

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 KHLEBNIKOV was born on October 28, 1885, in a small village near the ancient city of Astrakhan.¹ 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.²

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.³ 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...⁴

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 timespan 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.¹ 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.²

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.¹

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.²

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!"³

It was the start of a life-time's attempt to answer what he would later describe as "the states of space".⁴ 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.⁵

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!¹

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.¹ 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.²

Khlebnikov had been fond of Symbolist poetry for some time, having been seen carrying copies of the journal "Vesy" in his Kazan student days.³ He had been particularly attracted by Sologub—whom he would single out in 1912, however, for especial condemnation.⁴ Early in 1908 he had met Vyacheslav Ivanov—who had become the leader of Symbolism in its final phase—while holidaying in the Crimea.⁵ 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."⁶ Ivanov by all accounts appreciated the poems,⁷ 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, Polutoroglaazy 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.¹ 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 nudity², 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.³ On several occasions he read his verses to the

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1. Nadezhda Mandel'stam writes that the upper-class intelligentsia 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".¹

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.¹

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".² 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.¹

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

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.³

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"¹—in "Apollo". "I pretended to be very glad", wrote the young author, "but didn't care".² 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.³ 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.⁴ 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.¹

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,² 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,
Зажегши волосами,
И вместо Я
Стояло— Мы!
Иди, варяг суровый!
Неси закон и честь.³

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!¹

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.²

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.³

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.¹ 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..."² 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.³

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."¹ 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 3ⁿ days and a positive one through 2ⁿ 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 **dissappears** 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.²

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.¹ 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."² 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.³ 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.⁴

When this Symbolist sensation of historical "condemnation" is

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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 Woroszyński, op cit p 248.

appreciated,¹ 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...²

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."¹ 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 ?²

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:

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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."¹

Regardless of the merit or otherwise of his "computations", the fact that Khlebnikov managed to get the date right² 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.³ 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!"⁴

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...?"¹

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!"²

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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"¹, "impersonalism"² or "collectivism"³ 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.⁴ 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..."¹ Languages in his view had become "congealed" and "fossilized".² They no longer united people but divided them.³ 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".⁴ 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..."⁵ 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!⁶

Sometimes this loneliness was asserted aggressively. Wrote Balmont:

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

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

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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.¹

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.²

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).³

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...⁴

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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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.

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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'.¹

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.¹

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 Burl-yuks—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.¹ 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.² 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."³ It was peculiarly Russian, being a carrying to extremes of the possibilities of morphological derivation inherent in the Russian language as in few others.⁴ 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.

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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 1910¹ 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.

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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.¹ 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.²

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.³

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.⁴

Markov points out that primitivism had been anticipated, in a certain sense, by the Symbolists' wide interest in Slavic mythology.⁵ 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

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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.¹

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.² 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.³

In 1911, Khlebnikov wrote two of his greatest primitiv-

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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"¹). 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?"² In the same year Khlebnikov wrote: "I yearn for a bonfire of books."³

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.¹ 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.² 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.³

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.⁴

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

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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.¹

'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.²

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.³

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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.¹ 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!²

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".³

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

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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.¹ 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.² 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".³ 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.⁴ 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.⁵

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.¹

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."² El Lissitzky later gave a technological interpretation 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.³

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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".⁴ Predictable, habitual words and experiences

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1. SP V 167. However, Khlebnikov tells "Comrade Sun" that he and his fellow-Presidents would prefer mutiny and insurrection 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..."¹ 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.²

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.³

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

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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.¹

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"², 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.³

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

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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 magma becomes coated with dogma—a rigid, ossified, motionless crust".⁵

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^a 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.¹ 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."² Benedict Livshits considered his own work "100 per cent cubism transferred to the area of organized speech."³ Virtually all the Russian Futurist poets were students of painting, or were originally inspired by the methods of painting.⁴ Khlebnikov had Cubism clearly in mind when he declared in 1912:

We want the word boldly to follow painting.⁵

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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. Neizdannyye 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.¹

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.²

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.³

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.¹

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.²

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.³

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,

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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...¹

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...¹

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.¹

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, 1965, 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.¹

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.¹

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 profonde²

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

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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 ressemblent et qui nous ressemblent
Je vous ai bu et ne fus pas désaltéré
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...¹

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.²

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."³ 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-

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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.¹

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.¹

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.²

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.³ 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.¹

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...²

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.³

Jakobson writes:

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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.¹

Here Jakobson directly compares one of the chief characteristics of Khlebnikov's poetry with Cubism's "overthrow of the object".² 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.³

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".⁴

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."⁵ 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 Kuppers (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: E J 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.¹ 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.²

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.³

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, 1913.⁴ 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...¹

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."¹ Malevich hailed "the avant-garde of revolutionary destruction" which he saw "marching over the whole wide world."² 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.³

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.⁴

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

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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...¹

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..."² 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...³

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

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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.¹

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...²

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.³

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...⁴

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.

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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.¹ The suicide theme was bound up intimately with the creative life—and the death—of Mayakovsky.² 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.³

Khlebnikov thought—as we have seen—that it was necessary for the "I" to die in order to be re-born as a "We".⁴ 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"⁵, may be thought of as "suicidal" in a metaphysical sense.

Khlebnikov certainly felt that Symbolist culture represented "death".⁶ 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, meaninglessness 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, inarticulateness 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".¹ His language, to the extent that it was sometimes intentionally incomprehensible,² could perhaps be described as the linguistic aspect of this "suicide". It was a reduction of the old culture's language-forms to zero.³ 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.⁴

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"⁵—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".¹ 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".² Or Khlebnikov's poetry is enriched—as in "Zangezi" and other works—with the supposed languages of birds and beasts.³ 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.⁴

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.¹ 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.²

Since for Khlebnikov (as Tynyanov also writes), "the methods of literary revolution and historical revolution were similar"³, 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 1922.⁴ 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.¹

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.²

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.³

Khlebnikov's passion for "those first days of life on earth"⁴ 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.⁵

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'".¹ Later, Picasso became a prime target of the champions of Nazi morality, who regarded him as the leading representative of Kulturbolschewismus?² 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.³

Stuart Gilbert nine years earlier had noted that

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

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.⁵

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

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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.¹ 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..."²

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.³

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

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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.¹ 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.²

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.³

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.¹

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...²

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.³

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1. Quoted by: Marshall McLuhan, Quentin Fiore: The Medium is the Massage, 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 works¹—saw Khlebnikov's "transreason" as the equivalent of the "non-objectivity" of his own and other modern painting.² 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.³

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."

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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.¹

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.¹ 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".¹ 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.² 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.³ 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."⁴ 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.⁵

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."⁶ 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.⁷

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.¹

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 primeaval 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".² 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.³

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 multitungues.¹

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.²

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.¹

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.²

In 1921, Khlebnikov would pose the question:

What is better, a universal language or universal slaughter?³

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.