

Article

Technē of the Scriptor: Graphomania as Technique: Lebiadkin, Khlebnikov, Limonov, and Others

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Abstract

The paper examines the poetics of *graphomania* as a productive aesthetic device within the Russian literary tradition, focusing primarily on Velimir Khlebnikov and extending the analysis to figures such as Fedor Dostoevsky's Captain Lebyadkin and real authors such as Eduard Limonov, Dmitrii Prigov, and Sasha Sokolov. Building on the article's central insight that Khlebnikov's "bad writing," stylistic shifts, and violations of canonical norms constitute not a defect but a *sui generis* artistic strategy, the study situates these techniques within broader historical and theoretical frameworks, including the Formalist concepts of parody, junior branch, and heteroglossic subcodes of poetic culture. The article traces the way Khlebnikov's dynamic alternation of heterogeneous linguistic, prosodic, and generic registers produces a complex, unstable but grandstanding authorial "I" aligned with the traditional figure of the poet-as-character and the culturally embedded myth of the Poet-Tsar. Furthermore, it maps a genealogy of "graphomaniac" writing from the avant-garde to postmodernism, demonstrating how later authors transform Khlebnikov's innovations—alternately amplifying, parodying, or ironizing them. Through close readings and extensive intertextual contextualization, the article argues that graphomania functions as a critical mechanism for destabilizing aesthetic orthodoxies, exposing, performing and producing literary authority, and redefining the boundaries between norm and deviation, author and character, poetic freedom and canonical constraint.

Keywords: Khlebnikov; graphomania; Russian Avant-Garde; Limonov; Dostoevsky; implied author; authorial 'I'; (anti-)canon; postmodernism

1. Velimir Khlebnikov and the Problem of the Authorial "I"

The Russian Futurist poet Velimir Khlebnikov (1885–1922), who, even after his death, for long decades had remained a "controversial" innovator, reached his centenary finally crowned with unquestionable academic and readerly acceptance. One of the testimonies of his canonization is the abundance of studies examining Khlebnikov as a "normal" poet, an "ordinary genius," yet another classic mythmaker. Yet, all the while, in the perception of his contemporaries, as well as of later uninitiated readers, Khlebnikov's recognition as a "genius" exhibited a peculiar yet characteristic symbiosis with his non-canonical status. In what follows, I will try to make sense of this naïve reading of Khlebnikov in light of conceptions of the literary process in general and of Khlebnikov's place within it in particular.

An intriguing question that arises once we adopt such an approach is the following: what is to be done about the strange persona of the Author emerging from Khlebnikov's texts?¹ It looks like it is made quite relevant by today's interest, on one hand, in the critical



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demythologization of Russia's cultural heroes (among others Aleksandr Pushkin, Nikolai Gogol, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and Anna Akhmatova) (see [Sinyavsky-Terts 1975a, 1975b; Karabchievskii 1985; Freidin 1987; Zholkovsky 2000](#)), and, on the other, in the development of such theoretical categories as "narrator," "narratee," "speaker," "persona," lyrical "I," "implied author," "implied reader," and the like. According to some scholars, Khlebnikov has either no unified lyrical "I" whatsoever ([Weststeijn 1986](#)) or one that is so "monstrous" that, for the sake of preserving the honor of Russian poetry, it better be presumed not to exist ([Duganov 1976; Grigor'ev 1983](#), p. 176 ff.).

In the various critical portraits of Khlebnikov, the grandeur of his poetic insights has been time and again juxtaposed with such characterizations as "insane," "idiotic," "tongue-tied", and even "painfully trashy" (Grigory Vinokur). For one reason or another, there is indeed a lot of "trash" in Khlebnikov's poems—so much so that it appears quite deliberate and invites labeling as an "-ism." According to Vladimir Markov,² the appropriate term is "primitivism," employing various types of "bad writing," or "cacography." Khlebnikov's poems at times resemble drafts, word-for-word translations, pulp fiction, opera libretto, doggerel, lubok-style idylls, or sappy melodrama. They are full of tastelessness, nonsense, awkward jokes, crumpled endings (as though a child had lost interest in the composition); grammatical and lexical inaccuracies, clumsy turns of phrase, slips of the tongue, solecisms and other careless usages; fuzziness, helpless descriptiveness and ostension ("that," "those"); poor, often adjacent (i.e., easiest) rhymes, word choice "for the sake of the rhyme," and, in general, tying loose ends together at the cost of loss of meaning ([Grigor'ev 1983](#), p. 97); prosaic lines disrupting the verse; laughable attempts to popularize *zaum'*; and even, at times, crude Soviet propaganda.

Yet, what is characteristic of Khlebnikov's writing is not so much its individual defects as some strange combinations of "bad" writing with "good," of different kinds of "bad" writing with one another, and even of different and poorly compatible types of "good." In literary-critical descriptions of Khlebnikov's style, these combinations have been variously labeled as "shifts," "chunk-composition," "stringing," "mosaic," and the like. His verse lines can be construed as parts of an unwritten epic (Nikolai Gumilev), each one a potential opening of a poem (Osip Mandelstam).

Shifts occur literally on all levels of the linguistic and poetic structure of his texts. On the phonetic level, it is the attention to a single sound, letter, syllable; in morphology—an abundance of neologisms; in syntax—frequent mixing of grammatical tenses, homogenizing coordination of incompatible categories, rupture of connections; in lexis—mixing and disruptions of styles (high, low, archaic, Pushkinisms, dialecticisms); and in semantics—obscurity, ambiguity, "double talk" ([Lönnqvist 1986](#)), misnaming ("wrong words") and "forced contrast" identified by Vladimir Markov. In metrics this involves polymetry of adjacent lines and disruptions of meter within a line; in rhyming—negligence, prosaic disruptions, and structurally heterogeneous rhymes within a single series; and in plot and composition—anachronisms, shifts in point of view, introduction of extraneous material, palindromes, acrostics. In the sphere of genre, this entails transitions from lyric to epic to drama, from poetry to prose; in thematics—metamorphoses ([Hansen-Löve 1986](#)), doubling, shifts in mood and ideology within a single text and also from text to text; and, finally, on the scale of the oeuvre as a whole—the absence of unity of the lyrical "I", noted by Willem Weststeijn.

As a brief illustration, let us examine the following example:

Русь, ты вся поцелуй на морозе!
Синеют ночные дорожи. . .

“Rus’, you are, all of you, one [big] kiss in the frost!/ The night roadways are blue/ turning blue. . .” (“Rus’, you are all a kiss in the frost. . .”; Khlebnikov 1986, p. 165).

Brief as it is, this excerpt is highly representative. It comprises the following:

- A metrical shift from anapestic trimeter with an additional stress on the first foot (in line 1) to amphibrachic trimeter (line 2);
- A change in lyrical perspective from exclamatory poetic apostrophe addressing the 2nd person (line 1) to 3rd person landscape description (line 2);
- A leap from a Pushkinian image (see, e.g., *Как жарко поцелуй пылает на морозе!*, “How hot the kiss burns [out there] in the frost!”, in Pushkin’s lyric “Winter. What shall we do in the country?..”; Pushkin 1937–1959, 3 (1): 181–182.) to the typically bluish Blokian expanses;
- A morphologically incorrect—would-be dialectal—form *дорожи* “roadways”;
- An adjacent rhyme, but a conspicuously strained one, achieved at the price of resorting to an ungrammatical form;³
- And, last but not least, an overall pretentiously elevated *lubok* style.

To sum up, Khlebnikov’s writing is essentially built on shifts, switches, changes, and transitions. According to Markov, Khlebnikov seems constantly to shift from one language to another; V. Grigor’ev even undertook a cataloging of Khlebnikov’s 46 various “languages.” Characteristically, these shifts, on one hand, occur rapidly, that is, over very short stretches text,⁴ and on the other, encompass an extremely wide range of contexts: all possible epochs, styles, genres, geographical regions, grammatical and verse categories, and so on. The scope of Khlebnikov’s shifts—their frequency, intensity, and universality—has a direct bearing on the image of the authorial “I,” which is called upon to bind together and hold in place the disintegrating coherence of the text and therefore also of the author’s own personality.

Buit before focusing on this problem, a brief historical digression will be appropriate.

2. The Great Canon vs. Poetry by Characters

Prominent among Khlebnikov admirers and successors was Eduard Limonov (1943–2020).⁵ We will take a look at his poem “Who Is Lying There on the Sofa?” (written in 1969 and first published ten years later abroad in his 1979 collection “Russkoe,” “[Things] Russian”):

- Кто лежит там на диване? -- Чего он желает?
 Ничего он не желает а только моргает
 - Что моргает он -- что надо -- чего он желает?
 Ничего он не желает -- только он дремает
 - Что все это он дремает -- может заболевший?
 Он совсем не заболевший а только уставший
 - А чего же он уставший -- сложная работа?
 Да уж сложная работа быть от всех отличным
 - Ну дак взял бы и сравнялся и не отличался
 Дорожит он этим знаком -- быть как все не хочет
 - А! Так пусть такая личность на себя пеняет
 Он и так себе пеняет—оттого моргает
 Потому-то на диване он себе дремает
 А внутри большие речи речи выступает

- Who is lying there on the sofa? -- What does he desire? / He desires nothing but is only blinking // - Why is he blinking -- what is needed -- what does he desire? / He desires nothing -- he is just dozing // - What is all this dozing -- is he perhaps taken ill? / He is not at all taken ill but only tired // - And why then is he tired -- a complicated job? / Well, indeed, a complicated job to be different from everyone // - Well, then he should simply level himself and not be different / He values this sign -- does not want to be like everyone // - Ah! Then let such a personality blame himself / He is already blaming himself -- that is why he is blinking // That's the reason he is dozing on the sofa / And inside [himself] is delivering great speeches (Limonov 2003, p. 115).

From the point of view of the “high” canon of Russian poetry, Limonov’s poems are, of course, quite unacceptable. Naum Korzhavin’s epic reaction (in an oral communication with me) is telling: “There is nothing there to talk about: it’s characters doing the writing!” Another normative reaction to Limonov was in response to my remark that “Who Is Lying There on the Sofa...” is, essentially, a modern variation on the theme of Pushkin’s “The Poet”: --“ Ah, it’s Пока не требует поэта... (“Until the poet has been summoned...”; Pushkin 1937–1959, 3 (1): 65.)! Then he should stick to saying precisely this: Пока -- не -- требует -- поэта. . .!” These reactions are in tune with the response Nikolai Trubetskoy has claimed would be that by Pushkin’s to Khlebnikov: “if Pushkin had read Khlebnikov, he simply would not have considered him a poet. . . would not have found in. . . Khlebnikov even the substance/ matter [состава] of poetry” (Trubetskoy 1975, pp. 17–18). All such statements testify to the relevance of the tension that exists between the “norm” and the “abnormal”—Khlebnikovian mode of writing. Is it obligatory to speak “like Pushkin,” or is it permissible to speak “like characters”?

Opponents of the “poetry by characters” readily explain that characters they have in mind are those found in Dostoevsky’s works: Smerdyakov, Lebyadkin, Maksimov, Rakitin, etc. The reference to Dostoevsky is essential for the problem that concerns us here, in fact for several reasons. First of all, in view of the role played in his novels by parody, keeping in mind that Tynianov’s pioneering work on the theory of parody (Tynianov [1921] 1977) was devoted to Dostoevsky. His graphomaniac characters keep quoting, imitating, distorting, parodying Friedrich Schiller, Aleksandr Pushkin, Afanasii Fet, Nikolai Ogarev, Nikolai Nekrasov, traditional and urban folklore, and unabashedly poor/parodistic poetry (of Vladimir Pecherin, Ivan Miatlev). Well, this set is, to a significant degree, the very same as the one we have seen “awkwardly” emulated by Khlebnikov. Describing Khlebnikov’s stylistic palette, Vladimir Markov lists the odic discourse 18th century, the high-flown diction of Romanticism, the poetry of Pushkin, Fet, Aleksei K. Tolstoy, Symbolist poetry, propagandistic revolutionary verse, the primitivism of folklore, and the “cruel” urban romance. All of these are somehow mixed in Khlebnikov’s oeuvre and paraded in the guise of pretentious hamming.

To quote just one example of the poetry of Dostoevsky characters, here are verses composed by Captain Lebyadkin (“The Possessed,” I, 3, IX):

И порхает звезда на коне
В хороводе других амазонок;
Улыбается с лошади мне
Ари-сто-кратический ребенок

“And a star is fluttering on horseback / In the chorus of other Amazons; / Smiling to me from the horse is / An ari-sto-cratie child” (Dostoevsky 1974, p. 95).

These verses are relevant to my argument in many ways but primarily because of the rhythmic break in the last line, which necessitates a scanning segmentation of the word “aristocratic”, resulting in a pompously clownish performance.

To be sure, the essence of Dostoevsky’s poetics is not limited to parody per se, so beloved by the Formalists. Within Mikhail Bakhtin’s model, parody it is, as is well known, is only one manifestation of Dostoevsky’s polyphony, canceling the monologic dominance of authorial discourse over that of the character. Thus, in a sense it was precisely Dostoevsky who was the prophet of that new literary epoch in which, to paraphrase Karamzin, “characters, too, can write.” Incidentally, from the point of view of his contemporaries, and apparently of his own as well, Dostoevsky did “write badly,” “carelessly,” because (unlike the well-off Count Leo Tolstoy) he was always in a rush to publish. But as we now know, Dostoevsky was writing about the impending social revolution and inaugurating an artistic one, precisely by breaking the extant canon.

An even more overt conflict with the canon defines the oeuvre of Khlebnikov, beginning with Vyacheslav Ivanov’s self-appointed Academy’s refusal to duly recognize his worth. The Futurists’ challenge to Tradition “on behalf of the future,” was, in his case, intensified by his primitivist/infantilist/paganist negation of civilization in the name of the “universal Slavic past.” Khlebnikov’s favorite slogan is Freedom: “freedom from the taboos” of literary conventions (Tynianov), freedom from the confines of language, freedom from meter and rhyme (= free verse, which adopts in the end), “misprint as freedom from the given world” (Khlebnikov), freedom from normative literary professionalism and even from the very idea of a definitive and unified, “canonical” text—freedom that lets the “scaffolding” stand in his poems and accepts multiple variants of one and the same poem as equally valid (Grigor’ev 1983, p. 66).

The subversion/destruction of the “norm,” quite a sweeping phenomenon by the end of the Silver Age, had begun in the second half of the 19th century. Alongside Dostoevsky, this was practiced by the creators of the imaginary Russian poet Koz’ma Prutkov as a tool for undermining the literary canon, by Friedrich Nietzsche, the relativizer of philosophical, religious and cultural values, and later by Sigmund Freud, with his triple-layered structure of the human personality. In Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud, the polyphonic inclusion of previously unacceptable voices come into the open; thereafter, in the work of the Decadents, European and Russian, immoralism to the point of demonism seizes control even of the authorial voice. Thus, Khlebnikov emerges as part—if not the apex—of a major cultural upheaval: the breaking out of the canon and into the open of the “bad,” uncomfortable, not-well-intentioned, disorderly, destabilizing voice of “the character.” In poetry, Khlebnikov’s kith, kin and successors are Vladimir Mayakovsky and, to some extent, Sergey Yesenin (the “hooligans”), Nikolai Zabolotsky and the “Oberiu” (the Russian absurdist poets of the early 1930s) Eduard Limonov (the “semi-literate narcissist”). In prose, there are Mikhail Zoshchenko (the “likeable barbarian”), Andrei Platonov (the “self-taught proletarian philosopher”), Aleksei Remizov, Boris Pilnyak, and others. And, speaking of literary modes/genres, the famous Russian “skaz”—both in prose and poetry—can be seen as a sort of canonized graphomania authored by an unreliable character.

As a matter of fact, once the “graphomaniac trend” in literature has been identified, it immediately becomes clear that more or less explicitly—in a so to speak dotted line—it runs even through periods of apparently unquestioned dominance of the canon.⁶ As is well known, “skaz” and the “ornamental prose” of the 1920s go back to Nikolai Leskov, Gogol, and Pushkin, while the prose of Leo Tolstoy features elements of deliberate primitivism and ungrammaticality (note, in particular, the pointedly awkward repetitions of the conjunctions “that” and “which,” the syntactically blurred stream of consciousness,⁷ and

programmatic learning how to write from peasant children characters). It looks like Ivan Turgenev is the only classic who can claim full allegiance to the “great canon”.⁸

The same holds for poetry. Even Tyutchev and Fet, two major Russian poets of the 19th century, epitomizing—for Dostoevsky characters as well as the poets and reading public of the 20th century—“high poetry,” are known for their deviations from the “norm”:

- The former, for the so-called rhythmic italics, that is, failures to observe metrical regularity, and, in general, for an unprofessional, “amateurish” attitude toward his own work;
- The latter, for his “lyrical audacity” (Leo Tolstoy) in violating accepted poetic conventions (his verbless poems, tautological rhymes, and shifts in diction and syntax).⁹

Modern Russian poetry in general began with Vasilii Trediakovsky’s awkward experiments and Gavriil Derzhavin’s “bad and semi-literate translation from a brilliant Tatar original,” as Pushkin once chose to describe it. Then, in late 18th and early 19th centuries came the period of struggle between the so-called “archaists” and “innovators,” marked on both sides by a conscious or unconscious emphasis on nonsensical abracadabra and by absence of a dominant style. In several ways that literary epoch was similar to that of Khlebnikov and his time. As Yuri Lotman notes (I. Lotman 1971), the spread of “bad poetry” signals major shifts in aesthetic culture.

What happens is that the boundary between literary and extra-literary nonsense gets erased. Graphomaniacs and semi-graphomaniacs like Count Dmitrii Khvostov and Vasilii Pushkin often write “for the sake of the rhyme”; Semen Bobrov creates “scientific” poetry built on the combination of the incompatible; the “archaist” Aleksandr Shishkov appears as a kind of “innovator-utopianist” (similar in this sense to Khlebnikov); and in Aleksandr Voeikov’s “House of the Mad,” the image of the author blends with* the objects of his satire. If one takes into account that in the poetry of Vasilii Zhukovsky, the major immediate predecessor of Pushkin, a “captivating sweetness” alternates with “prose, and bad prose at that” (both formulations are Pushkin’s), and that Pushkin’s closest successor, Mikhail Lermontov, turned out, thanks to his posthumous editors, to be the author of a mass of immature poems, then the “high canon” will look like a rather brief episode of the poetic tradition, basically limited to just Pushkin. But then, even Pushkin has been perceived by some readers and critics as a sort of successful literary incarnation of the character Khlestakov.¹⁰

Remarkably, even at the heart of “the canon” one can encounter the same irregularities and shifts as in “bad” texts, only less noticeable and blatant. Let us compare the following examples:

Моих друзей летели сонмы.

Их семеро, их семеро, их сто!

И после испустили стон мы,

Нас отразило властное ничто <...>

А вы, проходя по дорожке из мауни,

Ужели нас спросите тоже, куда они?

(Хлебников. «Моих друзей летели сонмы. . .»)

My friends, legions of them, were flying/ There were seven of them, there were seven of them, there were a hundred!/ <...>/ And afterwards we uttered a groan, / We were reflected by a sovereign nothingness/ <...>/ And you, walking along the path of mauni,/ Will you really also ask us where they are going? (Khlebnikov, “My friends, legions of them, were flying. . .”; Khlebnikov 1986, p. 103).

«О, пощади меня, панич!»

Но тот: «Не может», говорю.

(Хлебников. «Война -- смерть»)

"Oh, have mercy on me, young master!" / But he [goes]: "He can't," says I
(Khlebnikov, "War -- Death"; [Khlebnikov 2020](#), 3: 49–54).

Зато я никому не должен

никто поутру не кричит

и в два часа и в полдругого

зайдет ли кто а я -- лежит

(Лимонов. «Я был веселая фигура. . .»)

But I owe nothing to anyone/ no one shouts in the morning / and at two o'clock
and at half past another / should somebody drop in—lo I is lying there
(Limonov, "I was a cheerful figure. . .": [Limonov 2003](#), p. 95).

Смертный миг наш будет светел;

И подруги шалунов

Соберут их легкий пепел

В урны праздные пиров.

(Пушкин. «Кривцову»)

Our mortal moment will be bright; / And the girlfriends of the pranksters / Will
gather their light ashes/ Into the empty urns of feasts
(Pushkin, "To Krivtsov"; [Pushkin 1937–1959](#), 2 (1): 50.)

По гребле неровной и тряской,

Вдоль мокрых рыбацких сетей,

Дорожная едет коляска,

Сижу я задумчиво в ней. . .

(А. К. Толстой. «По гребле неровной и тряской. . .»)

Along an uneven and jolting dam, / Along fishermen's nets,/ A travelling car-
riage is riding,/ I am sitting pensively in it. . . (Tolstoy A., "Along the uneven and
jolting dam. . ."; [Tolstoy 1984](#), pp. 52–53).

Shifts in point of view impact the use of pronouns. In the first Khlebnikov example, the shifts occur between independent sentences or clauses; in the second, between main and subordinate clauses;¹¹ and in the third Khlebnikov fragment and the subsequent Limonov excerpt the shifts that occur are already within a single phrase, producing an especially provocative violation of grammatical correctness. But a similar shift—from "our" to "their"—is, in fact, present in the Pushkin quote, with the only difference that it is not laid bare but rather hidden by a smooth syntactic transition and, moreover, naturalized by the otherworldly gaze from beyond the grave. In the example from Aleksei K. Tolstoy (incidentally, one of the creators of Koz'ma Prutkov and a favorite of Khlebnikov's and Limonov's), the effect is already deliberately absurd: this stanza is the one opening the poem and it begins with a third-person perspective, a panorama presented from the point of view of some implied distant observer, but then the frame narrows, zooming in on the observer's own 1st person "I". The grammar is preserved, but if we were to "clarify" it in a Khlebnikov/ Limonov fashion, we would end up with something like the following:

*дорожная едет коляска

сидит в ней задумчиво я.

A travelling carriage is riding,/ sitting in it pensively is I.

Yet, it should be kept in mind that this paradoxical perspective is; prompted/naturalized motivated by the fact that we are offered a description of what “once was” and appears now before the mind’s eye of the lyrical ‘I’.



Козьма Прутков. Вымышленный портрет работы А.М. Жемчужникова, А.Е. Бейдемана и Л.Ф. Лагорио.

Koz'ma Prutkov. The fictional portrait by A. M. Zhemchuzhnikov, A. E. Beideman and L. F. Lagorio (Prutkov 1965, p. 3).

3. Velimir Khlebnikov: Poet and Chairman

The subliminal presence of “abnormality” at the canon’s very citadel, as well as its surfacing in later—polyphonic or newly monological—structures correspond to the Formalists’ insight regarding “the canonization of the junior branch” and to Roman Jakobson’s realization of a constant coexistence of a number of subcodes within a unified semiotic system. It is not by chance that this principle was formulated in the 20th century, and by none other than the closest associates of Khlebnikov, whose poetics indeed represent an extreme case of the coexistence and free play of nearly all conceivable and mutually conflicting subcodes of Russian poetic culture. The combination, within a single authorial voice, of a heteroglossia of stylistic elements rapidly replacing one another across short stretches of text, is a challenging constructive task whose successful resolution may constitute Khlebnikov’s most valuable artistic achievement. The next question is, naturally, what is it that motivates—or, to use the language of contemporary literary theory, what “naturalizes”—this chaotic mixture present in Khlebnikov’s poems, what human and literary basis/core underpins it, and in the mouth of what kind of “character” these poems are put?



П. Митурич. Велимир в Москве 22 г. (по воспоминаниям)
Графитный карандаш. - 1924

Velimir in Moscow in '22 (according to memory), Pencil graphic—1924

(<http://www.visit-city.art/exhibitions/khlebnikov/>, accessed on 20 March 2026).

First off, this character turns out to be a very “loud” speaker, with a voice at once quite natural and exceptionally unnatural. While Khlebnikov’s set toward “incorrectness,” primitivism, and freedom violates the convention in every possible way (and thus sounds “natural”), the rapid alternation of heterogeneous fragments, on the contrary, heightens the literariness of the text by prompting an exaggerated delivery, overdramatizing the intonation, and adopting grandiloquent postures (cf. Vladimir Markov’s observations re Khlebnikov’s “operatic gestures” and “forced contrasts” and my own on his “clowning”)—techniques without which the text would fall apart into separate disjointed fragments. To “hold”/keep this unnaturally high note, a monstrous character is created/enlisted: a graphomaniac, a jester, an obsessed nutcase, a versifying idiot,¹² a child imitating grown-ups. He also poses as a scholar poet, which does not contradict (according to s Markov) his primitivism but rather peacefully coexists with it—for the simple reason that he is a pseudo-scholar, a self-taught philosopher, of the semi-literate kind generously represented among Dostoevsky’s characters and later those of Andrei Platonov and Mihail Zoshchenko. Naturally, entrusting the authorial word to such a home-grown would-be genius “from among the characters” sounds like a parody of the role of the “scholar-sage” proclaimed and assumed in all seriousness by the major Symbolists: Zinaida Gippius, Dmitrii Merezhkovsky, Vyacheslav Ivanov, Valerii Bryusov, and Andrei Bely.¹³

Thus, the “writing character” (the “publishing scoundrel” in Henry James’ terms) that emerges from Khlebnikov’s poems, that is, their implied author, turns out to be very similar to their “real author,” the historical Victor Vladimirovich Khlebnikov, as he is known from his other, “practical,” texts and biographical data. To put it bluntly, it would take no less than the Chairman of the Terrestrial Globe and the great discoverer of the laws of Language, Art, History and Time itself to convincingly deliver such lines as “O, Rus’, you are, all of you, one [big] kiss in the frost!/ The night roadways are [turning] blue. . .”

This figure, albeit fulfilling a characteristic pan-European cultural demand of the early 20th century, is archetypally Russian, flesh of the Russian artistic tradition with its centuries-long opposition of Poet and Tsar, or, in Nabokov's formulation, of literature and the police. Over the ages, this opposition has shaped a peculiar myth, varying, in a long chain of episodes, the real or imagined, tragic or comic clash/fusion of the roles of Poet and Tsar (and of the intermediate figures of Saint, Teacher, and Scholar).

In one way or another, this myth has involved the lives and (self-)portraits—"self-images"—of Mikhail Lomonosov, Gavriil Derzhavin, Aleksandr Radishchev, Catherine II, Vasilii Zhukovsky (as the mentor of Alexander II), Kondratii Ryleev, Aleksandr Pushkin, Nicholas I, Aleksandr von Benckendorff, Nikolai Gogol, Vissarion Belinsky, Nilolai Chernyshevsky, Leo Tolstoy, the already mentioned Symbolist magi, Maxim Gorky, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Leon Trotsky, Evgenii Zamyatin, Mikhail Bulgakov, Joseph Stalin, Osip Mandelstam, Anna Akhmatova, Mikhail Zoshchenko, Andrei Zhdanov, Boris Pasternak, Nikita Khrushchev, and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. One of the farcical, sometimes to the point of grotesque, variants of this mytheme is the literary character of a megalomaniac with authorial and governmental pretensions—Khlestakov, Poprishchin, Kozma Prutkov, and in our own time Eduard Limonov's Edichka and Sasha Sokolov's Palisandr (the protagonist of *Palisandriia*, the title that fuses reads in Russian as "Palisandr-and-I") (for more on the latter two, see below).¹⁴

In this context, it is entirely natural that the poet-innovator should envelop himself in a Khlebnikovian attire of the Great (and comical) Helmsman of nations, arts and sciences.¹⁵ In other words, Khlebnikov would achieve the revolutionary—that is, destructive and liberating—goals by relying—in part parodically—on the Russian authoritarian poetic tradition ("You are a Tsar..."), a combination that is shockingly similar to the history of Russian communism.¹⁶

Such are the stylistic means, characterological parallels, psychological motivations, and general literary–historical connections that determined the concrete poetic shape assumed by Khlebnikov's attempt to liberate Russian poetry from the "canon," both technically and ideologically. Despite Khlebnikov's genius, or perhaps precisely in view of its scale and extremism, this attempt, utopian and "graphomaniac," alas, already at its conception, has not led to success. More moderate forms of poetic revolution, represented by Vladimir Mayakovsky, Marina Tsvetaeva, Boris Pasternak, and Anna Akhmatova, have triumphed, as their poetics, while absorbing many of Khlebnikov's lessons, did remain on the whole within the framework of the "great standard," that of moral–political nobility, syllabotonic regularity, linguistic and stylistic "norm." Once again the longstanding conservatism of Russian poetry held its ground, just like in the times of its Golden Age it had managed, according to Dmitry Sviatopolk-Mirsky, to combine the spirit of European Romanticism with features of 18th-century Classicism (Mirsky 1958, p. 74). To be sure, in the 20th century, an enormous role was played in this by the political and cultural reaction of Stalin times, but the fact is that today's "new norm" has been associated with the names of Bulat Okudzhava, Bella Akhmadulina, Aleksandr Kushner, and Joseph Brodsky, while the "Khlebnikovian" line represented by, say, Nikolai Glazkov, Eduard Limonov, Elizaveta Mnatsakanova, Dmitrii Prigov, and others, until recently has existed in the margins, as a sort of secondary branch. Nevertheless, we are witnessing an undeniable revival of interest in Khlebnikov and his successors, and it makes sense to cast a brief glance at some of the contemporary avatars of the "Great Graphomaniac."

4. From the Avant-Garde to Postmodernism

As we have seen, Limonov's poetry follows in many ways the lessons of Khlebnikov's, without discarding the traditional—essentially Romantic—role of the Poet absorbed by the

uniqueness of his 'I'. Yet he decisively separates his own precious Persona both from the State and from its dissident opposition:

Мои друзья с обидою и жаром
 Ругают несвятую эту власть
 А я с индийским неким оттенком
 Всё думаю: А мне она чего?
 Мешает что ли мне детей плодить
 иль уток в речке разводить
 иль быть философом своим
 Мешает власть друзьям моим. . .

(«Мои друзья с обидою и жаром. . .», 4-й рукописный сборник
 «Стихотворений»)

My friends with resentment and fervor/ Curse this unholy [Soviet] power/ While
 I with a certain Indian/ Hinduist tinge/ Keep thinking: And what is it to me?//
 Does it hinder me from begetting children/ or from breeding ducks in the river /
 or from being my own philosopher. . ./ The power does hinder my friends. . .
 ("My friends with resentment and fervor. . ."; [Limonov n.d.](#)).

Ужасно государство
 Но все же лишь оно
 Мне от тебя поможет
 Да-да оно нужно

(«И этот мне противен. . .», из книги «Русское»)

The state is terrible / But still only it/ Will help me against you/ Oh, yes, it's
 needed ("This one is repugnant to me, too . . .," from the collection "The Russian
 Stuff"; [Limonov 2003](#), p. 122).

The graphomaniac ungrammaticality/incorrectness of these verses embodies iconically the "somewhat Indian/ Hinduist" rupture with the high civic canon, rather than a Khlebnikovian proclamation of the New Word, albeit illiterate but at the same innovative and obligatory, coming as it is from the prophet of a new creative class. And yet, Limonov's authorial position remains—despite his ironic subversion of the canon and at least in part of his own personality—quite earnestly engaged in full-scale fight for the cause of his own "I".

The next period, postmodern. The degree of dissociating the Poet not only from the State but from all conceivable roles and masks as a result of realizing the gestural nature of any literary, cultural, and political positions, is represented in the poems of Dmitrii Prigov. See his poem:

Внимательно коль приглядеться сегодня,
 Увидишь, что Пушкин, который певец,
 Пожалуй, скорее что бог плодородья
 И стад охранитель и народа отец.
 Во всех деревнях, уголках бы ничтожных
 Я бюсты везде бы поставил его
 А вот бы стихи я его уничтожил —
 Ведь облик они принижают его.

(«Внимательно коль приглядеться сегодня. . .»)

If you take a close look today,/ You will see that Pushkin, the bard,/ Is perhaps rather a god of fertility / And a guardian of herds and a father of the people./ In all villages, in the most insignificant nooks/ I would install his busts everywhere / But his poems I would destroy --/ For they do diminish his image ("If you take a close look today. . ."; Prigov 1997).

Instead of throwing Pushkin—in a fit of revolutionary futurist fervor—down from the steamship of modernity, the postmodernist lays bare both the totality of the Poet-Tsar's claims to all imaginable cultural roles and the real death of his poetry. This death occurs not so much as a result of an aesthetic automatization of his texts (in the sense of Victor Shklovsky's theory of "defamiliarization") but rather as a consequence of the poet's promotion to the rank of a cultural hero alongside the Party leaders, from whose busts and portraits his own will in no way differ after the destruction of his poems. Yet Prigov is by no means occupied with exposing the poetic dumbness of the "mass reader" befuddled by the school curriculum and official propaganda. On the contrary, he is happy to reap the fruits of the new reality, which has laid bare the strategic, power-hungry, politicized, posturizing nature of art—inasmuch as it allows him to assume the role of a universal Meta-Artist, one who takes pride not in individual texts (which, as we remember, are to be destroyed) but in nothing less than a complete set of all possible different poetries, prose works, paintings, theories of art, and so on. Megalomania is reproduced once again, but now on a new, explicitly meta-reflectional level.

A fully fledged postmodern image of a Kremlin Graphomaniac was created by Sasha Sokolov in the person of the protagonist-narrator of his *Palisandriia*. Let us read closely one telling paragraph from this novel, which, typically, sounds like a prose poem:

«Спросил пластилину и гипсу и где-то вблизи казармы предавался лепке, пленяя болезненное воображение матросских масс не столько многофигурностью композиции, сколько здоровой эротикой фабул и форм. По окончании - все роздал. Нет высшей награды художнику, нежели зреть, как трепетно вожделяют к его искусству заскорузлые руки ратного простолюдина (Sokolov 1985, с. 161)

"I requested some modeling clay and plaster of Paris and indulged in a little sculpting somewhere near the barracks, captivating the morbid imagination of the sailor masses not so much with the poly-figural compositions as with the healthy eroticism of the plots and forms. On accomplishing -- gave all away. There is no higher reward for an artist than to behold the calloused hands of the martial commoner tremulously lusting after his art."

This episode (taking place on the grounds of an elite prison-estate where Palisandr is held after the assassination attempt on Brezhnev) is constructed as a collage of several diverse discourses—in a stylistic embodiment of the protagonist's total polymorphism, comprising the cultural roles of a Kremlin ruler (quasi-Stalin), a poet of the Silver Age (quasi-Blok), a great lover (Giacomo Casanova; Limonov' Edichka), and many others. Even in his imprisonment Palisandr is occupied with creativity—a rapid production of pornographic sculptures for the camp guards (the *Vokhra*). The motif of his exceptional freedom even behind bars rests upon the topos of privileged confinement reserved for crowned criminals (Napoleon and the like), while the motif of activity while in prison refers to the personae of famous revolutionaries (Nikolai Chernyshevsky, Vladimir Lenin), who were known for using their enforced leisure to keep pursuing their cause. Combining elements of the two topos with that of artistic creation, particularly sculpture, is found in Leo Tolstoy's "The Prisoner of the Caucasus."

As for the “barracks” and the “sailor masses,” they supply a characteristic “military-patriotic” element, which is also projected onto the “classicist” plane in the form of the image of the “martial commoner”. The archaic layer of the text also includes the words зреть, “behold,” and нежели, “[there is no higher. . .] than,” and the emphatically shortened endings in -нье (воображение, окончание), which help fuse together the military-imperial classicism with the Romantic foregrounding of the Artist’s personal experiences, as in предавался, “indulged in,” пленяя воображение, “captivating the imagination,” нет высшей награды, “there is no higher award,” and трепетно, “tremulously.” These lyrical elements intersperse a report on the creative process that is written in the professional language of art/literary scholarship (“not so much with”, “poly-figural compositions”, “plots and forms”, “[un]healthy eroticism”). The “scientistic” point of view adopted in this “report” helps to further ironically highlight the protagonist’s maniacal narcissism, as if lending objectivity to his obsessive self-praises. Overcoming the gap between the “subjective” and “objective” attitudes relies on the narrative’s memoiristic mode (at once personal and documentary), set up by the very first words of the passage. The characteristic спросил, followed by the partitive genitive in -ы (“requested some. . .”), calls to mind the figure of an old-time traveler, stopping at a roadside inn and “requesting” ink, paper, bread, goat cheese, as well as the sentimentalist atmosphere of an action performed at the instant whim of inspiration, followed by an immediate distribution of its fruits and happening at a deliberately vague address (“somewhere near. . .”).

This piling up of styles is utterly absurd— suffice it to note the oxymoronic quenching of a “morbid imagination” with “healthy eroticism”. But all the glitches are artfully concealed: the stylistic piquancy of the passage lies precisely in the perfect fitting together of incompatible elements. One of the secrets is the linking of two clichés whose common element is “imagination”: the romantic task of “captivating the imagination” and the psychiatric diagnosis of “morbid imagination”. Another ironic bond is the ambiguity of the verb вожделеть, “desire, lust for,” which throws the revered mantle of “spiritual thirst” over “taste for pornography.” This dual passion materializes in the close-up of the “calloused hands”, a hackneyed cliché of Socialist Realism, refreshed here by projection onto the archaic image of the “martial commoner”.¹⁷ On the level of plot, this entire paradoxical combination is held together by the fact that both the genius of the creator and the baseness of his admirers’ tastes are hybrids of the “military-patriotic” and “decadent” principles, i.e., the two main thematic and stylistic poles of the novel. As for the passage’s generic unity, it is ensured by using the style of Prutkovian amateurish philosophizing, mixing literary pretensions with bureaucratic clichés. And last but not least, at the textual level the fragment is densely welded together by numerous alliterations and rhythmized segments (amphibrachs and dactyls).

* * *

Thus, the “graphomaniac” poetics makes a full circle going from the “hot” programmatic violations of the canon (in Khlebnikov and then Limonov) to its ironic and metaliterary, but aesthetically impeccable, restoration in Sokolov. What remains unchanged is the strong reaction—whether in the form of attraction or of repulsion—to the monarchic-poetic master myth of Russian literature.

To conclude, all this is meant not as a mere reassessment of Khlebnikov’s “graphomania” but a reconceptualization of his type of writing, offering a view of the way Russian experimental literature reflects upon—and ultimately destabilizes—its own discursive foundations. If Khlebnikov’s poetics appears to advance a delirious heteroglossia of shifts, ruptures, childish primitivisms, operatic hyperboles, and idiotic exaltations, this is not because he abandons the canon but because he repossesses it by coming at it from a radically different—“oblique”—angle, rendering its principles translucent, unstable, and finally

permeable. His writing demonstrates that the “bad,” the excessive, the maladroit, and the grotesquely earnest are not antithetical to literariness but constitute a counter-pressure indispensable for literature’s self-renewing metabolism.

In this sense, Khlebnikov’s implied author—half Chairman of the Terrestrial Globe, half jester-scholar—instantiates the cultural myth of the Poet–Tsar in its most parodically weaponized form: a voice at once sovereign and ridiculous, cosmic and infantile, destabilizing and self-explanatory. What later authors, such as Limonov and Sokolov, inherited from this stance is not a stylistic repertoire but rather a true structural posture: an attitude toward language in which dissolution of normativity becomes indistinguishable from staging of authority; where megalomania itself becomes a rhetorical device, whereby the canonical and the anti-canonical are not antagonistic poles but reciprocal mirrors. If Khlebnikov still labored under the utopian horizon of an “optimal projection,” his successors exposed the theatricality of all such projections while retaining the dazzling polyphonic excess he had inaugurated. The arc traced from Khlebnikov’s “transgressive” poetic persona to the self-ironic omnipotence of *Palisandriia*’s polymorphous narrator suggests that the Russian literary tradition continually reabsorbs the graphomaniac impulse as both its nemesis and its generative engine. Khlebnikov’s *graphomania*, far from being a pathological exercise, becomes a certain modality of cultural sovereignty—a technē of the scriptor that reveals, with exquisite clarity, the constitutive unsteadiness of literary authority itself.

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Notes

- ¹ This question has attracted the attention of a number of scholars; see, for example, (Duganov 1976; Grigor’ev 1983; Baran 1985; Weststeijn 1986).
- ² The classic monograph (Markov 1962) supplies an overview of the diverse evaluations of Khlebnikov.
- ³ For the analysis of this fragment see also Grigor’ev’s (1983, pp. 100–3) claim that “dorozi” are invoked for the sake of more profound purposes.
- ⁴ According to Grigor’ev (1983, p. 71), Khlebnikov’s focus was on individual words and even phonemes rather than on “long speeches.”
- ⁵ In the pages of the avant-garde almanac *Muleta*, Limonov remarked: “Once, in my poetic youth, captivated by the Khlebnikov I had discovered, I copied out by hand the three volumes of Stepanov’s edition. Then, I remember, I began to ponder the fact that I had copied out Khlebnikov, while he, before me, had copied everything from an interlinear text invisible to me but visible to him” (Limonov 1985, p. 156).
- ⁶ For valuable observations re the “graphomaniac tradition” in Russian poetry, particularly reflections on the “Khlebnikovian traits” in the poetic technique of Nikolai Gogol’s “Hans Küchelgarten,” in Dostoevsky’s poems “in the guise” of Captain Lebyadkin, and on Khlebnikov himself as a “gigantic autodidact,” see (Markov 1954, 1960).
- ⁷ For more detail, see (Zholkovsky 2016, pp. 121–38).
- ⁸ Remarkably, Turgenev happened to be the high-school curse of Mikhail Zoshchenko, who, in turn, was to become the leading practitioner of the *skaz* narrative (see Zholkovsky 2014, pp. 369–85; 2016, pp. 121–38).
- ⁹ It is no accident that Fet was one of the acknowledged sources of Pasternak’s innovative—“high,” yet also “tongue-tied”—poetic style. For example, the characteristically Pasternakian lines, Сиренью моет подоконник / Продо́рогий абрис ледника (“Из поэмы”) [“The shivering outline of the glacier is washing the windowsill with lilac” (“Из поэмы”; Pasternak 1990 1: 112) or: Бывало, раздвинется запад / ... / И примется хлопьями цапать, / Чтоб под буфера не попал (“Вокзал”) [“It used to happen, that the west would open up / ... / And start grabbing with its snowflakes / So I wouldn’t be hit by the buffers” (“Вокзал”;

- Pasternak 11,990, 1: 79), feature a rich cluster of several situations of contact (see Zholkovsky 2011, pp. 221–35, with crucial references to M. Lotman 1969). In the first case, the physical contact between the lilac and the window is amplified by the visual perspective of “observer–window–lilac–glacier”; in the second, the contact between the speaker and the snowflakes is projected on the view of the horizon from where, as it were, the snow is flying to grab him. Similar, albeit less daring, constructions, were already present in the poetry of Fet. Thus, his textbook lines about the sun that . . . горячим светом / по листьям затрепетало (“Я пришел к тебе с приветом. . .”) [“. . . with hot light / started quivering on leaves” (“Ja prishel k tebe s privetom. . .”; Fet 1959, p. 254) follow the same principle of piling up participants. The portrayed situation consists of several basic predicates: “the sun shines on the leaves,” “the sun warms the leaves and the air,” “this creates a wind,” and “in the wind the leaves tremble.” Fet, fuses all this into a single syntactic structure, somewhat ungrammatical, but quite Pasternakian *avant la lettre*: “the sun with/by a hot light began to quiver along/on the leaves” (for more detail see Zholkovsky 1985).
- 10 See the famous demythologizations of Gogol and Pushkin in (Sinyavsky-Terts 1975a, 1975b).
- 11 See discussion in (Uspensky 1973).
- 12 Grigor’ev (1983, p. 178) correlates Khlebnikov “idiocy” with that of Prince Myshkin, a Dostoevsky character (!).
- 13 The make-believe character of the Symbolists’ grandstanding was noted by Osip Mandelstam, who maliciously hinted that Vyacheslav Ivanov’s “cosmic poetry” was reminiscent, recalled by Stepan Trofimovich Verkhovensky’s lyric-dramatic allegory, in which “even a mineral has several words to mouth” (“even, if I recall, a mineral, that is, a completely inanimate thing, did sing something”—Dostoevsky, *The Possessed*, I, 1, I) (Ronen 1983, p. 79). Incidentally, this is yet another instance of poetry by characters.
- 14 One cannot help noticing that Khlebnikov, in particular, as portrayed by Petr Miturich, looked very much like an “official,” although fictional, portrait of Kozma Prutkov (see the two portraits on pp. 00. 00)
- 15 Incidentally, megalomania and narcissism can be correlated with the set towards auto-communication, also characteristic of Khlebnikov (see Uspensky 1973). On megalomania and narcissism, particularly among the characters of Limonov and Sokolov, see (Zholkovsky 2016, pp. 283–304); on Limonov’s narcissism, see also (Smirnov 1983; Carden 1984; Matich 1986b; Zholkovsky 1994, pp. 145–75; on Sokolov see Matich 1986a; Johnson 1987; Zholkovsky 1987).
- 16 On the legitimacy of such parallels, see (Groys 1987, 1988; Zholkovsky 1992, 2016, pp. 33–50).
- 17 On Socialist Realism as a Stalinist counterpart of Classicism, see in more detail (Zholkovsky 1992, 2016, pp. 33–50).

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