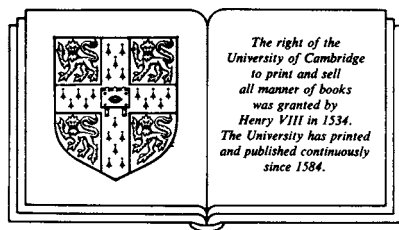


Velimir Khlebnikov

A critical study

RAYMOND COOKE



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Biography, discourse

I

Khlebnikov is 'impossible to read', the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky wrote in his obituary notice shortly after Khlebnikov's death in June 1922. And he also noted: Khlebnikov is not a 'poet for consumers', but a 'poet for producers'.¹ This much-quoted pronouncement set the seal on a reputation which Khlebnikov acquired in his lifetime and which was to last for many years to come.

Khlebnikov might have expected a more sympathetic appraisal from the fellow Futurist who had some years earlier proclaimed him the 'king of Russian poetry' (SP v 333). However, Mayakovsky was doing no more than echoing the opinion of his time. For most of his contemporaries Khlebnikov was in particular the author of the renowned neologistic poem 'Incantation by Laughter' ('Zaklyatiye smekhom') and in general the author of 'transrational' (*zaumnyy*) verse, and the purveyor of gibberish. It was generally considered, as Mayakovsky wrote in his obituary, that out of every 100 people who read Khlebnikov only 10 would be able to 'know and love' him and these would be Futurist poets and formalist philologists.² If Mayakovsky is voicing such opinions, then it is little surprise that a less sympathetic obituary writer could refer to Khlebnikov as an 'eternal failure and half-crazy versifier'.³

There was, however, some justification for the unhappy remarks of Mayakovsky and other writers and critics of his time. As another obituary writer, the poet Sergey Gorodetsky, noted, at the time of Khlebnikov's death in 1922 a large part of his work remained unpublished and thus unknown.⁴ The early literary assessments of Khlebnikov were often unfounded because they were based on insufficient information.

When, for example, the first volume of Khlebnikov's *Collected Works* (*Sobraniye proizvedeniy*) appeared in 1928, about half of the

long poems (*poemy*) it contained were being published for the first time, and these included Khlebnikov's masterpiece of the revolutionary period, 'Night Search' ('Nochnoy obysk'). Khlebnikov's flowering as a writer coincided with years which were not conducive to stable publication. They were years of world war, of revolution and of civil war. When Khlebnikov did succeed in publishing his works they appeared for the most part in small journals and miscellanies which circulated only erratically, if at all. These problems were compounded by Khlebnikov's own apparent neglect of his manuscripts and by the cavalier fashion in which his texts were edited by others. Small wonder then that he became the subject of ill-informed criticism.

The publication between 1928 and 1933 of the *Collected Works* certainly helped to eradicate some of the misconceptions which had prevailed. Printed here at last were not only previously unpublished works, but also works which appeared in publications which had subsequently become bibliographical rarities. Edited by Nikolay Stepanov, this edition has, however, proved somewhat unreliable and its effect, in any case, was muted by the change for the worse in the Soviet literary climate which was under way at the time of its publication. By the time the fifth volume appeared, the Soviet Communist Party had tightened its grip on literature and the arts. Khlebnikov's work now became the object of a more ideologically motivated brand of criticism. Khlebnikov had, in his own way, supported the Bolshevik revolution, but his works did not conform to the now official Soviet literary standards of socialist realism. Although in subsequent years (1936, 1940, 1960) individual editions were published, introductions by their editor Stepanov included statutory remarks on Khlebnikov's 'failure' to understand the revolution correctly.⁵ Less sympathetic critics attacked his 'anti-Soviet sentiments' and branded him a 'poet for aesthetes' and a 'literary pygmy'.⁶ Remarkably, Nikolay Khardzhiev and T. Grits managed to secure the publication in 1940 of some unpublished works by Khlebnikov in an excellent scholarly edition,⁷ but no collected edition of several volumes has appeared since Stepanov's unsatisfactory *Collected Works*.

At present, however, both in the Soviet Union and in the west a reassessment of Khlebnikov's literary achievements is in progress and the early reputation which he acquired as a purveyor of 'transrational' gibberish and the notion that he left nothing that

could survive as an accomplishment is being forcefully questioned. Since the 1960s not only have a number of important studies been published about him, but also anthologies and individual translations of his works have appeared in most major European languages, and even Japanese. A difficult poet he may be at times, but it has proved not only possible to read him, but also to translate him.

Khlebnikov's contemporary, the poet Aleksandr Blok, suspected that Khlebnikov was 'significant'; Osip Mandelstam saw in Khlebnikov 'a citizen of the whole of history, of the whole system of language and poetry'; and Mayakovsky, to give him his due, also regarded Khlebnikov as one of his 'teachers', as a 'Columbus of new poetic continents'.⁸ Moreover, today, over a hundred years after his birth and despite a knowledge of his work which is sometimes only superficial, Khlebnikov is an acknowledged influence for many Russian writers.⁹ His contribution to literature has been, and still is, a vital force.

II

In an article which prefaces the first volume of Khlebnikov's *Collected Works*, the critic Yury Tynyanov stressed the dangers of Khlebnikov's poetry being eclipsed by his biography (SP 1 29). The problem, as Vladimir Markov notes, was that Khlebnikov was a natural eccentric.¹⁰ Consequently, the memoirs of his life have produced a fascinating array of anecdotes, each one more bizarre than the next. In a sense, Tynyanov's warning has proved well-founded, since it is this anecdotal and 'legendary' image of Khlebnikov which has persisted in the public's literary imagination, along with the idea of Khlebnikov as an idiot poet, writing gibberish. However, despite Tynyanov's remarks, Khlebnikov's poetry has survived while his biography still remains to be written. And this 'real' biography (as opposed to the 'biography by anecdote') is not going to prove an easy task.

Khlebnikov himself did not leave any extensive autobiographical writings. Nothing, for example, to match the well-ordered diaries and notebooks of Blok. Some information can be gleaned from jottings which approximate to diary entries, but these often offer only tantalizing snippets of information which beg more questions than they answer. Khlebnikov replied briefly on occasion to some

questionnaires about his life and works, but for more detailed information one has to turn to his correspondence and to the reminiscences of others.

Khlebnikov *did* leave a few works which contain descriptions of some autobiographical events. Such writings, however, reflect, to paraphrase Shklovsky, an 'aesthetic experience of facts'.¹¹ Khlebnikov did not dissociate his life from his literature. Indeed, if some memoirists are guilty of 'mythologizing' the poet's life, then Khlebnikov himself is guilty of some 'self-mythologizing'.

Viktor Vladimirovich Khlebnikov (who was to become known to the world as Velimir Khlebnikov) was born on 28 October 1885 in Astrakhan province not far from the estuary of the River Volga as it flows into the Caspian Sea. The place where he spent the first six years of his childhood was not so much a village as a winter settlement of the nomadic Kalmyk people, for whom his father was a district administrator.¹² This area, and in particular the nearby city of Astrakhan where his family eventually settled, was to provide for him an important staging post in his wanderings across Russia. For Khlebnikov this was frontier country, a meeting place of land and sea, of Europe and Asia, where, as he put it, the 'scales' of Russia's affairs were frequently grasped and tipped (NP 352). The region was, however, not only a source of past and potential conflict, it was also a source of possible harmony and was singled out by Khlebnikov as a location for his futuristic utopia. Moreover, he looked back upon this region as on a childhood idyll.

Almost as important as the geographical location for Khlebnikov was the ethnographical make-up of the region. As a child he was surrounded by the Kalmyk tribes – 'Mongol nomads of the Buddhist faith' (NP 352), whose lifestyle became for him an object of some reverence. Such people seemed at one with nature, and nature was one of Khlebnikov's chief loves. Undoubtedly a major influence on the poet in this regard was his father, Vladimir Alekseyevich Khlebnikov, who was a naturalist and an ornithologist of some standing. The young Khlebnikov soon developed his father's enthusiasms.

When in 1891 the family moved westwards into Volhynia province, Khlebnikov found an ideal place to continue his natural education. Hunting, fishing and catching butterflies are the childhood activities he recalls (SP iv 120–1). His youthful observations of the natural world also show evidence of an artistic response.

Khlebnikov's earliest known poem is a description of a bird in a cage.¹³ This poem was written in 1897 when he was 11 years old, the same year the family moved back eastwards into Simbirsk province. It was here that Khlebnikov began his formal schooling which was continued in Kazan where the family moved the following year.

The family home at Kazan was to be Khlebnikov's last real 'fixed abode', and in a sense the ground had already been laid by this time for his future wanderings across Russia. The nomadic lifestyle of the Kalmyk people as well as the moves by his family before it settled in Kazan will have exerted some influence. Khlebnikov also believed that the wandering instinct was part of his heritage and that he had explorers' blood in his veins (SP v 279, NP 352). More importantly, his interest in the natural sciences meant that as a youth he had already begun to do some exploring himself. In the summer of 1903, for example, he is said to have taken part in a geological expedition to Dagestan (IS 9). The natural sciences were not, however, his only preoccupation. His final school report noted his 'great interest' (IS 9) in mathematics and it was the mathematics department at Kazan university which Khlebnikov joined as a student in the autumn of 1903.¹⁴

Apparently, Khlebnikov began university life with some enthusiasm, but this was soon disrupted. Only a few weeks after starting his first term, in November–December 1903, he spent a month in Kazan prison after being arrested during a student demonstration.¹⁵ Like many of his generation Khlebnikov had become caught up in the tide of troubles which culminated in the revolutionary upheaval of 1905. Soon after his release, he left the university and travelled north on a visit to Moscow. However, by the summer he was back in Kazan where he rejoined the university, but this time in the department of natural sciences.

In May 1905 Khlebnikov embarked, together with his brother Aleksandr, on a major nature expedition to the Urals, which lasted some five months. Several years later (in 1911) they published a paper outlining the ornithological observations they had made on this trip. Nor was this to be Khlebnikov's first such publication. As early as 1907 he had published another paper on an ornithological topic.¹⁶

Some of the notes Khlebnikov made on the expedition to the Urals have been likened to the preparatory sketches for a story.¹⁷

Certainly, by this time Khlebnikov was beginning to take his literary endeavours quite seriously. By the end of 1904 he had already sent work to the writer Maxim Gorky who had duly returned the manuscript 'marked' in red. Memoirs from this period indicate that Khlebnikov was reading the Russian Symbolist literature of his day and was also becoming acquainted with the work of some major west European writers.¹⁸

In 1908 Khlebnikov left university without completing his course, but in September of that year he enrolled in the natural sciences department of the physics and maths faculty of the University of St Petersburg. Before moving north to the Russian capital, however, he had made his first significant literary contact. While visiting Sudak in the Crimea – in 1908 – Khlebnikov met one of the leading Symbolist poets, Vyacheslav Ivanov. Little is known about the encounter, but not long before the meeting, Khlebnikov had written to Ivanov from Kazan, sending him 14 poems and asking his opinion of them (NP 354). Clearly, even before he reached St Petersburg, Khlebnikov regarded Ivanov as something of a literary mentor.

Upon his arrival in Russia's capital, Khlebnikov's interest in academic pursuits and any desire he may have had to pursue a career as a naturalist suffered a rapid decline. He soon began to involve himself in literary affairs and by October 1908 had already come into contact with the poets Sologub and Gorodetsky (SP v 284). By the following year his contacts with leading literary figures were further established and he had renewed his acquaintance with Vyacheslav Ivanov. In May 1909 he wrote and told his father that Ivanov had a 'highly sympathetic attitude' to his literary beginnings (SP v 286).¹⁹

Other letters of the period reflect his literary enthusiasms and aspirations. He records meetings with, among others, Gumilyov, Aleksey Tolstoy and Mikhail Kuzmin, who he names as his 'teacher'. 'Some', he wrote, were forecasting 'great success' for him (SP v 287) and there had been talk of his 'lines of genius' (SP v 289).

Khlebnikov became a visitor to the gatherings at Ivanov's 'tower' (so called because of the external appearance of Ivanov's flat) where the literary elite assembled to read and discuss their work. He also read his work at Ivanov's 'Academy of Verse' and had hopes of publishing some works in the journal *Apollon* (*Apollo*) which was being planned by some of his new literary acquaintances.

However, Khlebnikov's work was obviously not to the liking of the *Apollon* editor Sergey Makovsky and his hopes of publication were frustrated.²⁰ Khlebnikov subsequently broke with the literary establishment which had seemed to promise him so much. The failure of *Apollon* to publish his work must have been a considerable disappointment and was undoubtedly a major factor in the rift which occurred.

Khlebnikov did not, however, break with establishment writers with the intention of joining or forming the Futurist movement. The Russian Futurists did not exist as a movement at this time and Khlebnikov's alienation from the *Apollon* writers was merely one of the links in the chain which led to its appearance. Another link was the fact that long before the first edition of *Apollon* even appeared, Khlebnikov had established contact with Vasily Kamensky, who was to become a leading figure in the Russian Futurist movement. Kamensky, who was then editor of the journal *Vesna* (*Spring*), published in October 1908, to Khlebnikov's delight, a highly neologistic piece of his prose. Khlebnikov recorded his happiness in a letter to his sister, and added: 'I shall have a smooth pathway in the fields of praisedom if there is a willingness to venture' (NP 420). Moreover, in the same month Khlebnikov published (anonymously) in the newspaper *Vecher* (*Evening*) his 'Proclamation of Slav Students' ('Vozzvaniye uchashchikhsya slavyan'), an angry outburst of pan-Slavism against the annexation by Austria of Bosnia and Hercegovina.²¹

At the beginning of 1910, at about the same time as Khlebnikov was noting his own absence from the 'Academy of Verse' (SP v 290), Kamensky introduced him to the painter-composer Mikhail Matyushin and his wife, the writer Yelena Guro. Through these Khlebnikov also met the radical artist and poet David Burliuk. Khlebnikov's initial contacts with this group coincided with the staging of one of the many art exhibitions which were being held during that period. This exhibition was to have an accompanying publication, and it was here that Khlebnikov found the further outlet for his work that *Apollon* had denied him. The publication, edited by Nikolay Kulbin, and entitled *Studio of Impressionists* (*Studiya impressionistov*), included two poems by Khlebnikov, one of which was his neologistic 'Incantation by Laughter'. This was subsequently 'ridiculed'²² in numerous reviews and articles. Khlebnikov also participated in a further collection, *Trap for Judges*

(*Sadok sudey*), which appeared soon afterwards in April 1910 and also included works by David Burliuk, his two brothers Nikolay and Vladimir, Yelena Guro and Kamensky. There was a deliberately anti-establishment and anti-aesthetic flavour about this publication. It was printed on wall-paper and contained a satirical assault by Khlebnikov, 'Marquise Dezes' ('Markiza Dezes'), on the artists and writers connected with *Apollon*. It was this collection which Markov's history of Russian Futurism has described as 'the real appearance of the Russian Futurists as a group'.²³

In spite of a lull in publishing activity between 1910 and 1912 Khlebnikov was by no means creatively idle. He spent the summer of 1910 in the Burliuk household at Chernyanka, near Kherson in the south of Russia, and towards the end of the year already had hopes of publishing a volume of collected works (SP v 292). By summer 1911 he had been sent down from university for non-payment of fees. This expulsion was merely a matter of form, since he had long since given up any serious academic pursuits and was already devoting his life entirely to his writing. However, it was not only 'literature' in the accepted sense of the word which was taking up his time. As he wrote to his brother Aleksandr in February 1911, he was 'assiduously busy with numbers' (SP v 292). This is one of the earliest references by Khlebnikov to the mathematical tables and calculations which were to preoccupy him for the rest of his life.

These calculations were connected with establishing 'laws' which Khlebnikov had come to believe governed the development of history and fate. He was later to testify that his interest in such matters had first been aroused by the need to understand the reasons for the destruction of the Russian fleet at Tsushima in the war with Japan (SP II 10). Whatever the initial impetus, by the beginning of 1911 Khlebnikov was imparting considerable energy to his work 'on numbers and the fates of peoples' (NP 360). Such concerns were at the centre of his first work in an individual edition, the pamphlet *Teacher and Pupil* (*Uchitel' i uchenik*), published in 1912, with the financial assistance of David Burliuk, in whose household Khlebnikov stayed for a second time in the spring and summer of that year.

The year of 1912 also proved eventful for Khlebnikov in another respect, for it was at the beginning of that year that he first met the poet and artist Aleksey Kruchonykh. The fruitful creative relationship they shared did not take long to mature and by the autumn of

that year they had co-authored and published an edition of the long poem *Game in Hell* (*Igra v adu*). As in Burlinuk, Khlebnikov found in Kruchonykh an able propagandist for his work and a fellow writer with an extraordinary talent for transforming manuscripts into innovative and striking published material. Another event made 1912 something of a milestone for Khlebnikov. In Moscow in December of that year he was co-signatory, together with Kruchonykh, Mayakovsky and David Burlinuk, of the now infamous manifesto 'A Slap in the Face of Public Taste' ('Poshchochina obshchestvennomu vkusu').²⁴ This iconoclastic literary proclamation attacked both the literature of the past and the literature of the present. It called for Pushkin, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy 'and so forth' to be 'thrown overboard from the ship of Modernity'; and it rounded on contemporary writers, Symbolist and others. Although this brief manifesto is recalled chiefly for its polemics and literary impudence, it also attempted to provide something of a literary programme, expressing hatred for the existing language, calling for word creation and announcing the arrival of the 'self valuing (self-sufficient) word' – 'samotsennoye (samovitoye) slovo'. The 'self-sufficient word' has since become seen as one of the keystones of Russian Futurist aesthetics.

Any attempt to define Russian Futurism will prove problematic. Although, as a movement, it was marked by specific aesthetic stances, it also had an amorphous quality which renders most definitions unsatisfactory, since they fail to convey adequately its dynamism and diversity. It was, as Victor Erlich has pointed out, 'the most influential, the most vocal and possibly the most seminal movement within the Russian modernistic ambience', but it would, as Erlich also argues, perhaps be misleading to equate it with the whole of the post-Symbolist Russian avant-garde movement.²⁵ Nevertheless, it encompassed within itself many divergent and contradictory trends and certainly the most significant of these was the one which became known as Hylaea or Russian Cubo-Futurism and which recognized in Khlebnikov one of its leading figures.

Hylaea was the name given by the ancient Greeks to the area around Chernyanka where the Burlinuk family lived. It was a term which Khlebnikov accepted and used in his work (SP II 116), in spite of its European origins. Khlebnikov had a strong dislike of borrowings in Russian from western languages (particularly words reflecting Latin and Germanic influences) and as a rule he elimi-

nated them from his writings. Although the term Hylaea does not seem to have caused offence to his Russian ear, the appellation Futurists (in Russian *futuristy*) certainly did. As a consequence, in line with the group's proclaimed literary tenets of word creation, he coined a Russian equivalent, *budetlyanin* (from the Russian *budet* – it will be – and meaning roughly 'a man of the future').²⁶ This word was also used by other members of the group, particularly since the name *futuristy* had already been adopted in 1911 by a different literary grouping, the Ego-Futurists.

The December 1912 'Slap' manifesto was published without any label being attached to the group of signatories. The name Hylaea first surfaced in March 1913 in the third issue of the journal *Union of Youth* (*Soyuz molodyozhi*). However, a few months later the Hylaea group also appeared under the label *Futuristy* when David Burliuk began producing a series of booklets with the imprint 'Literary Company' of Futurists 'Hylaea' (*Literaturnaya kompaniya' futuristov 'Gileya'*). In accepting the Futurist appellation, David Burliuk was merely recognizing a *fait accompli*, since the press and the public had begun to use the term rather indiscriminately and the Hylaeans had become generally known along with other groups as 'Futurists'. In any case the boundaries between the different literary alliances to which the name was applied proved rather flexible, and by early 1914 David Burliuk and Mayakovsky had already toured and appeared in print with the Ego-Futurist Igor Severyanin.²⁷ Yet in spite of such shifting alliances and Russian Futurism's amorphous quality, it is certainly possible to point to some of the elements which provided a framework for the Hylaeian or Cubo-Futurist grouping to which Khlebnikov was aligned. The names themselves offer us some guide in this aesthetic maze and both, in effect, indicate the importance for the movement of the visual arts.

The term Hylaea might at first sight seem an odd name for a group of painters and writers who were later to become known as Futurists. This ancient name, however, reflected the primitivist tendencies which were of considerable importance in their work. Hylaea evoked for them the ancient inhabitants and the mythology of the region whose name it was. This was the site of Scythian burial mounds and of the pagan effigies of stone women, later to figure so prominently in Khlebnikov's works. The leading exponents of the primitivist trend in the visual arts (David Burliuk, Natalya Goncha-

rova and Mikhail Larionov) all contributed illustrations to the Russian Futurist collections. Primitivist traits can also be found in the literature of the Futurists, not least in Khlebnikov's work. He wrote, for example, a self-styled 'stone age tale' 'I and E' ('I i E'). These two apparently contradictory trends of primitivism and Futurism were able to run in tandem because in their primitivism the incipient Futurists were looking back in order to look forward. What they saw as the stale art of the present had to be reinigorated by a return to the more genuine and unspoiled art of the past. They saw it as their task to restore what had been ruined and to revive what was dead.²⁸

The term Cubo-Futurism clearly derives from the Cubist movement in art. This had its roots in France, but soon exerted an influence in Russia on the work of artists and thence on the progressive writing of the period.²⁹ This was particularly the case with the Hylaeans, since many of the writers associated with the group, including David Burliuk, Mayakovsky and Kruchonykh, came to poetry from painting. Khlebnikov too was a competent artist and techniques in the visual arts clearly exerted an effect upon his writing. 'We want the word boldly to follow painting', he once wrote (NP 334); and this desire is reflected in the *Word as Such* (*Slovo kak takovoye*) manifesto, of which he was a co-signatory with Kruchonykh. This compares the Futurist writers' (*budetlyane rechetvortsy*) dissection of words, use of half words and their 'transrational' combination with the sections and parts of bodies portrayed by the Futurist painters (*zhivopistsy budetlyane*).³⁰ Some of the terminology applied in the manifesto to literature is also taken from the language of painting. Khlebnikov even developed the concept of the *zvukopis'* (sound-painting) as a rival to *zhivopis'* (painting); 'painterly' concerns run through the whole of his work.

The influence of another west European artistic movement, that of Italian Futurism and its leading literary exponent Marinetti, is much more problematic and has already been the subject of considerable debate.³¹ The Russian Cubo-Futurists themselves argued that Russian Futurism was entirely independent of its Italian counterpart.³² However, recent commentators have remarked that 'Marinetti's Futurism was much more of an influence in Russia than is customarily thought and more than the Russian Futurists wanted to acknowledge.'³³ Almost certainly Khlebnikov would have been loath to acknowledge an Italian Futurist influence

on his art, but commentators are quite right to point to Khlebnikov's early nationalism and glorification of war as points in common with Marinetti.³⁴ This is, however, surely more a case of parallel development or of shared attitudes than of influence.³⁵ Curiously, though, Khlebnikov did allow Marinetti a 'consultative vote' in his 'Martian Duma' in the 1916 *Trumpet of the Martians* (*Truba marsian*) manifesto (SP v 153).

One aspect of Italian Futurism which was shared by the Russian Cubo-Futurists (and other modernist movements elsewhere) was a tendency to engage in street-parading and to cause scandal. Leading Russian Cubo-Futurists painted their faces, wore outrageous clothes, exchanged insults with their audiences and, in general, tried to shock the bourgeoisie and to 'slap the face of public taste'. They took their art out on to the streets, in contrast to the Symbolists who held themselves and their art aloof from the crowd.

Here is not the place to discuss the complex literary phenomenon of Symbolism. Inevitably, as the dominant literary movement in the early part of the century it exerted some influence on the incipient Futurists and Khlebnikov was no exception.³⁶ Nevertheless, Symbolism's tendency towards mysticism and metaphysics, its focus of attention on the symbol and the musicality of verse was attacked by Futurist writers with considerable vigour. Opposition to the aesthetic tenets of Symbolism was a cornerstone of Russian Cubo-Futurism, but this negative aspect also had a positive side. The need to move away from the art of the past also entailed a desire which was 'Futurist' – a desire to create the art of the future. The Futurist movement had a great awareness of time and looked forward eagerly to a utopian leap into the future away from an unacceptable present.³⁷

In answer to the Symbolists' concern with what lay beyond the word, the Cubo-Futurists favoured an emphasis on the word itself, on the 'new coming beauty' of the 'self-sufficient word'. Hence the title of the manifesto – the *Word as Such*. This manifesto attacked the mystical nature of contemporary literature; it criticized its preoccupation with the human soul and its 'pleasant' and 'sonorous' language. 'We think that language should be above all *language*,' the manifesto says, 'and if it should recall anything, then rather let it be a saw or the poisoned arrow of a savage.'³⁸ The Cubo-Futurists called for harsh words and sounds; for images which

would shock. To the religious mysticism and metaphysics of the Symbolists they counterposed a 'card-game in hell'.³⁹

In the collection accompanying the 'Slap' manifesto it was Khlebnikov's work which seemed, above all, to reflect the proclaimed literary programme. The collection included his neologistic short verse and prose and also the 'sound-painting' 'Bobeobi'. Khlebnikov's fellow Futurists were more than happy to help propagate precisely that aspect of his work which most establishment reviewers and literary figures found to their distaste. Khlebnikov was a gauntlet which administered the 'slap'. As Willem Weststeijn writes, 'the Futurists eagerly accepted Khlebnikov's experimental works because his experiments with words agreed with their own ideas about the necessary renovation of language'.⁴⁰ As a consequence, Khlebnikov, who in 1910 had already proved unacceptable to the literary establishment, rapidly found himself proclaimed the literary genius of the anti-establishment camp.

A result of this was that Khlebnikov was presented to the literary public largely as a *zaumnik* ('transrationalist') and experimenter and other aspects of his work did not receive much recognition, in spite of the fact that many were carried by Futurist publications. Few people, for example, would recognize Khlebnikov as the author of the stories 'The Hunter Usa-gali' ('Okhotnik Usa-gali') (SP IV 37–39) and 'Nikolay' (SP IV 40–46) with prose as 'semantically clear as Pushkin's',⁴¹ even though they were published in the Futurist collection *The Three (Troye)*. Equally, few would suspect that in 1913 Khlebnikov contributed articles and a story for the general readership of the slavophil newspaper *Slavyanin (The Slav)*.⁴² The Futurist collections seem to have left the reader with just a 'vague memory of Khlebnikov as some sort of transrational crank and conjurer';⁴³ yet these collections also contained work which was evidence of a much broader sweep of concerns. This was even true of the *Slap* collection which carried such works as 'Snake Train – Flight' ('Zmei poyezda – begstvo'), 'Monument' ('Pamyatnik') and 'Maiden God' ('Deviy bog'). By the end of 1912 Khlebnikov was already a writer of some maturity, and this maturity was further demonstrated in the deluge of Futurist publications which followed the *Slap* collection.

In 1913 and early 1914 Khlebnikov's work appeared in about 10 different collections. This was the most intensive period of activity for the Hylaeans as a group, and December 1913 saw the first

productions of Futurist work on stage with performances in St Petersburg of Mayakovsky's tragedy *Vladimir Mayakovsky* and Kruchonykh's opera *Victory over the Sun* (*Pobeda nad solntsem*) for which Khlebnikov wrote the prologue. This is clearly why Khlebnikov's neologistic activity during the summer of 1913 was oriented towards the theatre.⁴⁴ As was the rule now, language was not the only area of concern for Khlebnikov. In September 1913 he wrote to Matyushin telling him that he was 'busy with numbers, calculating from morning until night'.⁴⁵

Khlebnikov spent the summer months of 1913 in Astrakhan. When he returned north towards the end of that year, it was to an atmosphere of heated public debates and disputes on modern art and literature. The literary collections of the Futurists had only small circulations, and public lectures, readings and various street appearances enabled them to publicize their work more widely. Having spent the summer in the south, Khlebnikov had taken little part in these activities, and even after his return to Moscow and St Petersburg references to public readings by him are rare.⁴⁶ He seems to have been happy to allow his Futurist colleagues to promote his work, which they frequently did. David Burliuk, in particular, gave Khlebnikov's work much publicity, even reading lectures on the theme 'Pushkin and Khlebnikov'.⁴⁷ Nor did Khlebnikov take part in the celebrated Futurist tour of the provinces (December 1913–March 1914), which featured mainly David Burliuk, Mayakovsky and Kamensky.

Much is often made of Khlebnikov's 'shy and retiring' nature,⁴⁸ which made him an unlikely participant in Futurist publicity stunts. However, as Nadezhda Mandelstam points out, Khlebnikov was, at the same time, very quick to take offence.⁴⁹ His sister Vera said likewise, that, although at times 'gentle and quiet', he was also 'stubborn and capricious'.⁵⁰ In February 1914 the visit to Russia by the Italian Futurist Marinetti prompted one of the most public and publicized manifestations of Khlebnikov's temper. Inspired by nationalist sentiments and incensed at the homage being paid to this 'Italian vegetable' (NP 368), Khlebnikov distributed at one of Marinetti's lectures in St Petersburg a hostile leaflet which he had co-authored with Benedikt Livshits. Nikolay Kulbin tried to prevent the distribution and there was a confrontation.⁵¹

On the next day the impetuous Khlebnikov penned an angry letter to Marinetti, hurling back the insults he had received from