

Two essays by Roman Jakobson are here published in English Translation for the first time. The English titles of these essays are: ‘About Mayakovsky’s Later Lyrical Poems’ and ‘Dostoyevsky Echoed In Mayakovsky’s Work’.

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As the conclusion of research undertaken for the Visiting Research Fellowship the two essays are published as an Addendum to The Roman Jakobson Fellowship Colloquium Presentation 23rd October 2015 entitled: ‘The Development of Roman Jakobson’s semiotic interpretation of poetic form and function with special reference to his axial model of the poles of language: metaphor and metonymy; and the application of this developed model to the construction of city poetics with reference to Vladimir Mayakovsky’s poetry.’

Keywords: Roman Jakobson; Vladimir Mayakovsky; Fyodor Dostoyevsky; Formalism; poetry and poetics

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The two essays by Roman Jakobson which are now presented in English translation for the first time were originally published in Russian, in one of the nine volumes (a tenth volume is under preparation, edited by Professor Linda Waugh) of Jakobson’s Selected Writings. In keeping with a number of his other essays in various languages, it was published in Russian, in the English edition: *Selected Writings, Vol 5, On Verse, Its Masters and Explorers* (1979) The Hague, Mouton (pp382-412). The title details of the essays are: К ПОЗДНЕЙ ЛИРИКЕ МАЯКОВСКОГО (pp382-405), translated as: ‘About Mayakovsky’s Later Lyrical Poems’; and ДОСТОЕВСКИЙ В ОТГЛОСКАХ МАЯКОВСКОГО (pp406-412), translated as: ‘Dostoyevsky Echoed In Mayakovsky’s Work’. These essays were originally written as a commentary to previously unpublished texts by the Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovsky for an edition of his work *Russkij literaturnyi arxiv* (1956) New York, Harvard University Press.

Roman Jakobson wrote about Mayakovsky in his essay: ‘On a Generation That Squandered Its Poets’ in 1931. It was re-published in English in *Language in Literature* (1987)

Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press (pp273-300). These two newly translated essays reveal insights, not only into Mayakovsky but into Roman Jakobson himself, both as a theoretician and as a person. Known for his commitment to, and exploration of Formalism, the essays also reveal the more personal biographical response of a close friend. However, Jakobson clearly states his Formalist analytical position in the opening sentence of the first essay: 'In Mayakovsky's literary works, love poems and lyrical cycles befittingly alternate with lyrical epic poems about world events'. As is indicated in the Colloquium essay to which these translations provide an addendum, this alternation of composition is also evident within individual poems. After providing details of Mayakovsky's personal life events, Jakobson returns to Formalist analysis, in the penultimate paragraph of the second essay, stating that Mayakovsky often made:

'declarations about the alternation of genres and their dramatic collisions; about the fight between the lyrical and anti-lyrical inspiration. This is not a fight that was imposed upon the poet. No one could have imposed anything upon such a stubborn poet'.

The English translation of these essays provides fresh knowledge of Roman Jakobson the theorist by revealing how he uses personal biographical details to provide material for his Formalist analysis.

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My grateful thanks go also to the translators of the essays. Their diligence and expertise have rendered two very complex theoretical essays into readable and cogent English. They have been kind enough to allow me to make suggestions during the final drafting. This is a privilege, the rewards of which, I hope, outweigh any faults and criticism which might arise.

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ABOUT MAYAKOVSKY'S LATER LYRICAL POEMS

[T.N. the use of triple asterisks in the translations indicates text which the translators know to have been published elsewhere in English translation, though the choice of words may be different.]

In Mayakovsky's literary works, love poems and lyrical cycles befittingly alternate with lyrical epic poems about world events. David Burlyuk, always very meticulous in his poetry evaluations, accurately remarked that Mayakovsky's pre-war poems gravitate towards city still life scenes, where women entered only as decorative motifs. Later, women make an appearance "adorned with a name". Burlyuk names this type of lyrical genre "a bedpan diary", where nothing is made up and life is written with indelible letters.¹

Between June 1914 and July 1915, Mayakovsky wrote the tetraptych "A Cloud in Trousers". And by the end of the year, he completed the poem "The Backbone Flute". Later, in the spring of 1916, he wrote the poems from the same cycle: "To All" and "In Place of a Letter", and finally the poem "Don Juan", which he later destroyed after Lilya Brik "became upset that it was once again about love." This is his first wave of love poetry, which was followed by a social poem, "War and Peace," finished towards the end of 1916. "'War and Peace' is going round and round in my head, and 'A Man' in my heart," remembered the author². The lyrical side was once again dominating Mayakovsky.

This poem about "inconceivable love", a *thing* in which the poet, according to his own words, "lifted his heart like a flag," was already thought out by the end of 1916 and written with periods of interruption by October 1917.³ Then again "the lyrics of the heart" are replaced by

¹ D. Burlyuk, "Three Chapters from the Book *Mayakovsky and His Contemporaries*", *Red Arrow*, New York, 1932, p.11.

² "I Myself", *Vladimir Mayakovsky*, I (1928), p. 23.

³ In *Mayakovsky's Complete Collected Works*, I (1939), p. 466, the period of work on "A Man" is wrongly attributed to the year 1916 and the beginning of 1917. In February of 1917, Mayakovsky told me about "A Man" as a new concept: see "About a Generation"****, above mentioned, p. 358. When he read the poem to several writers at the end of January 1918, he spoke about it as if it were newly finished. This is a quote from his autobiography: "Year 1916. 'War and Peace' is finished. A little later, 'A Man'". This is an illustration of the author's warnings: "I swim freely in my own chronology". Some of these inconsistencies in dating are intentionally done by the poet. Compare V. Pertsov, *Mayakovsky* (Moscow, 1951), p. 153. It's interesting that Mayakovsky recreates the title hero of his previous poem in the draft of the poem "About This", when he worked on it at the end of 1922 and the beginning of 1923: "a man is standing chained before me" and he is imploring the poet: "For five years I have stood / and have gazed at these waters, // Tied to the handrails by the verse ropes, // For five years this abyss didn't take its eyes off of me". Consequently, while working on the poem, Mayakovsky substitutes the correct number with the fictitious "seven years": "Complete Collected Works", V (1934), p. 135. It is true that the events of 1917 were not reflected in "A Man". Regarding the question about the inhabitants of our world: "What

poetry ruled by reason. In 1919, the poet declares that “‘150,000,000’ is dominating my head”.⁴ He began working on the poem in the summer and by the end of the year it was already completely drafted. In January of 1920, he read it at the Moscow Linguistics Circle.⁵ In the spring of the same year, Mayakovsky conceived a new social-political poem later entitled “The Fifth International”. He worked on it until 1922, but abandoned it when he “thought of love”.

He was drawn again to personal poetry, and in November of 1921 he started working on his only idyllic poem “I Love.” “I started writing and I would be glad to be in such a state.”⁶ “Is this my heart / I admire mine,” proclaim these lines finished in February of 1922. The following winter, Mayakovsky wrote the tragic poem entitled “About This”, “a thing of the grandest and best works”, as the author himself boasts.⁷

This angry theme came to me,
ordered:
 Give me
 the rod of the day!
It looked, twisted at my every day,
and dumped a storm on people and things.
This theme came,
 erased the rest
and alone
 became inseparably close.
This theme put a knife to my throat.
Hammer-fighter!
 From my heart to the temples.

In the above-quoted introduction to the poem, Mayakovsky answers the question regarding “about what, about this,” but the name of the theme itself, *love*, was replaced with an ellipsis by the author out of superstition.

There is an internal connection between the three cycles of Mayakovsky’s love poems, and the poet accentuates it through direct references in verses from the preceding cycle to the subsequent one. In “A Man”: “Bowed before the hand / The lips whisper / to the little hairs

should they do, / water the fields with their blood?”, Mayakovsky answers from the sky, laughing: “I don’t give a damn! / They can, / I don’t care!” (537-538, 540-542). In a similar manner reflections of the current events are almost totally absent from “A Cloud”, which was written at the beginning of WWI.

⁴ “I Myself”, p.24.

⁵ V. Katanyan, *Mayakovsky. Literary Chronicle* (Leningrad, 1948), p.124, he guesses the poem was finished in February or March of 1920.

⁶ Mayakovsky’s letter to Lilya Brik 5 XII 21: Katanyan, *Mayakovsky*, p.159.

⁷ *Complete Collected Poems*, II (1939), p 507.

lyrical verses
with bayonets,
We seek
the precise
and naked speech.
But poetry is the worst scum:
it exists and it's clueless.¹¹

This sand without love, which was only glimpsed in “Jubilee,” will grow into the theme of fatal shoal in Mayakovsky’s farewell lines: “the sea goes backwards”.

The period of work required by social commission was extended, and in spring of 1926, Mayakovsky conceived a poem and finished it in the summer of the following year. It was dedicated to the 10th anniversary of the October revolution. If the title “One Hundred and Fifty Millions” was a polemical answer to Blok’s “Twelve”, the same poet also suggested to Mayakovsky the title of the second poem about revolution: “Good”.¹²

One evening in April of 1927, in the restaurant Nezdara in Prague, famous for its vintage Tokay wine, Mayakovsky assured me that his rhythm of alternating genres was unchanged, and real lyrical poems are going to follow the October poem. At that time he had just barely finished the screenplay “How Are You?”, the theme of which “is 24 hours in the life of a person”. In the last draft, the character openly receives the surname “Mayakovsky”, and along this secondary track, and under the guise of a cinematic experiment, the author keeps and further develops the symbolism of his previous lyrical poems. He wanted to meet the unconquerable resistance of the administrative types with a decisive voice. In a short article published in the April edition of a magazine, he gave notice, in his usual manner of anticipating events, that he was preparing “a poem about a woman”.¹³ Maybe it was about this woman that he spoke about in parodical contrast to his programmatic “Good” in his autobiography, captioned “Year 1928”: “I am writing the poem ‘Bad’”.¹⁴

“It’s bad,” he told his closest friends at the time, and “only a great and good love might still be able to save me”. His appetite for changing places is accompanied by the inescapable leitmotif of Onegin’s wanderings. After only five days in France he writes to Lilya Brik on October 20th, 1928: “Unfortunately I am in Paris, and it bores me

¹¹ “Jubilee”, 47-79, *Complete Collected Works*, II (1939), p.333

¹² “What Am I Doing?”, *Complete Collected Works*, X (1941), p. 267.

¹³ “What Am I Doing?”, *Complete Collected Works*, X (1941), p. 267

¹⁴ “I Myself”, p. 28.

response to her reproaches for days without receiving mail, he says, “You are my one and only letter-master”. “You keep saying that I don’t write, but what are my telegrams?” And in awaiting letters from her, he states: “Your lines are at least a half of my life in general, and the entirety of my personal life” (3 I 29).

Mid-January of 1929, Mayakovsky begins a lecture tour in Ukraine, but after two days of presentations in Kharkhov, he cancels the remaining seven scheduled performances “due to throat problems”, and returns to Moscow.¹⁹ “I quit traveling”, he writes to Tatyana in Paris, “I remain sitting here in the fear that I’ll be late in reading your letters, even if only by an hour. To work, and to wait for you, is my *only* joy.” These are the two themes of Mayakovsky’s letters at this time.

On December 28th, the very day of the actors’ reading of the comedy “The Bedbug”, the author writes again to Paris: “What news do you have? We (your Waterman and I) wrote a new play. We read it to Meyerhold. We wrote about 20 hours a day without food or drink. My head is all puffy from this kind of labor (even my cap doesn’t fit). I can’t judge for myself whether it came out well or not, and I’m not sending other opinions to avoid reproaches about self-advertising and having a hyper-inflated sense of inborn modesty. (Does it seem like I brag too much? It’s all right. I deserve it.) I work like an ox, with my head down and my eyes red from staring at the desk. Even my eyes betrayed me and I have to wear glasses! I am also using some cold compresses for my eyes. It’s okay. By the time we meet it will be okay. I can work with glasses. And I don’t need my eyes anyway before we get together, because except for you, I don’t have anyone to look at. And I have heaps and piles of work. I’ll finish and I’ll dash to see you. If we collapse from all this work (in the most unhappy case), you’ll come to me. Right? Right? ... What are you writing about, the new year? Crazy woman! What kind of celebration can I have without you? I’m working. This is my *one and only* pleasure.” The next letter is about the same thing: “I am working until I can’t see straight and my shoulders ache. In addition to writing now, I have daily play readings and rehearsals. I hope to finish all the work in a month. I’ll rest afterwards. When I get completely tired I say to myself “Tatyana” and then I entrust myself to paper again” (3 I 29).

The play “Bedbug”, the most anti-lyrical of all Mayakovsky’s works, is close to being finalized, and meanwhile, the lyrical tendency starts dominating the poet again: “I don’t spill all over the paper (professional hate towards writing), but if I would write down all my conversations with myself about you, the unwritten letters, the unsaid affectionate words,

¹⁹ Katanyan, *Mayakovsky*, p. 367.

then my collected works would swell to three times their usual size, and would be all lyrical” (3 | 29).

Even before his trip to Kharkov Mayakovsky sent telegrams to Paris: “In the beginning of February I hope to go somewhere and rest. I need the Riviera ****”, and Katanyan’s literary chronicle also notes: “The last few days in March - beginning of April (?), there was a trip to Nice and Monte-Carlo”. According to this chronicle, he went abroad the day after the Moscow stage premiere of the “Bedbug”, which took place February 13th²⁰, but according to T. Yakovleva, he left the day before the premiere. On February 15th Mayakovsky send a telegram to Negorelyi: “Leaving today will stop Prague Berlin few days”. He went to Berlin to sign a contract with a publisher for a translation of his prose and spent a day at my place in Prague. I called the critic Kodichka, who at the time ran the programming for Vinogradsky Theater to listen to “The Bedbug” read by the author. The critic was thrilled with Mayakovsky’s dramatic courage and his masterful reading, but he doubted he’d be able to get the director’s approval for staging the play. All of this, I have to say, didn’t affect the poet much in his hurry to go West. A telegram was sent to Paris: “I arrive tomorrow twenty second two o’clock blue express”. He did not go to Nice, but just stayed in Paris and went to the Paris Plage (beach).

While developing the motifs of his November poems, he warned, while still in Moscow: “Please gather your thoughts (and then your things) and look into your heart to see what you think about my hope to take you into my paws and bring you to us, here in Moscow. Let’s think about it and then let’s discuss it. We’ll turn our separation into a test. If you love me, is it good to waste our hearts and time in exhausting leaps from one telegraph post to another? ‘Am I right or am I wrong?’”.

In Paris they were always together, but sometimes he was overcome by his unending passion for gambling. Those who saw them together remember that he was very protective of, and shy with her, and carefully avoided any trace of rudeness or ambiguity. He was in awe of her “absolute ear” for poetry, as he called it, and recited to her Pasternak’s, Esenin’s and more often than not, his own poems. He sought her support for his own belief that he “beats Pushkin”.

However, he couldn’t remain in France beyond the end of April due to the expiration of his visa. Moreover, his presence was required in Moscow in order to receive money that was an absolute necessity for both himself and all those who depended on him at home.

His words to Pushkin, “I am now free”, were now absolutely true, but the past burdened him. “The calendar and the map hinder me” - was

²⁰ Katanyan, *Mayakovsky*, p. 370.

Mayakovsky aware of the secret tragedy of this dedication to Tatyana in a book of his poems? Were time, with its past of “hundred pound weights”, and space, with its deep chasm of no return across the border, standing in the way? On May 2nd, Mayakovsky returned to Moscow, alone again and hoping to go back to Paris soon.

“I’ll try to see you as soon as possible”, he writes in a telegram on May 25th. He laments the slow pace of his writing. “I am just starting to write, I will finish my ‘Bathhouse’”. (15 V 29). “I started to write *The Bathhouse* (after a damned delay!), and so far, I don’t even have all the surnames of the characters” (8 VI 29). Immediately he complains that he “didn’t write one poetic line. After your poems, all the others seem bland”. By *your poems* he means both of his lyrical letters in November, as for *the others*, it’s enough to mention the poem “Thrust in Self-criticism”, published a few days before the above-quoted letter and characterized in Mayakovsky’s *Complete Collected Works*, X (1941), p. 392, as a “poetical paraphrase of Stalin’s words”.

“I am throwing myself into my work”, continues Mayakovsky, “bearing in mind that there isn’t long until October, but work is terribly hard and I retreat from it with bumps on my forehead from perplexity and respect for the theme”. The reference to October is explained in the letter dated July 12th: “Beyond October (like we decided) I can’t imagine anything without you. Starting in September, I’ll begin making myself little wings to fly to you”. This is an allusion to the lines in “Letter to Comrade Kostrov”: “Here even / bears / would grow little wings” (134-136). The letter further develops the image of the bear: “I’m such a tall splay-footed and unsympathetic bear. On top of everything today I’m also very gloomy.” He laments again: “I write very little. My head doesn’t work. I have to do nothing for a while”. He writes in a telegram: “Miss you hope to see soon” (25 VI), repeating the same complaint in each and every way: “miss you very much”, “unbelievably miss you”, “miss you endlessly”, “absolutely long for you”, “miss you like never before”, “I long for you regularly, and lately more than regularly, I miss you even more often.”

“It cannot be” - Mayakovsky wants to believe this and yet knows that as long as he lives, it cannot really be - “the case that we wouldn’t be able to be together for all time.” (8, VI) He exhorts her to go as an “engineer-woman” somewhere in Altay: “Won’t you?” (12 VII). But the tragedy advances “heavily, rudely, and visibly”. If, during the fall of 1928, life in Paris was full of “numerous details”, now, in answer to a question from Paris about details of his life in Moscow, he replies abruptly: “There are no details”.

The Ukrainian poet Tychina, who visited Moscow in the beginning of 1929, remembers how fashionable the attacks on Mayakovsky were

at the time.²¹ Sending the “Letter to Comrade Kostrov” to the printing press, the author entirely understood that, in the environment created by the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP), it would be akin to a bomb. And in fact, they did not forgive him for it. Enmity towards the poet continued to grow, while both overt and covert hounding took place.

Only two weeks after returning to Moscow, Mayakovsky begs: “please don’t repine and don’t reproach me, I dealt with so many unpleasant things, from fly-size to elephant-size, truly you shouldn’t be mad at me” (15 V 29).

“The Bathhouse” was finished in time, during the second half of September, but “it’s impossible to retell and rewrite all the sad things that make me even more silent than usual”, as the author relates in his clear style in one of his last surviving letters dated October 5th. The month arrived that Mayakovsky had previously mentioned as being the “limit,” beyond which their reunion could not be delayed, but Mayakovsky is stubbornly silent. In Paris she feels that the earth is moving under her feet and the relationship is going nowhere. That same month Mayakovsky receives a letter from Paris that unequivocally bids him farewell. Within few months the poet’s life would end, even before the woman in Paris finds out from Moscow acquaintances that in September Mayakovsky was irrevocably denied any further trips abroad.

“Another horse is done for,” he says receiving the letter. This is both an expression from horse racing, but also from “A Good Attitude Towards Horses”. Soon after, friends organized a merry name-day celebration at his place. Later that night they asked him to recite some of his older poetry. According to an eyewitness,²² he refuses repeatedly, complaining that his voice has disappeared. He is asked by everyone, begged, and ultimately convinced - *** He stood up and grabbed the corner of the wardrobe with his hand, scanning us with a slow, memorable look that we would always remember and began reciting in a low voice and a sudden surliness:

[T.N. Alliteration that is impossible to convey in English with similar effect and meaning.]

The hooves trotted.
They seem to sing:
“Grib (Mushroom).
Grab’ (Plunder).
Grob (Coffin).
Grub (Rude)”

²¹ Katanyan, *Mayakovsky*, p.368.

²² L. Kassil, *Mayakovsky - Himself* (Moscow, 1940), p.144.

He continued reciting, gradually becoming gentler, lowering his tone line after line*** And everybody around became more serious. It wasn't a joke anymore, a poet's merry celebration, a friendly get together. We were all suddenly grabbed by the thought, like a draft going through all the circumvolutions of our brains, that we had to remember this moment*** And he continued reciting while glancing somewhere along the wall:

Horse, don't.
Horse, listen,
why do you think that you are worse than them?
My little one.
We all are part horse,
Each of us is a horse in our own way²³

and then he turned his back towards us with his broad shoulders hunched over as if he deeply understood something, as if he was strapped in some enormous harness, as if trekking up the mountain*** He moved softly as if he was afraid to hurt somebody. He went to the room next door and stayed there for a long time, his elbows on the desk, holding a glass with unfinished cold tea tight in his hands. There was something helpless, lonely, and plaintive seeping from him, something not understood by anyone at the time”.

Everything is known ahead of time, but everything happens suddenly. “And the giant will stand for a second and will collapse, // entombing himself under a ripple of notes”²⁴

“They tear me apart, cut me into pieces, rip people up from me with my meat”, says Mayakovsky on New Year's Eve.²⁵ “He is horribly tired”, writes Lilya Brik about him in February. He read his new poem “At the Top of My Voice” in contrast to his former habit of reciting “from a piece of paper and with no energy”.²⁶ “Something is wrong”, noticed Mayakovsky's driver in March: “his mood rarely improves”.²⁷ By the beginning of April, the illness “was given a name – a nervous breakdown”²⁸ in the Kremlin's hospital.

Mayakovsky's fate was sealed by the same inseparability of life and creative work that thrilled the poet in regards to his teacher, Khlebnikov. On April 1st, 1923, amidst feverish work on his poem “About This”, Mayakovsky reveals in a letter to Lilya Brik: “Love is life, it's the

²³ “A Good Attitude Towards Horses” (1918), 1-6, 35-40.

²⁴ “About This” (1923), 31-34.

²⁵ Kassil, cited work, p.146.

²⁶ L. Brik, “From Memoires about Mayakovsky's Poems”, *Znamja*, 1941, No 4, p. 235.

²⁷ Katanyan, *Mayakovsky*, p.367, 379.

²⁸ V. Shklovsky, *About Mayakovsky* (Moscow, 1940), p. 216.

most important. All poetry, life affairs, and everything else stems from it. Love is at the heart of everything. If it stops beating, everything else dies, becomes extraneous, useless. But if the heart beats it cannot help but make itself known in everything *** But if I don't have any 'activity', I'm dead".²⁹ In Mayakovsky's lyrical work from Paris loudly affirmed that his new love "heart's cold engine / was turned on again", and the break in the heart's activity symbolized on this occasion, not a metaphorical death but an actual one; no matter how much the poet tried to find a "tiny" replacement for the great love destroyed in his life.

On the eve of his last trip to Paris, Mayakovsky signed an agreement with the theater for a "Comedy with Suicides". The theme of the comedy, according to the author is "the forehead to forehead collision between the European and the Soviet cultures". On September 2nd, 1929, three days after his last letter to Tatyana he tells representatives of the Artistic Theater about the content of the play, outlining the main plot as "a profound dialogue about love between two characters". According to the Pravda newspaper dated April 14th, 1930, Mayakovsky's suicide prevented him and the theater from finalizing the Comedy with Suicides.³⁰

One morning in 1919, while walking with Lilya Brik on Okhotny Ryad, I said for some reason: "I can't imagine Volodya being old". A sudden and surprising reply followed: "Volodya, old? Never! He had already fired the gun twice, leaving a single bullet in the revolver. In the end the bullet will find its aim". In America this method is called "Russian roulette". On April 14th the lone bullet, which had remained in the cylinder as before, went through his heart. Mayakovsky lived and died as a gambler. Kassil was right when he said: "Whether falling in love or having a fight, writing a poem or playing pool, poker or mahjong, he embarked on each activity with his sizzling hot innards *** He loves the very ardor of the game, its heat, nerves and risk".³¹

The first few lines of Mayakovsky's debut in print showed how he perceived the world through the gambling metaphor:

The red and white are thrown and crumpled,
the ducats are dumped on the green,
and the black hands of the gathered windows
were dealing the yellow burning cards.³²

²⁹ L. Brik, cited work, p. 232.

³⁰ Katanyan, *Mayakovsky*, p. 367, 379.

³¹ Kassil, cited work, p.119.

³² "Night" (1912).

In the poem “About This” the same “gambling” symbolism grows into a “jeu suprême”:

My entire life
 lay on the cards of the windows -
 The point belongs to the glass -
 and I am losing.
 The blackamoor -
 cardsharper of mirages -
 he marked
 on windows the impudent ticking of merriness.
 The deck of the glass
 is glowing with victorious
 bareknuckle brightness
 in the paws of the night.³³

The characteristic title of this part of the poem, “Nowhere to Hide”, repeats the verse from “A Cloud”, “there is nowhere to hide now,” and pre-figured the words in the letter written before his death: “there is no way out”. The stake is life “Either, or // all or nothing”:³⁴ in this lies the essence of Mayakovsky’s hypnotic, irrepressible and smashing will to win, to “discover a different country”, to “wrest joy from the coming days”; here is the key to his passion for asceticism and martyrdom, and the continuous recognition of final despair: “there is no way out”. He grabbed life in a lethal embrace. Low-minded people leading banal lives maliciously called this *wishful thinking*. “The flinging Mayakovsky”, as he described himself in a screenplay,³⁵ developed into the belief that “armies of ascetics are condemned to be volunteers / there is no mercy from people”.³⁶

Mayakovsky opened his first volume of collected poems, initially entitled “Five Crucifixions,”³⁷ with an anathema:

Now
 I swear with all my pagan power!
 give me
 any
 beautiful
 young woman

³³ “About This”, 1109-1119.

³⁴ “150 000.000”, 447-448.

³⁵ “How Do You Do”, *Complete Collected Works*, XI (1947), p. 167.

³⁶ “To Everything” (1926), 54-55.

³⁷ Katanyan, *Tales about Mayakovsky*, p. 29.

I won't waste my soul,
 I'll rape her
 and I'll spit in her heart with disdain!
 Eye for an eye!³⁸

He met someone “beautiful and young,” but instead of curses for two days before dying, he carried his final letter in his pocket from April 12th through April 14th, which was dedicated “to everyone” and which ended with the lines:

Like they say,
 “the incident is over”,
 the love boat
 broke on the impact of everyday life.
 I don't owe life anything
 there is no point to list
 reciprocal pains,
 misfortunes
 and wrongs.

This stanza, with its remarkable replacement of the words “I and you” with the words “I don't owe life,” is taken by Mayakovsky from his last poem. In January he finished his farewell monologue to his “comrade-descendants,” entitled “At the Top of My Voice,” and reputed as an introduction to a future poem. According to the words of a biographer “nothing is known”³⁹ about the concept of this future poem. This civilian, anti-lyrical introduction was to be followed by another, purely lyrical one. Fragmented drafts of this other lyrical poem were found in the poet's notebooks. Almost all of them combine into one consolidated text with slight variations.⁴⁰

Loves me? Loves me not? I am breaking my hands
 and my fingers
 I'm throwing them after breaking
 That's how you tear up road side chamomile coronets
 after making a wish and
 you let them loose in the month of May
 May gray hair be uncovered by haircuts and shaving
 May the silver of passing years make plenty of noise

³⁸ “To Everything”, initially published with the title “Anathema”, 57-66.

³⁹ Katanyan, *Mayakovsky*, p. 387.

⁴⁰ See *Complete Collected Poems*, X (1941), p.187-190, 419-420 and photos of the four fragments before p. 198 and 421.

exhibit entitled “20 years of work”: “Why should I write about Manya’s love for Petya, instead of considering myself a part of that governmental organization which constructs life? *** The poet is not one who walks around like a curly lamb and bleats about lyrical love themes ***” (25 III 30).⁴⁴

At the same time, when the “Letters” to Tatyana and Kostrov were written in Paris, the poet was composing “The Bedbug”. Very soon afterwards he finished it in Moscow, while at the same time trying to get back to Paris. The poem represents the cruelest satire of the lyrical genre in general, and Mayakovsky’s own lyrical works in particular. “The Bedbug”, affirms its author, “is a theatrical variation of the main theme about which I wrote in my poems ***”⁴⁵

The final part of the poem “About This” was the author’s request addressed to the future “workshop of human resurrections”, to a comrade chemist from the thirtieth century. Anticipating his possible doubts about resurrecting Mayakovsky, the poet swears: “I did not finish living my earthly life // on earth / I did not finish loving” *** “Resurrect me, I want to finish living!” *** “I’ll do anything you want for free, // *** Do you / have // pets? / Let me be a guard for the animals. // I love animals. / If you see a little dog // *** I’m ready / to take my liver out. // I won’t spare it, dear, eat it!”

The hero of the “Bedbug”, Prisyppkin, is an “extreme example of bourgeoisie”, his engagement is an “escape from the trenches of working class lifestyle”. He undertakes exactly what the poem “About This” had reproached the poet himself, with a voice from his suffering past: “You may be adhered to their caste? // You kiss them? / Eat? / You grow a belly? // You / intend to enter / their lifestyle / their family happiness / the back way”. The erotic grotesque elements of the magical comedy resemble Gogol’s “Marriage”. The fire during the wedding banquet “destroys all characters”. Prisyppkin, who does not get to marry, is “frozen in a cascade of water by the firemen”,⁴⁶ and he is discovered fifty years later, in 1979. After a discussion, “the earth federation” decides to resurrect him. The “Institute of Human Resurrections” performs an experiment. Along with the man from the past mysterious ailments are also resurrected and the “ancient illness” of love becomes widespread again. On the other hand, “all attempts to turn Prisyppkin into a man of the future are doomed *** The human being protests against the fact that he was defrosted in order to be dried out” into the rational

⁴⁴ *Complete Collected Works*, X, p. 373.

⁴⁵ Note published in January 1929: *Complete Collected Works*, XI (1947), p. 423.

⁴⁶ In the screenplay “Forget About the Fireplace”, the first version of the “Bedbug”, “the husband with a guitar, executing a salto-mortale [daring deadly leap] in the air, is crushed in the hole of a cellar” and snow covers him: *Complete Collected Works*, XI (1947), p. 225.

are coming near in a rumble.
 Who
 will be able
 to reign them in?
 Can you?
 Try.

The theme of steaming, widening humidity, a powerful water mass, is closely connected with erotic motifs, and its presence is spread throughout Mayakovsky's poetry. At the end of the tragedy "Vladimir Mayakovsky" (1913), the "children-kisses" bring a heap of tears, and the poet wanders away with his back-breaking burden of tears "to the place where / in the tight squeeze of the endless longing / the waves' fingers / of the ocean-bigot / eternally / tear apart his chest". In the first part of "A Cloud in Trousers" Gioconda-Maria is stolen from him: "mama! / he has a fire in his heart". He doesn't want the firemen: "Large boots are forbidden! / *** I'll do it myself. / My eyes filled with tears I'll roll away like barrels". In the lyrical lines "Aside from your love / I don't have / the sea,"⁵⁰ the images from both planes are obviously fused.

Vasili Kamensky, when remembering his Black Sea tour with Mayakovsky in January of 1914, talks about his infatuation with Maria in Odessa: "(Volodya) was pacing nervously around the room, not knowing what to do, how to act and where to go with this sudden outpouring of love. For the first time in life he had experienced this immense feeling; he paced from corner to corner and kept saying in a low voice: What to do? What now? Write a letter? But isn't it stupid? *** "I love you. What else can I say ***" Should I tell her everything right away? She'll get scared *** And everyone will be terrified *** They'll say, a yellow jacket and suddenly... ***" And he gently, *childlike*, almost helplessly told us: 'I am very restless for some reason *** Let's walk to the sea ***' "⁵¹

"Mayakovsky played with the waves in the sea like a little boy", remembers Viktor Shklovsky about his meeting with the poet in Norderney in the summer of 1923.⁵² In the poem "About This", published at that time⁵³, the image of the wet bed (in the draft he described his own infantilism with childish expressions, but erased them from the final text): "Where is this water from? / Why so much? // I cried it out myself. / Cry-baby. / Slush // Untrue / one cannot cry so much". The leaking room turns into a river, "the storm makes bass sounds, it can't ever be

⁵⁰ "Instead of a Letter" (1916), 34-36.

⁵¹ V. Kamensky, *Life with Mayakovsky* (Moscow, 1940), p. 89.

⁵² V. Shklovsky, cited work, p. 177.

⁵³ "About This", 390-396, *Complete Collected Works*, V (1934), compare N. Aseev's note, p. 41.

conquered” (compare this with with “Letter to Comrade Kostrov” “Who’ll be able to conquer it?”). “The river ended / the sea rose. // The ocean / is so big it hurts”. An increasing procession of water symbols will merge with the “love that was not-to-be”⁵⁴; an unfinished, endless love motif.

“The thunder of the worldwide surf” will be replaced only once in Mayakovsky’s poetry by the image of an ebbing tide. “The sea goes backwards // the sea goes to sleep”. This theme of recession frames the image of a broken love boat in Mayakovsky’s poetic epilogue, the second introduction to an unwritten poem.

The first introduction is an emotional answer given to “comrade-descendants” after they pass a plausible historical sentence on Mayakovsky - “once upon a time lived / a singer who lauded boiled water / and was the sworn enemy of uncooked water.”⁵⁵ The imaginary conclusion of the professor from the future was based on the lines of a health campaign slogan written by Mayakovsky in 1928: “Uncooked water / replace with boiled! // *** One of the most important / benefits of evolved life // is a tub filled with boiled water”.⁵⁶

These slogans and advertisements are a complete antithesis to Mayakovsky’s poetic work. His own words and images, but also those of others, continued to live in Mayakovsky with amazing persistence.⁵⁷ In the spring of 1924 when he wrote for the Department of Tea “Our right / is in our power. // Where is the power? In this cacao”,⁵⁸ he was undoubtedly remembering his lines from “A Cloud in Trousers”: “It’s good to shout / when thrown to the fangs of the scaffold // Drink Van-Guten’s cocoa!”. The pages in the poem “About This,” about a poet on a scaffold, belonged to this recent past. “The themes of his verses were almost always his own feelings”, L. Brik notes correctly, and this “refers to all his poems”, including his advertising texts.⁵⁹

In addition to composing slogans for the Department of Tea, Mayakovsky also writes some bitter verses dedicated to Pushkin, which contain a jocular proposal to work also for the Fat and Bone Factory and GUM: “Everything happened: / I stood under the windows, // wrote letters, / my nerves were like jelly. // See / when / one cannot even grieve // this / Aleksandr Sergeich / is more difficult. // Come on, Mayakovsky! / go South! // Torment / your heart with rhymes // look! / the skiff of love is here, // dear Vladim Vladimich”.⁶⁰ These lines, just like

⁵⁴ See “About This”, versions and drafts, p. 165, 176.

⁵⁵ “At the Top of My Voice” (1930), 14-16.

⁵⁶ *Complete Collected Works*, IV, part 2, (1936), p. 436.

⁵⁷ L. Brik gives interesting examples, cited work, p. 282.

⁵⁸ *Complete Collected Works*, IV, p. 2, p. 406.

⁵⁹ L. Brik, “Mayakovsky and the poetry of others”, *Znamya*, 1940, nr.3, p.161.

⁶⁰ “Jubilee” (1924), 121-136.

his slogans for the Department of Tea, mark the end to his lyrical poem “About This” from the previous year.

In the tragedy “Vladimir Mayakovsky” the author talks about how he “searched for / her / unseen soul” and when he found it: “she came out / in a blue robe, // “Take a seat! / I’ve been waiting for you for a long time. / Would you like a cup of tea?”⁶¹ As a symbol, drinking tea signifies for Mayakovsky an emblem of ritualized ordinariness. “What is interesting in the life of a writer”, he said, “we get up in the morning, drink tea”.⁶² But “stupid historians” incited by contemporaries, will be wrong again if this “boring and uninteresting life” with its eternal “morning coffee”; this ordinary appearance of the “wonderful poet” masks the wonders and passions of his true existence.

In the fantastic reality of the poem “About This”, Mayakovsky is in the throngs of animal suffering in the shape of a bear, and he wanders along rivers and seas, and swims off to some “Gren / lap / liub-landia?” covered in snow. [T.N. *liub* = root of the word *love*]. His relatives, scared, call on him to calm down. “But I told them // in answer to this high-pitched family choir: // So what then? You’ll replace love with tea?” Mayakovsky describes the nightmare of a worldwide family tea time: “Paris, / America, / Brooklyn bridge, // Sahara, / and here / a black man drinks tea with his family / with his curly hair”. A faceless parade of ordinary, stale life: “Everything stays as is, for centuries, / as it was. // They don’t hit her / and the mare of everyday life doesn’t move”. The animal-helpers of the musty everyday life “from mattresses / lifting the rag linens, // the bedbugs raised their paws in a salute. // The samovar lit up in rays of light // and wants to give a hug with its handles”. In the initial draft, “huge tea roses from wallpaper” are associated in a play on words with the samovar. Jesus, Marx, and in the draft, Lenin as well, are forced to “tug the strap of philistinism”. In this tea-related context the writer recognizes with horror his own, everyday, bedbug twin.⁶³

A year later, when the poet is “free of love” and the “clawed bear / lies down like a skin of jealousy”, the two-lined slogans of Mayakovsky sound like a mean parody of this victorious symbolism: “Eskimo, / a bear / and a reindeer herd // drink / *the teas* / from the *Department of Tea*. / To the very Pole // use them / and warm yourselves up“. Or see the answer given by the author of “About This” to his everyday twin: “My dear, / throw away your words, // what am I to do / with these songs?! // Send / me tea as a gift // from the Department of Tea”.⁶⁴ The bear turns

⁶¹ “Vladimir Mayakovsky”, 185-187, 915-202.

⁶² Katanyan, *Mayakovsky*, p.3; “A Man”, Mayakovsky’s Christmas.

⁶³ “About This”, 772-777, 790-796, 886-889, 898, 908, 915-921. Comp. versions and drafts, p.151.

⁶⁴ *Complete Collected Works*, IV, p. 2, p. 403-404.

from an unhappy sea traveler into a rug underfoot, or into an earnest tea drinker, until he is given wings with the new wave of lyrical work in “Letter to Comrade Kostrov”. By the way, the short distance to this very Department of Tea (to pay off the advance) was that very “sharp and necessary contrast”, which Mayakovsky needed to be inspired with to write his poem at Esenin’s death: “You passed, / like they say, / into the other world. // Emptiness... Fly away, / crushing into stars. // No need for an advance anymore” and so on.⁶⁵

The first part of “A Cloud in Trousers” is connected to Maria from Odessa, and to “The Backbone Flute,” as well as the other poems that followed it ending with “About This”, all of which are addressed to Lilya Brik. “But where, my love, / where, my darling, // where / in a song! / I betrayed my love? // Here / every sound / is for admitting, / for calling. // But only from the song, don’t throw one word”. Mayakovsky wrote this in the poem “About This”,⁶⁶ and from this moment on, the lyrical poems are sidelined for years, even up to the “Letters to Tatyana” and the poems from that new cycle.

There’s a fourth woman in Mayakovsky’s poetry, who is from Moscow and is the main character from the last part of his tetraptych “A Cloud”, who borrows the name of the girl acclaimed in the first part: “Maria! Maria! Maria! / Let me go Maria!” This figure seems to disappear from the poet’s life and work when the tetraptych, recently finished, received a new dedication: “To you, Lilya”. The paintings by Moscow Maria, whose real name was Antonina Gumilina, have a direct connection to Mayakovsky, as well as her unpublished poetical prose “Two in One Heart”. The artistic works exhibited in the spring of 1919 in a posthumous show that took place soon after the painter had ended her own life, closely resembled, in motifs and treatment, the main part of the autobiographical screenplay “How Are You”, and the hero is the same. The screenplay, written at the end of 1926, at a time when Mayakovsky the poet was silent, was filled with his poetical motifs.⁶⁷ This “film detail” entitled “Natural Love” begins with the image of stagnant, swampy water, similar to the departure of young Mayakovsky from city still-life scenes. In his poem “Love” from 1913, “scared, the girl enveloped herself in the swamp”.⁶⁸ The “regular circles of the swamp” spread on the screen after a stone is thrown into the water. There is a circle of

⁶⁵ “How do you create poems?”, *Complete Collected Works*, X (1941), p. 230; “To Sergey Esenin”, VIII (1936).

⁶⁶ “About This”, 1238-1247.

⁶⁷ *Complete Collected Works*, XI (1947), p. 146-168, 452-479. The images used in the screenplay in opposition to Mayakovsky’s poetic symbols, are extensively analyzed in W. Rudy’s dissertation, *Mayakovsky and the Art of Film* (Harvard University, 1955).

⁶⁸ *Complete Collected Works*, I, p. 48.

people around the wedding, and another circle of people around the fire. The girl is part of the first circle, and Mayakovsky is part of the second circle. The circles merge, the girl and Mayakovsky exit their circles. There is a joyful love scene, built on Russian folklore images and the first, magical part of “A Man”. The relevant line of the magical part: “a room, that looks like an ordinary, dirty one *** The man takes his watch out. Nine twenty two. The hands of the watch point in different directions. The man shows the watch hands to the girl, and says goodbye. They leave in opposite directions”.

The screenplay reveals the end ahead of time: Mayakovsky reads the news section; from a dark corner of the newspaper, a girl’s figure emerges, a revolver to her temple. She pulls the trigger. The poet tries to catch and divert the arm holding the revolver, but it’s too late and the girl falls to the ground. He “squeezes the newspaper, pushes the tea away with disdain and falls in the chair”. Mayakovsky talked about Gumilina’s death (the Moscow Maria) with unexpected and unnaturally cruel disdain both in Pushkin [T.N. town near St. Petersburg] in the summer of 1919 and in Paris almost ten years later, during the time of the “Letter to Comrade Kostrov”.

The screenplay contrasts, with deep disdain, the grotesque tea drinking performed by the water bodies, the image of the predawn sea frames the film and the tense work of the central waterpipe. Under the title “The Water Destroyers” he creates the image of “a water faucet of incredible feebleness” from which “Mayakovsky fills the samovar with water”. There is also the pig-like family with a father who “grows a beard and fur on his paw holding the cup of tea” and a toddler son who brags about his dog who “doesn’t pee when it wants, but when I want”. There is the kettle that whistles, shakes, and then rises ridiculously “imitating” an erupting volcano. The sordid poverty of divided, distributed slime, like in the screenplay “Forget About the Fireplace”, where the “melancholy yardman tries hard to splash” the wedding fire with a handheld hose. The tiny puddle of water as motif merges with the theme of self-satisfied everyman and matrimonial well-being in the poem “Vladimir Ilici Lenin”: “We / sleep / at night. // We do deeds / during the day. // We love / to crush water / in our mortar *** [T.N. to crush water in the mortar = to do something pointless] We are liked by our wife / and we are extremely / satisfied”.⁶⁹

In November of 1926, Mayakovsky was on a tour in Rostov and had a conversation in a hospital with a young woman poet who was seriously injured in an attempt to kill herself.⁷⁰ Obviously influenced by

⁶⁹ “Vladimir Ilici Lenin”, 114-122, 135-138, *Complete Collected Works*, VI (1934).

⁷⁰ Shklovsky mentioned the encounter, cited work, p. 202-203.

the encounter, Maria's remembrance will appear in the screenplay, which was started right after the return to Moscow.

In Mayakovsky's last poems, the central motif from "A Cloud" resurfaces in the lines addressed to the Moscow Maria: "The bird / begs through its song, / sings, / is hungry and loud, // but Maria, I'm a man / ordinary, / coughed up by a night sick with tuberculosis in the dirty hand of Presnya. // Maria, do you want someone like me? / Release me, Maria! / I'll tightly squeeze the iron throat of the bell with twitchy fingers!"⁷¹ In the poem "At the Top of My Voice" the poet appears again directly associated with "sputum producing cough" but disassociated with the song, and his actions are presented again in terms of metaphorical suffocation: "But I / tamed myself, / standing // on the throat / of my own song".⁷² It's true, the theme of the twitchy spasm towards unrealizable love is apparently replaced with the theme of decimated lyrical work, but it's not by chance that, in the drafts of the text, these lines appear next to the gambling words of lyrical despair:

Where to seek love in such a neper
it would be like trying to seek amidst car-filled New-York
a good-luck horseshoe. ***⁷³

[T.N. Like the decibel, the neper is a unit in a logarithmic scale.]

The theme of female suicide plays a role in Mayakovsky's lyrical work only under cover of the screenplay, while being treated in a satiric way in newspaper-published verses such as "Marusya Took Poison" (1927), and the comedy "Bedbug". In the poem "About This" "in the silky / hands / steel" a sudden boyish suicide, which Mayakovsky is unable to stop, echoes the "event" in the screenplay.

The first of the three parts of the poem "About This" is entitled "The Ballad of the Reading Gaol": "Why jail? / Christmas. / Mess. // The windows of the little house don't have bars! // This is none of your business. / I'm telling you: jail". The draft sounds even sharper and wholehearted: "This is absolutely / none of anybody's business / other than mine. / This is my / private affair".⁷⁴ The commentators have referred to circumstances that surrounded the writing of the poem: his separation from the people closest to him and a voluntary two-month

⁷¹ "A Cloud in Trousers", 567-585.

⁷² "At the Top of My Voice", 62-64, 209-210.

⁷³ *Complete Collected Works*, X (1941), p. 414.

⁷⁴ "About This", 104-109; Versions and drafts, p.121.

seclusion.⁷⁵ These comments might explain the jail reference, but the connection with the Reading Gaol remains unclear.

In Oscar Wilde's ballad of the same name, the focus is not as much the jail, in which, and about which the ballad was written, as the story of the condemned and his punishment: "For he who lives more lives than one / More deaths than one must die" (Mayakovsky read the ballad in Bryusov's Russian translation). The tragic outcome of the poem "About This" is the "last death", the poet's execution: "after all / everything comes to an end. // Trembling ends too". Standing above both of the executed persons, the executioner's "merriness bubbled over". In Mayakovsky's poem, in the depths of its complex thematic elements, where "the day turned dark", there lies the allusion to the Reading ballad:

He killed the one he loved,
 And he'll die for it.
 Everybody kills the ones they love,
 It's been like this across centuries,
 That one, with mean wild eyes,
 That one with flattering words,
 The coward, with a treacherous kiss,
 The brave, with a blade in hand!

Written in Cambridge, Mass., 1955, as a commentary to previously unpublished texts by Mayakovsky: *Russkij literaturnyi arxiv* of Harvard University (New York, 1956), 180-206.

DOSTOYEVSKY ECHOED IN MAYAKOVSKY'S WORK

The eloquent title of Viktor Shklovsky's book *Pro and Contra* (Moscow, Sovetskij pisatel', 1957, 260 p.) is borrowed by the author from Book Five of *The Brothers Karamazov*. The volume was given an explanatory subtitle: "Notes about Dostoyevsky". The work is filled with accurate, witty, and sometimes unexpected intimations, oppositions, guesses and findings that enrich Dostoyevsky's literary biography in multiple directions, and is tightly connected to questions about his poetics.

The new study captivates the reader with the author's familiar sharp-sighted observations both about the role of continuity in Dostoyevsky's creative work, about artistic repetitions and their diverse

⁷⁵ N. Aseev, "Mayakovsky's Work on the Poem 'About This'", *Mayakovsky's Complete Collected Works*, V (1934), p.31. Comp. L. Brik, *Znamya*, 1941, p. 232.

functions, and “repetitive messages” within the same work. For example, in *Notes from the House of the Dead*, we find a repetition of that which has passed before, in particular, that which is rehashed from *Poor Folk* in *The Insulted and Humiliated* and from *White Nights* in *Notes from the Underground*. “Actually nothing is repeated: as always in art, there was a return to search for new artistic meanings and expression” (108). With reference to this even more representative are “repeating quotes”, brilliant examples of conversation between Dostoyevsky and Gogol, Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, and *The Hero of Our Time*. The researcher, Shklovsky, discovered a remarkable connection between the landscape of *Crime and Punishment* and “The Bronze Horseman”.

The literary dynamics of paraphrased quotes [T.N. inexact quotes from other writers’ works, used as a type of literary conversation] is masterfully described by Shklovsky, as in, for example, the distinctive deflection of Lermontov’s *Masquerade* and its hero, mentioned by Dostoyevsky “often and inexactly his entire life” (157). The foreword to *Diary of a Writer* begins with a reference to the speech addressed to the Big Dipper by Werther, the suicide, and the opposition between the vastness of the starry universe and his personal fate. The image of the Big Dipper frames Shklovsky’s book. He starts with a quote from Dostoyevsky, who foresees his own symbolism in Werther’s farewell lines, and in his turn, ends the book with a free interpretation and treatment of the Big Dipper motif in the tragic culmination of Mayakovsky’s poem “About This”. Dostoyevsky’s foreword somewhat anticipates Mayakovsky’s star leitmotif, which previously surfaced in his earlier poems (“Listen!”), then in “Our March,” with its direct address (“Hey, Big Dipper, request that we are taken to the skies alive!”).

Mayakovsky’s lyrical poems closely connect the image of a star with the poet’s death. In the final lines of “A Cloud,” “the universe sleeps, lying down with enormous ears on its paws, the stars as ticks.” In the epilogue of “A Man”, which is called “Some Star”, the poet, having severed his ties with the earth, lies down for centuries to come. Meanwhile, “the world attracts and tugs at him, peace is with the saints” and the requiem theme also migrates to the epilogues of Mayakovsky’s social poems: “150,000,000”, “V.I. Lenin”, and “Good”. In the poem “About This,” the guiding star is given a name: in answer to the execution of the bear-poet, “the Big Dipper started singing” in the mood of the entire “starry sky” (Big, carry along centuries-Ararats.) Even the poet himself, torn apart by bullets “the bear brother throatily recites poems to the creation amidst the noise”. The same ending is repeated in Mayakovsky’s farewell lyrical verses: “The night gifted the sky with stars. In hours like this you wake up and talk to the centuries of history and creation”.

The poem “About This”, which its author considered “a thing of the grandest and best works”, was the most literary, most filled with quotes among his creations. Besides including references to his previous work, e.g., “A Man”, “A Cloud”, “Mystery-Bouffe”, the themes of the new poem include parallels with Pushkin’s and Lermontov’s biographies, a parodic allusion to Blok’s *Inadvertent Joy*, an imitation of a gypsy romance, echoes of biblical motifs, and images from Beklin’s *Island of the Dead*. The title to the first part of the poem echoes Wilde’s “The Ballad of Reading Gaol”, and the second part of the poem echoes Gogol’s “Night Before Christmas”. The hero, exhausted by love and jealousy, plans to commit suicide, and his fantastic flight to and back from Petersburg is transformed from an amusing grotesque about the adventures of the merchant Vakula, into a tragic story about Mayakovsky’s passions in the second, more central part of his most personal of poems.

Shklovsky pauses to examine Raskolnikov’s “return” to the apartment where he killed the woman as being “one of the most emotional examples of “returns’ to the crime scene” in world literature. Comparing the poem “About This”, and more precisely, its second part, with Dostoyevsky’s themes, he quotes Mayakovsky’s fascinating comparison: ¹¹³⁵ “That’s how, having killed, Raskolnikov came to ring the doorbell”. At first glance it seems that the poet doesn’t compare *himself* to Raskolnikov, he only compares “his returns to the house of his lover with the returns of Dostoyevsky’s character”. Meanwhile, the entire context is filled with allusions to *Crime and Punishment*. The segment’s title, “There is Nowhere to Hide”, echoes Marmeladov’s words, “there is nowhere to go”, words that Raskolnikov remembers when he is overcome by the thought of killing (I/IV). To be more precise, the persistent motif from “A Cloud in Trousers” as in “he doesn’t have anywhere to go anymore,” merges with the recollections of Marmeladov’s and Raskolnikov’s diatribes. The above mentioned title is followed by the poetic lines, ¹⁰⁹³ “That’s how they enter your dream with an axe, measuring the foreheads of the ones who are asleep, and suddenly everything vanishes, and you can only see the axe butt”. In the novel, at exactly the same time mentioned above, “Raskolnikov had a horrible nightmare”, a nightmare dominated by the shouting of “Kill her with an axe. Finish her at once ***” and the awakened character exclaims: “Well, knock me down with a feather, would I really take an axe and hit her in the head, break her skull...” (I/IV). The theme continues: “The deed is to be done with an axe ***” (I/IV). “He pulled the axe out, *** and hit her head with the axe butt *** Now he hit with his entire strength, again and again, and just with the axe butt ***” (I/VII). In the poem, another dream follows immediately: ¹⁰⁹⁸

“In this way, the street drums enter the dream and it is suddenly remembered, that melancholy is in that corner, and there she is behind it, the guilty one.” In Raskolnikov’s delirious nightmare, in which the murder is re-enacted, “he thought it was strange that he didn’t remember how all of a sudden he was on the street *** The apartment is wide open to the staircase; he considered it and went in *** In the corner, between a small wardrobe and the window, he noticed an overcoat that seemed to hang on the wall *** Carefully he pulled the overcoat aside and right there saw a chair, and on the chair in the corner sat an old lady, hunched over, head bent, so that he couldn’t see her face at all, but it was her” (III/VI).

In draft versions of the poem we discover the motive for the murder after the second nightmare: “*** she’s wringing her hands, wringing them and crying, quieted, but if this is forever *** Having killed love, not having time to escape, I am trying to run ***”. Therefore, the initial comparison with Raskolnikov’s bell received a complex motivation, which offers the key to the gaol ballad in the title and verses of the first part, since the prisoner at Reading “had killed the thing he loved / And so he had to die”. The formula “he executes himself”, heard in the poetic lines of “War and Peace,” becomes the leitmotif of the poem “About This”.

During the time of Mayakovsky’s voluntary imprisonment, he continued working on the poem – yet, do we know who was part of his reading circle at the time? In any case, the poem keeps the memory of *Crime and Punishment* fresh by including “the unpleasant encounter” between Raskolnikov and the coachman, which in turn connects the chapter “There was pain” in Mayakovsky’s poem with the lines about the coachman’s whips, the ones that lashed Evgeny in “The Bronze Horseman”.

Viktor Shklovsky especially thoroughly examines that period of Dostoyevsky’s life and work right after the writer’s return from hard labor, i.e., the time of the *Notes*. The editing technique used in *Notes from the House of the Dead* is shown and explained in an innovative and convincing way, for example, the story about the fate of the faux criminal, where two hundred pages expressly separate the documented denial from the initial declaration of patricide. The polemic between the publications *Iskra* and *Vremya* forms a clear background for the researcher in his characterization of *Notes from the Underground*. The episode about F. Berg’s poem “The Birds Flew in from Across the Sea***”, published in 1863 in *Vremya* magazine, with various parodies of these birds from Berg’s poem and the derisive nickname “swifts” given to Dostoyevsky and his collaborators, is subjected to additional clarification.

Berg's poem was not only a recasting of an oral epic narrative poem about birds, but at the same time, was also a polemic answer to an older paraphrase of this epic poem, "Choir to the Fickle World" (1763), probably in connection with its one hundredth anniversary. Berg does not use the rhythm variations of the "Choir" and its folkloric prototype, but instead uses the strict frame of the regular trochaic pentameter for his birds. If Sumarokov's poem "the titmouse landed on the shore" exposed local customs and lauded the overseas lifestyle, then a hundred years hence "the gentle birds" don't search for anything except the quiet "in the thick fog". The same year in which the gentle birds poem was published, the magazine *Vremya* also published *Winter Notes about Summer Impressions* with a harsh condemnation of overseas habits and morality.

The magazine *Epokha* published *Notes from the Underground* replacing the magazine *Vremya*, which had earlier published *Winter Notes*. Dostoyevsky's friend Suslova, who in those years was connected with Russian political émigrés and who tried to preserve Dostoyevsky's connection to his revolutionary past, was revolted by the "scandalous story". "I don't like it when you write cynical things. They don't fit you somehow, the person I imagined you to be". The scandalous character of the piece consisted in the author's refusal to remove the contradictions he revealed.

The polyphonic quality of Dostoyevsky's work, discovered by the literary experts of the 1920's and especially by the talented Bakhtin, is defined by Shklovsky as an unending conflict between "pro and contra", which permeates his entire life and work: "Not only characters fight in Dostoyevsky's work. Separate elements of the developed subject contradict each other: the facts are elucidated in different ways, the character's psychology is self-contradicting ****" (223). Dostoyevsky's "pro and contra" conflict was inexactly understood by Saltykov-Schedrin in his polemic about *Notes from the Underground* as "a mix of contradictory declarations" (147). Meanwhile, only a non-organic, haphazard mix can destroy the unity of an artistic creation, but not a polyphonic conflict of declarations. Instead of a unilateral "polemic against Dostoyevsky" and a similarly flat dithyramb, Shklovsky's book demonstrates Dostoyevsky's "pro and contra" internal conflict and, succumbing to the writer's charm, transforms them into a congenial internal "pro and contra" conflict for Dostoyevsky, influenced by his typical methodology, including his "intonation breaks".

The self-contradictory psychology of the character, the irreconcilability of internal dialogue finds a better expression in the literary motif of "the double." In his comprehensive chapter about "Doubles and about *The Double*", despite its sketchiness, Shklovsky

comments on Dostoyevsky's persistent attempts to conquer the idea of *The Double*. In Dostoyevsky's *Diary of a Writer* he confesses he "never created anything in literature" more serious than this. Shklovsky compares Dostoyevsky's "Petersburg Poem" and the new treatment given the same theme in Mayakovsky's Moscow poem "About This", endowing the poet with "several doubles". The "pro and contra" dispute is between the first person of the poem and the Christ-like figure of the Komsomol member who is interspersed in the poem and later commits suicide. The verses describe him: "It's amazing how much he resembles me". In predictable fashion, even after this young double dies, the poet's dispute with himself about "a walk in life after death" continues both in and after the poem. The other double of the autobiographical hero of the poem "About This" is a "man from seven years ago" - the autobiographical hero of the older poem "A Man", who calls from the past to "stop the suffering", while the younger double doesn't find a premise for an exchange in the "time being." Furthermore, the lyrical 'I' of the poem "About This" has a third and insufferable, bedbug double: "**** I ran and saw *** I'm coming towards myself with gifts under my arms". It continues with the same double "**** the most terrifying: height, skin, clothes, even the gait is mine! In a word, in him I recognized myself, we are like twins, me and myself". This is the same double in whom the hero of "A Man" tries to identify the hero of "About This": "You may be adhered to their caste? You kiss them? Eat with them? You grow a belly? You intend to enter their lifestyle, their family happiness the back way?". This is the same double, Prisytkin, described in a comedic way in the "Bedbug". The author talked to us about the "Bedbug" as being a caricature of his poem right after he finished it and it was performed. It wasn't coincidental that the actor Ilyinsky, who according to his own admission, used a parody of Mayakovsky's gait for his role, and who delighted Mayakovsky with his interpretation of Prisytkin.

In 1930⁷⁶, in the article "About a Generation Who Wasted Its Poets" [On a Generation that Squandered Its Poets' by Jakobson IN *Language in*

⁷⁶ This quotation is translated in *Language in Literature* (1987), pp275/6 as follows: 'The poetry of Majakovskij from his first verses, in "A Slap in the Face of Public Taste", to his last lines is one and indivisible. It represents the dialectical development of a single theme. It is an extraordinarily unified symbolic system. A symbol one thrown out only as a kind of hint will later be developed and presented in a totally new perspective. He himself underlines these links in his verse by alluding to earlier works. In the poem "About That" ("Pro èto"), for instance, he recalls certain lines from the poem "Man" ("Čelovek"), written several years earlier, and in the latter poem he refers to lyrics of an even earlier period. An image at first offered humorously may later and in a different context lose its comic effect, or conversely, a motif developed solemnly may be repeated in a parodistic vein. Yet this does not mean that the beliefs of yesterday are necessarily held up to scorn; rather, we have here two levels, the tragic and the comic, of a single symbolic system as in the medieval theater'

Literature (1987) Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press] I tried to demonstrate that “Mayakovsky’s poetic creation, from his first poems *** to his last lines is unitary and indivisible. There is a dialectic development of a unitary theme. There is an unusual unity of symbols. A symbol that was alluded to in passing is developed and offered from a different angle *** An image that was initially humorously presented is shown in a different way, or vice versa, a sad motif is repeated in a parodical way. This is not contemptuous of yesterday’s belief, as these are two sides of a unitary symbolism, the tragic and the comic, like in medieval theatre.” In a note to “Mayakovsky’s Unknown Poems” (*Novosel’ie*, nr. 2, New York, 1942) I declared, and I continue to declare to this day, that although “not too long ago there were very serious discussions whether or not Mayakovsky is a poet, and if he is a poet, is he only a poet of the lyrical pieces ‘A Cloud’, ‘The Flute’ and so on, or is he only a poet in regard to his social satire and odes”. “All of these attempts to disregard some things from Mayakovsky’s work *** are recently abandoned to the distant past of the archives. Everything that Mayakovsky wrote is unitary, inseparable and inextricable”. Therefore, I wholly agree with G. Cheremin’s words that it is impossible to examine the political, agitational poetry as “something alien in regards to Mayakovsky’s original work” (*Voprosy literatury*, nr. 8, 1957, 250).

The love poems, or the poetry of the heart, as Mayakovsky referred to it in an old-fashioned way, and the lyrical-epical poems on social themes are equally essential and lively genres in his work. We will not negate the distinct fundamental differences between the genres. It is true that often Mayakovsky’s love poetry, from “A Cloud in Trousers” to the “Letters” from Paris in 1928, is sometimes closely tied with social problems, but, on the other hand, personal, love motifs (e.g. “War and Peace”: “Hello, my love!”; “Good”: “eyes like the sky, the eyes of my beloved”) sometimes surface in his epic poems. It is, however, true that common characteristics bring the themes of both genres closer to each other. For example, regardless of the genre, all major things that young Mayakovsky wrote before in “About This” and “The Fifth International,” end in the future. However, the major world events (war and peace, revolution and the world) which are characteristic of Mayakovsky’s social poems, are opposed in his lyrical poems by personal love tragedy, inescapable loneliness, and martyrdom.

The polyphonic character of Mayakovsky’s poetry consists in the interruption of both unmerged genres. This is not a theory imposed from the outside and backdated about the literary inheritance of a dead poet. Mayakovsky wrote many times in his poems and letters, and made oral

declarations about the alternation of genres and their dramatic collisions; about the fight between the lyrical and anti-lyrical inspiration. This is not a fight that was imposed upon the poet. No one could have imposed anything upon such a stubborn poet. “I have to write from a sense of mandatory obligation”, indicates his poetic line about poetry in answer to the upcoming “social order”. He creates these poems, although they will be met with censorship, as it happened before the revolution with “War and Peace”, or lengthy negotiations around the permission to publish “One Hundred and Fifty Millions”, which faced many obstacles and was disparaged in the beginning. The dispute of pro and contra and the pressure of writing lyrical poems, drove him again to write “about that and about this.” The attacks by others in response to his lyrical poems - became the internal law of Mayakovsky’s life and literary path. According to the prologue to the poem “About This,” the lyrical theme dominated the poet. He talks about overcoming the lyrical inspiration in metaphoric terms, e.g. suffocation in the prologue “At the Top of My Voice” to an unwritten poem: “But I tamed myself, standing on the throat of my own song”.

It is not coincidental that the notes about Mayakovsky’s poetry serve as a background for the notes about Dostoyevsky in Shklovsky’s book *Pro and Contra*. The researcher calls upon us not to confuse the polyphonic structure of confrontational lines [i.e.form] and the discord and gibberish of contradictory declarations [i.e.content], rather he prompts us to meditate about the polyphonic character of the opposing genres [i.e.forms], which shouldn’t be confused with the silly chaos of discordant dissonance [i.e.content].

Notes published in *IJSLP*, I (1959), 305-310.

'The streets shall be our brushes the squares our palettes'
 (Vladimir Mayakovsky)

Colloquium
23rd October 2015
10am -5.30pm

Form and Poetry: an exploration of
Russian Formalism - *ostranenie*, city
poetics, poles of poetic art - metaphor,
metonymy

Speakers:

Mary Coghill
 (presentation of completed Fellowship research)
Keith Green
Gareth Farmer
Helen Palmer
Charles Denroche
Anna Robinson
Alex Hills

Tea/coffee provided all day
Room 243 (2nd Floor),
Institute of English Studies
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