Some poets write merely as poets. They write, that is, literature: something previously defined, culturally and historically. Probably all poets begin this way; probably most poets remain this way. They perform their task in the space their culture allows to those who write poems.

In many cultures, what we call poems are not literature; that is, the class "literature" is restricted or non-existent, and poetic texts have sacred or ritual functions. This is true even in borderline cases, where Jakobson's criteria for the poetic function of language are met and recognized by the culture, but where other functions are also involved.

Within the Western literary tradition there are certain special cases, poets who at some point in their career perceive their task as fulfilling a function beyond literature, and their writing becomes an attempt to discover a method, a formula, for obtaining vision, knowledge; they themselves become a kind of medium. (Certain writers we like to call mystics belong to this category, but so, because of his radical newness, does so un-mystical a poet as Catullus.)

For our age, Rimbaud was the great exemplar of this, for his search for a method was at the same time a challenge to the capitalist attempt to bring the creation of literature into a controlled system of production. He makes his challenge by attempting to destroy the forms by which literature could be conventionally recognized and produced. Closer to us stand the Russian Futurists: Khlebnikov, Kruchenykh, Burliuk, Maiakovskii. Khlebnikov is the interesting case, because he began early to write beyond the conventions of literature, and yet returned periodically to those conventions. From our present viewpoint we can say that some of the great mass of stuff he wrote could be assimilated to the canons of literature and was; other things could not be so assimilated and were ignored or derided, and indeed many of his astonishing accomplishments in literature were derided by association with his non-literary texts. Scholarship must invent new categories if it is to discuss Khlebnikov intelligently.

Khlebnikov believed that verbal art flowed directly from the unconscious of the language itself, as a power that inhabited and lived through those who spoke it—as a kind of super-consciousness that transcended the individual, and was indeed mostly purely in pure sound, that generated meaning from its existence alone.
Khlebnikov thought of the artist, and of himself therefore, just as Rimbaud did: as a shaman, a seer, a visionary: one who sees and hears and then says. Spoken to directly by and through the Russian language, he saw himself as a medium of communication, and much of his theoretical writing was concerned with schemes for the communication systems of the future: the dissemination of texts by radio waves, attempts to discover the language of the stars. While he wanted very much to disseminate his texts and his ideas, he objected to entering the system of production of literature as an object, a thing for consumption.

Indeed, part of the Futurist aesthetic was to degrade the “thingness” of literary creation. Cheap printing, books on wallpaper, mimeographed editions: all these aspects of Futurist presentation attacked the bourgeois values of limited editions, fine bindings—the whole approach, for instance, of the World of Art movement and of the journals Apollo, Golden Fleece, and Libra. Futurist “books” attempted a different enterprise: the hand-written book, where illustrations and the lay-out of the text become an unavoidable part of the experience. Such books had to be looked at: they could not be internalized by silent reading.

The hand-written Futurist text is the equivalent of the speaking Futurist voice. Let us consider the remarkable text entitled “The Letter as Such” by Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh:

There are two distinct situations:

1. Our mood alters our handwriting as we write.

2. Our handwriting, distinctively altered by our mood, conveys that mood to the reader independently of the words. We must therefore consider the question of written signs—visible, or simply palpable, as if to a blind man's touch. It's clearly not necessary that the author himself should be the one who writes a hand-written book; indeed it would probably be better for him to entrust the task to an artist. But until today there have been no such books. The first ones have now been issued by the Futurians, for example: Starinaia Liubov', copied over for printing by Mikhail Larionov; Vzonval by Nikolai Kulbin and others; Utinoie gnezdkhko by Olga Rozanova.

When a piece is copied over, by someone else or even by the author himself, that person must re-experience himself during the act of recopying, otherwise the piece loses all the rightful magic that was conferred upon it by handwriting at the moment of its creation, in the “wild storm of inspiration”.1

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1. V. V. Khlebnikov, Sobranie proizvedenii, 5 vols. (Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo pisatelei, 1928-33), V, 248-49.