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Title: Poetic Pragmatics and Velimir Khlebnikov's *Zangezi*

Abstract:

In a 1921 letter to a friend, Velimir Khlebnikov expressed frustration with his audience's unwillingness to believe his pronouncements on time and language: "If people do not want to learn my art of foreseeing the future," he wrote, "I will teach it to horses." Khlebnikov believed that his writings carried a message which needed to be heard and accepted by the public in order for the utopian future he desired to be realized. This paper discusses Khlebnikov's last major work, the *sverkhpovest'* (super-saga) *Zangezi* (1922), as part of the poet's universalist project. Previous scholarship has analyzed *Zangezi* primarily as a literary artifact, elaborating on issues of intertextuality, structure, and language. I propose that to fully understand the text, it is necessary to take seriously Khlebnikov's own approach to his art, which blurred the boundaries between the literary and non-literary. Bringing extra-textual evidence from his letters and notes to bear on my reading of the text, I argue that, while writing *Zangezi*, Khlebnikov was preoccupied by the problem of convincing his audience of the truth of his discoveries and that this communicative problem is thematized in the text itself. I approach *Zangezi* through the lens of pragmatics, using J. L. Austin's and Judith Butler's work on speech-act theory to analyze the text as a communicative gesture, intended to have a real effect in the world, which is either successfully or unsuccessfully received by the audience. This approach justifies the extension of my analysis to look at the reactions to several posthumous productions of *Zangezi*, considering professional criticism, newspaper reviews, and internet comments. Comparison of the ways in which *Zangezi* has been received by audiences with the supra-literary nature of the text itself sheds light on the relationship between art as contemplation and art as transformation, and on the relationship of language to meaning.