

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

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Summary.

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

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

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

(375 words).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

James Joyce, Finnegans Wake.

A Note on Sources.

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

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

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