

## VELIMIR CHLEBNIKOV'S 'ZVERINEC' AS A POETIC MANIFESTO

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Chlebnikov's prose poem 'Zverinec' is generally not considered a programmatic work; it is usually viewed merely as an early piece by a budding poet under the influence of Walt Whitman. However, as I will argue below, the poem may be read as a programmatic piece rejecting the Symbolist aesthetic and proposing a new poetics, in which images grow organically out of language and relations in the real world are "discovered" through the study of relations in language. The poet also introduces the notion that heterogeneous forms are varying expressions of an underlying unity. This theme, and the poetics by which it is expressed in 'Zverinec', can be traced throughout the whole of Chlebnikov's remarkably unified and coherent oeuvre.

'Zverinec' was significantly revised twice between 1909 and 1911. An examination of the poem's first variants is particularly illuminating for the study of Chlebnikov's movement away from Symbolism. In this article I will not deal specifically with the third version, a poetic protest against the establishment of the Duma, as this version has been discussed elsewhere at some length (Turbin 1981). I will examine instead the changes appearing in the poem's second version, reworked after plans to publish the poem in the journal *Apollon* fell through and Chlebnikov broke with Symbolism.

Chlebnikov sent the first variant of 'Zverinec' (1940: 356-357) to his mentor, Vjačeslav Ivanov, in 1909. It is formally the least experimental of the three, and also the least polemical in content. It contains the fewest disruptions of meter, and there is no explicit indication of a connection between

the caged animals and the Russian Symbolists. At the time of the poem's conception, Chlebnikov was a frequent visitor to Ivanov's Tower and a member of the newly founded Academy of Verse. He originally wrote 'Zverinec' in response to a poem by Ivanov, who considered the new arrival on the literary scene his protégé. Ivanov's 'Podsteregatelju', dedicated to his avid admirer in June 1909, refers to its addressee as a trapper ("podsteregatel'") and a hunter ("lovec, promyslivšij ulov"; Ivanov 1974: 340). In his poetic response, Chlebnikov proves his "trapping" skills by "caging" various birds and animals, cataloguing them and allotting each a brief poetic description.

In the second version of the poem, the imagery takes on a polemical edge: one of the animals, the shaggy lion, is identified as "kosmatovlasij Ivanov". Ivanov's incarnation as the king of the beasts accords with his leading role among contemporary poets, which earned him the appellations "King of Poets" and "Vjačeslav the Magnificent". Thus in this second variant of 'Zverinec', Chlebnikov has caged not merely a few zoo animals, but his own mentor, and, by implication, the other Symbolists as well. This is the variant Chlebnikov chose to publish in the miscellany *Sadok sudej I*, which marked the decisive break of its contributors (later to be dubbed "Futurists") with Symbolism. The title of this collection, suggested by the author of 'Zverinec' himself, reinforces the trapping semantics of the poem at the same time as it echoes its first line ("O, Sad, Sad!"): *sadok* here signifies at once a trap and a small garden, or zoo.

If the animals in the cages may be interpreted as representing the Symbolists, then the child wandering through the zoo in freedom may be the harbinger of the new poetics himself, with the childlike, primitivist view of the world Chlebnikov shared with his newfound literary friends (cf. Turbin 1981 and 1985). This world view pervades *Sadok sudej I*, which opens with Kamenskij's appeal in "Žit' čudesno": "Svežimi glazami / Vzgljani na lug, vzgljani!" (1910: 2) and features a number of short stories relating to childhood, including E. Nizen's 'Detskij raj' (1910: 25-32) and E. Guro's 'Detstvo' (1910: 58-65). For Chlebnikov, this fascination with the naive world view of children is linked to the primitivism of his earliest short poems, as well as the longer poems 'Žuravl' (1909), 'Lesnaja deva' (1911), and 'I i È' (1911-1912). To adopt the language of Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, by the second version of 'Zverinec' the age of the lion had given way to the reign of the child.

There is evidence that Chlebnikov associated the Symbolists with menagerie beasts as early as 1908, when he wrote in a letter to his father: "[Ja] nedavno [...] videl vsech: F. Sologuba, Gorodeckogo i drugich iz zverinca [...]" (1928-1933, 5: 284). The association of the Symbolists with zoo animals may have been inspired, or at least encouraged, by Sologub's well-known poem "My – plenennye zveri", composed in 1905. Indeed, it is Sologub whom Chlebnikov names first in his letter to his father, and it is very

likely that Chlebnikov was familiar with this poem, as he was fond of Sologub's work and knew much of his poetry by heart (Chardžiev 1997: 275).<sup>1</sup>

It is evident, however, that the animals in Chlebnikov's zoo represent more than simply Symbolist poets. The division of animals into species is analogous to the separation of mankind into races. On one level the zoo is a microcosm of the world, where each race is unique and valuable, yet hostile towards other peoples as Chlebnikov's Siberian husky is towards a cat. This analogy is reinforced by the explicit comparison of certain animals to Russians, Chinese, Arabs, and Mongolians. At the same time, many of the animals are compared satirically to different types of people, regardless of race: the fishwingers to nineteenth-century landowners, eagles to a child and a girl, guinea hens to loud matrons, a rhinoceros to an overthrown czar, seagulls to international businessmen, and falcons to Cossacks.<sup>2</sup>

Apart from these satirical comparisons, the animals may be seen as analogous to people on a deeper level as well. Chlebnikov views different individuals as various "illuminations" of one and the same head carved in white stone. This view is stated unambiguously in the short story 'Nikolaj' (1913):

К людям вообще можно относиться как к разным освещением одной и той же белой головы с белыми кудрями. Тогда бесконечное разнообразие представит вам созерцание лба и глаз в разных освещениях, борьба теней и света на одной и той же каменной голове, повторенной и старцами и детьми, дельцами и мечтателями бесконечное число раз. (1986: 518)

This passage may be compared to a scene from the later prose work, 'Malinovaja šaška' (1921), in which the light of a match creates the illusion of the disappearance of a woman's individual traits, which give way to thousands of flickering faces, one after another. Her head is likened first to a meadow in which flowers and souls blossom, disappear, and are replaced by new flowers and souls; then to a seat in a train, occupied first by one, then by another passenger:

Тысячи лиц, сменяя веснами друг друга, со страниц книг переходили на суточный постой на лицо одной из сестер. [...] Тысячи разнообразных милых глазок, как цветы, как однодневные бабочки появляются и исчезают на лице. Лицо делается лугом лиц, где на почве одни цветы сменяют другие и одни души – другие. [...] Как место в поезде занимает то одним, то другим человеком, так живая человеческая голова становится гостиницей путешествующих лиц. (1986: 559-560)

Later in the story, one of the sisters sets a skull on her head. In the flickering light, the skull appears alternately light and dark, as does her hair. The sight of the beautiful woman with the skull on her head holds great significance for the narrator, as evidenced by his words: “Dychanie tajny nosilos’ v vozduche” (1986: 561). He describes the two heads as a vision “beyond time”, stacked one on top of another, “reflected in some sort of mirror” (1986: 560). In the context of his description of the effects of the lighting, the great secret he felt he was witnessing was a revelation of the nature of unity and multiplicity. Unity here, as in other works by Chlebnikov, is represented by the skull. Rooted beyond time, it is directly linked to death, which strips us of the clothing of difference.

A parallel may be drawn between the skull and number in Chlebnikov’s conception of the universe. This is not only because the skull is the seat of reason, as number constitutes the basis of mathematics and logic. There exists a more graphic parallel: in the programmatic poem ‘Čisla’ (1912), Chlebnikov sees numbers as “dressed in animals, in their skins” (1986: 79). Numbers are equivalent to the skeletons of living creatures. The underlying formula of animal nature is the same, with changes in the value of its variables yielding the different species. In the commentary on ‘Čisla’, V.P. Grigor’ev and A.E. Parnis note that there even exists an unpublished poem in free verse in the same form as ‘Zverinec’ the subject of which is numbers, rather than animals (1986: 664). In Chlebnikov’s words, each species possesses its own “private numbers”, which die with it upon its extinction: “Ich [čisla – K.L.] unosili s soboj v mogilu uchodjaščie zveri, ličnye čisla svoego vida” (1986: 567). The comparison of constants of basic equations to skeletons and their changing variables to muscles and flesh is most clearly expressed in ‘Doski sud’by’ (1922):

Иногда я мысленно сравнивал числа уравнения, твердые в своей  
величине, с костяком тела, а величины  $m$ ,  $n$  – с мышцами и мясом  
туловища, приводящими в движение сказочных зверей.  
(1928-1933, 5: 474)

Thus throughout Chlebnikov’s oeuvre natural species occupy a special position as a very visual illustration of how multiplicity arises out of unity.

On the level of form, ‘Zverinec’ is notable for its rich assonance and alliteration. Chlebnikov’s sound play, however, is not motivated by a desire to create a musical effect, as in much Symbolist poetry. Rather, in the new poetics linguistic similarity largely determines word choice, imagery, and metaphor. Images are integrally connected with form, becoming themselves formal elements, as suggested by the line from the 1909 variant: “Gde ja išču razmer, gde zveri i ljudi byli by stopy” (1940: 357).<sup>3</sup> Chlebnikov’s new “meter”, whose feet are images organically derived from paronomastic rela-

tions in language, is the basis of the new poetics Chlebnikov promotes in this programmatic poem. Assonance and alliteration are not limited to isolated phonemes, but extend over phonetic strings, as in the line: "Gde los' celuet skvoz' izgorod' ploskorogogo bujvola" (1986: 186). Here the word "los'" is echoed in the words "skvoz'", "ploskorogogo", and "bujvola"; "ploskorogogo" is echoed in "bujvola"; and "izgorod'" finds resonance in "ploskorogogo". Similarly, throughout the poem the word designating the animal is frequently echoed, and often anagrammed, in the description that follows. Hence, for example, *obez'jany raznoobrazno zljatsja; slony [...] prosjat milostynju*; and *netopyri visjat oprokinuto*, and *Slovo o polku Igoreve* is associated with – indeed, almost defined by – its destruction by burning ("goret"). Paronomasia has become the essential device of poetic creation.

As a prose poem, 'Zverinec' breaks down the border between prose and poetry. Its uncertain generic status has been noted by a number of commentators (e.g., Uijterlinde 1986; Orlickij 1996). As Orlickij points out, the disintegration of literary borders is underlined by the mention of two authors known for their distinctly rhythmic prose – namely Gogol' and Nietzsche, as well as of *Slovo o polku Igoreve*, with its disputed generic status (Orlickij 1996: 108). A more recent formal precursor to 'Zverinec' that is not mentioned in the prose poem may be added to this list: Andrej Belyj's "symphonies".<sup>4</sup> But the borders shaken in 'Zverinec' are not only generic; the division between culture and nature, man and beast, is also weakened. As we have seen, animals are likened to people, and vice versa, and the relations of the animals are described in cultural terms (cf. Koževnikova 1996). Thus Chlebnikov not only applies Nadson's dictum that one must compare human affairs with nature, which he cites in an early manuscript (Chlebnikov 1996: 16); he reverses it as well, seeing human affairs in the mirror of nature. Yet it is noteworthy that the two sides of the comparison are by no means equal; despite their humbling situation, the animals' superiority to their human visitors is evident throughout the poem, as in the following line from the 1909 version: "Gde voennyj s vycholennym licom brosaet tigru zémli tol'ko potomu, čto tot veličestven" (1940: 356). Such hints at the inequality of man and beast create a certain tension, given the frequent comparison of animals to people and their behavior to cultural rituals and traditions.

Thus in various ways the establishment and erasure of limits converge in 'Zverinec'. The latter tendency links this composition with Chlebnikov's early primitivist works, which look back to primeval idylls where wholeness and unity reign. But unity is substantially disrupted here by the classing of animals into species, more or less hostile towards one another and towards man. This paradox is sensed by Nils Åke Nilsson, who notes that although the opening apostrophe ("O, Sad, Sad!") is linked to the title, the two also stand in contrast; whereas the first line recalls the original unity of Eden, the title image of the menagerie, or zoo, evokes associations of imprisonment and

separation (Nilsson 1991: 85). The simultaneous presence of these opposite movements – towards unity and towards separation, or multiplicity – is characteristic of Chlebnikov's thought, as Natal'ja Bašmakova comments:

Как ни тяготеет мышление [...] Хлебникова к размытому, целостному, детскому и первобытному видению мира, оно с одинаковой силой тяготеет к точному улавливанию многообразия природных форм и передачи этого многообразия подробным перечнем.  
(Bašmakova 1986: 141)

In 'Zverinec', the impulse towards unity appears to be outweighed by the segregating effect of cataloguing by species. The formal device of devoting one or more lines to each species separately is vividly reinforced by the visual image of the iron bars, introduced at the very beginning of the poem. This image, together with the cataloguing of the species, points up the differences between the animals, rather than their common animal nature. A key line suggests, however, that the range of different animals described in the poem should be seen as various aspects of a whole; like different religious faiths, the different species represent various ways of looking at God:

Где мы начинаем думать, что веры – затихающие струи волн,  
разбег которых – виды.  
И что на свете потому так много зверей, что они умеют по-разному видеть бога. (1986: 186)

Although these lines are not included in the poem's original version, a letter to Vjačeslav Ivanov prefacing the first version makes it clear that it was precisely these thoughts that inspired the writing of the poem. Here the young poet meditates:

[...] виды – дети вер и [...] веры – младенческие виды. Один и тот же камень разбил на две струи человечество, дав буддизм и Ислам, и непрерывный стержень животного бытия, родив тигра и ладью пустыни. [...] Виды потому виды, что их звери умели по-разному видеть божество (лик). Волнующие нас веры суть лишь более бледный отпечаток древле действовавших сил, создавших некогда виды. (1940: 356)

The highly original concept of religions as "the subsiding surge of waves", whose "dispersion" gave rise to species, is deserving of discussion. This "wave" metaphor suggests not only that a primal disturbance created difference from unity, as waves are created when a stone is thrown into water, but also that when the waves eventually subside completely, the unity will be restored. This original, undisturbed unity corresponds on the strictly

semantic level to the lost paradise evoked repeatedly in the poem ("O, Sad, Sad!"). On the formal level, it finds a parallel in the repetition of the same word at the beginning of each line, after which the descriptions move in various semantic directions.

The revelation of an intrinsic link between religions and species disclosed in the second of the lines cited above was doubtlessly motivated, at least in part, by a complex process of poetic etymology. The poet certainly perceived an "etymological" connection not only between the words *vidy* and *videt'*, but also between *zveri* and *very*. Striving to unveil the secrets contained in language, which he felt to be a source of wisdom, the poet would have hypothesized a close semantic connection between *zveri* and *very*. It is likely that he saw the string *ver-* as a common stem in the two words. It is also possible that, even at this early date, he already associated the letter "z" with reflection, a theory set forth in the 1915 essay 'Z i ego okolica'. This would explain why he saw species as the reflection, or "offspring", of beliefs, rather than vice versa – he may have interpreted the word *zveri* as *z* (reflection) + *very* (of faith).<sup>5</sup> The poet would have surmised moreover that *vidy* are so called because of their way of seeing; the *zveri/very* connection suggests that what they see is the Divine. The cohesion of the two relevant lines is further strengthened by the echo of "razbeg" in the phrase "po-raznomu videt' boga".

The motif of multiple perspectives on a single unity appears in other works by Chlebnikov as well. In 'Vetka verby' (1922), the author suggests that various writing instruments (a pussy willow twig, a porcupine quill, and a blackthorn spine) are conducive to different writing styles and/or themes, each of which gives a unique perspective on "the infinite". As early as 1909-1910 Chlebnikov comments on his use of still another instrument in writing certain polemical works: the feather of an eagle (1986: 61). The use of the different penpoints is expected to provide some kind of "resonance":

Эта статья пишется вербой другим взором в бесконечное, в "без имени", другим способом видеть е<го>.

Я не знаю, какое созвучие дают все вместе эти три ручки писателя. (1986: 573)

Similarly, in 'Svojasi' (1919), the poet displays a desire to create a similar "resonance" through the juxtaposition of a number of his major works, each of which he associates with a specific culture, time period, and tone.

The relation between animals and the Divine reappears as a theme in the late poem, "Ra – vidjaščij oči svoi..." (1921). Ra, introduced in the first line as the deified sun, sees itself not only as a reflection in the Volga River, but also in the living animals and plants in the river's vicinity – a mouse, a frog, the grass, and the fish. Ra – which not only signifies the deified sun, as

in Egyptian mythology, but is also the ancient name given to the area between the Volga and the Don – finds its extension in “thousands of animals and plants”:

Ра – продолженный в тысяче зверей и растений,  
 Ра – дерево с живыми, бегающими и думающими листьями,  
 испускающими шорохи, стоны.

(1986: 148)

Ra is likened to a tree with living, thinking leaves. Whereas in ‘Zverinec’ creatures view the Divine in different ways, in this poem they themselves represent different aspects of the Divine.

We have seen, then, how ‘Zverinec’ in its second variant may be read as a polemic against the Symbolists and a poetic manifesto of new devices, including the creation of images and metaphors through paronomasia and the blurring of generic boundaries. The prose poem, moreover, introduces the motifs of multiplicity in unity and multiple perspectives on a single concept that will become key throughout the entire corpus of Chlebnikov’s writings. It would be an error, however, to ignore the Futurist’s debt to Symbolism in a discussion of his break with his literary predecessors; indeed, it is remarkable how well ‘Zverinec’ fulfills the task of art as formulated by Vladimir Solov’ev, whose views on aesthetics profoundly influenced the second generation of Symbolists:

[...] на место данных внешних отношений между божественным, человеческим и природным элементами установить в общем и частности, во всем и каждом, внутренние органические отношения этих трех начал. (Solov’ev 1990: 744)

The success with which Chlebnikov establishes the internal organic relations between the divine, the human, and the natural in his early poem, the original version of which he proudly sent to his mentor Vjačeslav Ivanov, should serve as a warning against overlooking his Symbolist roots. A comprehensive examination of these roots, however, is a topic requiring further study.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> That Chlebnikov continued to liken in his mind the set of his friends, whoever they might be, to a menagerie is suggested by the narrator’s comment in the



1915 short story 'Ka': "Ja imeju svoj nebol'soj zverinec družej, mne dorogich svoej porodistost'ju" (1986: 524).

The comparison of poets to the collection of an amateur natural scientist as a polemical device is not without precedent in Russian literature – we find it also in Puškin's comparison of insects to poets in 'Sobranie nasekomych' (1829). However, 'Zverinec' lacks the bitter irony of Puškin's poem: the poets he compares to insects are his enemies, "pinned up" for display in the glass cases of his epigrams. Nevertheless, it is possible to read the following line as an oblique reference to Puškin's poem: "I bulavka, na kotoruju nasekomych sadit redko nositel' česti, vernosti i dolga!" (1986: 187).

<sup>2</sup> This may bring to mind another work by Puškin: the unfinished 'Skazka o medvediche' (1830), in which various animals are satirically equated with human counterparts – the wolf with a landowner; the fat-tail beaver with a merchant; the lazy marmot with an abbot; and the rabbit with a peasant. As Nilsson points out, comparison of animals to people is frequent also in the folk genre, the *basnja* (Nilsson 1991: 85).

<sup>3</sup> The pronounced iambic impulse of this phrase is exemplary of the higher degree of metrical regularity that characterizes the whole of the poem's first version.

<sup>4</sup> Like Belyj's innovative prose, 'Zverinec' dissolves the borders that separate not only literary genres, but also the various arts. In the writings of both authors, this synaesthetic impulse is symptomatic of a desire for unity in general. Whereas Belyj's prose strives consciously towards integration with music, in Chlebnikov's prose poem the painterly aspect is more pronounced than the musical. Dubbed by one scholar a "tableau vivant" (Bašmakova 1986: 169), the work's extraordinarily vivid and colorful images recall the visual arts. With just a few strokes, the poet captures the distinct character of each bird and beast in turn.

<sup>5</sup> Although I have not found proof that Chlebnikov associated the letter "z" with reflection as early as 1909, unpublished manuscripts provide evidence that even before 1910 he had already begun assigning meanings to sounds (Kiktev 1991: 22).

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