

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...¹

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.²

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.¹ 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".² 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

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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".¹ 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.² 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".³ 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."⁴ 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.¹

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.²

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" aspirations¹ he proclaimed:

...we shall learn to carry 'more easily and freely the mobile fetters of existence.'²

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.

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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, Burluk 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-scrapers we look at their littleness"

(Andreyev's, Kuprin's, Kuzmin's, and others) are Khlebnikov's expressions."¹

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.² 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).³

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.⁴ 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

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1. Recollection by Kruchenykh in V. Khlebnikov, Zverinets, Moscow 1930; quoted in Woroszylsky, pp 49-50.
 2. Loc cit.
 3. Polutoroglazy 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."¹

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..."²

As far as concerned the latter, Khlebnikov urged that the devil should pour hot lead down their throats.³

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".¹

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).²

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.³

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.¹ 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.²

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.¹ 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...²

In this sense, it was a content-oriented, ideologically-motivated movement. The Russians, writes Markov, were quite different:

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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.¹

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."² Khlebnikov and his colleagues would follow wherever "the wisdom of language" (Khlebnikov's term) happened to lead.³ 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.⁴

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...⁵

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-

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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...¹

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: Woroszyński, 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."¹ 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.¹

In the same year he insisted:

Art can become a strong ally of revolution only insofar as it remains faithful to itself.²

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.³ 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.¹ 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,² 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.³

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 LEF 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.¹

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.¹

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".²

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...¹

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.²

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.¹

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 Woroszylski, 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.
