion that "in time there occurs a negative shift through 3<sup>n</sup> days and a positive one through 2<sup>n</sup> days" enabling him to construct "an edifice purely of threes and twos". After a series of dates and computations (incorporating the dates December 22 1905—the Moscow insurrection—and March 13, 1917—the February revolution—among others) he wrote:

When the future, thanks to such computations, becomes transparent, the sensation of time is lost, and it seems that you are standing motionless on the deck of the foresight of the future. The sensation of time disappears and it resembles a field before and a field behind, turning into a kind of space... I hope to publish the law of time and will then be free.<sup>2</sup>

The last line shows how Khlebnikov related the solution of his personal problems to the definitive and published solution of the "problem of time".

How is the genesis of Khlebnikov's time-theories to be explained? It would be a mistake to argue that Khlebnikov's early Symbolist environment—and his reaction to it—can in itself afford a complete explanation. One would have to go

---

1. NP pp 354-55.

2. SP V pp 324-5. On February 18, 1921 Khlebnikov had written to Meyerhold: "As concerns myself, I have achieved the promised revolution in the understanding of time, seizing the territory of several sciences, and I have an inescapable mandate for the publication of my book... The book is already completed and written in the language of equations. It's a canvas on which there is only one colour—number." SP V 318-19.

wider than that, to a consideration of the European climate of the time, with particular reference perhaps to the impact of the theories of Einstein.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, one can find in Symbolism itself an important part of the explanation for the genesis of Khlebnikov's ideas.

Within the framework of the general Symbolist mood of gloom, the themes of the immutability of time's laws, the regularity of its flow and the eternal, meaningless repetition of events had for long formed some of the most nightmarish motifs, particularly in the work of Blok. These themes are closely related to the Russian concept of 'byt' which will be discussed in a later chapter. But we may note here that as early as in 1901, Blok had written of his mournful spirit being hypnotized by "the evil laws of time."<sup>2</sup> And much later, in 1918, he was to jot in his diary the lines of a letter to Mayakovsky—who shared Khlebnikov's extreme "revolutionary" optimism as to the possibility of overcoming these laws.<sup>3</sup> Blok's tone was polemical. "The tooth of history", he insisted,

is far more venomous than you think; we can never get away from the condemnation of time.<sup>4</sup>

When this Symbolist sensation of historical "condemnation" is

- 
1. Stahlberger writes: "...in science, the advanced thought of the century has been dominated by Einstein's theory of relativity. If there is such a thing as the "climate" of a period, then the appearance of a literary movement such as Russian Futurism—a title which, of course, indicates the significance of time—can hardly be considered coincidental." The Symbolic System... p 113.
  2. Reeve, Between Image and Idea, p 46.
  3. Jakobson writes: "The idea of the liberation of energy, the problem of the time dimension, and the idea that movement at the speed of light may actually be a reverse movement in time—all of these things fascinated Mayakovsky... Mayakovsky's conception of the poet's role is clearly bound up with his belief in the possibility of conquering time and breaking its slow, steady step." On a Generation... in: E. J. Brown, op cit pp 18, 21.
  4. Extract in Woroszylski, op cit p 248.

appreciated,<sup>1</sup> it becomes easier to understand how and why Khlebnikov's own views on history and time developed in the way they did. They originated in the same rebellion against Symbolism's apparent death-wish which we have already noted.

As Khlebnikov himself was to put it in 1914:

For us, all freedoms merge in a single, basic freedom:  
freedom from the dead...<sup>2</sup>

What happened in 1909—his spiritual break from his Symbolist "teachers"—is described in a kind of parable-form in the first work of his to be published in an individual edition: "Teacher and Pupil". The booklet takes the form of a dialogue, in which the "pupil"—obviously Khlebnikov himself—is confident that he knows everything, and delivers a series of amazing lectures to his former "teacher".

If it is kept in mind that the Symbolists had originally had high political hopes of a Western-style liberalization in Russia, the import of Khlebnikov's claims will seem less obscure. The Symbolists' political hopes after 1905 (and we may recall how important was that year to Khlebnikov) had been shattered. Recent history had run cruelly counter to the Symbolists' dreams. What had gone wrong? Clearly (to Khlebnikov) a colossal "miscalculation" of some kind had been made. Having studied mathematics and physics at University, Khlebnikov felt a natural impulse to apply the methods of these sciences to the problem. In his view, the remedy could only be founded upon a new—and this time scientifically-rigorous—"computation" of the possibilities and inevitabilities inherent in the historical time-flow. It is on this basis that the "pupil" launches

---

1. Erlich explains: "The Symbolist movement was the swan song of that part of the Russian intelligentsia which was drawn from the gentry or upper middle class. It was the product of a culture which achieved a high degree of intellectual and aesthetic sophistication only to find itself faced with the prospect of inevitable extinction. As the historical cataclysm of revolution drew nearer, the world of the Symbolist poet began to crumble"—Russian Formalism, The Hague, 1965, p 34.

2. SP V p 195.

his attack.

"I have sought the laws", he declares, "which govern the destinies of peoples."<sup>1</sup> There follows, amazingly, a mathematical answer to the historical dilemma. With a mass of computations and formulae, it is argued that the major events of world history are not random events or the outcome of men's will or whims. They are subject to law, and to a law so rigorous that it can be expressed in an algebraic equation. Excitedly—in the tone of someone who has found the key to all the mysteries of the universe—the details are explained. The collapses of states and empires have occurred at regular intervals, the wave-length or lapse of time between each fall being calculable according to the formula

$$z = (365 + 48y)x$$

where  $z$  is the period of years between the events, and  $x$  and  $y$  are low numbers, positive or negative in the case of  $y$ . The destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, the Norman Conquest of Britain in 1066 and a mass of other dates are listed and their agreement with the formula explained. The computations conclude with a prediction which was to become famous:

But in the year 534, the kingdom of the Vandals was subjugated. Should we not expect the fall of a state in 1917 ?<sup>2</sup>

Later in the year of this booklet's printing (1912), the first manifesto of the Futurists was published. This too included a table of Khlebnikov's dates in simplified form, placed one under the other. Shklovsky recalls:

- 
1. SP V p 175.
  2. Ibid p 179.

They were placed in blocks: it was assumed that dates differed by the number 317 or its multiple. The last line was: "Someone 1917."

I met the fair-haired, quiet Khlebnikov, dressed in a black coat buttoned up to his neck, at some occasion or other.

"The dates in the book," I said, "are the year when great empires fell. Do you think that our empire will fall in the year 1917?" (Slap was published in 1912).

Khlebnikov replied almost without moving his lips, "You are the first man to understand what I meant."<sup>1</sup>

Regardless of the merit or otherwise of his "computations", the fact that Khlebnikov managed to get the date right<sup>2</sup> naturally helps explain his later reputation as something of a prophet. Whether it was chance, good guess-work, political acumen or something more can be argued about, although few would find it possible to take Khlebnikov's algebraic version of historical determinism very seriously.<sup>3</sup> What concerns us, however, is the impulse behind Khlebnikov's efforts. The final part of "Teacher and Pupil" makes this fairly clear.

The fatalism of the Symbolists which we have noted—their sense of being historically-doomed—is the real target of Khlebnikov's attack. He sees the Symbolists as cursed by time—and as having no answer but to curse time in return. To the question "What are these writers engaged in?", Khlebnikov answers—singling out in particular Bryusov, Andreyev, Artsybashev and Merezhkovsky:

"They curse! The past, the present and the future!"<sup>4</sup>

Instead of cursing time, Khlebnikov advocates the mastery of its laws. His "discovery" of the formula  $z=(365+48y)x$  implies, in his own view, that mankind need no longer submit to an

---

1. Quoted in: Woroszylsky, op cit p 50.

2. Chukovsky writes of Mayakovsky: "...amazingly enough, he presaged and raved about the Revolution before it even began. As early as 1915, at the height of the war, I read with astonishment:

—1916 is drawing near in the thorny crown of revolutions/  
And I am its harbinger, scouting it out for you/  
...like no other, I can see the future approaching,  
over the mountains of time."

Akhmatova and Mayakovsky, in: E.J. Brown, op cit p 48.

3. See Barooshian's comment, Russian Cubo-Futurism, p 25.

4. SP V p 181.

incomprehensible fate. The "pupil" accordingly addresses "the enemy" in triumph:

"Fate! Is not your power over the human race weakened, now that I have stolen the secret code of laws through which you govern...?"<sup>1</sup>

Russian art, in Khlebnikov's view, must utilize this new knowledge and power. It should throw off its fatalism and despair, stop thinking about death and champion life instead. As the "pupil" exclaims at the end of the pamphlet:

"I don't want Russian art to walk at the head of a crowd of suicides!"<sup>2</sup>

- 
1. SP V p 178. The "trapping" of fate by means of "equations" was to remain a persistent theme of the poet until the end of his life. In 1916 he wrote that the Futurist (budetlyanin) had "no right" to evade the task of measuring man's fate and throwing a noose around "the fat leg of destiny". In this brief article he described with a touch of humour how fate would seem once the task had been accomplished. It would resemble a poor little creature, "caught in a mousetrap, looking at people in fright. It will gnaw at the mousetrap with its teeth, visions of escape rising before it. But the Futurist will say to it sternly: 'Oh, no you don't!', and, thoughtfully bending over it, will study it, puffing out clouds of smoke." (SP V p 144). In 1917, the two Russian revolutions gave an enormous boost to Khlebnikov's hopes of gaining mastery over humanity's fate. In a "conversation" dated April 19, 1917, Khlebnikov reports a fictional character praising him as follows: "You have chained the god of battles in fetters of equations, and he lies there in chains, condemned by you, his head hanging low. He is the captive of your project to measure the ray of humanity for the purpose of constructing the first star-state... I see that 317 years is the true wave of the ray of time and that it is as if you carried at your belt a mousetrap in which fate had been caught. Resolve to call yourself a fate-catcher, just as people call green-eyed black cats mouse-catchers. From your learning there arises a single human race, not one divided up into peoples and states"—Razgovor. Vziryayushchii na gosudarstva. (NP 457-58). The Title for Khlebnikov's famous "War in a Mouse-trap" poem-sequence was of course another expression of this theme. Despite his early optimism, Khlebnikov later felt that his task had still to be accomplished. At the beginning of 1921 he wrote to his sister: "This year will be the year of the great and final battle with the serpent" (SP V 315). In April 1922—shortly before his death—he wrote to his mother of his projected world-shattering book of equations: "it's got stuck on the first page and won't go any further" (SP V 325).
  2. SP V 182.

Chapter Four:

"INCANTATION BY LAUGHTER" AND THE REBIRTH OF THE TRIBAL "WE".

The fatalism of the Symbolists was associated with feelings of hopelessness and loneliness. This chapter introduces the theme of the "problem of communication"—the modern experience of language's inability to penetrate the space separating one human consciousness from another. Khlebnikov's "Incantation by Laughter" is shown to have been one aspect of his general attempt to counter this experience by means of a new form of language which would restore the tribal sense of belonging of pre-civilized man.

LINKED WITH THE IDEA OF CONQUERING FATE was the notion of "uniting humanity" and escaping from imprisonment within the framework of the solitary "I". It would not be until after 1917 that Khlebnikov would explain this as the basis of his "transrational language". But from the beginning of his break from the Symbolists, a peculiar "universalism"<sup>1</sup>, "impersonalism"<sup>2</sup> or "collectivism"<sup>3</sup> characterized Khlebnikov's literary work. It is not difficult to see how this characteristic originated in part in a revolt against the extreme individualism of the Symbolists.

According to Husserl, language is intersubjective.<sup>4</sup> It takes place between one "I" and another, or others. This somewhat elementary point can be related to the theme of Khlebnikov's poem in which the "I" cedes place to a "We": language enable this "socializing" process to take place.

But Lukacs has pointed out how the view of man as

by nature solitary, asocial, unable to enter into relationships with other human beings

underlies the work of Joyce, Kafka and in fact a very large part of the modernist movement which has prevailed over Western literature for most of this century. The fundamental insight of these writers, in Lukacs' view, is their awareness not of any unifying or communicative power of human language under the conditions of modern city life, but of its utter inadequacy to bridge the chasm separating one human mind from another.

- 
1. David Burlyuk's expression: Boris Lavrenyev, Novy Mir, No 7, 1963. In: Woroszylsky, op cit p 85.
  2. Markov, Longer Poems, p 34.
  3. Pomorska, op cit pp 83-85.
  4. Pomorska, op cit p 27.
  5. The Meaning of Contemporary Realism, pp 17-46.

It was certainly out of a despair of the communicative efficacy of human language as such that Khlebnikov was to embark on his radical programme for the "destruction of languages..."<sup>1</sup> Languages in his view had become "congealed" and "fossilized".<sup>2</sup> They no longer united people but divided them.<sup>3</sup> Towards the end of his life he was to describe his "word-creation" technique as the "blasting of linguistic silence, of the deaf-and-dumb layers of language".<sup>4</sup> There can be little doubt that some part at least of this "blasting" was directed at the "deaf-and-dumb" layers which he felt around himself.

But a despair of the communicative efficacy of language was widespread in the literary circles in which Khlebnikov at first mixed. A sense of the powerlessness of words, of the complete impossibility of communication between one soul and another, was present to an extreme degree among the Russian Symbolists. Konevskoy wrote: "I am alone on the earth, alone..."<sup>5</sup> Merezhkovsky lamented:

Another's heart is a foreign land,  
To which there is no road!  
In the prison of your own self,  
Poor man,  
In love, in friendship, in all  
You are alone, forever alone!<sup>6</sup>

Sometimes this loneliness was asserted aggressively. Wrote Balmont:

I hate mankind  
and run from it, breathless.  
My only home  
Is my empty soul.<sup>7</sup>

Minsky sighed that he was made in such a way that he could not love anyone but himself.<sup>8</sup>

- 
1. SP V p 271. See also Ladomir, SP I p 198, and SP V p 265.
  2. Slovo kak takovoe, p 12; SP V p 233.
  3. SP V p 230.
  4. SP V p 229.
  5. Quoted by Donchin, op cit p 127.
  6. Ibid p 128.
  7. Ibid p 131.
  8. Ibid p 127.

Osip Mandel'stam observed that in Bal'mont's poetry there is no balance between speaker and listener:

On Bal'mont's poetic weighing-scales, the "I" pan decisively and impermissibly out-weighs the "not-I" pan, which appears to be too light.<sup>1</sup>

Pomorska points out that this observation can be generalized for the Symbolists as a whole. In each case, the poet

seems to ignore whether anyone is listening to him or not, because he knows that he is surrounded by emptiness.<sup>2</sup>

This emptiness finds perhaps its most extreme expression in the work of Zinaida Hippus. Maslenikov writes of her:

Her domain is one of isolation (absence of beings); of silence (absence of sound); of immobility (absence of motion); of darkness (absence of light); of death (absence of life); of indifference and apathy (absence of emotion); of chill and cold (absence of life-giving warmth).<sup>3</sup>

It is easy to see how Khlebnikov interpreted Symbolism as at bottom an expression of death. In terms of language, the relevant "absence" is the absence of sound. The theme of silence pervaded almost all the poetry of the Symbolists. Blok's lines convey its meaning of cosmic isolation:

I await a call, I seek an answer,  
The sky grows dumb, the earth is silent...<sup>4</sup>

The "music" of words could be heard—but it was an inner music, a sound from "other worlds", which could only be heard once the absolute solitude and silence of the listener's inner world had been assured.<sup>5</sup> In Zinaida Hippus' case, as Pomorska writes in relation to one poem, the desperately sought-for sounds were only echoes of the poet's own cries in an empty universe.<sup>6</sup> For all the Symbolists, the fundamental fact was the muteness and deafness of the universe, within which the "inner voices" and "magic sounds" of poetic inspiration were but attempts at consolation.

- 
1. O. Mandel'stam, O Sobesednike, Sobranie sochinenii, N.Y. 1955; quoted in: Pomorska, op cit p 66.
  2. Pomorska, op cit p 66.
  3. O. A. Maslenikov, Spectre of Nothingness, SEEJ, IV 1960 p 309.
  4. Reeve, Between Image and Idea, p 55.
  5. A. Blok, Sobranie sochinenii, Moscow-Leningrad, 1962, V, p 370.
  6. Pomorska op cit p 60.

It was into this poetic silence that Khlebnikov's "Incantation by Laughter"—considered by Chukovsky to mark the beginning of futurism in Russia—was loudly to intrude, followed soon afterwards by the general "cacophony" of futurist sounds. Peals of laughter and potent spells were to drive away the gloom and the helpless sighs. To the futurist Khlebnikov, as to Mayakovsky, the universe was not dumb at all but spoke with a multitude of voices. City-streets, inanimate objects of all kinds, animals, machines, rivers, the sun and the stars all clamoured to be heard. Noise was everywhere. Not only was communication possible—it was possible on a scale unheard-of before. Not only the entire population of the planet, but the birds, beasts, stones and stars could freely converse in the variegated sounds of a universal language. Far from being condemned to isolation, the poet could discover the secret of this language and find himself in the centre of a cosmic process of communication. It was this which Khlebnikov set out to do.

As early as in October 1908—the very month in which he wrote to his father of seeing Gorodetsky, Sologub and other Symbolists for the first time—Khlebnikov made his first acquaintance with someone with whom he was later to found the Futurist movement. In 1905, Vasily Kamensky had played a leading role in a general strike in Lower Tagila and had been arrested when the strike was suppressed. He had later fled to Constantinople and Teheran and in 1907 had come to St. Petersburg to study painting. In 1908, when Khlebnikov met him, he had recently got some of his own poetry published in the new journal, "Vesna", of which he had then become editor. Since the journal's policy was to print everything submitted, it had perhaps come to Khlebnikov's attention that this would be a

---

good way of getting some of his work into print. In any event, he turned up one day at the magazine's office, and—far too shy to say anything—fled away after leaving an exercise-book in Kamensky's hands. After some mathematical formulae on the first page and some first lines of unfinished poems on the second was a "stream of consciousness" prose-piece entitled "The Sinners' Temptation" and consisting largely of neologisms. Kamensky printed it. He later recalled in his memoirs that Khlebnikov

literally jumped with joy when I brought him the journal with the publication of his 'Sinners' Temptation'.<sup>1</sup>

The work went unnoticed, but it was appreciated by Kamensky, perhaps because of its freshness and air of child-like innocence, lightness and enchantment. In the swift flow of sounds and fairy-tale images there was certainly none of the morbidity, gloom and soul-searching of so much Symbolist poetry of the time. The title was misleading: there was no sinner and no temptation in the work.

Kamensky took an interest in Khlebnikov and introduced him to the artist and composer Matyushin (whose description of Khlebnikov's oddness we have noted). Kamenev had met Matyushin some months earlier at "The Impressionists" art-exhibition. Matyushin's wife was the poetess Elena Guro. The couple had already for two years known two brothers, David and Nikolai Burlyuk, to whom Khlebnikov was also introduced. In this way, Khlebnikov got to know an alternative—albeit less prestigious—artistic circle in the very months when he was coming into closest contact with the "Academy of Verse". We have seen already how Khlebnikov drifted from Ivanov's group, particularly after "Apollo" had failed to publish Khlebnikov's "Zverinets". As Khlebnikov felt more and more out of place at Ivanov's

---

1. Put' entuziasta, Moscow 1931 p 96. Quoted in: Barooshian, Russian Cubo-Futurism, p 99.

"Tower" he drew closer to his alternative circle of friends.

In 1908, Khlebnikov was already dreaming of a pan-slavic language, mixing mathematical formulae with poetic lines, writing works based on neologisms and making a virtue of "unfinishedness" in his work. His letter to Kamensky of January 1909 (outlining his plans for a novel embodying "freedom from time, from space") pictured the native soil of Russia as deprived of its voice. Russia's writers, Khlebnikov wrote, had remained deaf to the land's pleas: "Give me a mouth! Give me a mouth!" The poet looked forward to the coming of "the first Russian, with the courage to speak in Russian", linking this idea with the "right" of the Russian people to create words of their own and converse in a pan-Slavic tongue.<sup>1</sup>

The fruit of this concern for "Russianness" was Khlebnikov's "Incantation by Laughter". In February 1910, Nikolai Kulbin—organizer of "The Impressionists" art exhibition (among others) and close friend of Matyushin, Kamensky and the Burlyuks—published a collection of mostly amateurish poetry under the title "The Studio of the Impressionists". Its importance was that it contained Khlebnikov's "Laughter" poem, which quickly made the author famous (or notorious) in literary circles and with the newspaper-reading public.

The poem was an extraordinarily effective practical demonstration of many of the themes and theories closest to Khlebnikov's heart. It announced a return to a pre-historic, life-giving and magical view of the function of art. In assert-

---

1. All this was contained in an article, "Kurgan Svyatogor", enclosed with Khlebnikov's letter to Kamensky. For the letter, see NP pp 354-5; for the article, see *ibid.*, pp 321-324. Khlebnikov's concept of a "pan-Slavic tongue" was inspired by the studies of Russian and Slavic folk-lore which he was making at the time. Compare with Stravinsky, who after leaving Russia in 1914 "was to steep himself in the various collections of Russian folk poetry and popular stories that he had brought out of Russia. For musical purposes, he ignored differences of region and period, perfecting a kind of eclectic pan-Russian 'dialect'. He was attracted, not so much by the stories themselves, their images and metaphors, as by the sequence of words and syllables, and their varied cadences."—E. W. White, Stravinsky, London 1966, p 33.

ing itself as an "incantation", it had affirmed the power of words to magically upset the normal laws of existence.<sup>1</sup> In its form as laughter—and in part as an imperative, a call on the world to laugh—it affirmed in the simplest possible way the theme of the conquest by life of death.<sup>2</sup> The humour was in a sense "primitive" or "elemental" in that it was not 'about' anything at all. One thinks of a crowd of somewhat simple, robust folk—or perhaps wizards or witches—laughing at their own and one another's laughter. It was one of the most comprehensible demonstrations and forms of what Khlebnikov was to describe as "the self-sufficient word."<sup>3</sup> It was peculiarly Russian, being a carrying to extremes of the possibilities of morphological derivation inherent in the Russian language as in few others.<sup>4</sup> It was anything but "bookish", almost every word being an invention of Khlebnikov's through the addition of suffixes and prefixes to the root "smekh-", and the language forcing one to read aloud, with a hissing and clacking of consonants. It was strangely "impersonal". There was no suggestion whatsoever of a particular individual as the subject of the poem, the laughter appearing rather as an elemental expression of collective (perhaps tribal) mirth. And finally—to take the question of philosophic standpoint or mood—its theme of merriment was not unconnected with Khlebnikov's views on fate, history and time. It was appropriate that a peal of laughter should announce the arrival of an art-movement whose members insisted that they had mastered the laws of fate.

- 
1. "...art and miracle are related, aren't they?" Khlebnikov would write to Matyushin in 1912. SP V p 294.
  2. Pomorska writes: "The imperative, which dominates structurally (not statistically) in the poem, very clearly motivates the incantation form. Incantation 'by laughter' carries another hint: the ritual laughter of folklore, which has a magic function and often symbolizes the victory of the good power over the evil..." Pomorska, op cit p 97.
  3. Pomorska writes: "the poem mainly alludes to the folk incantation, of which the important property is that in it, language becomes both the tool and the object—two functions concentrated in one act. The linguistic sign becomes palpable, since attention is wholly turned upon it as carrying the magic function." Pomorska, op cit o 97.
  4. Markov, Russian Futurism, p 7.

Chapter Five:

KHLEBNIKOV AND THE PRIMITIVIST INSPIRATION.

"Incantation by Laughter" was only one manifestation of a primitivist current which swept the Russian cultural world at about the same time. This chapter introduces the theme of primitive art—and Khlebnikov's—as 'magic' in intention, as creation rather than depiction and as inseparable from life in general. It also anticipates, very briefly, a theme of later chapters: Khlebnikov's art as a revolt against literacy in the name of a reborn oral or pre-literate culture.

THE PRIMITIVIST IMPLICATIONS of the "Incantation by Laughter" accorded well with the origins of Russian Futurism as an organized group in the association known as "Hylea". In the summer of 1910<sup>1</sup> Khlebnikov was the guest of the Burlyuk brothers at the enormous estate of Count Mordvinov at Chernyanka, not far from the city of Kherson near the Black Sea Coast. Livshits has left an account of the estate. The ancient Greeks had called the area "Hylea"; it was mentioned four times by Herodotus and was traditionally taken as the setting for some of the deeds of Hercules. The Burlyuks' father managed the estate, living there with his big family amid the vast expanses of the steppes on which grazed countless sheep and pigs. It is easy to imagine how Khlebnikov, with his primitivist leanings, must have been inspired by the surroundings, perhaps particularly by the prehistoric mounds in the area and the Scythian arrows which had been found in them. During his stay, Khlebnikov covered piles of sheets of paper with countless lines of his miniscule handwriting, leaving it all behind him to be discovered and worked over by the Burlyuks and their friend Benedict Livshits, who came to stay late in the following summer. Both Livshits and the Burlyuks were at that time thrilled by their first discovery of French Cubist painting.

---

1. By this time, a major event in the history of Futurism had taken place. The latter half of 1909 had been spent by Matyushin and Kamensky largely in preparing the publication of a verse album. It eventually came out two months after Kulbin's "The Studio of the Impressionists"—i.e. in April 1910—printed cheaply on the reverse side of rough wall-paper. The contrast with the elegant publications of the "Academy" group could scarcely have been more stark, and—as if to rub in the intended provocation—the Burlyuk brothers went from the printers with handfuls of copies to Ivanov's "Tower" one Wednesday evening, where booklets were stuffed into the coat-pockets of the assembled writers—Stepanov, introduction to IS, p 18. Thus "A Trap for Judges" (containing three major works of Khlebnikov) saw the light of day.

Picasso's work, of course, was largely a return to a primitivistic, magical conception of art.<sup>1</sup> As Livshits and the Burlyuks pored over the manuscripts, Cubism and "Khlebnikovism" seemed to merge in their minds. They decided to call themselves "Hylea" and to organize as a definite group. Writes Livshits:

none of us could imagine the new association without Khlebnikov's participation.<sup>2</sup>

Of the estate at Chernyanka, Livshits affirms:

If Chernyanka's role is to be examined after the fact, it has to be described as the meeting-place of the coordinates from which the movement known as futurism was born in Russian poetry and art.<sup>3</sup>

With Khlebnikov at Chernyanka had stayed another friend of the Burlyuks. The primitivist painter Larionov, Markov remarks,

was probably the artist whose work had the greatest influence on the primitivistic poetry of the Russian futurists, especially on that of Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh.<sup>4</sup>

Markov points out that primitivism had been anticipated, in a certain sense, by the Symbolists' wide interest in Slavic mythology.<sup>5</sup> More specifically, however, he dates the beginning of Russian primitivism as December 1909, when in Moscow there was held the third exhibition of the "Golden Fleece", combining fauvist painting with specimens of Russian folk-art: icons, lace, woodcuts and so on. Soon a primitivist enthusiasm had swept through all the arts in Russia, expressing itself in painting, music and poetry. Unfortunately, we know nothing of any discussions Khlebnikov may have had with Larionov during their stay together at Chernyanka. But his presence may well have added to the primitivistic inspiration already provided

- 
1. P.W. Schwartz, The Cubists, London 1971, p 22. John Berger, The Success and Failure of Picasso, p 99.
  2. Polutoroglazy Strelets; quoted in: Woroszylsky, op cit p 28.
  3. Ibid; quoted in: Woroszylsky, p 28.
  4. Russian Futurism, pp 35-36.
  5. Ibid p 35.

Khlebnikov by his surroundings on the estate.

In Larionov's works exhibited at the "Golden Fleece" six months earlier, the effect of primitivism had been conveyed by a number of techniques. The rules of shading and of perspective were ignored or broken: the figures looked flat rather than three-dimensional, and appeared to be arbitrarily hemmed in or cut off at the edges by the borders or surface of the painting. Camilla Gray notes:

One thus gets the impression of a brief moment arbitrarily cut short, destroying the idea of a picture as a world complete in itself.<sup>1</sup>

This refusal to create an illusion of "another world" complete unto itself was to be central to Futurism and to Khlebnikov. For the Futurists, an art work would require action by the public: without this, it would be incomplete. Khlebnikov would continually create the impression of an arbitrary cutting short of his work. He would invite others to complete what he had started.<sup>2</sup> The idea that a poem could be "ended" on paper was itself something from which he recoiled. The only time Khlebnikov was to mention "bequeathing the end of the poem" would be early in 1917 when—on a wave of revolutionary enthusiasm—he would associate it with the abolition of all states of space and the unification of the human race.<sup>3</sup>

In 1911, Khlebnikov wrote two of his greatest primitiv-

- 
1. Camilla Gray notes: "The deliberate 'rudeness' of Larionov's work of 1907-13, his disrespect for both pictorial and social conventions, was a general characteristic of the so-called Futurist movement in Russia—so little resembling the Italian movement—of which Larionov's work is the first expression. In Russia, Futurism came first in painting and later in poetry—and indeed almost all the poets came to their writing from painting, and many of the literary devices in Russian Futurist poetry can be directly related to Larionov's painting of this time: for example, the use of 'irreverent, irrelevant' associations; the imitation of children's art; the adaptation of folk-art imagery and motifs." The Russian Experiment in Art, p 107. For passage quoted above: ibid p 105.
  2. Mayakovsky, V.V. Khlebnikov, in: E J Brown, op cit p 86.
  3. Letter to Petnikov, SP V pp 313-14.

ist works, his "I and E" (a cave-man love-story) and "Lesnaya Deva" (which, as Markov writes, "is written as if in an imaginary prehistoric tongue"<sup>1</sup>). In 1912 began one of his first attempts to provide theoretical justification for what he had been doing. It may seem inappropriate to return at this point in our analysis to Khlebnikov's "Teacher and Pupil", since it has already been discussed in connection with the poet's break from the Symbolists in 1909. Although it referred back to about this time, however, it was not in fact written until three years later, and it has a bearing not only on Khlebnikov's ideas on time and fate, but also on the philosophical implications of his primitivism. There is also a hint as to what Khlebnikov saw as the connection between these ideas and his championship of the spoken—as opposed to the written—word.

"Teacher and Pupil" contained a series of "scientific-looking" tables, with the names of contemporary writers listed in columns, their work categorized under various headings. In each case a stark contrast was drawn between these writers—and the anonymous authors of Russia's folk-songs. Writers such as Sologub, Andreyev, Artsybashev, Merezhkovsky, Kuprin and Remizov were accused of seeing only "horror" (uzhas) in life. Only the folk-song saw beauty. Again, the contemporary writers were accused of prophesying only death; only the folk-song stood for life. The contemporary writers were non-Russian in spirit; only the folk-song was genuinely Russian. The real dichotomy, as Khlebnikov presented it, was not between recent Russian literature and the literature of an earlier age: it was between the folk-song and the whole of written literature as such. "Why", asks the 'pupil', "do the Russian book and the Russian song prove to be in different camps?"<sup>2</sup> In the same year Khlebnikov wrote: "I yearn for a bonfire of books."<sup>3</sup>

- 
1. The Longer Poems... p 94.
  2. SP V pp 179-182. Khlebnikov condemned the Symbolists for being fatalist, Western-oriented, melancholy and possessed by a death-wish. The common elements in both Khlebnikov and Symbolism were real (see Appendix 'A') but it seems extraordinary that Barooshian can write: "Because of this ideological affinity with Symbolism, world-view obviously could not have played a role in Futurism's reaction against Symbolism"; Russian Cubo-Futurism, p 110.
  3. SP V p 183.

Chapter Six:

FUTURISM AND THE CONCEPT OF 'BYT'.

This chapter develops the concept of what Khlebnikov's art stood against. In previous chapters, it was shown that Khlebnikov fought against the "condemnation of time", and it was suggested that his art represented a revolt against many aspects of civilization, including its individualism, its loneliness and its literacy. This chapter shows how the art of Khlebnikov and his colleagues was directed against what in Russian is thought of as 'byt', a concept which in a way unites the idea of being "condemned by time" with the idea of the fixed, stable norms which civilization represents.

THE PART PLAYED by the concept of 'byt' in Russian thought and literature is well known. Jakobson points out that the languages of Western Europe have no real equivalent for this word.<sup>1</sup> He suggests that this may be because its basis in the idea of the immutability of social norms and conventions is something which West European society has been able to take for granted.<sup>2</sup> In Russia, however, civilization is a much more recent and superficial phenomenon. Like St Petersburg—built by decree, with Italian architects and on a marsh—it has always seemed somewhat insecure in its foundations, foreign and temporary. "In Russia", Jakobson writes,

this sense of an unstable foundation has been present for a very long time, and not just as a historical generalization, but as a direct experience.<sup>3</sup>

He quotes Chadaev:

Everything is slipping away, everything is passing... In our own homes we are as it were in temporary billets. In our family life we seem foreigners. In our cities we look like nomads.<sup>4</sup>

Because of this sense of slippage, a consciousness of its opposite—'byt'—has played in Russia a prominent part. The element of 'byt', as Jakobson describes it,

is the stabilizing force of an immutable present, covered

- 
1. On a Generation that Squandered its Poets, In: E.J. Brown (ed), Major Soviet Writers, New Jersey 1973, p 11.
  2. "Perhaps the reason is that in the European collective consciousness there is no concept of such a force as might oppose and break down the established norms of life." Loc cit.
  3. Loc cit.
  4. Loc cit.

over, as this present is, by a stagnating slime, which stifles life in its tight, hard mould.<sup>1</sup>

'Byt' stands for fixity, routine, convention and the boredom of the daily grind. It corresponds closely to the sense of the Symbolists—discussed earlier—of being condemned by time. A good example is provided by Blok's famous poem:

The night, the street, the street-lamp, the chemist's shop  
The meaningless dim light.  
For a quarter century you could live like this—  
And nothing would change. No way out.  
You die—and start again from the beginning,  
Everything repeated as before:  
The night, the icy ripples on the canal,  
The street, the chemist's shop and the lamp.<sup>2</sup>

Zamyatin uses the term "entropy" from physics to cover very much the same idea. Entropy is the opposite of revolution; the two are eternally in conflict:

Two dead, dark stars collide with an inaudible, deafening crash and light a new star: this is revolution. A molecule breaks away from its orbit and, bursting into a neighbouring atomic universe, gives birth to a new chemical element: this is revolution. Lobachevsky cracks the walls of the millenia-old Euclidean world with a single book, opening a path to innumerable non-Euclidean spaces: this is revolution...

The law of revolution is red, fiery, deadly; but this death means the birth of new life, a new star. And the law of entropy is cold, ice blue, like the icy interplanetary infinities. The flame turns from red to an even, warm pink, no longer deadly, but comfortable. The sun ages into a planet, convenient for highways, stores, beds, prostitutes, prisons: this is the law...

When the flaming, seething sphere (in science, religion, social life, art) cools, the fiery magma becomes coated with dogma—a rigid, ossified, motionless crust.<sup>3</sup>

- 
1. Loc cit.
  2. Blok, Sobranie Sochinenii, (Leningrad 1932) III p 26. My translation.
  3. On Literature, Revolution, Entropy and Other Matters. In: Mirra Ginsburg (ed): A Soviet Heretic: Essays by Yevgeny Zamyatin, (Chicago 1970), pp 107-112; pp 107-8.

An event which repeats itself endlessly in the same way—the ticking of a clock, the rising and setting of the sun, the daily routine of sleep and work—belongs to this slime-coated, ossified world of 'byt'. Stahlberger points out that this is why Mayakovsky, as a revolutionary, wants to stop the sun in its tracks.<sup>1</sup> In his poem, "An Extraordinary Adventure Which Befell Vladimir Mayakovsky in a Summer Dacha", Mayakovsky—bored with the grind of drawing posters—suddenly shouts at the sun "Get Down!" Incredibly, it does so, strides across the fields, comes through the garden, presses its mass through the windows of the poet's cottage—and speaks in a deep bass:

For the first time since creation,  
I drive the fires back.  
You called me?  
Give me tea, poet,  
spread out, spread out the jam!<sup>2</sup>

Occurring as it does "for the first time since creation", this is a novel, time-defying event. Time's tyranny is conquered; the poet treats the sun familiarly as an equal—a comrade—and the two resolve to pour forth their 'byt'-destroying, creative light, to "dawn and sing in a gray tattered world".<sup>3</sup>

The theme of speaking to the stars and commanding suns is to be found almost throughout Khlebnikov's works. In his "Declaration of the Presidents of the Terrestrial Sphere", written in 1917, he tells the public not to blame him and his

- 
1. The Symbolic System of Vladimir Mayakovsky, pp 116-18. Stahlberger writes: "The poet is subjugated by the sun, revolts against the sun, and makes a mythical attempt to put himself on a footing of equality with the sun. He cannot accept the natural event as unalterable. The sun is regarded as the regulator of day and night, of the orderly succession of days." Ibid p 117.
  2. Patricia Blake (ed) The Bedbug and Selected Poetry, pp 139-41.
  3. Ibid p 143. And:  
"A wall of shadows,  
a jail of nights  
fell under the double-barreled suns."

colleagues for their audacity and impudence. It is the sun which is to blame, for it has given them their thoughts and words.<sup>1</sup> In his poem, "The Sailor and Singer", his "self" merges with that of mankind, while the human race is to take to its wings and teach "neighbouring suns" to pay their respects.<sup>2</sup> The theme of conquering suns is central to the opening parts of Khlebnikov's "Children of the Otter", set in "those first days of life on earth".<sup>3</sup> While pre-historic volcanoes burn and lava is hurled into a flaming sea, there are three suns in the sky. Before long, however, a spear flies and the red sun falls. The earth darkens; figures stand on the dead sun. The Otter's son (who later turns out to be Khlebnikov) then flies at the black sun with a spear, and that one, too, falls into the sea.<sup>4</sup> Stahlberger writes in connection with Mayakovsky's "Adventure" poem that it is reminiscent of

the solar cults of primitive peoples which recognize the sun as both creative and immortal. The sun is regarded as a prototype of death (sunset) and resurrection (sunrise). Among some primitives there is the belief that one who looks at the setting sun provokes death. Therefore, any change in the sun's routine through the agency of a mythical hero signifies a triumph over time and death.<sup>5</sup>

These remarks are even more applicable to Khlebnikov, for whom the affinity with primitive thought was largely conscious. In 1922 Khlebnikov proclaimed in the name of his "Presidents of the Terrestrial Sphere":

We command, not people, but suns! ...  
And we—the Presidents of the Terrestrial Sphere—ask:

- 
1. IS p 171.
  2. SP III p 39: "Ancient sorrows—stop!  
We can become winged.  
I, mankind, will teach  
The neighbouring suns to honour me!"
  3. Velimir Khlebnikov, Choix de poemes; Paris 1967; p 104.
  4. Ibid p 106.
  5. The Symbolic System... etc. p 118.

which is it best to command—people or suns?  
And with astonishment we see that the suns readily and  
quietly carry out our instructions.<sup>1</sup>

Although here the "primitivist" implications remain the same,  
there is added the implication of space-age scientific mastery.  
As early as in 1914—in a letter to Kamensky commenting on  
some implications of Mayakovsky's work—Khlebnikov thought of  
the possibility of "a victory over the sun with the aid of  
lightning."<sup>2</sup> El Lissitzky later gave a technological inter-  
pretation of Kruchenykh's opera "Victory over the Sun":

The sun as the expression of the world's age-old energy  
is torn down from the sky by modern man; the power of  
his technical supremacy creates for itself a new source  
of energy.<sup>3</sup>

\* \* \* \* \*

But all this has taken us a little away from the theme being  
discussed: the idea of 'byt' and the struggle against it. To  
Khlebnikov and the Futurists, this struggle—conceived as a  
fight to conquer the "condemnation of time"—found its chief  
practical manifestation at first in the realm of linguistic  
form. The 'novel' or 'non-repeatable' event which upsets the  
rule of 'byt' was linguistic. The Futurists' emphasis on the  
sound-values of words, on their "texture", their "inner form"  
and so on was designed to jolt or shake the mind from its  
accustomed routine, to shatter the hold of 'byt' on the reader.  
Victor Shklovsky described the essence of the technique as  
"making strange".<sup>4</sup> Predictable, habitual words and experiences

- 
1. SP V 167. However, Khlebnikov tells "Comrade Sun" that he  
and his fellow-Presidents would prefer mutiny and insurre-  
ction to such docility: "It is boring in the world".
  2. NP p 370.
  3. The Plastic Form of the Electro-Mechanical Peepshow 'Victory  
Over the Sun' 1923. Sophie Lissitzky-Kuppers (ed), El  
Lissitzky, Life. Letters. Texts. London p 348.
  4. O Teory Prozy, "Krug", Moskva-Leningrad, 1925, p 12.

were not really felt. The purpose of art was, by breaking the routine of habit and making things seem fresh, unexpected and new, to restore a sense of the reality, the physical tangibility of living existence—"to restore the sensation of life, to feel things, to make a stone stony..."<sup>1</sup> Khlebnikov was determined above all to restore a sensation of the tangible materiality of language itself. Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov attacked the Symbolists' view of language as something smooth, mellifluous, clear and tender to the ear. This, to them, was a view of language as ideally effeminate. The Symbolists wanted language to be like a woman:

We think, on the other hand, that language should, first and foremost, be language, and if it should resemble anything at all, it should be a hand-saw, or the poisoned arrow of a savage.<sup>2</sup>

Writing of Khlebnikov's language, Jakobson notes:

an initial consonant is often replaced by another drawn from other poetic roots. The word in question thus gains as it were a new sound character. Its meaning wavers, and the word is apprehended as an acquaintance with a suddenly unfamiliar face, or as a stranger in whom we are able to see something familiar.<sup>3</sup>

The "disturbing" effect of "making strange" is discussed by Jakobson in a slightly different context (although still referring to Khlebnikov) as follows:

There comes a time when the traditional poetic language hardens into stereotype and is no longer capable of being felt but is experienced rather as a ritual, as a holy text in which even the errors are considered sacred. The language of poetry is as it were covered by a veneer—and

- 
1. Loc. cit.
  2. Slovo Kak Takovoe. p 10. Mayakovsky, in the opening lines of his 150,000,000 described the poem's rhythms as bullets, and its rhymes as fires spreading from building to building. Compare also with Khlebnikov's picture of words as weapons, e.g. in "Prachka" ("We write by knife!"). IS 291.
  3. Modern Russian Poetry, in: E.J. Brown op cit p 79.

neither its tropes nor its poetic licenses any longer speak to the consciousness.

Form takes possession of the matter; the matter is totally dominated by the form. Then form becomes stereotype, and it is no longer alive. When this happens an access of new verbal material is required, an addition of fresh elements from the everyday language, to the end that the irrational structures of poetry may once again disturb us, may once again hit a vital spot.<sup>1</sup>

Khlebnikov thought of taking the required "fresh verbal material" from oral language, from folk-culture and from "the countryside". He wrote of words being created every moment "in the countryside by the rivers and forests"<sup>2</sup>, and described his word-creation technique as being based on this fact. The creation of new words, he continued,

gives us the right to populate the died-out, non-existent words—words no longer beating with the waves of language—with new life.<sup>3</sup>

The result, he concluded, would be that the words would again sparkle with life "as in the first days of creation".<sup>4</sup>

\* \* \* \* \*

The struggle against 'byt' on the linguistic level was, then, a struggle against what Jakobson called a "hardening" of the forms of language into a "stereotype". This is the linguistic equivalent to the process described by Zamyatin in which a molten planetary mass (or a young science, religion, art-form or form of social life) cools—"the fiery magna becomes coated with dogma—a rigid, ossified, motionless crust".<sup>5</sup>

---

1. Ibid pp 69-70.  
2. Nasha Osnova, SP.V 233.  
3. Ibid pp 233-4.  
4. Loc cit. This, of course, was more than a casual analogy: the idea of his art as a kind of re-enactment of the original creation—as part of a cosmic re-birth—was central to Khlebnikov (see, for example, his letter to Petnikov, SP V 313-14). Compare also the language of "Lesnaya deva", written, as Markov says, "as if in an imaginary prehistoric tongue" (Longer Poems, p 94). There are many parallels with Joyce in "Finnegans Wake". A re-enactment of the Creation is obviously a supreme triumph over 'byt'.  
5. Zamyatin, op cit p 108.

## Chapter Seven:

### THE CUBIST REVOLUTION IN PAINTING.

Russian Futurism—particularly as embodied in the work of Khlebnikov—is widely recognized to have been a manifestation in Russia<sup>n</sup> art of the wider European art-revolution of the time, especially of French Cubism. The aspects of Khlebnikov's art discussed earlier—its 'magic' intent, its 'transcendence of the "I"', its activism and so on—are in this chapter shown to have been aspects also of Cubist art. The chapter also introduces a theme later to be discussed in relation to Khlebnikov: the way in which scientific and technological developments and inventions were revolutionizing human communications and affecting the newest forms of art.

THROUGHOUT EUROPE, the years immediately preceding World War One were a period of outward social stability and calm. Beneath the surface, however, forces were accumulating which threatened to blow sky-high the entire social, political and cultural structure of Europe and perhaps the world.<sup>1</sup> Never before had the peculiarly "Russian" experience of the grip of 'byt' over an ocean of chaos so widely prevailed over Europe as a whole.

If we take Russian futurism—and particularly the work of Khlebnikov—in its wider, European, context, it appears as a particular national manifestation of the art-movement known as "Cubism". Russian Futurism, as Pomorska writes, "transmitted the principles of Cubism into poetry."<sup>2</sup> Benedict Livshits considered his own work "100 per cent cubism transferred to the area of organized speech."<sup>3</sup> Virtually all the Russian Futurist poets were students of painting, or were originally inspired by the methods of painting.<sup>4</sup> Khlebnikov had Cubism clearly in mind when he declared in 1912:

We want the word boldly to follow painting.<sup>5</sup>

- 
1. Trotsky writes: "The armed peace, with its patches of diplomacy, the hollow parliamentary systems, the external and internal politics based on the system of safety valves and brakes—all this weighed heavily on poetry at a time when the air, charged with accumulated electricity, gave signs of impending great explosions."—Literature and Revolution, (1924), University of Michigan, 1960, p 126.
  2. Pomorska, op cit p 38. The same author writes elsewhere: "The direct transformation of Cubism into poetry was Russian Futurism..."—ibid p 20.
  3. Quoted by Markov: Russian Futurism, p 34.
  4. Markov, The Longer Poems, pp 3-4; Russian Futurism, p 3.
  5. Neizdannye proizvedeniya, p 352.

In view of all this, it is obviously important—in relation to any study of Khlebnikov and Russian Futurism—to ascertain what the significance of the Cubist revolution in painting was.

We may begin with the subject just discussed: the idea of a slippage of all fixed norms, a collapse of the foundations of existence and a shattering of the hold of 'byt'. Writing of the years 1907-1914, the French Cubists' friend and dealer, Kahnweiler insists:

what occurred at that time in the plastic arts will be understood only if one bears in mind that a new epoch was being born, in which man (all mankind in fact) was undergoing a transformation more radical than any other known within historical times.<sup>1</sup>

Leaving aside, for the moment, the threat of cataclysmic war and an epoch of social revolutions, the "transformation" to which Kahnweiler refers—a revolution in science and technology—was already real enough:

Electricity, the internal combustion engine, the progress of chemistry and metallurgy, all these things had completely and radically changed the relationship of man with nature.<sup>2</sup>

A Russian physicist of the time wrote as follows:

We live at a time of an unprecedented destruction of the old scientific structure... Among the truths which are being demolished today are concepts which seemed self-evident and thus lay at the base of all reasoning... A distinctive feature of this new science is the thoroughly paradoxical nature of many of its fundamental propositions: the latter are obviously at variance with what had come to be regarded as common sense.<sup>3</sup>

The most paradoxical and extraordinary discoveries were those connected with the infinitely large and the infinitely small poles of material existence: with the scale of the universe, the speed of light and its relation to time, and the structure of the atom.

---

1. Quoted by John Berger, The Moment of Cubism, p 5.

2. P. Daix, Picasso, London 1965, p 88.

3. Quoted by Jakobson: Futurizm, Iskusstvo, VII, p 2 (1919).

While the Cubist painters were depicting objects from two or more angles simultaneously—showing them not only from the "outside" but from the "inside" as well—scientists were penetrating to the "inside" of the elementary particles of the material world. While the Cubists were defying common sense,

a tide of discovery in science evoked strangely analogous ideas; the atom was found to be not a solid body, as previously supposed, but a complex of positively and negatively charged particles held in cohesion by their opposing energies. One implication of this discovery is that if all the atoms that make up a human being were to be concentrated into a solid mass, the human being would occupy an area about the size of a pinhead.<sup>1</sup>

Another aspect of the "abolition of space" was connected with radio and the invention of the aeroplane. Hertz was filling the air with invisible electro-magnetic waves, enabling men to communicate instantly from distant points on the globe. Heavier-than-air flying machines were transporting people across continents at hitherto unheard-of speeds. Cecily Mackworth describes the Cubists' techniques as

a visual translation of the new preoccupations that were being forced on men by their sudden precipitation into the Age of Science and the Age of Speed.<sup>2</sup>

This did not at all mean that the Cubists glorified aeroplanes or speed, or that new technologies and inventions formed the "contents" of their art. The relationship was far more a sub-conscious one. It was overwhelmingly in the realm of form—in the manner of perceiving the world—that the Cubist revolution took place.<sup>3</sup>

The Cubists sensed and gave voice to the profound sense of uncertainty and apprehension which was widely felt at the time. "The rainbow", wrote Apollinaire,

- 
1. P. Schwartz, The Cubists (London, Macmillan, 1971), p. 9.
  2. Guillaume Apollinaire and the Cubist Life, London 1961, p. 87.
  3. This was in contrast to the content-oriented, ideological machine-worshipping of the Italian Futurists. See Appendix C.

is bent, the seasons quiver, the crowds push on to death, science undoes and remakes what already exists, whole worlds disappear forever from our understanding...<sup>1</sup>

Somehow it seemed to the most perceptive that all the former bases of cultural and social existence had been undermined. All that had formerly appeared solid now seemed suspended in mid-air. Towering above all other scientific ideas were the theories of Einstein on the relations between matter, energy, time and the speed of light. These meant that even the most elementary presuppositions of physical existence—the dimensions of space and time—were apparently not immune from overthrow. Not only Europe's social structure but the world and the universe seemed to be slipping from mental grasp, shifting and trembling..."disappearing forever from our understanding..."

An art-form which was to express the spirit of the times would have to base itself not on the old and familiar certainties—which were certainties no more—but on the void, on the unknown world which seemed to be just coming into view. Above all, it would have to abandon the idea of a static, unchangeable objective reality "as seen through a window", beyond the reach of man, far away and undisturbed, existing "in a world of its own". The mathematical and other methodological principles of science were not merely "looking at" or "reflecting" reality. They were actively transforming nature and the globe. They were stretching through the window, as it were, and rooting up the view. It was this experience of intimate, tangible intercourse with nature—of penetration to its "inside"—which the Cubists felt compelled to express. The formal elements and principles of their art could not be content with "mirroring" the world—they had to smash through the glass and actively dominate and reconstruct it.

---

1. Apollinaire, The Cubist Painters, p 9.

This "leap through the window"—or through the frame of the picture—necessitated an abandonment of the rules of perspective which had been established by the Renaissance revolution in painting. Braque explained this as follows:

Before, one used the Renaissance framework, largely because of the vanishing point, and the depth helped the illusion. But I have suppressed the vanishing point which is almost always false. A painting should give a desire to live "within". I want the public to participate in my painting, for the frame to be behind one's back...<sup>1</sup>

The desire to live "within", and to express the experience of active involvement with the shapes and energies of existence, led to a number of other technical innovations. If it was the experience of involvement which mattered—rather than the depiction of an independent reality as seen through a pane of glass—then the "objective" world no longer had absolute priority over the "subjective". To put roughly the same idea in different words, "content" had no longer its supremacy over "form".

Painting since the Renaissance, whatever may have been its almost infinite diversity in other respects, had been content-oriented. What was important was not the daubs of paint, the splashes of colour and the brush-strokes in themselves. On the contrary, these traces and manifestations of the artist's own activity, of his own involvement in his work, had to be rendered "invisible". Like glass in a window, they should allow the viewer to see through them and perceive another reality beyond. The important personages, kings, saints or other "subjects" were what the picture was all about. It was to accomplish the requisite "invisibility" of form that the various revolutionary techniques of Renaissance painting—tonal composition, the vanishing-point and so on—had been established.

The Renaissance assumptions were accepted without question until the later decades of the nineteenth century. These

---

1. Michel Georges-Michel, De Renoir a Picasso, Paris 1954, p 112. Quoted in: Schwartz, op cit p 44.

assumptions were appropriate to a period throughout which scientific knowledge was experienced as akin to astronomy: as "viewing" a fixed and given universe. They were appropriate to that kind of materialism in which, as Marx puts it,

things, reality, the sensible world, are conceived only in the form of objects of observation, but not as human sense activity, not as practical activity, not subjectively.<sup>1</sup>

It was only towards the end of the nineteenth century that it became impossible any longer to ignore the fact that the objective world was not fixed but fluid, and that science and technology were transforming beyond recognition the world in which man lived. It was only then that this process of transformation—previously something which had taken place only piecemeal, and like a natural process independent of anyone's will—began to be experienced as something which "We", the entire human race, were actively doing.

This new "subjective" experience of the world percolated by obscure routes into the realm of art, turning the premises of Renaissance painting upside-down. To begin with, it was merely a matter of a new "subjectivist" sensibility—a new emphasis on the active role of the eyes, ears and senses in any experience of the world. For the French Impressionists, it was not what the subject "was" that mattered—not how it corresponded with a fixed mental stereotype—but how its colours, shapes and texture were experienced by the eye. To Van Gogh, a poor wicker chair was a thing of extraordinary beauty. Like all the Impressionists, he refused to paint "important subjects". The manner of seeing the object took primacy over the "importance" of the object itself. The activity of the painter—the dynamic movement of the brush-strokes and the activity of the eye in following them—became as important as (and in a sense inseparable from) the life of the world he portrayed. The invisible window had dissolved.

---

1. Theses on Feuerbach, I; in: Karl Marx, Selected Writings in Sociology and Social Philosophy, edited by T B Bottomore and Maximilien Rubel, Penguin, 1954, p. 82.

But even if the window had now gone, the act of stepping through it had yet to be taken. Despite everything, art for the Impressionists was still ultimately a matter of "reflection". The activity of the artist was emphasized as never before—but this "subjective" activity was still only that of depiction and perception. Reality was still only experienced as sensations and impressions. The experience of reaching out, seizing and transforming reality was still unexpressed.

Cubism was a rebellion against Impressionism. This rebellion, however, took the form of an insistence on carrying many of Impressionism's central principles to their logical conclusion. The Cubist painters not only devalued the concept of what the object "was supposed to be". They actively attacked the concept, dislocating, splitting, refracting, distorting and otherwise radically altering the familiar mental stereotype of every object painted. They not only chose the very humblest objects to paint: cafe tables, cheap chairs, coffee cups, newspapers, old musical instruments and so on. They placed obstacles in front of the intellect to prevent its immediate recognition of what these objects were.

"Cubism", writes McLuhan,

by giving the inside and outside, the top, bottom, back and front and the rest, in two dimensions, drops the illusion of perspective in favour of instant sensory awareness of the whole.<sup>1</sup>

No longer is the objective world "out there", at a measurable distance from the eye, while the "ego" or "self" is in its own four walls. One seems to be "inside" the objects depicted, and on all sides of them, while they seem to be inside one's own mind and eye.

---

1. Understanding Media, London 1964, p 13.

All art is largely an expression of the subconscious—of the world of dreams—and it is obvious that the Cubist "distortion" of reality is in part of this "dream-world" kind. The disintegration of the "ego" in Cubist art—the presentation of reality from a multiple standpoint instead of that of the "I"—flowed, paradoxically, from an aspect of Impressionism, which had emphasized the "I"-standpoint to an extreme degree. For in attempting to convey an impression of reality as it is actually experienced by the senses, the Impressionists had tried to penetrate to the inner mind, to the mind half-awake, to the mental realms beyond the conceptualizing, calculating intellect. But it is the intellect, not the senses as such, which measures distance, which notes perspective, and which places the "ego" in a fixed position in time and in space. It is the intellect which distinguishes the "I" from the "not-I", and in this sense preserves the boundaries and integrity of the "I". Consequently, in penetrating to the depths of the "I", the Impressionists threatened to destroy the sensation of its existence. This dream-world subjectivism and individualism in this way helped prepare the way for the Cubist transcendence of the "I".

However, dreams have always existed, and it is not possible to explain on this basis why Cubism arose at the moment in history when it did. The dream-world freedom from time-and-space dimensions was only one source of Cubism's inspiration. What was decisive was that, in the fullest waking state, it was obvious that the concept of the world as seen from an "ego" in a fixed point in time and in space was no longer an appropriate standpoint for art.

As the Cubist revolution took place, modern means of communication seemed to be promising the possibility of escape

---

for the individual from his age-old imprisonment within the limitations imposed by the dimensions of time and space. It was now becoming quite possible—given the invention of radio—to "be" in two or more countries or continents simultaneously. One could "travel" over the globe without moving through space, and without taking any time. Apollinaire wrote of the sensation created by this ability to remain in Europe whilst "walking with" a friend in America—the feeling of being everywhere on the globe at once.<sup>1</sup>

The "shrinking" of the globe made the Renaissance concept of the vanishing-point—in which space stretches out to infinity—quite inappropriate. Equally inappropriate was the concept of the "ego" as an isolated, static point confronting this infinity of space. The Cubists stood things on their head: the world of objects was shrunk to the proportions of a small piece of wood, a guitar or something else which could be held quite easily in the hand, while it was the "ego" which occupied all available space, being apparently everywhere at once.

The idea of the "I's" capacity to swallow the entire globe was expressed in words in a poem of Apollinaire's:

J'ai soif villes de France et d'Europe et du monde  
Venez toutes couler dans ma gorge profonde<sup>2</sup>

But this extraordinary enlargement of the "I" also implied its transcendence. It was only as a "we"—only in the process of communication with others—that one could exist simultaneously on widely separated points on the globe. And in Cubist art, the

- 
1. Quoted in: John Berger, The Moment of Cubism, London 1969, p 9. Cendrars wrote of crossing the Atlantic solo by aeroplane, feeling the Milky Way around his neck and the globe's two hemispheres on his eyes—ibid p 7.
  2. Vendemaire, in: Roger Shattuck, Selected Writings of Guillaume Apollinaire, p 132. The same poet writes of "drinking" the entire universe:

"Mondes qui vous ressemblez et qui nous ressemblez  
Je vous ai bu et ne fus pas desaltéré  
Mais je connus des lors quelle saveur à l'univers  
Je suis ivre d'avoir bu tout l'univers."—ibid p 138.

"I" which could look on things from all sides at once was obviously a disintegrated or multiple "I", an "I" which was already a "We". As the Russian suprematist painter, Malevich, put it, with the arrival of Cubism there now spoke through art

not only the individual "ego", but the "ego" of an elemental world movement...<sup>1</sup>

Or as Paul Laporte later wrote of the Cubists:

They are no longer limited to their human isolation and to a local relationship but are themselves integrated into a universal relationship.<sup>2</sup>

Given this "universal" relationship to other human beings and to the world, the thirst for an art-form to transcend the entire globe became felt. Apollinaire asked why—in an era of the telephone, the wireless and aviation, and when the new communications media ranged over the continents, embracing a vast diversity of human experience—it should be assumed that the poet "should not have at least an equal freedom...in confronting space."<sup>3</sup> Writing of the new artists whose world had been transformed by science, he explained that they were bound to attempt to match the demands of the age with a totally new and globe-embracing art:

One should not be astonished if, with only the means they have now at their disposal, they set themselves to preparing this new art (vaster than the plain art of words) in which, like conductors of an orchestra of un-

- 
1. "In the Italian Renaissance, the ideal of a spiritualized personal anonymity gradually changed to one of singular individuality; the Cubist impulse moved in the opposite direction, towards an expression and an order transcending the individual"—Schwartz, op cit p 12. Like Khlebnikov and the Russian Futurists, the Cubists renounced the standpoint of the "I" in art even to the point of repudiating the notion of personal authorship. Picasso is quoted as having said: "People didn't understand very well at the time why very often we didn't sign our canvasses. Most of those that are signed we signed years later. It was because...we felt the temptation, the hope of an anonymous art, not in its expression but in its point of departure"—Francoise Gilot and Carlton Lake, Life With Picasso, quoted by Schwartz, op cit p 7.
  2. P.M.Laporte, Cubism and Science, The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism,
  3. Roger Shattuck (ed) op cit p 229.

believable scope, they will have at their disposition the entire world, its noises and its appearances, the thought and language of man, song, dance, all the arts and all the artifices, still more mirages than Morgan could summon up on the hill of Gibel, with which to compose the visible and unfolded book of the future.<sup>1</sup>

---

1. Quoted in: Shattuck (ed) op cit p 228.

Chapter Eight:

CUBISM AND KHLEBNIKOV—"OBJECTLESSNESS" AND THE  
CREATION OF A NEW WORLD.

The basic concept of Russian Futurism was that of the "self-sufficient word". This corresponded to the Cubist idea of the primacy of "the material itself"—paint and form—over any other "content". A related technique of Khlebnikov's was what Jakobson calls the "realization of the device". This chapter suggests that this and all other manifestations of "objectlessness" or "formalism" expressed an implicitly 'revolutionary' impulse, in the sense that their aim was to change, not reflect, the existing world.

FOR A NUMBER OF REASONS, but above all because it set out not to interpret the world, but to change it, John Berger has described Cubism as the nearest there has been to an expression of Marxist dialectics in art. Referring to the period 1907 to 1914 he writes:

...it is both possible and logical to define Cubism during those years as the only example of dialectical materialism in painting.<sup>1</sup>

If that is so, there seems a peculiar appropriateness in the fact that it was in Russia, in the years immediately preceding and following the October revolution, that the reverberations of Cubism sounded loudest and its implications were most fully developed.

The "Cubist" characteristics of Russian Futurism have often been noted, particularly in the work of Khlebnikov. The fundamental fact was the idea of the "self-sufficient word", which corresponded to the Cubist idea of the primacy of form over content—of the "way of seeing" over the object itself. Mayakovsky declared:

...the word is the end of poetry.<sup>2</sup>

This was a conscious attempt to carry over into the field of poetry the idea of the primacy of "the material itself"—i.e. of paint, and geometric shape—in Cubist painting.<sup>3</sup> The same idea was expressed in a different way when Mayakovsky wrote:

---

1. The Success and Failure of Picasso, p 56.

2. Quoted in: Barooshian, Russian Cubo-Futurism, p 42.

3. Pomorska, op cit p 38.

art is not a copy of nature; its task is to distort nature so that it is fixed in a different consciousness.<sup>1</sup>

For Khlebnikov, the "self-sufficient word" was not a well-used, familiar word whose meaning had long since been conventionally agreed. It was—like a Cubist painting—an unfamiliar combination of elements. Its meaning was not "somewhere else"—beyond the word, in the "object" to which it referred. It was actually in the sound-sequence itself, which created new meanings of its own. The speech-act itself—the material fact of articulating sounds—was now all-important, whereas formerly it had been taken for granted.

The "cutting" and "dislocation" of reality—practised by the Cubist painters to assert the primacy of painting over the external world—was quite consciously imitated by Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh as is shown in their manifesto "The Word as Such":

futurist painters love to utilize cut parts of bodies, while the futurist speech-creators make use of broken words, words cut in half, and their capricious, subtle combinations...<sup>2</sup>

That the meaning of the "self-sufficient word" was conceived of as being "in" the word itself—intrinsic to the sounds of which it is composed—is clear from a reading of any of Khlebnikov's many articles on the subject. Khlebnikov devoted an enormous labour of love to the attempt to determine the precise intrinsic meaning of various consonants, likening his findings to Mendeleev's periodic table of the elements.<sup>3</sup>

Jakobson writes:

---

1. Mayakovsky, quoted by: Barooshian, op cit p 43.

2. Slovo Kak Takovoe, p 12.

3. SP V pp 228-230.

The important ability of the poetic neologism is its objectlessness.<sup>1</sup>

Here Jakobson directly compares one of the chief characteristics of Khlebnikov's poetry with Cubism's "overthrow of the object".<sup>2</sup> Livshits referred to the same feature of both Cubism and Khlebnikov's futurism when he declared that

a work of art is complete only when it is self-contained, when it does not seek an object beyond itself.<sup>3</sup>

However, this "self-contained" idea was not quite what Khlebnikov himself intended. He did not want his art to be insulated from the real world. He was simply against merely "mirroring" it. The real implication of both Cubism and Futurism was not that these art-forms needed no objects. It was that they created their own objects. Pasternak wrote of "transrational" poetry as

poetry without reference—pure and palpable sound which can evoke new "referents".<sup>4</sup>

It was this ability to create new referents, to create new "meaning" and new "objects" in place of the realities which already exist which was the real "secret" of the newest forms of art.

One of the key "Cubist" features of Khlebnikov's art was what Jakobson called the "realization of the device."<sup>5</sup> Just as in Cubist painting the geometric forms needed to depict objects take on a life of their own—imposing themselves on the depicted things and transforming them—so, in Khlebnikov's poetry, we find time and again a parallel feature in the realm of words. In Khlebnikov's "The Crane", a train is described (as part of a general "insurrection of things") rising up from its rails. The thought occurs to the poet that the train's movements res-

- 
1. Quoted by Pomorska, op cit p 29.
  2. El Lissitzky uses this term in: New Russian Art, A Lecture, (1922); in: El Lissitzky, Life. Letters. Texts. Sophie Lissitzky Kupperts (ed), London pp 332-33.
  3. Text of interview with Marinetti in: Barooshian, op cit p 149.
  4. Quoted by Pomorska, op cit p 29.
  5. Modern Russian Poetry, in: EJ Brown op cit p 65.

emble those of a worm. However, this thought takes on a life of its own. It becomes the thought of the train itself, which consciously imitates the movements of a worm. The simile has been "realized"—it has run out from the poet's head, as it were, and animated the scene he was describing.<sup>1</sup> Jakobson gives a number of examples—from the poetry of both Khlebnikov and Mayakovsky—of what he calls

the projection of a literary device into artistic reality, the turning of a poetic trope into a poetic fact, into a plot element.<sup>2</sup>

This "realization of device" expresses clearly the impulse to subdue reality rather than merely to serve it. The idea here—as in Cubist and Futurist art generally—is that the techniques of artistic creation should actively dominate, re-structure and transform the external world.<sup>3</sup>

However, this "world-changing" activity is still only imaginary. The devices of artistic creation are "realized" only in the sense that they become part of the "plot" or "content" of the art instead of merely its "form". Outside the poem, the world is not changed at all.

For the same "formalist" impulse to run to its logical conclusion, it would have to overstep the boundary between art and life. The Futurists attempted to make this happen in a number of different ways. One was by spilling hot tea over the first row of seats during their first public recital in Moscow on October 13, 1913.<sup>4</sup> Another was by painting their own faces in bright colours and strolling along public streets. As the initiators of this practice, the painters Larionov

- 
1. For this and other examples see: Barooshian, op cit pp 29-33 and Jakobson Modern Russian Poetry in: E J Brown op cit pp 64-67. One of the best analyses of the "Cubism" of Khlebnikov's poetry is in Pomorska, op cit pp 93-106.
  2. Modern Russian Poetry, p 64.
  3. "It is time for us to be the masters"—Guillaume Apollinaire The Cubist Painters, Lionel Abel (trans.), N Y 1949 p 9. Khlebnikov's idea of a world government of artists—an expression of the same impulse—will be considered later.
  4. Markov, Russian Futurism, p 134.

and Zdanovich, explained:

...life has invaded art; it is time for art to invade life. The painting of faces—is the start of this invasion...<sup>1</sup>

But it would not be until the outbreak of revolution that the artistic attempt to "invade life" could be made on a grander scale.

---

1. Quoted in: Woroszylsky, op cit p 55.

Chapter Nine:

FUTURISM AS THE DESTRUCTION OF ART.

This chapter continues the theme of the previous one. It also incorporates an extension of some themes discussed earlier. The idea of dying and being re-born is associated with the notion of the death of art (as something separate from life) and the idea of revolutionary re-birth. Khlebnikov and his colleagues carry the Symbolist notions of dumbness, incommunicability etc to extreme conclusions, believing that a new life of post-revolutionary communication lies beyond. This new life will be an active one for the artist: Khlebnikov dreams of a world government of poets.

THE IDEA OF MODERN ART in general as "the destruction of art" has had some currency in many quarters since the beginning of the century. This has not necessarily been an expression of ignorance or prejudice. Picasso himself defined a painting as "a sum of destructions."<sup>1</sup> Malevich hailed "the avant-garde of revolutionary destruction" which he saw "marching over the whole wide world."<sup>2</sup> Mayakovsky often seemed to be calling for the destruction of poetry, as when, in the published introduction to his "Fifth International" (1922), he issued

an order to vacate the beauties of verse and introduce into poetry the brevity and accuracy of mathematical formulas.<sup>3</sup>

And it was a habit of Khlebnikov (whose demand for a "bonfire of books" has been noted) to call point blank for "the destruction of languages", without qualifying this demand in any way.<sup>4</sup>

Critics have often been quick to seize on the "negative" aspects of the modernists' programmes, and have argued that what all these artists really represent is the beginning of the end of culture and art. Even James Joyce's brother, Stanislaus, suggested in 1924 that the draft chapters of Finnegans Wake represented

- 
1. Quoted by John Berger, The Success and Failure of Picasso, p 22.
  2. Architecture as a Slap in the Face to Ferro-Concrete (1918); in: Sophie Lissitzky-Kuppers, op cit p 63.
  3. These words are Jakobson's: On a Generation etc., in: E J Brown, (ed) op cit p 14.
  4. SP V p 271; I p 198.

the witless wandering of literature before its final extinction...<sup>1</sup>

D.S. Mirsky called it "pure nonsense, the work of a master of language writing nothing....", adding that "Russian futurism went through this period of nonsense in its earliest stages..."<sup>2</sup> As often as not, when Futurism was spoken of in similar terms, the arch-villain to be singled out was Khlebnikov. Wladimir Weidle, for example, wrote in 1928 that the Symbolists

were followed by people who declared all the traditions of Russian literature to be outworn, and who created nothing, for the simple reason that they decided they could create out of nothing. These people wanted to rid form of meaning: as a result they forfeited form itself; taking it upon themselves to turn words into mere sounds, they were deprived even of words. However, the very fact that Russian Futurism was so extreme meant that it was to some extent harmless. It could not succeed in destroying the Russian literary tradition, for it denied literature itself; nor could it for long mutilate the Russian language, because it denied the very basis of all language, of all human speech. At any rate, this was what Futurism was in Khlebnikov, a man visited by genius but marked by idiocy; he preached the destruction of language...<sup>3</sup>

G. Vinokur also wrote that Khlebnikov produced ultimately "nothing",<sup>4</sup> and Maxim Gorky called his output "verbal chaos."<sup>5</sup> Remarks about his being an "idiot" were frequently made.<sup>6</sup>

- 
1. Stanislaus Joyce, Letter to his brother dated August 7 1924; quoted by Ellman, James Joyce, extract in: R H Denning, James Joyce: The Critical Heritage, London 1970, Vol 2, p 387. Denning's anthology includes an unsigned review from the Irish Times, (June 3 1939) commenting on the finished work: "It may be a novel to end novels; for, if there is shape at all, it is the shape of a superb annihilation—as of some gigantic thing let loose to destroy what we had come to regard as a not unnecessary part of civilization"—op cit p 691.
  2. Dzheims Dzhois, Almanakh: god 16 No 1 1933 Moscow, pp 428-50. Translated by Davis Kinkhead as 'Joyce and Irish Literature', in New Masses, x-xi (April 3 1934), pp 31-4. Extract in: Denning, op cit pp 589-92; p 591.
  3. W Weidle, The Poetry and Prose of Boris Pasternak, (1928); translation in: D Davie and A Livingstone (eds), Pasternak, Modern Judgements, London 1969, p 110. Weidle concedes that Khlebnikov was at the same time "deeply conscious of a very Russian literary heritage"—op cit.
  4. Quoted by Markov, The Longer Poems, p 23.
  5. Ibid.
  6. For example, by B Lazarevsky, I Aksyonov and Khodasevich, ibid

An 'official' Soviet evaluation of Joyce's later work described it as

a return to inarticulateness, to a chaotic, pre-logical form of consciousness... a return to that monotonous flow of inarticulate perceptions that characterized primitive consciousness; it is an attempt to penetrate to the very beginnings of language, to the dawn of articulate speech.<sup>1</sup>

The "transrational" language of Khlebnikov and his colleagues was described by Chukovsky in similar terms as a

pre-language, precultural, pre-historical...when there was no discourse, conversation, but only cries and screams...<sup>2</sup>

Chukovsky thought it paradoxical that, in their passion for the future, the Futurists had

selected for their future poetry the most ancient of the very ancient languages.<sup>3</sup>

The Stalinist reviewer quoted above argued that "the quest for the primeval, the turning to savage, primitive art as the elixir that might help to revive bourgeois culture" characterized modern art in general and declared:

The reactionary significance of these 'modernist' seekings is quite clear...They give expression to an anarchic desire to destroy, to turn the universe into chaos, in a word, to the pathos of suicide of contemporary bourgeois civilization...<sup>4</sup>

This reviewer seems uncertain as to whether the charge is that the modernists wish to "revive" bourgeois culture or destroy it, but it would seem that in either case the artists are to be condemned.

- 
1. R Miller-Budnitskaya, James Joyce's Ulysses, (translated by N J Nelson), Dialectics, A Marxian Literary Journal, N Y No 5 (1938); in: Denning op cit p 658. Compare Malcolm Muggeridge's comment: "Language which emerged from confused, meaningless sound, returns to its origins—painstakingly, laboriously returns..." Time and Tide (review) May 20 1939; in: Denning, op cit p 684.
  2. Futurist, (1922); quoted in: Barooshian, op cit p 95.
  3. Loc cit.
  4. Miller-Budnitskaya, loc cit.

The notion of modern art as a kind of "suicide" perhaps bears closer examination. Khlebnikov's view of the Symbolists as a "crowd of suicides" has already been mentioned.<sup>1</sup> The suicide theme was bound up intimately with the creative life—and the death—of Mayakovsky.<sup>2</sup> There is a certain parallel between the idea of revolution and the idea of suicide, in the sense that for an individualistic bourgeois soul—such as that of Blok—to surrender to a collectivist revolution is "suicidal" from the standpoint of his class, his background and, perhaps, his entire psychology. Trotsky wrote of Blok, who died soon after the revolution:

Blok is not one of ours, but he reached towards us. And in doing so, he broke down.<sup>3</sup>

Khlebnikov thought—as we have seen—that it was necessary for the "I" to die in order to be re-born as a "We".<sup>4</sup> And his letter to Petnikov, written on a wave of revolutionary enthusiasm and exclaiming: "We intend to die, knowing the instant of our re-birth and bequeathing the end of the poem"<sup>5</sup>, may be thought of as "suicidal" in a metaphysical sense.

Khlebnikov certainly felt that Symbolist culture represented "death".<sup>6</sup> The Futurists generally felt that a social catastrophe was approaching, that the whole of the old culture was doomed, that it was dead, past and meaningless already and that a break with it had to be made. However, while wishing to break free from the world they saw as doomed, they had no wish to evade the impending ultimate crisis. On the contrary, they wanted to bring it to a head. They saw salvation not in the postponement of the fatal hour or in escape from the fate awaiting them—but in accepting the inevitable, and even in speeding up and accentuating the catastrophe which they had for some time

---

1. SP V p 182.

2. See especially Stahlberger, op cit pp 133-34.

3. Literature and Revolution, Michigan, 1960 p 125.

4. SP III, p 306.

5. Letter to Petnikov, SP V pp 313-14.

6. SP V pp 181-82.

been prophesying. If the logical conclusion of Symbolism was absolute isolation, dumbness, incommunicability, meaningless-ness and death—the death of an entire culture and way of life—then the Futurists wanted to reach this conclusion in order to pass beyond it on the other side. It was precisely the felt existence of this "other side"—a post-revolutionary world, a collective life-beyond-death—which in fact enabled the Futurists to carry the themes of dumbness, inarticulate-ness and spiritual death to their ultimate extremes: thematically in the work of Mayakovsky and formally or linguistically in that of Khlebnikov.

Khlebnikov linked his linguistic experiments with what he called "the suicide of states".<sup>1</sup> His language, to the extent that it was sometimes intentionally incomprehensible,<sup>2</sup> could perhaps be described as the linguistic aspect of this "suicide". It was a reduction of the old culture's language-forms to zero.<sup>3</sup> Admittedly, mere incomprehensibility in itself was for Khlebnikov far from being the central feature of his "transrational" experimentation with language. But it was one of its poles, the opposite pole being (in intention, at least) a level of understanding or meaningfulness far beyond the scope of the merely "rational" languages of the past.<sup>4</sup>

The pole of incomprehensibility—Khlebnikov praised sounds such as "shagadam, magadam, vygadam, pitz, patz, patzu" as "basically strings of syllables of which the intellect can make nothing"<sup>5</sup>—was a vital part of the new art. It was a way

- 
1. SP V p 259 (April 1917).
  2. In his article O Stikhakh (1920), Khlebnikov attacks the notion that poetry has to be comprehensible—SP V p 225.
  3. Khlebnikov described himself and his colleagues as "those youths who gave an oath to destroy languages"—Ladomir, SP I, p 198 (May 1920).
  4. Khudozhniki Mira, (1919), SP V p 217; Nasha Osnova, (1920), SP V p 229; letter to Petnikov, SP V pp 313-14.
  5. O Stikhakh, SP V p 225.

of severing the umbilical cord between the old world and the new. It was a way of stressing that between the futurists and the "public" (whom they despised), no communication or understanding was possible. "You speak like a child" says the representative of conventional culture to Khlebnikov in "Teacher and Pupil".<sup>1</sup> But all the forces of revolution in Khlebnikov's poems speak in this way, like carefree children who have not yet learned human speech. The effect is sometimes frightening, as it appears to the old doomed Grand Duke as he listens to the menacing chants—in words sliced and cut in two—of the crowds in the poem "The Present".<sup>2</sup> Or Khlebnikov's poetry is enriched—as in "Zangezi" and other works—with the supposed languages of birds and beasts.<sup>3</sup> Animals and children—like pre-historic men—are representatives of realms of experience more or less incomprehensible to the literate civilization to which Khlebnikov was opposed. By using their supposed languages, Khlebnikov was asserting the rights of these alternative realms. It was a way of saying that to the whole of established society, the new State of Time—the world of the Future—was an unknown realm of experience, an entire universe separated by a chasm of incomprehension from the present.

This idea of driving a wedge between two worlds became almost a commonplace in Russian modernist art. Immediately after the 1917 revolution, wrote El Lissitzky,

there flashed before my eyes the short-circuit which split the world in two. This single blow pushed the time we call the present like a wedge between yesterday and tomorrow. My efforts are now directed to driving the wedge deeper. One must belong on this side or on that—there is no midway.<sup>4</sup>

---

1. SP V p 179.

2. IS pp 298-9.

3. Markov describes Khlebnikov's "Mudrost v silke" as "a charming and ingenious attempt to reproduce the singing of forest birds with letters of the alphabet"—Russian Futurism p 171. Apes' language is used in Ka. In his "Ladomir", Khlebnikov prophesied "horses' freedom and equal rights for cows"—see IS p 66.

4. Lissitzky-Kuppers, op cit p 325 (written in 1928).

The same rift between "yesterday and tomorrow" Khlebnikov saw as a "shift" (sdvig), a word taken from the vocabulary of Cubist painting.<sup>1</sup> The word implies a break in continuity, a displacement, an abrupt juxtaposition of alien worlds. Khlebnikov's poetry is full of such collisions or displacements; he "builds his verse", as Tynyanov puts it,

on the principle of combining strata which are semantically foreign to one another.<sup>2</sup>

Since for Khlebnikov (as Tynyanov also writes), "the methods of literary revolution and historical revolution were similar"<sup>3</sup>, it was inevitable that he should have seen the Russian revolution as one gigantic "shift" or sdvig. The establishment of the power of the Soviets is presented as one of the "shifts of the Russian people" in the poet's "Boards of Fate", published in 1922.<sup>4</sup> For Khlebnikov, in other words, the post-revolutionary power and the pre-revolutionary system which preceded it were two different strata, two different worlds "semantically foreign to one another." As early as in 1912, the Futurists in their "Slap" manifesto had described the culture of the old world as "more unintelligible than hieroglyphs". Since they thought of themselves as representing the future, it was entirely appropriate that the language of their "semantically foreign" world should seem equally incomprehensible to "public taste" and the inhabitants of the present day. In this sense, the "incomprehensibility" of their "transrational language" was both an artistic and historical necessity.

However, as we have noted, death was seen as an entrance to new life: the extremes of meaninglessness, dumbness, inarticulateness and incomprehensibility were seen as barriers beyond which unimaginable heights of awareness and communicative power could be attained. Those who felt the barriers merely

---

1. Vladimir Markov, The Longer Poems... p 107.

2. Quoted by Markov, loc cit.

3. Y. Tynyanov, On Khlebnikov, in: E J Brown, op cit p 97.

4. Otryvok iz Dosok Sudby, Nesob. Proiz. pp 490-491.

as barriers—as obstacles and nothing more—were those who were incapable of perceiving in the destruction of the old world the birth of a new one. As Tynyanov writes of Khlebnikov:

Those who think his language is 'meaningless' do not see how a revolution is simultaneously a new order.<sup>1</sup>

For those able to see this "new order" behind the apparent chaos of revolution, the destruction of the old language was not the end of the world. It was a zero-point beyond which stretched an infinity of numbers under a new sign. It was a sudden "shift" or "displacement"—after which everything was reversed, the reduction to zero becoming a new ascent on the "other side". Wrote El Lissitzky:

We are living in a field of force which is being generated between two poles. Minus: one society which is destroying itself; plus: one which is building itself up.<sup>2</sup>

For those associated with the positive pole, what seemed to be taking place was the birth of the world—in a sense a "primeval" re-enactment of the Creation. After 1917, wrote El Lissitzky in 1922:

it became clear to us that the world was only just coming into existence, and everything must be re-created from scratch, including art.<sup>3</sup>

Khlebnikov's passion for "those first days of life on earth"<sup>4</sup> and his use of "pre historic" language then assumed a new and deeper significance in the context of the Genesis which seemed to be taking place.<sup>5</sup>

- 
1. Tynyanov, op cit p 95.
  2. In: Lissitzky-Kuppers, op cit p 60.
  3. Ibid p 330.
  4. The Otter's Children, Choix de Poemes, Paris 1967, p 3.
  5. One can apply to Khlebnikov Marcel Brion's words on Joyce, inasmuch as his linguistic experimentation (like the later work of Joyce), "gives us the impression of assisting at the birth of the world, because we perceive in the aspect of chaos a creative will, constructive, architectural, which has spilled around it the traditional dimensions, concepts and vocabulary, to find in these scattered materials the elements of the edifice"—written March 1928; in: Denning, op cit p 428.

The idea of the "destructiveness" of modern art is put into a new focus when the charge is that it is bourgeois culture in particular which is being destroyed, or which is destroying itself. The attacks on "modernism" then assume a political coloration: they are made in defence of the social status quo. French Cubist painting came under attack during World War One as "inherently 'anti-national'".<sup>1</sup> Later, Picasso became a prime target of the champions of Nazi morality, who regarded him as the leading representative of Kultur bolschewismus? Oliver Gogarty in the Observer (May 7, 1939) saw "Bolshevism" of a sort even in James Joyce:

Resentment against his upbringing, his surroundings, and finally against the system of civilization throughout Europe... created this literary Bolshevism which strikes not only at all standards and accepted modes of expression whether of beauty or truth but at the very vehicle of rational expression.<sup>3</sup>

Stuart Gilbert nine years earlier had noted that

Mr Joyce has been hailed in certain quarters as a 'literary Bolshevist', whose object and delight is to blow sky high all conventions, social and artistic.<sup>4</sup>

There is scarcely need to refer to the many such remarks made in relation to Khlebnikov, for whom, as Tynyanov put it,

the methods of literary revolution and historical revolution were similar.<sup>5</sup>

The Russian Futurists gladly accepted the charges levelled against them as "Bolshevists" of literature.

- 
1. Schwartz, op cit p 118.
  2. Daix, op cit p 181. In October, 1944, Picasso joined the French Communist Party, having been a sympathizer since its foundation.
  3. In: Denning, op cit p 675.
  4. The Growth of a Titan, Saturday Review of Literature, vii (August 2 1930); in: Denning op cit p 537.
  5. On Khlebnikov, in: E J Brown, op cit p 97,

However, the connection between modern art and "Bolshevism"—assuming there is such a connection—has never been straightforward or at all points self-evident. This has been above all because, by the very nature of their art, the artists concerned have tended to be form-conscious, paying to the question of ideological content little if any attention. Picasso's paintings—with the notable exception of his "Guernica"—were not intended to express an ideological content or message. And the Russian futurists distinguished themselves from previous literary schools precisely on account of their own repudiation of literary "themes" of any kind.<sup>1</sup> For this reason, the "destructiveness" of Futurism has often been thought of as purely negative, directed as much against socialist culture as against bourgeois art—an expression, in Miller-Budnitskaya's words, of "an anarchic desire to destroy, to turn the universe into chaos..."<sup>2</sup>

There is some truth in the accusation that the Futurists wanted to destroy art—all art as such. But the Futurists themselves—when it came to theorizing about such problems towards the end of their movement's life—justified this by pointing to the fact that "art", in all recent literate or civilized societies, had been thought of as a world of beauty of its own, and as something separate from life. "Why," asked Mayakovsky,

should literature occupy its own special little corner? Either it should appear in every newspaper, every day, on every page, or else it's totally useless. The kind of literature that's dished out as dessert can go to hell.<sup>3</sup>

Even the most extreme "modernist" art of the period—Malevich's white square on a white background, for example—can only be

- 
1. Pomorska notes: "As a consequence of their word-orientation, the Futurists attacked the 'thematic' literature, just as the Cubists were against the copying of objects in painting. The attention of the reader should concentrate on the poetic message itself, and not on the facts or objects which stand behind it and which are only signalized by verbal signs. Didactic or propagandistic literature, ideologically oriented, was for Russian Futurists the strongest expression of an objectful message."—op cit p 80.
  2. Miller-Budnitskaya, op cit; in Denning, op cit p 684.
  3. From the reminiscences of D Lebedev; quoted by Jakobson, On a Generation etc., in: E J Brown, op cit p 14.

described as "the destruction of art" if by "art" is meant what Mayakovsky calls "dessert"—an "extra", a postscript to life, a commentary on it or a "reflection".

We have noted already the statement of Larionov and Zdanevich justifying their face-painting in which they explain that while it is good that life should invade art (i.e. that art should reflect contemporary themes, the machine-age etc), even this is not enough: what is needed is that art should invade life.<sup>1</sup> Malevich made the point even more expressively when he justified his "destruction of content" in his paintings. Writing of the post-revolutionary period and its requirements, he insisted:

Our contemporaries must understand that life will not be the content of art, but rather that art must become the content of life, since only thus can life be beautiful.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, in the new life, art will be the way of living, the form of cities and of the entire earth. Malevich insisted that his art was a starting-point of this new life. Identifying his painting with the creative work of the revolution, he insisted that it should be regarded as a manifestation of this new life of human creativity. To look into it for some other "content"—as if in the hope of seeing "through" it into the old and familiar world—was completely to misconstrue his aims. Those, on the other hand, who had been able to appreciate the form of his art, wrote Malevich,

have also seen a new world for their life.<sup>3</sup>

Thus Malevich's "destruction" was much more than merely the destruction of a particular form or school of art. It was intend-

---

1. Quoted in: Woroszylsky, op cit p 55.

2. K S Malevich, Essays on Art, 1915-1933, T Andersen (ed), London 1969, Vol 2 p 18.

3. Ibid Vol 1 p 171.

ed to be the destruction of everything which had been understood as "art" since civilization had begun. If Malevich's vision of the future had been realized, it would have been a kind of "return", on a higher plane, to the pre-literate conception of a people such as the Balinese, who told an anthropologist:

We have no art. We do everything as well as we can.<sup>1</sup>

El Lissitzky, writing of Malevich's "square on square" painting, described the implied "death" and "rebirth" of art in the "mathematical" terms quoted earlier:

Here a form was displayed which was opposed to everything that was understood by 'pictures' or 'painting' or 'art'. Its creator wanted to reduce all forms, all painting to zero. For us, however, this zero was the turning point. When we have a series of numbers coming from infinity...6,5,4,3,2,1,0... it comes right down to the 0, then begins the ascending line 0,1,2,3,4,5,6...<sup>2</sup>

It was hoped that from Malevich's pure geometrical shapes would emerge an art, an architecture and forms of self-government and work emanating directly from the springs of human creativity and owing nothing to the forms of the out-lived world. The "abolition of art" expressed only one side of the modernists' programme. The other was the artistic re-creation of life. Wrote El Lissitzky:

In the new order of society...where work is being done by everyone for everyone, in such a society work is given free scope and everything which is produced is art. Thus the conception of art as something with its own separate existence is abolished.<sup>3</sup>

- 
1. Quoted by: Marshall McLuhan, Quentin Fiore: The Medium is the Message, Penguin 1967.
  2. New Russian Art: A Lecture, in: Lissitzky-Kuppers, op cit p 333.
  3. Ibid p 330.

Malevich—who was intimately associated with the Cubo-Futurists, and who provided the illustrations for many of their published works<sup>1</sup>—saw Khlebnikov's "transreason" as the equivalent of the "non-objectivity" of his own and other modern painting.<sup>2</sup> He saw it, in other words, as an art-form of the revolution, aiming at the creation of life rather than its mere reflection. The peculiar "activism" of Khlebnikov is noted by Markov, who writes (perhaps unfairly to Mayakovsky and other Futurists):

Khlebnikov was the only futurist who not only thought and talked about the future, but tried to do something about it as well.<sup>3</sup>

And although it would be a mistake, perhaps, to associate Khlebnikov's intentions too closely with those of Mayakovsky, Malevich and other modernists who linked their art with the Bolshevik revolution—it remains true that Khlebnikov's work ran parallel with some of the most topical and significant currents of his time.

After the October revolution, the idea that the task of artists was to "change the world" became almost a commonplace. Although Khlebnikov was always too much wrapped in his own dream-world to fit in easily among his colleagues who later formed the "Left Front of the Arts", the fact was that in his own way he had anticipated their "political" or "world-changing" ideas a long time ago in a number of respects. His "transrational language", for example, had been intended not to reflect or express an existing "content" but to create a "content" of its own—to actually abolish war and unite all mankind. And Mayakovsky's ideas for a "Red Art International" and for involvement in the political struggle had long been familiar to Khlebnikov—in the form, for example, of his schemes for a world government of artists and scientists: the "Presidents of the Terrestrial Sphere."

- 
1. Slovo kak takovoe, Troe and other works.
  2. K S Malevich, Essays on Art, London 1969, Vol 2 p 15.
  3. Russian Futurism, p 300.

## Chapter Ten:

### A LANGUAGE TO UNITE MANKIND.

The previous three chapters, dealing generally with Cubism and Futurism, have set the scene: the new art-forms were to change the world, not mirror it. In this, they were to parallel, in a certain sense, the achievements of modern science. The following chapters show how this world-changing desire expressed itself in Khlebnikov's work—in a way which was very much his own. This chapter deals with one example: Khlebnikov's attempts to create a language form which would abolish war and restore to man the lost unity of his primitive past. The chapter also introduces the theme of Khlebnikov's enthusiasm for Asia, associating it with his primitivism and his yearning for pre-civilized forms of human unity.

KHLEBNIKOV'S VIEWS on the artist's active role, his idea on a world government and his yearning for involvement in the affairs of mankind originated to a large extent (like his other ideas) in a revolt against certain implications of Symbolism. Essentially, they were his answer to the escapism of the Symbolists. Georgette Donchin writes:

Actually, almost the entire range of subjects in symbolist poetry can be correlated to the one theme of escapism. The importance attributed to art assumes a new significance if one considers, as the symbolists did, that art is the best means to forget life, for it allows the poet to live in a passive way and frees him from the duty of active participation in life. Escapism forces the modernists to prefer dreams to reality. Just as imaginative experience is preferred to life, the world of artificial inventions is preferred to reality and, at the same time, while the world is being transformed into a playhouse and man into an actor, the deepest emotions become simply theatrical subjects. Shunning life, the modernists move away from people, into solitude and death.<sup>1</sup>

Khlebnikov's revolt against this escapist tendency was thoroughgoing. His struggle for the future, his mathematical preoccupations, his views about language and virtually all his interests and attempts can be seen as expressions of this revolt. Perhaps the most 'extreme' form of Khlebnikov's anti-escapism became clear when he began urging his colleagues to help in the establishment of a world government of artists and scientists which would transform the globe—the "Presidents of the Terrestrial Sphere".

However, this "governmental" project should not be taken as a peculiar "oddity" of Khlebnikov's but seen as a logical correlate of his linguistic and other strivings. Being a poet, and

---

1. Donchin, op cit p 126.

living therefore largely in a world of words as the basic realities, it was perhaps natural that Khlebnikov should have tended to approach problems from a linguistic standpoint. Internationalism, for example, appeared to him primarily in the form of the dream of a world language. But although he began from this standpoint, this did not mean that he was interested only in linguistics or words. To him, his work on language led quite logically to certain conclusions regarding states, forms of government and the ideal of human unity.

From 1913 onwards, Khlebnikov worked consciously and deliberately on his "transrational language" inspired by the hope of "uniting men." One aspect of this "transreason" was the "incomprehensibility" whose significance has already been discussed. For Khlebnikov, the ideal of human unity could not be achieved in a simple, straightforward way: it had to be won through conflict, through a carrying-to-extremes of the incomprehensibilities, displacements and dissonances of life in order to reach a climax, a sudden resolution of the world's conflicts and a new unity on a higher plane.<sup>1</sup> Among the various conflicts to be brought to a head, one was that between the generations—between youth and age—while another was that between East and West, Asia and Europe on a world scale.

Behind the aim of incomprehensibility in Khlebnikov's "transrational language" was the aim of a wider understanding, and a universal language which would unite all men. Seeing this unity as emerging through conflict, however, Khlebnikov at first saw his language as uniting, to begin with, the oppressed cultures and nationalities of the Russian Empire against their oppressors, and the people of Asia against Europe and the West.

---

1. Letter to Petnikov, SP V pp 313-14.

As early as in 1908, Khlebnikov had mentioned (in a letter to Kamensky referred to in Chapter One) his ideal of creating a "pan-Slavic language".<sup>1</sup> In the same year, he had linked the idea of the poet's right to create new words with the "right" of the Russian people to converse in a pan-Slavic tongue.<sup>2</sup> Now in 1913 Khlebnikov returned seriously and methodically to this idea. In March, he wrote an article arguing against great-Russian nationalism in favour of an Asian-continental language and culture.<sup>3</sup> In the following year, he made his famous furious attack on Marinetti and the Italian's Russian admirers who were bending, as he put it, "the noble neck of Asia under the yoke of Europe."<sup>4</sup> In 1916, he wrote his "Letter to Two Japanese", speaking as if on behalf of the youth of Russia to the youth of Japan and calling for a "world union of youth" and a "war between the generations." He explained his own position by saying:

I can more easily understand a young Japanese speaking in the old-Japanese language, than certain of my own countrymen speaking in modern Russian.<sup>5</sup>

He deplored the fact that Asia lacked, as it were, its own "I", and urged the continent's youth to join him in the struggle to write in huge letters: "I—Asia". For Asia, as he put it, "has her own will."<sup>6</sup> Appended to the letter was a list of proposals for, among other things, the construction of a round-Himalayan railway-line, the pan-Asian use of a "language of numbers", particularly useful for communication by radio-teleg-ramme, and the establishment of an "Asian Daily of Songs and Inventions." Articles in this Daily would be published in all languages, transmitted from the four corners by radio-teleg-raph and translated once a week.<sup>7</sup>

- 
1. Neizd. P, p 354.
  2. Ibid., pp 354-5.
  3. Ibid., p 342.
  4. SP V p 250.
  5. Ibid. p 155.
  6. Loc cit.
  7. Ibid pp 156-7.

At an early stage, however, Khlebnikov's pan-Slavism, having merged into a wider pan-Asianism, began flowing towards a still wider internationalism. In 1913, Khlebnikov was already convinced that he had discovered the traces of an ancient international "protolanguage" underlying the existing languages of the world. Although from a scholarly or scientific standpoint Khlebnikov was as usual anything but convincing, the impulse behind this idea was significant. The poet asserted that the letter "A" must have meant "dry land" in the "protolanguage" on account of the fact that

A stubbornly stands at the start of the names of the continents—Asia, Africa, America, Australia—although the names relate to different languages.<sup>1</sup>

Leaving aside objections—among other things, the very idea of a "continent", and knowledge of the separate existence of the continents, arose only in recent historical times—what was reflected here was a search for a lost primeval unity which was to become central to Khlebnikov's world-view. It is probable that Khlebnikov's Sanskrit studies at University must have seemed to provide him with a scientific basis for the idea of a "protolanguage" to which the world's existing languages can be traced.

Khlebnikov's theory of continent-names was only one example of a general view of the significance of the first letter in every word. Words beginning with the same letter were in his view joined by a kind of "wire", or a "river-bed of the currents of fate".<sup>2</sup> In another article written in 1913, Khlebnikov defined the meanings of these first letters. "S", for example, meant in his view "the gathering of parts into a whole." "T" meant the subordination of a movement to a superior force. A large number of consonants were treated in this way, as if each one, in and of itself, lent its meaning to the word it headed.<sup>3</sup>

---

1. SP V p 192.  
2. Loc cit.  
3. SP V p 189.

A few years later—in 1919—Khlebnikov would publish a much-elaborated and refined version of this table of consonants in an article entitled "Artists of the World". Here it would be categorically asserted that the consonant-meanings which he had "discovered" applied to all the languages of the world. His consonant-table was an "all-human alphabet", or a "short dictionary of the world of space". The value of this table was that it allowed the world's artists to recover the lost unity of the world's languages and re-unite the human race. For, as Khlebnikov would explain in this article:

Languages have betrayed their glorious past. Once, when words dispelled enmity and made the future transparent and calm, languages united people in gradual steps (1: caves, 2: villages, 3: tribes, blood-unions, 4: states) to form a single rational world, a unity of rational values exchanged against identical exchange-sounds. Savage understood savage and put the blind weapon aside. But now, having betrayed their past, languages serve the cause of enmity. As incompatible exchange-sounds for commerce in mental merchandize, they have divided up multi-tongued humanity into trade-warring camps—a series of verbal markets each with a boundary allowing no escape for its particular language. Each layer of sonorous coinage now claims supremacy over the others. In this way languages as such have served to disunite mankind and introduce **spectral wars**. But let a single written language accompany man to his most distant destinies—and, gathered in a new embracing whirlwind, a new assembly of the human race will appear. The silent, graphic signs will reconcile language's multitongues.<sup>1</sup>

It was an answer to the Biblical condemnation of humanity: the destruction of the Tower of Babel and the confusion of all tongues.

In the same article, Khlebnikov conceded that the task of constructing the required new language had only just been begun. "But", he added,

the general form of the world language of the future is given. It will be a "transrational" language.<sup>2</sup>

---

1. SP V pp 216-17.  
2. Ibid p 221.

In the following year, Khlebnikov would write:

...transrational language is the future language of the universe in embryo. It alone can unite people. Rational languages are already dividing them.<sup>1</sup>

Khlebnikov saw unifying human language as the alternative to violence. Returning to his "primitivist" theme he wrote:

There was a time when languages united people. Let us transport ourselves back to the Stone Age. It is night. There are fires. Men are working with black stone hammers.

Suddenly footsteps are heard. Everyone rushes to arm himself. They stand threateningly. But what is this? From the dark comes a familiar name, and at once all becomes clear. They are our people coming. "Ours!"—floats the sound from the darkness, spoken in words of the shared language. Language united people then, just as did a familiar voice. The weapon—is a sign of cowardice. If one goes into the matter, then it turns out that the weapon is an additional dictionary for those speaking in a different language—a pocket dictionary.<sup>2</sup>

In 1921, Khlebnikov would pose the question:

What is better, a universal language or universal slaughter?<sup>3</sup>

- 
1. SP V p 236.
  2. Ibid p 230.
  3. Ibid p 266. The dream of a universal language expressed an important part of the spirit of Cubism and the spirit of the age. The peculiar "universalism" of Cubism in general has been discussed already above. Apart from this, however, there is the important parallel with Joyce, whose Finnegans Wake was a strange product of the same international ferment, even if it remained unfinished and unpublished until a rather later and different period. A. Kazin wrote in a review, referring to Joyce's language: "All cultures have relation to it, all minds, all languages nourish its night-speech"—Denning, op cit p 687. C Giedon-Welcker wrote that we have no "feeling that an individual man is speaking, but as if a sound came from some giant mental vessel..."—ibid. p 499. The same author wrote that Joyce "strides through countries, through centuries, through intellectual dimensions..."—pp 496-97. Frank O'Connor wrote that the language "anticipates the universalization of language"—p 516. For Miller-Budnitskaya, the book was written in "a peculiar pan-European Esperanto"—p 655. Stephen Spender wrote that Joyce had "invented a new language in Finnegans Wake which is the beginning of a universal language"—p 749. All page-references refer to Denning, op cit.

Chapter Eleven:

ALL THE WORLD'S KNOWLEDGE IN A FORMULA.

An important aspect of Cubism was its relationship with the scientific revolution of the time. The total 'newness' (as it seemed) of the Cubist paintings was appropriate to a period in which the very bases of all previous knowledge seemed to have been undermined, and unimaginable new vistas of science seemed to be opening up. This chapter deals with what Khlebnikov felt to be his own contribution to this revolution in human knowledge.

ALONG WITH THE UNITY OF HUMAN TONGUES, the unity of all knowledge became for Khlebnikov an ever more potent dream. In search of its fulfilment, the poet began studying an extraordinarily wide variety of facts culled from the library-books he could lay his hands on. "I am studying mountains and their location on the earth's crust", he wrote to Kruchenykh in 1913.<sup>1</sup> He also built complicated equations designed to express the motions of the planets and their relation to the speed of light. His equation for the planet Earth looked like this:

$$M. 365.24.60.60.v. = PR^2 - \frac{48PR^2}{365}.$$

The equation for Jupiter was more complicated:

$$300.00 \cdot 1044 \cdot 11 \cdot 6000 \cdot 86400 = 3.777^2 10^{12} - \frac{48 \cdot 3 \cdot 777^2 \cdot 10^{12}}{1044}$$

He wrote that it was the same for Venus, and that "in this consists the first boomerang aimed at Newton".<sup>2</sup>

Khlebnikov's thirst for mathematical material seemed unquenchable. To his friend Spassky he wrote:

I need books with numbers in them.<sup>3</sup>

It was almost as if it hardly mattered what the subject of study was, so long as the information could be expressed in numerical form. In May 1914 he wrote to Kamensky:

A business proposition: jot down the days and hours of your emotions, as if they moved like the stars. Yours and hers. And namely their angles, turns, climax points. And I will construct an equation!<sup>4</sup>

---

1. Neizd. P p 367.

2. Nesob. P., pp 444-45.

3. Quoted by Markov, Russian Futurism, p 301.

4. Neizd. P., p 369.

Khlebnikov studied the chronicle of Pushkin's life—and Gogol's—in order to construct still more equations.<sup>1</sup> He made detailed notes of the exact times of the experiences of his own life and discovered perfect mathematical correlations. To Matyushin he wrote in December 1914, for example:

This year I notice a reverse relationship with the past. That is, the days which were gloomy for me last year have been bright this year.<sup>2</sup>

Later he would ponder on the significance of the fact that "the number of bones in a human being is 48 times 5 = 240", and that "the surface of a red blood cell is equal to the surface of the earth divided by 365 to the power of ten."<sup>3</sup>

Max Rychner writes of Joyce's Ulysses that in it:

Nothing is isolated or separate; even the most singular, the most incomprehensible thing makes itself felt in countless connections which at first are unrecognizable, but reveal themselves in their darkness to sympathetic men.<sup>4</sup>

The same notion of universal interconnectedness runs through Khlebnikov's work. His studies of the planets and stars are based on the firm belief that the laws governing their motions are the same as those governing the lives of men. As he put it himself:

The breath of the same mouth of time covers both the windowpanes of stars and the panes of human destinies; the same laws work in both.<sup>5</sup>

- 
1. SP V pp 271-273.
  2. Neizd. P p 375.
  3. SP V p 242.
  4. Extract in: Denning, op cit p 742.
  5. Nesob. P p 509.

But above all, Khlebnikov's work is about the history of mankind, the rise and fall of empires, wars, revolutions and the laws of time underlying these events.<sup>1</sup> It was this historical process which Khlebnikov dreamed of mastering with his "equations" and his plan for a world-government or "Presidents of the Terrestrial Sphere". Early in the course of the First World War—in the first or second week of December, 1914—he became excitedly convinced that he could "foresee" some of the major battles of the war. To Matyushin he wrote:

These days are important to me because, according to my calculations, on the fifteenth and twentieth of December there ought to be some naval battles of the first magnitude. I wrote about this long ago to Kuzmin (his address is Kuzmin, First Aviation Company, Polytechnical Institute, Petrograd). And now, today, on the sixteenth, our paper publishes "rumours of a major naval engagement." Tomorrow I will know for sure whether one occurred or not. If it did, then I will be able to determine exactly the dates of the great naval battles—and their outcome—for the whole of this war. The days and nights of conquest! I have picked on this day as an experiment. If it turns out wrong, then I will chuck in the computations, the regularities of exhausting calculations. And for a whole month I have been living only for this.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, the "rumours" proved without substance and the eagerly-expected battles failed to materialize. Undaunted, Khlebnikov wrote to Matyushin acknowledging his "mistake" and outlining the premises on which his calculations had been based. Essentially, his idea seems to have been that correspondences can be established across time: that the great events

---

1. Compare with Walter Rybert's comment on Finnegans Wake that it is about "man's history, the rise and fall of his civilizations, his nations and his families..."—extract in: Denning, op cit p 733.

2. Neizd. P p 374.

of world history are repetitions, on a different plane, of events which occurred in the distant past. As he explained to Matyushin, his premise was:

The assumption that a particular war is a repetition of age-old times preceding it...<sup>1</sup>

Another premise—flowing from this—was:

that, as regards the naval war of 1914, one must turn to the century of battles waged by Islam against the West from the beginning of the Crusades to 1095.<sup>2</sup>

A third assumption was that, once a correspondence between two events has been established, the same correspondence would be found to extend to cover yet further events.

Having admitted his mistakes, Khlebnikov did not abandon his attempts but plunged deeper into them. He later described how he had to be rescued from his obsession by his friends:

Khlebnikov drowned in a bog of calculations, and was forcibly saved.<sup>3</sup>

In 1916 he wrote to two friends of the ultimate aim of his researches:

The summit—the whole of knowledge in a single equation the size of  $\sqrt{-1}$  <sup>3</sup>

- 
1. Neizd. P p 375.
  2. Ibid p 376. There seems to be an important relationship between Khlebnikov's theory of temporal correspondences and a central theme of the Symbolists. In the case of the latter, "correspondences" were established, by means of the sounds and symbols of language, between "this world" and "other worlds" conceived to exist on other planes in a preponderantly timeless, motionless state of being. The Symbolists' language was thought of as suffused with the light from these other worlds, into which the reader was thereby brought into contact. Khlebnikov's peculiar transformation of this idea was primarily based on its re-construction, as it were, along a time-axis. This would have been in accordance with his call: "Replace the concept of space everywhere with the concept of time"—1915-16. SP V p 159. Thus it was the future with which his language was suffused: "Learn: upon language the future's shadow is cast"—1914, SP V p 193; "...the homeland of creation is the future. It is from there that the word-gods blow their wind"—SP II p 8. The "other world" into which his work ushered humanity was this future, with which there were "correspondences" with the pre-historic past.
  3. SP V p 307.

Chapter Twelve:

THE PRESIDENT OF THE TERRESTRIAL SPHERE.

This chapter begins by returning to the year 1908, in order to trace the origins of the impulse which led Khlebnikov eventually to his world-government plan. The idea of "presiding" over the entire globe represents another aspect of that "carrying to extremes" of Symbolist premises—while at the same time overthrowing them—which has been discussed in earlier chapters. It represents another aspect of the explosion of the "I" and its merging in a global "We" which has been described as central to Khlebnikov's work. The chapter concludes with a survey of some of the scientific and technological projects which Khlebnikov's world-government was to implement.

IN 1908, KHLEBNIKOV had already begun to recoil from the Symbolists' sense of futility, powerlessness and the imminence of catastrophe. As a Symbolist himself, he had written to his fellow-artists:

We know nothing, we foretell nothing, we simply ask in terror: has the time really come, really come?<sup>1</sup>

Khlebnikov soon decided that "the time" had come, and that the much-feared ultimate cataclysm should be positively welcomed and plunged into.<sup>2</sup> The experience of uncertainty was in this way overcome, while the feeling of "knowing nothing" and "foretelling" nothing was replaced by the sensation of knowing everything and foretelling everything, as we have seen.

In a similar "turning inside out" of Symbolist forms and premises,<sup>3</sup> Khlebnikov reached his own form of artistic collectivism not by a crude negation of the Symbolists' "ego" but by expanding its walls, until it became so enormous and vaguely-defined as to appear to merge with the human collectivity. An aspect of this process was his peculiar idea of becoming the "King of Time" and the "President of the Terrestrial Sphere".

The poet's first mention of his "Government" project seems to have been made in a letter to Kamensky written in the spring

---

1. Neizd. P p 322.

2. It was partly for this reason that Khlebnikov (like Mayakovsky) for a brief period actually welcomed the First World War. Another reason was that Khlebnikov saw in it an aspect of the struggle of the East against the West. See Nesob. P pp 405-06. A fierce anti-militarism soon replaced these moods, however.

3. "Artistic creation is always a complicated turning inside out of old forms, under the influence of new stimuli which originate outside of art"—Trotsky, Lit. & Rev'n., quoted in: Leon Trotsky on Literature and Art, N Y 1970, p 37 (introduction by P N Siegel).

of 1914. Here the idea that "the time" had arrived was fervently expressed, even though introduced in the form of a question:

All in all, isn't it time to rush to Razin's boats?  
Everything is ready. We will form a Government of the  
Presidents of the Terrestrial Sphere. Prepare a list.  
Send it.<sup>1</sup>

The "list", presumably, was to be of the names of the artists or others willing to "join" his supposed "Government." The central figure in the Government was obviously going to be Khlebnikov himself. The poet was allowing his "ego" to become inflated in his own dream-world to an extent which might have embarrassed even a Mayakovsky, or one of the most self-centred of the Symbolists. In 1916, Khlebnikov wrote, referring to his alter-ego, "Ka":

Ka became my teacher. Under his guidance, I gradually became the chief of the terrestrial sphere. I received a letter: "To the Chief of the Terrestrial Sphere"—there were no other words.<sup>2</sup>

But in being expanded on this scale, Khlebnikov's "ego" was in a sense being turned inside-out and dissolved into an apparent one-ness with the entire human race. This paradoxical route to collectivism—through a carrying of egotism to impossible extremes—was also characteristic of Mayakovsky. As Trotsky notes in this connection:

The universalization of one's ego breaks down, to some extent, the limits of one's individuality, and brings one nearer to the collectivity—from the reverse end.<sup>3</sup>

It was, of course, the same death of the "I" and birth of the "We" which we noted earlier that underlay this process. Trotsky's comment here is that "extremes meet", and it is this process of transformation of things into their opposites which explains why

---

1. SP V p 303.

2. Ibid p 137.

3. Trotsky adds: "But this is true only to a certain degree..."—Literature and Revolution, p 149.

for all the apparent egotism just mentioned, D S Mirsky could write that the "I" never became a poetic theme with Khlebnikov.<sup>1</sup> The poet's peculiar impersonalism or collectivism was a point fervently insisted upon by the Cubo-Futurists, who distinguished themselves thereby from the so-called "Ego-Futurists". Boris Lavrenyev writes how, at a meeting between the ego- and cubo-futurists in his apartment in 1913, David Burlyuk denounced the former because they

were really not futurists at all and had no right to usurp that name... By the very prefix "ego", the ego-futurists underlined their narrow individualist horizon... "You are egoists, while we Khlebnikovians, we Hileans are universalists", David said.<sup>2</sup>

Khlebnikov's championship of the power of the "We" appears in a variety of forms throughout his work, from the sound of "thousands of voices" (accompanied by the rumblings of mountains) shouting "We can!" in "Zangezi" to a note in which, writing of himself, Khlebnikov explains:

The iron sword of the "We" cut the "I"-sword of copper.<sup>3</sup>

The re-construction or re-unification of the archaic tribal "We" of humanity was of course, as we have seen, the ultimate aim of all Khlebnikov's linguistic efforts. The fragmentation of the ancient unity into separate "egos" is lamented in the following poetic lines:

Ведь мы и ведьмы я  
Великой ведуньи мы (не тьмы, а мы)  
Стоим у ворот великого Мы...

Ведь мы мирское целое  
Делим на я, на множество я,  
Муку я.  
Дерево Господина Народа  
Мелем на я,  
Состоим из многих частей.<sup>4</sup>

- 
1. Quoted by Markov. For this and similar comments by critics, see his The Longer Poems... p 34.
  2. Quoted in: Woroszylsky, op cit p 85.
  3. Zangezi: SP III p 339; "Iron sword" sentence: SP V p 43.
  4. SP V pp 112-113; written in 1922.

If in his world-government project, Khlebnikov in one sense carried the "I"-principle to extremes, it was really to transcend this principle altogether and re-unite the "I's" of all humanity into the primeval "We". As Khlebnikov described his own work:

I piece together the human race, like the parts  
Of a whole conceived long ago.<sup>1</sup>

In 1916, Khlebnikov wrote an extraordinary manifesto entitled "Martian Trumpet", to which he obtained the signatures of a number of colleagues, and which he himself signed in the capacity of "The King of Time, Velimir Ist". It began with an attack on existing states for being based on spatial axes rather than on the axis of time. The next section was an attack on those subordinated to the reign of byt:

Those who are drowned in the laws of family-life and the laws of commerce—those who have only one speech: "I eat"—do not understand us, thinking neither of this, nor that, nor the other.<sup>2</sup>

These sections of the population were identified with the older generations. Satisfied with the present constitution of things, they were nearer death than birth. "But we", Khlebnikov continued,

we have explored the soil of the continent of Time—and have found it to be fruitful... We call you to a land where the trees speak, where associations of scientists resemble waves, where there are spring troops of love, where Time blossoms like a bird-cherry tree and moves like a piston, and where transman in a carpenter's apron saws time into boards and like a lathe-operator handles his own tomorrow.<sup>3</sup>

---

1. SP I p 177.

2. SP V p 152.

3. Loc cit. Khlebnikov's classification of the opposing forces in society can be compared with Mayakovsky's version: "to be a bourgeois does not mean to own capital or squander gold. It means to be the heel of a corpse on the throat of the young. It means a mouth stopped up with fat. To be a proletarian doesn't mean to have a dirty face and work in a factory; it means to be in love with the future that's going to explode the filth of the cellars... Believe me"—quoted by Jakobson, On a Generation... in: E J Brown, op cit p 13.

Khlebnikov called on the world's youth to "raise the winged sails of time" and to strike "a new blow in the eyes of the crude folk of space".<sup>1</sup> He then went on to explain that the struggle of youth against age was also the fight of inventors (izobretateli) against proprietors (priobretateli). Scientific inventors fought for time; property-owners only for space, stealing the produce of inventors in the process. Khlebnikov gave an example of this theft:

From the standpoint of the proprietors themselves, the whole of modern industry on the terrestrial sphere is "theft" (in the proprietors' language and morals) from the first inventor—Gauss. He founded the study of lighting. And yet during his life he did not have 150 rubles annually for his scientific work.<sup>2</sup>

After further explanations, Khlebnikov concluded—placing himself and his colleagues in the camp of "inventors":

That is why, fully conscious of their special nature, different morality and peculiar mission, the inventors separate themselves from the proprietors in a sovereign state of time (without space), placing rods of iron between themselves and them.<sup>3</sup>

At about the same time that he wrote this manifesto, Khlebnikov made a series of "proposals". One was to use heartbeats as the "monetary units of the future".<sup>4</sup> Another was:

Put an end to the Great War with the first flight to the Moon.<sup>5</sup>

A selection of various other "proposals" follows:

- 
1. SP V pp 152-53.
  2. Ibid p 153.
  3. Loc cit.
  4. Ibid p 157. There is an echo of this idea in Mayakovsky's Man, in which the bourgeois enemy declares: "If the heart is everything then why, why have I been gathering you, my dear money!"—quoted in: Jakobson, On a Generation, in: E J Brown, op cit p 15.
  5. SP V p 157.

Let air-sailing be one foot, and the gift of spark-speech the other foot of humanity. What next: we'll see.

Introduce monkeys into the family of man and give them certain rights of citizenship.

Establish a special empty island (Iceland, for example), as a place for uninterrupted war between those of all countries who want it. (Splendid death).

Introduce as much order and system into the business of giving birth as now prevails in the business of killing; birth-armies, in limited numbers.

Replace the concept of space everywhere with the concept of time—for example, wars between the generations of the terrestrial sphere, wars of time-entrenchments.

It would be impossible to avoid destroying trains, if their movements were limited only to within space...

A re-organization of housing rights. The right to rooms in any town, and the right to change one's dwelling-place continually (the right to a home independently of the dimensions of space). Airborne mankind does not let private space restrict his property.

Construct houses in the form of iron lattice-work, so that little mobile dwellings of glass can be inserted anywhere.

Demand that armed groups of people with weapons in their hands refute the opinion of the Futurists—that the entire Terrestrial Globe belongs to them.

Arouse in factory chimney pipes the desire to sing morning praise to the rising sun—whether over the Seine, or in Tokyo, or over the Nile, or in Delhi.

Introduce radio for the transmission of lectures from the Central University to village schools. Any school at the foot of a green hill will receive scientific news, and the teacher will be the ear-trumpet of the attentive village. The language of lightnings as conductor of scientific truth.

Accomplish the transfer of power gradually to the starry sky...

Treat the Earth as a resonant plate, and its capital cities as dust nodules gathered in still waves.

The world may be understood as a light-ray. You are a construction of spaces. We are a construction of time.<sup>1</sup>

---

1. SP V pp 158-162.

Soon after the February 1917 Revolution, Khlebnikov—  
convinced that his mathematical prophesies had been or were  
being realized—wrote ecstatically to his friend Petnikov:

Is the universal roar of insurrections terrifying to us—  
when we ourselves are an insurrection still more terrible?  
You remember that a government of poets has been estab-  
lished, embracing the terrestrial sphere. You remember  
that a sonorous string of tribes has united Tokyo, Moscow  
and Singapore. We are like the sea's waves during a grey  
storm, one moment swelling and towering high, the next  
rolling down and scattering wide. You recall that we have  
succeeded in discovering the harmony of destinies, which  
we need in order to lift humanity on the palm of our  
thought to the next plane of existence. You know, this  
wandering century—is going somewhere!<sup>1</sup>

In April, Khlebnikov made a series of notes relating to an  
"appearance" to be made by himself and Petnikov on some occasion.  
Among these notes were:

Our answer to wars—the mousetrap.  
The rays of my name.  
The ray of humanity.  
People as rays.  
Beautiful waterfalls of numbers.  
An armful of equations of fate.  
The secret of humanity.  
The ray of Khlebnikov.  
The suicide of states.  
The seige of languages.  
Logs of time.  
The ray of the world.  
The world as a poem.  
We have come to you from the future, from the distance of  
centuriges. We gaze upon your time from the rock of the  
future.<sup>2</sup>

At about the same time, Khlebnikov composed his "Declaration of  
the Presidents of the Terrestrial Sphere":

Only we, having rolled up—like a scroll—  
Your three years of war, to form a terrifying trumpet,  
Sing and shout, sing and shout,  
Drunk with the enchantment of the truth,  
That the Government of the Terrestrial Sphere  
Already exists:  
It is—We.<sup>3</sup>

---

1. SP V p 313.  
2. Ibid p 259.  
3. IS p 170.

Khlebnikov blamed the War on the world's "states of space", which he likened to the cannibalistic gods of an earlier age:

Here in the name of all humanity  
 We turn to negotiations  
 With the states of the past:  
 If you, O states, are so fine,  
 As you love to describe yourselves,  
 And as you force your servants to describe you,  
 Then why this food-of-the-gods?  
 Why do we, the people, crunch in your jaws—  
 Between your canine teeth and your molars?<sup>1</sup>

In the future, explained Khlebnikov, these states would be destroyed: a Government of Poets would have taken their place, forming a State of Time. But that day had yet to be reached:

And in the meantime, mothers,  
 Carry your children away  
 Should a state anywhere appear.  
 Young people—run off and hide in the caves,  
 Or in the depths of the sea  
 Should you anywhere glimpse a state.  
 Young girls and all those who can't tolerate the  
 odour of death,  
 Fall into a swoon at the word "frontiers":  
 It stinks of corpses.<sup>2</sup>

In Petrograd in the spring of 1917 a grandiose "Carnival of the Arts" was staged. Writes Kamensky:

...writers, artists, composers and actors moved slowly down the Nevsky in a procession of automobiles strewn with flowers. Bringing up the rear of this 'carnival' procession of vehicles was a big lorry, on the side of which was inscribed in chalk:

THE PRESIDENT OF THE TERRESTRIAL SPHERE.

In the lorry in a soldier's greatcoat, sitting hunched-up, was Khlebnikov.<sup>3</sup>

- 
1. Choix de poemes, p 102. In another version of the "declaration" Khlebnikov wrote: "If you, states, are well-behaved—then why this food-of-the-gods? Why do we crunch between your jaws—we soldiers and sailors? But then if you are bad, O states, who among us will raise a little finger to prevent your destruction?"—SP V p 163.
  2. Choix de poemes, p 102.
  3. Put' entuziasta, M 1931, pp 256-7; quoted by Stepanov, introd to IS p 49.

Chapter Thirteen:

THE WORLD AS A LIGHT-RAY: KHLEBNIKOV AND THE  
ELECTRONICS REVOLUTION.

Khlebnikov's technological "futurism" was far more advanced than that of his "urbanist" contemporaries such as Marinetti. Khlebnikov drew little or no inspiration from the nineteenth-century steam-age and iron-age industrial revolution. But the electronics revolution, the invention of radio and the theories of Einstein—all connected, in one way or another, with the idea of electro-magnetic waves—were something different. In this chapter it is suggested that Khlebnikov's concept of "people-rays", his idea of the whole of humanity as "inhabiting" a "light-ray of fate" and his enthusiasm for radio were interconnected, and reflected a profound consciousness of the importance of the "inventions" and scientific discoveries which formed the background to the Cubist revolution in art.

POLITICALLY, the Futurists were at heart Anarchists. The "enemy" to them was not so much the rule of Capital or of the bourgeoisie as the reign of byt, which expressed itself in the greyness and grind of daily life, the routine of work, eating and sleep, the boredom of family existence—and the all-pervading fixed regulations, institutions and hierarchies of the state. Under the rule of byt, everything was fossilized, congealed, immovable. There was existence in space: everyone struggled for his own plot, his own cabbage-patch, his own position in or portion of the Terrestrial Sphere. But it was a timeless existence, or an existence subject only to the endless repetition of time, the interminable repetition of one and the same "today".

Khlebnikov's vision of the explosion of this "byt" was intimately connected with his sense of the significance of the scientific revolution which was taking place in his time. Fundamentally, he felt that radio-waves, movement at the speed of light, electronic technology and the prospect of space-travel were creating a new kind of man, for whom the struggle for fixed territory on the planet earth was becoming irrelevant. If man could exist on all points of the globe simultaneously, how could he bother any longer about fighting for space? How could he care any longer for frontiers, for fences, for private territory or for fatherlands? And if the old immobilities were dissolving, space was disappearing and the whole earth was becoming, as it were, a "ray"—then how could the new man avoid seeing his future struggle as a struggle for change, a struggle for time?

---

The link between Cubist painting and radio, electronics and the theories of Einstein—a link insisted upon by virtually all critics—has been discussed already. In the case of the French painters, the link operated largely on the level of the subconscious.<sup>1</sup> Those closely associated with the Cubist painters, such as their dealer, Kahnweiler and the poet Apollinaire, saw the parallel with the scientific revolution, writing and speaking about it at the time or soon afterwards. But the painters themselves were almost wholly unaware of what they were doing.

In the case of Khlebnikov, things were rather different. Having studied science at University, at least the images and forms of scientific thought (if not its real methods) had probably penetrated deeply into his consciousness. Almost certainly, this made it far easier for him than it would otherwise have been to grasp intellectually the link between his art and the scientific revolution which had been taking place.

For Khlebnikov, as we have seen, the "whole of contemporary industry" was essentially electronic—it stemmed from "the first inventor, Gauss", who "founded the study of lightning." For Khlebnikov, the implications of this were enormous. He had very little enthusiasm for mechanical movements and machines—the products of the earlier industrial revolution whose praises were perhaps belatedly being sung by Marinetti. But the heroes of the new technological revolution—radio and electronics—were for him quite another matter.<sup>2</sup>

- 
1. Braque himself writes of the role of the subconscious in the Cubist revolution: "At such a time one has to follow dictates which are almost unconscious, because there is no knowing what will happen. The adventure through which one is living is one in which consciousness plays no part"—written in 1954; quoted in: John Russell, G Braque, London 1959, p 9.
  2. Khlebnikov's hostility towards conventional machines is shown in his "The Crane", in which the world of machines rises up in an insurrection against man. Khlebnikov believed that "the tiniest vein on my hand is a laugh of scorn at all machines"—quoted by Stepanov, IS (introduction) p 67.

By facilitating instantaneous global communication, Radio may be thought of as inaugurating a new age—the age (to quote Marshall McLuhan) of "instant humans."<sup>1</sup> Khlebnikov used the term "people-rays" (lyud-luchi), as we have seen. As early as the summer of 1910, he had written to Kamensky:

We—are a new breed of people-rays. We have come to illuminate the universe.<sup>2</sup>

And his notes about "the ray of humanity, people as rays, the ray of Khlebnikov, the ray of the world" and so on have already been cited.<sup>3</sup> When Khlebnikov wrote to Petnikov about "a government of poets" and "a sonorous string of tribes" encircling the globe—and went on to declare: "We are like the sea's waves during a grey storm"—he was not being simply mystical.<sup>4</sup> He had a concrete technological possibility in mind. In 1916 he had already quite convincingly—if also in certain respects fancifully—described this possibility. One form it had taken was the project for a "Higher Institute of Futurists", which would occupy not a particular geographical site but many sites widely separated over the globe (on the Asian side, however), its members communicating by means of radio-teleg-raphy:

Foundation of the first Higher Institute of Futurists (budetlyan). It consists of a number (13) of estates borrowed (for 100 years) from people-of-space, situated on the sea-shore or among mountains by extinct volcanos in Siam, Siberia, Japan, Ceylon, Murmansk, among the empty mountains, where it is difficult to acquire prop-erty from anyone but easy to invent things. They are all united with each other through radio-telegraphy, on which lessons are given. To have a radio-telegraph of one's own. Communication through the air.<sup>5</sup>

- 
1. "The age of co-presence of all individuals is the age of communication—the age of instant humans"—Counter-Blast, London 1969, p 35.
  2. SP V p 291.
  3. Ibid p 259.
  4. The Symbolist composer Scriabin had written in his 1905-06 notebooks: "The whole world is inundated by the waves of my being"; in 1904 he had written: "I want to be the bright-est light, the greatest (and only) sun. I want to illuminate the universe with my light"—quoted in: Faubion Bowers, Scriabin, p 101; p 54. Khlebnikov was partially de-mysticiz-ing this streak in Symbolism, giving it a technological twist.
  5. SP V p 156.

This should be seen also in the context of the passages quoted already, in which Khlebnikov envisaged radio-transmission of lectures "to any school at the foot of a green hill", saw "the language of lightning" as the "conductor of scientific truth", and hailed "air-sailing" and "the gift of spark-speech" as the two new "feet" of humanity.

A reading of Khlebnikov's writings on "fate"—especially his post-revolutionary ones—shows that the idea of motion at the speed of light and the concept of humanity as a sort of "light-ray" or radio-wave were not mere incidental notions but were absolutely fundamental to his developing world-view. In his now-characteristic way, he saw the "ray of humanity"—in his "Nasha Osnova" written in 1920—as moving not through space but through time. He likened the 317-yearly "shifts" of human history (which he believed he had 'discovered') to the vibrations of a balalaika-string. This was only one of several such balalaika-notes: the vibrations of another string were manifested in people's heart-beats and footsteps; another represented "the central axis of the sonorous world."<sup>1</sup> But for Khlebnikov, the long-wave string—pulsing at intervals of 317 years—was the most important one. The extent to which the idea of electromagnetic waves and their control had penetrated into Khlebnikov's consciousness may be gauged from the following passage, in which the poet elaborates his idea of humanity as a ray through time:

Once science had measured the light-wave, studying it in the light of figures, it became possible to regulate the course of rays. The image of a distant star is brought up close to the writing-table with these mirrors. The sizes of infinitely small things, previously invisible, become accessible view...

Let us suppose that a light-wave were populated by rational beings, with their government, laws and even prophets. Wouldn't it appear to them that a scientist who used mirrors to regulate the course of waves was an almighty

---

1. SP V p 239.

divinity? If prophets existed on such a light-wave, they would glorify the scientist's power and flatter him: "You breathe—and the oceans move; you speak—and they flow back"; they would lament that they could not do this themselves.

Now, having studied the mighty rays of human fate, whose waves are populated by people, each single pulse lasting for centuries, human thought can aspire to apply to them the techniques of mirror-regulation, building a force consisting of a pair of convex and concave lenses. It may be imagined that the century-sized oscillations of our giant ray will be no less obedient to the scientist than infinitely small waves of light-ray. Then people will be at one and the same time both the population inhabiting the light-ray—and the scientist directing the course of these rays, altering their direction at will.<sup>1</sup>

If all this seems rather far-fetched, we should perhaps turn to a more convincing Utopian vision: Khlebnikov's "Radio of the Future", which deals less with time than with the conquest of space. To a certain extent, it is a vision which has already come true, but it is remarkable that it should have been written as early as in 1921:

The Radio of the future—the main tree of consciousness—will open up a knowledge of countless tasks and will unite all mankind.

Around the Radio's central station, this iron palace, where clouds of wires stream out like strands of hair, there will surely be posted a skull and cross-bones with the familiar inscription: 'Danger!' For the slightest halt in the working of the Radio would produce a spiritual swoon of the entire country, a temporary loss of its consciousness.

The Radio becomes the spiritual sun of the country, the great sorcerer and ensorceler.

Imagine the Radio's central station: A spider web of lines in the air, a cloud of lightning-flashes, now extinguishing themselves, now re-igniting, running from one end of the building to the other. A skyblue globule of circular lightning hovering in the air like a timid bird, tackle stretched obliquely.

Around the clock, from this point on the terrestrial sphere, flocks of news-items from the life of the spirit scatter like the spring flight of birds.

In this stream of lightning-birds, the spirit will prevail over force, good advice over intimidation.

---

1. SP V pp 239-40.

The activities of the artist of the pen and the artist of the brush, the discoveries of the artists of thought (Mechnikov, Einstein) suddenly transporting mankind to new shores...

The task of communing with the one soul of mankind, with the one quotidian spiritual wave which sweeps over the country every day, drenching it with a rain of scientific and artistic news—the Radio has accomplished this task with the aid of lightning.<sup>1</sup>

Khlebnikov is already prophesying the invention of television. The Radio, he writes,

has sent coloured shadows out on its instruments, so that the whole country and every village can become a communicant in an exhibition of paintings from the distant capital. The exhibition is transmitted by impulses of light and is repeated in thousands of mirrors through all of the Radio's stations. If previously the Radio was the ears of the world, now it is the eyes which admit no distance.<sup>2</sup>

This is Khlebnikov's vision of "the conquest of space" in the future:

Proud skyscrapers plunging into the clouds, a game of chess between two people located at opposite ends of the globe, a lively conversation between a man in America and a man in Europe...

Thus the Radio will forge the unbroken links of the world soul and fuse together all mankind.<sup>3</sup>

The sensation of existing in the form of a radio-wave—roaming freely over the spaces of the globe—is conveyed in the following poetic lines:

I am a wave, rolling down,  
From the white brow of a mountain in Iran,  
And reflected in black

---

1. SP IV, pp 290-291.

2. Ibid p 292.

3. Ibid p 293.

From the antennae-eyes of a lobster  
As it runs obliquely to the side  
While a wild-eyed maiden  
Rides an ass...

I ran  
Along a wave, cut  
By a whale's tail,  
And sea-jelly,  
And Einstein's radio  
About spectral suns...

I rose in the air  
Like steam  
Spiralling in a column  
Like a white tree  
A clean birch standing on the sea...

I tickled  
An American air-pilot's  
Coarse moustache,  
And heard the wheel  
Of the wagon of the skies in my ears...

And then, like a ray,  
I flew to a star.  
And there a wise man said:  
Here's a fragment  
Of an unknown star...<sup>1</sup>

---

1. SP V pp 101-02.

Chapter Fourteen:

THE CONTRADICTIONS OF KHEBNIKOV—REAL OR IMAGINED?

The ground has now been prepared for a discussion of the main theme: the underlying logic connecting together the various aspects of Khlebnikov's thought and work. His love of the past is usually thought of as being inconsistent with his "futurism". This brief chapter simply presents this misconception without dealing with it in any depth: it will be answered in the chapters following.

THERE IS A VIEW among critics that Khlebnikov was a mass of contradictions. In many ways he was, as perhaps the preceding pages have helped to show. But the contradictions were in certain crucial respects not nearly so fundamental as is usually alleged.

The chief accusation made against Khlebnikov has usually been of an inconsistency between his primitivist poetic practice and his allegiance to "the future". Marinetti himself was one of the earliest to lay this charge, when he attacked Russian Futurism as "savagism", and asked, referring to Khlebnikov:

Why is this archaism necessary? Is it really capable of expressing the whole complexity of the tempo of contemporary life?<sup>1</sup>

A comparable remark of Chukovsky's—in which he points to the paradox of "futurists" who choose to write in pre-historic cries and screams—has already been cited.<sup>2</sup> The Soviet critic Gofman similarly concludes that

in founding his system of a 'universal language', and in transforming the language of poetry, Khlebnikov attempted to establish structural and semantic principles more characteristic of one of the ancient phases of the evolution of vocal speech than of 'the language of the future', no matter how this is conceived.<sup>3</sup>

And Renato Poggioli cannot understand why Khlebnikov thought of himself as a futurist at all:

Khlebnikov's Utopia is regressive and retrospective: it repudiates our own steel or iron age for a mythical age of gold, even for a stone or wooden age.<sup>4</sup>

---

1. Quoted in: Barooshian, op cit p 151.

2. Quoted in: ibid, p 95.

3. Yazykovye novatorstvo Khlebnikova, p 225.

4. Russian Futurism, Khlebnikov, Esenin, SEEJ, XVI 1 p 10.

Poggioli concludes, rather amazingly, that Khlebnikov's poetry has little to do with the movement to which he gave his allegiance.<sup>1</sup>

Even Markov accepts the idea of the same contradiction, as when he writes:

Khlebnikov's work is built on a conflict between modernity (his thought) and the past (his poetry).<sup>2</sup>

For those who hold this view, Khlebnikov's enthusiastic espousal of "inventions", and particularly Radio, was a surface phenomenon, developed rather late in the poet's life, derived externally from the avant-garde milieu in which he mixed and having little to do with—and indeed conflicting with—the more deeply-rooted and original linguistic and poetic practice which was developed at an earlier stage.

In the present work an opposite view will be put forward. It is suggested that an important aspect of Khlebnikov's early linguistic practice was its character as a revolt against the forms and conventions of literacy. Far from conflicting with the poet's later espousal of Radio, it in a certain sense anticipated it. For if Radio really does mark, in a sense, the beginning of a new age of communication, then one of its important features is a certain transcendence over the written word—and a new emphasis on the primacy of the voice. In emphasizing the oral tradition of culture—the "song" as opposed to the "book"—Khlebnikov may have been helping to familiarize his contemporaries with the new oral emphasis which the age of Radio seemed to be promising.

---

1. Loc cit.

2. The Longer Poems, p v.

Chapter Fifteen:

THE ELECTRONICS REVOLUTION: McLUHAN.

Khlebnikov's association of the electronic future with the pre-historic past is an idea which is also central to the theories of the 'media-philosopher' Marshall McLuhan. For McLuhan, the electronic future will be a 'return' to the pre-literate past in the sense that it will be an age, once again, of the spoken word. The primacy of writing, and of the culture of literacy, is destined to be overthrown by the age of Radio and TV.

ONE OF KHLEBNIKOV'S MANIFESTOS begins with a radio-call: "To all! To all! To all!"<sup>1</sup> There is a crucial point in Joyce's "Finnegans Wake" where a similar call is made:

Sandhias! Sandhias! Sandhias!  
 Calling all downs. Calling all downs to dayne. Array!  
 Surrection. Eire-weeker to the wohld bludyn world. O  
 rally, O rally, O rally! Phlenxty, O rally! To what  
 lifelike thyne of the bird can be.<sup>2</sup>

The Eastern note (the first thrice-repeated word is a chant from a Sanskrit prayer), the call to the "whole world", the idea of re-birth (the resurrection and the Phoenix) and the idea of mankind being able to live like a bird—all these show that the parallels with Khlebnikov are quite close. Marshall McLuhan thinks that

James Joyce's book is about the electrical retribalization of the West and the West's effect on the East...<sup>3</sup>

What he means is that "Finnegans Wake" is a sort of premonition of the end of literature, the end of the age of literacy, as Radio and electronic communications media threaten to supplant the familiar primacy in art and culture of the written word. The complete dominance in culture of the written word has been a largely Western fact: the cultures of the East have preserved more of their tribal, oral heritage. Hence the coming of Radio in a sense redresses the balance between East and West, inasmuch as it promises, on the one hand the superseding of the West's culture of literacy, and on the other an extraordinary new life on a global scale for a transformed version of the oral cultures of the East.<sup>4</sup>

- 
1. SP V p 164.
  2. Finnegans Wake, first lines of last chapter.
  3. War and Peace in the Global Village, p 4.
  4. Ibid p 128.

It is not necessary to accept all of McLuhan's positions in order to concede that his views are of some importance to an understanding of much modern art. In his view, the habits and conventions of literacy have imposed their own assumptions on Western consciousness to a much greater degree than has been supposed. When communicating through writing, the individual senses his isolation, his separation in space from other "I's", to a much greater degree than when communication is through the spoken word.<sup>1</sup> The emphasis which literacy places on the visual sense—to the exclusion of hearing and touch—again helps underline this spatial separateness, since it is the eye above all which permits the sense of perspective and orientates the individual in space. By placing a new emphasis on the ear, Radio tends to dissolve the sense of spatial separation. And, as McLuhan argues,

As visual space is superseded, we discover that there is no continuity or connectedness, let alone depth and perspective, in any of the other senses. The modern artist—in music, in painting, in poetry—has been patiently expounding this fact for some decades, insisting that we educate our long neglected senses of touch and taste and hearing.<sup>2</sup>

In McLuhan's view, the 'return', by means of Radio, to a new form of oral culture similar in many respects to the pre-literate tribal cultures of the past—makes possible a transcendence of the spatial separateness which has been a characteristic of the literate "I":

An oral or tribal society has the means of stability far beyond anything possible to a visual or civilized and fragmented world. The oral and auditory are structured by a total and simultaneous field of relations describable as "acoustic space". Quite different is the visual world where special goals and points of view are natural and inevitable.<sup>3</sup>

- 
1. Counter-Blast, p 73: "With the book came silent, solitary reading".
  2. War and Peace in the Global Village, p 13.
  3. Ibid p 23.

McLuhan's method is exaggeration. When he claims that "civilization is entirely the product of phonetic literacy"<sup>1</sup>, or that "the invention of Euclidean space is, itself, a direct result of the action of the phonetic alphabet on the human senses"<sup>2</sup>, one has to allow for the exaggeration in order to appreciate the element of truth in what he says. According to McLuhan, the invention of writing coincided with the appearance of the bureaucrat—and hence the state:

A goose quill put an end to talk, abolished mystery, gave us enclosed space and towns, brought roads and armies and bureaucracies.<sup>3</sup>

This new form of "language", in other words, had certain social or political correlates which were inherent in the language-form as such, regardless of what was actually being "said". This is what McLuhan means when he says "the medium is the message": in a long-term historical sense, written language always "says" the same thing, not by virtue of its content but by virtue of its form. No matter what was written on it, papyrus as such

meant control and direction of armies at a distance from a central bureaucracy.<sup>4</sup>

Literacy divorced men from the living web of social reciprocity; it gave men "the power to act without reacting."<sup>5</sup> The "I" was no longer in a reciprocal relationship with other "I's"—it could now assert itself one-sidedly, bureaucratically, from above. On a less political level, writing meant a parallel "fossilization" of emotions and being:

Writing meant that the acoustic world with its magic power over the being of things was arrested and banished to a humble sphere. Writing meant the power of fixing the flux of words and of thought.<sup>6</sup>

---

1. War and Peace in the Global Village, p 24.  
2. Understanding Media: quoted in: Sidney Finkelstein, Sense and Nonsense of McLuhan, N Y 1968 p 15.  
3. Counter-Blast, p 14.  
4. War and Peace etc., p 26.  
5. Understanding Media, p 20.  
6. Counter-Blast, p 115.

But just as all this is what writing "says" (regardless of what might happen to be written), so oral language—and its resurrection in Radio—has a definite "message" of its own. In writing about Radio, McLuhan has a tendency to describe certain possibilities or potentialities as if they were already facts. Making all due allowances for this, however—and for his usual exaggeration—it seems that he has something important to say about the "message" which the electronic media may bring. McLuhan's relevance to a study of Khlebnikov should be obvious:

By surpassing writing, we have regained our sensorial WHOLENESS, not on a national or cultural plane, but on a cosmic plane. We have evoked a super-civilized sub-primitive man.<sup>1</sup>

By restoring in a new form the oral cultures and priorities of the past, Radio brings a future which is also a kind of 'return' to the pre-historic past:

Bless the electric return to the tribal paleolithic age, to the world of the hunter!<sup>2</sup>

Or again:

We begin to structure the primordial feelings and emotions from which 3,000 years of literacy divorced us.<sup>3</sup>

In that sense, we are back again in the beginning of the world:

Extensions of man are the hominization of the world. It is a 2nd phase of the original creation.<sup>4</sup>

Or, in another sense, it is the end of the world:

Just as history begins with writing, so it ends with TV.<sup>5</sup>

The basic fact of the new "language-form" is that it presupposes and in a sense creates a new awareness of unity:

We begin to realize the depth of our involvement in one another as a total human community.<sup>6</sup>

Or again:

- 
1. Counter-Blast p 16.
  2. Ibid p 43.
  3. Ibid p 17.
  4. Ibid p 34.
  5. Ibid p 122.
  6. Ibid p 37.

Today, electronics and automation make mandatory that everybody adjust to the vast global environment as if it were his little home town.<sup>1</sup>

In McLuhan's view, computers and electronics are destined to enable man to treat the entire globe almost as a work of art. Writing of the computer, for example, he states:

Its true function is to program and orchestrate terrestrial and galactic environments and energies in a harmonious way.<sup>2</sup>

He adds:

In merely terrestrial terms, programming the environment means, first of all, a kind of console for global thermostats to pattern all sensory life in a way conducive to comfort and happiness. Till now, only the artist has been permitted the opportunity to do this in the most puny fashion.<sup>3</sup>

Again, there is a 'return' to the pre-literate conception of art

From the beginnings of literacy until now, art has mostly been thought of as representation, a kind of matching of inner and outer environments. Primitive man and post-literate man agree that art is making and that it affects the universe.<sup>4</sup>

This new art-form operates on a vast scale:

Technological art takes the whole earth and its population as its material, not as its form.<sup>5</sup>

And so a completely new role opens up for the artist:

The Ivory Tower becomes the Control Tower of Human Navigation.<sup>6</sup>

- 
1. War and Peace etc., p 11. In a reference, presumably, to the anti-war youth-movements of the 1960's, McLuhan says: "All our teen-agers are now tribal. That is, they recognize their total involvement in the human family regardless of their personal goals or backgrounds"—Counter-Blast, p 143.
  2. War and Peace etc., p 89.
  3. Ibid p 90.
  4. Ibid p 92.
  5. Counter-Blast, p 53.
  6. Counter-Blast, last words in book, p 144.

Chapter Sixteen:

KHLEBNIKOV: THE REVOLT AGAINST LITERACY.

McLuhan sees the essence of the electronics revolution as the overthrow of the cultural tradition of literacy. This chapter shows how Khlebnikov's work can be seen as in a sense anticipating or paralleling this overthrow in the realm of art.

IN AN EARLIER CHAPTER, the Russian concept of 'byt' was discussed. We noted Jakobson's remarks about the peculiarly Russian historical consciousness of the precarious reign of 'byt'—of fixed norms, conventions and order—over an ocean of chaos. And mention was made of the fact that a very similar consciousness was prevalent not only in Russia but throughout Europe in the immediate pre-war period in which Cubism was born.<sup>1</sup>

Russian Futurism, we have seen, was in large part a revolt against 'byt'. The Sun in Mayakovsky's "Extraordinary Adventure" comes down from the sky and drives the fires back—"for the first time since creation". Everything in the Futurists' poetry seemed new, strange—reminiscent in part of what Khlebnikov called "those first days of life on earth", when mountains belched lava and there were three suns in the sky. Khlebnikov's word-creation was designed to make words sparkle with fresh life, in his own words, "as in the first days of creation". For both Mayakovsky and Khlebnikov, the age they were entering was a "second re birth" of mankind.

For Kruchenykh, all previous art in Russia had consisted merely of

pitiful attempts on the part of servile thought to re-  
create its byt, its philosophy and its psychology...<sup>2</sup>

- 
1. The poet Pierre Reverdy, an associate of the Cubists, writes that the year 1911 was a time "when the future was quite bare and the present unusually complex and precarious... I doubt if ever before in the history of art was there so much sunshine, so many blue skies, so much responsibility so bravely assumed, or so great a gap set between disaster and the hoped-for"—Une Aventure Methodique (1949), quoted in: John Russell, & Braque, London 1959 p 13.
  2. A Kruchenykh, Novye Puti Slova, (1913); in: V Markov (ed), Manifesty i Programmy russkikh futuristov, 1967, p 65.

Ever since the "Lay of Igor's Campaign" and the period of the byliny, real word-art had fallen into disuse and

everything was done to muffle the primeval feeling for the native language...<sup>1</sup>

The word had become an automatic, mechanical, repetitive instrument of thought, while

everything which connects it with its kinsmen and the springs of existence—is unnoticed.<sup>2</sup>

It was in a revolt against the reign of byt in language that Kruchenykh made such exaggerated statements as

the more disorder we introduce into the construction of sentences—the better.<sup>3</sup>

\* \* \* \* \*

We have noted that Khlebnikov championed Russia's "singers" as opposed to her "writers".<sup>4</sup> He believed that "the song" and "the book" in Russia belonged in "different camps".<sup>5</sup> He yearned for a "bonfire of books"<sup>6</sup>—and also for a "second language of songs."<sup>7</sup> He described his word-creation technique as "the enemy of the bookish fossilization of language."<sup>8</sup> Livshits praised Khlebnikov for "a discovery of language in its liquid state."<sup>9</sup> Khlebnikov condemned "language borrowed from dusty libraries" as "alien, not one's own language".<sup>10</sup> And he curiously associated the overthrow of this "bookish-fossilized" language—with the unification of mankind and the overthrow of all "states of space."<sup>11</sup>

---

1. Ibid p 65.

2. Ibid pp 66-67.

3. Ibid p 68.

4. SP V p 182.

5. Loc cit.

6. SP V p 183.

7. Ibid p 210.

8. Ibid p 233.

9. Quoted by Markov, Russian Futurism, p 189.

10. SP V p 223.

11. Ibid pp 313-14.

It is in its written form that language corresponds most closely to the conception of 'byt'. "Arrested or frozen speech", writes McLuhan, "is writing."<sup>1</sup> It was therefore appropriate that Khlebnikov's poetic and linguistic practice—as a struggle against 'byt' in language—should have taken very largely the form of a revolt against the forms and conventions of literacy.

Joyce's language in Finnegans Wake has been described as that of pre-historic man—language as it was prior to the development of literacy.<sup>2</sup> It has also been described as the language of childhood—of an age in the life of the individual before reading and writing have been learned.<sup>3</sup> It is also, according to most critics, the language of the dreaming mind—or of those deeper layers of the consciousness which the conventions of literacy fail to reach.<sup>4</sup> In all these cases—and there is no very sharp dividing line between them—the crucial point is that the language comes close to the ideal of "pure sound".<sup>5</sup> These remarks apply to Khlebnikov to no less a degree.

"The main point in Futurist aesthetics", writes Krystyna Pomorska,

was the theory of the word from the aspect of sound, as the only material and theme of poetry.<sup>6</sup>

The idea of Futurism as above all the championship of sound for its own sake would be a simplification, especially in relation to Khlebnikov. On the other hand, to contemporaries, this was largely the impression conveyed, particularly when the new poets were compared with their Symbolist predecessors. The Symbolists

---

1. Counter-Blast, p 63.

2. Miller-Budnitskaya, in: Denning, op cit p 657; Malcolm Muggeridge in: ibid p 684. L A G Strong describes Joyce's method as a "technique of incantation"—ibid p 637. Rebecca West writes that Joyce's theory is "that if words are so handled as to recall meanings they had in the past we will go back into the experience of the race in these bygone phases"—ibid p 536. Marcel Brion sees an "Asiatic sense" in Joyce—428

3. A Lyner writes that reading the words of Finnegans Wake "gives us the pleasure that children get by just making sounds"—Denning, op cit p 588.

4. See: S Gilbert in: Denning, op cit p 539, p 564.

5. See: Max Eastman in: Denning, op cit p 490.

6. Pomorska, op cit p 78.

had been above all littérateurs, seeing themselves as the educated, cultured ones, living in the world of the written word.<sup>1</sup> But as Chukovsky wrote of Mayakovsky (perhaps in a sense misunderstanding him, but making an important point nevertheless):

It would be silly to call him a writer—his calling is not writing, but yelling. His medium isn't paper, but his own throat—which is natural for a poet of the revolution.<sup>2</sup>

Or again:

...he is the poet of thunder and lightning, roars and screeches; he is incapable of maintaining any sort of quiet.<sup>3</sup>

Khlebnikov personally was very quiet. Writing of an early public appearance of the Futurists in Moscow, Livshits recalls that Khlebnikov

could not be allowed to mount the platform because of his weak voice and the hopeless "and so on" with which he broke up his recital after the first few lines, as if stressing the continuity of his verbal emanation.<sup>4</sup>

His speech-difficulties even in private have already been noted. If too much literacy creates an emphasized sense of the spatial and emotional isolation of the "I", then Khlebnikov embodied this condition in his own person to an unusual degree. The enormity of the task of penetrating space—of communicating—was for him no mere academic concept. It was a daunting and seemingly inescapable fact of his personal life. And it may be that it was precisely Khlebnikov's practical difficulties in verbally communicating that spurred his efforts to solve "the problem of communication"—leading to his stupendous output of solutions and answers on a theoretical plane. For all his personal quietness, in any event, the effect of Khlebnikov's linguistic experiments was to create a ringing awareness of the

- 
1. The extreme "culturedness" and "literacy" of the Symbolists—and their frequent use of abstract nouns and French and other foreign words—removed them considerably from the native Russian folk-tradition in poetry and was associated with their "quietness". See especially G Donchin, op cit, for the "bookish" effect of the Symbolists' attempts to translate French Symbolist techniques directly into Russian (esp. pp 164-6).
  2. K Chukovsky, Akhmatova and Mayakovsky, in E J Brown op cit p 50
  3. Ibid p 48.
  4. Polutoroglazy Strelets, in: Woroszylsky, op cit p 64.

sound-waves of language. As a theoretician and as a poet, Khlebnikov was an inseparable part of that outburst of "thunder and lightning, roars and screeches" of which Chukovsky speaks. The apparently rough and elemental "loudness" and extraordinary sound-effects of Mayakovsky's verse stemmed in fact from an extremely sophisticated poetic technique, and the pioneer in the development of this technique was undoubtedly Khlebnikov.<sup>1</sup>

In the view of Roman Jakobson, Khlebnikov's technique represented a carrying to its logical conclusion of a tendency essential to all poetic language:

It has been observed many times in the history of the poetry of all peoples and countries that, as Tredyakovsky put it, for the poet "only sound" is important. The language of poetry strives to reach, as a final limit, the phonetic, or rather—to the extent that such a purpose may be present—the euphonic phrase—in other words, a trans-sense speech.<sup>2</sup>

However, in carrying this general tendency to its conclusion, Khlebnikov was at the same time breaking new ground. All poetry can perhaps in a sense be regarded as a use of language in a way which runs counter to the normal tendencies of literacy. All poetry is a kind of "song", harking back, in one way or another, to the tradition of folk-song. But Khlebnikov's poetry breaks with literacy to a quite unprecedented degree.

In our earlier survey of the Russian concept of 'byt', we noted the peculiar Russian experience of the "temporariness" of civilization, the precariousness of the "order" represented by a city such as St Petersburg, the sense of slippage, as if everything had been built—like St Petersburg—on a marsh. The fact is that civilization in Russia—and with it, a literate culture—had very shallow roots compared with its Western European counterparts. Even in the nineteenth century, and in the

---

1. See Khardzhiev, Poeticheskaya Kultura Mayakovskogo, esp pp 97-103.

2. Modern Russian Poetry, in: E J Brown, op cit p 82.

early decades of the twentieth, the culture-forms of literate civilization were familiar only to a relatively miniscule proportion of the population.

Some scholars would date Russian poetry only from Vasily Zhukovsky's translation of Gray's "Elegy". For this reason, the struggle of the oral against the written tradition in Russian culture has been more fierce and evident in recent times than in any West European country.

Literacy can be traced back in Russia to the introduction of Christianity in the ninth century by the missionaries from Byzantium. For centuries, literate culture was largely church culture: in a sense hostile, foreign, in a closed-in world of its own, set quite apart from the folk-culture of the Russian people. Mandel'stam writes that even in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this hostile, foreign, Byzantine, priestly nature of the written language lived on in the literate culture and language of the intelligentsia. And this again is a reason why the struggle of the oral against the written language has lived on.<sup>1</sup> Mandel'stam sees the written tradition as not only alienated and hostile, but also as a precarious structure in Russia. And it is a structure which Khlebnikov, identifying with the pre-Byzantine, pre-literate folk-singers of old, blows sky-high:

Khlebnikov's language is as lay, as vernacular a language as if no monks, no Byzantium, no intelligentsia's culture had ever existed. It is an absolutely **worldly and secular** Russian language, heard for the first time since a written Russian culture has existed.<sup>2</sup>

- 
1. "The struggle of Russian, that is of the secular, unwritten speech, whose words have grown from domestic roots, the tongue of the lay people, against the written language of the monks, with their Church-Slavonic, hostile, Byzantine literacy—this struggle is still to be sensed"—O. Mandel'stam, Notes on Poetry, (1923), in: D Davie and A Livingstone (eds), Modern Judgements: Pasternak, London 1969, p 67.
  2. Ibid p 70.

Chapter Seventeen:

KHLEBNIKOV'S POETRY AS ANTI-LITERACY.

It is shown how many of the distinguishing characteristics of Khlebnikov's poetic practice constitute aspects of his struggle against the effects which the forms and conventions of literacy have upon language.

KHLEBNIKOV'S ANTI-LITERACY manifests itself in virtually all aspects of his poetic practice. We may see it in:

1. Khlebnikov's general reluctance to finish anything.
2. His repudiation of the dictionary.
3. His hostility to Moscow-standard Russian.
4. His attempts to reproduce or restore "pre-literate" language-forms (the language of children and pre-historic men).
5. His epic inclinations.
6. His hostility to the "fossilization" of language.
7. His championship of "transreason".
8. His emphasis on the voice.

These eight points may seem somewhat arbitrarily-chosen. In part they overlap with each other, and probably other relevant characteristics could be thought of. However they may provide a convenient framework for our discussion. It would be to go beyond the scope of this work to undertake any original or extensive analysis of Khlebnikov's language. All that is proposed is that a note be made of the essentials of what is involved in each of the above points.

#### I. Khlebnikov's general reluctance to finish anything.

There is an element of finality about words which have been written down. The spoken word floats away on the air as soon as it has been uttered—other words replace it, and these, too, may themselves be replaced. Spoken language is a continuous process, a liquid stream rather than a "thing". A body of written words is a "thing". If it is recalled that written language originates historically in connection with official or state purposes: to preserve laws, property-titles, monetary accounts

---

and so on, it will be appreciated how intrinsic to the nature of writing is its permanence, its fixity and its lack of ambiguity—as ideals if not always necessarily in practice. It would obviously seem absurd to sign an unfinished document, enforce a partly-written law or purchase an incomplete title to property. In other words there can be no question, in any of these cases, of dealing with a linguistic process. The written words must comprise a definite thing.<sup>1</sup>

A finished "thing" is, almost invariably, what Khlebnikov's writing is not. Khlebnikov loved new beginnings—and hated endings. Mandel'stam put it beautifully when he commented:

...each line is the beginning of a new poem.<sup>2</sup>

With Kruchenykh, Khlebnikov explicitly attacked the idea of finish and polish: in his view, true poets

should write on their books: after reading, tear it up.<sup>3</sup>

Khlebnikov was so true to this impulse that he was incapable of correcting printers' proofs of his own work. As Mayakovsky explains:

You couldn't let him have anything to do with proofs: he would cross out everything completely and give you an entirely new text.<sup>4</sup>

Khardzhiev writes:

Khlebnikov felt that every verbal construction was a process, not an object.<sup>5</sup>

The activity of making sounds or communicating was the important thing, not the finished result. Writes Mayakovsky:

- 
1. In connection with all this, it would seem not accidental that in attacking "bookish" or "fossilized" language, Khlebnikov very often had the language of state officialdom and of commerce in mind. Khlebnikov thought of himself as leading "a troop of songs" into battle against the market-place" (see Mayakovsky's essay, V V Khlebnikov, in E J Brown, op cit p 86) See also his attack on street-signboard language (SP V p 225).
  2. Quoted by Markov, The Literary Importance of Khlebnikov's Longer Poems, The Russian Review, Vol 19 No 4 Oct. 1960 p 353.
  3. Slovo kak takovoe, quoted in: Markov, Russian Futurism p 130.
  4. V V Khlebnikov, in: E J Brown, op cit p 83.
  5. Quoted by Markov, The Longer Poems, p 32.

Khlebnikov never completed any extensive and finished poetic works. The apparent finished state of his published pieces is most often the work of his friends' hands. We chose from the pile of his discarded notebooks those that seemed most valuable to us and we published them...

When bringing something in for publication, Khlebnikov usually remarked, "If something isn't right, change it." When he recited his poems he would sometimes break off in the middle of a sentence and indicate simply "et cetera."<sup>1</sup>

The idea of preserving his manuscripts apparently hardly occurred to Khlebnikov who, according to Sergey Gorodetsky, would give them to anyone who wanted them.<sup>2</sup> And even many of Khlebnikov's most "finished" extensive works are deliberately composed of seemingly unfinished fragments, like scattered pieces of mosaic. His Zangezi was constructed, in his own words,

...from independent pieces, each with its own god, its own faith, and its own code.<sup>3</sup>

His "Children of the Otter" was composed of equally independent fragments or, as he rather strangely termed them, "sails". A. Metchenko observed that "a mosaic quality is present even in Khlebnikov's larger works"<sup>4</sup>, while Petrovsky called the poet's work "a mosaic of his biography."<sup>5</sup> Khlebnikov's love of unfinishedness, impermanence, transience and discontinuous movement was clearly the corollary of his dislike of everything which the act of writing typically does to language. Perhaps nothing says more of the "anti-literacy" of all this than the idea that poets should write on their books: "After reading, tear it up." No instruction could hit more surely at the central principle of literacy as such.

- 
1. Mayakovsky, VVV Khlebnikov, in: E J Brown, op cit p 83. Khlebnikov wrote to Kruchenykh in 1913: "A work, 'Vila', is being sent to you, unfinished. You may, if you like, cross out or omit something, or, if you find it necessary, make corrections"—quoted by Markov, The Longer Poems, p 32.
  2. S Gorodetsky, Velemir Khlebnikov, Izvestia, July 5 1922 (cited by Markov, Longer Poems, p 32).
  3. SP II p 317.
  4. Quoted by Markov, The Longer Poems, p 34.
  5. Quoted by Markov, loc cit. Compare with Walton Litz on James Joyce: "The comparison between Joyce's method of composition and that of the mosaic workers...is strikingly appropriate. Joyce himself called the corrected galleys of Ulysses 'mosaics'"—A Walton Litz, The Art of James Joyce, London 1961, p 12.

## 2. Khlebnikov's repudiation of the dictionary.

The development of writing leads to a certain standardization of a language. The dictionary helps reduce the language to certain norms of spelling, pronunciation, grammar and so on. A large number of colloquialisms, regional variants, slang terms and so on are either ignored or set outside the normal bounds of the written language. In this sense, literacy becomes a limitation. Mandel'stam associates it with a small vocabulary, which is "a sign that the speaker does not trust his native soil, and dare not set his foot wherever he likes".<sup>1</sup> The literate social strata dare not set foot outside the bounds of what is "literate" and "correct": Mandel'stam comments that the Russian Symbolists "have not more than five hundred words among them".<sup>2</sup> He contrasts this with the "turbulent morphological flowering" of language in the hands of Khlebnikov, who multiplies roots, evolves new words out of existing ones and knows no limits to his vocabulary.<sup>3</sup> Markov comments that "Khlebnikov's vocabulary is easily the richest in Russian literature."<sup>4</sup> It is obvious that this is closely associated with the fact that Khlebnikov rarely if ever thought of using a dictionary, happily inventing his own words and meanings as he went along. In Khlebnikov's work, all dictionary-definitions, norms, literary correct usages and standards are either disregarded or challenged in some way.

## 3. His hostility to Moscow-standard Russian.

This point will be discussed in the next chapter: it is relevant to the theme of Khlebnikov's tendency to identify "bookish" language with the state, opposing both almost as if they were one and the same thing. We may note here, however, that most of the futurists were "provincials", whose anarchistic rebellion always included an element of revolt against the "correct" and "literary" linguistic norms historically set by Moscow in opposition to the regions. This was particularly the case with Khlebnikov, as far-

---

1. Notes on Poetry, in: Davie and Livingstone (eds), op cit p 69.  
 2. Loc cit.  
 3. Ibid p 68.  
 4. Russian Futurism, p 300.

kov points out in his "The Longer Poems".

4. His use of "pre-historic" and "child-like" language.

The childhood of the race and the childhood of the individual can both be seen as pre-literate stages of existence. A wave of interest in what Nikolai Kulbin called "the art of children and prehistoric men"<sup>1</sup> accompanied the emergence of "primitivism" in Russian art and—as we noted in Chapter Five—it was largely as a poetic expression of this movement that Russian Futurism (and particularly its "Khlebnikovian" aspects) took shape. The generally "clumsy" and "illiterate" impression created by Larionov's or Goncharova's paintings was equally conveyed by much of Khlebnikov's language. Already in 1908, as Markov mentions, Khlebnikov was (e.g. in his ballad "Lyubovnik Yunony") rendering child-like effects through the use of stylistic and grammatical errors.<sup>2</sup> Pomorska cites the poet's "Komu skazatenki" (written a year or two later) in a similar context, and remarks that children's language was a source for Khlebnikov's zaum.<sup>3</sup> In 1913, Khlebnikov insisted that the editors of Sadok Sudei II print two poems by a thirteen-year-old Ukrainian girl, Militsa, withdrawing one of his own poems to give her space.<sup>4</sup> Khlebnikov was fascinated by the way in which literate language could be rendered illiterate—or by the way in which literature is distorted and transformed when children or uneducated people attempt to copy it. His use of folk-lore, as Markov explains, is

not the "respectable" imitation of, or use of motifs from folk epics, lyrical songs, and fairy tales which is so widespread in Russian literature. It is, instead, an interest in the naive and "illiterate" imitation and distortion of literature, especially of romantic poetry, in numerous songs, ballads and poems which seldom attracted the attention of scholars, who to this day tend to dismiss them as having no artistic merit.<sup>5</sup>

The implications in terms of Khlebnikov's "anti-literacy" need no further elaboration.

- 
1. Quoted by Markov, Russian Futurism, p 35.
  2. Markov, The Longer Poems, p 41.
  3. Pomorska, op cit p 100.
  4. Markov, Russian Futurism p 55.
  5. Ibid p 36.

### 5. His epic inclinations.

The classic study of this aspect of Khlebnikov's style is, of course, Markov's "The Longer Poems." Khlebnikov's "epic" inclinations are shown in a number of characteristics which are reminiscent of the "Igor Tale", the Russian byliny and the Homeric tales. In keeping with the generally anonymous, oral collective or tribal origins and mode of existence of the great epic tales, the individualistic "I"-standpoint is generally lacking in epic poetry. Markov points to the same absence of an "I"-standpoint in Khlebnikov as one of the two basic "epic" features of his work.<sup>1</sup> The second such feature, for Markov, is the "mosaic" quality discussed above. The era of Symbolism, Markov notes, "brought the writing of long poems to a virtual standstill."<sup>2</sup> Most of the Symbolists' poems were short, highly-polished and finished expressions of a unified mood or theme. Khlebnikov yearned for works of immense size, and so could only regard shorter pieces as fragments of some larger unfinished whole. Jakobson notes that even

his small poems create an impression of epic fragments, and Khlebnikov, without any effort, frequently integrated them into a larger poem.<sup>3</sup>

N. Gumilyev made a similar point in 1914:

Many of his lines seem to be fragments of a never-written epic.<sup>4</sup>

And Sir Maurice Bowra wrote of "broken epics by Khlebnikov".<sup>5</sup> There is no need to summarise Markov's study here. It will suffice if we note that the great epics were orally composed and transmitted, and <sup>that</sup> in his epic tendencies, as in so many other respects, Khlebnikov was returning to the traditions of a pre-literate cultural era.

---

1. Markov, The Longer Poems, p 34.

2. Ibid p 36.

3. Quoted by Markov, The Longer Poems, p 34.

4. Quoted by Markov, loc cit.

5. Quoted by Markov, loc cit.

6. His hostility to the "fossilization" of language.

In Chapter Six, Khlebnikov's efforts were interpreted as a struggle against 'byt' on the linguistic level—a struggle against what Jakobson called the "hardening" of the forms of language into a "stereotype". It is evident that it is in its written form that language is most likely to seem "hardened" in this way. The freezing or hardening of language seems to operate on two levels. Firstly, as we have noted, the development of writing tends to standardize a language, obliterating dialect distinctions and, it would seem, slowing down the process of linguistic evolution by providing <sup>fixed</sup> points of reference or standards. Secondly, the freezing operates on the "microscopic" level, since each individual utterance, once written on paper, is in a sense preserved in a frozen state.

Khlebnikov fought against both these fossilizing tendencies. On the one hand, he insisted on re-animating the evolutionary movement of language, producing new words and meanings in accordance with the principles (as he saw them) of Russian linguistic development. This is what he meant when he wrote:

Poetry should be constructed according to the laws of Darwin.<sup>1</sup>

Mandel'stam writes of Khlebnikov:

He has plotted the transitional, intermediate paths in the development of the language, paths that historically it never took; they are taken solely in Khlebnikov, and made firm in his zaum, which is nothing other than those transitional forms which have not had time to acquire the crust of meaning that a rightly and justly developing language acquires.<sup>2</sup>

---

1. SP V p 270.

2. Notes on Poetry, in: Davie and Livingstone, (eds), op. cit., p 70. The translation here uses the word 'metalogy', which I have changed back to the Russian zaum. Compare Mandel'stam's comment with Arnold Bennett's on Joyce: "He has obviously had a vision of the possible evolution of the English tongue", Evening Standard, Aug. 8 1929; in Denning, op cit p 494.

On the other hand, as we have seen, Khlebnikov could relate to language only as a process, not as a finished thing. The very act of writing things down seemed to destroy his purpose, fixing and finishing the process which he sought to present in its continuous genesis and life. Oral language constantly emanates from the future; but the lustre is lost as writing fixes it in the present and past:

When I noticed how old lines suddenly grew dull as their hidden content became that of the present day, I understood that the native land of creation is the future. It is from there that the wind of the word-gods blows.<sup>1</sup>

After a while, having been committed to paper, even the most magical-seeming word-forms began to lose their magic effect. Khlebnikov gives an example:

During the time they were being written, the transrational words of the dying Ekhnatén, "manch, manch!", from Ka, almost caused pain; I could not read them, seeing lightning between them and myself; now they are nothing to me. Why, I don't know myself.<sup>2</sup>

Despite such feelings of failure, however, Khlebnikov was astonishingly successful in creating a sense of continuous genesis and movement in language even in its written form. Confronted for the first time by a mass of Khlebnikov's manuscripts, Benedict Livshits was overcome by a peculiar sensation, as if the anchors of his existence were being removed. The two aspects of Khlebnikov's "de-fossilization" of language are well indicated in Livshits' account of his feelings:

...the whole of my being seemed riveted by an apocalyptic horror. If the dolomites, purples and slates of a mountain range in the caucasus suddenly came alive before my eyes and—in the flora and fauna of the mesozoic era—had stepped up to me from all sides, it would not have created a stronger impression.

For I saw with my own eyes animated language.<sup>3</sup>

---

1. Svoyasi, SP II p 8.

2. Ibid, p 9.

3. Polutoroglazyi strelets, Leningrad 1933, pp 46-7.

From one standpoint, reading Livshits' words, it might be wondered what is so peculiar about "animated language"? One may often speak of "animated conversation", and to describe the result as "animated language" would not seem far-fetched or very much out of the ordinary. But, of course, Livshits was looking at manuscripts. In its written form, language is not expected to be animated. The feelings which can be experienced when it is—feelings which Livshits describes—indicate something of the scale and the nature of Khlebnikov's peculiar achievement.

7. His championship of "transreason".

Human language has an "arbitrariness" about it which distinguishes it from the cries, screams, barks and other forms of communication characteristic of the animal world. In human language, there is no necessary relation between a given sound and a given meaning—the connection is determined by social convention alone. This is not true in the animal world: a cat's purr or a gibbon's howl conveys the same message in the case of all cats and all gibbons of the same genus, being determined biologically rather than socially.

Khlebnikov's "transrational" principles assume that nothing in human language is arbitrary. Every sound has an intrinsic meaning which can be traced back to the Stone Age and is universal to humanity as a species. The parallel with forms of communication in the animal world is evident. That Khlebnikov was to an extent conscious of this parallel is shown by the fact that he treated real or imaginary animal cries in his poetry as examples of "transreason."

The lack of any necessary or unalterable connection between sound and meaning is in a sense as much a characteristic of human language in its oral form as in its written state. On the other hand, there is a kind of "animal" or "biological"

---

substratum to language when it is spoken rather than written. Quaverings in the voice, alterations in pitch, breathing, stammering and so on can be heard, and such factors can convey states of feeling in a way which does tend to be universal to all humans, biologically-determined and in that sense "necessary" rather than "arbitrary". This aspect of language is normally lost when the spoken word is translated into writing. Yet it can be of considerable importance in the communication of emotions, being an essential ingredient of, for example, the song. In his "transrational language", Khlebnikov was interested in "uniting people", appealing over the head of "the government of intellect" direct to the "stormy people of feelings".<sup>1</sup> He was attempting to bring to the fore those aspects of language which exert a direct or "magical" effect on the emotions and which are generally missing in the "fossilized" written word.

In oral language, then, the relation between sound and meaning seems more "necessary", less "arbitrary" than is the case with the written word. Khlebnikov in his "transrational" experiments takes the idea of a necessary sound-meaning correlation to extremes. He insists that the very material, the substance of "transrational language" is itself meaningful. As Yuri Tynyanov puts it,

for him no sound is uncoloured by meaning.<sup>2</sup>

More specifically, his "transrational language" is based on the idea that each consonant, as a sound, embodies a meaning which is inseparable from it. In actual fact, so far as language is distinctively human, this is not the case: the meaning of a consonant depends on its position in a word and varies according to convention. Although within a given language there may be a certain tendency to associate particular consonants with a number of consistent areas of meaning, in general each consonant is meaningless in and of itself.

---

1. SP V p 225.

2. On Khlebnikov, in E.J. Brown, op cit p 95.

The point is, however, that the "meaninglessness" of individual consonants becomes fully apparent only with the development of the phonetic alphabet and literacy. For when language is known only as spoken language, there is no need to fragment the sound-flow into isolated "letters". The mind is conscious only of units which do possess meaning—whole words and sequences of words. It is as a result of phonetic literacy that language is thought of as consisting of letters of the alphabet—i.e. intrinsically meaningless units. Khlebnikov, in denying the meaninglessness of consonants, was repudiating an important characteristic of phonetic literacy which McLuhan describes as follows:

The phonetic alphabet is a unique technology. There have been many kinds of writing, pictographic and syllabic, but there is only one phonetic alphabet in which semantically meaningless letters are used to correspond to semantically meaningless sounds.<sup>1</sup>

Khlebnikov's consonant-meaning tables and theories, then, were one more manifestation of his opposition to the principles and linguistic effects of phonetic literacy as such.

These considerations by no means exhaust the anti-literate implications of Khlebnikov's transrational language experiments. However, the relationship of his zaum to child-language, pre-historic language, magical incantations, oral language in general and Radio as a return to the primacy of the spoken word are all subjects dealt with elsewhere in this work.

#### 8. His emphasis on the voice.

It is obvious that literacy diminishes the role of the voice in language. Virtually all commentators on Russian futurism have recognized in it an attempt to restore to language the

---

1. Understanding Media, p 83. Not only his consonant-meaning theories in particular, but Khlebnikov's insistence on the inseparability of sound and meaning in general can be seen as incompatible with the premises of the phonetic alphabet, of which McLuhan writes: "It alone is based on the abstraction of the sound of words from the meaning of words"—Counter-Blast, p 91.

ancient pre-eminence of sound, breath and the movement of the organs of the voice. Referring to Mayakovsky's rhythms, Chukovsky writes that they are:

those we hear in the marketplace, on trolley cars, at meetings, the rhythm of shouts, conversations, speeches, squabbles, agitators' exhortations, swearing.<sup>1</sup>

In the manifesto (Sadok Sudei II) containing the Ukrainian girl's poems a similar claim was made for Khlebnikov's rhythms:

We have smashed rhythms. Khlebnikov has introduced the poetic cadence of the living conversational word.<sup>2</sup>

Yuri Tynyanov writes of Khlebnikov's verse that it is

modern man's intimate language, given as though accidentally overheard.<sup>3</sup>

Khardzhiev details Khlebnikov's frequent use of conversational free verse, showing its close relationship to much of the poetry of Mayakovsky.<sup>4</sup>

All of this, however, taken in isolation might give an inaccurate impression of Khlebnikov's own language. It was by no means his primary intention to give at all times a realistic rendering of conversational or colloquial Russian. His language is based only in part on the contemporary colloquial word. Equally important is its basis in the oral tradition of the Russian folk-epic and song, as has been noted. Moreover, Khlebnikov in many of his experiments was attempting to convey not so much a "tape-recording" of everyday colloquial language as the underlying patterns in accordance with which the sound-combinations of speech evolve and arrange themselves. Often he was so successful that the res-

- 
1. K. Chukovsky, Akhmatova and Mayakovsky, in E.J. Brown op cit p 50.
  2. Quoted by Khardzhiev, op cit p 104.
  3. On Khlebnikov, in E.J. Brown, op cit p 96.
  4. Khardzhiev, op cit pp 105, 124.

ults sounded more Russian than Russian itself. Thus Mayakovsky was amazed when Khlebnikov produced about five hundred derivatives of the verb lyubit' (to love), all of them, according to Mayakovsky,

absolutely accurate in their Russian construction,  
accurate and inevitable,

although strictly-speaking, of course, they were not "Russian" at all.<sup>1</sup>

Writing about the language of Joyce's Finnegans Wake, Max Eastman comments disparagingly that the reader experiences nothing of the author's inner life or mind through it. Asking (with reference to the author) "What is there that we experience in common with him?", Eastman replies:

A kind of elementary tongue dance, a feeling of the willingness to perform it.<sup>2</sup>

Other critics differ strongly, of course, but it would seem undeniable that this "tongue-dance" element, while not the only thing communicated by Joyce's language, represents one of its important characteristics. In Khlebnikov's "transrational language", this same element of tongue-dance, present to an extent in all poetry, likewise comes to the fore. Shklovsky even seems to see it as the main source of enjoyment in poetry in general:

In the enjoyment of the meaningless 'transrational word' the articulatory side, a sui generis dancing of the speech organs, causes most of the enjoyment which poetry brings.<sup>3</sup>

In many of his experimental lines, Khlebnikov took this tongue-dance (sometimes "tongue-twister") principle to extremes:

- 
1. Quoted by Khardzhiev, op cit p 97.
  2. The Cult of Unintelligibility, Harper's Magazine, April 1929, in: Denning, op cit p 490.
  3. O poezii i zaumnom yazyke, quoted by Pomorska, op cit pp 29-30.

Помирал морень, моримый морицей,  
 Верен в веримое верицы.  
 Умирал в морильях морень  
 Верень в вероча верни.  
 Обжирал морея морень.  
 Верен веритвам Вераны.  
 Приобмер моряжески морень  
 Верень верови верязя.<sup>1</sup>

Or again:

Мы чаруемся и чураемся.  
 Там чаруясь, здесь чураясь,  
 То чурахарь, то чарахарь,  
 Здесь чуриль, там чариль...

and so on—there is no need to quote the poem in full.<sup>2</sup>

In learning to read, a child is taught to scan the lines more and more quickly, gradually eliminating the need to speak aloud or even to whisper inwardly. Efficient literacy is achieved when the words are "recognized" without delay, without movement of the lips or vocal organs and without being heard. If all that constitutes genuine reading, then the above lines of Khlebnikov cannot be "read" at all. The lines cannot be scanned, the eyes and mind are slowed down to a crawling pace and it becomes almost impossible to avoid precisely the practice which literacy is supposed to eliminate: namely, the practice of moving the tongue or lips, speaking in a whisper or aloud. Despite himself, the reader seems faced almost with a rebellion—a re-assertion of his long-suppressed babbling tendencies and childhood reading-habits—a temporary undoing of the work which years of literacy have achieved.

---

1. SP II p 44.  
 2. Ibid p 42.

Chapter Eighteen:

SOUND, TIME, LANGUAGE AND THE STATE.

The "political" implications of Khlebnikov's anti-literacy are discussed in terms which help show the underlying links between the various aspects of his world-view.

First, it is argued that his counterposition of a "state of time" to the existing "states of space" is consistent with his counterposition of oral language (arranged in temporal sequence) to writing (arranged in space).

Secondly, it is suggested that Khlebnikov's association of language-forms with state-forms is not devoid of a certain logic. Writing developed historically largely to meet new needs which emerged with the rise of the state. The state is a territorial unit (a "state of space"). To preserve fixed laws uniformly over wide areas of territory, a fixed, spatially arranged, durable and transportable language-form was needed. The written word, which met this need, may be thought to embody certain of the specific characteristics of the state as a historical form of social organization. In particular, its ideal of fixity can be seen as an expression of the state's ideal of the fixity of its laws and the permanence of its power.

Khlebnikov fought against this form of language—and saw his struggle against the "states of space" as a simple extension of that fight. The language to which he was opposed, Mandel'stam associates in particular with the state in its Russian form. According to Mandel'stam, the Symbolists' language was that of the Church and the State, while—in struggle against it—Khlebnikov's language represented "the terrible and boundless elements of the Russian language, not accommodating themselves to any state or church forms." This was one expression of the fact that Khlebnikov's Russian was the oral form, "heard for the first time since a written Russian culture has existed."

Opposing all "states of space" and harking back to the stateless, tribal past of Russia and mankind, Khlebnikov's linguistic efforts were directed towards restoring what he thought of as the archaic unity of the human race. But this restoration was to be accomplished through a revolution in which "inventions" such as Radio were to play a crucial part. The result would be a "state of time". Power would be in the hands no longer of the language-form and "reason" of the state, but of a transrational language of electronically-transmitted sounds, expressing the will of humanity and of "the starry sky".

"LIKE BLOK", writes Mandel'stam,

Khlebnikov thought of language as a state, but not at all one in space—not geographical—but in time.<sup>1</sup>

Khlebnikov's idea of the "state of time", for all its apparent extraordinariness, does have a certain logic in terms of the struggle for the spoken word. It is a fairly elementary observation to note that spoken language is composed of elements related in a temporal sequence. Its dimension is time, while (since the words, ideally, exist "everywhere at once") it has no real spatial position or dimensions at all. The ideal dimensions of written language are just the opposite. The whole point of written language is that it is permanent: its elements exist in a durable form, related to each other not in time but in space.<sup>2</sup>

The association of writing with the territorial state is also not without foundation. In a small tribal village, there is no real "space": space is being penetrated instantaneously and continuously by voices, and people respond to each other simultaneously and reciprocally almost all the time. Obviously, this is never entirely the case: voices do not carry very far, and there is always plenty of travelling and moving about. But to the extent that "space" as civilized man experiences it does not exist, it would perhaps not be too far-fetched to call such a village a little "state of time". This is not the place

- 
1. Burya i Natisk, Osip Mandel'stam, Collected Works in 3 vols., edited by G P Struve and B A Filipoff, Vol 2, p 390.
  2. El Lissitzy: "...we have two dimensions for the word. As a sound it is a function of time, and as a representation it is a function of space"—Lissitzky-Kuppers, op cit p 357. Joyce's Stephen Dedalus: "An aesthetic image is presented to us either in space or in time. What is audible is presented in time, what is visible is presented in space"—A Portrait of the Artist, quoted in A W Litz, The Art of James Joyce, London 1961, p 55.

for a historical analysis of the origins of the world's various systems of writing. But we may at least note the fact that the written word arises historically to meet the needs of the state. For the territorial state, the penetration of distances is a real problem. Since there can be no instantaneous communication over such spaces, the problem can only be solved by a durable, changeless form of language which is the same when it arrives at its destination as it was at its point of departure. The written word on papyrus—which is not only durable but transportable—was for long the best answer to this problem.<sup>1</sup> The changelessness or durability of writing is a feature not only of this communications-medium. It also becomes, from the beginning, a fundamental principle of the state itself, expressed in the fixity of its laws, its property-relationships and so on (all of which must be recorded in writing). The ideal of fixity is, of course, never fully achieved. If it were to be, then nothing would ever happen. All life would take place in a process of endlessly-repeated obedience to pre-existing laws and written words. It would be the reign of 'byt' carried to its ultimate extreme. But although this ideal is never actually reached—conflicts always break out, laws have to be re-written and so on—to the extent that changelessness is achieved, time in a sense ceases to exist. And to that extent, the state is a pure "state of space".

Khlebnikov's language, we have seen, evolved in a process of continuation of—and reaction against—the language-use of the Symbolists. In a discussion of Khlebnikov's language, Osip Mandel'stam describes Blok's language as "the language of the state."<sup>2</sup> In his view it is a classic expression of that 'liter-

- 
1. McLuhan cites The Bias of Communication by Harold Innis in this connection. War and Peace etc., p 26.
  2. Burya i Natisk, in: Struve and Filipoff (eds) op cit Vol 2 p 390.

acy' in Russian history against which Khlebnikov rebelled. Blok's language, says Mandel'stam, is priestly, foreign. Its origins can be traced back to the Byzantine introduction of Christianity into Russia and the origins of the Muscovite state. It imposes itself externally against the multiplicity of provincialisms and oral traditions of real Russian culture, blotting them out and in a sense harking back thereby to the founding of the Russian state. Blok's

tendency to centralize verse and language reminds one of the flair for statesmanship of the Moscow historic activists. It is a strong, stern hand in relation to provincialism of any kind: everything is subordinated to Moscow—that is, in this case, to the historically-conditioned poetry of the traditional language of the state official.<sup>1</sup>

To Mandel'stam, this intimate association of language and state is an aspect of literacy, and is therefore particularly characteristic of the West. In his view,

the cultures and histories of the West lock up the language from outside, enclose it with walls of state and church, and saturate themselves with it...<sup>2</sup>

But Russia stands on the Eastern outposts of Europe, where literacy has a far shallower foothold:

Russian culture and history is washed and encircled on all sides by the terrible and boundless elements of the Russian language, not accommodating themselves to any state or church forms.<sup>3</sup>

Russian Futurism represents the invasion of these "terrible and boundless elements" which have been kept at bay for so long:

Futurism is expressed all in regionalisms, in provincial militancy, in a folkloristic, ethnographical multiplicity of tongues.<sup>4</sup>

- 
1. Burya i Natisk, ibid p 390.
  2. O prirode slova, in: ibid p 287.
  3. Loc cit.
  4. Burya i Natisk, p 390.

The real Russian elemental language had always been represented by Russia's first and greatest epic poem—

the living, graphic speech of the 'Lay of Igor's Campaign', through and through secular, temporal and Russian at every turn...<sup>1</sup>

And when Velimir Khlebnikov, concludes Mandel'stam,

a contemporary Russian writer, plunges us into that same thicket of Russian word-roots, into that etymological night, kind to the heart and intellect of the wise reader, there lives that same Russian literature, the literature of the 'Lay of Igor's Campaign'.<sup>2</sup>

Mandel'stam's position, then, is that Khlebnikov's struggle was against a language-form that was written, priestly, foreign, centralized and intimately associated with the functions of the state. Khlebnikov's own language was anti-literate, secular, through-and-through Russian, decentralized and inimical to the existence of the state. This analysis is central to an understanding of Khlebnikov, and is confirmed by many of Khlebnikov's own statements, as well as in his poetry.

Khlebnikov wanted to inhabit a state of sounds:

We are going to the sounds inhabited by people.  
A town of logs of sound,  
A town of stones of sound,  
There I lead you  
To the town whose food you can hear,  
The town where people eat sounds, let us go,  
Where there are logs of sound,  
Logs of laughter,  
And streets of song...

**Enough of idly strumming  
Strings with one's hand;  
Enough of catching and clinging  
To the sounds, hungry-eared,  
To listen to them.  
It is time mankind inhabited  
The state of sounds.<sup>3</sup>**

1. O Prirode Slova, *ibid* p 287.

2. *Loc cit.*

3. SP V pp 88-89.

The entire Earth was to be treated as a kind of vibrating musical instrument:

Treat the Earth as a resonant plate, and its capital cities as dust nodules gathered in still waves.<sup>1</sup>

Khlebnikov saw the future as a return, on a new technological basis, to the tribal or stateless condition of man's past. He anticipated by half a century McLuhan's idea of "an electric return to the tribal paleolithic age":

You will recall that a resonant string of tribes has joined together Tokyo, Moscow and Singapore.<sup>2</sup>

He saw the events of his age as a sudden "shift" from the pre-historic past to the electronic future, a difficult movement like a jump across railway-points—and a movement which it was the task of his world government to guide. As he wrote in his "Declaration of the Presidents of the Terrestrial Sphere" early in 1917:

Our heavy task is to be railway-pointsmen at the junction of Past and Future.<sup>3</sup>

The "shift" to be engineered was a kind of short-circuit of the historical process: a sudden meeting of the two ends of time, through a by-passing or telescoping of the events of the intervening period, so that it was almost as if the entire history of literacy and the civilized state had (to quote Mandel'stam) "never existed".<sup>4</sup>

A feeling that "the ends of time" are being joined permeates almost all Khlebnikov's work. The whole history of the human race is as it were "telescoped" and seen as if "in a flash", the most diverse periods being almost violently juxtaposed.<sup>5</sup> Per-

1. SP V p 161.

2. SP V p 313.

3. SP V p 163.

4. Notes on Poetry, in: Davie and Livingstone (eds) op cit p 70.

5. Exactly this feature is noted by S Gilbert in Finnegans Wake: "the dimensions of time and space are telescoped and we see, like gods or as in a dream, all history in the flash of a moment"—Denning op cit p 539. Joyce, too, joins the ends of time: he "chews thoughts of the beginning and the end of creation"—Unsigned Notice, Times Lit., Supp't., 25.1. 1941; Denning, op cit p 753. J P Bishop writes that in Finnegans Wake "is the past and the future of mankind"—ibid p 738.

haps the best example is provided by "The Otter's Children", in which, (among other things), a mammoth-hunt is juxtaposed with a Futurist public stage-performance.<sup>1</sup> This work, composed of "sails" each of which represents a fragment of life from a different age, was the one which came, perhaps, closest to realizing Khlebnikov's dream (noted earlier) of creating a novel which broke through the normal laws of time.<sup>2</sup>

For Khlebnikov, the events of 1917 were, then, an abrupt uniting of far-removed times—the future and the pre-historic past. Hence in his poetic works, the revolution, besides being pictured as a leap into the future, was depicted, (as one critic has put it),

as a breaking in of the primeval world, as a new bubbling forth of the prehistoric springs of life.<sup>3</sup>

In this way, the culture of literacy and the "states of space" were seen as being attacked from both ends. The rule of "the present" was being attacked by the combined forces of past and future.

For Khlebnikov, this meant that the "conception of time" was gaining the upper hand over "the conception of space." The present—insofar as it was a manifestation of changelessness and 'byt'—had been a frozen, static world, a world of territorial states and of existence in space. Its language-form had been "bookish" or "fossilized" or "congealed" language—made of "words no longer beating with the waves of language" —which divided people territorially from each other. Such language (whose words

---

1. Choix de Poemes, p 110.

2. Neizd. P p 358.

3. Holthusen, Twentieth Century Russian Literature, N Y 1972, p 78. Although Khlebnikov was probably not aware of it, something similar was also the view of the Bolsheviks and of Marx and Engels. See the draft of Marx's letter to Vera Zasulich, where (in a discussion on a survival of "primitive communism"—the primitive Russian peasant commune) he wrote: "To save the Russian commune, there must be a Russian revolution" and described the conditions under which "this commune will soon become an element that regenerates Russian society"—D McLellan, The Thought of K Marx, London 1971, p 137. See also Engels: Anti-Duhring, Foreign Languages Publishing Hse., M 1959, esp. p 477 and Lenin: Philosophical Notebooks, Coll. Works M 1961 Vol 38, esp. p 222.

were "died-out" and "non-existent") had been made for "suicides and cripples".<sup>1</sup> It did not serve to penetrate or conquer the distances and spaces separating people from one another, but, on the contrary, enormously increased them:

Who would travel from Moscow to Kiev via New York?  
And yet is there one line of contemporary bookish  
language which is free of such detours?<sup>2</sup>

But with the development of "the study of lightning", the coming of "radio-telegraph" and "Radio", the "language of lightning" and the "gift of spark-speech"—technological inventions which Khlebnikov's sound-experiments and "trans-rational language" were designed to match—communication could take place "in the twinkling of an eye."<sup>3</sup> Inventors—people who accelerated the historical time-flow, people who hungered and fought for time—could begin to challenge proprietors or acquirers—people who froze the time-flow, people who owned landed estates, who defended "frontiers" and hungered only for the parcelled-out spaces of the Terrestrial Sphere. These spaces were now being shot through and through by "people-rays". Futurists communicating by radio-telegraph planned to occupy the estates of "people of space" and encircle the globe like waves. The ground was being pulled—literally—from under the feet of the "people of space". For all the world's space was being shrunk into a tiny ball:

Nobody will deny that I carry your terrestrial globe  
on the little finger of my hand.<sup>4</sup>

Consequently, terrestrial ownership or "property" was becoming an absurdity, an impossibility. The right to space was being

- 
1. Neizd P p 437. Khlebnikov's lines about "suicides and cripples", written in 1912, are paralleled in Mayakovsky's first play, "Vladimir Mayakovsky, A Tragedy", whose premier was held on December 2, 1913. Here a "chorus of cripples" plays an important role, as does the theme of suicide. See: Stahlberger, op cit, Chapter One (pp 20-43).
  2. SP V p 228.
  3. Slovo Kak Takovoe.
  4. SP IV p 114. Khlebnikov is here anticipating McLuhan's "Global Village" slogan; but of course it was also in a sense anticipated by Apollinaire and others (see above, chapter Seven).

undermined and replaced by something else. Khlebnikov "foresaw" all this, as he wrote in 1916:

I foresaw the destruction of the right to property.  
Space is conquered, and the grass of spaces wilts.  
The right to property is changed to the creative  
battle for time.<sup>1</sup>

\* \* \* \* \*

"If we sit and talk in a dark room", writes McLuhan,

words suddenly acquire new meanings and different textures... All those gestural qualities that the printed page strips from language come back in the dark, and on the radio.<sup>2</sup>

In Khlebnikov's "state of sounds", in accordance with the corresponding emphasis on the ear as opposed to the eye, everything is in a sense "dark", although it is a darkness in which the stars shine, and the kind of darkness associated with evening fire-light and songs. Khlebnikov links many things with this vibrant darkness: it is the "star-world", it is the world of night-time and of dreams, it is the world of the pre-historic past and also of the future. All of these are in a sense one, and they all meet in the idea of "transreason", which corresponds to the deeper, more primitive, more essential and universal layers of consciousness or of the subconscious mind, as opposed to the every-day rational or "daylight" layers.

In agreement with McLuhan's comment on the "new meanings" of words which emerge in the dark, Khlebnikov argues that a kind of "darkness" is required if the "transrational" meanings of words are to be brought out and experienced. The word, he writes, has a double aspect:

---

1. The word for "property" Khlebnikov uses here is imenie—"estate" or "landed property"—which thus in itself incorporates the idea of ownership of space or territory:

"Я провидел перелом права имения. Пространство завоевано, и трава пространств завянет. Право имения перейдет на творческий бой за время." —SP V p 132.

2. Understanding Media, p 303.

One could think of its daily sunlit sense concealing a nocturnal, starry one underneath. For the everyday meaning of the word—whatever it is—blots out its other meanings, which disappear just as the stars of the night vanish in daytime.<sup>1</sup>

However, in sleep and drowsiness, when the demands of daily business and the intellect relent, these "star-world" meanings re-assert themselves:

...life's night allows one to see the weak meanings of words as one sees the weak visions of the nighttime.<sup>2</sup>

In Chapter Nine, the "pole of incomprehensibility" in the idea of "transrational language" was associated with the "objectlessness" of Cubist painting, the "reduction to zero" of art, the idea of the Bolshevik revolution and the idea of the semantic incompatibility of the "languages" of the future and present. The incomprehensibility of the "language of the future" emphasized the gap separating this future from the present world. Khlebnikov's "transrational language", we noted, was often supposed to be the language of animals and children, and these—like prehistoric men—represent realms of experience more or less incomprehensible to the literate civilization to which Khlebnikov was opposed.

Now if it is accepted that the instincts (men's link with the animal world), the ways of childhood and (perhaps) some of the thought-processes of primitive man re-appear to a certain extent in dreams, it needs no special insight to grasp how for Khlebnikov the language of "transreason" became associated also with the language of dreams. The world of dreams is a world of darkness beyond reach, by and large, of the state. As the mind slips into a dream, the "sunlit" and "rational" world—the world of literacy, logic, everyday business and officialdom—is reduced to zero. In its place there opens up a new world of freedom from the dimensions of time and space.

---

1. SP V p 229.

2. Ibid p 230.

If the world of dreams lies beyond the reach of literacy and the state, the opposite is the case in relation to the "governing" layers of the mind. Khlebnikov sees the "sunlit" or "rational", everyday or literate layers of language and consciousness as "ruling over" the starry, transrational layers just as governments rule over people. His "transrational language" is designed to reach the "people" as if "over the heads" of the "government":

If one may distinguish, within the soul, the government of intellect from the stormy people of feelings, then charms and transrational language are an appeal over the head of the government straight to the people of feelings, a direct call to the twilight regions of the soul or the highest point of popular sovereignty in the life of the word...<sup>1</sup>

This, of course, throws important new light on Mandel'stam's comment that Khlebnikov sees language as a state. Two kinds of state are involved—as Mandel'stam pointed out. But Khlebnikov sees the struggle between these two as in a curious way paralleling, on the one hand, the conflict between peoples and governments, and, on the other, the conflict between the intellect and the deeper, "twilight" or "star-world" layers of the mind.

Under the conditions of "the present", Khlebnikov is aware, it is the governing or intellectual layers of the mind which have the upper hand. But this, for him, is precisely what is wrong with the world: these governing layers represent the rule of the "states of space". The language of these mental layers is not "self-governing". It is governed from outside, serving "reason" and hence the "governments" as opposed to the "people" of the Terrestrial Sphere. The way in which Khlebnikov derives his political conclusions from linguistic premises is perhaps nowhere better illustrated than in the following lines, written in 1913, where the poet explains the implications, for him, of the slogan of the "self-sufficient word":

---

1. SP V p 225.

We teach: the word governs the brain, the brain—the hands, the hands—kingdoms. The bridge to a self-governing kingdom—is a self-governing speech.<sup>1</sup>

Under the conditions of the present, self-sufficient language—the language of the "twilight" mental layers—is ruled by the "congealed", "bookish", "rational" language of the "daylight" waking mind. The "political" differences between these two forms of language have been noted already: one divides people, the other unites them; one corresponds to the "states of space", the other to the "state of time"; one corresponds to the world's "governments", the other to its "people"; one corresponds to "the present", the other to the future and the distant past. Another difference is suggested when Khlebnikov states his own preference as between these two forms or realms of existence of the word:

I would much rather  
Gaze at the stars  
Than sign a death-warrant...  
That is why I will never,  
Never,  
Be a ruler!<sup>2</sup>

The "bookish" language of "states of space" is also the language of the bureaucrat who inflicts death with his pen. A different scale of violence through language—the "historical violence" perpetrated over centuries against the entire continent and culture of Asia—seems to be what Khlebnikov tries to depict in another poem through an extraordinary extended metaphor. Here again the state is identified with language—in this case, with print—the inner ruptures and fissures through society being significantly "confused" with the effects on paper of the pressures of a printing press and its letters:

In that book you may turn pages  
Printed by the pressure of seas,  
Nations gleaming like inks in the night.

---

1. SP V p 188.  
2. SP III p 297.

The execution of a Tsar forms an angry exclamation mark,  
 Or an army's victory, a comma.  
 In the margin are the dots of anger of the peoples' eyes,  
 Their rage unrestrained.  
 And a fissure through the centuries forms a bracket.<sup>1</sup>

Khlebnikov believed that mankind had endured the warring,  
 violent language of the state for too long:

Too often has the pen of war been dipped into the ink-well  
 of mankind.<sup>2</sup>

Khlebnikov's idea that "bookish-fossilized", "rational"  
 language—linked with the state—serves to oppress mankind is  
 a notion which may not be quite so peculiar or far-fetched as  
 it at first may appear. To the extent that Khlebnikov's target  
 is literacy (and this is very largely the case, as we have  
 seen), the idea seems to approximate quite closely to the con-  
 clusion of the structural anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss,  
 that

the primary function of writing, as a means of communica-  
 tion, is to facilitate the enslavement of other human  
 beings.<sup>3</sup>

It was only with the invention of writing that the state and  
 bureaucracy could come into existence, and, in more recent  
 times, it has only been with the extension of literacy that  
 the state has been able to exert its control over each indiv-  
 idual citizen:

The struggle against illiteracy is indistinguishable, at  
 times, from the increased powers exerted over the individ-  
 ual citizen by the central authority.<sup>4</sup>

The fact that Khlebnikov often identifies what he calls "reason"  
 as the enemy does not lessen the relevance of this. McLuhan  
 remarks that it is a general characteristic of thought in the  
 West that "we have confused reason with literacy..."<sup>5</sup> And—to

- 
1. SP III p 122. The translation here (unlike others in this work) is a little 'loose' and simplified (the original begins in the present tense and continues in the past).
  2. SP V p 266.
  3. A World on the Wane (trans J Russell) London 1961 p 292.
  4. Ibid p 293.
  5. Understanding Media, p 15.

take the question of Khlebnikov's championship of the "We" as against the "I"-standpoint in language—this, too, may be consistent <sup>with</sup> his "anti-literacy". We have already noted how the written word allows a certain independence to the "I", isolating it from the more "normal" process of immediate reciprocity characteristic of language. Pomorska notes how the Formalist "Opoyaz" scholars based themselves in part on the work of Lev Shcherba, whose most important innovation in stylistic studies was his differentiation between oral style and written style. On the level of discourse, writes Pomorska,

these two different styles correspond to the structures of monologue and dialogue. Monologue is a tendency proper to a written style, whereas oral speech is primarily oriented towards dialogue.<sup>1</sup>

This takes us back to our earlier discussion of Khlebnikov's break with the Symbolists. His revolt against his earlier "teachers" was not only a revolt against their excessive "literacy"—it was also a revolt against the way in which their "I" always "out-weighed" (as Mandel'stam put it) the "not-I". But if this tendency towards "monologue" is actually "proper to a written style", then the two things against which Khlebnikov was rebelling were in a sense one and the same. Over-literate language—"bookish-fossilized" or "rational" language as Khlebnikov called it—assumes the monologue rather than the dialogue as its form of discourse. Or, as Khlebnikov put it more simply, it "divides people".

The language which was to "unite people" was conceived by Khlebnikov in a number of rather different forms. In a passage quoted in chapter ten, Khlebnikov even conceived it as a "written language", whose "silent, graphic signs" would unite the multitongues of humanity.<sup>2</sup> Khlebnikov seems very confused here, however, because in the same article ("Artists of the World") he makes it clear that what he is actually thinking of is his old idea of the universal meanings of consonant-sounds, which he represents with letters of the alphabet—i.e. with his

---

1. Pomorska op cit p 17.  
2. SP V pp 216-17.

"silent graphic signs". He is thinking, as he puts it, of the "elementary particles of language—the sounds of the alphabet", and of the theory, developed by him, that "the first sound of a word is like the President of a society, directing all the multiplicity of the word's sounds."<sup>1</sup> It is clear that, for all his theoretical talk of a "silent" and "written" language, Khlebnikov is actually still haunted by his old and central obsession with a universal language of pure sounds.

In his 1915–1916 "propositions", Khlebnikov presented his "universal language" as a "language of numbers". After describing his proposal to assign numbers to all the world's thoughts, he writes:

That is the first international language.<sup>2</sup>

It seems here, however, that Khlebnikov is being a little ironical. The reduction of language to such a hum-drum, official "rational" form—a form deprived of sound-content and used only to communicate abstract concepts—was something which Khlebnikov deplored, and which he saw as far too characteristic of language already. Of his "language of numbers" idea, Khlebnikov writes

It has already been partially introduced in law-codes.<sup>3</sup>

He was referring to the procedures of case-law, where already it was possible to refer to a mass of legal precedents and "thoughts" without going through them all, simply referring to the cases in question. Khlebnikov thought that this ultra-"rational" use of language might as well be carried to its ultimate absurdity: assign numbers to all the world's thoughts, and to the great speeches made by Cicero, Cato and others in the past, and, forgetting about language, just hold up boards with the relevant numbers on them.<sup>4</sup> This would ease the ears and save a lot of effort:

Languages will remain for art and become free of their offensive burden. The ear is tired.<sup>5</sup>

---

1. SP V p 219.

2. Ibid p 158.

3. Loc cit.

4. Loc cit.

5. Loc cit.

The intended irony in all this is obvious.

What Khlebnikov opposed in language was precisely the tendency caricatured in his "language of numbers" idea: the use of language only to transmit ready-formed concepts, in such a way that nothing—neither the sounds of words, their associated emotional values or anything else—is actually experienced at all. This is what Khlebnikov meant when he wrote:

The desire to "rationally"—as opposed to transrationally—understand the word has led to the destruction of any artistic relationship with the word. I cite this by way of warning.<sup>1</sup>

To Khlebnikov, a language capable of "uniting people" would have to penetrate beyond intellect to the realm of feelings.<sup>2</sup> It was inconceivable that a purely rational "language of numbers" could do this. That is why, in all Khlebnikov's work, the theme is returned to again and again that a transrational language will be necessary to unite the human race.

But there is yet another form in which Khlebnikov's "universal language" idea appears. This is the "gift of spark-speech", the "language of lightning"—the "Radio of the future". The idea of modern science and technology as "uniting mankind" was sometimes conceived in more general terms, as when Khlebnikov wrote:

The people's international we conceive through the international of the ideas of science.<sup>3</sup>

But, when it came to a specific invention, it was always Radio (or, earlier, radio-telegraphy) to which Khlebnikov most en-

---

1. SP II p 10.

2. SP V p 225. See also *ibid* p 235: "Transrational language—means that which is beyond the limits of reason."

3. SP V p 265 (1921).

thusiastically turned. If Khlebnikov did not actually identify the "language of lightning" with his "transrational language", he certainly seemed to see parallels between the two. The Radio—like transrational language—was seen as exercising magical powers. It was a "great sorcerer and ensorceler", enveloping the globe in its spell. The Radio was, secondly, the "main tree of consciousness." In this it resembled "the wisdom of language", which Khlebnikov saw as the single consciousness of the globe:

Its "I" coincides with the life of the world.<sup>1</sup>

The Radio was, thirdly, like "a timid bird", its outpourings resembling "the spring flight of birds". Khlebnikov associated Radio with his dream of a humanity which would develop wings and fly: the "gift of spark-speech" was linked with "air-sailing." All this made Radio resemble transrational language in another way, for this new language, too, was associated with Khlebnikov's dream of a human race which could "fly". In Ladomir he calls:

Лети, созвездье человечье,  
Все дальше, далее в простор,  
И перелей земли наречья  
В единый смертных разговор.<sup>2</sup>

Conversely, man's existing system of languages—fossilized, violent and divisive—is seen as an evolutionary handicap. It is like the vestigial claw on the wing of a reptilian fossil-bird—a useless, burdensome survival from an aggressive past, weighing upon humanity's wings and hindering its flight:

Destruction of languages which resemble the claw on the wing... Languages on contemporary humanity—are the claw on the wing of birds: a useless residue of antiquity, a claw of former times.<sup>3</sup>

---

1. SP V p 321.  
2. IS p 219.  
3. SP V p 265.

As a source of magic, as the seat of the world's consciousness and as a means of spiritual "flight"—in these three forms, Radio was seen, then, as in a sense "paralleling" the functions of Khlebnikov's "transrational" or "universal" language. One could cite other parallels—the "instantaneous", space-conquering nature of the two communications-forms, their shared "oral" bias and so on. One could even refer to a certain "incomprehensibility" common to both, at least if McLuhan's remarks on the electronic media are to be believed:

Radio and TV aren't audio-visual aids to enhance or to popularize previous forms of experience. They are new languages...

It is easy to see now that language has always been a mass medium even as the new media are new languages having each its own unique grammar and aesthetic modes...

NOBODY yet knows the languages inherent in the new technological culture; we are all technological idiots in terms of the new situation.<sup>1</sup>

Whether the "idiot" Khlebnikov was, in creating his "incomprehensible" language, sensing in some way this impending impact of Radio is perhaps an interesting thought, but we have no direct evidence that the poet himself consciously thought of the new media as incomprehensible languages.

However, perhaps the most important parallel which Khlebnikov saw between Radio and his linguistic projects was that both were to unite humanity. In 1920, as we have noted, Khlebnikov wrote of his "future language of the universe in embryo":

It alone can unite people.<sup>2</sup>

In 1921, however, he wrote that something else could "unite people". Almost as if his "universal language" were now unnecessary, he wrote that it was Radio which

will forge the unbroken links of the world soul and fuse together all mankind.<sup>3</sup>

Clearly, he could only have said this if he had thought that the parallel between Radio-communications and his own linguistic

---

1. Counter-Blast, pp 133, 84 and 16 respectively.

2. SP V p 236.

3. SP IV p 293.

efforts was close.

Khlebnikov's vision of a "universal language" took, then, a number of different forms. Among these forms, however, some appear to have been less seriously-considered than others. Among these were the ultra-"rational" idea of a "language of numbers", and the notion—suggested in one passage of Khlebnikov's "Artists of the World"—of a universal language of "silent, graphic signs". In the overwhelming majority of Khlebnikov's statements on the subject, his "universal language" is identified with his "transrational" linguistic experiments, and in these the emphasis is on the "magic" and the supposedly intrinsic meaningfulness of sounds. The various attributes of Khlebnikov's "transrational language"—and of his language-use in general—can be interpreted, as we have seen, as in large part the embodiment of a revolt against literacy. This can be seen—as Mandel'stam suggests—as the central thrust of Khlebnikov's linguistic efforts, and in this we can see an important parallel with the effects of the invention of Radio, a parallel of which Khlebnikov was to a significant degree aware.

In opposing literacy—or in opposing a certain sort of language—Khlebnikov saw himself as opposing a certain kind of state, as we have seen. His "transrational" attempts were designed to secure a transfer of power—from governments to people, from intellect to feelings. Under existing circumstances, as Khlebnikov saw it, it was the daylight world, the world of everyday business, of the state and of the intellect—it was this world which held all real power. The "twilight" world or "star-world"—the world of childhood, of tribal man, of dreams and of the innermost realms of feeling—was suppressed, along with the Asian or primitive tribal areas of the globe and the peoples of the world. In this light, a large number of implications—psychological, historical, linguistic and geographical—were attached to Khlebnikov's "political" aim, which was, perhaps, the most fundamental of all his aims:

---

Accomplish by degrees a surrender of power to the starry sky...<sup>1</sup>

To Khlebnikov, to surrender power to "the starry sky" was equally to surrender it to "a self-governing speech". There was no contradiction, in other words, between his "starry sky" demand and his words, quoted earlier, about a "self-governing kingdom" ruled by a "self-governing speech".<sup>2</sup> For the language of the star-world was, as we have seen, none other than Khlebnikov's "transrational language", the language of words in their "nocturnal, starry" sense.<sup>3</sup> To surrender power to the starry sky meant, for Khlebnikov, to allow the world to be governed, as it were, "from within", in accordance with the inner will of humanity—a will (expressed in dreams and poetry alike) by which man is linked with his childhood, with his prehistoric ancestry and with his roots in the natural universe with its light-waves and stars. As one of his "Tasks of the Presidents of the Terrestrial Sphere", Khlebnikov listed the re-discovery of man's "white, glistening root", remarking that

in realizing mankind, it is necessary not to sever his ties in the universe and in the will, in which—as in a chalice—humanity was born.<sup>4</sup>

Khlebnikov saw Radio as an instrument of this "will": it was humanity's "ears" and "eyes", and a manifestation of the "life of the spirit", as we have seen. Identifying "inventions" with his own poetic work, Khlebnikov saw the electronics revolution more generally as stemming from the inner world of the human spirit, while at the same time it returned "the light-ray" of humanity in a direct way into contact with the light-rays of the suns and stars of the universe. In this way the inner world of man's dreams was linked with the infinities of the universe, just as man's future was linked with his prehistoric or even cosmic past. The extremes of space—inner and outer—were joined, just as were the ends of time. A sense of these mind-boggling

---

1. SP V p 161.  
 2. SP V p 188.  
 3. SP V p 229.  
 4. SP V pp 265-6.

connections is conveyed when Khlebnikov describes the "graph" (the "path of the point" along the graph-paper) of his "ray of fate", the ray which links everything with everything else, and which he calls "Gamma Budetlyanina".\* The hostility of this ray to "states of space" (an inevitable incompatibility, since the ray's laws cut through states and connect everything, while the states divide people) adds yet another dimension to the complexity of Khlebnikov's thought:

It should be remembered that man is in the final analysis lightning, that there exists the great lightning of the human race—and the lightning of the earth. Is it surprising that people, even without knowing each other, should be connected one with the other by means of precise laws?

...Precise laws cut freely through states without noticing them, just as X-rays penetrate through muscles and give a picture of the bones: they strip mankind of the rags of state and give him another fabric—the starry sky...

To understand the will of the stars means to unfurl before the eyes all the scrolls of genuine freedom. They hang above us only in the black night, these boards of future laws, and doesn't the point's path follow this course in order to avoid the wire of states among the eternal stars and hearing of humanity? Let the will of the stars be wireless. One of the routes—is Gamma Budetlyanina, with one end stirring the sky and the other hidden in the throbbings of the heart.<sup>1</sup>

As the great "ray" is uncovered, writes Khlebnikov, human divisions and states vanish into nothingness:

...the conception of peoples and states disappears, and there remains a single humanity, all of whose points are harmoniously connected.<sup>2</sup>

This was written in 1920, but early in 1917—inspired by the outbreak of the February revolution—Khlebnikov, in his letter to Petnikov, had already put forward the basic ideas. The mission of the Futurists (or rather, of those who followed him among the Futurists) was, he had said, to replace states with a government of poets, territorial divisions with waves of sound embracing the globe, war and cannon-fire with the vibrations of strings. Some of this letter has been cited already, but a crucial passage was the following:

---

1. SP V pp 240, 241, 242-3.

2. SP V p 242.

\* "The Scale of the Futurist".

You know that the goal which has already crowned us, accomplishing by means of string play that which is now accomplished with cannon-fire, is to give to the star-world power over people...<sup>1</sup>

- 
1. SP V p 313. Compare with Khlebnikov's words in "Our Foundations": "In front of you is a futurist with his 'balalaika'. Attached to its strings, the spectre of humanity vibrates. And the futurist plays: and it seems to him that international discord can be changed into the magic of strings." SP V p 240.

Chapter Nineteen:

A CHILD'S VIEW OF THE WORLD.

For Khlebnikov, life and art were inseparable. This chapter touches on this theme in order to show some of the ways in which the peculiarities of Khlebnikov's art also characterized him in his personal life. In particular, it is argued that not only did his poetic language often show "infantilist" features, but his methods of work and thought resembled the ways and the world-view of a child.

KHLEBNIKOV'S LIFE AND HIS WORK were inextricably intertwined. It is often difficult to distinguish between the typical features of his poetry and his habits and characteristics in everyday life.<sup>1</sup>

The impression of inarticulateness created by much of Khlebnikov's poetic language was also created, as we have seen, by his speech-behaviour on a personal level. If his work seemed incomprehensible at times, then it was in this respect true to its author, who was psychologically largely incomprehensible to his friends<sup>2</sup> and has been misunderstood by most literary critics ever since.

In his poetic imagination, the poet roamed freely across centuries.<sup>3</sup> This was no merely literary stance—it reflected a real incapacity to accommodate himself to life in what he called that world and that century into which, by the grace of good providence, I have been thrown...<sup>4</sup>

As Mandel'stam put it:

Khlebnikov does not know what a contemporary means. He is a citizen of all history, of the whole structure of language and poetry. He is an idiotic Einstein who cannot make out which is nearer, a railroad bridge or the Igor Tale.<sup>5</sup>

A parallel incapacity related to the dimensions of space.

- 
1. One facet of this "confusion" is captured by Petrovsky in his description of Khlebnikov's work as "a mosaic of his biography"—quoted by Markov, The Longer Poems, p 34.
  2. Khlebnikov was aware of this. He wrote in 1914: "...now I know for sure that there is no one capable of understanding me except myself."—Neizd. P. p 371.
  3. As Khlebnikov wrote of his alter-ego, Ka: "He finds no obstacles in time; Ka goes from dream to dream, intersecting time and achieving bronzes (the bronzes of time). He accommodates himself in the centuries as comfortably as in a rocking-chair. Isn't this the way the consciousness unites times together, like the armchair and the chairs of a drawing-room"—SP IV p 47
  4. Neizd. P. p 358.
  5. Burya i natisk, in Mandel'stam, Collected Works, 2, p 390.

In his dreams and in his art, Khlebnikov could not keep still. He flitted across Asia, around the globe and among the stars. The same incapacity to inhabit a given space afflicted him in his everyday life. Shortly before the War, he was seized by what his friends called a "hunger for space", and travelled up and down across Russia several times. It was a habit which stayed with him. His friend Spassky remarks that Khlebnikov

literally lived in train stations, getting off one train and waiting for another.<sup>1</sup>

We noted earlier Khlebnikov's demand for

the right to rooms in any town, and the right to change one's dwelling-place continually... the right to a home independently of the dimensions of space.<sup>2</sup>

It was a demand which was obviously seriously-meant. Khlebnikov only wished that the trains in which he travelled could carry him through time as well as space.<sup>3</sup>

Khlebnikov seemed somehow "primitivist" not only poetically but in his whole being. Vyacheslav Ivanov wrote:

He is like the author of the Slovo, who, by some miracle, continues to live in our age.<sup>4</sup>

He was also "infantilist" or "child-like" not merely linguistically but as a person. Artyom Vesoly has called him "a visionary with child's eyes",<sup>5</sup> while Korney Zelinsky refers to him as a poet who "became a child".<sup>6</sup> We have noted how the poet saw "meaning" in the most varied numbers and facts, and how he believed he could connect everything and foresee all. The child-psychologist Piaget remarks that it is an important (if often overlooked) fact that the child

conceives the world as more logical than it really is. This makes him believe it possible to connect everything and to

---

1. Mayakovskiy i ego sputniki, Leningrad, 1940, p 68.

2. SP V p 159.

3. "It would be impossible to avoid destroying trains, if their movements were limited only to within space..."—SP V p 159.

4. Quoted by Markov, The Longer Poems, p 22.

5. Quoted by Markov, *ibid* p 23.

6. Quoted by Markov, *ibid* p 25.

foresee everything, and the assumptions which he makes are endowed in his eyes with a richness in possible deductions which our adult logic could never allow them to possess.

It is not difficult to see that Khlebnikov's "infantilism" was not merely an affectation, or a characteristic of his language in much of his work, but was an important characteristic of his thought-processes and world-view, too.<sup>2</sup> This may be looked upon as an intellectual failing, even if it constituted an essential part of the charm of his work. On the other hand, it might possibly be argued that a child's mode of thought expresses a freshness, an emphasis on the will and even a degree of insight lacking in the more habit-formed, resigned and routine mind of the adult, and that an element of such "childishness" was essential in a poet who was to express some of the sense of newness and optimism of the years of revolution. In those years, after all, Khlebnikov was not the only one to believe in the possibility of inhabiting a more logical world and universe than mankind had experienced in the past,

- 
1. Jean Piaget, The Language and Thought of the Child, London 1960, p 212. He continues, in words equally applicable to Khlebnikov: "...reality is for the child both more arbitrary and better regulated than for us. It is more arbitrary, because nothing is impossible, and nothing obeys causal laws. But whatever may happen, it can always be accounted for, for behind the most fantastic events which he believes in, the child will always discover motives which are sufficient to justify them; just as the world of the primitive races is peopled with a wealth of arbitrary intentions, but is devoid of chance."—loc cit.
  2. The whole of Piaget's book, it seems, might almost have been written to describe the peculiarities of Khlebnikov's outlook and techniques. It discusses childrens' view of words as magic forces (p 3), and their tendency (p 149) "to find in every event and every sentence a hidden meaning of greater depth than that which is apparent..." Piaget writes of "the spontaneous etymology which children practise, or their astonishing propensity for verbalism, i.e. the imaginative interpretation of imperfectly understood words..."(p 149). Often, he writes, "the child seems to be on the look-out only for words resembling each other in sense or in sound" (p 157). Piaget relates (p 158) "the picking out of verbal and even punning resemblances" to the way in which the mind works in a dream.

Chapter Twenty:

KHLEBNIKOV, SCIENCE AND THE SPIRIT OF THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION.

Khlebnikov was not a scientist, but his work was a reflection in art of the scientific revolution of his age. He was not in the normal sense a political revolutionary—and certainly no Marxist—yet in important respects his concepts and work paralleled and gave artistic expression to the spirit of the Russian Revolution.

TO PICTURE KHLEBNIKOV as living in a childish fantasy-world would be an over-simplification and, to an extent, a distortion. For he was also living in a technological future which, as we have seen, was really beginning to come into being. His "logic" may have shown infantilist features, but only in the sense that the child expects more control over events and more "logic" in the universe than there actually is. Whatever the defects of Khlebnikov's "scientific" methods, at the root of his efforts was a yearning for human mastery and a demand for precision and system which also characterized the scientific revolution of his age.

Khlebnikov was living in a childhood world and a world of dreams, as perhaps any artist must do to a certain extent. But there are different kinds of childishness, and different ways of living in dreams. Infantilism may be escapist, inward-looking and irresponsible, while "other-worldliness" may be dreamy, mystical, romantic or idle and passive. Khlebnikov was none of these things. Within his dream-world, the thrust of his efforts was directed towards will-power, system, definition, logical 'computation' and intellectual order—in other words, towards the very opposite of 'dreaminess' as normally understood. True, it was still all ultimately "dream": Khlebnikov's "science" (with the exception, perhaps, of some linguistic perceptions) was not scientific in any accepted sense of that term. But while other artists have dreamed dreams, there are not so many whose dreams have been dreams about science. An essential—perhaps the essential—feature of real science is the ability to distinguish fact from fantasy, and to subject results to some form of objective (experimental or other) test. Such an ability Khlebnikov almost wholly lacked. But, since Khlebnikov was an artist, the question

---

to be asked (if we are going to treat his work as a product of the scientific revolution of his age) is not whether his writings constituted science, but whether they expressed, from the subjective, human side, the experience of scientific mastery, the sensation of opening up new vistas of knowledge, and the optimism and hopes aroused by the discoveries of the new age. In the light of this question, as (it is hoped) the preceding pages have helped to show, Khlebnikov's works score perhaps more highly than any other literature of his time. Khlebnikov himself wrote of himself as "spending my days in a dream."<sup>1</sup> But what he was dreaming of was—as we have seen—the scientific and mathematical ordering of human society, history and language, the elimination of irrationality and violence from human life and the final conquest by humankind of the forces controlling his destiny. It may have been an optimistic dream—perhaps childishly so. But it expressed an important part of the spirit of the age.

Even in working on his "transrational language", Khlebnikov's real purpose was a scientific one. After describing the way in which "transrational language" has, in his words, "a special power over the consciousness", Khlebnikov defines his isolation and listing of the intrinsic meanings of consonant-sounds as "a way of making transrational language rational."<sup>2</sup> Khlebnikov did not subscribe to any philosophy of irrationalism—his aim was to bring what Jakobson called "the irrational structures of poetry" into the light of consciousness, so that they could be consciously mastered and used. Transrational language, in his view, had to become self-governing. Its ideal was to embody "the highest point of popular sovereignty in the life of the word..."<sup>3</sup> The inner world, the world of feelings—the "stormy people" of the "state" of the mind—should become the "government", become a new "reason" on a higher plane. This was a very different ideal from the aim of repudiating and dispensing with "government" or "reason" of any kind.

---

1. SP II p 45.

2. SP V 235. Having defined the meaning of the sound "Ch", Khlebnikov declares: "And in this way, transrational language ceases to be transrational"—loc cit.

3. SP V p 225.

In the light of these considerations, Khlebnikov's "zaum" or "transreason" should be understood as representing an "ultra-rationalist" rather than "irrationalist" viewpoint. Perhaps "ultra-rationalist" is not the right word, but at least it may help emphasize the almost complete absence of obscurantism or mysticism in Khlebnikov's intentions.<sup>1</sup> This point is essential to an understanding of Khlebnikov's work as one expression of an essential element in the spirit of the Russian Revolution.

To understand Khlebnikov, it is necessary to see how his work finds its own place in, and sheds light upon, the world he was living in—a world which in some respects is that in which we continue to live today. Khlebnikov may have seemed like a survivor from a pre-historic age, or like a visitor from the space-age future. These semblances, however, do not alter the fact that he was a product of his age. The important thing is that the times he lived and wrote in were a strange and decisive turning-point in human history, and that the appearance of a meeting of past and future in a way characterized these revolutionary years no less than they characterized Khlebnikov himself.

Khlebnikov saw his own work as in a sense paralleling the work of the revolutionary workers of 1917. As he declared in his "Declaration of the Presidents of the Terrestrial Sphere" early in that year:

We—are a special kind of weapon. Comrade workers, do not complain that we are going by a special route to the common goal. Every type of weapon has its own methods and laws... We are worker-architects (social-architects).<sup>2</sup>

The ultra-rationalist, systematizing, sound-tabulating tendencies in Khlebnikov's work were carried further by other Futurist writers and theoreticians—and also (in a much more genuinely scientific way) by the 'Opoyaz' or "Formalist" critics

---

1. "The intuitions 'uncovered' by Khlebnikov in the language of words—and in the 'language' of numbers, mathematics—have always a rationalist character in the final analysis. Khlebnikov does not repudiate 'the language of understanding' but in every way strives to reform it, 'sharpen' and 'enliven' it'... Khlebnikov's intuitivism, and the whole of his metaphysic of language has a rationalistic, logical character" — Gofman, op cit p 229.

2. SP V p 164.

whose attentions were centred upon the Futurists. In his "Our Foundations", Khlebnikov complained of the "harm" done by "unsuccessfully constructed words", blaming this on the fact "that there are no account-books kept of the expenditure of popular intellect" and that "there are no railway-engineers of language".<sup>1</sup> It was just this "technologist" interest in the "nuts and bolts", as it were, of language which was thought of as characterizing Futurism in the post-revolutionary period. Khlebnikov's idea of constructing a "Mendelejev's law"<sup>2</sup> or "atomic table" of sound meanings was very much in tune with the revolutionary spirit of the times. The artists grouped around Mayakovsky's "Left Front of the Arts" liked to think of themselves as technicians, concerned with the real business—the brass tacks—of poetic creation, while others were concerned with sentiment, philosophy, religion or ideology—anything but language itself.

This extreme rationalist aspect of Futurism—which was to a large extent an extrapolation of Khlebnikov's linguistic experiments and tabulations—obviously had something in common with the "technologist", "rationalizing" and "planning" aims of the Bolshevik revolution. Leon Trotsky acknowledged this when he wrote:

Futurism is against mysticism, against the passive deification of nature, against the aristocratic and every other kind of laziness, against dreaminess, and against lachrymosity—and stands for technique, for scientific organization, for the machine, for planfulness, for will-power, for courage, for speed, for precision and for the new man, who is armed with all these things. The connection of the aesthetic 'revolt' with the moral and social revolt is direct...<sup>3</sup>

In Khlebnikov's case, the "parallel" with the social revolution was in some ways a more distant one than in the case of Mayakovsky and others. Khlebnikov's ideas and theories ran, in a sense, parallel with the revolution's aims, but they did so as if

---

1. SP V p 228.

2. Loc cit.

3. Literature and Revolution, p 145.

on a distant, different plane.

According to Malevich:

Cubism and Futurism were the revolutionary forms in art foreshadowing the revolution in political and economic life of 1917.<sup>1</sup>

Tatlin went so far as to declare:

The events of 1917 in the social field were already brought about in our art in 1914...<sup>2</sup>

Although in the early years of the Revolution, Futurism made a bid for recognition almost as the "official" school of art,<sup>3</sup> the Bolshevik leaders themselves (where they were concerned at all with such questions) disputed such categorical claims. Leon Trotsky, however, while arguing that Futurism had not "mastered" the Revolution, conceded that

it has an internal striving which, in a certain sense, is parallel to it.<sup>4</sup>

This was more than he was prepared to say for any other school of art.

The notion of Khlebnikov's work as expressing a "striving" running in a peculiar way "parallel" to the Russian Revolution is important to an understanding of the poet. We have already surveyed Khlebnikov's attempts to "anticipate" and "foresee" the events of history (conceived to be mathematically regular and measurable) by means of algebraic formulae. The "striving" or "impulse" behind these attempts, we have seen, was a determination to find order and meaning in the chaos of human affairs, and to subject the processes of history to the human intellect and will. It was a reaction against the historical passivity and gloomy fatalism of the Symbolists.

Now it does not need much special insight to see that this anti-Symbolist reaction, in itself, represented a striving running in a way parallel to one of the central themes of the October revolution. One has only to turn to a passage of Trotsky's

---

1. Quoted by Camilla Gray, The Russian Experiment in Art, p 219.  
2. Quoted by Gray, loc cit.  
3. Trotsky, Literature and Revolution, p 111.  
4. Ibid. p 112.

in which he describes (without in any way thinking of Khlebnikov) the "algebra of revolution"—the dialectical method—to see how close in a formal sense the parallel can appear to be:

In the arena visible to the external eye, are chaos and floods, formlessness and boundlessness. But it is a counted and measured chaos, whose successive stages are foreseen. The regularity of their succession is anticipated and enclosed in steel-like formulas. In elemental chaos there is an abyss of blindness. But clear-sightedness and vigilance exist in a directing politics. Revolutionary strategy is not formless like an element; it is finished like a mathematical formula. For the first time in history, we see the algebra of revolution in action.<sup>1</sup>

It is difficult to imagine that Khlebnikov would have disagreed with a single word of the above—except that he would have seen the description as applying, not to the method of Marxism (in which he showed no interest) but to his own revolution—predicting "algebra". But for Trotsky, the idea of a revolutionary "algebra" is basically a metaphor, intended only to have an approximate relationship with reality. Writing of the "counted and measured" phases of history, he can hardly be thought to mean that the time-intervals between them are numerically-fixed. Describing the "regularity of succession" of these phases, he does not assume that they recur at fixed intervals of, say, 317 years. But Khlebnikov, as we have seen, does assume this. Extremist as he was, he might almost have been thought to have been deliberately caricaturing, exaggerating—carrying "to its logical conclusion"—the revolutionary dream of mastering fate and history by means of science. He took the idea of an "algebra of revolution" not metaphorically but in the most literal possible way. It was not deliberate caricature, however. The idea came to Khlebnikov long before 1917, as we have seen, and was taken in a deadly serious way, without his being aware of any parallels which seem to present themselves to us today. The coincidence seems strange—per-

---

1. Literature and Revolution, p 104.

haps almost as strange as Khlebnikov's correct prediction of the revolution's date in 1912.

There also seems to be a certain relationship between Khlebnikov's ideas on time and the ideas of the Russian Revolution, although here again the parallel is in the main between conceptual forms rather than concrete ideas. We have seen that Khlebnikov sensed, apparently, a close relationship between the future and the prehistoric past. In place of the straight-line or linear conception of time, he believed he was establishing "a new attitude towards time" which taught "that distant points can be closer than two neighbouring ones..."<sup>1</sup> It does not need much knowledge of Marxism to perceive that there is a kind of "parallel" here similar to the one just described. Engels wrote of historical and natural evolution as a "spiral form of development"<sup>2</sup>, and, writing of "primitive communism", defined it as the task of the social revolution "to restore common property on a higher plane of development..."<sup>3</sup> Lenin wrote in this connection of "the apparent return to the old", and of the "repetition" of lower evolutionary phases "at a higher stage".<sup>4</sup> In relation particularly to Russia, Marx, after describing the disintegration of the ancient peasant "mir" or commune, wrote in an un-sent letter to Zasulich:

To save the Russian commune, there must be a Russian revolution...

And he went on to describe the circumstances under which "this commune will soon become an element that regenerates Russian society..."<sup>5</sup> It is obvious that the Bolsheviks thought of themselves as, in a certain sense, "restoring" common property, enacting an "apparent return to the old", although "on a higher plane of development". This is true in the sense that they believed in the dialectic—even though the idea of a kind of "restoration" of the "mir" (which Marx himself was evidently unsure of) came to nothing. It is not difficult to see, in this

---

1. SP V p 242.

2. Dialectics of Nature, Moscow, 1964, p 17.

3. Anti-Duhring, Moscow, 1959, p 477.

4. Philosophical Notebooks, Collected Works, M 1961 Vol 38 p 222.

5. Quoted in: D McLellan, The Thought of K. Marx, London '71 p 137.

context, how Khlebnikov's view of the Revolution as a breaking-in of the primeval world found at least some support in the wider ferment of ideas of the period. We have noted already McLuhan's idea of the age of Radio as an "electric return to the tribal paleolithic age, to the world of the hunter".<sup>1</sup> This idea, if accepted, would seem to complement the Marxist view of the future as a kind of "return" to the stateless, tribal "primitive communism" of the past. In any event—whatever our opinion of the validity of such views—merely to appreciate that they have been and can be held is to realize the peculiar inadequacy of critics such as Renato Poggioli, who fail to grasp how Khlebnikov's yearning for the distant past could possibly have co-existed with any real commitment to the future.

A widespread view of the relationship between Russian Futurism and the Russian Revolution is that it was essentially a "mistake", on the part of the poets, to see any connection at all. Having noted that Futurism began to disintegrate between 1914 and 1916, Markov expresses this view when he explains:

The Revolution brought new blood to the movement, because Futurists, mistakenly, associated themselves with the revolution and expected now no obstacles in their development.<sup>2</sup>

A far more perceptive view of the relationship is presented by Erlich, who sees the "aesthetic" or "cultural" revolution as an integral part of the social revolution:

The Revolution of 1917 did not confine itself to a thorough overhauling of Russia's political and social structure; it also shook loose fixed patterns of behaviour and accepted moral codes and philosophical systems. This cultural upheaval was not a mere by-product of political revolution; it was spurred and accelerated, rather than brought about, by the breakdown of the old regime.<sup>3</sup>

- 
1. Counter-Blast, p 43.
  2. The Province of Russian Futurism, SEEJ, VIII 4 (1964) p 406.
  3. Russian Formalism, The Hague, 1965 p 80.

Something like this view was also expressed by Lev Trotsky, who was one of the few Bolshevik leaders to write perceptively about Futurism and is therefore worth quoting. Writing of "Khlebnikov's or Kruchenykh's making ten or one hundred new derivative words out of existing roots",<sup>1</sup> Trotsky insists that such experiments lie "outside of poetry", even though they "may have a certain philological interest" and

may, in a certain though very modest degree, facilitate the development of the living and even of the poetic language, and forecast a time when the evolution of speech will be more consciously directed.<sup>2</sup>

But when he comes to survey the overall philological work achieved by the Futurists, Trotsky is much less equivocal, and it is evident that he treats the "linguistic revolution" as very much part of the wider social revolt:

The struggle against the old vocabulary and syntax of poetry, regardless of all its Bohemian extravagances, was a progressive revolt against a vocabulary that was cramped and selected artificially with the view of being undisturbed by anything extraneous; a revolt against impressionism, which was sipping life through a straw; a revolt against symbolism which had become false in its heavenly vacuity, against Zinaida Hippus and her kind, and against all the other squeezed lemons and picked chicken-bones of the little world of the liberal-mystic intelligentsia. If we survey attentively the period left behind, we cannot help but realize how vital and progressive was the work of the Futurists in the field of philology. Without exaggerating the dimensions of this "revolution" in language, we must realize that Futurism has pushed out of poetry many worn words and phrases, and has made them full-blooded again and, in a few cases, has happily created new words and phrases which have entered, or are entering, into the vocabulary of poetry and which can enrich the living language. This refers not only to the separate word, but also to its place among other words, that is, to syntax. In the field of word-formations, Futurism truly has gone somewhat beyond the limits which a living language can hold. The same thing, however, has happened with the Revolution; and is the "sin" of every living movement.<sup>3</sup>

- 
1. Literature and Revolution, p 133.
  2. Loc cit.
  3. Ibid p 142.

To the extent that Trotsky found fault with the Futurists, it was only owing to what he saw as "sins" of a similar nature—sins of over-optimism, of impatience and of "ultra-leftism" which had characterized the Revolution itself. The "formalism" of the Futurists represented an insistence on shaping life, fusing with life and overturning the "contents" of the old world (giving "form" priority over "content" in that sense) in a thoroughly revolutionary way. As Nikolai Punin put it in 1919:

Art is form (being), just as socialist theory and Communist revolution is form... The Internationale is just as much a futurist form as any other creative form... I ask what difference is there between the Third Internationale and Tatlin's bas-relief of Khlebnikov's "Martian Trumpet"? To me there is none.<sup>1</sup>

Mayakovsky made a similar claim when he declared:

The revolution of substance—socialism—~~anarchism~~—is not to be thought of apart from the revolution of form—~~futurism~~.<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of the new art was not to communicate ideas (other means were available for that—perhaps even a language of numbers, as Khlebnikov suggested<sup>3</sup>) but to create things and life, and re-create the world. As Brik declared:

We don't need your ideas! ...If you are artists, if you can create and ~~make~~—then make us our human nature, our human things.<sup>4</sup>

It was in this spirit that El Lissitzky declared:

we shall give a new face to this globe. we shall reshape it so thoroughly that the sun will no longer recognize its satellite.<sup>5</sup>

Trotsky agreed that there would come a "time when life will reach such proportions that it will be entirely formed by art..."<sup>6</sup>

---

1. Quoted in Worosnylsky, op cit pp 258-9.

2. Quoted in: *ibid*, p 193.

3. SP V p 158.

4. Quoted by Robert A Maguire, Red Virgin Soil, Soviet Literature in the 1920s, New Jersey, 1968, p 152.

5. In: Lissitzky-Kuppers, op cit, p 328.

6. Literature and Revolution, pp 136-37.

But he insisted that, despite the Russian revolution, it would be a long time before this came about. In the meantime—alongside more 'modern' forms of art—an art which "mirrored" life would continue to be required.<sup>1</sup> Trotsky criticized the Futurists' attempt "to tear out of the future that which can only develop as an inseparable part of it", saying that the artists responsible reminded him of "anarchists who anticipate the absence of government in the future" but "have no bridge to the future."<sup>2</sup>

For Trotsky, then, the kind of world which the Futurists required for their art was one which could only emerge after a long period of revolutionary work. Nevertheless, this future would emerge. The "future" of the Futurists, in this sense, was also the "future" fought for by the revolutionary movement as a whole. There was an intimate and necessary connection between the Futurists' dreams and the aims of the Revolution, even if there were disagreements as to how the future could be reached.

It is not necessary to agree with these arguments to see that the view of Futurism's revolutionary commitments as a "mistake" is shallow in the extreme. One can agree or disagree with the aims and hopes of the revolutionary movement as a whole. But to describe the revolution's artistic expression as "mistakenly" associated with its other expressions is simply nonsensical.

The real "sin" of the Futurists—an extreme revolutionary optimism, impatience and milleniarism—had also been, to a large extent (as Trotsky concedes), the "sin" of the Revolution itself. In the earliest period of the Revolution, many even of the wildest dreams and expectations of the Futurists could be seen as having at least some foundation in the wider revolutionary optimism of the time. As Shklovsky writes:

---

1. Literature and Revolution, p 137.  
2. Ibid pp 134-5.

In the early years of the revolution there was no existence, or rather, the storm itself was existence. There was no man of calibre who did not go through a period of faith in the revolution. One believed in the Bolsheviks. Germany and England would fall—and the frontiers that no-one needed any more would be ploughed up. And heaven would be rolled up like a scroll of parchment...

When Khlebnikov signed manifestos on behalf of the "Presidents of the Terrestrial Sphere" and Kamensky proclaimed the Futurists "the poets of all-mankind's revolution", it was in an atmosphere of just such hopes and expectations as these.

To Mayakovsky, the revolution represented the ultimate defiance of byt. The whole earth was engulfed in a revolutionary ocean—liquid and flowing—in which states, bourgeois relationships and the personal agonies of the past were being swept away.<sup>2</sup> But as the dream of a world revolution failed to materialize, and the revolution in Russia grew cold, the reign of byt seemed to be establishing itself with a grip more total even than before. Mayakovsky dreamed of a new revolution, and of a Fourth and a Fifth International. But the process of cooling and solidification went on. "By April, 1930", as Erlich writes,

when Mayakovsky shot himself through the heart, the revolutionary chaos which he celebrated so resonantly had solidified into the mold of the most elaborate system of cultural repression in modern history.<sup>3</sup>

Mayakovsky needed revolution as other men need air.<sup>4</sup>

Khlebnikov, too, needed the same element of chaos in which to breathe. It may be that he was even less capable of surviving without it than Mayakovsky. Writing of the chaotic revolutionary period, Korney Zelinsky observes that life in it was an "unreal" one—an "existence of being constantly on the move"—and suggests:

Perhaps only the "chairman of the world", Velimir Khlebnikov, who was entirely immersed in it, wished for nothing else. All the others began to organize their existence as they could...<sup>5</sup>

- 
1. Quoted in: Woroszylski, op cit pp 284-5.
  2. Stahlberger, op cit pp 127-31.
  3. The Double Image, p 14.
  4. Shklovsky suggests that Mayakovsky would have committed suicide much earlier had the revolution not broken out—see Stahlberger op cit p 122.
  5. Quoted in: Woroszylski, op cit p 285.

There is no need at this point to detail Khlebnikov's view of the revolution: the preceding pages have shown how he saw it as a "rebirth", a leap into the future and at the same time a return to the prehistoric past. To Khlebnikov, the revolution was "his own" revolution—he had, after all, predicted its date long in advance—and an event through which his theories and dreams were being materialized. When it occurred, it was almost a familiar thing to him.<sup>1</sup> It was a "shift"\*—an abrupt transfer on to a new plane of existence. He had long been used to such things in his own poetry: the entire revolution was almost to be seen as only a colossal "realization" of an artistic "device". It was a movement in which the right to terrestrial property was being destroyed and replaced by the battle for time. But Khlebnikov had "foreseen" this in 1916.<sup>2</sup> In the storm of revolutions, Khlebnikov and his colleagues were to be crowned with laurel-wreaths and made "Presidents of the Terrestrial Sphere." But already in 1916, Khlebnikov wrote that he had been made "head of the first State of Time in the world".<sup>3</sup> It was almost as if, for Khlebnikov, the Revolution had already in a sense happened in advance—as if it really did not matter too much what particular point in time he was writing in, since he stood in a way astride and outside the time dimension, determining its course as a railway-pointsman guides the path of a train.

The starting-point for Khlebnikov was the revolution of form. The core of his revolt was a linguistic one. Where Mayakovsky fought to defy the reign of 'byt' as the hardening and fossilization of life, Khlebnikov fought first and foremost against the hardening and fossilization of language—a struggle which in effect took (to a large extent) the form of a fight against the linguistic results and implications of literacy. The struggle was for a restoration of the primacy of sound in language and for the impermanence, pervasiveness and "darkness" (in the sense earlier discussed) of the world of sounds. The

---

1. Compare with Shklovsky's comment that "Mayakovsky entered the revolution as he would enter his own home"—quoted in: Woroszylski op cit p 174.

2. SP V p 132.

3. SP V p 130.

\* "sdvig".

fight for fluidity, transience, newness, strangeness and change in language (and the fight for "inventions" in science and technology) seemed naturally to be a fight not for space but for time. Where Mayakovsky fought against 'byt' in social and political life as state officialdom and bureaucracy,<sup>1</sup> Khlebnikov fought against it as "the states of space".

Khlebnikov welcomed "inventions" in general, but reserved his most ardent enthusiasm for those connected with "lightning". He saw Radio as "the language of lightning" and believed that it would achieve the aim of his "universal language"—the unification of mankind. Khlebnikov treated Radio very much as he treated the "magical" and "transrational" language of primitive chants, prayers and folk-culture, saw humanity as a "ray" and talked of "a sonorous string of tribes" stretching across the globe. He believed that the entire Earth itself could be treated "as a resonant plate".<sup>2</sup> Radio and its visual extension would become "the ears and eyes" of the world.<sup>3</sup> Although he usually referred to the future as a "State of Time", he also thought of it as a "state of sounds".<sup>4</sup> The entire globe would be embraced by a web of sound-waves; territorial "frontiers" and "spaces" would "wilt".<sup>5</sup> Khlebnikov saw this process as occurring not by whim or individual choice but by necessity—inevitably and, in a way, "compulsorily". He wrote to Mayakovsky in 1921:

I am thinking of writing a thing in which all 3 milliard of humanity would participate, and in which it would be obligatory for mankind to play. But ordinary language is unsuitable for it; a new one will have to be created step by step.<sup>6</sup>

- 
1. See Mayakovsky's The Bathhouse and Bedbug in particular.
  2. SP V p 161.
  3. SP IV p 292.
  4. SP V p 89.
  5. Ibid p 132.
  6. Ibid p 317.

This suggestion should be seen as an elaboration of Khlebnikov's idea of "the world as a poem"<sup>1</sup>, which we noted earlier. A related notion was Khlebnikov's picture of the futurist (budetlyan) as a balalaika-player, plucking the strings of the globe, of human heart-beats and of humanity's fate.<sup>2</sup>

Some ideas of Marshall McLuhan which seem relevant have been discussed above. Khlebnikov's "world as a poem" idea, however, can be related not only to McLuhan's concept of "electronic" and "technological" art taking "the whole earth and its population as its material", but also to the ideas of some who were living and writing in Russia in Khlebnikov's own time. Vassily Kamensky writes, discussing the futurists in the early revolutionary years, that

new creative projects of a cosmic scale were born in our circle every day.<sup>3</sup>

In relation to plans to stage Mayakovsky's play depicting the world revolution, Kamensky recalls:

We were dreaming of a revolutionary mass theatre of the future, where thousands of people, as well as hundreds of cars and airplanes, would fill a gigantic arena, creating for millions the vision of, say, the heroic epic of the October Revolution.<sup>4</sup>

However, here the mention of cars and airplanes indicates that Kamensky was still thinking in mechanical, rather than electronic terms. It was electricity and Radio which seemed to promise the most effective means of creating an art-form to involve millions and embrace the globe. Where Khlebnikov talked of "people-rays" and "lightning", Malevich spoke of "I-beams" and "electricity".<sup>5</sup> Khlebnikov's vision of Radio uniting the globe and of the world as a poem was matched by the words of El Lissitzky, written in 1920:

only a creative work which fills the whole world with its energy can join us together by means of its energy components to form a collective unity like a circuit of electric current.<sup>6</sup>

---

1. SP V p 259.

2. Ibid p 239.

3. In: Woroszylski, op cit p 233.

4. Loc cit. The play was Mayakovsky's "Mystery Bouffe".

5. Iskusstvo Kommuny, no 12, Feb 23 1919; in: Malevich op cit p 72

6. Lissitzky-Kuppers, op cit p 330.

At first sight, Khlebnikov's world view, like much of his poetry, seems to be composed of various incomplete and incompatible fragments. There are his views on sound-meanings, his numerical researches, his world-government project, his dream of conquering fate, his conception of the prehistoric past, his enthusiasm for "inventions" and so on. Just as Markov sees a conflict between Khlebnikov's poetry and his thought, so it is possible to see a conflict between almost every element of his thought and every other one. His primitivism clashes with his futurism, his Russian nationalism with his universalism, his mathematical "ultra-rationalism" with his championship of transreason and his "formalism" with his revolutionary commitment. Khlebnikov himself was aware that he had not explained himself.<sup>1</sup> His great book on numbers and fate was left unwritten. Just before he died, it seems that he began almost to panic at the thought of what he had left undone. Perhaps also a sense that the revolution was cooling and failing added to his alarm. In any event, Khlebnikov's friend Spassky recalls that in the spring of 1922 there was a "disturbed aura" around Khlebnikov, which began to get worse. Spassky visited Khlebnikov in Moscow and was walking with him one day through some dark, winding alleys:

Just then I remarked, I do not know why, that it was time to put Khlebnikov's work in order. I said that it was all scattered, a number of brochures, lost in space. Where is it all? There is no book to speak of.

He reacted to this with unexpected passion. There was anxiety and excitement in what he was saying. He did not complain about any particular person. But he spoke about careless treatment of his manuscripts, about unrealized projects...

In the spring Khlebnikov suddenly felt extremely tired. He would sit sulking in his brother's room. He would rush to the table, spread his manuscripts, panic, and sigh over them. He would rush to the Briks, full of anxious decisiveness. On one occasion he took me with him. He was in a hurry, as if anxious to explain something. In answer to the question from behind the door, he frantically shouted his name. The Briks were not in; Khlebnikov rushed on. It was as if he were looking for someone with whom he wanted to share some urgent reflections.

Sometime in May he moved out of his brother's apartment and left Moscow.

In the summer news came of his death.<sup>2</sup>

---

1. Neizd P. p 371; SP III p 307.

2. In: Woroszyński, op cit p 294.

With so many of Khlebnikov's concepts only half-formed and fragmentarily-expressed, there are obvious difficulties and risks in any attempt at interpretation. In the preceding pages, an attempt has been made to show that, despite the reality of the conflicting tensions in Khlebnikov's thought, the outlines of a relatively coherent and consistent world-view can at a deeper level be discerned. Central to his view of the future was his concept of revolution as a "shift" or "displacement" of temporal planes. The oral past and the electronic future were con-joined, in a process which cut out the present. Man and the universe were being turned on a new axis—the axis of time instead of that of space. Khlebnikov's excitement and anticipation began, as we have seen, long in advance of the revolution itself. But at no time was his enthusiasm so great as in the days immediately preceding the Bolshevik insurrection. "In those days", as he wrote afterwards,

the word "Bolshevik" rang with a strange pride, and it soon became clear that the phantoms of "today" were about to be ripped apart by gunfire.<sup>1</sup>

In his imagination it was he and his colleagues who had seized the Winter Palace and the communications-media and were broadcasting to the world:

Here. The Winter Palace. To Alexandra Fedorovna Kerenskaya. To all. To all. To all... What? You still don't know that the Government of the Terrestrial Sphere already exists? Well, well—so you don't know it exists! The Government of the Terrestrial Sphere. Signatures.<sup>2</sup>

---

1. SP IV p 109.

2. Ibid p 110.

APPENDIX 'A'.A Note on Khlebnikov and Symbolism.

It is often argued that Futurism, far from being a revolt against Symbolism, was in reality the reverse: a continuation of it in more extreme form. A particularly vehement expression of this viewpoint has recently been made by Nadezhda Mandel'stam in her "Hope Abandoned". Noting that the Futurists "were received with open arms by the Symbolists, in an almost fatherly way", she comments:

It seems to me that the Symbolists showed discernment in regarding the Futurists as their direct descendants and heirs. The Futurists took what the Symbolists had begun to its logical conclusion...<sup>1</sup>

Mrs. Mandel'stam is thinking of the anti-Christian, paganistic-mystical streak in Symbolism, its adoption of the principle that "all is permitted" in morals as in art, and its view of words as symbols capable of carrying the reader into a "world beyond". The exaggerated "license", lack of self-restraint, dissatisfaction with "this world" and artist-cult of the Symbolists led, in her view, to the Bolshevism of the Futurists. In her view, the real anti-Symbolist rebels were the Acmeists in general and her husband in particular. They were disciplined and restrained. They refused to probe the unknowable. They had no wish for "other worlds", accepting this one as the "God-given palace". They made no world-shattering claims of their art.<sup>2</sup>

All of this is quite important and perceptive, and it is certainly true that Khlebnikov in particular to a large extent carried Symbolism to its "logical conclusions". In fact,

---

1. Hope Abandoned, London 1974, p 41.

2. Ibid pp 43-46.

one could make a convincing case for the idea that Khlebnikov's version of Futurism was nothing but Symbolism in "extremist" form. What to Bely, Ivanov and others were merely fascinating ideas with some relevance to the realms of the mind, Khlebnikov took seriously and literally, and insisted on putting into practice in the most uncompromising way. Had words a magic power? To Khlebnikov, the answer was that they had, or should have. But Bely's "magic" was all in the realms of the mind. Words, for him, were "world-creating"—but they created neither heaven nor earth but some "third world" of a mystical character in between.<sup>1</sup> Khlebnikov wanted to take Bely's own idea much more seriously than that. He wanted to create a language of literally earth-changing force. His "transrational language" was to abolish war, abolish territorial states and unite all mankind in a "state of time".<sup>2</sup> Nadezhda Mandel'stam is right to see in this a certain relationship with both Symbolism and the atmosphere of extreme optimism characteristic of the artists who supported the Bolsheviki and later were organized into LEF. Khlebnikov's reaction against the Symbolists was primarily focussed on their pessimism, which led them to "betray", in a sense, some of their own most meaningful (to Khlebnikov) promises and ideals.

One can say something similar of the Symbolists' belief in the use of words as symbols through which the mind is brought into touch with "another world". Admittedly, the fundamental point of futurist theory was that the word was not a symbol, and not a means to any end other than itself. But what of the significance to Khlebnikov of "the future"? Was this not in a sense "a world beyond"? In actual fact, the parallel here is quite close. Khlebnikov wrote of the

- 
1. A. Bely, Magia Slova, Simvolizm, p 430. Quoted in: Pomorska, op cit p 62.
  2. SP V 236, 216, 266, 314.

"prophetic sounds" of his "universal language" not as affording glimpses of a world beyond—but as "dispersing" what he called "the gloom of times".<sup>1</sup> The Symbolists had thought of their language as suffused with the light of other worlds; Khlebnikov wrote of the "shadow of the future" being cast over language.<sup>2</sup> He also wrote his famous lines about the future being the "native land of creation" from which blows "the wind of the gods of the word".<sup>3</sup> Khlebnikov had accepted the idea of "two worlds" or "a world beyond" from his Symbolist "teachers". However, he soon realized that the Symbolists were not very serious about reaching these other regions except in imagination. For him, this was not enough. The "world beyond" had to be brought down to earth. It had to be established on earth through the agency of his "Presidents of the Terrestrial Sphere" and his "universal language". In recoiling from the pessimism and despair of the Symbolists, he developed a kind of mandatory optimism, an absolute insistence that the future did contain the "world beyond" for which the Symbolists had been longing. In this way, he re-constructed the Symbolist system of "worlds" along a time-axis. "This world" was now the present. "The world beyond" was the future. And he insisted that this future was already invading the present: "The Government of the Terrestrial Sphere already exists—it is We."<sup>4</sup> Again, Nadezhda Mandel'stam is right to see a certain relationship with the optimistic "extremism" of the pro-Bolshevik artistic avant-garde in the early years of the revolution. In Mayakovsky's letter to the Central Committee of the Communist Party (October 1918) explaining his "Mystery Bouffe",

- 
1. SP III p 330.
  2. SP V p 193.
  3. SP II p 8.
  4. IS 170.

the Symbolist "world beyond" has clearly turned into the vision of a communist future heaven on earth. The believers in a religious, celestial heaven, after a series of adventures, realize their mistake. They see

that they had been wrong to condemn the earth: washed by revolution and dried with the heat of new suns, it appears to them in a dazzling brightness, in which only we can see life, we, who beyond all the terrors of the day can clearly sense another, marvellous existence.<sup>1</sup>

Several of the Symbolists—among them Blok, Bely and Bryusov—were quick to support the new Bolshevik government. For Bely, and particularly for Blok, this was a painful and in a sense suicidal surrender to the "sounds of Revolution". But the fact that this surrender could be made at all shows that the Acmeists were—from a non-communist standpoint—correct to have drawn back earlier from the "logic" of many of the Symbolists' positions. Acmeism reacted against Symbolism in an opposite direction to Khlebnikov and the Futurists. While Khlebnikov's criticism was that the Symbolists had fallen short of their own promises, Mandel'stam's was that they had made such promises in the first place. Mandel'stam's "The Morning of Acmeism" was not officially accepted as his movement's manifesto, but it expressed brilliantly the 'political' impulse of Acmeism. Mandel'stam praised the Middle Ages

because they possessed to a high degree the feeling of boundary and partition. They never mixed various levels, and they treated the beyond with huge restraint.<sup>2</sup>

The author's promise was that his movement would accept the

1. Quoted by Woroszylsky, op cit p 234.
2. The Morning of Acmeism, Section F (1913); in; Clarence Brown: Mandel'stam, Cambridge 1973, p 146. The contrast with Khlebnikov—a constant "mixer of various levels"—is obvious. In a more explicitly political way, the work of Mayakovsky shows the same impatience with "boundary and partition". As Jakobson writes: "Weariness with fixed and narrow confines, the urge to transcend static boundaries—such is Mayakovsky's infinitely varied theme... The "ego" of the poet is a battering ram, thudding into a forbidden future; it is a mighty will "hurled over the last limit" toward the incarnation of the future, toward an absolute fulness of being: "one must rip joy from the days yet to come."—On a Generation that Squandered its Poets, in: E J Brown, (ed) op cit pp 10-11.

world as it was. Renouncing the Symbolists' "life-creating" aspirations<sup>1</sup> he proclaimed:

...we shall learn to carry 'more easily and freely the mobile fetters of existence.'<sup>2</sup>

It was precisely Khlebnikov's refusal to carry any such fetters that led him not only to question the presuppositions of language and even the dimensions of time and space, but to ally with the Bolshevik revolution which seemed to promise a new and transfigured world. In this sense it can certainly be said that he was taking to its conclusion an essential Symbolist idea.

On the other hand, an element of continuity can probably be found in almost any "revolution". The fact that Khlebnikov seized on aspects of Symbolism which formed the basis of his own positions in no way lessened the scale of the rupture which this involved. The question has to be asked why it was that the Symbolists themselves dared not carry their own principles through "to the end"? Obviously a number of temperamental, aesthetic and other factors were involved, but behind everything lay the fact that the Symbolists were the bourgeois "elite" of the intelligentsia who found it psychologically difficult to accept the requisite renunciation of the "I" and surrender to alien and unknown class forces. It was much easier for the Futurists—recruited from the lower, revolutionary, ranks of the intelligentsia—to see that they yearned for "transfigurations", "other worlds" and so on presupposed a revolution, and that this revolution could not for long tolerate the survival of the bourgeois individualistic "I". This is not to say that Nadezhda Mandel'stam was wrong in emphasizing the Symbolist-Futurist element of continuity. It is only to redress the balance by pointing out that a kind of revolution—a genuine rupture and "turning inside-out"—was also involved.

---

1. "Symbolism was not content to be a school of poetry, a literary movement; it sought to become a mode of creating life, and in this lay its deepest and most elusive truth"—Vladimir Khodasevich; quoted in Erlich, The Double Image, p 8.

2. The Morning of Acmeism, in: Clarence Brown op cit p 146.

APPENDIX 'B'.Khlebnikov and the 'Slap' Manifesto.

In the preceding pages it has been assumed that his "Futurism" was an essential aspect of Khlebnikov's literary personality and psychology. Despite his uniqueness and originality, he shared to a significant degree the attitudes and aims of such colleagues as Mayakovsky, Kruchenykh and others prominent in the pre-war "Cubo-Futurist" movement. His "primitivism" did not cut him off ideologically (as Poggioli would have it) from his fellow-Futurists, all of whom (in contrast to the Italians) were to some degree inspired by the idea of the "primitive" in art. It is true that Khlebnikov was not an "urbanist" or an admirer of the machine-age, but his championship of "inventions" was genuine, and in the preceding pages it has been argued that his "electronic" enthusiasms may have made him more, not less, of a "futurist" in technological matters than most of his contemporaries.

Those who would draw a clear-cut distinction between Futurism and Khlebnikov usually refer to the "urbanist" tone and flavour of the "Slap" manifesto in support of their case. Whether Khlebnikov participated in writing this has been much discussed. Kruchenykh wrote that he did:

I remember only one instance when Khlebnikov, Mayakovsky, Burlyuk and myself were all writing a piece together—it was the manifesto for the book Slap to the Public's Taste. The writing took a long time; we discussed every sentence, every letter...

I remember my phrase: "perfumed lechery of Balmont." Khlebnikov's amendment, "aromatic lechery of Balmont," was not accepted...

"To stand on the rock of the word "We" and "From the heights of sky-scrappers we look at their littleness"

---

(Andreyev's, Kuprin's, Kuzmin's, and others) are Khlebnikov's expressions."<sup>1</sup>

According to this version, Khlebnikov at first refused to sign unless Kuzmin's name was omitted ("I will not sign this... Kuzmin must be crossed out—he is sensitive"), but later relented.<sup>2</sup> Livshits, who was not present during the composition but would otherwise be regarded as perhaps a more reliable source, writes:

I could never find out from David who composed the notorious manifesto. I know only that Khlebnikov did not take part in it (he may have been away from Moscow at the time).<sup>3</sup>

It should be mentioned, however, that Livshits had "an axe to grind". He was anxious to shield Khlebnikov, whom he admired almost beyond measure as an artist, from the ignominy of association with what he (Livshits) regarded as a wholly tasteless piece of writing.

Markov provides perhaps the most plausible reconciliation of these incompatible versions of history: in his view, Khlebnikov was present during the discussions which preceded the writing of the manifesto, but absent when it was actually written.<sup>4</sup> Be that as it may, what concerns us for our present purposes is a slightly different question: not whether or not Khlebnikov actually did help write the manifesto, but whether or not he could or would have done—whether or not the manifesto's contents and tone were compatible with his attitudes and views.

The manifesto's theme was anything but primitivist. The same can be said, however, of many of Khlebnikov's own manifestos written at a somewhat later date: his "Martian Trumpet", for example. In the preceding pages we have seen

- 
1. Recollection by Kruchenykh in V. Khlebnikov, Zverinets, Moscow 1930; quoted in Woroszylsky, pp 49-50.
  2. Loc cit.
  3. Polutorozglazy strelets., Leningrad 1933; in Woroszylsky op cit p 49.
  4. The Longer Poems, p 11.

that Khlebnikov was not simply a primitivist, and that he in fact saw a kind of identity of past and future, so that to him there was no contradiction between his primitivism on the one hand and his futurism on the other. There is no reason to suppose that Khlebnikov in 1912 would have felt philosophically disinclined to put his name to the "Slap" manifesto on account of its technological futurism as such, although it is true that its "urbanist" and "machine-age" flavour set it at a certain distance from Khlebnikov's more advanced "electronic age" inclinations.

Apart from this "urbanist" flavour, however, it seems difficult to find anything in the Slap manifesto that Khlebnikov could possibly have disagreed with. The opening lines about "Time's trumpet" remind one strongly of Khlebnikov's time-theories and of his "Martian Trumpet" written in 1916. The general "loudness" and "rudeness" of the manifesto—and the note of bragging associated with the word "We"—may be thought uncharacteristic of Khlebnikov and more in tune with the attitudes of the "urbanist" Mayakovsky. But then, Khlebnikov was quite capable of the same sort of "loudness", bragging and use of the word "We", having written two years earlier:

"We are a new species of people-rays. We have come to light up the universe. We are invincible."<sup>1</sup>

The exaggerated claims of the "Slap" manifesto seem mild by comparison. Again, the string of insults against the enemies of the Futurists might be thought untypical of Khlebnikov's style—were it not for the fact that he himself had written:

"We recognize only two classes—the class of 'We', and our accursed enemies..."<sup>2</sup>

As far as concerned the latter, Khlebnikov urged that the devil should pour hot lead down their throats.<sup>3</sup>

---

1. Letter to Kamensky, SP V p 291.  
2. Loc cit.

If we take the Slap's line attacking "all these Maxim Gorkys, Kuprins, Bloks, Sologubs, Remizovs, Averchenkos, Chernys, Kuzmins, Bunins, etc., etc.," it could be imagined that here was something which must have seemed offensive to the gentle Khlebnikov. Far from it. Khlebnikov had himself damned, by name, roughly the same set of authors in his "Teacher and Pupil". True, the correlation was not exact (Khlebnikov's soft spot for Kuzmin has already been mentioned), but the names of Kuprin, Sologub, Remizov and Bunin are all prominent in Khlebnikov's accusatory "tables".<sup>1</sup>

Finally, let us turn to the notorious call for Pushkin, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy to be thrown overboard from the steamship of modernity. Those who believe that Khlebnikov could not possibly have identified himself with so crude and wholesale a rejection of the past should read Khlebnikov's "Budetlyansky", in which the point made by the Slap's author or authors is made in a slightly different way:

We have found that twentieth-century man, in dragging along a thousand-year-old corpse (the past), has been bowed down, like an ant dragging along a log. We alone have restored to man his stature, having thrown off the bundle of the past (the Tolstoys, Homers, Pushkins).<sup>2</sup>

In his "Teacher and Pupil", Khlebnikov went further than the Slap in condemning the writers of the past. He allowed for no exceptions when he condemned wholesale "Russia's writers" as such (contrasting them with the old folk-singers) as cursers of Time.<sup>3</sup>

There was not much of a theoretical nature in the Slap manifesto. What there was, however, was very much an expression of Khlebnikov's own distinctive formal achievements or

---

1. SP V pp 179-181.

2. SP V p 194.

3. SP V p 181.

aims. It might be supposed that Khlebnikov, with his astonishing 'feel' for language and its evolutionary laws, could not really have sympathised with the Slap manifesto's declaration of "uncompromising hatred of the language used hitherto". Markov supports this view when he notes that, strictly speaking, only Kruchenykh was to live up to this declaration.<sup>1</sup> Practice and theory rarely perfectly coincide, however, and in considering the Slap manifesto we are really dealing with a declaration of aims, i.e. with theory. On this level, it is hard to see how Khlebnikov could have objected to the "uncompromising hatred" in question. It had been he, after all, who had pioneered the idea of "trans-rational language". And long after his early "futurist" period—as late as in 1921—he was still making the most "extreme" and "uncompromising" imaginable statements on language, some of which put the Slap's declaration in the shade. In 1921 Khlebnikov demanded:

The destruction of languages as a duty.  
Destroy the shell of language always and everywhere.<sup>2</sup>

It would be hard to sound more "uncompromising" than that.

The demand for the poet's right "to enlarge the vocabulary with arbitrary and derivative words", and the final, brief mention of the "self-centred word" were obviously inspired first and foremost by Khlebnikov's practical poetic example, beginning with the "Incantation by Laughter".

In conclusion, it can be said that Khlebnikov in 1912 was firmly associated—not only in the public mind but internally and intrinsically—with the group who were shortly to become known as Russia's "futurists." In an important sense, he was actually the centre of the new movement. The various albums and manifestos which appeared in 1913 almost

---

1. Russian Futurism, p 47.

2. Tasks of the Presidents of the Terrestrial Sphere,  
SP V p 271.

invariably featured Khlebnikov's work as the central point of interest. Even the Slap manifesto—often taken to stand furthest from the strand of futurism which Khlebnikov himself represented—expressed positions stemming in whole or in part from his peculiar example and inspiration, although other influences (including Marinetti's) had been effective to a certain extent.

---

APPENDIX 'C'.

Some notes on Italian Futurism.

To a large extent, it was the primitivist origin of Russian futurism—and, correspondingly, the central role played in it by Khlebnikov—which set the Russian movement so far apart from the Italian one of the same name.

There is no need to detail here the way in which the newspapers in Russia rather arbitrarily attached the name "futurism" to the primitivist Hylea group, to the initial consternation of its members. The subject has been well documented by Markov.<sup>1</sup> In this note what concerns us is the position of Khlebnikov not merely as (to a considerable extent) the central pole of attraction for the Russian movement but as the polar opposite (as one might put it with some simplification) of everything for which Marinetti and the Italians stood.

In essence, this polar opposition can be expressed as follows. Khlebnikovian futurism was "formalist"; the Italians were content-oriented, ideological.

Such enormous differences are implied in this dichotomy that it is sometimes hard to see what the two movements had in common. Markov brings out the contrast well. The Italian movement, he writes,

sought to be not only an aesthetic creed, but also a new morality and an appeal to action, political or social, for the regeneration of Italy...<sup>2</sup>

In this sense, it was a content-oriented, ideologically-motivated movement. The Russians, writes Markov, were quite different:

- 
1. Russian Futurism, pp 117-19.
  2. The Longer Poems, p 2.

Their activities never overstepped the boundaries of literature or the arts, and their main achievements were in the field of poetry.<sup>1</sup>

While there is something wrong with this statement—which is difficult to square with the futurists' close identification with revolutionary politics—it does express an important truth. What is crucial is that first and foremost, the Russians were artists. Throughout the pre-revolutionary period, there was never any question for them of a pre-conceived ideological goal for which an art-form would have to be found. It was the other way around. The word came first. Insofar as the futurists had a goal, it was conceived as the word in and for itself. As Mayakovsky put it, "the word is the end of poetry."<sup>2</sup> Khlebnikov and his colleagues would follow wherever "the wisdom of language" (Khlebnikov's term) happened to lead.<sup>3</sup> This order of primacy was expressed by Kruchenykh in explicitly "formalist" terms:

If there is a new form, there must also exist a new content... It is form that determines content.<sup>4</sup>

Marinetti could never have acceded to any such thought. As Pomorska puts it, writing of the Italian futurists:

The latter see the source of poetic innovation mainly in the object of description, in the topic itself. It would be sufficient to turn to contemporary reality itself and to its very spring—the machine and speed—in order to liberate literature from the old rubbish: the obnoxious, old-fashioned themes...<sup>5</sup>

For Marinetti, the whole purpose of modern poetry was to express a definite content. It was to extol a definite external reality:

The racing car, with its body adorned by huge pipes, with its exploding exhaust... We will extol immense crowds, moved by work, pleasure or rebellion; the multi-

- 
1. The Longer Poems, p 2.
  2. Quoted by Barooshian, Russian Cubo-Futurism, p 42.
  3. Nasha Osnova, SP V pp 230-231.
  4. A. Kruchenykh, Novye puti slova, pp 64-72 in Markov, Manifesty i programmy russkikh futuristov, p 72.
  5. Russian Formalist Theory etc., p 53.

coloured and polyphonic fits of revolutions in all modern capitals; the nightly vibrations of arsenals and shipyards beneath their powerful electric moons; the voracious railway stations devouring the steaming snakes; the factories, attached to the clouds by ropes of smoke...<sup>1</sup>

Admittedly, in drawing this distinction, the Russian futurists' eventual commitment to the October revolution may seem to present a problem. Even here, however, it is important to remember that their art's social content was never for the futurists a starting-point. A wider sociological analysis could show, of course, that in developing their "new forms", the futurists were in the last analysis reflecting and responding to new external circumstances. Indeed, a central purpose of the preceding pages has been to show how futurism was influenced by the technological and scientific revolution of its time. The relationship between this technological revolution and the sense of impending social revolution has also been touched upon. In that sense—in a broad perspective—it was obviously "content" which determined "form" for the futurists as much as for anyone else.

But the link between, say, Khlebnikov's poetry and the "electronics revolution" was unlike the much more obvious link between, say, Marinetti's poetry and the "machine-age". Khlebnikov did not set out to "glorify" or even merely to "depict" the effects of the new scientific revolution. On the contrary, his poetry was often about the distant past. The point is that it was because of its formal characteristics that his language expressed the spirit of the new age, doing so as much when the subject-matter was an incident in the Stone Age as when it was a glimpse of the Space Age.

Taken in the widest historical context, as one literary school among others in a complex social setting, futurism appears as a product of its time. Its forms were produced

---

1. Quoted in: Woroszylski, op cit p 39.

in a complicated process of refraction and interaction stemming ultimately from changes in the socio-economic structure and technological level of the European and Russian society of that period. The new inner world was produced by the new outer conditions; the new "form" by the newly-developed "content" in that sense.

Seen in a narrower context, however, things appear almost in reverse. Because they were first and foremost artists, the futurists did not base themselves intellectually and directly upon economic statistics, measurements of technological advance or any other indicators of change in the external world. Being artists, they surrendered first and foremost to their own inner world, the world of forms, dreams and the subconscious. To take the question of revolutionary commitment, it was arrived at only through this prior commitment to the inner world of form. It was Khlebnikov's formal preoccupations—with the subjective aspects of language, with the meanings and sound-correlations subconsciously felt, and in general with the need to give voice to a new inner world in its own language—which led him in the general direction of the Bolshevik revolution. Cutting Khlebnikov, for analytical purposes, from his social context and seeing him as an individual, the priority of his inner world in determining his external choices appears clear. Form came first, and "determined" its content. Mayakovsky admitted the same when he described himself as having fallen into communism "from poetry's skies."<sup>1</sup> On this psychological level, it was a definite kind of poetry which led in the direction of revolutionary politics rather than revolutionary commitment which dictated its own kind of poetry. Each futurist (and Khlebnikov is the prime example) reflected the new technological and other circumstances of the age not directly, not rationally, but only in an indirect way—"transrationally" one might almost say—in proportion as his

---

1. Domoy, 1925; in: Patricia Blake, The Bedbug and Selected Poetry, p 185.

own subconscious itself had been and continued to be moulded and changed imperceptibly by the changing social and technological circumstances of his time. What is especially interesting about Khlebnikov, as we have seen, is that this generally subconscious process, besides being expressed in one way or another in the entirety of his poetic output, was also to an extent something of which he became conscious. The French Cubist painters did not depict or write about the inventions of the "electronics revolution", however much they may have been subconsciously influenced by them; Khlebnikov did. It has been with the writings in which he did so that we have been mainly concerned in the preceding pages.

It may be worth noting that the "subjective" route to revolution was recognized by Lev Trotsky, who no doubt was recalling the Russian experience when he wrote in 1938:

The need for emancipation felt by the individual spirit has only to follow its natural course to be led to mingle its stream with this primeval necessity—the need for the emancipation of man.<sup>1</sup>

In the same year he insisted:

Art can become a strong ally of revolution only insofar as it remains faithful to itself.<sup>2</sup>

A sense of fidelity to itself—to the material and (largely) autonomous laws of artistic creation—was something which Italian futurism in general lacked. The Italians had little of the Russians' deference towards the rules of their craft, fidelity to the "language" of the subconscious mind or sensitivity towards the inner texture of words or linguistic evolution.<sup>3</sup> Far from all this, Marinetti insisted, as we have seen, that modern poetry was to extol an external beauty—the beauty

---

1. Trotsky on Literature and Art, p 119.

2. Ibid p 114.

3. The reference here is to the Italian futurist poets, not the painters. This is perhaps unfair, since the Italians' greatest achievements were not in poetry but in painting. Here too, however, an intellectual pre-conception—e.g. the idea of representing mechanical speed—generally predominated over "inner form" or "material" as understood by the Cubists or Russian futurists.

of mechanical speed. Language had to be hurried-up for this purpose, by removing from it the delaying devices of conventional grammar, such as adjectives, adverbs and punctuation.<sup>1</sup> It was as if the machine-age, having subordinated man himself to the rhythms of the machine, were now to do the same to his language.

Two of the most perceptive contemporary commentators on Russian futurism—Benedict Livshits and Roman Jakobson—both appealed to the example of Khlebnikov in contrasting the Russian to the Italian movement. In the case of both critics, it was the Italians' lack of respect for the "material" of their art which drew the heaviest criticism.

When Livshits, in a discussion with Marinetti during the Italian's Russian visit in 1914, dwelt at some length on the accomplishments of Khlebnikov,<sup>2</sup> the response was mere incomprehension. Shrugging his shoulders, Marinetti asked:

Why is this archaism necessary? Is it really capable of expressing the whole complexity of the tempo of contemporary life?

To which Livshits scathingly replied:

Your question is extremely characteristic. It is only added proof of your indifference to material, an indifference which you are vainly attempting to conceal by loud phrases about the lyrical obsession with material. In fact, in the name of what do you propose to eliminate punctuation marks? In the name of the beauty of speed, isn't that so? Well, we, excuse me, don't give a rap for this beauty.<sup>3</sup>

That last remark was not quite true. Khlebnikov himself (not to speak of Kamensky, Mayakovsky and others) became extremely

- 
1. Erlich, Russian Formalism, p 44.
  2. Livshits declared to Marinetti, in words which are worth quoting: "Unfortunately, Khlebnikov for you is merely a name: he is utterly untranslatable in those very works where his genius is expressed with the greatest force. Rimbaud's most daring ventures are baby talk in comparison with what Khlebnikov is doing, by shattering the millennial linguistic stratification and by fearlessly plunging into the articulatory chasm of the primordial word." Polutoroglazy Strelets; in: Barooshian, Russian Cubo-Futurism, p 151.
  3. Ibid p 151.

enthusiastic, as we have seen, about air-travel, speed-of-light radio-communication, the idea of space-rockets and similar things. But in a sense Livshits was right. The Russians, putting "form" or "the inner world" first, were prepared to see beauty in these things only conditionally. The condition was the subordination of these inventions to man's inner world, to human needs, either through the agency of the "Presidents of the Terrestrial Sphere" (Khlebnikov's version) or through that of the "Red Art International" or the Third International itself (in the version of Mayakovsky and his LEP associates in the post-revolutionary period). The Italians did not put "form" or "the inner world" first. For them, it was the pulse, the rhythm, the staccato beat and the clangour of naked machines—and not any inner complex of forms and sounds emanating from the "word as such"—which was to animate their art. The distinction, so far as it holds, amounts to a diametric opposition.

And in what remains to this day probably the most brilliant (if philosophically one-sided) brief account of the poetry of Khlebnikov and his colleagues, Roman Jakobson made the same point. Having quoted from Marinetti's manifesto the words about extolling crowds, factories, railway-stations and so on, he remarked:

But this is a reform in the field of reportage, not in poetic language.<sup>1</sup>

What Jakobson is really saying is that the Italians were not artists at all. We noted earlier that, because they were first and foremost artists, the Russians did not base themselves intellectually or directly upon specific indications of technological advance in the external world. They based themselves on the forms of the inner world—a largely subconscious realm—and on external changes only to the extent

---

1. Modern Russian Poetry: Velimir Khlebnikov; in E.J. Brown, Major Soviet Writers, p 61.

that these had permeated the subconscious and modified it in ways discernible in the realm of "form". The Italian futurists, Jakobson noted, proclaimed that new subject-matter and new concepts had "led to a renewal of the devices of poetry and of artistic forms", so that content in a direct fashion determined form. But, he continued, the Russians in no way felt obliged to speak only of motor cars and of contemporary machine-industry and civilization. For them, new forms—a new "language"—came first. They had invented a poetry of the "self-developing, self-valuing word" as the established and clearly visible "material" of poetry:

And so it is not surprising that Khlebnikov's poems sometimes deal with the depths of the Stone Age, sometimes with the Russo-Japanese War, sometimes with the days of Prince Vladimir... and then again with the future of the world.<sup>1</sup>

To lend force to his position, Jakobson made a further point. The Russian futurists, he wrote, seemed often hostile to the very facts of city life which the Italians set out to praise. He cited Mayakovsky's words:

Abandon cities, you foolish people.

And Khlebnikov's:

There's a certain fat gourmand who's fond of impaling human hearts on his spit, and who derives a mild enjoyment from the sound of hissing and breaking as he sees the bright red drops falling into the fire and flowing down—and the name of that fat man is—"the city".<sup>2</sup>

This brings us to the question of what was the Russian futurists' attitude to the new "contents"—the new technological and social realities—of their time. It is a question which the previous pages of this work have taken up and attempted to answer at least in part. The fact that the Russian futurists were "formalists" did not mean that they lacked any

---

1. Loc cit.

2. Ibid pp 61-62.

emotional or ideological attitudes whatsoever towards the external world. Just the contrary. Their "formalism" was their emotional, their ideological and their political attitude. It meant that the world's machines and cities—inhuman and terrifying in their "naked" form—were to be grasped, clothed, re-shaped by man. "Form" was to dominate over "content" not merely in a literary sense but "out there" in the real world.

Jakobson misses all this completely. Having quoted Mayakovsky and Khlebnikov on the horrors of the naked "city", he robs the passages of their vital meaning by claiming that neither writer could possibly have meant what he said:

To incriminate the poet with ideas and emotions is as absurd as the behaviour of the medieval audiences that beat the actor who played Judas...<sup>1</sup>

The analogy is grotesque: Khlebnikov in his poetry was not assuming a mask, adopting a guise, acting a part. He was not playing the role of someone else but expressing his own being in the fullest way he knew how. Despite a certain amount of "play-acting", at the deepest level the same can be said of Mayakovsky. Jakobson here as elsewhere, for all his brilliance, was carrying his theoretical conception of "formalism" to doctrinaire extremes which the futurist poets themselves could have had no sympathy for.

In actual fact, the ideological contrast between the Italian futurists and the Russians in respect of "the city" was a very real one. Barooshian sums it up as follows:

Poetically, the Russian Futurists reacted pessimistically towards, and violently against, industrial society because of its threat to human values and its dehumanization of man. The Italian futurists, on the other hand, viewed industrial society optimistically and wanted to glorify it poetically.<sup>2</sup>

---

1. Ibid p 66.

2. Russian Cubo-Futurism, p 17.

Whereas Jakobson treated such differences as quite incidental to questions of form, in reality the reverse was the case. The "ideological" (if such a term is permissible here) contrast between Russian and Italian futurism was at root inseparable from the "formal" contrast. It was because they worshipped the machine-age and its city-civilization that the Italian futurists were willing and eager to subordinate the forms of language to what they saw as the requirements of the machine-age. It was because they were hostile to the city and its inhuman machines that the Russian futurists, on the other hand, wanted to put "form" (or "the word") first and impose it upon the external world.<sup>1</sup>

The eventual political alignments of the two "futurist" movements can be seen as consistent extensions of this basic divergence. At the risk of simplifying somewhat, the "logic" of the two positions can be expressed as follows. If—as the Italians in effect advocated—words were to serve the beauty of machines, then, correspondingly, the user of words (the poet) should naturally tend to see himself as serving the social order whose master was (or appeared to be) the machine. If this led him to glorify the first full-scale machine-age war, then that was perfectly consistent with his premises. If it led him at a later stage to place his talents at the disposal of capitalist industrialism in its most militaristic and unbridled form—the regime of Mussolini—then this, too, was not inconsistent with the "formal" premises of his art.

---

1. The Russians were (as Stahlberger says of Mayakovsky and Khlebnikov), "inclined to see the city as a place of terror..." (The Symbolic System etc., p ). Chukovsky recognized the same fact when he asked, referring to Mayakovsky, "What kind of urbanist, what kind of city poet is he, if the city is for him a dungeon, a torture chamber!" (quoted in Woroszyński, op cit p 107). The Russians wanted their words and formal devices to break the walls of the "dungeon", to subdue the terror, to exorcise the evil spirit, to shape and master the naked city so that it became habitable for human beings.

On the other hand, if—as the Russian futurists advocated—the human "word" and its associated "forms" were to come first, seizing, clothing and reshaping the naked city and terminating its reign of terror over man, then, correspondingly, the artist should naturally see himself politically in revolutionary terms. He should lend his talents to the task of revolutionizing society and subordinating machines to the requirements—communicative and aesthetic as well as material—of human beings.

---

B I B L I O G R A P H Y

- G. Apollinaire, The Cubist Painters, Aesthetic Meditations, 1913; trans. L. Abel (New York, Wittenborn Schultz, Inc., 1949).
- D. Barooshian, Russian Cubo-Futurism, 1910-1930, A Study in Avant-Gardism; (The Hague, Mouton and Co., 1974).
- J. Berger, The Moment of Cubism; (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London 1969).
- J. Berger, The Success and Failure of Picasso; (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1965).
- P. Blake, (ed.), V. Mayakovsky: The Bedbug and Selected Poetry; (London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1961).
- A. Blok, Sobranie sochinenii; (Moscow-Leningrad, 1962), Vol V.
- T.B. Bottonore and H. Rubel, (eds.), Karl Marx: Selected Writings in Sociology and Social Philosophy; (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1963).
- F. Bowers, Scriabin: A Biography of the Russian Composer, 1871-1915; Vol 2; (Tokyo and Palo Alto, Kodansha International Ltd., 1969).
- C. Brown, Mandelstam; (Cambridge University Press, 1973).
- E.J. Brown, (ed.), Major Soviet Writers, Essays in Criticism; (Oxford University Press, 1973).
- E.J. Brown, Mayakovsky, A Poet in the Revolution; (Princeton, New Jersey, 1973).
- K. Chukovsky, Akhmatova and Mayakovsky; (see E.J. Brown, Major Soviet Writers).
- P. Daix, Picasso; (London, Macmillan, 1965).
- D. Davie and A. Livingstone (eds), Modern Judgments: Pasternak; (London, Macmillan, 1969).
- R.H. Denning, (ed.), James Joyce, The Critical Heritage; (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), Vol 2.
- G. Donchin, The Influence of French Symbolism on Russian Poetry; (The Hague, Mouton and Co., 1958).
- F. Engels, Anti-Duhring; (Moscow, 1959).
- V. Erlich, Russian Formalism; (The Hague, Mouton and Co., 1965).
- V. Erlich, The Double Image; (Baltimore, Maryland, 1964).
- S. Finkelstein, Sense and Nonsense of McLuhan; (New York, International Publishers Co., Inc., 1968).
- M. Ginsberg (ed.), A Soviet Heretic: Essays by Yevgeny Zamiatin; (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1970).
- V. Gofman, Yazykovoe novatorstvo Khlebnikova; (In: Zvezda, 6, 1935, pp 209-236).
- C. Gray, The Russian Experiment in Art; (London, Thames and Hudson, 1962).

- J. Holthusen, Twentieth-Century Russian Literature, A Critical Study; (new York, Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1972).
- R. Jakobson, Modern Russian Poetry: Velimir Khlebnikov; (see E.J. Brown, Major Soviet Writers).
- R. Jakobson, On a Generation that Squandered its Poets; (see E.J. Brown, Major Soviet Writers).
- N. Khardzhiev and V. Trenin, Poeticheskaya kultura Mayakovskogo; (Moscow 1970).
- V. Khlebnikov, Choix de poemes; (Paris 1967).
- V. Khlebnikov, Izbrannye stikhotvorenia; (ed. N. Stepanov, Moscow, 1936).
- V. Khlebnikov, Neizdannye proizvedenia; in Vol. IV of V. Khlebnikov, Sobranie sochinenii; (Vols I-IV, Munich, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1968-1973).
- V. Khlebnikov, Nesobrannye proizvedenia; in Vol III of above.
- V. Khlebnikov and A. Kruchenykh, Slovo kak takovoe; (Michigan, University Microfilms Inc., Ann Arbor, 1965).
- V. Khlebnikov, Sobranie proizvedenii, Vols I-V, (ed. N. Stepanov, Leningrad, 1928-1933). Reprinted as Sobranie sochinenii, Vols I-IV, (Munich, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1968-1973).
- P. Laporte, Cubism and Science; (The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, March 1949, Vol III No 3, pp 243-256).
- V. Lenin, Philosophical Notebooks; (Collected Works, Moscow, 1961, Vol 38).
- El Lissitzky: Life. Letters. Texts. (ed. S. Lissitzky-Kuppers, London, Thames and Hudson, n.d.).
- A. Litz, The Art of James Joyce, (London, Oxford University Press, 1961).
- B. Livshitz, Polutoroglazy strelets, (Leningrad, 1933).
- G. Lukacs, The Meaning of Contemporary Realism; (London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1962).
- C. Mackworth, Guillaume Apollinaire and the Cubist Life; (London, John Murray, 1961).
- D. McLellan, The Thought of Karl Marx; (London, Macmillan, 1971).
- M. McLuhan, Counter-Blast; (London, Rapp and Whiting Ltd., 1969).
- M. McLuhan, Understanding Media; (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964).
- M. McLuhan, War and Peace in the Global Village; (New York, Bantam Books, 1968).
- M. McLuhan and Q. Fiore, The Medium is the Massage; (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1970).
- K.S. Malevich, Essays on Art 1915-1933, (ed. T. Andersen, trans. X. Glowacki-Prus and A. McMillin; London, Rapp and Whiting, 1969), Vols 1-2.
- N. Mandel'stam, Hope Abandoned; (London, Collins and Harvill Press, 1974).

- V. Markov, The Literary Importance of Khlebnikov's Longer Poems; (The Russian Review, Vol 19 No 4, October 1960).
- V. Markov, The Longer Poems of Velimir Khlebnikov; (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1962).
- V. Markov, Russian Futurism; (London, MacGibbon and Kee, 1969).
- V. Markov (ed.), Manifesty i programmy russkikh futuristov, (Munich, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1967).
- O. Maslenikov, Spectre of Nothingness; (Slavonic and East European Journal, Vol IV, 1960).
- V. Mayakovsky, V.V. Khlebnikov; (see E.J. Brown, Major Soviet Writers).
- V. Pertsov, O Velimire Khlebnikove; (Moscow, Voprosy Literatury, 1966, Vol 7, pp 46-71).
- J. Piaget, The Language and Thought of the Child; (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960).
- R. Poggioli, Russian Futurism, Khlebnikov, Essenin; (Slavonic and East European Journal, Vol XVI, 1958).
- K. Pomorska, Russian Formalist Theory and its Poetic Ambiance; (The Hague, Mouton and Co., 1968).
- F. Reeve, Alexandr Blok, Between Image and Idea; (New York and London, Columbia University Press, 1962).
- J. Russell, G. Braque; (London 1959).
- P. Schwartz, The Cubists; (London, Macmillan, 1971).
- R. Shattuck, (ed.), Selected Writings of Guillaume Apollinaire, (London, The Harvill Press, 1950).
- V. Shklovsky, O teorii prozy; (Moscow-Leningrad, Krug, 1925).
- V. Shklovsky, Zaumny yazyk i poezia; (Petrograd, Sborniki po teorii poeticheskogo yazyka, pp 1-15, 1916).
- P. N. Siegel (ed), Leon Protosky on Literature and Art; (New York, Pathfinder Press Inc., 1970).
- A. Sinyavsky and A. Menshutina, Poezia pervikh let revolutsii; (Moscow, 1964).
- S. Spassky, Mayakovsky i ego sputniki; (Leningrad, 1940).
- L. Stahlberger, The Symbolic System of Vladimir Mayakovsky; (The Hague, Mouton and Co., 1964).
- L. Trotsky, Literature and Revolution; (Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1960).
- Y. Tynyanov, On Khlebnikov; (see E.J. Brown, Major Soviet Writers).
- E. W. White, Stravinsky; (London 1966).
- W. Woroszyński, The Life of Mayakovsky; (London, Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1972).

"Not in chalk, but in love are drawn the lines  
Of the pattern to come."

V.V. Khlebnikov, from the last lines of Ladomir.