1.4. "Devise the Art of Waking Easily from Dreams": Velimir Khlebnikov's Utopian Proposals

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Abstract

This article discusses selected writings of the Russian Futurist Velimir Khlebnikov, with the intention to show that, rather than being simply nonsensical and absurd, his works such as "Proposals" reveal the nonsense and absurdity of our dehumanized, war-driven world. Khlebnikov's texts are considered against the background of debates concerning the genres of the manifesto and the critical manifesto.

Key words: Velimir Khlebnikov, Russian Futurism, manifesto, poetry, utopia

David Burlyuk, Aleksei Kruchonykh, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and Velimir Khlebnikov published works in various genres in the first decade of the twentieth century, but it was through manifestos such as "A Slap in the Face of Public Taste" that they brought notice to what became known as Russian Futurism. This manifesto achieved what poems, dramas, and essays never did, and these writers and artists continued to work with the genre. The interpretation of certain Futurist texts nevertheless remains a question. Are the more absurd and aphoristic works such as Khlebnikov's "Proposals", which I consider in this article, manifestos? Are they what Kathi Weeks calls "critical manifestos"; that is, manifestos that aim seriously to intervene in the literary, cultural, and socio-political space without, to quote Weeks, "the more typical manifesto's authoritative certainty and aggressive drawing of lines in the sand" (2013: 222)? Are they artistic collages or experimental poems? Does it matter?

Manifesto

As Martin Puchner observes, the word "manifesto" initially "designate[d] a declaration of the will of a sovereign. It [was] a communication, authored by those in authority, by the state, the military or the church, to let their subjects know their sovereign intentions and laws" (2006: 12). The second lineage besides the monarchic one "derives from the religious practice of revelation or manifestation" (2006: 12). In the seventeenth century, more democratic manifestos that challenged monarchic and religious authority began to appear. Examples include documents issued by the Levellers and later, *The Communist Manifesto,* which called into being the collective subjectivity of the proletariat. The genre has not become democratic by default, even though as Janet Lyon points out, manifestos have since been written by the Communards, Suffragettes, and Black Panthers, among others, with explicit anti-colonial and feminist agendas. The word "manifesto" has functioned "as a center of gravity" (Puchner, 2006: 16), but manifestos have had a variety of other names including "declaration", "proposalle" or "petition" (Puchner, 2006: 16), and therefore the genre is better defined by its intended performative function. Although manifestos need be neither prosaic nor verbal, and a "case can be made for the poem-manifesto, the painting-manifesto, [and] the aphorism-manifesto" (Caws, 2001: xxix), they aim to intervene in the status quo and the dominant vision of history by provoking transformative subjectivity into being. As Weeks writes of *The Communist Manifesto*, "[t]he traditional utopia of the sort the utopian socialists produced sought to outline a new and improved social world; the *Manifesto* wants to call into being the political actors who could create it" (2013: 218).

Weeks points out that "critical manifestos" resemble "critical utopias" in that they are self-reflexive and non-authoritative; incomplete, imperfect, and impermanent. Moreover, "the category of the critical manifesto might also help us to read *all* manifestos differently, to find ambiguity in what looks like certainty, provocation in what at first encounter sounds only like pontification, joy in what might feel simply like rage, and open, hopeful speculation in what might be rhetorically packaged as command or prediction" (Weeks, 2013: 229, original emphasis). This appears particularly true of artistic manifestos, which have frequently revelled in provocation and speculation, to the extent that Puchner distinguishes between the intended performative function of political manifestos and the "calculated theatricality" (2006: 5) of artistic ones, notably manifestos of the modernist avant-garde. In his view, "theatrical manifestos of the Futurists or Dadaists seem to have given up entirely on the desire for authority and real change and instead delight in theatrical pranks and the liberties provided by the theaters" (2006: 25). From this perspective, artistic manifestos are rather art for art's sake.

Keeping in mind these thoughts about manifestos, critical manifestos, and theatrical manifestos, I will now turn to Khlebnikov's "Proposals".

"Proposals"

In the preface to a selection of Klebnikov's works, Yuri Tynianov warned in 1928 that Khlebnikov's biography should not be allowed to stifle his poetry" (2019: 217). However, the author's writing is difficult to read without considering how it emerged. Viktor Vladimirovich Khlebnikov was born in the province of Astrakhan and spent much of his youth in this multicultural and multireligious region. He wrote poetry first under the influence of the symbolists. His subsequent writing was published as a result of his involvement with writers and artists who formed the Hylea and later the Cubo-Futurist groups. The exact extent of Khlebnikov's contributions to collections such as *A Trap for Judges* or even the aforementioned "Slap in the Face of Public Taste" remains contested as Khlebnikov oftentimes stood apart from the Futurists (or Futurians, as they sometimes called themselves). He is known to have written constantly but haphazardly, in minuscule letters on various sheets and scraps of paper, returning to the same texts, rewriting and extending them. As if this was not confusing enough, the writer travelled around Europe and Asia with his "notes, mathematical formulas, projects for improvement of the world, and lines of poetry" (Markov, 1962: 19) at one point stuffed in a pillowcase, in no order whatsoever. Many of Khlebnikov's works were lost and once, according to Tynianov, even stolen to use as cigarette paper (Taufer, 1974: 15). "Confronted with a bundle of Khlebnikov's manuscripts, [his Futurist editors] tended to pick out lines at random, to mix texts together, print rough drafts, append inappropriate titles, and so on, producing what was often little more than an editorial interpretation of a given text" (Cooke, 1987: 249). Khlebnikov was not content with this treatment because he took his writing seriously but his legacy indeed consists of volumes of disorganized and generically-ambiguous works.

"Proposals" was first published in the collection *Took: The Futurists' Drum* in 1915, along with texts by Mayakovsky, Viktor Shklovsky, and Boris Pasternak, among others. As is the case with other works by Khlebnikov, there are different versions of the text and several proposals also appear reformulated in his other works, such as the poem "Ladomir". I will use here the version translated by Paul Schmidt and printed in the collection *Utopias* edited by Catriona Kelly, and discuss the text's three thematic clusters: art and governance, war and language, and utopia.

The proposals that address art and governance range from enigmatic to preposterous claims about artists as "far-seeing visionaries" destined to rule, predict the fate of and decorate the planet (if not the entire universe). The poet suggests, for example, to "divide up humanity into inventor/explorers and all the rest", to "[d]ecorate Mont Blanc with the head of Hiawatha, the gray peaks of Nicaragua with the head of Kruchonykh, the Andes with the head of David Burlyuk" and to "[t]ake 1915 as the first year of a new era: indicate years by means of the numerical expression for a plane a + b√-1, in the form 317d + e√-1, where e is less than 317" (Khlebnikov, 1999: 15–16). Departing from such claims, several critics argue that Khlebnikov, who accepted the pseudonym Velimir (meaning "command the world") that friends bestowed on him in 1909, mythologized himself as an artist-prophet along with other Futurists. Raymond Cooke, for example, remembers that the writer, who "could sign one of his edicts as 'king of time Velimir I'" (1987: 34), in 1916 "founded the union or society of the '317', a number which Khlebnikov chose because of the central role it played at that time in his attempts at mathematical prediction [and] viewed this society as a prospective world government" (1987: 16).

During the thirty-seven years of his life, Khlebnikov created elaborate mathematical theories of history; the booklet where the first version of "Proposals" was published also included his essay about the significance of the number 317 for the rhythm of the public and private lives of figures such as Pushkin, who got married exactly 317 days after his engagement. However, there are reasons to consider many of Khlebnikov's views as conscious artistic fictions rather than seriously advanced theories. The generic boundaries of his works are blurred, as he "often tried to introduce experiment into his nonexperimental works and to apply his theories in artistic writing" (Markov, 1962: 26) and presented his ideas also in the form of poetry. Moreover, as Cooke himself points out, the writer "was not entirely happy with the determinist theory which he had constructed [and] fear[ed] that he might have imprisoned himself in a net of numbers of his own making" (1987: 154). This is not to argue that Khlebnikov did not seriously attempt to gain insight into the historical process and that he did not see "his investigations and proposals as the tools to create a new, better situation for mankind" (Baran, 1983: 1341), but that there was a conscious fantastic dimension to his mathematical theories.

Concerning aspirations to planetary governance, not only were the documents issued in the name of the self-appointed "Chairmen of the Terrestrial Globe" often undercut with self-mockery, irony and hyperbole, but the Futurists could act quite theatrically. In "October on the Neva", for example, Khlebnikov remembers how they called the Winter Palace:

- Winter Palace? — Please kindly connect us with the Winter Palace.
- Winter Palace? — Here is the Teamsters' Union.
- What can I do for you? — cold, polite but cheerless voice.
- Answer: — The Teamsters' Union would kindly like to know when the inhabitants of the Winter Palace are planning to move out?
- What? What? — a question.
- Answer: — The inhabitants of the Winter Palace are moving out? Let us give you a hand...
- Nothing else? — the sound of a sour smile.
- Nothing.

  The one on the other side of the line can hear me and Pietnikov laughing.

  Someone's terrified face peeks in from the neighboring room.

  Two days later, cannons spoke. (Chlebnikov, 1974: 116; my translation)

Just as it is absurd of Khlebnikov to ask in the "Proposals" that the fantastic ideas of the Futurians be disputed with weapons, it is difficult to see Khlebnikov as a self-assured "King of Time" who was serious about his royal obligations. Whatever the poet's intentions, the absurdity of his numerically driven history and his ideas about chairing the globe are rather a grotesque mirror of an otherwise taken-for-granted selection of events around which historical periodization is constructed, and a grotesque mirror of artists' powerlessness, on the one hand, and aggrandizement, on the other.[1]

Another set of proposals concerns war and language, and includes suggestions to "[e]nd the World War with the first flight to the moon"; "[s]et aside a special uninhabited island, such as Iceland, for a never-ending war between anybody from any country who wants to fight now. (For people who want to die like heroes)"; "for ordinary wars, use sleep guns (with sleep bullets)"; and "[e]stablish a single written language for all Indo-Europeans, based on scientific principles" (Khlebnikov, 1999: 14–15). Cooke and other critics such as Henryk Baran and Ronald Vroon notice streaks of nationalism and pan-Slavism in Khlebnikov's early writing, as well as a certain attraction to warrior-type heroes and a romanticized view of battle; nevertheless, they agree that his view changed substantially once he faced the reality of the war; Vroon, for example, writes that "the outbreak of the First World War and his subsequent induction in April 1916 rapidly deflated his militancy" (1989: 102). Khlebnikov's proposals reveal how nonsensical war is, and their aim is to end it rather than call for bloodshed.

In several other works, Khlebnikov diminishes war poetically by metamorphosing it into something tame, controllable, and erasable. In a fragment of "Boards of Fate", Cooke observes that war "is to be transformed into a 'useless *izhitsa*' (*izhitsa* being a letter which disappeared in the post-revolutionary alphabet reform of 1918)" (1987: 158). In another poem, Khlebnikov describes wars as birds that eat grains from his palm (Chlebnikov, 1974: 112). These efforts draw attention also to the writer's second life-long project: the transformation of and through language, which he aimed to free mainly by neologisms, and the creation of a universal language by linking ideas with specific consonants. Many critics would agree with Willem Weststeijn that "Khlebnikov's word creation is an integral part of his literary oeuvre, which has as its unique aim the creation of a new world and a new future on the basis of knowledge and experience stored in language since its existence" (1998: 37). Nevertheless, as creative as Khlebnikov's linguistic explorations are, he could become disillusioned about their effectiveness. He also published them as poetry. His attempts to form a universal language were somewhat impractical as he did not try to create an Esperanto-like tongue combining different languages but extended Russian into infinity through various analogies and derivatives. In many ways, the language is untranslatable and if anything, it could be argued that, rather than being a serious alternative, it undermines confidence in language as a representation of, and action on, reality and opens up questions of linguistic dominance, including in attempts to create universal languages like Esperanto.

My third selection from "Proposals" shows that, although many of Khlebnikov's ideas, intentionally or not, are a grotesque, estranging mirror of the surrounding world, they are more than manifestations of the modernist crisis of history and representation. They also contain a genuine care for the good life of others. Examples are:

> Grow edible microscopic organisms in lakes. Every lake will become a kettle of ready-made soup that only needs to be heated. Contented people will lie about on the shores, swimming and having dinner. The food of the future.
>
> Effect the exchange of labour and services by means of an exchange of heartbeats. Estimate every task in terms of heartbeats — the monetary unit of the future, in which all individuals are equally wealthy.
>
> Effect an innovation in land ownership, recognizing that the amount of land every single individual requires cannot be less than the total surface of Planet Earth.

> Reform of the housing laws and regulations, the right to have a room of your own in any city whatsoever and the right to move whenever you want.
>
> Let factory chimneys awake and sing morning hymns to the rising sun, above the Seine as well as over Tokyo, over the Nile, and over Delhi. (Khlebnikov, 1999: 14–16)

It is apparent that through nonsense, Khlebnikov critiques everyday realities of starvation, hoarding, lack of housing, pollution, economic inequality, and a dehumanized market on which everything may be quantified and converted into monetary value.

Khlebnikov's "Proposals" therefore do not envision realistic solutions while nevertheless pointing to what humans lack: understanding and control over the historical process, governance not concentrated in the hands of the Winter Palace, peace, common language, food, housing, clean environment, economic equality, and a humane rhythm of labour. Ironically, the proposals are significant for what they oppose implicitly, rather than for what they propose. This is not necessarily a failure: utopia as full representation, as we know post-Jameson, tends to bring about a contemplation of our imagination's limits.

Conclusion

In the end, the question is whether Khlebnikov's text is a manifesto; that is, a work that aims to intervene with more or less hesitancy in the status quo and in the dominant vision of history, and to evoke into existence collective political agency. Weeks considers Donna Haraway's "Manifesto of Cyborgs" as an example of a "critical manifesto", and argues that the work is uncertain about historical process and agency, without giving up on hope. Haraway "treats truth ironically", Weeks writes,

> as a way to cut the text's knowledge claims down to size, but never hope. … Irony enacts a distancing from aspects of the form, but these do not include the way the genre serves as a vessel and vector of the handful of political affects that Ernst Bloch named militant optimism and I am calling hopeful resolve. In this sense, the 'Manifesto for Cyborgs' should be read not as an act of disavowal but as a critical reoccupation of the form. (2013: 222–3)

"Proposals" are not a typical authoritative manifesto and the work is not purely theatrical either, given the author's serious preoccupation with the questions raised. Is it a "critical manifesto"? There is little certainly about the historical process and agency; the recurring directives — devise, create, take, grow, end — do not have a clear addressee. It is unclear whether the proposals are intended for artists, scientists, architects, lawyers, workers, politicians, or soldiers who could end wars if they stopped fighting. There is humour, which is not bitterly satirical; it seems hopeful, regenerative, communal, extending perhaps the tradition of the Bakhtinian medieval and Renaissance grotesque, where madness parodies official reason and laughter awakens the possibility of an entirely different world. But who is the interpolated utopian subjectivity and what realistically is to be done?

After 1917, Khlebnikov worked as a journalist in Ukraine and afterwards joined the Red Army campaign in Persia as a lecturer. He welcomed the October Revolution although in 1921, he returned ill, barefoot, and penniless to Pyatigorsk, where he struggled to survive materially. His health rapidly deteriorated, and he died in 1922, due to a combination of illness, malnutrition, and maltreatment. As Cooke observes, many of his late works addressed poverty and famine particularly in civil-war Kharkov; Vroon points out that Khlebnikov was much disturbed by the violence he witnessed, such as the execution of the poet Nikolai Gumilyov (2000: 674). Socially-conscious as he was, Khlebnikov seems to have passed his life above all as a writer who kept being painfully reminded that he too needed, as one of his own proposals stated, "the art of waking easily from dreams" (1999: 14).

Note

1. Speaking of self-aggrandizement, is "Velimir" more self-laudatory than "Victor Vladimirovich" or does it rather reveal the absurdity of our names that evoke victory and world-rule?

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