



The Flutes of Dionysus : Reports on World Culture
Rene Wadlow

The Classical Greek writer Sophocles called Dionysus “the god of many names”, and Dionysus has been associated with the arts of civilization and with drama, and under his form as Bacchus with wine as liberating and rhapsodic. Friedrich Nietzsche saw Dionysus as the bringer of divine ecstasy, the restorer of the instinctive, unconscious unity of all life, a symbol of the periodic need of release from the rational and the common place, a return to the springs of life through the emotions. While Dionysus is associated with the vine and fertility, his main function is to teach that the soul is beyond time and space and seeks rapturous union with the divine.

Velimir Khlebnikov : The Futurian (1895-1922)

*My soul is a seer
Who has seen in the skies
The constellations beginning to rise.
And the thunderstorm fly like a bird.*

So wrote the Russian poet Velimir Khlebnikov on the eve of his death in 1922. Khlebnikov was part of an active avant-garde circle of writers and painters known as the Cubo-Futurists, although Khlebnikov used the term “futurian” to separate himself from the urban-military-technological themes of Italian futurism represented by Marinetti. Khlebnikov had a strong sense of what Russia could bring to the modern world despite the hardships that the 1917 Revolution brought to the avant-garde. In 1920 he wrote:

*Russia, I give you my divine
white brain. Be me. Be Khlebnikov.
I have sunk a foundation deep in the minds
of your people. I have laid down an axis,
I have built a house on a firm foundation.
We are Futurians.*

The group produced most of its work from 1910 until the start of World War I and then was scattered by the War and the Revolution. The group which included the painter Kazimir Malevich (1878-1935) was inspired by the paintings of Henri Matisse which existed in private collections in Moscow, but basically the group found its inspiration in the native art of Russian folklore — folklore which had a wisdom beyond intellect. In his essay “On Poetry” Khlebnikov wrote “*If we think of the soul as split between the government of intellect and a stormy population of feelings, then incantations and beyondsense language are appeals over the head of the government straight to the population of feelings, a direct cry to the predawn of the soul.*”

Yet Khlebnikov does not fit into any one school or trend. As Paul Schmidt, the translator of his collective works points out “Taken as a whole, his work explores a unique and much broader terrain. In addition to poems and plays, stories and essays, he wrote political and artistic manifestos, essays on history, architecture, and social problems, literary theory, and journalistic pieces on current events. His passion for internationalism in politics and the

arts prompted him to envisage a world-wide brotherhood of creative scientists, writers, and thinkers dedicated to understanding nature and to counteracting all the social evils fostered by political leaders.”

Khlebnikov, who died when he was 36, is in many ways a short-lived Walt Whitman whom he much admired. *“Attentively I read the springtime thoughts of the Divinity in designs on the speckled feet of tree-toads, Homer shaken by the awful wagon of a great war, the way a glass shakes at the passing of a wagon. I have the same Neanderthal skull, the same curving forehead as you, old Walt.”*

Khlebnikov’s “O Garden of Animals” is directly influenced by Whitman:

“O Garden of Animals,

Where iron bars seem like a father who stops a bloody fight to remind his sons they are brothers; Where a clean-shaven soldier throws dirt at a tiger, all because the tiger is greater. Where a camel knows the essence of Buddhism, and suppresses a Chinese smile; Where I search for new rhythms, whose beats are animals and men.

Like Whitman, Khlebnikov was an innovator of language and form. At first sight, his poetry was considered anarchic and destructive of accepted rules. Khlebnikov wanted a clear break with the past. As he wrote in 1916 as the war ground on *“Old Ones, you are holding back the fast advance of humanity; you are preventing the boiling locomotive of youth from crossing the mountain that lies in its path. We have broken the locks and see what your freight cars contain: tombstones for the young.”* He saw himself as a creator of new forms that would penetrate below the surface of phenomena and give a new art that might change the human condition. As we look more deeply at his writings, we see the metaphysical structure of order behind the innovative lines. His break with the past was to discover the true laws of nature. As Paul Schmidt writes *“This passionate belief in the sovereignty of a lawful nature gave Khlebnikov a great intellectual freedom in the pursuit of its boundless variety, in poetry and in the various languages he devised for poetry. It removed the constraints of common forms and opened words to the wide prospects enjoyed by natural objects, while making them subject to the deep scrutiny of analytic dissection. Khlebnikov was thus able to proceed to the work of the poet with the methodological precision of the scientist and to partake of the passion of both. To unite mankind into harmony with the universe — that was Khlebnikov’s vocation. He wanted to make Planet Earth fit for the future, to free it from the deadly gravitational pull of everyday lying and pretence, from the tyranny of petty human instincts and the slow death of comfort and complacency. He wanted to transform the World through the Word.”*

Khlebnikov’s metaphysics are largely Taoist, more likely a rediscovery of the workings of *yin* and *yang* than a conscious influence of Chinese philosophy although he had a wide knowledge of Slavic and Indian mythology and a general interest in Asia. In a wry little poem of 1914, he describes concisely the underlying principle of his view of history, the idea of an equilibrium produced by the shift from positive to negative states:

The law of the see-saw argues

That your shoes will be loose or tight

That the hours will be day or night,

And that the ruler of earth the rhinoceros

Or us.

We find the same sense of the working of equilibrium in a section of “The Song of One Comes to Confusion”:

*These tenuous Japanese shadows,
These murmuring Indian maidens,
Nothing sounds so mournful
As words at this last supper.
Death — but first life flashes past
Again: unknown, unlike, immediate.
This rule is the only rhythm
For the dance of death and attainment.*

Death came too soon. 1913 had been a high point of cooperation among the Cubo-Futurists when they staged the opera “Victory over the Sun”. The music was by Mikhail Matiushin (1861 -1934) with the sets and costumes by Kazimir Malevich and the prologue by Khlebnikov. War, revolution, civil war and exile broke up these creative groups. Although they were unable to create the future they had envisaged, the ideas are powerful beacons and can still reach a wider audience.

See: Raymond Cooke. *Velimir Khlebnikov* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) and Paul Schmidt’s translations *The King of Time* (1985) and *Collected Works* (1987 and 1989) both published by Harvard University Press.



Drawing: Evgueni Bosyatski