

Osip Brik

Khlebnikov and I were travelling on the tram together. We were sitting opposite one another. Khlebnikov was wearing a heavy fur coat with a fur shawl collar. On his head was a fur hat. He was leaning slightly back in his seat, his eyes half-closed, puffing out his lips. 'Vitya! You look just like an Old Believer', I said. Without a second's hesitation Khlebnikov retorted 'Of what persuasion?' That confused me. 'I don't know of what persuasion. Just an Old Believer generally.' 'I'm asking because the Old Believers were bearded – I'm clean-shaven.'

A conversation started up at someone's place, Kul'bin's I think, about the way the refugees were spoiling the Russian language. It was in Petersburg during the war. Shklovsky was pontificating about the Kievans who were bringing their provincialism into Russian speech. When Khlebnikov lost his temper his words came out in a high-pitched tenor. His bird-like shrill was heard now: 'Province derives from the Latin *'pro'* and *'vincere'*, which means to conquer. A province is a conquered country. As far as the Russian language is concerned Petersburg is the province, not Kiev.'

For Khlebnikov, the words 'Old Believer' and 'province' and all the other words of human speech were not conventional signs which designated something 'approximately' – for him every word was like a luxuriant, branchy tree blossoming with its own range of meanings and sounds, its own formal differences and resemblances, its own synonyms and homonyms.

For the vast majority of people words are an arbitrary combination of sounds by which we have 'agreed' to convey some particular meaning. Outside that agreement, the given sound combinations in no way distinguish themselves from 'meaningless' sound combinations.

It's like playing cards with chips. 'By agreement' certain objects are allowed to stand for chips – matches, nuts, buttons. Two categories of matches, nuts and buttons then emerge. Matches which are struck, and matches 'which go into circulation', nuts you can eat, and nuts 'which are money', buttons you sew on, and buttons 'which can be exchanged for matches and nuts'.

What exactly happened when I told Khlebnikov he looked like an Old Believer? Khlebnikov 'vaguely' reminded me of 'some' image of 'some sort of' old time Russians I had seen somewhere. And I designated that complex of the seen and the recalled 'approximately' by the words 'Old Believer'.

For Khlebnikov, however, they had not an 'approximate', but a rich and varied meaning which certainly included among other things the notion 'beard'. My words 'Old Believer' had therefore in no way covered the phenomenon they had been used to designate – namely the beardless Khlebnikov.

In addition, and this is most important, in order to sense the 'non-coverage' of the reality by the word, one had to have just as complete a sense of the reality as of the word. One had to remember the beard, not just within the complex constituted by the concept 'Old Believer', but also within the complex of the 'beardless' man I had tried to designate by that term.

Khlebnikov knew not just the meaning of the word 'province' but also the meaning of Petersburg and Kiev. Khlebnikov was a man of enormous learning with a most acute sense of reality. What nonsense it was to describe this man as 'not of this world'. He knew and perceived this world in all the subtleties and twists of its historical destiny and human psyche. Reading him carefully, you discover in his verse, his prose and his letters a million extraordinarily subtle, sharp, accurate observations, and details which are very much 'of this world'.

When Khlebnikov 'invented' words he did so in order to designate a newborn phenomenon, or a newly discovered variety of that phenomenon. Khlebnikov was never an aesthete of the word. He never thought a word outside the object or fact which it was intended to designate. When Khlebnikov wrote his poem *Incantation by Laughter*\* he was convinced that every one of his words would find its place in the many-sided real complex 'laughter'.

Kruchënykh said: 'The word lily has been soiled by use. I say *E-u-y* and the lily's snow-whiteness is restored.' This is aestheticism. There is no new phenomenon or new nuance in that phenomenon to correspond to the new word. The flower lily simply changes its name. It answered to lily and it will answer to *Euy*. That's all. For Khlebnikov this was not enough. Khlebnikov produced new realities along with new words. That was the whole point.

Above all, Khlebnikov never 'made up' or invented anything.

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\* Khlebnikov's poem consists almost entirely of newly-coined derivatives from the root *smekh* (laughter), and works on the possibilities of morphological derivations inherent in the Russian language. It is therefore impossible to render into English, but Vladimir Markov's translation, a few lines of which are reproduced below, as the translator says, goes some way to demonstrating the principle –

. . . Laughiness of the laughish laughers, counterlaugh the laughdom's laughs!

Laughio! Laughio!

Dislaugh, relaugh, laughlets, laughlets,

Laughulets, laughulets, . . .

106 He discovered. The inventor produces what does not yet exist. The discoverer conveys to people what has always existed. For this reason an inventor's creations may not take life, they can be still-born. Whereas the discovery has always existed and the question of its existence does not even arise. Electricity was discovered, the electric light bulb was invented. Geniuses discover, the talented invent.

Khlebnikov did not make up words. Khlebnikov revealed aspects within language which we did not even suspect.

Kirsanov takes two words and out of them makes a third. And this 'third' word has no corresponding reality. His word 'lyublyutik' for example – is this a kind of buttercup (lyutik)? or a nuance in love (lyubov')? Neither one nor the other, but an *objet d'art*.<sup>1</sup>

But, it will be asked, what about 'the word as such'? 'As such' is precisely the point. The word must of necessity refer to the real, otherwise it is not 'a word as such'.

Translating one language into another is not a question of translating the words of one language into the words of another. It means re-telling in the words of one's own language the realities related by the words of the foreign language. To translate well one has not only to know languages, but above all to know the reality in question. However well a person knows the language, he will not be able to produce a good translation of say, a novel out of Negro life, if he has no notion of Negroes and their life. The vast majority of the blunders and oddities that bespatter translations occur not through lack of knowledge of the language, but through lack of knowledge of the subject concerned.

And I might add that the 'Greek word which has no meaning' is the match which has not become a chip. But of course it is not a 'word' – a word cannot mean nothing. *Zaum* (trans-sense) is not 'trans-sense language' (*zaumnaya rech'*). It is precisely 'trans-sense' – an extra-linguistic combination of the articulated sounds produced by the organs of human speech.

But from the moment any trans-sense sound combination finds itself a corresponding reality, it becomes a word. This was the case with the invented word *Khlysch* (playboy).

And the reverse: if an artificial word for a new reality is put together out of meaningful segments – which is how all our composite Soviet words were invented – only those survive which overcome their fragmentary nature and achieve an integral phonic form of their own. For example Narkom (people's commissar, from *narodniy kommissar*), komsomolets (young Communist, from *Kommunistichesky soyuz molodezhi* – Communist Union of youth), politruk (political instructor, from *politichesky rukovoditel'*). These were hastily composed from verbal scraps, and they have become words in their own right.

In his poem *About This* Mayakovsky has a marvellous example of

word-formation (line 616). The dominant theme reverberating through it is love. In line 577, the theme of travel to the north is brought in: 107

shores surge by –  
vista after vista

and in line 609:

What land is this?  
What strand?

Green-  
Lap-  
Love-land?

In an instant the two themes – love and travel – intersect. And suddenly the word 'loveland' flashes like a spark. Yes, a word! Because it designated the most real of realities – the poem's unknown quantity, its ultimate meaning.

But it would be extreme vulgarisation to prise loveland from the context of the poem and include it in the dictionary of the Russian language: 'loveland = the land of love'. Why a vulgarisation? Because the reality designated by the word loveland is unrepeatable, unique, and exists only in Mayakovsky in a particular moment of creativity. It is not generalisable. The word which flashed momentarily and illuminated that reality cannot be made common currency. Love-land is not the land of love.

There are many such unique poetic sparks and explosions in Mayakovsky. Mayakovsky is a lyricist. And his lyricism is autobiographical. The history of his times is also a part of his autobiography.

In our fighters  
or in our land  
they were

Or else  
in this heart  
of mine.\*

A variation of the famous formula of the great lyricist Heinrich Heine: – the world split open, and the rift passed through my heart. . . .

Khlebnikov was quite different. Khlebnikov was not in any sense a lyricist. This does not mean that Khlebnikov was not capable of intense personal emotion, or that he was dry, callous and unfeeling. He was explosive, humorous and often profoundly sad.

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\* From *Very Good, An October poem*. Translations from *Mayakovsky*, translated and edited by Herbert Marshall, Dennis Dobson (London) 1965.

But it never occurred to Khlebnikov to write verse about his own emotions. He was reserved and shy. And moreover he had a different attitude to the word. For Khlebnikov the word was least of all a 'means of expression', the servant of thought and feeling.

The word for Khlebnikov lived its own rich life of sounds and meanings. Khlebnikov scattered words on paper like stars over the sky, and by them he read the fate of man and humanity.

What constitutes the sense of words? Not what they mean, but what they *can* mean. What do we mean when we say 'in the full sense of the word'? What is this 'full sense of the word'? It is the limitless diversity of existing and possible meanings of a word. The word in customary, everyday usage is not the word 'in its full sense', it is a word for which only a minor part of the meaning has passed through – that part which is needed in practice for 'exchange' and 'expression'.

Khlebnikov wrote with words in their full sense. And full to the brim, his words followed on one another without merging together, without conforming to one another, but existing, like the world of stars, according to the laws of attraction and repulsion. In Khlebnikov there are not combinations but constellations of words. Khlebnikov is a poet-astrologer.

'Stars, reading the stars, astrologer' – this is all very figurative and unclear. Agreed. But that's Khlebnikov. Stars, their life, their organisation, the laws of their movement are indisputably the prototype of Khlebnikov's creative system. He talked a lot about the stars.

'The bright southern stars awoke the Chaldean in me'

*(Teacher and pupil)*

'... Jot down the days and hours of your emotions ... and namely their angles, turns, climax points. I will build an equation.'

*(letter to Kamensky)*

'I have the equation of the stars, the equation of the voice, the equation of thought, the equation of birth and death.'

*(letter to V V Khlebnikov)*

This would in fact be an appropriate place to speak of Khlebnikov's mathematical calculations. But I want to say a little more about Khlebnikov the poet.

For Khlebnikov 'the word in its full sense' is not just the whole meaning of the word, but its whole range of resonances, because every sound is full of meaning for Khlebnikov. Every sound in human speech is meaningful. And Khlebnikov produced signifying constellations of words beginning with the letters N, V, S, K – thereby earning a smile from 'sensible' people.

What caused those sensible people to smile? How could they fail to smile when Khlebnikov was trying to play the most naive kind of trick on them? Khlebnikov wrote: 'K either begins words

about death – *kolot'* (stab), *koika* ([hospital] bed), *koniets* (end), *kukla* (puppet/doll); or words for the deprivation of freedom – *kovat'* (to shackle), *kuznya* (forge), *koltso* (ring), *klyuch* (key), *krug* (circle); or for virtually immobile objects – *klad'* (load), *koloda* (block), *kamen'* (stone). *kot* (cat). That's a laugh! What about *kisel'* (Russian cranberry dessert), *kuritsa* (hen), *kolbasa* (sausage)? How could you classify them? as linked to death? deprivation of freedom? or virtual immobility? Come on! Stop pulling my leg!

But the laughter of these sensible people is misplaced. What does Khlebnikov care about words which don't fall within his constellation? What does a poet care about words which don't rhyme? The ones he's concerned with do! What is it to Khlebnikov if his constellation does not take in all the words beginning with K. And why does it matter, what would be the point of laboriously classifying all words beginning with K according to meaning? That's not what Khlebnikov was doing.

Fools! Khlebnikov is not a cataloguer of words. Khlebnikov is a poet. Khlebnikov was concerned with rhyming words, rhyming them according to sound and sense. He wrote poems around the letters K, M, S and V – the purest of poetry, poetry of consummate skill, in which words are combined not according to the logic of practical speech, but freely, self-sufficiently, according to the laws of the 'word as such'.

The most remarkable book there is is the dictionary, the book of language. It contains not only everything that has already been said, or that will be said, but everything that can be said. This has never been said by sensible people, nor will it be said by them. What use is it to them! Poor sensible people, they won't ever read Khlebnikov.

*Translated by Diana Matias*

### Editorial note

1. Brik's description of Kirsanoff's method is reminiscent of Eisenstein's early remarks about montage: two shots colliding to produce a new concept. In fact, throughout this essay, Brik compares the poetry of Khlebnikov, Kirsanoff, Kruchenykh and Mayakovsky in terms similar to the arguments about montage in the debates between Eisenstein, Vertov and Pudovkin. Brik's analysis of ZAUM-poetry lends support to Kuleshov's statement that already before the revolution, the ideas of 'montage' were, as he puts it, 'floating in the air', ready to be picked up by artists and theorists.