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"Not in chalk, but in love are drawn the lines
Of the pattern to come."

V.V. Khlebnikov, from the last lines of Ladomir.

Poet, futurian, holy fool

Peter France

VELIMIR KHLEBNIKOV

The King of Time: Poems, fictions, visions of the future

Translated by Paul Schmidt

Edited by Charlotte Douglas

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Near the beginning of his pioneering study, *The Longer Poems of Velimir Khlebnikov*, Vladimir Markov quotes a rich selection of views of the poet, ranging from I. Aksyonov's "He was an idiot in the most ordinary sense of the word" to Roman Jakobson's "I have never ceased to consider him one of the greatest Russian poets and perhaps the most important modern poet in the world." Others see him as both madman and genius – and it is hard not to join their uninspiring company.

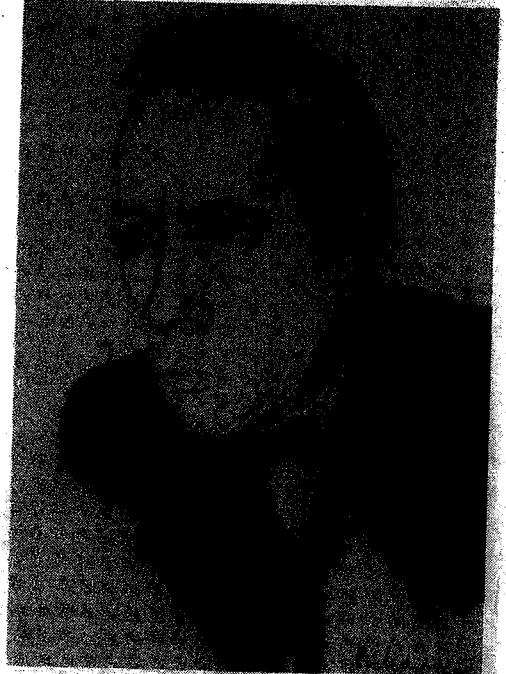
What is one to make of the man who proclaims: "I discovered the pure Laws of Time in 1920 in Baku, the land of fire, in a tall building that housed the naval dormitory where I was living with Dobrokovsky. The exact date was December 17th"; of the man who declared himself one of the Presidents of Planet Earth, and who maintained that "V in all languages means the turning of one point around another, either in a full circle or only a part of one, along an arc, up or down"? Madman or genius? And things are exacerbated by the legend which surrounds his life; here he figures as a holy and inspired fool, incapable of practical organization, wandering ceaselessly by train around revolutionary Russia, dragging with him a great pillowcase stuffed with mountains of notes, succumbing to typhus and malnutrition, and dying the tragically early and lonely death that almost seems obligatory for the Russian poet of legend. Small wonder that the blurb to this volume of translations announces that "general readers will be introduced to the legendary Khlebnikov, and cognoscenti will applaud the inventiveness of the rendering".

Khlebnikov's reputation has seen great ups and downs in the Soviet Union, but now his star seems to be rising, with a number of new editions, books and articles – even a pop record of his famous "Incantation by Laughter". In television, remains little known except by the from a new fan.

"cognoscenti" – whatever Jakobson may have thought of him, he does not figure in our standard pantheon of twentieth-century Russian poets. Given his difficulty, this is understandable, but now the Khlebnikov Translation Project of the Dia Art Foundation is seeking to do something about the situation. The cognoscenti have been influential enough for the Foundation to commission a translation of the "complete works" – or so at least says the dust-jacket of this introductory selection.

It is a daunting prospect. It is not just that Khlebnikov can be a translator's torment, but also that the Russian editions of his works, based on his chaotic papers, are full of gaps and confusion. It will be a strange paradox, moreover, if Khlebnikov thus becomes more fully available in English than in Russian. One naturally applauds an ambitious undertaking of this kind, but not without wondering if it is really necessary or helpful to translate everything he wrote (what other prolific poet is ever accorded such an honour?) Meanwhile, however, this sample is full of good things.

Khlebnikov's visionary schemes of numbers, sounds and time will fascinate some readers. Who would not wish, if only in dreams, to acquire a mathematical mastery over the great



Vladimir Mayakovsky's drawing of Khlebnikov, 1916 (left). Tatlin, c.1915; both are reproduced from the book reviewed

flux of events in time or an insight into the basic principles underlying the huge variety of languages built out of sound? Such ambitions go back to the universal language theorists of the eighteenth century, to Nostradamus, and beyond. In Khlebnikov they are given a special character by the utopian hopes of the revolutionary period, which also finds expression in visions of ideal cities, full of "swing-buildings", "tube-buildings", "goblet-buildings" and the like, all wired up for radio, the universal church of the future – a chilling prospect now. But none of this in itself would justify Khlebnikov's huge reputation. Nor indeed would his commanding position as a "futurian" – the neologism he invented to differentiate Russian futurism, with its strong Slavonic and primitivist elements, from Marinetti's modernism. All of this feeds Khlebnikov's poetry, but it is the poetry that matters; as the translator says in his introduction, "it is above all the extraordinary excellence of his poetry that justifies Khlebnikov and his endeavors".

He was surely one of the most remarkable practitioners in language who has ever written. He seems to inhabit the very heart of his language, exploring its roots, making it send up new and wonderful growths. This is much more

evident to Russians than to foreigners, of course – someone as alive to the Russian poetic word as Mandelstam could write: "Khlebnikov burrows in the word like a mole... He has dug passages through the earth a hundred years into the future." The foreigner who knows Russian can glimpse this and admire the marvels of Khlebnikov's language, though never with the inwardness of the native speaker. But what of those who approach him through translation? Can they come to see the importance and the beauty of his work? This is the challenge taken up by Paul Schmidt, the principal translator of the proposed complete works, and he rises to it nobly.

Unfortunately, perhaps, the bulk of this volume is made up of prose, including theory, drama and fiction; all of this is rendered effectively and imaginatively, with the right degree of freedom to make the texts work in English without losing touch with their often strange originals. Schmidt's approach to the verse is likewise free and it changes from poem to poem, since "no one rule seems suitable for such a vast and shifting terrain of language". In translating Khlebnikov's word comings, he operates on English as his original does on Russian – and so comes up with a version of the "Incantation by Laughter" that is far stranger and more suggestive than those usually offered: "Hlahla! Uthlofan, lauflings!" In less experimental poems, which are the majority, he often captures the luminous power of the original, even if not the full appeal of the sound. And he can sustain this over many pages, which will be very necessary when he comes to translate Khlebnikov's large quasi-epic production.

In this volume we are given the extraordinary "supersaga" *Zangezi*, in which the languages of birds and of gods, of prophecy and of street banter, join with "beyonsense" sound poetry (*zaum*) and large visions of historical change to produce a summa, a kind of crazier *Zarathustra*. That Schmidt can deal so confidently with this bodes well for his larger enterprise. Even if one may argue about the need for a complete English translation, it looks set to be a fine achievement. It will be English poetry based on Khlebnikov rather than Khlebnikov himself, of course, since for all his universalist ambitions he remains locked into Russian. But perhaps it will give some readers courage to explore the great original.

(left), and (right) Khlebnikov's drawing of Vladimir