

**1917: RUSSIA IN REVOLUTION.
HISTORY, CULTURE AND MEMORY**

**1917: RUSIA EN REVOLUCIÓN.
HISTORIA, CULTURA Y MEMORIA**

**1917: РОССИЯ В ПЕРИОД РЕВОЛЮЦИИ.
ИСТОРИЯ, КУЛЬТУРА И ПАМЯТЬ**

Suárez-Cuadros, S.J., Valdera-Gil, J.M.,
del Arco-Blanco, M.A., Barros-García, B.,
Quero-Gervilla, E.F. (Eds.)



1917

**RUSSIA IN REVOLUTION
HISTORY, CULTURE AND MEMORY**

1917

**RUSIA EN REVOLUCIÓN
HISTORIA, CULTURA Y MEMORIA**

1917

**РОССИЯ В ПЕРИОД
РЕВОЛЮЦИИ
ИСТОРИЯ, КУЛЬТУРА И ПАМЯТЬ**

S. J. Suárez-Cuadros, J. M. Valdera-Gil, M. A. del Arco-Blanco,
B. Barros-García, E. F. Quero-Gervilla (Eds.)



URSS

МОСКВА

ББК 63.3(2)7 66.1 66.61(1) 87.6

Редакционная коллегия:

S. J. Suárez-Cuadros, J. M. Valdera-Gil, M. A. del Arco-Blanco,
B. Barros-García, E. F. Quero-Gervilla.

1917: Russia in Revolution. History, Culture and Memory

1917: Rusia en Revolución. Historia, cultura y memoria

1917: Россия в период революции. История, культура и память.

М.: ЛЕНАНД, 2019. — 532 с.

Данная книга представляет собой коллекцию научных трудов, посвящённых изучению Русской Революции 1917 года и отражающих современные дискуссии в этой области при мультидисциплинарном подходе (история, филология, политология, социология, культурология и т. д.).

Сборник разделен на четыре части, каждая из которых посвящена соответствующей тематике: «Теоретические подходы к Русской Революции», «Отображение Русской Революции в искусстве», «Влияние и последствия Русской Революции», «Испания и Русская Революция».

Книга рекомендуется специалистам, студентам, а также всем, кто интересуется Русской Революцией 1917 года, и может расцениваться как источник справочной информации по этой тематике.

Esta obra reúne más de cuarenta trabajos académicos consagrados al estudio de la Revolución Rusa de 1917. El libro, en el que han participado especialistas de diversas disciplinas y procedencias, refleja las ricas discusiones que 100 años después se siguen produciendo en torno a la Revolución de Octubre.

El volumen está organizado alrededor de cuatro grandes ejes temáticos. El primero presenta distintos enfoques teóricos sobre la Revolución, con contribuciones en las que se reflexiona sobre las causas, la naturaleza y consecuencias de lo sucedido en Rusia en 1917. El segundo bloque se ocupa de las expresiones artísticas de la Revolución o derivadas de ella. En esta sección encontraremos trabajos dedicados a la literatura, al arte o al pensamiento, donde se trata de ofrecer una visión compleja, heterogénea de los fenómenos culturales que hicieron posibles (o caracterizaron) las sociedades de antes y después de Octubre. En tercer lugar, un buen número de investigaciones examinan el impacto y las consecuencias de la Revolución Rusa, evidenciando que fue un fenómeno de consecuencias globales que todavía perduran. Finalmente, la monografía se cierra con una sección sobre la Revolución Soviética y España, que muestra como los acontecimientos revolucionarios de 1917 en Rusia, dejaron su impronta en la historia española del siglo XX.

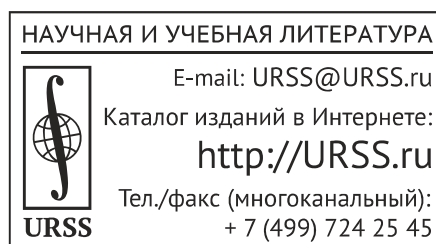
El libro está recomendado tanto para especialistas del ámbito universitario, como para el público general interesado en la Revolución Rusa de 1917.

ООО «ЛЕНАНД». 117312, Москва, пр-т Шестидесятилетия Октября, д. 11А, стр. 11.
Формат 60×90/16. Печ. л. 33,25.

ISBN 978-5-9710-5743-7

© ЛЕНАНД, 2019

24478 ID 242318



Velimir Chlebnikov Between the Revolutions and the Civil War

LUCA CORTESI, *Università Ca' Foscari di Venezia*
luca.cortesi@unive.it

The aim of this study is to define and contextualise Velimir Chlebnikov's point of view of the events that took place in Russia during the revolutionary and post-revolutionary periods. This research focuses on the way in which the writer, explicitly or not, expresses his own position, and primarily concerns the analysis of the narrative prose writings of the "late" period of his literary production (1917-1922). By considering other prose texts belonging to different genres it was possible to find further tools to identify Chlebnikov's position. In fact, the analysis of the *vozzvanija*, private letters and diary entries proved to be particularly significant. Other biographical memoirs (Petrovskij, 1929; Aseeva, 1996) were also consulted. Taking inspiration from studies devoted to Chlebnikov's poetic production of the late period (Vroon, 2000; Maksimova, 2004), this paper aims to highlight the phases in the development of the writer's position.

Literary criticism of the Soviet era adopted a kind of periodization of literary works that considers the development of the *oeuvre* of any author as influenced by the course of political events. When applied to the literary works of those authors whose activity intertwined with events such as the October Revolution, the *oeuvre* is thus divided into works composed before and after 1917 (Starkina, 2009: 119). Chlebnikov's case is no exception and, considering the example of the most recently published *Sobranie Sočinenij*, this kind of categorization continues to this day.⁶ However, the mere subdivision in pre- and post-revolutionary periods often appears inadequate to understand Chlebnikov's position. A position which is, indeed, extremely intricate and sometimes even in contradiction with his best-known ideological beliefs. However, this is not the only factor of relevance. As Parnis (1978: 225, n. 11) and Starkina (2009: 119) have reported, in Chlebnikov's case the event of universal consequence that generated such a radical change in his *corpus*, thus allowing its division into two periods, is the First World War. It is befitting, therefore, to consider not only the ties between World War I and the Revolution (and subsequently, between the Revolution and Civil War) but it is also necessary to step backwards to analyse Chlebnikov's *Weltanschauung* in the pre-war period, as this may help to understand his early ideological views. The most astounding fact is that in many of

⁶ In the references to the critical editions of Chlebnikov's literary corpus the title is indicated with its acronym, the volume in Roman numbers and the pages in arabic numbers. See "References" for the complete references to the texts.

his literary works, above all in his prose, one can find a description or a reference to openly biographical events. In a perspective of “aesthetical experiencing of facts”, R. Cooke argues that Chlebnikov did not distinguish his own life from his literature: “indeed, if some memoirists are guilty of ‘mythologizing’ the poet’s life, then Chlebnikov himself is guilty of some ‘self-mythologizing’” (1987: 4; See also McLean, 1974: 147). This is what R. Duganov (1988: 15) identified as *avtobiografizm*, a peculiar trait of Chlebnikov’s prose, to which we shall return later in this study. Given the complexity of Chlebnikovian texts, this study by no means claims to provide a thorough definition of Chlebnikov’s position. It aims instead at highlighting its intricacy, with the purpose of being a valuable contribution to the study of the poet’s late prose.

In order to mark the development of Chlebnikov’s position towards the events of the October Revolution, it is worthwhile briefly recalling some episodes of the poet’s life.

An important phase for the formation of the poet’s political and social beliefs is to be found in the year 1903, when the young Chlebnikov, at that time a student at the University of Kazan’, spent a month in jail due to his participation in a students’ social-democratic demonstration, that was harshly repressed, and Chlebnikov, having refused to leave, was arrested and imprisoned (Stepanov, 1936: 10-11; Cooke, 1987: 5; Starkina, 2007: 22-24). In 1908 Chlebnikov moved to St. Petersburg, and in October of the same year Austria-Hungary announced the annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina, an event which deeply affected the Russian milieu of that period. Almost simultaneously the *Vozzvanie učaščichsja slavjan*, of which Chlebnikov was the sole author, was published in the Petersburg magazine *Večer*. This appeal marked the beginning of a kind of literary production strongly influenced by Slavophile and Panslavic beliefs that did not end until the beginning of the First World War (Parnis, 1978; Starkina, 2007: 119-125). Only in a 1914 *anketa* and in later autobiographical memories did he admit to being the author of this appeal, ironically defined as “kriklivoe vozzvanie k slavjanam” (SS, VI.2, 240-241). This text brings together those ideological views that were strengthening in Russia in reaction to the Bosnian crisis. The “Slavic question”, the contrast between the Germans and the Slavs, and Pan-Slavism in its broadest sense, contributed to shaping one of the most important ideological currents of Chlebnikov’s early literature (Parnis, 1978: 224-225).

It is important to mention the following, emblematic words, that are part of the final exhortation of the 1908 appeal: “Svjaščennaja i neobchodimaja, grjaduščaja i blizkaja vojna za poprannye prava slavjan, privetstvuju tebjja!” (SS, VI.1, 198). They allow the reader to understand the deep zeal that moved the young Chlebnikov. He expressed it as well in many other works, where “the authorial *persona* assumes the role of warrior leader exhorting fellow Slavs, or

fellow countrymen, to take up arms for the good of the cause” (Cooke, 1987: 106). In this context, Chlebnikov heralds a ‘holy and necessary war’, which finds its *raison d’être* in the retribution that springs from the conflict between German and Slavic worlds (SS, VI.1, 197; Cooke, 1987: 107-110). This commitment does not remain contained within the genre of *vozzvanie*, but permeates poems and lyrics as well (Cooke, 1987: 105-108), and persists until 1913, when four texts are published in *Slavjanin*, a conservative and anti-Western magazine. There the writer strongly states his belligerent Pan-Slavic views (Parnis, 1978: 229-241). As McLean argued (1974: 90-91), the peculiar trait of Chlebnikov’s pre-war works is a kind of mythopoiesis that draws its inspiration from ancient Slavic culture and folklore. These motifs are heavily affected by ideological richness, as they are made the vehicle of politically-connoted meaning.

However, considering how the poet’s attitude towards war later changed and the fact that Chlebnikov witnessed events that radically affected not only twentieth-century history, but also his own *mirovozzrenie*, allows us to profile the reasons why he so drastically reconsidered his stance. There are two possible explanations: the first is that the young Chlebnikov had such a romantic, epic perception of war that was so strongly influenced by folklore that he did not consider the deaths and massacres. This perception was then gradually undermined by the dramatic events of WW1 (McLean, 1974: 91; Cooke: 1987, 110); second, his conscription in the Tsarist army in 1916-1917 was so profoundly disturbing that he changed his mind radically.

It is interesting to notice that one of the best-known Chlebnikovian motifs, whereby he attempted to find a justification for the deaths caused by the 1905 battle of Tsushima (SS, VI.2, 10), on which his research of the *zakony vremeni* is grounded, shows some inconsistencies. In the two texts related to this dramatic event, *Svojasi* (1919) and the preface to *Doski sud’by* (1920-1922),⁷ the writer implicitly links concern for the defeat of the Russian fleet that clashes with his juvenile stance (See Cooke, 1987: 114-115; Starkina, 2007: 229). Still, having witnessed the events of the 1914-1917 period, he went through such intense turmoil as to repudiate his Slavophile-oriented ideology. After a period of belligerent fury, the impact of war on him was so crucial that he came back to his senses. (T, 28).

After the February Revolution, the change in the political situation coincided more or less with the end of Chlebnikov’s military service. The letters dating back to the conscription period show how unbearable it had been for him and give an idea of the humiliation he had had to suffer. Thanks to N.A. Kul’bin and D. Petrovskij’s interventions, and after several psychiatric examinations that finally led him to being granted furlough (Cooke, 1987: 16-

⁷ The lyrics in which the battle of Tsushima is mentioned have been intentionally kept out of this analysis, as they were not considered functional to the study of this paper.

17, 132-141; Starkina, 2007: 167-175, 314-315), in April 1917 he composed the *Vozzvanie Predsedatelej Zemnogo Šara* which, with its strong antimilitarist content, was probably influenced not only by the dramatic events of WWI, but also by his shocking experience in the army. Some commentators have noticed the paradox “of this former belligerent Pan-Slav warrior suffering horrors in a reserve infantry regiment” (Cooke, 1987: 132). For the whole mandate of the Provisional Government, his strong anti-war stance coincided with a rather naïve revolutionary militancy, since if the line of “war until victory” pursued by Miljukov first and Kerenskij later did not find a supporter in Chlebnikov, the necessity to cease the war, for which the Bolsheviks fought, might have been more congenial to him. Moreover, the way in which Kerenskij dealt with the Kornilov affair, constraining Russians to take arms against other Russians, had acquired the features of a Civil War harbinger and the poet had reacted not indifferently. In his 1918 memoirs *Oktjabr’ na Neve*, Chlebnikov refers to Kerenskij with the deepest scorn.

However, Cooke (1987, 138) noticed that Chlebnikov did not fully share the Bolshevik perspective, seeing instead the Revolution not as a prelude to a proletarian political conquest, but as a mass upheaval against the oppressors, as a sort of “retribution” which, by balancing and harmonizing an unbalanced situation, would have potentially allowed the establishment of his “Government of the Terrestrial Globe”. For this reason, Starkina (2007: 178-179) states that even if the poet looked kindly upon the February and October Revolutions, his ideological position was never unambiguous. On these grounds some scholars argue that he gave his support to the October Revolution for material needs and, more importantly, to have his works published. In fact, by supporting the October Revolution Chlebnikov gained employment at several Bolshevik media and propaganda organizations, where he even managed to obtain a positive acknowledgment for his works (Cooke, 1987: 140). It shall not be forgotten that many of his texts were published in different Bolshevik magazines and that the most significant collaboration he had was with the magazine *Krasnyj vojn*, between 1918 and 1919 (Parnis, 1980: 106). Between 1919 and 1921 the poet took part in a series of events organized by the Bolsheviks (SS, VI.2, 200-202; Cooke, 1987: 139; Starkina, 2007: 244-247, 318-319; Stepanov, 1975: 210-212), and in the 1921 expedition to Persia with the Red Army (Parnis, 1967). Whatever the reasons were that moved him to collaborate so closely with the Red Army, Chlebnikov’s stance in this period clashes with his desperate requests to be discharged from the Tsarist army. Probably, the reasons for such a drastic change are to be sought in the fact that, when he left for Persia in 1921, he was never forced to participate in military operations and, differently to what he had experienced before, the Bolshevik army “accorded him a freedom of movement and operation that was vital for his spiritual well-being. Hence, in spite of

previous offensives against the ‘monster war’, Khlebnikov was now quite happy to participate as a volunteer in the military campaign of a ‘liberating’ army” (Cooke, 1987: 140. See also Stepanov, 1936: 58). From a wider perspective, Chlebnikov’s stance is particularly controversial not only in this context, but from another point of view, too. Before the expedition to Persia, thus between 1919 and 1920, Chlebnikov had experienced both the consequences of the October Revolution and the outbreak of Civil War. He probably witnessed some violent episodes of reprisal that occurred in Char’kov (Cooke, 1987: 140-141). There Chlebnikov spent some months as a patient in an asylum to avoid forced conscription in the White Army (Starkina, 2007; 2013). When considering how harshly the poet depicts the violent actions carried out both by the Reds and the Whites in his literary works of that time, it is plausible that on this very occasion he lost any kind of faith in any unambiguously positive interpretation of the Revolution (See SS, III, 210-212), thus denying any possibility for which “ideological” reasons could be assumed as the grounds on which he so frequently collaborated with the Bolshevik media and with the Red Army. He transposed the sense of the Revolution from a political environment to a purely ethic-aesthetical one in harmony with his utopian theories of “States of Time” because his longing for a “Government of the Terrestrial Globe” of presidents-wisemen, of platonic reminiscence, had been frustrated.

Textual analysis

The following textual analysis is divided into two parts: first, the 1918 prose pieces *Nikto ne budet otricat’...* and *Oktjabr’ na Neve* are analysed, and the second part is instead dedicated to *Malinovaja šaška*, dated 1921. The first two texts represent a clear example of what Duganov (1988) describes as a peculiar feature of Chlebnikov’s prose: the concept of *avtobiografizm*. According to Duganov, Chlebnikov’s autobiographism springs from the will to identify the direct relationships between the writer’s “I” and the “world” and to sublimate them in a literary form that Duganov defines *ličnyj èpos*. In this subjective, individual epic the general leanings of all the prose works of Chlebnikov and many of his contemporaries are to be found: for the first quarter of the Twentieth century, it is possible to speak of the birth of a new literary genre, the “epic of the subject” (Duganov, 1988: 34). Moreover, Duganov has suggested two categories for the analysis of Chlebnikovian prose and in doing so he even considered those texts that are not part of the wider label of *chudožestvennye prozy*. In this way he distinguished between *prjamyje vospominanija* (direct memories) and *kosvennye vospominanija* (indirect memories). Even if in the narration there is almost no explicit reference to the literary “self” in the latter category, the presence of the writer’s “I” cannot be deleted, and the reader perceives it from a different, “side”

perspective (Duganov, 1988: 18-19).

Two of the examined texts enter Duganov's former category (*Oktjabr' na Neve; Nikto ne budet otricat'...*), and one the latter (*Malinovaja šaška*). All texts were analysed by taking (auto)biographical sources into account, which made it possible to be very precise about the narrated events and their respective contexts.

Oktjabr' na Neve and *Nikto ne budet otricat'...* are two prose pieces dated 1918. Being essentially autobiographical works, they mostly deal with the memories and the experiences of the writer himself during the first months after the October Revolution. McLean argues that the peculiar feature of these two texts is that they mark a decisive turn in Chlebnikov's *modus operandi*: for the first time in his literary production, the narrator's "I" is moved to the foreground, and the autobiographical or "journalistic" style used by the poet is the symptom of a gradual process of overlapping between writer and first character in the text (1974, 148. See also Parnis, 1967: 162-163). In recounting the facts in first person, the evaluation of the author-narrator, who observes his contemporary world from a moral point of view, is made the center of the narration (Maksimova, 2004: 10).

Oktjabr' na Neve was originally commissioned by the editor of the magazine *Krasnyj voin*, on the occasion of the first anniversary of the October Revolution. The title seems to be attributable to the editor himself and itself this text can be considered one of the first examples of literary works bearing documentary value about the Revolution in the Russian-Soviet literary tradition (Parnis, 1980: 106-108). Here Chlebnikov depicts the events that happened in 1917, starting in March, when he was discharged from the army, and moved from Char'kov to Moscow and Petergrad along with Petnikov and Petrovskij. In the very first page the writer lists a series of events that took place in the spring of 1917.⁸ With a swift sequence of chronologically distant scenes from Chlebnikov's life, one can recognise the furlough obtained at the beginning of March 1917; the journey Char'kov-Moscow with Petnikov; a variant of his appeal *Vozzvanie Predsedatelej Zemnogo Šara*, and the participation in the Arts Festival (25th May). Before commencing the narration of some episodes from October 1917, Chlebnikov introduces several scenes that break the chronological order of his recalling of 1917. They are memories within memories, episodes that date back to the period of his enlistment in the Tsarist army, and to when he was deployed near Saratov (winter 1916), and to just after the furlough. The fundamental principle recurring in the whole text is antimilitarism, which upholds in full the spirit of Chlebnikov's revolutionary militancy. Here emerges the strong utopian certainty of establishing a "Government of the Terrestrial Globe", a government of wise men, established as a reaction to *their* 'three years of war'

⁸ For the precise context of all the cited events, see Starkina: 2007, 307-320.

(SS, V, 179) from which Chlebnikov totally dissociates himself. The utopian Government of the Terrestrial Globe stands out as a possible solution for the current situation of the country: the goal of Chlebnikov and his companions is to blind the monster-war which has exhausted combatants and civilians so deeply that the dead must rise again to take up arms against the war. A situation that, having frustrated the hopes that the February Revolution bore within itself, the Provisional Government still thought it could reverse. The poet expresses all his contempt towards the line adopted by Kerenskij and defines him the “insect-in-chief”, demanding his immediate arrest. The poet refutes the legitimacy of the Provisional Government, and addresses Kerenskij inflecting his name as feminine, with the deepest contempt. These attacks on Kerenskij’s *persona*, and consequently, on his policies, are expressed in a series of asides where the writer recalls having sent letters to Mariinskij Palace or made phone calls to the Winter Palace, all episodes that happened for real (Parnis, 1980: 107-108).

The setting then moves to Moscow. And it is with the description of the chimneystacks in the *Zamoskvoreč’*e district that the writer introduces his own view of the Revolution. By bestowing a human appearance on the course of events (SS, V, 185-186), Chlebnikov establishes an analogy between the Revolution and the figure of Qurrat-al-‘Ayn (Vroon, 2001: 335-362). This very analogy allows us to grasp the writer’s position towards the Bolshevik cause, as he expresses it in this text: it is a cause of social equality, bearing an essentially positive value, yet only time will show how the situation develops, as represented by Chlebnikov in a metaphor:

Ja osobenno ljubil Zamoskvoreč’e i tri zavodskih trub, točno sveči tverdoj rukoj zažžennye zdes’ [...] No nad vsem<i> zolotym</i> kupol<ami> gospodstvuet vychodjaščij iz gromadnoj ruki svetil’nik trech zavodskih trub, železnaja lestnica vedet na veršinu ich, po nej inogda podymaetsja čelovek, svjaščennik svečej pered licom iz sedoj zavodskoj kopoti (SS, V, 185).

To understand this metaphor, it is necessary to highlight its implicit contrast, found in the three chimney stacks, which resemble an “industrial” candle holder and stand above the golden church-domes. The man climbing on them is like a “minister”, an intermediary who stands in front of the face of a new, superior and divine-like entity, which is forming from the soot and will impose itself on the past. This new face has indeed the features of a *lik*, and the poet is not able to determine yet if the entity that it represents will be benevolent or malevolent. Chlebnikov provides a comment with a hint of irony: “Kto on, èto lico? Drug ili vrag? [...] My ešče ne znaem, my tol’ko smotrim. No èti novye sveči nevedomomu vladyke gospodstvujut nad starym chramom” (SS, V, 186). The writer concludes with a sentence that only apparently proposes a positive solution to the ethical question highlighted within it. However, if one considers

it from the point of view of the text and of the historical context, it is likely that the conclusion of the text expresses profound disenchantment:

Zdes' že ja v pervye perelistal stranicy knigi mertvych, kogda videl verenicu rodných u sadika Lomonosova v dlinnoj očeredi v celuju ulicu, tolpivšichsja u vchoda v chranilišče mertvych. Pervaja zaglavnaja bukva novych dneň svobody tak často pišet'sja černilami smerti (SS, V, 186).

This passage allows for a dual interpretation: with the very last sentence, Chlebnikov might seem to justify somehow the carnage that took place after the 1917 events, seeing it as an unavoidable price to pay, as a means to a superior end. Nevertheless, the same conclusive sentence gives way to another, rather ironical reading, that would demonstrate a sort of real and tangible concern of the writer for the dramatic turn of events. If we are inclined to this second interpretation, it is possible to find evidence in other works as well, such as *Nikto ne budet otricat' ...*, a brief work of prose whose composition in 1918 is attested by the historical context of the depicted facts. Its setting can be placed in January of the same year, during the skirmishes that led the Bolsheviks to take the city, since it is the writer himself who provides a precise date (26th January 1918) when recounting the “sacrificial” burning of the pages of Flaubert’s novel, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (SS, V, 178). In the opening, Chlebnikov introduces several scenes that reveal how he perceived the arrival of the Civil War in Astrachan’. The writer depicts episodes that really occurred in the city with aloof disengagement. In the first part of the text he presents very raw circumstances: the skirmishes near the Kremlin of Astrachan’, the dismay of death, a consequence of a civil war, to which the poet cannot resign himself. Chlebnikov depicts with anguish a sudden decline, caused by the tragic occurrences experienced by the soldiers coming back from the front. Man surrenders to his most feline nature, without law or constraint: “Èto byla igra, zabava ljudej iz okopov, oblako vojny, prinesennoe imi sjuda, - ja znal, čto odin čerkes, possorivšis' i vyskakivaja iz duchana, ostavljaet bol'she trupov, čem èta dnevnaja vojna. Vpročem, zdes' že [...] dva voina pljasali nad trupom obyvatelja” (SS, V, 177).

The eschatological-like tension dominating the prose piece is then solved by Chlebnikov in the subsequent passages, when he describes a sort of “danse macabre” of the exhausting light bulb filament and the act of burning Flaubert’s novel. They are both metaphorical scenes in which one can find the essence of the writer’s position. A dismayed witness of the cruel events that the Civil War brought, Chlebnikov recognises, in the spasms of the filament, the downfall of a whole epoch, its culture and its values. Here the poet does not give any assessment, he takes no part, and this may be a consequence of his fear of death and carnage, as if to underline that no ideological nor political stance can be a

viable justification. Yet Chlebnikov inserts a positive resolution, that is to be found in his identification with the burning of Flaubert's novel: the sacrifice he is presenting to the year 1918 sees as a ritual victim 'all those consumed names of human fantasies and everyday life' (SS, V, 178). The gruesomeness of a fratricidal war seems to convey the cathartic need to reinvent a cultural and value system to substitute the old ones, now obsolete, that are turned over 'in Flaubert's rhythmic words like gravel in a wave of transparent water' (SS, V, 178). The very end of the text echoes the gravity of the last sentence of *Oktjabr 'na Neve*, but in this case, any possible ambiguity is denied. The idea of "the superiority of the species", which Chlebnikov admits to having felt when comparing his own human skull with the raw, bestial shapes of a chimpanzee's skull some days before the narrated events occur, wanes with the final, obviously rhetorical question, which is a clear reference to the trouble afflicting Russia at that time: "A nedavno, za dva dnja pered ètim, ja gordilsja svojim čerepom čeloveka, sravnivaja s nim čerep s kostjanistym grebnem i svirepymi zubami šimpanze. Ja byl polon vidovoj gordosti. U vas ona est'?" (SS, V, 178).

Malinovaja šaška is one of Chlebnikov's longest prose writings and, similarly to what has been examined so far, it draws from the writer's life. The background leading to the composition of this text can be ascribed to the period spent in Char'kov, with the frequent sojourns at Sinjakov's estate in the years 1919-1921. Undoubtedly, the main character in this work is D. Petrovskij, and the narrated events revolve completely around his literary *alter ego*, "P.". It is possible to find most of the characterising traits of P. in another prose text that was originally published as *I vot on priechal...* and in SS is presented as an "alternative version" of *Malinovaja šaška* (SS, V, 366). It is important to analyse this short sketch, as within it one can find basically every episode where P. is depicted, even if its structure could be described as draft-like. Two elements in particular stand out: firstly, there is no mention at all of the Sinjakov sisters, who in the short story play the determining role of balancing and belieing all of P.'s boasting; secondly, the composition of this draft is dated 1919, two years before the composition date attributed to the short story. As McLean argues, the fact that this probably-previous sketch to *Malinovaja šaška* shows a totally different portrait of P., leads us to suppose that "this story is much more than lightly disguised biography" (1974: 174).

In detail, *Malinovaja šaška* can be divided into two sections. The opening is marked by the exclusivity of the omniscient and impersonal narrating voice. Chlebnikov portrays the situation of a country overrun by war, with an intense and continuous succession of chronologically distant events, "waves" that upset the Ukrainian region contextualising the setting of the story during the Soviet "wave". As McLean (1974: 174-175) states, the short story takes place during the first phase of the Civil War, when the Bolsheviks had not yet reached military

superiority and the country was experiencing a critical situation.

Chlebnikov refers to the relationship between the forming Soviet government and the local population, as in the sentence: “v gorode znali: rabočie byli protiv!” (SS, V, 207), to point at the intrinsic paradox of a revolution opposed by those same workers, who were expected to be its fiercest supporters. This is a stance that is by no means official; it is rumoured in the alleys or remains confined to the households. Chlebnikov brings to the reader’s attention what should have been the dismay spreading among the people, a casualty in the clashes of the conflicting factions. Nor less important is the description of the waning of a nation and the dawn of a new social order, pervaded by a sort of cruel irony:

Bežavšie iz Moskvy, kaki z začumlennogo goroda, ljudi, kakim-to splavom boga i čerta zachvativšie mestva v poezde [...] èti ljudi s užasom videli za soboj dogonjavšij ich prizrak Moskvy, točno želtje zuby konja nizko naklonjalis’ nad čvetami, sryvaja cvety. Raem, s pulemetom u vchoda, čtoby ne razbežalis’, vytjanuv ruki, rajskie žiteli, byl sever. Kon’ graždanskoj vojny, naklonjaja želtje zuby, rval i el travu ljudej (SS, V, 206-207).

This passage could easily lead to an ideological misunderstanding, which can be found in the depiction of the escape from Moscow, as it was an infected city, from the northern part of Russia, represented in a metaphor as a ‘heaven with a machine-gun aiming at its entrance’ to prevent the inhabitants from escaping south, to Ukraine, one of the regions of the former Empire that had become the scene of a massive White Army conscription. It is in the presence of the horse, an animal that occupies a peculiar place in Chlebnikov’s complex symbology and that in this case assumes the meaning of death, that any supposition as to the writer’s position of this kind becomes inconsistent.⁹

In detail, the writer’s observations on people’s circumstances, expressed reiterating the construction *ne pomogal/o*, seem to be a justification for the subsequent assessment: “ljudi perestali byt’ ljud’mi”, which well represents what should have been the situation in the inhabited centers afflicted by the fury of war (SS, V, 207).

Here Chlebnikov brings to the foreground the atmosphere of strong human and social tension, which not only leads to the negation of any kind of harmonious coexistence among people, who have now become surrogates of sentient beings or “clockwork puppets”, but at the same time produces a series of relationships among individuals, who are only bound by the fear of death, in which even the most insignificant action can lead to the most tragic outcome: “[...] kukly s pružinami smerti v grudi, ne znavšie, vzorvutsja li oni ili net ot slov “dorogoj

⁹ In his article *Koni Chlebnikova*, W.G. Weststeijn states that the contexts in which the figure of the horse appears in Chlebnikov’s *oeuvre* are those in which scenes of battles or death occur. See Weststeijn, 2004: 331-341.

tovarišč”, “Kotoryj čas?”, ot prikosnovenija ruki. Smert provolakoj oputyvala ljudej” (SS, V, 207).

An analysis of these examples, if joined with other details scattered in the first part of the story, leans towards the possibility that behind the mere depiction of the facts there is a somewhat explicit stance. This interpretation is reinforced by a comment of the curators of SS, who identify in the “subtext” disclosed by the writer the cause for which he himself expected rather passionate responses to this short story.¹⁰

With a change of scene, Chlebnikov moves the setting from North to South, and from the generic national situation moves to the specific case of the *locus amoenus* of Sinjakov’s estate. Here the second part of the story develops, which in some passages seems to move away from a typical narrative form and become a quasi-theatrical verbal crossfire. McLean believes that both the irony and the humor pervading this section have the function of tempering the tension that emerged in the first one: “their product is not at all what one would expect from the manner in which the story begins. Rather than enforce it as grim or black humor, they overcome it” (1974: 177)

Chlebnikov’s use of irony in this work consists of a catharsis that juxtaposes the two single parts of the story. Indeed, in the second part there is a sort of overturning of the content expressed in the first: the role of death itself, presented with gloom in the descriptive part, is mocked and belittled in the dialogue. From the scenes where P. dances an unrestrained *gopak*, wrapped in his župan holding a skull on his head, as if to mock its quintessential symbolic appearance; the acts of war are tempered analogously, with a representation that from a traditional character shapes P. into a caricature. The caricatural warrior-like image that the reader realises is proper to him, is pushed to the limits of the grotesque, with the quasi-theatrical device of the dyed sabre, which is “supposed to be emblematic of all the blood he has spilled, is as virginal as he is [...] Its validity as a symbol of war and death is as acceptable as is that of P. as a warrior” (McLean, 1974: 178). After unveiling the mask, any action of P. is hopelessly compromised: no matter how credible the events narrated by P. may sound in their uncompromising gravity, every other character contributes to undermining their trustfulness, thus creating the impression that he is only bragging and being pretentious. And it is in this last element that the catharsis of the Chlebnikovian “tragicomedy” is made possible: the minimisation of the figure of death achieved either by the carnivalesque parody which P. enacts, or with the symbolic overturning of the tragic situation that Russia was experiencing at that time, highlights the inner necessity of the poet. Not being able to find a viable justification for the horrors of the Civil War, Chlebnikov aims somehow

¹⁰ “Nad zaglavijem pomečeno: “Otryvok”, pod zaglavijem: “Abmob” (v obratnom čtenii – “Bomba”, čto, verovatno, označalo ožidanje ostroj reakcij na tekst)” (SS, V, 429).

to obtain a sort of “purification”, of detachment from events, by mocking their importance.

The circumstances narrated in this short story draw on real events. In summer 1919 Chlebnikov was a guest at the *dača* of the Sinjakov sisters, near Char'kov. Although the Civil War was raging, Petrovskij, at that time deployed with the “Red Cossacks”, reached the *dača* with the purpose of meeting the poet (SS, V, 429. See also Aseeva, 1996: 58-59). Later on, Petrovskij himself recalled the meetings with Chlebnikov, also adding some anecdotes that highlight how sincere the poet's interest in the political and military events that were taking place in those years was: “On očen' interesovalsja moim učastiem v revoljucii, rasprašival o byte partisan [...] I sam mečtal prinjat' dejatel'noe učastie v revoljucii” (Petrovskij, 1929: 46).

Petrovskij's comment accurately contextualises the poet's interest in the Revolution. However, whether Chlebnikov would have wished to take an active part in the political-ideological overturn is still to be verified. Another encounter followed a year later. Petrovskij here reports that Chlebnikov's enthusiasm towards the Revolution and its consequences had changed: “Ego ugneta revoljucija, kak ona vyjavljalas' togda, no verit' on chotel i bodrilsja” (Petrovskij, 1929: 47).

It is noteworthy that Petrovskij's memoir ends (1929: 48) with the observation that Chlebnikov was attributed esteem by his fellow soldiers in Caricyn, despite his posthumous fame as being a “poet for poets” or “impossible to read”. Petrovskij portrays the writer in a way that is more attractive for future generations, to whom his spiritual heritage will be transmitted. This is the figure of a poet, who seemed like a *jurodivyj* (Petrovskij, 1929: 46), and as such, he is made the object of profound respect, regardless of the abstraction of his lucubrations.

The degree of reliability of the anecdotes reported by Petrovskij shall not be discussed here; however, considering the generally negative opinion towards the work of Chlebnikov that spread from the Thirties onwards, it becomes clear that Petrovskij's point of view was not shared by the establishment. Referring to ideological beliefs, the situation changed in the following decades. In the critical assessments of the late thirties of the literary works of the WWI period that remained substantially unaltered until the Seventies, Chlebnikov is presented as a ‘naïve dreamer, who opposes war in the name of a utopian world of peace’ (Imposti, 2016: 56). This kind of remark probably gave rise to several detrimental articles published in *Novyj Mir*. In these articles, Chlebnikov is accused of “ideological vagueness”, of “formalism in literature”; he is accused of not having understood the true meaning of the October Revolution, due to his anarcho-individualist or Slavophile-reactionary beliefs (Timofeev, 1941; Jakovlev, 1948). This stigma of “ideological vagueness” has defined Chlebnikov's *oeuvre* for such

a long time that it has negatively influenced the already scarce availability of the poet's *corpus*, even though no formal bans have prevented its distribution. From this point of view, one can explain certain attempts to reconcile Chlebnikov's works and the Marxist ideology of the Seventies. It is however worthwhile considering that in the here-examined prose pieces Chlebnikov shows an ambiguous position, conveying the idea of the inner conflict he felt. The generic and doctrinary accusation of "ideological vagueness" with which the Soviet establishment unjustly charged him is rooted in a more complex *mirovozzrenie*. If one considers the development of his ideological beliefs starting from his juvenile experiences to his deployment in the Tsarist army, a different kind of figure is then depicted: a writer who is perfectly conscious of his becoming *I*, who never shies from his involvement in the world. Welcoming the advent of the October Revolution, he is not only hoping for the war to end, but also for the laying of the groundwork for the utopian state of the *Predsedatelej Zemnogo Šara*. And as the expectations of a positive resolution in the transition towards a new social order are frustrated, Chlebnikov witnesses a series of cruel events, which he reports with no misgivings in his post-revolutionary *oeuvre*. Although he himself experienced the contradiction between the need to provide for himself and the horrors, the reprisals and the executions that took place in the years of the Civil War, in his prose Chlebnikov emphatically tries to express the need for catharsis and spiritual renewal in a Russia haunted by the dreadful consequences of the Revolution.

REFERENCES

- Aseeva, K.M. (1996). Velimir Chlebnikov v razmyšlenijach i vospominanijach sovremennikov (po fonodokumentam V.D. Duvakina 1960-70 godov). In *Vestnik Obščestva Velimira Chlebnikova* (pp. 58-59), T. I. Moskva: Gileja.
- Cooke, R. (1987). *Velimir Khlebnikov. A Critical Study*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Duganov, R. (1988). Zavtra pišu sebja v proze... In Chlebnikov, V. (Ed.), *Utes iz buduščego* (pp. 5-36). Ėlista: Kalmyckoe knižnoe izdatel'stvo.
- Chlebnikov, V. (1986). *Tvorenija*, pod obščej redakciej M. Poljakova. Moskva: Sovetskij pisatel'.
- Chlebnikov, V. (2000-2006). *Sobranie sočinenij v šesti tomach*, pod obščej redakciej R.V. Duganova. Moskva: IMLI RAN.
- Imposti, G.E. (2016). La Prima Guerra Mondiale e la sua ricezione nella letteratura russa dell'epoca. Una memoria smarrita e recuperata. In Panaccione, A. (ed.), *Oltre il confine. Europa e Russia dal 1917 a oggi* (pp.

- 55-58). Milano: Feltrinelli.
- Jakovlev, B. (1948). Poèt dlja èstetov. *Novyj Mir*, 5, 207-231.
- Kisin, V. (1922). Oktjabr' v otaženijach sovremennoj literatury, in *Iz nedr zemli* (pp. 101-107). Rjazan': Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel'stvo.
- Maksimova, N.V. (2004). Poèzija Velimira Chlebnikova 1917-1922. Problematika i poètika (avtoreferat dis. na soisk. učen. step. kand. filol. nauk). Astrachan', Rossijskaja Federacija.
- McLean, R. (1974). The prose of Velimir Xlebnikov (Ph.D. Dissertation). Princeton University, USA.
- Parnis, A.E. (1967), V. Chlebnikov v revoljucionnom Giljane (novye materialy). *Narody Azii i Afriki*, 5, 156-164.
- Parnis, A.E. (1978), Južnoslavjanskaja tema Velimira Chlebnikova. Novye materialy k tvorčeskoj biografii poëta. In *Zarubežnye slavjane i russkaja kul'tura* (pp. 223-251). Leningrad: Nauka.
- Parnis, A.E. (1980). V. Chlebnikov – sotrudnik "Krasnogo vojna". *Literaturnoe obozrenie*, 2, 105-111.
- Petrovskij, D.V. (1929). *Vospominanija o Chlebnikove*. Moskva: Federacija.
- Starkina, S. (2007). *Velimir Chlebnikov*. Moskva: Molodaja Gvardia.
- Starkina, S. (2009). Vojna v tvorčeskoj biografii V. Chlebnikova: zametki k teme. In *Velimir Xlebnikov, poète futurien* (pp. 119-134). Lyon: CESAL, Université Jean Moulin Lyon 3.
- Stepanov, N. (1936). Biografičeskij očerk. In Chlebnikov, V. (Ed.), *Izbrannye stichotvorenija* (pp. 8-77). Moskva: Sovetskij pisatel'.
- Stepanov, N. (1975). *Velimir Chlebnikov. Žizn' i tvorčestvo*. Moskva: Sovetskij pisatel'.
- Timofeev, L. (1941). Knigi o Majakovskom. *Novyj Mir*, 1, 201-213.
- Vroon, R. (2000). A Poet's Abdication: Velimir Khlebnikov's 'Otkaz' and Its Pretexts. *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 78(4), 671-687.
- Vroon, R. (2001). Qurrat-al-'Ayn and the Image of Asia in Velimir Chlebnikov's Post-revolutionary Oeuvre. *Russian Literature*, L, 335-362.
- Weststeijn, W.G. (2004). Koni Chlebnikova. *Russian Literature*, LVI, 331-341.