

**VELIMIR KHLEBNIKOV**

**1922–2022**

*One Hundred Years of a Myth*

edited by

***Luca Cortesi***

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*Velimir Khlebnikov 1922-2022. One Hundred Years of a Myth*

edited by Luca Cortesi and Gabriella Elina Imposti

*Велимир Хлебников 1922-2022. Сто лет мифа*

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Ronald Vroon

## KHLEBNIKOV AND WHITMAN A REAPPRAISAL

**Abstract.** Walt Whitman's influence on Velimir Khlebnikov has been universally acknowledged but frequently poorly understood and too superficially characterized because of the impact of Kornei Chukovskii's claim that Khlebnikov was explicitly parodying Whitman in his early poem *Zverinets* and because Khlebnikov's clearly positive assessment of Whitman in the last years of his life could easily be projected on his whole life's work, though Khlebnikov himself categorically denied that Whitman had influenced his pre-revolutionary poetry. In the present study we pay particular attention to certain key paratexts in collections of Whitman's verse in translations of Kornei Chukovskii, focusing in particular on the collection which Khlebnikov (according to one eyewitness) kept in his possession in 1921–1922, to determine how the paratexts of that edition might have influenced his reception of the American bard.

**Keywords.** Khlebnikov, Chukovskii, Bucke, Whitman, paratexts.

**Аннотация.** Влияние Уолта Уитмена на Велимира Хлебникова общепризнано, но плохо изучено и обычно поверхностно характеризуется на основе замечаний Корнея Чуковского о том, что Хлебников откровенно пародировал Уитмена в своей ранней поэме «Зверинец», и что явно положительная оценка Уитмена Хлебниковым в последние годы его жизни можно закономерно проецировать на его «жизнь и творчество» в целом, хотя сам Хлебников категорически отрицал влияние Уитмена на его дореволюционные стихи. В настоящем исследовании мы рассматриваем некоторые ключевые паратексты в сборниках стихов Уитмена, переведенных Чуковским, обращая особое внимание на тот сборник, который (по свидетельству одного очевидца) Хлебников возил с собой в 1921–1922 гг., чтобы определить, как паратексты этого издания могли повлиять на хлебниковскую рецепцию американского барда.

**Ключевые слова.** Хлебников, Чуковский, Бёкк, Уитмен, паратексты.

The history of Walt Whitman's reception in Russia has been reviewed and documented in a number of studies, leaving the clear picture of a poet who, though familiar to readers through the last four decades of the nineteenth century, became a major influence on Russian poetry and poetics only in the first two decades of the twentieth (see, *inter alia*, [Allen 1975](#), [Abieva 1986](#), [Chukovskii 1966](#): 241–262, [Evich 2007](#), [Leighton 1982](#), [Orlitskii 2018](#)). Two writers served as the major transmitters of his legacy: the Russian Symbolist Konstantin Bal'mont and Kornei Chukovskii, a poet, journalist and literary critic best known today for the children's verse he wrote between 1915 and 1930 (see [Leighton 1982](#); [Podol'skaia 1992](#)). Bal'mont's early contributions to the popularization of Whitman were limited to a few essays and translations published in periodicals between 1904 and 1910, followed by a very substantial collection of translations – more than 200 pages from *Leaves of Grass* – published in 1911 under the title *Pobegi travy*, with a brief preface ([Uitman 1911](#)). Chukovskii also began translating Whitman in the early 1900s, at about the same time as Bal'mont, but his first translated collection of Whitman's verse appeared earlier, in 1907, under a title that profiled the translator as much as the translatee: *Poet anarchist Uot Uitman. Perevod v stikhakh i kharakteristika* ([Chukovskii 1907](#)). It contained a relatively modest thirty-seven pages of translated poetry (21–57) sandwiched between a twelve-page biographical introduction (9–20) and a twenty-one-page essay on his poetry and philosophy (59–79), followed by a three-page postscript on the Russian reception of Whitman, “Russkoe o Uitmane” (81–83).

As the content of this edition testifies, Chukovskii was not only a translator, but also an astute self-promoter. The biographical introduction and the *kharakteristika*, both borrowing heavily from two previously published articles on Whitman ([Chukovskii 1906a](#) and [1906b](#)) maintain a polemical stance toward other interpreters

and translators of Whitman as Chukovskii stakes his claim as Whitman's chief Russian exponent. Indeed, the three-page postscript, "Russkoe o Uitmane" ([Chukovskii 1907](#)) highlights errors made by previous translators and commentators, concluding with a brief critique of Bal'mont, Chukovskii's chief rival.

Many of Khlebnikov's editors and critics have commented on Whitman and how the latter's writing might have influenced Khlebnikov. Regrettably, many of these remarks are based on an inadequate study either of Khlebnikov's works or of the materials on and by Whitman that were accessible to him. Typical is the following remark made by Khlebnikov's editor Nikolai Stepanov in 1936:

Далеко не случайно, что уже в то время [после революции 1905 г. – RV] особенно высоко ценил Хлебников великого поэта американской демократии Уота Уитмана, с которым был знаком как по переводам, так и в оригинале. Уот Уитман, которого он называл «космическим психоприемником», близок был Хлебникову своим пантеистическим слиянием с природой, своим бунтарским утопизмом ([Stepanov 1936](#): 37).

In a somewhat more reserved fashion Vladimir Markov, while recognizing that Whitman's prosody probably influenced Khlebnikov's adoption of free verse in his last long poems in 1921–22, also opines that:

Khlebnikov's free verse may go back to Kuzmin, his admitted master.... Another influence must have been Walt Whitman, who is often mentioned in connection with Khlebnikov's early work, "Zverinets." At the time Khlebnikov must have been familiar with Kornei Chukovsky's translation of Whitman, which appeared in 1907, and it is understandable that he would have been attracted by the American poet's pantheism. In 1921, when he was writing his late poems, Khlebnikov "enjoyed

listening to readings from Whitman in English, though he had difficulty in understanding the language,” and he used to say that Whitman “has no equal among poets” ([Markov 1962](#): 156).

These assessments are troublesome for several reasons. First, while Khlebnikov was indeed in a position to read Whitman’s poetry in Russian in Chukovskii’s translations of 1907 and earlier, he was insufficiently familiar with English to appreciate the contents, let alone the prosodic novelty, of Whitman’s verse (see in this connection, the commentary to *Zverinets* in [SS V](#): 394), and in fact wrote far less poetry in free verse before the Revolution than after. Second, we need a broader context to understand Stepanov’s and Markov’s citing of Dmitrii Kozlov’s memoirs here. Speaking of Whitman to Kozlov, Khlebnikov did indeed say, “Drugogo podobnogo emu – net”, but goes on to explain:

Пушкин, Сервантес, Данте, Руставели слишком человечны, пожалуй *только* человечны. Но и они – Эльбрусы, сравнительно с другими... Поэты рождаются один на тысячу лет. Как и Ньютоны, Галилеи, Марксы и Ленины...

Одни пронизывают взором звездную твердь, другие припадают ухом к сырой земле...

Одни только ногой в современности, а на 99% в будущем, другие только в современности...

Кому надо было родиться три тысячи лет тому назад, напр., Розанову, а кому жить двести лет спустя ([Kozlov 1927](#): 179).

Thus, Khlebnikov is comparing Whitman with other poets, but less in terms of their poetics than the chronotopes they privilege.

Third, in the prerevolutionary period Khlebnikov almost always mentions Whitman in tandem with Chukovskii and has virtually nothing to say about the American poet’s verse or his poetics. His mention of the American poet in this period generally

appears in his critiques of Kornei Chukovskii, who wanted to present Whitman as the world's first Futurist ([Chukovskii 1913](#)). In doing so Khlebnikov and other Futurists saw him as undercutting their own claim to originality and importance as social and cultural innovators. To the extent that any commentary on Whitman is discernable in Khlebnikov's responses to Chukovskii's claim, he appears to be disdainful of Chukovskii's public pronouncements – in lectures or in print – about Whitman's political and social views, in particular his defense of democracy. Khlebnikov writes in October 1913:

I

Вы, волны грязи и порока и буря мерзости душевной!  
Вы, Чуковск<ие>, Яблонов<ские>! Знайте, у нас есть  
звезды, есть и рука кормчего, и нашей ладье не  
страшны ваша осада и приступ.

Словесный пират Чуковский с топором Уитмана  
вскочил на испытывавшую бурю ладью, чтоб завладеть  
местом кормчего и сокровищами бега.

Но разве не видите уже его труп, плавающего в  
волнах?

II

Пристав Чуковский вчера предложил нам отдохнуть,  
соснуть в участке Уитмана и какой-то *кратии*. Но  
гордые кони Пржевальского, презрительно фыркнув,  
отказались. Узда скифа, кою вы можете видеть на  
Чертомлыцкой вазе, осталась висеть в воздухе ([NP](#): 343,  
[SS](#) VI.1: 219).<sup>1</sup>

As T. Grits notes in his commentary on this polemical outburst ([NP](#): 462–464), Khlebnikov is here responding to an essay Chukovskii published in the newspaper “Russkoe slovo” on June 4, 1913 ([Chukovskii 1913](#)) in which he praises Whitman, not for his radical poetics, but for his radical politics, which for him means his defense of democracy. That is what Khlebnikov apparently has in mind when

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<sup>1</sup> See also Khlebnikov's disparaging remarks about Chukovskii in the rough draft of the “Rykaiushchii Parnas” draft, [SS](#) VI.1: 343.



he accuses Chukovskii of inviting Russia's new, homegrown Futurists to "sosnut' v uchastke Uitmama i kakoi-to *kratii*" (i.e. "demokratii" – RV), an invitation Khlebnikov roundly rejects.

Fourth, both Stepanov and Markov project Khlebnikov's unambiguously articulated admiration for Whitman in the postrevolutionary years to his entire poetic career.<sup>2</sup> This projection proves to be problematic in assessing Khlebnikov's evolving attitude toward the American poet and the various contexts in which he encountered Whitman's oeuvre over his own lifetime. How, in other words, are we to account for the apparent contradiction between Khlebnikov's negative reaction to Chukovskii's "Whitmanophilia" in 1913 and his expressions of admiration for Whitman in the post-revolutionary period? One possible answer is that Khlebnikov deeply resented surrendering the honors of Futurist primacy to one outside of Russia (he reacted with similar antipathy to what he perceived as Marinetti's condescending attitude toward Russian Futurism). Another answer, which we pursue here, is to demonstrate that Khlebnikov's admiration for Whitman was a post-revolutionary phenomenon awakened by considerations having more to do with Whitman's status as a prophetic figure than a Futurist *avant la lettre*.

In building a case for this hypothesis we must consider both 1) Khlebnikov's own assessment of Whitman's influence, and 2) the texts available to him in familiarizing (and/or refamiliarizing) himself with Whitman's life and works. The two factors are occasionally intertwined. Khlebnikov's assessment of Whitman's influence is most clearly and unequivocally expressed in a source

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<sup>2</sup> So does Chukovskii. As late as the 1960s he writes: "Велемир [так!] Хлебников в начале своего литературного поприща находился под сильным влиянием американского барда. По словам его друга Д. Козлова, поэт 'очень любил слушать Уитмена по-английски, хотя он не вполне понимал английский язык'" ([Chukovskii 1966](#): 251). What Chukovskii fails to mention is that Kozlov made Khlebnikov's acquaintance only in late 1921, and therefore we can safely conclude only that toward the end of his life Khlebnikov liked to hear Whitman read aloud in English.

first cited by A. Parnis, a literary sketch on the occasion of Khlebnikov's death composed by A. Borodin, a Baku colleague of Khlebnikov who was also a specialist on Whitman (see [T](#): 679, [Khlebnikov 2001](#): 663 and [SS](#) V: 394; see also [Korovin 2019](#); regrettably Korovin's lecture and the book about which he is speaking ([Borodin 1922b](#)) were not accessible to the author of this essay at the time of writing) and for a time head of the Red Star Naval University (Morskoi universitet "Krasnaia zvezda") in Baku, where Khlebnikov publicly announced his final discovery of the Laws of Time. Borodin writes:

К. Чуковский в своей книге об Уитмэне писал, между прочим, что Х. "откровенно пародировал в своей поэме 'Зверинец' Уитмэновскую 'Песнь о самом себе'" (33 отрывка). Когда я заговорил об этом с В. В. он решительно заявил, что познакомился с У. уже после того, как были написаны вещи, позволяющие думать о влиянии или заимствовании ([Borodin 1922a](#): 4).<sup>3</sup>

A. E. Parnis, in his commentary on Khlebnikov's *Zverinets*, cites an unpublished essay by Khlebnikov, tentatively dated 1920, where we read:

Говор<ят>, я подра<жаю> Уитмену, да, если имет<ь> так<ое> же чис<ло> гла<з>, как и у вас, значит подраж<ать> вам, если смотреть на то же солнце, как и вы, значит подраж<ать> вам, то я подра<жаю> Уитм<ену> ([Khlebnikov 2001](#): 663).

Chukovskii's own more qualified assessment of Khlebnikov's reception of Whitman is well documented by Parnis ([T](#): 679; see also [Khlebnikov 2001](#): 663).

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<sup>3</sup> I would like to express my gratitude to Iurii Borisovich Orlitskii for making a copy of Borodin's article available to me.

Despite the evidence Parnis cites, a well-known Western scholar dismissed Khlebnikov's repudiation, claiming that Khlebnikov's denial of any familiarity with Whitman prior to the composition of Whitmanesque verse early in his career, is "a not uncommon way of repudiating allegations of 'influence' or 'plagiarism'. The whole question of a possible influence...is, however, as it seems to me, of minor interest" ([Nilsson 1991](#): 50). But the author of the words I have just cited also notes that "Whitman's influence on Russian poetry in those years was not insignificant. Chlebnikov has himself testified to his enthusiasm. In the last years of his life, he is said to have carried Chukovskii's book in his pocket" ([Nilsson 1991](#): 48).

Such is indeed the case. But how are we to explain such contradictory evidence? One important key to this conundrum may be found in the very book Khlebnikov was carrying around with him. Of this book memoirist Olga Samorodova wrote in 1928:

Единственная книга, которую он всюду возил с собою, был Уитмен в переводе Чуковского. Отзыв Чуковского о нем, как о русском Уитмене, он, видимо, высоко ценил, и, когда давал мне прочесть строки, указывающие на это сходство, я впервые увидела в его лице отражение внутренней гордости ([Samorodova 1972](#): 191).

These words are not entirely accurate. It is not clear exactly when or where Chukovskii calls Khlebnikov "the Russian Whitman", and Khlebnikov's own remarks made to A. Borodin suggest that the similarities between his verse and Whitman's were to be attributed to something other than poetic "influence", which he categorically denied.

That "something other" is readily identified once we ascertain what book Khlebnikov was carrying about with him. Before turning to that book and examining its contents, let us briefly review the

publication history of Chukovskii's Whitman collections, the main channels through which Khlebnikov familiarized himself with the American poet's life and works. The first edition, as we have already noted, came out in 1907 in St. Petersburg bearing the title *Poet-anarkhist Uot Uitmen. Perevod v stikhakh i kharakteristika* ([Chukovskii 1907](#)). The main critical essay in the book, "Uot Uitmen: poet" (59-79) focuses on two major aspects of the poetry: Whitman's "democratism" and his individualism.

The second edition of Chukovskii's Whitman came out in Moscow in 1914 under the title *Poeziia griadushchei demokratii. Uot Uitmen* ([Chukovskii 1914](#)). It differs in many respects from the first edition: a preface by Ilia Efimovich Repin (5-6) opens the book, followed by an apologetic note ("Ot sostavitelia", 7-8) wherein Chukovskii expresses his displeasure with the previous edition and informs us that he has revised all his translations. He reintroduces Whitman as a poet of collective love and peace in opposition to the extravagant individualism of the Symbolist followers of Nietzsche (7-8). There follows a much longer biographical introduction (9-65) and a much larger selection of poems in verse translation (66-103). The volume concludes with a lengthier essay, "Russkoe o Uitmene" (104-124), on Russian-language news reports and essays (often themselves translated from non-Russian sources, e.g., the writing of William James and Knut Hamsun); the essay concludes with a brief excursus on "Uitmen i futuristy" (122-124). This 1914 edition is particularly germane vis-à-vis Khlebnikov in that 1) it contains a translation of the section of Whitman's *Song of Myself* (section 33) that, according to Chukovskii, Khlebnikov's *Zverinets* resembles (*Zverinets* was composed in 1909); 2) in his excursus on Whitman and Russia's Futurists Chukovskii for the first time asserts in print that Khlebnikov's *Zverinets* "otkrovenno parodiroval Uitmena" ([Chukovskii 1914](#): 122), which Khlebnikov, as we have seen, explicitly denied.

The third edition ([Chukovskii 1918](#)), *Poeziia griadushchei demokrattii. Uot Uitmen* appeared in Petrograd. The prefatory remarks by Repin have been removed, and the note “Ot sostavitelia” has been retitled “Ot avtora” (5-8) revised and enlarged to include a brief bibliography of books in English on Whitman, and here Chukovskii mentions in passing Canadian psychiatrist and theosophist Richard Maurice Bucke, who befriended and wrote about Whitman and is now best known for a theosophical classic titled *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind* ([Bucke 1901](#)), which appeared soon thereafter in Russian translation ([Bëkk 1915](#)).<sup>4</sup> There follows a lengthy essay. “Uot Uitmen. 1819-1892” (9-76), subtitled in the table of contents “kritiko-bibliograficheskaia stat’ia”, which repeats much of what is given in the 1914 edition, often reordered. The essay diverges in many respects from that biographical essay in the 1914 edition; for our purposes one of the most important differences is the insertion of a footnote to a passage describing Whitman’s “epiphany”, the moment in 1853 or 1854 when he experienced that oneness with God and the universe described by Bucke as “cosmic consciousness”; Chukovskii here references the pages in the 1915 Petrograd translation of Bucke’s book that are dedicated to Whitman. After citing the pages, he summarizes some of Bucke’s views as follows: “Richard Moris Bëkk stavit Uitmena riadom s takimi Bogovidtsami, kak Iisus Khristos i Budda” ([Chukovskii 1918](#): 22). After the biographic essay we find the translations of Whitman’s verse (77-129), a selection as substantial as that which one finds in the 1914 edition, but with a

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<sup>4</sup> Chukovskii dates the Russian translation “1914” (see citation that follows, [Chukovskii 1918](#): 149); the Russian State Library catalogue dates the book “1915”. Bucke is already mentioned in the first edition of Chukovskii’s Whitman translations, but only among a list of friends of the poet ([Chukovskii 1907](#): 82). Here, in the 1918 edition, he is simply identified as one of several “idolopoklonniki” of Whitman whom G. W. Allen later includes among those “mythmakers” whose legends about Whitman were exposed and debunked by later biographers of the poet ([Allen 1975](#): 312).

different selection and with some works retranslated. One of the pieces carried over from the 1914 edition is the 33<sup>rd</sup> section of *Song of Myself* that Chukovskii claimed Khlebnikov had parodied in his verse, a claim which, as in the second edition, is set forth in the essay “Russkoe o Uitmene” (130-149) with a similar review of essays and news about Whitman in Russian in the writings of Knut Hamsun, William James and others. Among the major differences between this essay and the one with the same title in the second edition are 1) the addition of a brief note on Ilya Repin’s view of Whitman with an extensive citation from the preface by Repin in the second edition; 2) a new sub-chapter on “Uitmen v istorii amerikanskoi slovesnosti” and, perhaps most significantly, 3) a brief discourse on Whitman’s “Cosmic Consciousness” (149). This paratext may be our most important key to understanding Khlebnikov’s reception of Whitman toward the end of his life. It reads, in part:

#### **Космическое сознание Уитмэна**

Намъ уже случалось упоминать любопытный трудъ канадскаго доктора Ричарда Мориса Бёкка «Космическое Сознаніе», гдѣ Уитмэнъ сопоставляется съ Буддой, Иисусомъ Христомъ, Магометомъ и другими основателями міровыхъ религій. Такихъ неумѣренныхъ почитателей Уитмэна одинъ англійскій поэтъ язвительно назвалъ уитманьяками. Въ 1914 году [так!] эта «уитманіакальная» книга вышла въ русскомъ переводѣ въ издательствѣ «Новый Человѣкъ». Авторъ затѣялъ собрать и изслѣдовать всевозможные человѣческіе документы, относящіеся къ «озареніямъ» и «просвѣтленіямъ» избранныхъ экстатическихъ душъ, вышедшихъ за грани обычнаго сознанія, внезапно увѣровавшихъ въ божественность міра, въ бессмертіе душъ, глянувшихъ изъ времени въ вѣчность. Коллекція у него получилась богатая, и выводы, къ которымъ онъ пришелъ, любопытны ([Chukovskii 1918](#): 149).

The book ends with a postface, “Uitmen i demokratiia” (150–153) by Anatolii Lunacharskii.

The fourth edition of Chukovskii’s book ([Chukovskii 1919](#)) is of the greatest importance for us because we know it is the one Khlebnikov would not part with in the last two years of his life – the copy has been preserved in the Khlebnikov museum in Astrakhan.<sup>5</sup> The fourth edition was published in Moscow, under the same title as the second and third editions, in the new orthography, by the Petrograd Soviet of Workers and Red Army Deputies. This is essentially a reprint of the 1918 edition, without Lunacharskii’s essay<sup>6</sup> “Uitmen i demokratiia”, but including the subsection on “Kosmicheskoe soznanie Uitmena” ([Chukovskii 1919](#): 119-120). Khlebnikov probably acquired a copy of the book in the winter or spring of 1919, when he was in Petersburg or Moscow, or after he arrived in Khar’kov.

It is curious that Khlebnikov’s mentions of Whitman are clustered at the beginning and end of his creative lifespan. The remarks made prior to the First World War, as we have seen, are intended to defend the originality of the Cubo-Futurists and his own as well. The mentions of Whitman (or memoirists’ evidence of his interest in Whitman) that start up again in 1918 after four years of silence are mostly focused, not on his verse, but on his persona, on his status as a prophetic figure. The first such reference is in the tabular essay *Poedinok s Khammurabi* (1918) where Whitman and Jesus Christ are seen as comparable champions of the poor and defenders of the God of the poor: “liubotesy i bogotesy boga bednykh” ([SS VI.1](#): 296-97).

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<sup>5</sup> I would like to express my gratitude to Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Mamaev, former director of the museum, for informing me that the museum housed this book, and for granting me access to it. The inventory number of Khlebnikov’s copy of this book, is MXK – 355.

<sup>6</sup> Chukovskii later mistakenly claimed that the 1919 edition is accompanied by Lunacharskii’s postscript ([Chukovskii 1966](#): 6).

This pairing of Jesus Christ and Whitman, one of several “pary podobnykh liudei” (SS VI.1: 296-97), born at intervals of 365 years, finds its fullest extrapolation in the 1919 essay *Koleso rozhdanii* where Khlebnikov notes that 365·5 years after the birth of Christ Whitman was born, *based on dates drawn from Bucke’s Cosmic Consciousness*. Khlebnikov in all likelihood looked up Bucke’s book after reading Chukovskii’s annotation about it and about Whitman’s “cosmic consciousness”. He writes in *Koleso rozhdanii*:

[По Беку («Космическое сознание»), Иисус родился за 6 лет до христианской эры, в 6-ом году, через 365 после Мэнция. Через 365·4 после Иисуса, в 1454 <году> пришел Савонарола. «друг бедных, бич богатых», а через 365·5 после Иисуса, в 1819 <году> рождается Уитман, а в 1818 <году> – Карл Маркс. Или Карл Маркс пришел через 365·8 после брахманского Будды, по Бхагавате-Пуране. Ведь Уитман – Иисус, но осыпанный искрами рабочего станка, а не брызгами моря и пылью дорог. Рабочие в дымных одеждах пришли на смену старых седых рыбаков. Вспомни, что Мэнций, великий старец Китая, учил: «народ больше, чем боги, боги больше, чем царь», и ставил царей на последнее место в своей очереди, а творчество богов приписывал народу], а отречение от желаний буддизма имело целью смягчить сословное неравенство вольной нищетой верующих (SS VI.1: 162).<sup>7</sup>

Khlebnikov continues to place Whitman in the ranks of prophetic thinkers and leaders, those whom he terms “svetochi chelovechestva” (Khlebnikov 2000: 95) in his reflection on historical cycles in his *Doski sud’by*. These include: the Buddha of Mongolian tradition, the Chinese neo-Confucianist Mencius (Meng-zi), who

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<sup>7</sup> The essay did not appear in print in Khlebnikov’s lifetime. He prepared it for a collection of articles, *Internatsional iskusstva*, which was never published (see Parnis 2009) and the full text was reproduced in Khlebnikov 1935 and later reprinted in the *Sobranie sochinenii* (SS VI.1: 161–165). An abridged version of the essay in the form of several theses (see commentary in SS VI.1: 404) was first published in Vroon 1986: 286–287 and subsequently in Khlebnikov 1988: 214–215. Prominent among the theses are the remarks about Whitman: they are set in square brackets by the editor of the *Sobranie sochinenii* in the passage we have cited above.



defended the right of revolution, Jesus Christ, Girolamo Savonarola, Karl Marx, and Walt Whitman.

As Khlebnikov sums up in his *Doski sud'by*, his magisterial final reflections on the Laws of Time:

Это люди одной судьбы.

Будда сделал то, чему учил делать Иисус, раздал свое царство и ушел нищим в мир, плача о «тщете земного».

Мэнцзы говорил: «боги больше царей, народ больше богов»; народ > боги > цари. Он грустил, видя раздолье оленей крупных помещичьих имений своего времени: «душа обливается кровью».

Савонарола огненный пророк бедных, римской голытьбы, невенчаный король Рима.

Уитман и Маркс словарь проповеди Иисуса, прошептаный и подсказанный волнами Галилейского моря среди рыбаков, перевели на словарь дымных станков и заводов, и под копченое небо 19-го столетия возвели стены Иисуса ([Khlebnikov 2000](#): 96).

Highly suggestive is the fact that in *Doski sud'by* Khlebnikov once again mentions Richard Bucke as his authority for dating the birth of Jesus Christ 6 BCE ([Khlebnikov 2000](#): 94). It is more than likely that Khlebnikov learned of Bucke's assessment of Whitman from Chukovskii's remarks in the third and fourth editions of his Whitman translations, and that this assessment played a role in his renewed appreciation for Whitman, as is apparent in his remarks to Olga Samorodova and Dmitrii Kozlov. Particularly salient is the following report by Kozlov of a conversation he had with Khlebnikov toward the end of 1921:

— Да, — говорит он [Хлебников – RV], — Уитман был космическим психоприемником!

Хлебников назвал поэта медиумом эпохи, который как радиоприемник, принимает и отображает идеи, чувства, волевые волны человечества ([Kozlov 1927](#): 179).

Not coincidentally, Khlebnikov himself developed an image of himself as a prophet/philosopher in the closing years of his life, somewhat akin to Whitman, as depicted both by Bucke and by Chukovskii in his discussion of Whitman’s “cosmic consciousness” (see [Vroon 1996](#)). This similarity is captured in Borodin’s note on Khlebnikov on the occasion of the poet’s passing:

Хлебников не был, конечно, пролетарским поэтом, но чем он мне всегда интересен и дорог, это своей близостью к Уоту Уитмэну, своей безбрежностью, постоянной обращенностью духа к безграничным далям Космоса. Правда, чаще всего его космизм не получал коллективистской разверстки, она носила скорее **сверхчеловеческий** чем **всечеловеческий** характер, но одно несомненно — в них [так!] чувствовалась мощная индивидуальность ([Borodin 1922b](#): 4).<sup>8</sup>

*Postscript:*

A short time after this paper was submitted for editing and digital publication in mid-2023, a new book on Walt Whitman’s global reception, Delphine Rumeau’s *Comrade Whitman: From Russian to Internationalist Icon* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2024) was published in mid-2024. It includes a brief section on Velimir Khlebnikov’s reception of Whitman (“From Circumspection to Kinship”).

The author is to be acknowledged and commended for discerning Khlebnikov’s early ambiguous attitude toward the American poet, and his later admiration for Whitman as a prophetic figure, and for noting the role that the Canadian theosophist Richard Bucke may have played in influencing Khlebnikov’s attitude toward Whitman.

The Khlebnikov–Whitman–Bucke nexus is also mentioned by Andrei Rossomakhin in an editorial footnote in Vroon ([2008](#): 21).

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<sup>8</sup> Curiously enough Whitman’s name occurs in two highly ambiguous entries in the *Grossbuch* album of 1920–1922. The first is in a short poem that suggests the appeal of Whitman’s pantheism (see *Vnimatel’no chitaiu vesennie mysli boga na uzore zhaby...* ([SS II](#): 185). The second is in a marginal notation recorded by N. Stepanov ([SP V](#): 270) as follows: “Поэмы Верхарна, лари Уитмана, Эпос (*неразб.*) <Проза Уэльса>”. An alternate reading would be:

Поэмы Верхарн<а>  
Лири<ка> Уитм<ана> и М<а>риенгофа  
Эпос Блока  
Проза Уэльс<а> ([RGALI 1920–1922](#): l. 104).

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