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# **Vladimir Mayakovsky: The Language of Revolution**

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PhD  
The University of Sussex  
September 2016

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

Signature: R. Carrick

UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

ROSY PATIENCE CARRICK

PhD CRITICAL THEORY

VLADIMIR MAYAKOVSKY: THE LANGUAGE OF REVOLUTION

My thesis addresses two significant misrepresentations in western criticism and translation of Mayakovsky that have developed since his death in 1930: his diminished status as a Marxist poet; and his negative attitude towards everyday life (*byt*).

Part One ('Mayakovsky and Marxism') contests the consistent refusal in the west to acknowledge Mayakovsky as a Marxist poet and demonstrates instead, through a close examination of the specific terminology used in certain essays and poems by Mayakovsky in relation to that used by Karl Marx in *Capital*, not only that the poet is keenly engaged with and influenced by Marxist theory, but that he uses that theory explicitly to describe and imagine the production of ideal communist writing.

Part Two ('Mayakovsky and Byt') contests the widespread western characterisation of Mayakovsky as a misogynist whose hatred of domesticity in all its forms has long been accepted as fact. At the heart of this characterisation is the Russian concept of *byt* (everyday life), which has been systematically misunderstood and mistranslated in relation to Mayakovsky. Through a study of the complex cultural, political and social developments of this concept in early Soviet Russia, alongside the collation of my own translations of twenty-nine never-before-translated poems by Mayakovsky on the subject of *byt*, this part of the thesis presents a radical and feminist perspective of the poet as a vocal proponent of equality and revolution in everyday life.

Both contestations represent the first sustained studies of their kind in English, and – in the case of Part Two in particular, which is the first of its kind in any language – constitute significant and challenging contributions to Mayakovsky scholarship.

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### A Note on Editions and Translations

There are three major Russian editions of Mayakovsky's collected works. These are:

*Полное собрание сочинений* [*Complete Collected Works*] (12 volumes), edited by L.Y. Brik and I. Bespolav, ГОСЛИТИЗДАТ, Moscow, 1934-8.

*Полное собрание сочинений* (12 volumes), edited by N. Aseyev, L.V. Mayakovskaya, V.O. Pertsov and M.N. Serebryansky, ГОСЛИТИЗДАТ, Moscow, 1939-49.

*Полное собрание сочинений* (13 volumes), edited by V.A. Katanyan and A.V. Fevralsky, Gos. Izd. Khud. Lit., Moscow, 1955-61.

Not all English translations state from which Russian text their source material came. However, of those that do, the 1955-1961 edition is credited most frequently in *My Discovery of America*, *Listen!* and *The Bedbug* (with the exception of one poem, 'Past One O'Clock', which comes from the 1939-1949 version). *How Are Verses Made* also uses this earlier edition of 1939-1949. Hyde and Gureyeva have taken the Russian text of *Pro Eto* from the site of its first publication in Vol. 1 of *Lef* magazine, published in Moscow in 1923, and *Love is the Heart of Everything* is the English language edition of *В. В. Маяковский и Л. Ю. Брик: Переписка 1915-1930* which, like its English counterpart, is edited by Jangfeldt. In his preface to the English translation, Jangfeldt clarifies his sources for this collection of correspondence:

All Lili Brik's letters, postcards and telegrams are published in this book [the Russian version] for the first time, as are the telegrams from Osip Brik [...]. Of Mayakovsky's letters and telegrams, 129 (125 to Lili and four to Osip Brik) were published in the USSR in 1958 (*Literaturnoye nasledstvo*, No. 65), though some passages were deleted. [... The other] letters and telegrams [...] are published for the first time.<sup>1</sup>

Unless specified otherwise, I will use the most recent Russian edition of Mayakovsky's collected works (1955-61), which is also the most comprehensive of the three, as my primary source of his works.

### A Note on Transliteration

I have transliterated all Russian text from Cyrillic into Latin script, with the exception of titles of Russian poems, articles and books, and in cases where I directly quote English language excerpts that use Cyrillic in the originals.

Soft signs (ь) are represented in transliteration with a comma. For example, on page 99 when I note the difference between the Russian words Быт [daily life] and Быть [to be], the only lexical difference between which is the soft sign, I distinguish between them in transliteration thus: byt and byt'. The difference in pronunciation is minor – the soft sign simply indicates the palatisation of its preceeding consonant.

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<sup>1</sup> Bengt Jangfeldt, *Love Is The Heart Of Everything: Correspondence Between Vladimir Mayakovsky and Lili Brik 1915-1930*, trans. Julian Graffy (New York: Grove Press, 1987), p. 1.



## Introduction

If the Mayakovsky who has, since his death, been constructed by generations of critics and translators in the western world were to rise up off the pages of their books and stand before us today, what kind of a man would we be faced with? This Mayakovsky, though he may have lived through the politically and culturally tumultuous years of the revolution and the early Soviet period, would nevertheless be politically immature, a man whose ‘understanding of Marx was elementary’<sup>2</sup>, useful only insofar as it offered him an explosive context for his own ego-centric interests – ‘a way out of his personal dilemma’<sup>3</sup>. Creatively, he would stand for the most part a lone rebel, spurning Soviet demands for a collective ‘proletarian’ poetry in favour of highly individualistic, romantically passionate, avant-garde love poems such as ‘The Backbone Flute’, and would consider his concessions to agitprop work something akin to self-harm, of ‘setting his heel on the throat of his own song.’<sup>4</sup> His ‘glowering’ face would reveal his ‘proto-punk ferocity, a still-burning aura of tough-guy tenderness [and] soulful defiance.’<sup>5</sup> He would be machismo personified – a womaniser,<sup>6</sup> a misogynist<sup>7</sup> and a hater of children,<sup>8</sup> whose poetry makes frequent reference to his unwavering opinion that domesticity in all its incarnations is disgusting and antithetical to the thrusting force of revolution.<sup>9</sup> He would be characterised largely by his numerous love affairs, his gambling addiction and his obsessive and brooding nature, and we would speak of his suicide as one performed

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<sup>2</sup> Edward Brown, *Russian Literature Since the Revolution*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> Lawrence Stahlberger, ‘The Poet and Time’, in *The Symbolic System of Mayakovsky* (The Hague: Mouton, 1964), p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> A line from Mayakovsky’s poem ‘At the Top of My Voice’, translated by George Reavey in Rosy Carrick, ed., *Volodya* (London: Enitharmon, 2015), p. 211.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Almereyda, *Night Wraps the Sky: Writings By and About Mayakovsky* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), p. xvii.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Mayakovsky loves women. Women love Mayakovsky. [...] He fashions ideal beings for himself, he vows that he will only commit himself to a woman who corresponds to his ideal, but he is always coming across other women.’ Bengt Jangfeldt, *Mayakovsky: A Biography*, trans. Harry D. Watson (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 413.

<sup>7</sup> On this accusation Connor Doak acknowledges that ‘[I]ittle work exists on Maiakovskii’s relationship to this new gender order. Most critics tend to assume that his work accords fully with the misogynistic spirit of the times. For example, Naiman cites Maiakovskii in passing as an example of a writer whose work is infused with a ‘misogynistic intoxication with sex and power.’ In ‘One Man’s Meat is Another Man’s Poetry: Masculinity and Metaphor in the Work of Vladimir Mayakovskii’, *Modernism/modernity* (20:2): 2013, p. 250. The question of Mayakovsky and misogyny is addressed in Part 2 Chapter 2 of this thesis.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Majakovskij, with complete consistency, is hostile to children.’ Stahlberger, *Symbolic System*, p. 124.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Byt, the eternal routine of everyday living, was hateful to Mayakovsky’. Victor Terras, *Vladimir Mayakovsky* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1983), p. 139.

by a known depressive whose final submission to death occurred not least because, desirous of a state of perpetual revolution and upheaval, he came to realise he could never fully escape the tortuous endless morass of the daily grind.<sup>10</sup>

This image may seem extreme, but of the infinite possible biographical moments and the thousands of poems, captions, artworks, plays and other works over which the material of Mayakovsky's life might be draped, there is a distinct leaning in the west towards certain particular characteristics of the poet, with the inevitable result that the Mayakovsky we have now inherited is – at best – lopsided, and in many cases notably inaccurate. For example, although we know that, through his sister, Mayakovsky was involved in – and imprisoned for – Bolshevik activities in his teens, and despite how we are often provided with descriptions of the rabble-rousing behaviour that led to his solitary confinement, and with photographs from that time which show a sullen and impetuous youth, still the account provided by his mother of the poet's keen interest in Marxist literature, and of the specific texts he was binding together, reading and discussing as a boy as young as twelve, has never been mentioned. His intensely passionate lyrical poem 'A Cloud In Trousers', written in 1915 when Mayakovsky was twenty-two years old and before the revolution had taken place, remains the work for which he is most well-known in the west – it has been translated into English eight or more times since his death, of which six versions are in print at this time. By comparison, of his 1924 epic, 'Vladimir Ilyich Lenin', a poem which proudly and passionately charts Lenin's life and death, as well as the history of capitalism and the trajectory of communism, and about which Mayakovsky said, '[n]ever have I wanted to be understood so much as in this poem[, i]t is probably the most serious piece of work I have ever done',<sup>11</sup> there have been only three complete translations into English, none of which are currently in print and the most recent of which was almost thirty years ago, the others significantly earlier. Mayakovsky was a lover of animals, and yet the photographs that exist of him fondly cuddling his pet dogs are rarely reproduced. Meanwhile, the brooding series of photographs taken by Rodchenko one afternoon in 1925, which show a smouldering and, uncharacteristically,

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<sup>10</sup> '[T]he theme of the poet's suicide, of art as an impassioned dicing with death, of gambling one's life away for the sake of those moments of intensity that banished the nothingness of "byt" (dullness), mere material existence, had haunted Mayakovsky's poetry from the beginning.' John Wakeman, from the foreword to *Pro Eto – That's What*, trans. George Hyde and Larisa Gureyeva (London: Arc Press, 2009), p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> Quote taken from the sleeve information to *Vladimir Ilyich Lenin: A Poem* (Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 2003). No source given.

shaven-headed Mayakovsky have become iconic representations of the poet. Mayakovsky wrote many poems that openly challenged unequal gender dynamics following the revolution, including domestic abuse, infidelity and child maintenance issues.<sup>12</sup> None of these poems have ever been translated – into any language at all, as far as I know. In his final years his main place of publication was the official paper of the Communist Youth group, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, for which he wrote over a hundred poems instructing and encouraging young people in all the minute practical ways they could play a part in building communism by acting in a way that supported the proposed new Soviet way of life (*new byt*) – for example by doing things like keeping their rooms tidy, working hard and not swearing or drinking alcohol.<sup>13</sup> These poems too, it seems, have never been translated into any language. In the last five years of his life Mayakovsky wrote thirteen narrative poems for younger children, some of considerable length, of which so few have been translated, and which had been for so long out of print before the reproduction of several in my own collection, *Volodya*,<sup>14</sup> that most people don't even know they exist – and yet one single metaphorical and consciously controversial line from his poem sequence 'I', written when he was nineteen or twenty years old – 'I love to watch children dying'<sup>15</sup> – is consistently used as "proof" that he hated children and literally wanted them dead.

Initially for this thesis I was interested in writing a study of the political significance of the various ways in which individual poems by Mayakovsky have been translated over the years. What struck me almost immediately when I began to look into this was that a much greater politically-motivated translation has been developing in the west with regard to Mayakovsky – a translation that does indeed filter down to particular renderings of individual lines or poems,<sup>16</sup> but that is far broader and more systematic in its approach,

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<sup>12</sup> The 1926 poem 'Love' is perhaps the most sustained of these – see Part 2 Chapter 2 for a discussion of this.

<sup>13</sup> 'Let your desire for combat / flare up / at byt - / At the vodka! / At the swearing! / At the grime! / At the fleas!' From 'Forward Komsomol!'. Vladimir Mayakovsky, *Полное Собрание Сочинений Том 8*, ed. V.A. Katanyan (Moscow: Gos. Izd. Khud. Lit., 1955-61), p. 285. My translation.

<sup>14</sup> For more about this book see the Afterword.

<sup>15</sup> 'The walls [of the Poet's Café] were covered with paintings that must have looked very strange to the public, and with sentences that were no less strange. 'I like watching children die – that line from Mayakovsky's early, pre-revolutionary poem was to be seen on the wall in order to shock those who entered. [...] David Burlyuk would mount the platform, his face heavily powdered [...] and recite, 'I like pregnant men...'.' Ilya Ehrenburg, 'Poets Café', in *Mayakovsky: Twenty Years of Work*, ed. David Elliott (Oxford: Museum of Modern Art, 1982), p. 18.

<sup>16</sup> For example, the lines from 'At the Top of My Voice' that George Reavey translates as 'Agitprop / sticks / in my teeth too'<sup>□</sup> have been "adapted" for *Night Wraps the Sky* to the far more relaxed – and New York

a translation that has enveloped the whole of the way Mayakovsky is now regarded and, in having done so, whose machinations are now practically invisible, whose perpetuation appears perfectly natural. It is this cultural translation that is the subject of my thesis, in addressing which I ask *what* exactly has been happening in our western representation of Mayakovsky, *why* it might be happening, and how we can begin to stop it from continuing in the future – or at least to recognise the limits of our current criticism and translation of Mayakovsky and to actively work towards a broader, more representative view of the poet. The thesis contests two significant ways in which Mayakovsky has been consistently misrepresented in the west: firstly, the minimisation of his status as a Marxist poet – indeed, often this status is refuted altogether; and secondly, the long-accepted “fact” that Mayakovsky hated everyday life – the family, children and domesticity in all its various forms. The word at the heart of these latter claims is *byt*, and it permeates, without development, almost all western criticism of the poet. When Edward Brown, for example, writing in 1963 says, ‘routine and regularity, the established pattern of life, was [Mayakovsky’s] personal enemy’;<sup>17</sup> when Victor Terras, in 1983, says ‘the eternal routine of everyday living was hateful to Mayakovsky’;<sup>18</sup> when Svetlana Boym, in 1994, talks of ‘the monstrous daily grind’;<sup>19</sup> and when, in 2015, Bengt Jangfeldt talks about Mayakovsky’s need to combat ‘daily life with its routine and its insipidity’;<sup>20</sup> they are all referring to this term: *byt*. At its most basic level, *byt* does indeed translate as ‘everyday life’, but in early Soviet Russia the term was far more complex. It ceased altogether to represent one single concept, and became instead split into two opposing concepts: *old byt* and *new byt*. *Old byt* referred to the stagnant daily life before the revolution, the practical conditions of the culturally and industrially backward, largely illiterate and impoverished population and, alongside that, the parasitic greed and extravagance associated with the bourgeoisie. *New byt* represented the ideal communist way for the “new soviet man” to live: a life of classless equality which embraced technology, education and good physical health. When Mayakovsky writes, as he often does, about his hatred for *byt*, it is always made explicit that it is the *old byt* to which he refers – and

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School vernacular-sounding – phrase ‘I’ve had every kind / of bullshit / up to here!’ In Blake, P. ed., *The Bedbug and Selected Poetry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), p. 222, and *Night Wraps the Sky*, p. 4 respectively.

<sup>17</sup> Brown, *Russian Literature*, pp. 21-22.

<sup>18</sup> Terras, *Vladimir Mayakovsky*, p. 139.

<sup>19</sup> Svetlana Boym, ‘Byt: “Daily Grind” and “Domestic Trash”’, in *Death in Quotation Marks: Cultural Myths of the Modern Poet*, (Cambridge Mass and London: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 29.

<sup>20</sup> Jangfeldt, *Mayakovsky*, pp. 259-260.

*not* to domesticity in general. Likewise, there are many poems in which he vigorously extols the virtues of the *new byt* as a central element of the revolutionary goal.

In this thesis I establish a Mayakovsky radically different from the one we have inherited in the west. A Mayakovsky whose work reflects a keen engagement with and influence by Marxist theory, who is a vocal proponent of equality and revolution in everyday life, and who has written innumerable poems on all the various elements of domesticity. A Mayakovsky whose complex and highly individual personality, whose capacity for outstanding creative innovation, romantic intensity and lyrical genius, and whose challenging relationship with the Soviet government are not the credentials of a politically immature defiant ‘literary bad boy’, but rather represent a set of circumstances that make his central position as the leading poet of the early Soviet period an incredible feat, worthy of closer and more rigorous investigation. A Mayakovsky whose many well-documented liaisons with women are not an indicator of sexism or misogyny – indeed, whose sexual partners have plentifully documented his respectful and loving manner towards them,<sup>21</sup> whose work frequently challenges misogyny and gender inequality and in doing so may be considered overtly feminist. This is the Mayakovsky I am interested in, and the one I want other people to discover. This Mayakovsky emerges not from the cultivation of a partial appropriation – a ‘suitable patchwork’<sup>22</sup> for English-speaking readers – but from the concrete evidence of the actions of his own life, and my hope is that it will go some way towards breaking down the inaccurate construction of him that has been doggedly maintained here in the west since his death.

The thesis is presented in two parts, both of which constitute significant contributions to Mayakovsky scholarship. In Part One, ‘Mayakovsky and Marxism’, by presenting a series of close readings of certain key texts by Mayakovsky alongside a contemporaneous Russian edition of Karl Marx’s *Capital*, I set out for the first time the evidence that Mayakovsky’s work is influenced by and explicitly references that of Marx, and, moreover, that the poet uses that theory to describe and imagine the production of ideal communist writing. In Part Two, ‘Mayakovsky and *Byt*’, my research represents the first study ever to fully contest the heroic masculine representation of Mayakovsky that has

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<sup>21</sup> Elly Jones, for example, says that contrary to her expectations, ‘[Mayakovsky] was absolutely correct with me, and I had a wonderful time.’ Patricia J. Thompson, *Mayakovsky in Manhattan: A Love Story* (New York: West End Productions, 1993), p. 51.

<sup>22</sup> *Night Wraps the Sky*, p. xxvi.

been perpetuated in the west since his death in 1930, and proposes a radical and feminist perspective of the poet in its place – one which re-contextualises him within the wider Soviet drive for *new byt* and which, in doing so, further reinforces his Marxist identification. To demonstrate this I present a history of the political, social and cultural significance of *byt* in Soviet Russia, before documenting every instance of Mayakovsky's usage of the term alongside every instance of western criticism on the subject of Mayakovsky and *byt* in order to expose not only the wide gulf that exists between western criticism and Mayakovsky's own writings on this matter, but the fact that, far from expressing a hatred of domesticity, for Mayakovsky everyday life was of central importance to the fight for communism. Moreover, in undertaking this work I have translated over thirty never-before-translated poems, twenty-nine of which relate explicitly to *byt*, and all of which show a side of the poet's work rarely seen before, in English or any other language. Both Parts additionally address the question of how these very particular representations of Mayakovsky have been maintained for so long in the west, taking into consideration aspects such as Cold War-era repackaging, capitalist appropriation and cultural misunderstanding, and of what it means now to be able to present a more accurate image of the poet. This seems particularly relevant at this time, given the explosive increase in interest in Mayakovsky's work over the last few years. Since 2005 there have been eight publications of new translations of Mayakovsky's work – that is more than were produced in the seventies, eighties and nineties put together. Four of these brand new works have emerged since 2013. Furthermore, this Summer Carcanet published a new edition of Edwin Morgan's Lallans Scots translations, *Wi the Haill Voice*, which had previously been out of print for decades, and I am currently editing a new publication of Dorian Rottenberg's full translation of 'Vladimir Ilyich Lenin', which will be published to commemorate the centenary of the Russian revolution in 2017. Some of these new translations indicate an exciting development in western representation of Mayakovsky. The very fact that a new publication of 'Lenin' has been commissioned, for example, shows an interest in reconnecting Mayakovsky to his Bolshevik background, as does Harry Gilonis's 2015 collection, *For British Workers*, which focuses exclusively on Mayakovsky's manifestly political works. Meanwhile, James Womack's collection, *Vladimir Mayakovsky and Other Poems*, is perhaps the first to properly capture the poet's extraordinary wit. His translations are laugh-out-loud funny, and in capturing the coarseness, the quickness and the playful hilarity of Mayakovsky's humour they make the popular image of him as a smouldering scowler

impossible to maintain. His version of the 1913 poem ‘They Just Don’t Get it’, for example, opens with the wonderfully colloquial:

Went into the barber’s shop, said—calmly:  
‘Do me a solid and trim my ears’<sup>23</sup>

while ‘And That’s How I Became a Dog’ from 1913 begins with the brilliant phrase ‘Well, that’s a fucker and no mistake!’<sup>24</sup>

By comparison, James McGavran starts *his* version of the ‘Dog’ poem with ‘Well this is completely unbearable!’,<sup>25</sup> and translates the same lines from ‘They Just Don’t Get it’ (which he calls ‘They Don’t Understand Anything’) like this:

Walked into a barbershop and said, perfectly calm,  
“Would you be so kind as to give my ears a trim?”<sup>26</sup>

It seems then that – in translation at least – people are increasingly open to reaching beyond the Mayakovsky we traditionally recognise in the west, but without a parallel *critical* framework this interest can only be taken so far. Gilonis is keen to foreground Mayakovsky’s Marxist poetry; but in the introduction to his collection he nevertheless staunchly maintains the poet’s all-out hatred of *byt*.<sup>27</sup> In 2015 the English translation of Bengt Jangfeldt’s comprehensive biography was published, receiving fantastic reviews from a significant number of mainstream newspapers and journals. This biography is now widely considered to be the definitive authority on Mayakovsky, and rightly so – it is a fascinating, informative and hugely detailed book which runs to over 600 pages and took decades to put together. Nevertheless Jangfeldt offers nothing new on the subjects I address in my thesis. There is no recognition whatsoever of Mayakovsky as a Marxist poet, and its interpretation and discussion of *byt* is presented in exactly the same incorrect terms as all its predecessors. The aim of my work is to now begin that process of change by providing a solid body of critical analysis from which the many complex and

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<sup>23</sup> ‘They Just Don’t Get it’, trans. James Womack, *Vladimir Mayakovsky and Other Poems* (London: Carcanet, 2016), p. 13.

<sup>24</sup> ‘And That’s How I Became a Dog’, trans. James Womack in *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>25</sup> ‘Dog’, trans. James McGavran III, *Vladimir Mayakovsky Selected Poems* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2013), p. 58.

<sup>26</sup> ‘They Don’t Understand Anything’, trans. James McGavran III in *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>27</sup> ‘Part of Mayakovsky’s zeal comes from his life-long detestation of *byt*, that untranslatable Russian notion which is like a hypostatised, intensified ‘daily grind’.’ In *For British Workers: Versions of Vladimir Mayakovsky (and Others)* (London: Barque Press, 2015), p. 11.

fascinating aspects of Mayakovsky's life and work may finally be understood and discussed in their fullness.



**Part 1**  
**Mayakovsky and Marxism**

## Introduction

Mayakovsky's engagement with Marxism has consistently been either undermined, refuted or absented from discussion altogether in Western accounts of the poet's life and work – a strange phenomenon given that throughout his whole career he aligned himself emphatically with the revolutionary cause, and was a figure of major cultural significance throughout the Russian revolution and early Soviet period. Indeed, in Bengt Jangfeldt's words, '[n]o other writer is as indissolubly linked with the Russian Revolution as Mayakovsky [... He] was the main poet of the Revolution'.<sup>28</sup> Mayakovsky became a member of the Bolshevik party at the age of fifteen, and between 1908 and 1910 was arrested three times for revolutionary activity, and imprisoned for a total of eleven months.<sup>29</sup> Between 1919 and 1922 he produced thousands of agitational posters for the Russian Telegraph Agency (ROSTA) and, in the following year, began to create advertisement posters for state-produced goods including light bulbs, cigarettes, dummies, watches and galoshes. The arts journal *Lef* (*The Left Front of Arts*), and its successor, *New Lef*, both co-edited by Mayakovsky, focussed on ways to revolutionise the arts alongside political and social life, and from the mid-twenties until the end of his life, the poet wrote an enormous volume of work which expressed criticism of those who capitalised on the reintroduction of free trade under Lenin's 1921 New Economic Policy, and which fought for ways to avoid slipping back into the conditions of pre-revolutionary life. Despite this practical communist action, the implication is often made that if Mayakovsky had any interest in Marxist theory itself then it was superficial at best and developed primarily to serve his own individualistic interests. The poet's most well-known Soviet biographer Edward Brown, for example, says that '[h]is understanding of Marx was elementary, but the ideas of Marx threatened the rigidities of Russian life, and he, Mayakovsky, found the propagation of those ideas a perfect method of self-expression on a grand scale.'<sup>30</sup> Bengt Jangfeldt's 2015 comprehensive biography of the poet meanwhile,<sup>31</sup> which runs to over six hundred pages and has overtaken Brown's work as the definitive biography of Mayakovsky, contains no mention whatsoever of his status as a Marxist poet, nor even of any passing interest in Marx. Lawrence Stahlberger goes as

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<sup>28</sup> Jangfeldt, *Mayakovsky*, p. x.

<sup>29</sup> See 'I Myself' in Vladimir Mayakovsky, *Mayakovsky*, trans. Herbert Marshall (New York: Hill and Wang, 1965) p. 81.

<sup>30</sup> *Russian Literature*, p. 22.

<sup>31</sup> This is the release year of its English translation. It was first published in Swedish in 2007.

far as to claim that ‘Mayakovsky was no more a Marxist than a Christian’<sup>32</sup>, and elsewhere asserts that ‘the Revolution served as a temporary means for Mayakovskij to repress the inherent and most vital questions that he had to ask of life. [... It] offered to Mayakovskij a way out of his *personal* dilemma’.<sup>33</sup>

This part of the thesis will argue that, contrary to these popularly held beliefs, Mayakovsky was not only closely familiar with the works of Marx but that he explicitly used Marx’s description of capitalist production as a model for his own practice of writing. In his account of the theory and practice of the process of writing in his 1926 essay ‘How Are Verses Made’ an extended analogy is set up by Mayakovsky between *this* process and the process of factory production, in which both the structure of the method itself and the language by which he explains it bear a striking resemblance to the concepts and language used by Karl Marx in his critique of political economy in *Capital Volume 1*. In examining the extent to which this analogy of Mayakovsky’s – which seems not to have been acknowledged anywhere in print as Marxist in its language and theory – may be considered as such, I will think also about the potential implications for the western reader of Mayakovsky in this new light – how our understanding of his work may be altered not only in terms of gaining a developed perspective of him as a Marxist poet, but also insofar as the particular methods proposed by Mayakovsky as being essential to his writing may change the way we think about or respond to the finished writing itself.

By describing Mayakovsky as a “Marxist” poet what I mean is that the majority of his writing focuses explicitly on the social, economic and cultural aspects of class-struggle with the aim of disrupting and overthrowing that system of class structure which favours the bourgeoisie, and working instead towards the development of one in which the peasants and workers have the power. Mayakovsky does this using two significant approaches. Firstly, the manifest content of his poems derides and belittles capitalists, landowners, religion and other bourgeois traditions (‘Eat your pineapples, guzzle your grouse, your last day draws near, bourgeois!’<sup>34</sup>) and forefronts instead the experiences, needs and interests of the working class (‘We are counting on you,/ young Komsomol

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<sup>32</sup> Stahlberger, *The Symbolic System*, p. 125.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 11. My italics.

<sup>34</sup> Untitled, 1917. In *Полное Собрание Сочинений Том I*, p. 148. My translation.

comrades, – / on you, / the makers of the future!’<sup>35</sup>; ‘Comrades! [...] / Fight / for a clean table and chair!’<sup>36</sup>) Secondly, he uses irregular forms, neologism and street slang in order to reject the previous authority of bourgeois language and style and its inherent social and cultural reinforcement of class control (‘Chuck Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and all that lot overboard from the Ship of Modernity. [...] We COMMAND you to honour the RIGHTS of poets: [...] To feel an insuperable hatred towards that language which exists before their own’<sup>37</sup>), in favour of an amalgamation of the real language spoken by the working classes, and new, invented forms of expression as a cultural gesture towards a revolutionary future (‘Listen up, goldenbrow!’<sup>38</sup>; ‘Mayakonferensky’s Anecdote’)<sup>39</sup>. Furthermore he draws attention to this new style, and pre-emptively defends its departure from traditional poetry in the manifest content of certain poems themselves (‘I know, / your critics’ll / grip their whips, / your poets’ll go hysteric: / “Call that poetry? / Sheer publicists. / No feeling, / no nothing – / just bare rhetoric!”’)<sup>40</sup>. Connected to this kind of verse criticism are Mayakovsky’s poems that are dedicated to the criticism of those poets who write for the purpose of cultural decoration and entertainment over political agitation, and who therefore, in Mayakovsky’s view, belong more to the old class than the new. (‘How can you dare to call yourself a poet, / You dullard, and twitter like a quail! [...] Worried by just one thought – ‘Do I dance elegantly?’’<sup>41</sup>)

Alongside the radically political content and form of the poetry itself, and the self-reflexive commentary that in places runs through it, the practical considerations of

<sup>35</sup> ‘On the Agenda’, in *Полное Собрание Сочинений Том 7*, p. 139. My translation.

<sup>36</sup> From ‘Education business – Nice and Confusing’, in *Полное Собрание Сочинений Том 8*, p. 123. My translation.

<sup>37</sup> ‘A Slap in the Face of Public Taste’, trans. Rosy Carrick, in *Volodya*, p. 24.

<sup>38</sup> Mayakovsky’s address to the sun in ‘An Extraordinary Adventure...’, trans. George Reavey in *Ibid.*, p. 66. Mayakovsky’s neologism, ‘zlatolobo’ is an amalgamation of ‘gold’ (zlato) and ‘brow’ (lob) which, especially with the imperative ‘listen up’ feels extremely colloquial.

<sup>39</sup> The title of a 1922 poem by Mayakovsky which attacks the insane bureaucracy of the Soviet State, as translated by Edwin Morgan in *Wi the Haill Voice* (London: Carcanet, 1972), p. 42. As James McGavran notes in the notes of his own collection of translations, ‘the title of the poem is a one-word neologism in the original [‘Prozasedavshiesya’]. Through prefixation and suffixation, Mayakovsky creates a past participle meaning “those who have meetinged through themselves” (or “meetinged themselves out”, etc.’ From *Selected Poems*, p. 343. James Womack’s translation of this poem in *Vladimir Mayakovsky and Other Poems* captures the glee with which Mayakovsky satirises bureaucratic language fantastically: Up the stairs once again, as the twilight grows thicker, / to the office’s penthouse suite. / ‘Ivan Vanich?’ ‘Yes, but...’ An undisguised snicker: / ‘He’s with the board of Immakingthisup PLC.’ (‘All Meetinged Out’, p. 107.)

<sup>40</sup> From ‘Vladimir Ilyich Lenin’, trans. Dorian Rottenberg, in *Volodya*, p. 121.

<sup>41</sup> From ‘A Cloud in Trousers’ trans. George Hyde, in *How Are Verses Made* (Bristol: The Bristol Press, 1990), pp. 28-29.

Mayakovsky's Marxist way of writing are discussed by him in 'How Are Verses Made'. About the issue of language for example, he says:

The Revolution [...] has thrown up on to the streets the unpolished speech of the masses, the slang of the suburbs has flowed along the downtown boulevards; [...] There is a new linguistic element. How can one make it poetic? The old rules about 'love and dove', 'moon and June' and alexandrines are no use. How can we introduce the spoken language into poetry, and extract poetry from this spoken language? [...] It's not enough to give examples of the new poetry, or rules about how a word should act on the revolutionary masses – one must ensure that these words will act in such a way as to give maximum support to one's class. The old textbooks on writing poetry [...] describe only a historical and already accepted mode of writing. Actually these books shouldn't be called 'how to write' but 'how they used to write'.<sup>42</sup>

Mayakovsky illustrates his point by giving an example of the exact theoretical conditions under which 'fine poetical work' may be written:

As I see it, fine poetical work would be written to the social command of the Comintern,<sup>43</sup> taking for its objective the victory of the proletariat, making its points in a new vocabulary, striking and comprehensible to all, fashioned on a table that is N.O.T.<sup>44</sup> equipment, and sent to the publisher by plane. I insist, 'by plane', since the engagement of poetry with contemporary life is one of the most important factors in our production.<sup>45</sup>

It is very interesting to see Mayakovsky outlining the practical method of writing communist poetry in this manner alongside the acknowledgement of the Marxist nature of his own poetry more broadly, because paradoxically, as we will see, although he uses specific Marxist language throughout this essay to set up his analogy for the process of writing, that analogy does something quite different from this manifest outline. To clarify, in speaking of 'Marxist language' as distinct from 'political or revolutionary language' my meaning is twofold. Marxist language is the language of political economy – 'reserves', 'circulation', 'hoarding', 'production' – and the particular meanings given to it by Marx in the course of his critique, as distinct from a discourse of social revolution more generally.

<sup>42</sup> George Hyde, trans., in *Verses*, pp. 46-47.

<sup>43</sup> The Communist International.

<sup>44</sup> The *Nauchnaya organizatsiya truda*, or Scientific Organization of Labour, was set up in order to supply factories with information and equipment to promote their more scientific and efficient running. (Hyde's note.)

I will focus predominantly on the following works by Mayakovsky: the 1926 theoretical essay 'How Are Verses Made', the 1923 poem 'About This', travel journals collected in *My Discovery of America* (1925-6), and certain letters from 1922-23, collected in *Love Is the Heart of Everything: Collected Correspondence Between Vladimir Mayakovsky and Lili Brik*. In these texts – particularly in 'Verses' – there are frequent instances when Marxist jargon is used by Mayakovsky: not, on the whole, in the serious, scientific way that Marx himself develops his critique of capitalism, but rather in an off-hand, casual, often metaphorical manner, in the context of writing poetry. As indicated above, the political status of Mayakovsky's work is no revelation – what is of interest to me is his explicit use of Marxist language in the context of poetry and poetics, and the question of what may be understood by this approach – particularly given his misread and belittled political status in the west. Regardless of the difference in weight attached to the use of this language by Mayakovsky, the fact that he seeks to organise poetry through the prism of it suggests that, far from being 'no more a Marxist than a Christian', the poet is actively engaged with and interested in the dynamics of capitalist political economy outlined by Marx and that, for him, either there truly exists a closeness in the way one might comprehend those dynamics in relation to that of an economy of language, or there is an opportunity, by invoking the comparison, to express his Marxist commitments (or indeed perhaps both of these things), and that there may be some benefit, both to himself as an individual and to society more broadly, in working out the affinities of the two.

Indeed, the nature of this closeness is sometimes problematic. For in the analogy created by Mayakovsky, as will become clear throughout this part of the thesis, the act of writing is given not just communist but capitalist characteristics; that is, the poet appears to align his practice not simply with the experience of the proletariat at work in the factory, but with both the proletariat *and* the bourgeoisie in what looks very much like specifically a capitalist factory. The defining characteristics of these two main social groups are clarified by Engels in the 1888 English edition of *The Communist Manifesto*:

[b]y bourgeoisie is meant the class of modern capitalists, owners of the means of social production and employers of wage labour. By proletariat, the class of modern wage-labourers who, having no means of production of their own, are reduced to selling their labour power in order to live.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> *Verses*, pp. 49-50.

<sup>46</sup> Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. S. Moore (London: Penguin Books, 1981), p. 79.

In seeking to make parallels between the language of Mayakovsky and that of Marx, certain initial problems must be addressed. The question of how terminology may be defined as specifically ‘Marxist’, as opposed to that of the language of political and economic discourse more broadly is raised above and will be discussed further below. Beyond securing our own understanding of this, it is also necessary to speculate on Mayakovsky’s understanding: that is, whether his own experience of such language may be considered consciously and deliberately Marxist or whether for him it existed more generally, with terms such as ‘reserves’ and ‘circulation’ being perhaps freely and casually used in the revolutionary circles he inhabited and thus representing a more diluted and unconscious Marxist articulation. On this point it is important to bear in mind that the words ‘reserves’, ‘circulation’, etc. are not in themselves uncommon in economic discourse; it is highly unlikely that Mayakovsky would have been exposed to them exclusively through Marx’s own writings. However, the poet’s language contains such frequent and ostensibly explicit use of this jargon that it is impossible to dismiss the connection without further examination. Indeed, often Mayakovsky reproduces Marx’s language and phraseology – as rendered by Nikolai Frantsevich Danielson, Mikhail Bakunin and German Lopatin in their 1872 Russian translation of *Capital* – exactly. This first Russian translation of the text (which was also the first foreign translation of *Capital* into any language) is undoubtedly that with which Mayakovsky and his contemporaries would have been familiar; a subsequent version by Stepanova-Skvortsova was not published until 1920.<sup>47</sup> Danielson’s translation was published by Nikolai Poliakov, who specialised in publishing revolutionary and socially-focussed material, such as Vasilii Bervi-Flerovskii’s *The Position of the Working Class in Russia* and P. L. Lavrov’s *Historical Letters* (both 1869). Although less than a year after the publication of *Capital* Poliakov was forced by Russian censors to liquidate his publishing house, *Capital* itself was allowed to freely circulate in the country. As Albert Resis notes in his essay ‘*Das Kapital* Comes to Russia’, ‘[t]he official [censorship] reader [...] described the book as “a difficult, inaccessible, strictly scientific work,” implying that it could scarcely pose a danger to the state.’<sup>48</sup> In fact, the book became relatively popular, as Marx himself notes in 1873, in his ‘Afterword to the Second German Edition’: ‘[a]n excellent Russian translation of *Das Kapital* appeared in the Spring of 1872. The edition of 3,000 copies is

<sup>47</sup> Here I have used the second edition of Danielson’s 1872 version, published in 1898.

<sup>48</sup> Albert Resis, ‘*Das Kapital* Comes to Russia’, *Slavic Review*, 29:2 (Jun 1970), p. 221.



already nearly exhausted.’<sup>49</sup> By comparison, the first German edition of 1867 came out in 1,000 copies and did not require a second edition until 1872. Although 3,000 may not seem an enormous number given that the population of the Russian Empire at that time was over 125 million,<sup>50</sup> it is important to bear in mind that at the end of the nineteenth century Germany was the most literate society in Europe, and Russia one of the very least. As Ben Eklof notes, ‘[in 1897] only one in five subjects of the Russian Empire could sign his own name’.<sup>51</sup> David Vincent adds that ‘Russia [...] had yet to achieve the levels of literacy in 1900 that had been recorded in much of the west 100 years earlier’, stating by comparison that ‘in 1886, [...] of Germany’s population of fifty million, some twenty million could read the Bible, hymn books or almanacs, some thirty million could read a newspaper, some ten million could manage ‘demanding literary subjects’, some two million read regularly the classics and some one million ‘followed literary developments’.<sup>52</sup> With this in mind, 3,000 copies in Russia in one year compared to 1,000 in Germany over five represents a significant readership. At a similar time Leo Tolstoy was considered by many as by far the greatest living Russian writer, and yet when *Anna Karenina* was first published in 1878, that too came out in an edition ‘in the very low thousands’.<sup>53</sup>

In a footnote to the same afterword, Marx, in response to public criticism of *Capital* from ‘the spokesmen of the German bourgeoisie’, refers to this Russian popularity (and relative accessibility) with a quote from the *St. Petersburg Journal*, which reads:

The presentation of the subject, with the exception of one or two exceptionally special parts, is distinguished by its comprehensibility by the general reader, its clearness, and, in spite of the scientific intricacy

<sup>49</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, trans. S. Moore and E. Aveling (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1996), p. 17.

<sup>50</sup> Figure taken from the Russian Empire census of 1897, recorded in *Demoscope Weekly No. 689-690*, 6-19th June. Accessed online at [http://demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/rus\\_lan\\_97.php](http://demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/rus_lan_97.php) on 24/06/2016.

<sup>51</sup> Ben Eklof, ‘Russian Literacy Campaigns 1861–1939’ in Robert F. Arnove and Harvey J. Graff, eds., *National Literacy Campaigns and Movements: Historical and Comparative Perspectives* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2008), pp. 128–29.

<sup>52</sup> David Vincent, *The Rise of Mass Literacy. Reading and Writing in Modern Europe*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), pp. 11, 18.

<sup>53</sup> Figure provided by Rosamund Bartlett, recorded from correspondence, June 2016. Prior to this full publication, the novel was available in serial instalments, in *The Russian Messenger* magazine, but nevertheless, out of these ‘low thousands’, Bartlett notes in the introduction to her translation of *Anna Karenina* that ‘St Petersburg’s leading bookshop sold an unprecedented 500 copies on the day *Anna Karenina* first became available as a separate work’. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, p. xiii.) This is because Tolstoy’s anti-war sentiment in the novel, which related directly to the Serbo-Turkish war in the mid-1870s, resulted in his editor’s refusal to publish the final section and, in turn, in a surge of interest from its Russian readers.



of the subject, by an unusual liveliness. In this respect the author in no way resembles ... the majority of German scholars who ... write their books in a language so dry and obscure that the heads of ordinary mortals are cracked by it.<sup>54</sup>

The popularity of Danielson's translation had an immediate and widespread effect on Russian society. As Resis notes, following its publication '[p]assages from the book began to crop up in the journals as Populist writers cited Marx in order to [...] gain insight into Russia's economic destiny.'<sup>55</sup> Mayakovsky's 'dilemma', as he himself names it, following his seven-month prison sentence in 1908-10, is also testimony to the extent of Marxist influence around him. In his autobiography, *I, Myself*, he writes:

To work underground [...] meant [...] writing leaflets all my life and rearranging ideas taken from books which were correct, but had not been thought out by me. If what I had read were shaken out of me, what would remain? The Marxist method.<sup>56</sup>

If this comment indicates an 'elementary' understanding of Marx, as suggested by Brown, it is not because Mayakovsky was not familiar with Marx's works – in fact quite the contrary: it expresses the poet's concern that to study, reproduce and learn by rote the text, the theory, of Marx was not enough – that one must take time to think through and develop these ideas for oneself. At this time he ceased his underground political work and instead began to pursue a formal education in the arts. This refusal to simply propagate the reprinted and politically correct views of Marxism in favour of a more active engagement follows a period of several years in which, far beyond simply absorbing Marxism via social osmosis, Mayakovsky was indeed a keen reader of Marx's work himself. Shklovsky, in *Mayakovsky and His Circle*, references the fact that the poet 'read Marx' in 1909,<sup>57</sup> and in *I, Myself* Mayakovsky dates his own involvement in Marxist study circles as early as 1905. Indeed, his entry covering 1906 states that at that time he read '[c]hiefly Marxism. No work of art ever interested me more than Marx's *Introduction [to the Critique of Political Economy]*.' Herbert Marshall, by whom this is translated, adds the following in a footnote: '[Mayakovsky] knew by heart long passages of this.'<sup>58</sup> It would be easy to assume that Mayakovsky accentuated this interest after the fact (*I, Myself* was written in 1922), and yet his mother Alexandra Mayakovskaya, in her

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<sup>54</sup> *Capital*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>55</sup> Resis, 'Das Kapital Comes to Russia', p. 227.

<sup>56</sup> Marshall, *Mayakovsky*, pp. 82-83.

<sup>57</sup> Victor Shklovsky, *Mayakovsky and His Circle*, trans. Lily Feiler (London: Pluto Press, 1974), p. 11.

<sup>58</sup> Marshall, *Mayakovsky*, p. 80.

book *The Childhood and Adolescence of Vladimir Mayakovsky*, offers further details on the poet's reading of radical literature at this time:

[Following political demonstrations] we saved several books and brochures, which Volodya read in 1905. With great diligence he bound these books and brochures of his, of political content, putting them together into several little volumes.

In one such little volume are collected five brochures. The volume opens with the brochure by F. Engels, *The Peasant Question in France and Germany*. In another of the collections are placed two brochures, which include *Reminiscences of Marx* by V. Liebknecht.<sup>59</sup>

She goes on to reprint a letter sent from [Mayakovsky's sisters] Olya to Lyuda, the latter of whom was at this time living and studying in Moscow while the rest of the family still lived in Georgia. In this letter Olya lists a selection of books and essays she has been reading, which include 'The ideas of Marxism in the German Workers' Party', 'The Bourgeoisie, The Proletariat and Communism', and Dora Montefiore's 1903 essay 'Women's Position in The Present and in The Future', telling her sister that 'Volodya has bought himself ten such similar books'.<sup>60</sup>

These accounts make for a strong case that above and beyond his existence within a society rife with interest in Marxist thinking and Marxist language, Mayakovsky did actively study Marxist theory, and that it is unlikely therefore that he would have been oblivious to the implications of his choice in language in the texts to be discussed here. For this reason we might consider it surprising that no such links have been made by others who have written about Mayakovsky's work. In his 2015 biography of Mayakovsky, Jangfeldt writes that 'the brand of socialism he supported was libertarian, with a strongly anarchist bent. At this time, his political views were not more distinct than that.'<sup>61</sup> He goes on to say that Mayakovsky had an 'airy-fairy view of the potential of the February revolution'.<sup>62</sup> This is a description of Mayakovsky in 1917, when it was certainly true that Mayakovsky's revolutionary aims were more aesthetic than explicitly political. For example, in his 1913 Futurist manifesto 'A Slap in the Face of Public Taste'

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<sup>59</sup> Alexandra Mayakovskaya, *Детство и юность Владимира Маяковского* (Moscow: ДЕТГИЗ, 1963), p. 58. My translation.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>61</sup> Jangfeldt, *Mayakovsky*, p. 97.

the emphasis is firmly on disposing of traditional form and language, and getting rid of old literary giants such as Dostoevsky, Pushkin and Tolstoy in favour of ‘the Summer Lightning of the New Impending Beauty of the Self-valuable (self-creating) Word’.<sup>63</sup> However, to refer to his views as ‘airy fairy’, even at that time, seems inexplicable, and moreover there is no account by Jangfeldt of the development in Mayakovsky’s political attitude throughout his career. Likewise, Edward Brown is very vague about Mayakovsky’s knowledge of or interest in Marxism. In *Mayakovsky: A Poet in the Revolution*, for example, he makes frequent mention of the poet’s interest in Marxism. In reference to Mayakovsky’s poor performance at school, he states that ‘[an] education of another kind proceeded through the reading of Marxist literature and frequent contacts with radical students. He professed [...] a passion for Karl Marx (not surprising in the future bolshevik agitator).’<sup>64</sup> Further, he notes that ‘[i]n a letter to [his sister] Lyudmila during his second [prison] detention he asked for a number of books, among them Marx’s *Capital*’.<sup>65</sup> In discussing Mayakovsky’s writings from America in 1925, Brown also quotes from the Russian journal *Вопросы литературы* (*Questions of Literature*), which describes his essays from this time as ‘expos[ing] American capitalism in all its nakedness.’<sup>66</sup> Given these convincing, if brief, references to Mayakovsky’s knowledge of – and identification with – Marxist thought, it is surprising to see that in another of Brown’s books, *Russian Literature Since the Revolution*, which was written before *Mayakovsky*, but has since been republished in a revised and enlarged edition, he describes Mayakovsky’s Marxist interests very differently:

When, as a boy of fifteen, he joined the Social-Democrats, Bolshevik faction, and carried on propaganda among bakers and printers, he was asserting, much more than any political doctrine, his own self, Vladimir Mayakovsky. His understanding of Marx was elementary, but the ideas of Marx threatened the rigidities of Russian life, and he, Mayakovsky, found the propagation of those ideas a perfect method of self-expression on a grand scale. Marx was one weapon against *byt*, and others were soon found.<sup>67</sup>

It is true that, although Brown references Mayakovsky’s ‘passion’ for Marxism in *Mayakovsky*, he doesn’t explicitly argue that this passion is anything *more* than being

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>63</sup> ‘A Slap’, trans. Rosy Carrick, *Volodya*, pp. 24-25.

<sup>64</sup> Edward Brown, *Mayakovsky: A Poet in the Revolution* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 30.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 293.

<sup>67</sup> Brown, *Russian Literature*, p. 22. The subject of ‘byt’ is addressed in Part 2 of this thesis.

either elementary or one of a number of tools with which to self-inoculate against boredom and rigidity, as is suggested in the above passage from *Russian Literature*. However, this conclusion would not be a natural one. Furthermore, any assumption on the part of the reader of *Russian Literature* that the ‘elementary’ nature of Mayakovsky’s knowledge of Marx refers particularly to him at his specified age of fifteen, when the poet’s knowledge of Marx would inevitably have been less developed than that of his later years, is dispelled on the following page. In seeking to explain the lines ‘Love boat/Smashed on *byt*’ [or ‘convention’ as Brown translates *byt*], taken from Mayakovsky’s suicide note of 1930, it is clear that, in Brown’s view, Marxism had only *ever* been an external reference used by Mayakovsky in his poetry, and not one of its central inspirations. He writes:

[T]here can be no doubt about the general import of the line. The poet’s own life was, at the time he wrote, caught in the web of new conventions and tangled by routine. Marxian ideas, once a weapon against rigidity, had been reduced to fixed formulas. Mayakovsky had discarded the mock haberdashery of Futurism for conventional jackets and properly invisible ties. He had become one of the writers of the vast organization of proletarian writers[.]<sup>68</sup>

With this, Brown seems to dismiss any notion of Mayakovsky as a Marxist poet, except insofar as to identify as such allows him a greater scope for individual expression and the reactionary rejection of bourgeois ‘rigidity’ in literature. He skips directly from the poet’s early, pre-revolutionary Futurist work in which, as Bengt Jangfeldt notes, ‘there is little mention [...] of the political or economic changes [...] taking place in [...] society[; rather, their stated task was revolutionizing the arts’,<sup>69</sup> to a point in Mayakovsky’s career only several months before his death, when the poet had left the arts organisation of his own making, *Lef* (by then reformed as *The Revolutionary Front of Arts*, or *Ref*), in order to join The Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP), without allowing for any aesthetic or political development in the interim period. This conflict, between the individual and the collective, is one which runs throughout the whole of Mayakovsky’s poetic career. It is raised not only by his critics and biographers, but also by the poet himself, and is particularly relevant in the context of his politico-economic treatment of writing, a point to which I will return. For now however, regardless of the undecidable

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>69</sup> Bengt Jangfeldt, *Majakovskij and Futurism 1917-1921* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1976), p. 66.

motives for Mayakovsky's interest in Marxism, it is clear that, for Brown, a wider exploration of this interest is of no pressing concern.

The scant attention given to Mayakovsky's Marxist engagement by his most prominent English language biographers appears even more stark when looked at alongside Russian criticism of the poet. Former director of the Mayakovsky museum, V. Makarov, is clear on the matter in 'Origins', his 1973 essay on the links between communism and Mayakovsky's poetry: "I am a Marxist", – Mayakovsky writes about himself in 'The Fifth International'. And these words very accurately characterise Mayakovsky the artist.<sup>70</sup> The Russian critic Alexei Metchenko studies this 'accurate characterisation' more explicitly still, and in more detail. In his essay 'The Poetry of Mayakovsky', he describes the poet's familiarity with Marx in terms of his attempts to move away from bourgeois styles of writing and instead towards one which prioritises that common language more immediately relevant to the proletariat. For example, in reference to the 1924 poem 'Vladimir Ilyich Lenin', Mayakovsky's vision for which Metchenko refers to as 'includ[ing], with Lenin, the working class and its leading role in the struggle for the liberation of working people from capitalist enslavement', he writes:

[i]n this poem Mayakovsky was the first in the history of poetry to attempt solving from a Marxist standpoint the problem of the relationship between an outstanding personality and history. [...] he] attacks the idealistic exaggeration of the part played by personality in history [...] and] ridicules various "lofty similies" ("prophet", "epoch", "era") used by the poets and publicists when they tried to convey Lenin's greatness. [...] Mayakovsky writes with inspiration of Lenin as the most earthly of all people, as the most human of human beings[...] He strove to write about Lenin in such a way that millions of ordinary people would feel a passionate desire to continue Lenin's work[.]<sup>71</sup>

This, from 'Vladimir Ilyich Lenin', is perhaps the 'Marxist standpoint' Metchenko is describing:

I fear  
     these eulogies  
                     line upon line  
 like a boy  
     fears falsehood and delusion.  
 They'll rig up an aura  
                     round any head:

<sup>70</sup> 'Истоки', *Огонёк* 29 (Июль), Правда, Москва 1973, p. 10. My translation.

<sup>71</sup> Alexei Metchenko, 'The Poetry of Mayakovsky', *Vladimir Mayakovsky: Innovator*, trans. Alex Miller, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), pp. 46-48.



actual existence (the basis) determines sign and [...] sign reflects and refracts existence in its process of generation. [...] The word is the medium in which occur the slow quantitative accretions of those changes which have not yet achieved the status of a new ideological quality [...] all the transitory, delicate, momentary phases of social change.<sup>74</sup>

If Metchenko recognises the Marxist significance of Mayakovsky's argument in this 1925 speech however, he does not seem to notice the poet's use elsewhere of Marxist terminology itself as a way of presenting that argument. In fact, in 'Verses', Mayakovsky expands on the comments of this speech in an explicit and concrete manner – part of which I quoted earlier – as he explains the nature of a poet's work:

[E]stablishing rules is not in itself the aim of poetry [...]

A proposition which demands formulation, demands *rules*, is thrust upon us by life. Methods of formulation, the aim of the rules, are defined by factors of class and the needs of our struggle.

The Revolution, for instance, has thrown up on to the streets the unpolished speech of the masses [...] There is a new linguistic element. [...] How can we introduce the spoken language into poetry [...]? [...] It's not enough to give examples of the new poetry, or rules about how a word should act on the revolutionary masses – one must ensure that these words will act in such a way as to give maximum support to one's class.<sup>75</sup>

The body of this part of the thesis will be divided into close readings of some of the terms which emerge in the work of both Marx and Mayakovsky, in order to determine the extent to which parallels between the two exist, and to address the questions which arise as a result of these parallels. Before I begin to draw comparisons, Marx's specific use of the key terms in question must be understood. Each chapter will begin with an examination of his own writings on these points, before progressing to those of Mayakovsky. Not only will this make Marx's meaning and context in each instance as clear as possible, it will also uncover any terminological variations throughout *Capital*, in order to ensure that mistaken assumptions are not made on the basis of generalisations in translation.

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<sup>74</sup> V.N. Voloshinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge Mass and London: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 19.

<sup>75</sup> *Verses*, pp. 46-47.



## I

## Reserves

i. Terminology

In *Mayakovsky – Russian Poet: A Memoir 1939*, Elsa Triolet – the younger sister of Lili Brik, with whom Mayakovsky maintained a friendship until his death – recounts Mayakovsky’s frustration at the wasting of a good story in life, as opposed to putting it to use in writing:

I started telling [some people] an anecdote, [and] Mayakovsky suddenly tugged at my sleeve: “why don’t you shut up?” he hissed. “You can use that!” [...] Mayakovsky wanted me to learn to hold my tongue and be economical with my “reserves” [...] : “Up until now you’ve been drawing on your ‘reserves’ to write [...] They’re not to be squandered.”<sup>76</sup>

This strong reaction to Triolet’s conversation is interesting, not least because it is difficult at first to decide whether Mayakovsky is even being serious in his reprimand. The notion of “squandering” and “being economical with” gossip is a comical one, and yet both Mayakovsky’s hard language – ‘why don’t you shut up?’ and Triolet’s explanation of it – ‘[he] wanted me to learn to hold my tongue’, suggest that the advice was neither intended nor received in jest. This raises the question of what it would mean then if the poet is in fact serious in this opinion – that language, and in particular every day conversations, represent for him a store of ‘reserves’ for the creation of poetry. In a way the anecdote seems to sum up Mayakovsky’s thoughts on the matter more generally. For example, in ‘Verses’, describing a conversation he had with a young woman in 1913, he writes, ‘ I told her I was ‘not a man, but a cloud in trousers’. When I’d said it, I immediately thought it could be used in a poem; but what if it should at once be spent [razoidetsya]<sup>77</sup> in conversation and squandered to no avail?’<sup>78</sup> Elsewhere in the same essay Mayakovsky

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<sup>76</sup> Elsa Triolet, *Mayakovsky – Russian Poet: A Memoir 1939*, trans. Susan deMuth (London: Hearing Eye, 2002), p.84. The French original reads: ‘[P]endant que je racontais une histoire quelconque, il me tirât par la manche, et me soufflât: “Veux-tu te taire, ça te servira...” [...] Maïakovski voulait m’apprendre à tenir ma langue, à être économe de mes “reserves” [...] “Tu as écrit jusqu’à présent sur tes reserves. Maintenant, il faut, si tu veux écrire, les renouveler. Ne les gaspille pas.”’ Elsa Triolet, *Maïakovski Poète Russe: Souvenirs, 1939* (Paris: Pierre Seghers, 1945), pp. 128-129.

<sup>77</sup> The literal English translation of this particular word is not, as Hyde renders it, ‘circulate’, but rather ‘be dispersed’ or ‘be spent’. I have changed it here accordingly.

<sup>78</sup> *Verses*, p. 56.



explains this concern more broadly as he insists that it is necessary to have ‘a large reserve of preliminaries’<sup>79</sup> before it is possible to create anything good in writing. From these and many other instances in his work it is clear that for the poet the analogy of political economy cropped up often in the way he thought about the practice of writing.

In *Capital*, the term ‘reserves’ has two senses. It relates firstly to a store of money, but is also used to name the surplus labouring workforce, both of which Marx describes as being necessary for capitalist production. In discussing the reserve as a store of money, Marx focusses on the individual capitalist, as well as on national and international economy. For the individual capitalist for example, in order to have that reserve of gold at his disposal with which he is able to assert his social power, he must carefully save a portion of his profits to one side, or “hoard” them. These hoards are what form the reserves. On this, Marx writes:

In order [...] to be able to buy without selling, he must have previously sold without buying. [...] In this way, all along the line of exchange, hoards of gold and silver of varied extent are accumulated. [...] In order that gold may be held as money, and made to form a hoard, it must be prevented from circulating, or from transforming itself into a means of enjoyment. The hoarder, therefore, makes a sacrifice of the lusts of the flesh to his gold fetish. He acts in earnest up to the Gospel of abstention. On the other hand, he can withdraw from circulation no more than what he has thrown into it in the shape of commodities. The more he produces, the more he is able to sell. Hard work, saving, and avarice are, therefore, his three cardinal virtues, and to sell much and buy little the sum of his political economy.<sup>80</sup>

Initially then, the act, by individual capitalists, of hoarding money, ‘that absolutely social form of wealth, ever ready for use’<sup>81</sup> is necessary for them to be able to buy commodities later without also needing to sell at that time. However, because of the gap between the exchange of commodities opened up by this individual hoarding, a money reserve is needed on a national level for the smooth continuation of circulation. This condition exposes the difference between hoarding on the one hand, and reserve-formation on the other. Whilst the latter exists to allow for effective circulation by, to variable degrees, being thrown back into the economy, and to increase the total amount of capital by its purchasing of more labour power for the generation of still greater surplus value, the

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<sup>79</sup> Vladimir Mayakovsky, *Как делать стихи* (Москва : Государственное издательство “Художественная литература”, 1940), p. 13. My translation.

<sup>80</sup> *Capital* Chapter III, Section 3, pp. 141-144.

former – if left inactive – is sealed off altogether from circulation and exists only as a passive paralysed value, with no capacity for self-expansion. Here is what Marx says in *Capital* on the term ‘reserve’ as a store of money:

In order that the mass of money, actually current, may constantly saturate the absorbing power of the circulation, it is necessary that the quantity of gold and silver in a country be greater than the quantity required to function as coin. This condition is fulfilled by money taking the form of hoards. These reserves serve as conduits for the supply or withdrawal of money to or from the circulation, which in this way never overflows its banks.<sup>82</sup>

Marx’s German term for ‘reserves’ in this case is ‘Schatzreservoirs’, which literally translates as ‘treasure reservoirs’. For Marx, this has its counterpoint in the term ‘Schatzbildung’, or ‘treasure formation’ – that is, ‘hoarding’ in this English translation. In the Russian translation the term reflects that of the original: ‘xranilishcha sokrovishch’, or ‘treasure vault’.<sup>83</sup> The distinction between hoarding and reserve-formation is not made explicit in this instance because the purpose of this specific hoard is purely to build the reserve. However, Marx goes on in this chapter to discuss the development of reserve funds in place of money hoards, as gold moves beyond its role as the money form of commodities into a disassociated means of paying for those commodities:

The development of money into a medium of payment makes it necessary to accumulate money against the dates fixed for the payment of the sums owing. While hoarding, as a distinct mode of acquiring riches, vanishes with the progress of civil society, the formation of reserves of the means of payment grows with that progress.<sup>84</sup>

In this instance, the German term ‘Reservefonds’ (literally: ‘reserve funds’) is used, and in Russian this is the same: ‘zapasnago fonda’.<sup>85</sup> In both cases, the emphasis is now on the idea of reserves more generally. The Russian word ‘zapas’ is an economic one, but, as in the case of ‘reserve’ in English and German, it may be used to denote a reserve of anything, as opposed to Schatz and sokrovishch, which specifically indicate treasure or riches. The same term appears in both the German and the Russian when, shortly

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 142.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., pp. 144-145.

<sup>83</sup> *Капиталъ* (Saint Petersburg: Nikolai Poliakov, 1898), p. 90. This and all subsequent references from *Капиталъ* are translated by me.

<sup>84</sup> *Capital* Chapter III, Section 3, pp. 152-153.

<sup>85</sup> *Капиталъ*, p. 96.

afterwards, Marx describes the extension of domestic circulation into the international sphere:

Just as every country needs a reserve [Reservefonds; zapasniy fond] of money for its home circulation, so, too, it requires one for external circulation in the markets of the world. The functions of hoards, therefore, arise in part out of the function of money, as the medium of the home circulation and home payments, and in part out of its function of money of the world.<sup>86</sup>

The broader nature of this particular term for ‘reserves’ may be seen in Chapter X, ‘The Working Day’. Here, it relates not specifically to money, but more generally to the ‘products’ of a communal cultivation of land. In this passage Marx is outlining the labour situation in the Romanian provinces, before the communities’ common land was, over time, usurped, and their free labour on it transformed into *corvée*. Here, although ‘Reservefonds’ is once more used by him, in Russian it is shortened to ‘zapasa’;<sup>87</sup> that is, ‘a reserve’, rather than ‘a reserve fund’:

Part of the land was cultivated in severalty as freehold by the members of the community, another part – *ager publicus* – was cultivated by them in common. The products of this common labour served partly as a reserve fund against bad harvests and other accidents, partly as a public store for providing the costs of war, religion, and other common expenses.<sup>88</sup>

In Chapter XVII, ‘Changes of Magnitude in the Price of Labour Power and in Surplus Value’, Marx uses the term ‘reserve’ to clarify the probable result of a shortening of the working day to that which allows only the production of the means of subsistence for the worker, and excluding any surplus labour for the benefit of the capitalist. In this instance, Marx again uses the word ‘Reservefonds’, but here it is grouped together with accumulation: ‘Reserve- und Akkumulationsfonds’. This is reflected in the Russian, which reads ‘zapasnago fonda i fonda nakopleniya’:<sup>89</sup>

[T]he notion of “means of subsistence” would considerably expand, and the labourer would lay claim to an altogether different standard of life. On the other hand, [...] a part of what is now surplus labour, would then count as necessary labour; I mean the labour of forming a fund for reserve and accumulation.<sup>90</sup>

<sup>86</sup> *Capital* Chapter III, Section 3, p. 155.

<sup>87</sup> *Капиталь*, p. 189.

<sup>88</sup> *Capital*, Chapter X, p. 246.

<sup>89</sup> *Капиталь*, p. 461.

<sup>90</sup> *Capital*, Chapter XVII, p. 530.

In Chapter XXIV, ‘Conversion of Surplus Value into Capital’, a different phrase, ‘reserve stocks’, is used – this time in Marx’s discussion of the nature of accumulation. In this instance, the German term is ‘Vorratbildung’ which, literally translated, means ‘stockpiling’, or ‘the building up of stocks’. The Russian phrase is similarly ‘obrazovanie zapasov’ – ‘formation of stocks’:

[T]he economists had to contend against the popular prejudice, that confuses capitalist production with hoarding [‘sobiraniem’ sokrovishch’ – ‘collecting treasure’<sup>91</sup>], and fancies that accumulated wealth [‘nakoplennoe bogatstvo’<sup>92</sup>] is either wealth that is rescued from being destroyed in its existing form, i.e., from being consumed, or wealth that is withdrawn from circulation [obrashcheniya]. Exclusion of money from circulation would also exclude absolutely its self-expansion as capital, while accumulation of a hoard in the shape of commodities would be sheer tomfoolery. The accumulation of commodities in great masses is the result either of overproduction or of a stoppage of circulation. It is true that the popular mind is impressed by the sight, on the one hand, of the mass of goods that are stored up for the gradual consumption by the rich, and on the other hand, by the formation of reserve stocks; the latter, a phenomenon that is common to all modes of production[.]<sup>93</sup>

Marx’s final use of the term ‘reserve’ in this primary context can be found in Chapter XXV, ‘The General Law of Capitalist Accumulation’, in which he writes about the changing conditions of the labourer, in accordance with the growth of capital:

A larger part of [the labourers’] own surplus product, always increasing and continually transformed into additional capital, comes back to them in the shape of means of payment, so that they can extend the circle of their enjoyments; can make some additions to their consumption fund of clothes, furniture, &c., and can lay by small reserve funds of money.<sup>94</sup>

The Russian phrase here again uses that general ‘reserve’ word, ‘zapas’: ‘nebolshie denezhnie zapasi’ – ‘small money reserves’.<sup>95</sup>

Marx’s second use of the term ‘reserves’ refers to a collection of human beings who, for the capitalist, exist for the purpose of endlessly producing those commodities through which the latter may build his money reserves. Whereas, in his theoretical discussions of

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<sup>91</sup> *Капиталь*, p. 514.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid*, p. 514.

<sup>93</sup> *Capital*, pp. 584-585.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 613.

<sup>95</sup> *Капиталь*, p. 540.

reserves of money or goods (above), Marx's tone is mainly impartial and informative as he outlines this element of political economy (although these descriptions do, in themselves, expose the social inequality involved in reserve-formation, i.e. his description of a 'different standard of life' against the 'means of subsistence' for wage labourers, etc), he is explicit in his negative views of the human 'reserve army'. His initial discussions of the term in this context are found in Chapter XV, 'Machinery and Modern Industry'. First, Marx uses it in describing the effects on workers of the use of machinery in capitalist production:

[E]very branch of industry attracts each year a new stream of men, who furnish a contingent from which to fill up vacancies, and to draw a supply for expansion. So soon as machinery sets free a part of the workmen employed in a given branch of industry, the reserve men are also diverted into new channels of employment, and become absorbed in other branches[.]<sup>96</sup>

In this passage, which is not present in the 1872 Russian translation, Marx uses the term 'Ersatzmannschaft', the literal translation of which is 'reserve team'. One of the specific functions of this reserve team is given later in the same chapter, in which Marx describes the capitalist's reliance on it during seasons of high demand in the factory:

In those factories and manufactories that are not yet subject to the Factory Acts, the most fearful over-work prevails periodically during what is called the season, in consequence of sudden orders. [...] Here then [the capitalist] sets himself systematically to work to form an industrial reserve force that shall be ready at a moment's notice; during one part of the year he decimates this force by the most inhuman toil, during the other part, he lets it starve for want of work.<sup>97</sup>

Here, the German phrase, 'industrielle Reservearmee', is translated exactly in the Russian version: 'promishlennuyu rezervnuyu armiyu'.<sup>98</sup> In the same chapter (and using that same phrase), Marx reiterates the function of the reserve army:

We have seen how this absolute contradiction between the technical necessities of modern industry, and the social character inherent in its capitalistic form, dispels all fixity and security in the situation of the labourer[...] We have seen, too, how this antagonism vents its rage in the creation of that monstrosity, an industrial reserve army, kept in misery in order to be always at the disposal of capital[.]<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> *Capital*, p. 444.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 481.

<sup>98</sup> *Капиталь*, p. 419.

This time however, the industrial reserve army is referred to as ‘zapasnoi promishlennoi armii’ in the Russian edition.<sup>100</sup> The difference between these two words in Russian, ‘reserv’ and ‘zapas’ is slight but significant. As a noun, ‘zapas’ refers only to material (i.e. inanimate) stocks held in reserve. As an adjective, as is the case here (‘zapasnoi’), it may be attached more broadly to other nouns to indicate the quality of being in reserve in the manner of material stocks, as in the case of an army of reserves: an army held in reserve as though it were material stock. In this sense it resembles, albeit in a less provocative way, the German phrase ‘Menschenmaterial’, or ‘human material’ which Marx uses to describe the reserve army at a later point in *Capital* (see discussion below). The Russian word ‘reserv’, on the other hand, is not subject to these conditions, and may be applied to any type of reserve. From this point onwards, the German and Russian terminology for ‘industrial reserve army’ remains exactly the same as in the above quote, with the exception of necessary structural alterations in the Russian, in accordance with its differing grammatical cases.

In Chapter XXV, Marx discusses the complex and unwittingly self-generating nature of the reserve army in relation to capital, in what is perhaps his most explicit description of the creation and purpose of human reserves:

[I]f a surplus labouring population is a necessary product of accumulation or of the development of wealth on a capitalist basis, this surplus population becomes, conversely, the lever of capitalistic accumulation, nay, a condition of existence of the capitalist mode of production. It forms a disposable reserve army, that belongs to capital quite as absolutely as if the latter had bred it at its own cost. Independently of the limits of the actual increase of population, it creates, for the changing needs of the self-expansion of capital, a mass of human material always ready for exploitation. [...] In all such cases [of changing needs and expanding markets], there must be the possibility of throwing great masses of men suddenly on the decisive points without injury to the scale of production in other spheres. [...] The course characteristic of modern industry, viz., a decennial cycle (interrupted by smaller oscillations), of periods of average activity, production at high pressure, crisis and stagnation, depends on the constant formation, the greater or less absorption, and the re-formation of the industrial reserve army or surplus population.<sup>101</sup>

Below, he further stresses the unnatural dynamic of this need for reserves:

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<sup>99</sup> *Capital*, p. 490.

<sup>100</sup> *Капиталъ*, p. 426.

<sup>101</sup> *Capital*, pp. 626-627.

Capitalist production can by no means content itself with the quantity of disposable labour power which the natural increase of population yields. It requires for its free play an industrial reserve army independent of these natural limits. [...] The overwork of the employed part of the working class swells the ranks of the reserve [*'sluzhit' k uvelicheniyu ryadov ego zapasa*]<sup>102</sup>, whilst conversely the greater pressure that the latter by its competition exerts on the former, forces these to submit to overwork and to subjugation under the dictates of capital. [This] accelerates [...] the production of the industrial reserve army on a scale corresponding with the advance of social accumulation.<sup>103</sup>

This then is what Marx means by the term 'reserve(s)', which he variously calls 'treasure reservoirs', 'reserve funds' and 'stockpiling' (in reference to money or product reserves and their creation), and 'reserve team' and 'industrial reserve army' (in relation to human labour reserves). Both types of reserve are necessary in capitalist production but the former is nevertheless dependent on the latter; that is, the individual capitalist may only create a money reserve by creating surplus value from his products, and this is made possible by making use of the reserve army. Moreover, as a 'reserve' of unemployed labour desperate for work, the army functions to keep the price of employed labour to a minimum. Surplus money from production may be turned into reserves; likewise it may be spent so soon as it is earned or stored away, separate from the main sphere of production and circulation. This is the choice of the capitalist. The reserve army, on the other hand, *must* exist, regardless of what each individual capitalist chooses to do with his growing capital, for without it, the potential for capital would be stopped dead, or at the very least, significantly stifled.

With these distinctions in mind, I will now look at how the term 'reserves' appears in Mayakovsky's work. As an initial example, in Triolet's quote above, to see a similarity to Marx's description of the capitalist's necessary abstinence from the pleasures of spending in order not to be left with nothing with which to produce his own commodities ('you've been drawing on your 'reserves' to write [...] They're not to be squandered'). In Mayakovsky's case of course, this spending is a verbal one, and the commodity is poetry; thus 'anecdotes', and perhaps even conversations and situations more generally, represent for him a store of reserves from which poetry emerges. From

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<sup>102</sup> Literally: 'serves to increase the ranks of its stock'. *Кануналь*, p. 557.

this perspective, “useful” raw language operates for Mayakovsky like money which, if squandered on the social pleasures of conversational exchange, will leave no currency for the “purchase” of his own poetry. Whereas Triolet has the money in her hand, as it were, and is eager to spend it, Mayakovsky, like the good capitalist, recognises its potential as something which may be transformed at a later date into a thing of greater value. If he is to ‘pay the sums owing’ for his poetry at some future point, then he must be careful to reserve some of his current funds in order to do so. His intention to use this raw language reserve *at some point* is made clear. Just as Marx warns against the common ‘confus[ion between] capitalist production [and] hoarding’, the latter being that which is ‘exclu[ded] from circulation [and thereby also from] self-expansion as capital’, so Mayakovsky leaves Triolet in no doubt that he does not simply intend to keep spare language to himself as a private hoard. ‘You can use that!’, he says, ‘to write.’ Certainly, this idea of ‘hard work, saving, and avarice’ is apparent in Mayakovsky’s disclosure in ‘Verses’, that ‘[t]here was a time when I embarked on such work as if fearful to utter words and expressions that seemed to me needful for future poems – I became gloomy, dull and untalkative.’<sup>104</sup> That the process is considered ‘work’ by Mayakovsky is important. Contrary to Triolet’s light treatment of her anecdote, Mayakovsky makes clear that for him the building of such reserves is a serious business:

Work on them goes on with such intensity that in ninety cases out of a hundred I even know where, in all that fifteen years of work, such-and-such a rhyme, alliteration or image came to me and took its final shape.<sup>105</sup>

The poems therefore do not come from nothing; they are not freely attained, even though their raw material is located “freely”, just as stories and anecdotes etc. may be picked up and retold by anyone who hears or experiences them. But, for Mayakovsky, without these language reserves; without their being catalogued and stored until that moment when they may realise their highest value; without their accumulation, by which the poet is able to achieve the safety of a ‘reserve fund against bad harvests and other accidents’, such as times of scarce gossip and boring friendships perhaps, there can be no poetry. After all, as Marx says, ‘the formation of reserve stocks [is] a phenomenon that is common to *all*

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<sup>103</sup> *Capital*, pp. 629-630. As Marx’s further references to the industrial reserve army all serve to reiterate or further expand upon those already given in the body of this chapter, and because the same German and Russian terms are used in every instance, I will not list them all here.

<sup>104</sup> *Verses*, pp. 55-56.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.



modes of production'.<sup>106</sup> As both a keen Marxist and a poet of the Constructivist movement, with all its emphasis on writing as an active form of labour (on which I shall say more later), it is clear that for Mayakovsky this rule extends even to the production of poetry.

## ii. The Problem of Invisible Reserves – ‘About This’

In the instance of Triolet’s account, it is possible to see similarities between the way Mayakovsky talks about reserves of language on the one hand, and the way Marx describes reserves in its primary context, i.e. a store of money or material goods, on the other. However, this account is, of course, written in French – and by a third party, not by Mayakovsky himself. As I continue I will be looking further at the specific Russian terms Mayakovsky uses in relation to those given in the Russian translation of *Capital*, as well as whether there also exist similarities between the poet’s work and Marx’s second context of reserves: the human workforce. However, before I look at those individual elements in detail it is interesting to first think about the arguable possibility of locating concrete evidence of Mayakovsky’s actual practice of storing poetic reserves in a way that resembles Marx’s descriptions of the term – i.e. evidence of these reserves within his poetry itself, and not merely in his theoretical descriptions of that poetry. This raises the problem of even deciding what is a reserve and what isn’t. Paradoxically, one might argue, the more serious, or “Marxist”, Mayakovsky is in this theory of abstinence, the harder it will be to find evidence of it in his own work, for if the poet truly *is* dedicated to the practice of ‘holding his tongue’ in public in order to release it to its greatest effect in poetry, then surely it must be an all but impossible task to judge whether the content of that poetry is drawn from such silenced reserves. This initial instance from Triolet can be found in her memoirs of the poet, written in 1939 – some nine years following his death. In Mayakovsky’s own writings there is not a great deal in the way of memoirs, notes and essays from which to draw comparisons with that language used in his poetry. Such lack, in addition to Mayakovsky’s explicit assertion in ‘Verses’ that, for the most part his reserves are not written down at all (‘[a]ll these preliminaries are put together in one’s head, and the most difficult ones are noted down’<sup>107</sup>), makes the process of trying to pick out the source language from the finished poem a complicated business. In approaching

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<sup>106</sup> *Capital*, p. 585. My italics.

<sup>107</sup> *Verses*, p. 54.

this question I will take a temporary side-step from the specific questions of terminology and theoretical context raised so far, in favour of closely examining the developmental dynamic between certain texts, and the degree to which it is possible to reconstruct their genesis. I will return to those questions in due course; however, it is only by making the practical limits of this investigation absolutely clear that any subsequent links between Marx's and Mayakovsky's respective understanding of the term 'reserves' may be accurately theorised.

For example, certain themes, and even specific conversations discussed in the private letters between Mayakovsky and Lili Brik during their two-month period of separation between 28<sup>th</sup> December 1922 and 28<sup>th</sup> February 1923 can be found in the long love poem 'About This', which, written about his desperation and love for Lili, was also created during these two months and published in 1923. There is certainly a clear progressive link from the letters to the poem, which, if we choose to interpret them using this Marxist theoretical framework, suggests that the latter may be considered the consummation of the former; but the fact that these originating thoughts were recorded as *letters* problematises their categorisation as poetic 'reserves', for they were not held back entirely but written down and shared with another person: Lili. Thus, whilst the position of 'About This' in this equation may be seen as the "commodity", how might the letters be determined as reserves? In thinking about this question it is important to distinguish between our own interpretation and Mayakovsky's. *We*, having read what the poet has to say about reserves in 'Verses', might naturally consider these letters to be reserves, but can we be certain that Mayakovsky *himself* thought of them as such? Nowhere does he explicitly refer to them as being the raw material for 'Pro Eto', but equally, nowhere except in 'Verses' does he give *any* insight into the exact content of his previous reserves, and from whence they originated – and even then his examples are very limited. With no way of knowing absolutely, what we *can* do is to look closely at the relationship between the letters and the poem in this instance, and see how those two bodies of work relate to the way Mayakovsky describes the process of creating verses from reserves in 'Verses', in order to speculate on his intentions. One way to approach this would be to ask what is the purpose of these letters – that is, were they intended to remain private, or were they, like the poem, intended for a wider audience? Given that for Mayakovsky, in the analogy he creates between his work and that of Marx, the value of the reserve lies in the prevention of its premature circulation (a point I'll come back to), the question of this

privacy is key. If the public sharing of language reserves is equal to spending, or ‘squandering’, one’s money instead of holding it in reserve, then the writing and delivery of these letters might be figured in terms of privately lending or giving that same money to a friend. In doing such a thing, we might request that this friend does not spend too much of it themselves in case we need it back in the future, and we might even at some point ask for the whole amount back, at such a time as we find ourselves impoverished and without the means to make more, but this is no foolproof plan – there is no guarantee that the money has not been squandered just as easily by another’s hand as it might have been by our own. Of course, this analogy is not entirely accurate; an amount of money may be spent by our friend and then that same quantity re-earned by their own means for the purpose of paying us back, a fungibility which language does not share. However, as a manner of indicating that middle-ground between the act of holding a thing in reserve and actively expending it, it remains useful. Certainly, both Lili and Mayakovsky explicitly state a desire for secrecy within the letters themselves, the latter closing one of his notes with ‘Lilik [sic], don’t let anyone else read this’,<sup>108</sup> whilst the former, in making a plan for the pair’s reunion, writes, ‘[d]on’t tell anyone about this, not even Oska.’<sup>109</sup> Of course this may well be simply a desire for secrecy, which, given the intimate and somewhat desperate nature of the messages, is understandable; there is no way we can know for certain from these lines that such secrecy is, for Mayakovsky, important primarily because he wants to protect his reserves. However, the fact that they were exchanged with secrecy in mind is interesting to think about in terms of the economic analogy the poet so often invokes. In this light, his comment to Lili: ‘don’t let anyone else read this’, may be translated in economic terms as, ‘this money I put in your pocket – don’t go and spend it’. Indeed, the raw (i.e. reserve-like) nature of the content of these letters is made explicit by Mayakovsky when he writes to Lili, ‘[i]t may seem to you – why does he write that, it’s clear anyway. If that’s the way it seems to you, that’s good. [...] This is the most serious letter of my life. It’s not even a letter, it’s:

“existence”<sup>110</sup>

By explaining the letter as ‘existence’, and qualifying it as ‘the most serious’, he pre-emptively that description of reserve formation in ‘Verses’, of all the ‘preliminaries [being]

<sup>108</sup> From *Love Is The Heart Of Everything*, letter 89, p. 116.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., letter 97, p. 119. ‘Oska’ refers to Osip Brik, Lili’s husband and Mayakovsky’s good friend and publisher.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., letter 83, p. 111.

put together in one's head, and the most difficult ones [...] noted down'. Reserves, after all, are the stuff of existence – anecdotes, impressions, recalled conversations, and so on. That he names this letter 'existence' indicates that, for Mayakovsky, there is not an identifiably clear line between the writing of the letters and the collation of his own thoughts, or rather that the letters act as an *overflow* of his own thoughts, of those too difficult to be organised mentally.

Contrariwise of course, one could argue that the status of these letters, "existence" or not, as, in Mayakovsky's own estimation, 'the most serious of [his] life', indicates that they are not merely raw material thought recorded verbatim, but a series of carefully worked out pieces of writing, designed for maximum persuasion to win Lili back. In addition, the fact remains that the practice of sending the written reserves as letters – on account of the risk involved of unwittingly losing those reserves to public consumption, runs counter to the seriousness with which Mayakovsky maintains his need to protect them. If he feels as adamantly in practice as he appears to, for example, in his conversation with Triolet, then it seems uncharacteristic of him to be sending forth such passionate excerpts from his reserves in such a way, and to expect those reserves to remain undamaged – particularly as the majority of them were delivered via third persons such as mutual friends and couriers – even Osip Brik himself, from whom Lili specifically stresses the need for secrecy. Moreover, both Mayakovsky and Lili allude to the fact that they each often wrote several copies of the same letter, transporting each with a different person in order to ensure that at least one arrived at its destination – and, in doing so, implicitly acknowledging that the rest would be mislaid, taken or read by the wrong person along the way. For example in letter 34 Mayakovsky writes:

Yesterday I at last received two of your letters. One was angry (the one you sent three copies of – my luck was in, I got all three!) [...] I write to you with every courier without fail, and sometimes I send letters with people too. [...] Why don't you put the date on your letters, and the number (did you get my letter in which I asked you to do so?). Then at least we could always know how many letters were sent but not received[.]<sup>111</sup>

On this matter Peter Heinegg, in his 1987 review of *Correspondence*, disputes the genuineness of the couple's express desire for their communications to remain private:

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

Brik and Mayakovsky's "puppy love" was short on style and clearly not intended for publication, yet highly public and theatrical (there is not an embarrassingly intimate line in the whole collection). It seems these lovers meant to be overheard, and now they have been.<sup>112</sup>

What then if we were to consider the letters not as a private store of materials out of which 'About This' emerged, but as a kind of crude alternative, or rough draft of this poem – a more immediate expression of that which the poet sought to present in 'About This'? In figuring them in this way, the dynamic between the two is not one of reserves against commodity, in which the poem and letters stand as hierarchical entities, but rather as two separate written products, both of which perhaps share the same "silent" reserves but which use them to different degrees. 'About This' after all, like the letters, is explicitly written to Lili: not only does it open with the dedication 'to her and to me', but the front cover of the 1923 first edition shows a close-up photograph of Lili's face, taken by Alexander Rodchenko. Just as the letters have her name and Mayakovsky's love everywhere in them, so 'About This' literally has Lili all over it. Thus, to put this into the context of Marx's discussion of reserves-as-money, the letters may be considered not as the private giving or loaning of money to another individual as suggested above but rather, like the poem itself, a 'proper' use of the poet's reserves, the difference being that in the case of the letters the investment is smaller because any "return" on it comes from just one individual, and not a wider audience – at least during Mayakovsky's lifetime and until such a time as they were published, at which point Lili, as their owner, inherited the return on their publication, in cultural, if perhaps not financial, terms.

The two-month separation during which the poem and letters were written was instigated and maintained by Lili, 'in order [for them] to think about life in the future',<sup>113</sup> and as far as she was concerned there was to be no communication between them at all throughout it but Mayakovsky, early in the correspondence, makes use of the disclaimer that '[y]ou [Lili] permitted me to write when I very much needed to – that very much has now come.'<sup>114</sup> In her memoirs, Lili corroborates that, '[s]ometimes, unable to restrain himself, Volodya would telephone me, and once I told him that it would be better if he wrote to

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<sup>112</sup> Peter Heinegg, Book review of *Correspondence* in *The Los Angeles Times* online, July 5th 1987: [http://articles.latimes.com/1987-07-05/books/bk-2112\\_1\\_lili-brik](http://articles.latimes.com/1987-07-05/books/bk-2112_1_lili-brik).

<sup>113</sup> Mayakovsky's words, from *Correspondence*, p.128.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., letter 83, p. 111.

me when he very much needed to.’<sup>115</sup> This telephonic urgency and lack of restraint is clear in ‘About This’, when Mayakovsky, on hearing that Lili is ill, immediately calls her:

She’s ill!  
       Sick in bed!  
 Run!  
       Faster!  
       Double-quick!  
 My flesh smokes as I grip the burning  
 A flash of lightning ran through my body on the instant  
 clenched by a million volt current.  
 I thrust my lips into the telephone hell  
 screwing holes  
                   through  
                           the house,  
 [...] lacerating  
                   the wires,  
                           the number  
 sped  
       like a bullet  
                   towards her ladyship.<sup>116</sup>

The illness in question is also recorded in one of the letters from Lili, in which she tells him simply, ‘Dear Volodenka, I’m ill. [...] I’m lying in bed.’<sup>117</sup> In fact, although Gureyeva and Hyde translate the lines slightly differently (‘sick in bed’ rather than ‘lying in bed’), in the original Russian the sentences are almost exact, as we can see: ‘Ya bol’na. [...] Lezhu v posteli.’ (‘I am ill. [...] I am lying in bed.’)<sup>118</sup>; and:

Bol’na ona!  
       Ona lezhit!  
 (She is ill!  
       She is lying [down])!<sup>119</sup>

The theme of incarceration is also strong in both the letters and the poem, and in this theme it is possible to see how certain influences, or reserves, are transmitted to each. For example, borrowing from Oscar Wilde, the latter’s first main section following the introduction is called ‘THE BALLAD OF READING GAOL’<sup>120</sup>

<sup>115</sup> From Brik’s unpublished memoirs, 1956, quoted in *Correspondence*, note 3 of letter 83, p. 242.

<sup>116</sup> *Pro Eto – That’s What*, trans. Larisa Gureyeva and George Hyde, (London: Arc, 2009), pp. 33-35.

<sup>117</sup> *Correspondence*, letter no. 98, p. 119.

<sup>118</sup> В. Маяковский и Л.Ю. Брик: *Переписка 1915-1930*, ed. Bengt Jangfeldt (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1982), p. 106.

<sup>119</sup> *Pro Eto*, p. 32 Transliteration: ‘Bolna Ona! Ona lezheet!’

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

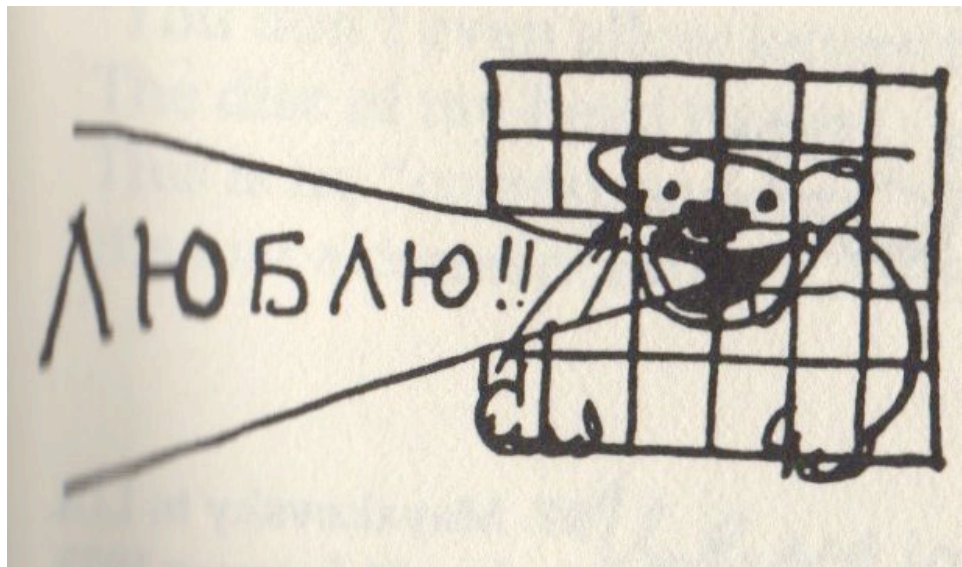
Not long into this section a further expression of the poet's imprisonment appears, in the lines:

The little house's windows have no bars.  
But that's immaterial.  
It's a gaol I tell you.<sup>121</sup>

The language here is directly traceable to Mayakovsky's letter to Lili on the 19<sup>th</sup> January 1923, in which he adds the words 'Moscow, Reading Gaol' beside the date, and signs it:

Your Schen<sup>122</sup>  
also known as Oscar Wilde  
also known as The Prisoner of Chillon  
also known as:  
I sit – behind bars in the  
dungeon – dry (I'm the one  
that's dry, but when necessary  
I shall be fat for you).<sup>123</sup>

The accompanying illustration depicts Mayakovsky as a puppy shouting 'I Love [you]!!' from behind the heavily barred window of his room:



In using the title of Oscar Wilde's poem in both his letters to Lili and as the opening to 'About This', Mayakovsky makes the link between what he sees as his enforced imprisonment at Lili's hands:

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>122</sup> Translation: puppy.

<sup>123</sup> *Correspondence*, letter no. 86, pp 114-115.



you [...] crook your little finger and [I] sit at home howling for two months[...] If I don't have a little "lightness" [...] a]ll I shall be capable of is proving my love by some sort of physical labour, as I'm doing now.<sup>124</sup>

and his own role in that imprisonment; that it is something that *he* has done to *Lili* which keeps him in isolation from her:

I am not capable of not writing, not begging you to forgive me for everything. [...] How terrible it is to part if you know that you are in love and that the parting is your own fault.<sup>125</sup>

Mayakovsky's reference here to '[what] I'm doing now' (i.e. both writing to her and writing 'About This') as a 'sort of physical labour', sounds very similar meanwhile to the analogy of physical labour with which he describes the process of writing in 'Verses': 'I believe that even my brief examples [of how a poem grows from its preliminaries] will put poetry where it truly belongs, among the most difficult and laborious jobs'.<sup>126</sup>

Just as in Wilde's poem the condemned man 'had killed the thing he loved, [a]nd so he had to die',<sup>127</sup> so is Mayakovsky, having been, on account of his behaviour towards Lili, 'banished' by her, and thus feels that he has been 'torn away from life, as if there will never, ever be anything else again.'<sup>128</sup> This effect echoes further in his reference to Byron's prisoner of Chillon, for whom the prison eventually becomes a second home, of which he is the solitary monarch:

For all was blank, and bleak, and grey;  
It was not night – it was not day;  
It was not even the dungeon-light,  
So hateful to my heavy sight,  
But vacancy absorbing space,  
And fixedness – without a place;  
There were no stars – no earth – no time –  
No check – no change – no good, no crime –  
But silence, and a stirless breath  
Which neither was of life nor death;

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., pp. 128-129.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>126</sup> *Verses*, p. 57.

<sup>127</sup> *Collected Works of Oscar Wilde* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Ltd, 1997), p. 748.

<sup>128</sup> *Correspondence*, p. 109.



A sea of stagnant idleness,  
Blind, boundless, mute, and motionless!<sup>129</sup>

Mayakovsky's interest in Byron, and the latter's influence on his work, is noted by Marshall, who writes:

[h]e was [...] influenced by Byron. Professor Jakobson has pointed out the similarity between "Don Juan", stanzas xxxvii and xxxviii, and some verses of "At the Top of my Voice". Mayakovsky also once wrote a poem for Lily Brik called "Don Juan" but later destroyed it.<sup>130</sup>

In relation to Wilde's ballad, Mayakovsky also appears keen to convey the martyr-like sense of his inhuman capacity to withstand suffering, to die and be reborn in suffering. In this vein, he writes in one of the letters, '[i]s it possible to live like this at all? It's possible, only not for long. Anyone who lives like this even these 39 days can boldly accept his certificate of immortality.'<sup>131</sup> The unfairness of this suffering in spite (or because) of his love for Lili is also apparent. Lines from his letters, such as '[m]y brain tells me that you shouldn't do a thing like this to a person'<sup>132</sup>, and '[s]ometimes it seems to me that people have got together and thought of a punishment for me [... w]hatever trash I may be, I'm still a little bit human',<sup>133</sup> resonate with Wilde's lines on the universality of causing pain to loved ones and that, by extension, it is unfair to distinguish amongst this universality between '[a] great or little thing'.<sup>134</sup> In aligning himself with Wilde's protagonist in this way, Mayakovsky in effect casts himself as the hero of the situation. It is by being 'the brave man', that he endures his imprisonment and 'death', just as in Wilde:

Yet each man kills the things he loves,  
By each let this be heard,  
Some do it with a bitter look,  
Some with a flattering word,  
The coward does it with a kiss,  
The brave man with a sword!<sup>135</sup>

<sup>129</sup> 'The Prisoner of Chillon', *The Works of Lord Byron Vol. IV*, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge (London: John Murray, 1905), p. 23.

<sup>130</sup> Marshall, *Mayakovsky*, p. 49.

<sup>131</sup> *Correspondence*, pp. 126-127.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>134</sup> 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol', p. 747.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 748.

Earlier, I raised the problem of considering Mayakovsky's letters to be reserves, on account of the fact that, in however limited a way, they have been consciously constructed and sent out into the world. With this in mind it is interesting to note that, throughout the final month of this period of exchange, Mayakovsky also wrote one ongoing and unsent diary-like letter, which Lili found in his belongings following the poet's death. These fragmented writings appear to be more of a private working out of Mayakovsky's thoughts than a form of communication. For example, it is divided into such categories as 'About my sitting here', 'Do I love you?', and 'My character', and begins with the phrase (which again pre-empted the sentiment in 'Verses' of his only needing to write down the most difficult ideas) 'I'm writing because I'm no longer capable of thinking about it'.<sup>136</sup> Certain lines in the final section of 'About This', in which Mayakovsky denounces the comfortable lure of pre-revolutionary ways of life, or *old byt*, have evident roots in this diary-letter. In particular, he says:

I've chucked out  
all the other old  
rubbish.  
Resurrect me just on that account!<sup>137</sup>

This is followed by the lines:

Posteli proklyav,  
vstav s lezhanki

Gureyeva and Hyde, the latter having made the reader aware in his introduction to *Pro Eto* that '[t]his translation follows Mayakovsky in the way he followed Lily, obsessively but not always faithfully', render these two lines:

Curse beds,  
Get up you supine fool.

However, it is Marshall's version:

Decrying bed,  
forsaking the fireside chair,<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> *Correspondence*, letter no. 113, pp. 124.

<sup>137</sup> *Pro Eto*, p.161.

<sup>138</sup> Marshall, *Mayakovsky*, p. 214.



well as its theme, can be discovered. The ‘future’ which the two were to be considering during their mutual absence had primarily to do with their fear of falling into a bourgeois way of living. As Lili describes:

... we were living well; we had grown used to each other, to the fact that we were shod, dressed and living in the warm, eating regular tasty meals, drinking a lot of tea with jam. *Byt* had been established. Suddenly we took fright at this and decided on the forcible destruction of ‘shameful prudence’.<sup>141</sup>

Thus, Mayakovsky’s uncommunicated promise to Lili – ‘I give you my firm word about THIS’ [‘za ETO ya ruchayus’ tverdo’<sup>142</sup>] finds its public, poeticised counterpart in the line ‘Resurrect me just on that account!’ [‘Voskresi menya xotya b za eto!’<sup>143</sup>]; the ‘za eto’ translating in both cases to ‘regarding this’, or ‘on this’. In each case he appeals to Lili to rescue him from his misery on account of his promises to do ‘THIS’; ‘THIS’ being the very subject of the poem – ‘Pro Eto’ – ‘About This’.

It is clear that the process of looking into Mayakovsky’s own poetry for “evidence” of that which he describes in his Marxist analogy as ‘reserves’ is a difficult one. In the case of ‘About This’, the complicated strands of (arguably) ‘public’ and ‘private’ expression, the presence of recognisable literary sources and the knowledge of the poet’s desire to be ‘economical’ with his reserves in general mean that it is impossible to definitively state what may be considered a conscious reserve and what cannot. Indeed, the concrete examples provided by Mayakovsky in ‘Verses’ are so minor and obscure (as opposed to the explicit use of the characters of Wilde and Byron, for example) as perhaps to be imperceptible to the reader of his work. Amongst his examples of these lines of poetry and their origins are:

A street.  
I meet... (The tram from the Sukharev tower to the Sretenka gate, 1913)

A menacing rain narrowed the eyes,  
While I ... (The Strastnoy monastery, 1912)

Stroke the shrivelled black cats (Oak tree in Kuntsevo, 1914)

Left

<sup>141</sup> From ‘Из воспоминаний о стихах Маяковского’, *Знамя*, 4, 1941, quoted by Bengt Jangfeldt in his introduction to *Correspondence*, pp. 20-21. Again, Jangfeldt includes the misleading and incorrect phrase ‘little old routine’ alongside *byt* here, which I have omitted from the quote.

<sup>142</sup> *Пепениска*, p. 111.

<sup>143</sup> *Pro Eto*, p. 160.

Left. (Cab on the Embankment, 1917)<sup>144</sup>

The fact of this obscurity, this *invisibility* of the language reserves in a finished poem, is no cause for concern in seeking to understand Mayakovsky's method of writing; that is, the manner in which he describes the process of writing in an apparently Marxist context. In fact, in Marxist terms such invisibility is inevitable, as Marx makes clear when he describes the way in which commodities express only their own existence, and not that which has gone into making them. On this 'enigmatical character of the product of labour, so soon as it assumes the form of commodities', he explains, 'the products of labour [...] are but material expressions of the human labour spent in their production'.<sup>145</sup> Marx is here explaining the process by which the values of different commodities are defined by the quantity of labour time involved in their individual production, in relation to the labour time needed for the production of all other commodities. Thus, in expressing a given value, commodities do not in themselves reveal the specific type of work undertaken to produce them, nor the tools involved, nor the particular human beings responsible for their production, but simply the degree of labour time involved. However, although the price of a commodity might tell its potential consumers something about the amount of time needed for its completion, that commodity *itself* is certainly not able, for the labour and materials of its production are subsumed by its appearance as finished commodity. In Marx's words:

[this] relation [...], so to say, exists only in their own heads. Their owner must, therefore, lend them his tongue, or hang a ticket on them, before their prices can be communicated to the outside world.<sup>146</sup>

In a similar way, in becoming "the commodity" of a completed poem, the means of producing that poem – i.e. the language reserves – become invisible in the objective material fact of the poem's existence in the world. Not only this but they become indistinguishable from another kind of language involved in the writing of poetry – that which appears spontaneously and on the spot at the moment of the poem's composition. The reserves are made visible only at such a time as the poem's 'owner', Mayakovsky, actively demonstrates its value, by naming a price for its publication, for example. However, this labelling of value cannot indicate the specific nature of each unit of the

<sup>144</sup> *Verses*, pp. 54-55.

<sup>145</sup> *Capital* Chapter I Section 4: "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof", pp. 82, 85.

<sup>146</sup> *Capital*, Chapter III, p. 105.

language reserve, of the time and place of each conception and subsequent use, any more than, with the knowledge that a coat costs the equivalent amount of money to 10 hours' labour, we could assume to simultaneously know the full names and childhood hobbies of those individuals by whose work the coat was produced. That Mayakovsky does at times indicate the source materials of his poetry is certainly useful – not least because although the raw materials disappear into *all* finished poems (except perhaps in cases where they are indicated by quotation marks or italics, or appear in a foreign language or archaic spelling, etc), and not just those of Mayakovsky, unlike most other poets Mayakovsky never wants us to forget that *his* poetry is the manifest product of imaginative labour. Indeed he *wants* and *encourages* us to read his work as the product of labour – and this is why his own individual 'invisible reserves' feel so deliberately Marxist. After all, there could equally exist descriptions of such absorption and invisibility that have nothing to do with Marxism, but the analogy set up by Mayakovsky himself makes for a compelling comparison. However, it is in his discussions and theorisation of the process of writing that any links with political economy must be primarily sought, and not purely with the finished writing itself. Evidence of the poet's theories *may* be sometimes apparent in his writing, but it is important to clarify that this evidence comes generally from Mayakovsky's own admission, or, in the case of 'About This', from having certain supporting materials to hand.

### iii. Political Application – *How Are Verses Made*

In that case then, what is the particular nature of Mayakovsky's use of reserves – that is, what makes *his* use of them distinctly "Marxist", compared to that of other writers? After all, this method of building up a reserve of material is not, in itself, an uncommon practice for a writer. Notable examples include Flaubert, who claims to have read some 1,500 books in preparation for the writing of *Bouvard and Pecuchet*,<sup>147</sup> the first edition of which, in spite of its short length, 'was based on some 4000 manuscript pages',<sup>148</sup> and also Joyce, whose composition methods for *Ulysses* involved 'for years [...] jotting down notes – from whatever source caught his eye – either in notebooks [...] or on little tablets

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<sup>147</sup> From his letter to Madame Roger des Genettes, 25 January 1880: 'Do you know the number of volumes I've had to absorb for my two little fellows? More than 1500! My file is eight inches tall!'. From *Correspondence Vol. 5*, ed. Jean Bruneau and Yvan Leclerc (Gallimard: Paris, 2007), p.796, my translation.

[...] carefully crossing through a note in crayon when he had inserted it in its apparently pre-destined place in the draft.’<sup>149</sup> These two in particular strikingly resemble those methods described by Mayakovsky in ‘Verses’ – not only in their frequent note-taking, on which the poet claims to spend ‘from ten to eighteen hours per day’<sup>150</sup> but also in the perfectionist approach to making use of these extensive supplies. Flaubert asserts that ‘[a] good prose sentence should be like a good line of poetry—*unchangeable*’,<sup>151</sup> whilst Mayakovsky, in spite of admitting that ‘the manner of their future application is all obscure to [him]’,<sup>152</sup> is meticulous in his choice and positioning of each word. On this, he says:

It’s like having a tooth crowned. A hundred times (or so it seems) the dentist tries a crown on the tooth, and it’s the wrong size; but at last [...] he presses one down and it fits. The analogy is all the more apposite in my case, because when at last the crown fits, I (quite literally) have tears in my eyes, from pain and relief.<sup>153</sup>

What is notable about Mayakovsky in particular however are the links he makes between this dedication to poetic precision and the processes of political economy. It is in ‘Verses’ that we find his most explicit and concrete example of that fear of ‘squandered reserves’, as described by Triolet. In the following extract, part of which I quoted at the beginning of this chapter, Mayakovsky is describing the raw material origins of the title of his 1915 poem ‘A Cloud In Trousers’:

In about 1913 when I was returning from Saratov to Moscow, so as to prove my devotion to a certain female companion, I told her that I was ‘not a man, but a cloud in trousers’. When I’d said it, I immediately thought it could be used in a poem; but what if it should at once be spent [razoidetsya] in conversation and be squandered to no avail? Terribly worried, I put leading questions to the girl for half an hour, and only calmed down when I was quite sure my words were going in one ear and out the other.

Two years later I needed ‘a cloud in trousers’ for the title of a long poem.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> *Bouvard and Pecuchet* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005). From the introduction by M. Polizzotti, p. xvi.

<sup>149</sup> J. Johnson, ‘Composition and Publication History’, *Ulysses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. xiii.

<sup>150</sup> *Verses*, p. 54.

<sup>151</sup> From a letter to Louise Colet, quoted by Polizzotti in *Bouvard and Pecuchet*, p. viii.

<sup>152</sup> *Verses*, p. 54.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

Here we have not only a description of language as a ‘reserve’ to be hoarded (in this case for two years) until it may be produced to maximum effect (in this case as the title of what was to become one of the poet’s most famous and enduring poems), but also an expression of the seriousness of Mayakovsky’s fear (being ‘terribly worried’) that this reserve should be ‘squandered to no avail’ (i.e. to be used uneconomically).

‘Verses’ contains the highest concentration of the poet’s use of political-economic jargon in explaining poetry. In this essay he speaks of the need for ‘a large reserve of preliminaries’ before it is possible to create anything good in writing: ‘Tolko imeya bolshoi zapas predvaritel'nix poeticheskix zagotovok’.<sup>155</sup> This term ‘reserve’ – ‘zapas’ – is that same one which is so frequently used in Danielson’s translation of *Capital*. As I discussed earlier, there are two ways in which the word ‘zapas’ may be understood in *Capital*, in correlation with Marx’s twofold use of the notion of reserves: as a noun, in reference to material stock; and as an adjective, to indicate the use of human workers as similar to material stock. In the excerpt from Triolet, Mayakovsky’s adamant protection of his ‘reserves’ seems to fit more closely with the first of these two uses, as though he is protecting a hoard of gold. In this instance however, the poet’s extended use of the term has more in common with Marx’s ‘industrial reserve army’. For example, look again at chapter 25 of *Capital*, in which the term ‘zapas’ is used as Marx states that ‘a surplus labouring population [...] forms a disposable industrial reserve army[; ...] it creates [...] a mass of human material always ready for exploitation.’<sup>156</sup> [‘izbitok’ rabochago nasyeleniya [...] obrazuyet *zapasnuyu* promishlyennuyu armiyu [...] on’ sozdaet’ vsyegda gotoviy dlya ekspluatatsii chelovecheskiy material’].<sup>157</sup> This ‘mass of human material’ for Marx is appropriated by Mayakovsky in his explanation of building *poetic* reserves later on in ‘Verses’ when he states that ‘[a] poet regards every meeting, every signpost, every event in whatever circumstances simply as material to be shaped into words.’<sup>158</sup> By using the word ‘reserves’ to describe an accumulation of language – language which can readily be built up using the ‘raw materials’ of conversation or events from everyday life – Mayakovsky proposes a parallel with Marx, in which the surplus

<sup>155</sup> *Как делать стихи* p. 13. Hyde’s translation in *Verses* is: ‘You can produce something good to order only when you’ve a large stock of preliminaries behind you.’ (p. 53.)

<sup>156</sup> *Capital*, Chapter XXV Section 3 ‘Progressive Production of a Relative Surplus Population or Industrial Reserve Army’, p.626.

<sup>157</sup> *Кануналь*, p.553, my emphasis. The word ‘disposable’ in the English translation given here is not present in the Russian.

<sup>158</sup> *Verses*, p. 55.



labouring population of the capitalist's workforce is replaced by the excess quantity of language for the purpose of making poetry. Just as the capitalist need never be without workers, and is at leisure to replace one worker with another should the work of the first not be up to standard, so is Mayakovsky able to see in his reserves a vast array of potential poetry for his use. If there were only as many workers as required in any given workplace, the capitalist's levels of production would inevitably suffer should just one become unfit for work, for example. Similarly, without this excess quantity of language, Mayakovsky asserts that his poetry would also suffer; it is required in order for the "right" word to reveal itself. As he describes, '[s]everal words just jump away and never come back[...] More often than not, the most important word emerges first: the word that most completely conveys the meaning.'<sup>159</sup>

It would be a reductive – and futile – exercise to attempt to force this crown of Mayakovsky's phrase regarding stocks of reserves exactly onto Marx's tooth; after all, being a Marxist poet need not mean that your poetry can be explained altogether on Marx's terms. As parallel systems of economy they are problematic, not least because of course for Marx the point of the surplus labouring population is its fungibility – each member of the 'reserve army' carries the same value as the rest insofar as they are all able to undertake the duties of unskilled labour. For Mayakovsky however, the opposite is true. Certainly, he asserts that all preliminaries 'will be made use of',<sup>160</sup> but it is obvious that in the context of a singular poem these reserves cannot be randomly brought into action. This is made clear when the poet describes the writing of 'To Sergey Esenin':

You went off ra ra ra to a world above... and so on.

What is that damed 'ra ra ra', and what can I put in its place? Perhaps  
I can leave it without any 'ra ra ra's.

You went off to a world above.

No! I'm reminded at once of some line or other I've heard:

The poor steed fell in the field.

What's that horse doing there! This isn't a horse, this is Esenin.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

The difference in terminology, between ‘surplus’ and ‘excess’, is important. In both Mayakovsky’s analogy about having a tooth crowned and his description above of finding ‘the most important word’, it seems that having a reserve of language at one’s disposal is crucial in order to choose from it the one which is best for each poetic “product”. The rest, which either ‘jump away and never come back’ or else are ‘the wrong size’ and don’t fit, are excess to requirement and thus are discarded. The capitalist, on the other hand, in addition to ensuring the practical fungibility of his workers, does not maintain a surplus labouring population in order that he might discard the excess once he has employed as many as he requires for production to take place during the course of, say, one day. Rather, for Marx, the term ‘surplus’ means something very different from Mayakovsky’s ‘excess’. Firstly, it exists to ensure that, unlike the frustrated Mayakovsky, who ‘a hundred times (or so it seems)’ draws on his reserves to no avail, the capitalist’s process of production need never cease. Secondly, it relates to the quantity of the commodity produced, and the money duly exchanged for that commodity. The surplus is, for the capitalist, the *profit* on labour; not that which gets thrown away but, conversely, the desired result – as Marx makes clear:

Since the production of surplus value is the chief end and aim of capitalist production, it is clear, that the greatness of a man’s or a nation’s wealth should be measured, not by the absolute quantity produced, but by the relative magnitude of the surplus produce.<sup>162</sup>

Of course this ‘surplus’ quantity, which represents the capitalist’s main aim and refers to the end product and its exchange value in money, is a quite different point of reference from that of the *surplus labouring population*, which remains simply one element of the process of production, and not its ‘aim’. From this point of view, the capitalist model is not entirely at odds with Mayakovsky, for whom it is also the end product (the poem) and not the excess word-bank out of which the poem appears which constitutes the main aim. It is true that surplus value for the capitalist is dependent in turn on the surplus labour of his workers, the overworking of whom necessitates a surplus labouring population in order that new recruits may be brought in at no risk to the rate of production. In this sense the acquisition of surplus workers may be considered a part, or condition, of that ‘main aim’. This also resembles Mayakovsky’s economy insofar as he too is reliant on maintaining his reserves in order to produce poetry. On this he says ‘[o]nly the presence of rigorously thought-out preliminary work gives me the time to finish anything, since my

normal output of work in progress is eight to ten lines a day.’<sup>163</sup> The point at which these two systems diverge definitively is in the repetitive potential of the worker, as opposed to the singular potential of the word or phrase. As is touched upon above, the surplus workforce is interchangeable, and Mayakovsky’s linguistic reserve is not. Further to this, for so long as there arises no need for the replacement of workers in a capitalist organisation, that same group may reproduce the same product a hundred times or more – it is the same stock of workers who produce new goods each day. In language, this is impossible; it would simply equate to a new composition of the same words in every poem produced. Regardless of this divergence in logic, the mode of writing outlined by Mayakovsky places him in both the role of the capitalist and the worker. He is in control of the means of production – the one who puts this ‘reserve army’ of words to work for his own individual gain. And yet he is also the worker whose labour transforms the raw material into its finished state. This image of Mayakovsky the factory worker is further accentuated by some of the more practical items on his list of ‘basic propositions [in] begin[ning] poetical work’:

Third thing. Materials. Words. Fill your storehouse constantly, fill the granaries of your skull with all kinds of words, necessary, expressive, rare, invented, renovated and manufactured.

Fourth thing. Equipment for the plant and tools for the assembly line. A pen, a pencil, a typewriter[.]<sup>164</sup>

To discuss the process in this way puts his assertion that ‘one must ensure that [one’s poetry] will act in such a way as to give maximum support to one’s class’ in an interesting light, for his very description of the production of a poetics which is able to push forward and consolidate the power of the proletariat is presented using that same model of existence by which they had previously been enslaved. One of Mayakovsky’s major criticisms of the State-sponsored cultural programme Proletkult [Proletarian Culture], which existed to encourage the development of a new ‘proletarian’ poetry by new (amateur) proletarian workers-turned-writers was that, coming from a position of cultural immaturity, their work described the remodelled experience of life in the new Soviet State – but did so in a form very similar to the old, classic, bourgeois styles of the past, those being the only styles they knew. For example, the poetry of Mikhail Gerasimov, one of the most widely read early Soviet proletarian poets, looked like this:

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<sup>162</sup> *Capital*, Chapter IX Section 4 ‘Surplus Produce’, p. 238.

<sup>163</sup> *Verses*, p. 55.

I am not in gentle nature  
 Among the blooming bowers.  
 Under the smokey sky in the factory  
 I forged iron flowers.<sup>165</sup>

This poem, Lynn Mally writes,

exemplifies the best-known genre of Proletkult artistic practice during the early revolutionary years. Its proletarian imagery was meant to set it apart from the art of the bourgeoisie, which was dedicated to gentle nature. Instead Gerasimov exalted iron flowers as a uniquely working-class image of beauty. The laborer in the midst of the factory milieu was both the subject and the creator of this new form.<sup>166</sup>

In reality, Gerasimov's attempt at separation from bourgeois imagery is made only by drawing attention *to* that same imagery and drawing a comparison on the basis of it, a technique which cannot help but replicate, rather than move away from old forms. In 'Order No. 2 To the Army of the Arts' Mayakovsky criticises this approach, insisting that '[t]his [admonishment] is for you / [...] you, men of the Proletcult / who keep patching / Pushkin's faded tailcoat.'<sup>167</sup> By comparison, as Jangfeldt notes, 'a conviction which was fundamental for [Mayakovsky's] aesthetics and for that of the avant-garde in general[, was that] there can be no revolutionary content without a revolutionary form.'<sup>168</sup> Why then would Mayakovsky model his method of writing – a method which creates explicit parallels between the process of writing and the more physical aspects of constructing communism – on the degrading and exploitative experience of capitalist factory production? One answer could be this: it is already clear that Mayakovsky wants his readers to be constantly aware of the fact that, for him, writing is a form of labour. Perhaps then, framing this labour in the extreme conditions of the capitalist factory is a means to express more fully the extent of the exertion, stress and exhaustion he experiences. By comparison, using the newly developed communist factory work dynamic as his setting may have made for an awkward – and potentially “anti-communist” – backdrop with which to indicate both the torture endured by Mayakovsky to produce his poems, and the tough pressure and discipline he enforces upon himself in

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>165</sup> From 'Iron Flowers', translated by Lynn Mally in *Culture of the Future: The Proletkult Movement in Revolutionary Russia* (Berkley Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), p. 122.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> 'Order No. 2...', trans. George Reavey, *Volodya*, p. 72.

<sup>168</sup> Jangfeldt, *Mayakovsky*, p. 101.



However, as a work dynamic in real life the factory committee rule was short-lived, lasting no longer than the period of time between the February revolution and the October one, at which time the Bolsheviks established their own control over the running of factories. It is worth remembering that this, like many Bolshevik actions and issues, was a contentious topic, with dramatically different angles of reportage reflecting wider political sympathies. Nevertheless, in his pamphlet *The Bolsheviks and Workers Control*, Maurice Brinton gives an interesting impression of this power shift – and the way that, following the Civil War, ‘the more ‘enlightened’ and technologically skilled sections of the ‘expropriated class’ soon resumed dominant positions in the relations of production’ – in a move which effectively stifled the potential for real structural change in factory work relations:

Between March and October the Bolsheviks supported the growth of the Factory Committees, only to turn viciously against them in the last few weeks of 1917, seeking to incorporate them into the new union structure, the better to emasculate them. This process [...] was to play an important role in preventing the rapidly growing challenge to capitalist relations of production from coming to a head. Instead the Bolsheviks canalised the energies released between March and October into a successful onslaught against the political power of the bourgeoisie (and against the property relations on which that power was based). At this level the revolution was ‘successful’. But the Bolsheviks were also ‘successful’ in restoring ‘law and order’ in industry; law and order that re-consolidated the authoritarian relations in production, which for a brief period had been seriously shaken.<sup>172</sup>

Thus, in Brinton’s view, although certain key changes in working conditions were made – for example the implementation of the eight hour working day – in many ways the structures of power remained the same. The negative trajectory of this problematic dynamic is discussed by the journalist Gareth Jones in his 1933 article ‘Pitiful Lives of Soviet Factory Slaves: Russia’s Collapse’, in which his factory worker interviewees tell him variously, “[t]hey are cruelly strict now in the factories. If you are absent one day you are sacked, get your bread card taken away, and cannot get a passport’ [...], ‘[i]t is more terrible than ever. If you say a word now in the factories you are dismissed’ [...], and ‘[w]e work now for a greater slave driver than ever’”.<sup>173</sup> These accounts were taken during the Soviet famine of 1932-33, a time when circumstances – and the direction of Soviet leadership – had shifted considerably since both the revolution in 1917 and 1926, the year

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<sup>172</sup> Maurice Brinton, *The Bolsheviks and Workers Control* (1970), <https://libcom.org/library/the-bolsheviks-and-workers-control-solidarity-group>, accessed 01/09/2016.

Mayakovsky wrote his essay. Additionally – printed as they are in the *The Daily Express* – it must be borne in mind that they represent just as much an example of what the right-wing tabloid press at that time wanted us to think about factory work as they are representative of the situation itself. Nevertheless, it is interesting to bear in mind that Mayakovsky's use of the capitalist labour structure in his analogy for the process of writing may have been neither the invocation of a bygone era, nor a politically backward means of describing a communist practice in the same way that the so-called proletarian writers were considered by Mayakovsky to be formally backward. In fact it could just as easily have been a description of the current working conditions of factory workers, under a system which was ostensibly communist but which in practice operated very much like the old capitalist system, and indeed with many of the old factory owners at the helm. It could also have been, (as seems to be the case in 'Conversation with a Tax Collector' too) a way to reimagine or recreate that small period of post-revolutionary time when the workers really were in control of their own means of production in a literal and immediate way. Either way, the major difference between pre- and post-revolutionary conditions was that the Soviet factories, though sharing some organisational similarities with capitalist factories, were not run by a single individual or group of individuals for the purpose of creating capital; they were State-run, for communal gain. Likewise, despite the similarity to the capitalist factory suggested by Mayakovsky in his account of poetic production, he makes it explicit that his method of writing poetry is not designed for the purpose of teaching communists *How To Be a Poet in Five Easy Lessons* – which for him is analogous to the bourgeois, passive, uncritical writing and reception of the poetry of the past – and that, on the contrary, his method acts as a way to move away from the old ways of thinking:

Our chief and enduring hatred falls on sentimental-critical Philistinism. On those who see all the greatness of the poetry of the past in the fact that they too have loved as Oniegin loved Tatyana or the fact that even they can understand these poets (they studied them at school) and iammbuses caress *their* ears too. [...]

All you have to do is compare Tatyana's love and 'the science of which Ovid sang' with a programme of legislation about marriage, read about Pushkin's 'superior, disenchanted lorgnette' to the Donets coalminers, or run in front of the May-day processions declaiming 'My uncle showed his good intentions...'.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> From *The Daily Express*, April 8th, 1933, Page 9. Accessed 29/08/2016, [http://www.colley.co.uk/garethjones/soviet\\_articles/pitiful\\_lives\\_factory\\_slaves.htm](http://www.colley.co.uk/garethjones/soviet_articles/pitiful_lives_factory_slaves.htm).

After an experiment like that, I hardly think any young man, burning to give his energies to the Revolution, will feel any great urge to spend time studying ancient poetic skills.<sup>174</sup>

Speculation aside, whatever the reason for the particular structure of Mayakovsky's analogy, which identifies with an incessant controlling force even as it rallies in support of those who work underneath such control, that structure becomes more complex still in the context of the poet's approach to poetic production.

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<sup>174</sup> *Verses*, pp. 42-43.



## II

### Production

In speaking of the process of production in a capitalist context, several things must be considered: the practical context of this production, i.e. the tools and workspace; the work dynamic involved, for example the dynamic between underpaid, overworked factory workers and the factory owner, who sits at the visible end of the production line and reaps the profits made by those workers; and that which is being produced – the commodity. Necessarily, there will be some overlap between the discussion of production here with that of reserves in the previous chapter, given that the reserve is itself a component of the process of production. However, what is of interest here are the specific ways in which Marx discusses the process of production, and how his descriptions and opinions of this process are also visible in the analogy set up by Mayakovsky. The need to determine specific terminology is not of such great emphasis here as it was for the section on reserves, because whenever the terms ‘production’ and ‘the mode of production’ are used in *Capital*, the same German words are used in each case: ‘Produktions’ and ‘Produktionsweise’, respectively. As this is also true of the English and Russian translations, the latter consistently using the terms ‘proizvodstva’ and ‘protsessa proizvodstva’ (literally, ‘production’ and ‘process of production’) there is no danger when examining this particular jargon that particular meanings may have become de-emphasised or altered in translation. Before I examine Mayakovsky’s writings on the process of production in writing, I will first look at what Marx says about capitalist production in *Capital*.

His first mention of the term appears in his outline of the aims of that book:

In this work I have to examine the capitalist mode of production, and the conditions of production and exchange corresponding to that mode [...] Intrinsically, it is not a question of the higher or lower degree of development of the social antagonisms that result from the natural laws of capitalist production. It is a question of these laws themselves, of these tendencies working with iron necessity towards inevitable results. The country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future. [...] Where capitalist production is fully naturalised among the Germans (for instance, in the factories proper) the condition of things is much worse than in England, because the counterpoise of the Factory Acts is wanting. In all other spheres, we [...] suffer not only from the development of capitalist production but also from the incompleteness of that development. Alongside of modern evils, a whole series of inherited evils oppress us, arising from the passive survival of

antiquated modes of production. [...] We suffer not only from the living, but from the dead.<sup>175</sup>

It is clear then that for Marx capitalist production causes suffering and social antagonism as a result of the ‘natural laws’ by which it operates: that is to say, by the exploitation of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie. It is also clear from this extract that the effect of suffering is inevitable and without end for so long as capitalist production exists; that the best that they who are exploited may hope for is the introduction of certain regulations, such as the English Factory Acts, which serve to limit, or regulate in an official way, the degree of this suffering (and, in doing so, to sanction it as legal and acceptable practice). Shortly afterwards, Marx alludes further to this inequality in the capitalist process of production, as he explains the impossibility of investigating modern political economy in an impartial way:

In so far as Political Economy remains within [the bourgeois] horizon, in so far, i.e., as the capitalist régime is looked upon as the absolutely final form of social production, instead of as a passing historical phase of its evolution, political economy can remain a science only so long as the class struggle is latent or manifests itself only in isolated and sporadic phenomena.<sup>176</sup>

Marx exemplifies capitalism’s reliance on a docile and passive working class society on the following page:

In Germany, [...] the capitalist mode of production came to a head after its antagonistic character had already, in France and England, shown itself in a fierce strife of classes.<sup>177</sup>

So far then, Marx’s comments on capitalist production make clear that, for him, as in the case of the existence of the industrial reserve army, it is a system for perpetuating injustice. Later in *Capital*, he focuses particularly on the product of this system itself: the commodity:

The wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails, presents itself as “an immense accumulation of commodities” [...] A commodity is [...] a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another [...], whether directly as means of subsistence, or indirectly as means of production.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> *Capital*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.

Commodities are not produced out of an altruistic aim to provide social satisfaction, but rather to be sold – specifically, to be sold at a profit on their production costs. Marx continues his explanation of capitalist production by outlining the way in which the value of a given commodity is determined by the degree of labour time, or ‘homogenous human labour’, involved in its production:

All that [commodities] tell us is that human labour power has been expended in their production, that human labour is embodied in them. [...] Some people might think that if the value of a commodity is determined by the quantity of labour spent on it, the more idle and unskilful the labourer, the more valuable would his commodity be, because more time would be required in its production. The labour, however, that forms the substance of value, is homogenous human labour, expenditure of one uniform labour power.<sup>179</sup>

Thus, Marx explains, with the introduction of machinery for example, and the increased rate of production which results from this development, the value of a commodity must fall in direct relation to the decrease in necessary labour time. He goes on to exemplify the nature of this shifting value:

If the productive power of all the different sorts of useful labour required for the production of a coat remains unchanged, the sum of the values of the coats produced increases with their number. If one coat represents x days’ labour, two coats represent 2x days’ labour, and so on. But assume that the duration of the labour necessary for the production of a coat becomes doubled or halved. In the first case, one coat is worth as much as two were before; in the second case, two coats are only worth as much as one was before, although in both cases one coat renders the same service as before, and the useful labour embodied in it remains of the same quality. But the quantity of labour spent on its production has altered.<sup>180</sup>

This method of ascribing shifting values to commodities which nevertheless themselves appear unchanged is reiterated soon after, when Marx writes that ‘[the coat is a] depository of value, but though worn to a thread, it does not let this fact show through.’<sup>181</sup>

This differentiation between a commodity’s use value – i.e., in the case of the coat, its potential to be worn, and its exchange value – i.e. the extent to which it can be exchanged for other commodities or for an amount of money, is elaborated by Marx as he explains

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., pp. 48-49.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., pp. 55-56.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

the social remove effected when the value of a product becomes, in capitalist production, equally as important as its practical purpose. On this, he writes:

It is only by being exchanged that the products of labour acquire, as values, one uniform social status, distinct from their varied forms of existence as objects of utility. This division of a product into a useful thing and a value becomes practically important, only when exchange has acquired such an extension that useful articles are produced for the purpose of being exchanged, and their character as values has therefore to be taken into account, beforehand, during production. From this moment the labour of the individual producer acquires socially a two-fold character.<sup>182</sup>

The effect of this two-fold character, Marx writes, is that the value of a commodity, i.e. its capacity to make profit, becomes the primary factor at the production stage, rather than the quality of the item: '[w]hat, first of all, practically concerns producers when they make an exchange, is the question, how much of some other product they get for their own?'<sup>183</sup> In this way, the commodity itself ceases to be the main aim of production, except insofar as it represents the necessary route by which to realise its *actual* aim – surplus value, which in turn creates capital. This shift in the status of commodities in turn colours the way in which labour itself is classified. No longer is it primarily recognised on the basis of workers' skill in producing various commodities, but rather on the basis of the amount of surplus value it creates. Marx describes this process of production as one which workers cannot themselves control, since they are merely appendages to the system:

Political economy [...] has never once asked the question why labour is represented by the value of its product and labour time by the magnitude of that value. These formulae, which bear it stamped upon them in unmistakable letters that they belong to a state of society, in which the process of production has the mastery over man, instead of being controlled by him, such formulae appear to the bourgeois intellect to be as much a self-evident necessity imposed by Nature as productive labour itself.<sup>184</sup>

Before I begin to explore Mayakovsky's framing of the production of *poetry* in relation to Marx's description of the process of producing commodities, I must draw attention to Mayakovsky's own recorded opinion of the exploitation of the working classes as a result of this shifting labour dynamic, and to how closely it resembles that of Marx in *Capital*.

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<sup>182</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., pp. 91-92.

This is especially significant because, by contrast, in his subsequent descriptions of *poetic* production his approach aligns itself not only with the experience of the proletariat, but, just as was the case in his account of poetic reserves, with that of the capitalist too, as an embodiment of the whole system.

In the poet's final journal entry included in *My Discovery of America* – which contains no explicit mention of Marx or Marxism – Mayakovsky's account of his reflections of the USA veer suddenly away from the primarily informally written style of the rest of the journal, to this:

In the solitude of the return voyage, I tried to formulate my essential American impressions. [...] The division of labour is destructive of human means of livelihood. The capitalist, having separated out and allocated a percentage of workers of material value to himself (certain specialists, tame union bosses, etc.), treats the remaining working masses like inexhaustible goods.

If we want to, we sell; if we want to, we buy. If you don't agree to work, we sit it out; if you go on strike, we take on others. We look after the subordinate and the capable; and for the insubordinate, it's the batons of the official police, and the Mausers and the Colts of the private dicks.

The cunning splitting of the working class – into the run-of-the-mill and the privileged; the ignorance of workers sucked dry by labour, who, after a thoroughly systematised working day, are not even left with sufficient energy needed to be able to think; the comparative prosperity of the worker able to hammer out a subsistence wage; the delusory hope of riches in the future, given added relish by insistent anecdotes of billionaires who started off as cleaners; the absolute military fortresses on many a street corner, and the menacing word 'deportation' – these push into the distance any significant hopes there may be of revolutionary outbursts in America.<sup>185</sup>

This 'impression' of Mayakovsky's, which was written shortly before 'Verses', has no explicit connection to the act of writing poetry (except indirectly, insofar as he was writing poetry alongside the journals during his trip). What it does do however, is make a strong case for the argument that the thoughts and terminology which reappear in the later essay were already at the forefront of the poet's mind and therefore may indeed be considered in terms of a Marxist influence, and not just the influence of political discourse in general. The closeness of Mayakovsky's critique here to that of Marx in *Capital* is remarkable. For example, his opinion that '[t]he division of labour is destructive of human means of livelihood' ['Razdelenie truda unichtozhaet

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<sup>185</sup> *My Discovery of America*, trans. Neil Cornwell (London: Hesperus Press Ltd, 2005), pp. 103-104.

chelovecheskuyu kvalifikatsiyu’]<sup>186</sup> can be located in *Capital*, chapter XIV - ‘Division of Labour and Manufacture’ [‘Razdelenie Truda i Manufaktura’], in which Marx says:

[...] manufacture arises [...] from the union of various independent handicrafts, which become stripped of their independence and specialised to such an extent as to be reduced to mere supplementary partial processes in the production of one particular commodity.<sup>187</sup>

The effect of this division of labour on ‘human means of livelihood’ is made still clearer by Marx:

[V]ery soon an important change takes place. The tailor, the locksmith, and the other artificers, being now exclusively occupied [...], each gradually loses, through want of practice, the ability to carry on, to its full extent, his old handicraft. [...] Hence, manufacture begets, in every handicraft that it seizes upon, a class of so-called unskilled labourers, a class which handicraft industry strictly excluded. If it develops a one-sided speciality into a perfection, at the expense of the whole of a man’s working capacity, it also begins to make a speciality of the absence of all development. [...] In both [skilled and unskilled labour] the value of labour power falls.<sup>188</sup>

In this chapter of *Capital*, Marx also pre-empts Mayakovsky’s mention of the worker’s ‘thoroughly systematised working day’, [‘xorosho zorganizovannogo rabochego dnya’<sup>189</sup>] when he makes reference to the ‘reproducing, and systematically driving to an extreme within the workshop’<sup>190</sup> of different trades, which results in turn in an overworking of the labourer. ‘The transition from one operation to another interrupts the flow of [the artificer’s] labour’, Marx writes, ‘and creates [...] gaps in his working day. These gaps close up so soon as he is tied to one and the same operation all day long’.<sup>191</sup> [‘Takoi perexod ot odnoi raboti k drugoi prerivaet techenie ego truda i obrazuyet nekim obrazom pori v ego rabochem dne. Eti pori zakrivayutsya kol’ skoro on v techenie vsego rabochego dnya, ispolnyaet neprerivno odny i tu zhe rabotu[.]’<sup>192</sup>] This effect, which Mayakovsky describes as ‘workers sucked dry by labour’ [‘nevezhestvo trdom visosannix rabochix’<sup>193</sup>] is discussed more fully by Marx earlier in *Capital*. For example, in Chapter X Section 1, he writes – using that same metaphor – ‘[c]apital is dead labour,

<sup>186</sup> *Моё открытие америки, Полное собрание сочинений Том 7*, p. 344.

<sup>187</sup> *Capital*, Chapter XIV Section 1 ‘Twofold Origin of Manufacture’, p. 343.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 341-355.

<sup>189</sup> *Америки*, p. 344.

<sup>190</sup> *Capital*, p.344.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 345.

<sup>192</sup> *Капиталъ*, p. 293.

<sup>193</sup> *Америки*, p. 344.

that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks.’<sup>194</sup> [‘Kapital, eto – mertviy trud’, kotoriy, podobno vampiru ozhivaet’ vsledstvie vsasivaniya v’ sebya zhivogo truda I priobretaet’ pri etom’ tem’ bolee zhiznennoi sili, chem’ bolee vsosano im’etogo truda.’<sup>195</sup>] The metaphor is reiterated by Marx in Section 4 of the same chapter: ‘The prolongation of the working day beyond the limits of the natural day, into the night [...] quenches only in a slight degree the vampire thirst for the living blood of labour.’<sup>196</sup> [‘Udlinenie rabochago dnya za predeli estestvennago dnya do pozdnei nochi [...] utolyaet tol’ko otchasti zhazhdu vampira k zhivoi krovi truda.’<sup>197</sup>] More directly on this subject, Marx writes:

[T]he working day contains the full 24 hours, with the deduction of the few hours of repose without which labour power absolutely refuses its services again. Hence it is self-evident that the labourer is nothing else, his whole life through, than labour power [...] Time for education, for intellectual development, for the fulfilling of social functions and for social intercourse, for the free play of his bodily and mental activity [...] – moonshine! [...] Capital] usurps the time for growth, development, and healthy maintenance of the body. It steals the time required for the consumption of fresh air and sunlight. It higgles over a meal-time, incorporating it where possible with the process of production itself, so that food is given to the labourer as to a mere means of production, as coal is supplied to the boiler, grease and oil to the machinery.<sup>198</sup>

This final sentence, the notion of which Mayakovsky refers to in *My Discovery of America* as labourers being treated like ‘inexhaustible goods’ [‘neischerpaemim tovarom’<sup>199</sup>] follows similar comments from Marx on the subject of mealtimes being withheld or compromised to avoid a loss in profits in the workplace:

Losing profit is not a sufficient reason [...] to lose their dinner, nor for giving it to them as coal and water are applied to the steam engine, soap to wool, oil to the wheel – as merely auxiliary material to the instruments of labour during the process of production itself.<sup>200</sup>

With this evidence of Mayakovsky’s familiarisation with the capitalist structure of production – and his agreement with Marx’s opinions of this structure – in mind, the

<sup>194</sup> *Capital*, Chapter X Section 1 ‘The Limits of the Working Day’, p. 241.

<sup>195</sup> *Kanumal’*, p. 184.

<sup>196</sup> *Capital*, p. 263.

<sup>197</sup> *Kanumal’*, p. 208.

<sup>198</sup> *Capital*, Chapter X Section 5, pp. 270-271.

<sup>199</sup> *Америки*, p. 344.

<sup>200</sup> *Capital*, Chapter X Section 3, p. 255.



poet's significantly politically-focussed approach to writing is greatly illuminated. An example of this may be found in his autobiography *I, Myself*, which was written in 1922 – the year before, under Mayakovsky's editorship, the literary journal *Lef* came into being. Despite his nostalgic appreciation of Marx in *I, Myself*, it seems unlikely that, at the age of thirteen, the poet would have considered *Capital* the 'work of art'<sup>201</sup> he later describes (although either way it is interesting to note that Marx too held this opinion; in a letter to Engels dated July 31<sup>st</sup> 1865 he emphatically declares: 'the merit of my writings is that they are an artistic whole'<sup>202</sup>). Aside from this, Mayakovsky's view on the matter reflects far more on the development of his aesthetic theory in the context of art-as-production for which *Lef* was his primary vehicle. These writings show the start of Mayakovsky's trajectory towards those theories developed in 'Verses'. For example, in 'What is *Lef* Fighting For? (Manifesto)' it is stated that:

*Lef* will support our theories with active art, raising it to the highest working skill. [...] *Lef* will fight for the art construction of life. [...] We believe that: by the [...] strength of the things we make, we shall prove: we are on the correct road to the future.<sup>203</sup>

Further, in 'Whom is *Lef* Alerting? (Manifesto)', the instruction is given, '*Everyone together!* As you go from theory to practice remember your craftsmanship, your technical skill.'<sup>204</sup> This emphatic urging towards the value of 'active art as the highest working skill', of 'craftsmanship' and 'technical skill', stands in direct opposition to the 'destruction of human means of livelihood' that Mayakovsky knows is caused by the capitalist division of labour. This marks the first time we see these two separate strands: the discussion of poetry in terms of material reserves, as discussed in the 'Reserves' chapter of this Part; and the explicit adherence to Marxist political-economic views, above, coming together as a discussion of artistic creation, strongly contextualised as physical construction work, or labouring. By extension, in 'Verses', Mayakovsky does more than argue that artistic production should *resemble* or *be done in the manner of* material production. Instead, the former has simply taken on the appearance of the latter. Even the title of this essay – 'Kak Delat' Stixi', literally 'How to Make Verses', (as a narrower framing of the allusion to art as 'the things we make' in *Lef*) makes clear the poet's specific approach to writing, as distinct from those he dismisses in the essay, such

<sup>201</sup> Mayakovsky, trans. Herbert Marshall, p. 80.

<sup>202</sup> Karl Marx, *Selected Correspondence 1846-1895* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1943), p.204.

<sup>203</sup> *Lef* Vol. 1, trans. Richard Sherwood in *Screen* 12:4, (1971): p. 35.

<sup>204</sup> *Screen* 12:4, p. 36.



as ‘a little book called *How to be a Poet in Five Easy Lessons*’.<sup>205</sup> The unconventionality of this approach is recognised by George Hyde in his mis-translation of the title ‘Kak Delat’ Stixi’, from ‘How to Make Verses’ to ‘How Are Verses Made’. This was not done in error, but was rather an attempt to remove Mayakovsky from the communist context which the title implies, and instead towards one of Formalism. On his decision to alter the title, Hyde says, ‘I wanted to situate Mayakovsky firmly among the Formalists. At that moment in time it still seemed important to detach him from communist orthodoxy, for British readers.’<sup>206</sup> Following Stalin’s public statement in 1935 that ‘Mayakovsky is the best and most talented poet of our Soviet epoch[, i]ndifference to his memory and to his work is a crime’,<sup>207</sup> the loaded qualifier of ‘Communist Poet’ was flung over him at the expense of any official recognition of his avant-garde innovation or his direct criticism of the communist regime in the late twenties. The idea that by expressing indifference to a poet’s work one was committing ‘a crime’ was meant – and taken – very literally by Stalin, whose insistence at the plenum of the Central Committee in January 1933, that ‘revolutionary vigilance is the quality that Bolsheviks especially need at the present time [...] in order to scatter to the winds the last remnants of the dying classes’<sup>208</sup> was matched by an enormous increase in the numbers of people purged from the Communist party – as Robert Conquest notes in *The Great Terror: A Reassessment*, ‘[m]ore than 800,000 members were expelled during [that] year, and another 340,000 in 1934.’<sup>209</sup> With the first of the show trials taking place in 1936, Stalin’s endorsement of Mayakovsky publicly situated the poet at the centre of his ascent to terror. After the issue of his instruction, which Pasternak famously described as Mayakovsky’s ‘second death’,<sup>210</sup> statues of the poet, as well as metro stations and streets dedicated to his name sprung up in Moscow and St Petersburg, and new editions of his revolutionary and communist works emerged –

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<sup>205</sup> *Verses*, p.57.

<sup>206</sup> Recorded from conversations, 2012.

<sup>207</sup> From the *Literary Gazette*, December 9 and 20, 1935, quoted by Blake in *The Bedbug*, pp. 49-50.

<sup>208</sup> *The Results of the First Five-Year Plan Part VII: The Results of the Five-year Plan in Four Years in the Sphere of the Struggle Against the Remnants of the Hostile Classes*, Joint Plenum of the C.C. and C.C.C., C.P.S.U.(B.) (Jan 7-12, 1933), *Marxists Internet Archive*, accessed 13.05.2016.

<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1933/01/07.htm#VII>. In this report Stalin is speaking specifically about those who would seek to jeopardise the success of collective farming, but the sentiment translates directly into his general paranoia around bourgeois nationalists, counter-revolutionaries, capitalist encirclement and other perceived threats to his dictatorship.

<sup>209</sup> Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 26.

<sup>210</sup> Boris Pasternak, *An Essay in Autobiography*, 1959, quoted by Blake in her introduction to *Bedbug*, p. 50. Pasternak precedes this opinion with the acknowledgement that on account of Stalin’s public endorsement, Mayakovsky ‘began to be introduced forcibly, like potatoes under Catherine the Great’. These two statements by Stalin and Pasternak are discussed at length by Laura Shear Urbaszewski in her

though these were heavily censored to remove any critical aspects or “individualistic” poetry. His most patriotic poems, such as ‘My Red Passport’ were widely taught in schools, and for those not old enough to have remembered the multiplicity of Mayakovsky’s themes and artistic aims, his name simply became synonymous with propaganda-in-verse. The spread of this “repackaging” effect outside of Russia is made clear by Lytle Shaw, as he talks about Mayakovsky’s influence on Frank O’Hara. On this, he says, ‘little was known of Mayakovsky – and this because he was taken, when he was available at all, as an ideological dupe, a propagandist for the soviet state. [... He] suffered from caricature’.<sup>211</sup> On O’Hara’s poem ‘Mayakovsky’, he notes that ‘[Mayakovsky’s] work at the time was largely unavailable to American audiences because of his status as *the* national poet of Soviet Communism’, and discusses the potential dangers of this poetic ‘dialog’, which ‘incorporates Russian modernism (and later explicitly Soviet modernism) with O’Hara’s field of precedents at a time when such an association was politically risky’.<sup>212</sup> Thus, Hyde’s desire to change the title of Mayakovsky’s essay is not an attempt to undo or misrepresent Mayakovsky’s theories in ‘Verses’ (which are in any case self-evident in the body of the text itself) but to counter-balance the potentially negative response from English readers to what might appear to be outright “communist” work at a time when mistrust of, and opposition to communism was rife in the western world, and instead to draw attention to the innovative aesthetic concepts in Mayakovsky’s work. The altered title alludes to the classic Formalist essay by Boris Eikhenbaum, ‘How Gogol’s ‘Overcoat’ Was Made’.<sup>213</sup> Edward Brown gives no such similar explanation for his minimisation of Mayakovsky’s Marxist status in his own work on the poet, but as an American biographer writing in the seventies about a revolutionary Russian it is highly possible that an awareness of anti-communist sentiment was influential in his representation too. Of course this does not explain the de-Marxification in Jangfeldt’s far more recent biography of Mayakovsky, nor that of others who have written about and translated the poet in more recent years, a detailed account of which can be found in the closing chapter of Part 2 of this thesis.

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essay, ‘Canonizing the “Best, Most Talented” Soviet Poet: Vladimir Mayakovsky and the Soviet Literary Celebration’, *Modernism/modernity*, 9:4, November 2002, pp. 635-665.

<sup>211</sup> Lytle Shaw, ‘Combative Names: Mayakovsky and Pasternak in the American 1950s’, in *Frank O’Hara: The Poetics of Coterie* (Iowa City: Iowa Press, 2006), p. 116.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

<sup>213</sup> This essay from 1919, which is written in accordance with the principles of Formalism, refers to the short story, ‘The Overcoat’, by Nikolai Gogol.

Thus far then, it is clear that Mayakovsky not only understands and is in a position of agreement with Marx's views on the manner in which the process of production in capitalist societies is exploitative and damaging to the proletariat; he also, in *Lef*, proposes a way of making art which supports this view, insofar as it specifically highlights those skills which, in capitalist production, become lost or diminished. In fact there is an interesting inversion between the two strands of factory and artistic production on this front: it is in the *capitalist* factory setting that practical work skills are lost, and yet in the context of art the State-commissioned *communist* (Proletkult) practice is that in which potential skill is stunted and held back. There is a gap for Mayakovsky here, it seems, between "communist" writing" and "revolutionary" writing, in which the communist element is, in its own way, just as harmful as the capitalist element is for production in general. Perhaps this is why, in the same way that Mayakovsky's use of the term 'reserves' in the context of poetry aligns him on both the side of the proletariat *and* the capitalist, so, in 'Verses', does his description of poetic production reflect both the positively-valued labouring producer *and* that very process which, in *My Discovery of America*, the poet speaks so vehemently against. By naming the essay 'How to Make Verses', and explicitly setting it apart from conventional guides to writing poetry, Mayakovsky seems to create a parallel between the physical work of 'constructing' communism and the way in which he proposes the act of producing poetry to be carried out. The fact that he specifies 'verses' here, and not 'poetry', is significant; 'poetry' is a more ambiguous term which conjures associations with mystical experience and the expression of feeling. One of Mayakovsky's 'chief and enduring hatred[s]', he asserts at the start of 'Verses', 'falls on [those for whom] the only method of production is the inspired throwing back of the head while one waits for the heavenly soul of poetry to descend on one's bald patch in the form of a dove, a peacock or an ostrich.'<sup>214</sup> 'Verses', by comparison, are technical units which require labour and craft to construct, and Mayakovsky stresses the value of the skill and labour involved in writing such poems in a manner which echoes that in *Lef*, asserting that:

[t]he poet has no let-out. Either he stops writing, or he applies himself to poetry as to a job that needs a lot of work. [...] In the name of raising the qualifications of poets, in the name of the future blossoming of poetry, we must expunge the idea that such facile undertakings should stand apart from other aspects of human endeavour.<sup>215</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> *Verses*, pp. 42-43.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

However, the Marxist terminology used in Mayakovsky's descriptions of poetic reserves, as discussed in the previous chapter, appears more explicit still in the context of the practical business of the production of poetry, and this terminology of course relates, for Marx, not to communist but specifically to capitalist practice. It is important to note at this point that, as I discussed at the end of the previous chapter, the experience of factory life under communist rule was in some ways not significantly different from that under capitalism. With this in mind the question must be addressed of whether a specifically capitalist categorisation of Mayakovsky's account of writing is entirely fair. A subsequent question is what then – if not *this* – an account of 'communist' production might look like, and might not Mayakovsky's be just as much an account of communist production as it is of capitalism. For myself, I think it does in fact refer pointedly to the capitalist factory setting, and this is why: Mayakovsky outlines the way writing ought to be approached in two ways in 'Verses'. In one he manifestly describes how the literal production of writing ought to be undertaken in a communist context, as we saw earlier:

As I see it, fine poetical work would be written to the social command of the Comintern, taking for its objective the victory of the proletariat, making its points in a new vocabulary, striking and comprehensible to all, fashioned on a table that is N.O.T. equipment, and sent to the publisher by plane. I insist, 'by plane', since the engagement of poetry with contemporary life is one of the most important factors in our production.<sup>216</sup>

His second approach is the Marxist analogy. If, as it seems, this analogy has been set up consciously by Mayakovsky to indicate the closeness between poetry and political economy then the fact that the poet not only frequently invokes Marx's specific language but moreover quotes entire phrases in a way that cannot help but continually draw attention to the closeness he sees between his own subject matter and Marx's, then given that Marx's text is a study of capitalist production, it seems inescapable that this is not the parallel Mayakovsky seeks to make with his own production of poetry. This is not to say that Mayakovsky is not a communist writer. On the contrary it is his status as a Marxist poet, writing vehemently for the communist cause which makes this dynamic so interesting, as I will discuss in detail later on.

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<sup>216</sup> Ibid., pp. 49-50.

Marx asserts at the start of *Capital* that ‘in this work I have to examine the capitalist mode of production.’ Mayakovsky creates an explicit parallel with this aim in ‘Verses’, by stating clearly that ‘this article is concerned with an attempt to uncover the very process of poetic production.’<sup>217</sup> Of course, in Marx’s case, the mode of production in question is under critique, and is consistently described in terms of its socially unequal dynamic, of the bourgeoisie exploiting the proletariat. Mayakovsky’s process of poetic production, on the other hand, is not one that he is critiquing, but one that he is actively proposing as the way in which writing *should* be done – and yet, as with Mayakovsky’s notion of ‘reserves’, the processes described are remarkably similar to those of capitalist production. For example, both Marx and Mayakovsky speak of the need for continuity in production – Marx’s continuity referring to the production of commodities, and Mayakovsky’s to poetry. Mayakovsky, in explaining his own poetic ‘process of production’ [‘proizvodstvennogo protsyessa’<sup>218</sup>], says that the process [of preliminary poetic work] is continuous – ‘Predshestvuyushchaya poeticheskara rabota vedetsya *neprerivno*.’<sup>219</sup> Marx, in his chapter on simple reproduction, says similarly, ‘[w]hatever the form of the *process of production* in a society, it must be a *continuous process*’.<sup>220</sup> This translates as ‘Kakova by ni byla obshchestvennaya forma *protsesssa proizvodstva*, on dolzhen byt’ *nepreriven*’.<sup>221</sup> The exact use of these key terms is striking, particularly as Marx continuously uses them throughout *Capital*. For him, the process has to do with the capitalist social need to reproduce, by ‘constantly reconvert[ing] a part of its products into means of production, or elements of fresh products’, to replace ‘the means of production – i.e. [...] the raw material [...] by an equal quantity of the same kind of articles’.<sup>222</sup> (I will say more about this ‘constant reversion’ in the following chapter on circulation.) For Mayakovsky, that which is produced is poetry, but the ‘continuous process’ to which he refers is the process of producing reserves from which the product may be formed. Just as the capitalist requires a continuous supply of commodities in order to sell without interruption, so Mayakovsky requires a continuous supply of raw material language in order to ensure that, even at his self-confessed slow rate of writing, the flow of his poetic production will not be arrested. Marx’s description of the overwork of the industrial

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<sup>217</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>218</sup> *Как делать стихи* p. 13. Hyde translates this as the ‘process of poetic production’ in *Verses*, p. 52.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., p.13, my italics. This line is translated by Hyde as ‘Preliminary work goes on incessantly’ in *Verses*, p. 53, but a more direct translation is given by Triolet in *Maïakovski Poète Russe*: ‘The preparatory poetic work is done in a continuous manner’. p. 84, my translation.

<sup>220</sup> *Capital*, p. 565.

<sup>221</sup> *Кануналь*, my emphases, p. 493.

reserve army in high seasons of demand, who must labour continuously to ensure there is enough stock for such a time as high volumes of orders are received, is echoed in Mayakovsky's description of the way in which these language reserves are put to productive use:

Work begins long before one receives or is aware of a social command.  
[...] You can produce something good to order only when you've a  
large stock of preliminaries behind you.<sup>223</sup>

Mayakovsky's description in 'Verses' of the agonising experience of being unable to think of a necessary rhyme resonates strongly with his description in *My Discovery of America* of the overworking of factory workers, as well as with Marx's remarks on the effects of that overwork. In Mayakovsky's hyperbolic account, a parallel can again be seen with the reserve army in high season, although now it is Mayakovsky himself who is figured as the overworked labourer, 'decimated by toil', striving to finish the production of his commodity as soon as possible:

A rhyme that has been hooked but not yet landed can poison one's  
whole existence: you talk without knowing what you're saying, in a  
daze, you don't sleep, you can almost see that rhyme flying past your  
eyes.<sup>224</sup>

From this, as well as Mayakovsky's insistence that, for the writer, the necessary '[e]quipment for the plant and tools for the assembly line [include a] pen, a pencil [and] a typewriter' it appears that Mayakovsky is not simply 'playing the capitalist', he is embodying the whole process of social production – taking on the dual roles of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat in a microcosmic representation of class antagonism. I will say more about this dynamic following the section on circulation.

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<sup>222</sup> *Capital*, pp. 565-566.

<sup>223</sup> *Verses*, pp. 52-53.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

### III

#### Circulation

At the beginning of Chapter IV of *Capital*, ‘The General Formula for Capital’, Marx states that ‘[t]he circulation of commodities is the starting-point of capital.’<sup>225</sup> Indeed, the building and using of reserves, and the process of production itself, are useless to the capitalist if these finished products are not circulated and sold. It is to maintain this necessary circulation that ‘the process of production must be a continuous process’; likewise, it is in order that they will *at some future point* be circulated in the form of poems that Mayakovsky so vehemently guards his anecdotes, for circulation can only take place once a product is ready to sell. Marx’s descriptions of the function of circulation in creating capital are clear:

The production of commodities, their circulation, and that more developed form of their circulation called commerce, these form the historical ground-work from which [capitalism] rises. [...] If we abstract from the material substance of the circulation of commodities, that is, from the exchange of the various use values, and consider only the economic forms produced by this process of circulation, we find its final result to be money: this final product of the circulation of commodities is the first form in which capital appears.<sup>226</sup>

In these extracts, and all those which follow below, the German term for ‘circulation’ is consistently ‘Zirkulation’, or compounds of that word. For example, the phrase for ‘circulation of commodities’ is ‘Warenzirkulation’, a word which has as its counterpoint ‘Warenproduktion’, or ‘commodity production’; ‘circuit’ or ‘circulatory process’ is ‘Zirkulationsprozeß’; ‘the form of circulation’ is ‘Zirkulationsform’; and ‘phases of circulation’ is ‘Zirkulationsphasen’. The Russian word used throughout by Danielson et al is ‘obrashcheniya’.

Capital then is the product of the circulation of commodities. However, in order for this to be successful, the mode of circulation itself must be of a specific sort, as Marx explains:

The simplest form of the circulation of commodities is C-M-C, the transformation of commodities into money, and the change of the money back again into commodities; or selling in order to buy. But alongside this form we find another specifically different form: M-C-M, the transformation of money into commodities, and the change of

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<sup>225</sup> *Capital*, p. 157.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.



commodities back again into money; or buying in order to sell. Money that circulates in the latter manner is thereby transformed into, becomes capital, and is already potentially capital. [...] The simple circulation of commodities begins with a sale and ends with a purchase, while the circulation of money as capital begins with a purchase and ends with a sale. In the one case both the starting point and the goal are commodities, in the other they are money.<sup>227</sup>

Marx goes on to clarify the exact manner in which this transformation into capital occurs:

The result, in which the phases of the process vanish, is the exchange of money for money, M-M. If I purchase 2,000 lbs of cotton for £100, and resell the 2,000 lbs of cotton for £110, I have, in fact, exchanged £100 for £110, money for money. [...] This increment or excess over the original value I call "surplus value". The value originally advanced, therefore, not only remains intact while in circulation, but adds to itself a surplus value or expands itself. It is this movement that converts it into capital.<sup>228</sup>

In his description of the two different forms of circulation Marx exposes the root condition (and in that, the basis of social inequality) of that one which exists for capitalist accumulation, as opposed to the other which simply operates for survival – for example, in Marx's description, 'in the hands of the peasant who sells corn, and with the money thus set free buys clothes'.<sup>229</sup> This condition is one of initial monetary outlay: in order to become a capitalist one must first have an amount of money which stretches beyond the basic requirement for survival so as to make the initial purchase and set circulation in motion:

In the circulation C-M-C, the money is in the end converted into a commodity, that serves as a use value; it is spent once for all. In the inverted form, M-C-M, on the contrary, the buyer lays out money in order that, as a seller, he may recover money. By the purchase of his commodity he throws money into circulation, in order to withdraw it again by the sale of the same commodity. He lets the money go, but only with the sly intention of getting it back again. The money, therefore, is not spent, it is merely advanced.<sup>230</sup>

This initial requirement is certainly also true for Mayakovsky. This is made clear not only in his statements about the need for 'a large stock of preliminaries' before it is possible to 'produce something good to order', but also in his opinions of those who try to write *without* this stock, of whom he says:

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<sup>227</sup> Ibid., pp. 158-159.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid., pp. 158, 161.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid., p. 158.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid., p. 159.



This 'notebook' is one of the most important pre-conditions for the composition of the genuine article. [...] Inexperienced poets naturally lack this little book, since they lack practice and experience. Properly worked-out lines are few, and that's why their whole output is anaemic and tedious.

No beginner will, whatever his talents, write something fine straight off[.]<sup>231</sup>

However, for Mayakovsky the process is more complicated than it is for the capitalist. Although he adheres to the capitalist mode of circulation – that is, he “buys” the production of poetry using his store of reserve language in order to sell that poetry for a higher price than the initial language reserves themselves were worth – the final exchange, once we remove its ‘phases’, is not one of the same substance. Unlike the capitalist, who exchanges money for money, Mayakovsky does not exchange his raw language through the circulation of poetry simply for a greater quantity of raw language. His return is one of fame and cultural status on a personal level, and of social change and support for the working class more generally. Indeed, number one on Mayakovsky’s first ‘basic [and indispensable list of] proposition[s]’ for writing poetry is ‘[t]he presence of a problem in society [... a] social command’, while the way to tackle that problem is to ‘ensure that [one’s] words will act in such a way as to give maximum support to one’s class.’<sup>232</sup> Just as ‘the expansion of value takes place [...] within this constantly renewed movement [and t]he circulation of capital has therefore no limits’,<sup>233</sup> so, for Mayakovsky, there exists an ostensibly endless capacity for fame. Chantal Sundaram gives an idea of just how great this capacity was as she describes how ‘Mayakovsky’s funeral procession and burial in Moscow on April 17, 1930 was the largest demonstration of public mourning since the funeral of Lenin himself: over a hundred thousand people took part, without encouragement from the State.’<sup>234</sup> Just as, for the capitalist, each investment allows for profit which, if it is itself added to the standard investment amount in the following circuits, in turn yields more and more profit each time, so should Mayakovsky – in theory – each time he releases a new poem, achieve greater and greater status. The later poems, in addition to their own value (which is itself greater than the sum of their raw language parts), accrue all the additional value of those that came before them. Of

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<sup>231</sup> *Verses*, p. 55.

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 49,47.

<sup>233</sup> *Capital*, p. 163.

<sup>234</sup> Chantal Sundaram, *Manufacturing culture, the Soviet state and the Mayakovsky legend, 1930-1993* (Ottawa: National Library of Canada, 2001), p. 79.

course, despite the fame and popularity indicated by the scope of his funeral, in the case of Mayakovsky this trajectory was not so straightforward. Although the direction of his own work remained constant, the context in which he produced it certainly was not; the Soviet State itself, a key element in Mayakovsky's process of production – the figurehead of the very class for whose consumption his work was intended – underwent a significant transformation in character throughout the poet's career, from the explosive potential for expressive freedom at the time of the revolution, to the complete dissolution of all independent literary groupings in a move towards that 'party-minded' Socialist Realism that would come to dominate the arts absolutely during the thirties. Thus, although Mayakovsky himself continued to play the dual roles of communist agitator and creative innovator, the increasingly narrow conditions set out by the State – to which Mayakovsky largely refused to submit – resulted inevitably in a reduction in the value of his work. When that work responded to its devaluation with explicit criticisms of Soviet Bureaucracy and even of Stalin himself (as can be seen most explicitly in the 1930 play *The Bathhouse*), it was stripped of any value at all, and Mayakovsky was hounded aggressively by State critics until his death.

The trajectory of Mayakovsky's 'circulatory value', as we might think about it, can be traced through sales figures, financial support from the State and the censorship of his work throughout his career. For example, on the 1913-14 Futurist reading tours, Jangfeldt notes that '[s]ince the Futurist poets had difficulty finding publishers and were forced to bring out their books themselves, often in small editions of three to five hundred, there were few people outside of Petersburg and Moscow who had read them.'<sup>235</sup> Meanwhile, in 1915 Osip Brik funded the publication of 'A Cloud in Trousers' as Mayakovsky was still at that time relatively unknown except as a Futurist troublemaker:

The [first] edition ran to 1050 copies'. [...] But sales were sluggish – according to Mayakovsky, "because most consumers of poetry were unmarried women and ladies, who couldn't buy the book because of its title" – the erotic subtext of which was strengthened by the semantic ambiguity of the Russian word for "trousers," *shtany*, with its nuance of "underpants".<sup>236</sup>

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<sup>235</sup> Jangfeldt, *Mayakovsky*, p. 17.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

By 1921 Mayakovsky was being published by the State – although not always without controversy, as Herbert Marshall describes in his account of Lenin’s reaction to the revolutionary poem ‘150,000,000’ being published that year in an edition of 5,000:

On the 6<sup>th</sup> May 1921 during a meeting, Lenin sent Lunacharsky the following note:

You ought to be ashamed of yourself for voting for the publication of “150,000,000” in 5,000 copies. Nonsense, stupid, double-dyed stupidity and pretentiousness. I consider that one should only print one to ten copies of such things and certainly not more than 1,500 for the libraries and for fools. Lunacharsky should be whipped for his Futurism.  
[Signed] Lenin.

On the other side Lunacharsky replied to Lenin:

I wasn’t very keen on it myself but such a great poet as Bryusev went into ecstasies over it and said it should be printed in 20,000 copies. When the author himself declaimed it it had immediate success, particularly with workers.<sup>237</sup>

Despite Lenin’s objections, the fact that such a huge edition was printed – and on the basis of worker popularity at that – shows how steep was Mayakovsky’s rise to success in those years since the publication of ‘A Cloud’. In the mid-twenties the daily youth newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda* became the poet’s main – and permanent – place of publication. Its inaugural issue of 1925 came out in an edition of 31,000, and Mayakovsky was its chief literary contributor – in 1928 alone, 46 of his poems were published in the paper.<sup>238</sup> However, 1928 also marked a significant turning point in critical responses to the poet’s work and, by extension, to his creative freedom. In his fantastically fascinating biography of Mayakovsky, made entirely of collated documents from the poet’s contemporary sources, Wictor Woroszylski presents the devastating decline of Mayakovsky’s popularity in the last two years of his life. In late 1927, his poem ‘Very Good!’, written to celebrate the ten year anniversary of the revolution, received a scathing review which explicitly denounced that connection with physical labour that Mayakovsky had been so keen to promote in his work, essentially undermining the main purpose, as he saw it, of his poetry – its use as a weapon in the fight for communism:

For the tenth anniversary, the working people of the Soviet Union have offered the republic valuable gifts: power stations, factories, railways.

<sup>237</sup> Marshall, *Mayakovsky*, Introduction, p.31.

<sup>238</sup> For a fuller account of these publications see ‘What is Byt’ in Part 2 of this thesis.

Mayakovsky's poem is not one of these gifts.  
It is rather like gaudily painted jubilee triumphal gates and pavilions  
made of plywood and cardboard for the feast day.<sup>239</sup>

The Soviet literary historian Vasily Katanyan describes how the review was frequently reprinted by others keen to mock and criticise Mayakovsky – and was even reprinted the following year in *Na Postu (On Guard)*, the official fortnightly journal of the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP), under the new title 'A Reader's Statement About Mayakovsky's Poem 'Good!'''. As Katanyan notes, '[t]he original source was not even given! Just to denote that [...] this is not our judgement *but of the readers themselves!*'<sup>240</sup> The criticisms affected Mayakovsky profoundly, and 'Very Good!' was the last poem he ever fully completed, choosing to work instead on the satirical plays *The Bedbug* and *The Bathhouse*. A review of the former, printed on February 26<sup>th</sup> 1929 in *Izvestiya (News)*, the biggest State-run newspaper of that time, lists the play's defects, seemingly failing to notice that the very aspects it criticises are central to the play's satire – and, in doing so, inadvertently aligning itself with Mayakovsky's barbed victims:

Mayakovsky sets a praiseworthy goal for himself: to ridicule the bourgeois and philistine elements which also exist within the working class, and to help the struggle for a new morality, for a cultural revolution. Did he, however, draw the basic background – the life of the working classes in our time – on a sufficiently wide scale, in a sufficiently precise form? Did he, against this background, clearly present the characteristics of these bourgeois elements? To both questions one must, unfortunately, reply in the negative. [...] Mayakovsky's socialists are too easily infected with bourgeois germs. [...] Socialism, as a result, [...] turns out to be superficial.<sup>241</sup>

Another review, printed only one week earlier in the official paper of the Union of Textile Workers, suggests a very different reaction from the proletariat itself:

'The Voice of the Textile Workers' organised a collective performance of *The Bedbug* for the social activists of the 'Krasnaya Zarya' factory. All workers unanimously state that the play made a great impression on them. [...] Comrade Brayer says:] "If it is not pleasant to watch Prysipkin wallowing in his cage, it means that the performance has been effective. This play spits in the face of everybody who is like Prysipkin."<sup>242</sup>

<sup>239</sup> Wictor Woroszyński, *The Life of Mayakovsky*, trans. Boleslaw Taborski (New York: The Orion Press, 1971), p. 434. The review was printed in the daily newspaper *Sovetsky Yug (The Soviet South)*.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid., p. 435.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid., p. 444.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid., p. 445.

At the same time, annihilation of both Mayakovsky's poetry and his role in communism continued, with the literary bureaucrats of *Na Postu* again leading the way. In an explicit attempt to culturally bury the poet, an article from 1928 states, '[t]he new crisis Mayakovsky is going through marks the end of his historic role. [...] One parts from Mayakovsky not readily, but after a kind of inner struggle. After all, for many Mayakovsky was a "first love". *But one can arrive at the new understanding of revolution only by stepping across Mayakovsky.*'<sup>243</sup> The questionable notion of a 'new understanding of revolution' represents exactly the kind of Soviet doublespeak Mayakovsky so vehemently attacks in *The Bathhouse* – for example, when Pobedonosikov ('Nose for Victory', a character who, as Guy Daniels puts it, was all 'too evidently based on the reigning dictator'<sup>244</sup>) decides that amongst all the 'Looeys' style chairs available the ones he wants are the 'Looeys the Fourteenth', he nevertheless specifies that:

naturally, in accordance with the order on cost-reduction issued by the Workers' and Peasants' Inspection, I must suggest that you proceed with all possible speed to straighten out the legs of the chairs and sofas, remove the gilt, paint them over so they look like fumed oak, and put on a few Soviet national emblems here and there – on the backs of the chairs and in other prominent places.

To this request his sycophantic portraiteer Belvedonsky responds:

Exquisite! There were more than fifteen Looeys, and none of them could think up anything like that! But you did it right away, in the Bolshevik style – in the Revolutionary style! Comrade, allow me to continue with your portrait and immortalize you as an executive of the innovator type – and also as a distributor of loans.<sup>245</sup>

Later that same year *Na Postu* literally 'warn[s its] readers [...] against light-hearted hopes that Mayakovsky has straightened himself out and his line', stating that the reality is '[n]othing like it', and offering this menacing advice to other poets:

We welcome with joy any real renunciation of errors. *We are ready to help in any way* all those who are searching for the proper path. But the expression of our help is a decisive line, a watchful look, a strong will.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid., p. 448. The 'crisis' in question is the breakdown of Mayakovsky's literary journal *Lef*.

<sup>244</sup> Guy Daniels, *Complete Plays of Vladimir Mayakovsky* (Evanston: Washington Square Press, 1968). Introduction, p. 15.

<sup>245</sup> Daniels, *Plays. The Bathhouse* Act II, pp. 218-219.

[...] We are ready to help you even through revealing the social sense of your failure.<sup>246</sup>

Articles such as these increased in frequency and scope right up until the end of Mayakovsky's life, the relentlessness of which explains his decision finally to give in and join RAPP – whose members were both the very same people denouncing him and Mayakovsky's main targets in *The Bathhouse*. In spite of this humiliating U-turn, made in order to prove once and for all that he truly was a “real” communist poet, the State press effected a total boycott of Mayakovsky's Twenty Years of Work exhibition in March 1930. This refusal to ‘purchase’ or circulate Mayakovsky's poetic product effectively shut down the potential for any gain, and by extension for any further production whatsoever. Shortly afterwards Mayakovsky killed himself. In this light, Sundaram's qualification that the enormity of the poet's funeral procession took place ‘without encouragement from the State’ is significant; by this time the State had completely deserted him, a fact reflected in its control over publication of Mayakovsky's works following his death:

Aside from the 10-volume edition of Mayakovsky's works which had already been initiated during his lifetime, in 1928, and which continued to appear in a slow and dragged-out fashion until 1933, with the last two volumes appearing more than a year apart – and all in editions of only 3,000 – only three other volumes appeared between 1930 and 1933. In contrast, eleven volumes of his work had appeared in 1930 alone. Moreover, the new publications between 1930 and 1933 were printed in small editions of 5,200 and sold at a very expensive price. The Briks, Katanian and some of Mayakovsky's other former colleagues had to engage in a battle to have cheap mass editions published. The small inexpensive volume published by Gosizdat in a edition of 100,000 contained an enormous number of typographical errors, and yet Gosizdat protested any attempts at cheap publications “on the side”. [...]

A few individual works did appear as separate editions, but only two in significant print runs, and for very specific reasons. *At the Top of My Voice* appeared in 15,000 copies over two editions, but these were in 1930 and 1931, during the aftershock of the suicide: it was the poet's final work, and given the emphasis placed on it in official commentary about his death it was no doubt seen as a work that could serve as a denial of political conjecture about his suicide motives. [...]

The poema [sic] *V. I. Lenin* appeared in largest numbers: it was printed three times in 1934-35 with a total print run of 70,000 copies. At this time there were still relatively few large poetic works of quality devoted to Lenin, and Mayakovsky's had the advantage of being one of the few such works written shortly after Lenin's death, during the period of widespread mourning.<sup>247</sup>

<sup>246</sup> Woroszyński, *The Life*, p. 452.

<sup>247</sup> Sundaram, *Manufacturing Culture*, pp. 114-115.

Going on the basis of Mayakovsky's own analogy between production of poetry and the capitalist model of production, this creates an interesting dynamic whereby, just as in the cases of actual factories following the revolution, production was taken over from individual factory owners and placed in the collective hands of the State for communist gain, so was the product of Mayakovsky's 'factory' taken over for communist purposes – while the poet himself was deposed. Certain product lines were removed from circulation; others repackaged and mass-produced. That the implications of this coup in relation to Mayakovsky feel very negative and dictatorial compared to the victorious sense of reclamation in the Bolsheviks' 1917 industrial takeover is a sign of the great ideological gap which had developed in the Communist party between these two points in time.

The trajectory of Mayakovsky's cultural value in *his own* country has its counterpart in the general oscillations in value felt by the poet towards his work during his travels elsewhere, but in this latter case the 'circulation' in question does not denote actual numbers of books produced but, for Mayakovsky, something more literal – the obstruction of the immediate circulation of 'materials' (be they conversation, readings or anything else) in the face of international language barriers – and what happens to the process of circulation and notions of value when this occurs. In my earlier section on 'About This', I suggested that Mayakovsky's letters to Lili Brik may be seen not merely as a stock of reserves in themselves but rather as another, smaller sort of linguistic investment; similar to that involved in the production of a poem for public consumption but necessarily with a much-decreased and more risky rate of return. Such variability can also be seen with regard to the poet's perception of circulation, in particular his concern about the premature circulation of reserves in relation to the point at which those reserves represent the highest value. Whereas premature circulation is always a bad thing, and its avoidance therefore a pre-condition of capitalist production, the timing of a product's release (and therefore the amount of time before it may be circulated without being considered 'premature') is variable. For example, in his short journal entry *How I Made Her Laugh*, also from 1926, the poet speaks again of the importance of building up language reserves, and of his despair at not having 'the right ones' at his disposal – although this time there is a distinct shift in the intended delivery of those reserves, which are not aimed at producing poetry, but witty conversation. The piece describes Mayakovsky's return to Russia following his trip to America in 1925, during which he

had become increasingly frustrated by his inability to communicate, speaking, as he did, only Russian and Georgian. On this frustration he says:

[p]robably foreigners have some respect for me, but it's also possible they consider me an idiot [... T]hey've invited over a poet – so they've been told, a genius. [...] So I turn up, and straight away I say:

'Gif mi pliz sem tee!' [...]

I wait a while – and once more [...]

And I do it again and again, in different tones of voice and varying my expression [...]

Alert, deferential old men listen, admire and think: 'Oh, that's the Russian for you, he won't say more than he has to. A thinker... Tolstoy... The North.' [...]

It won't enter an American's head [...] that I don't have a word of English, that my tongue is jumping up and down and twisting like a corkscrew from the urge to speak, that, hoisting my tongue like a hoopla ring, I am desperately trying to string together in a comprehensible manner the various requisite vowels and consonants [...] convulsively giving birth to wild supra-English phrases:

'Yess, oowite pliz fife dobbble arm strong...' <sup>248</sup>

Even when he asks his English speaking friend and former fellow-Futurist David Burliuk to defend his tongue-tied idiocy by translating on his behalf that 'if they only knew Russian, I could, without as much as a blemish on their dicky shirt, nail them with my tongue to the crosses of their own braces, I could twirl the whole verminous collection of them round the skewer of my tongue...', the latter merely repeats Mayakovsky's sole English phrase: 'My great friend Vladimir Vladimirovich would like another cup of tea.'<sup>249</sup> Thus, on his journey back home the poet is itching for conversation; '[i]n a state of high oratorical tension' he 'rush[es] off everywhere where there's even the slightest hope of speaking.' On finally arriving at a Russian hotel towards the end of his journey home and thinking forward to the evening's potential conversation, he writes, '[w]ords and phrases had already accumulated [skopilis] over the day, and I had already chewed over them in such a way that any speakers of the infinite Russian language could not help but – indeed they absolutely must – laugh. [...] On the first person I meet, I told myself [...], on the very first person, I'll try out the hilarious power of words.'<sup>250</sup> Eventually finding a partner for this conversation, in a young female worker at the hotel, he 'draw[s] her into conversation by resorting to crockery talk', declaring, 'I want some tea'. On this occasion, the accumulation and organisation of language for maximum effect was unsuccessful; after several exchanges of increasing irritation on the part of the woman,

<sup>248</sup> *My Discovery of America*, trans. Neil Cornwell, p. 109.

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.



she snaps at the poet and storms off, slamming the door behind her. Regardless of its failure however, this instance not only provides further evidence of the poet's obsessiveness in his attitude to storing up reserves of language for that moment when they are (to his mind) of highest value, but also makes clear that the point of this ultimate value is not fixed – that there are, as it were, foreign markets or cultures of production in which his work has no value. He considers his cloud-in-trousers comment to the girl on the train from Saratov as squandered because it constitutes the raw material – the first instance of the phrase's imagining – ill-placed in the wooing of a woman compared to its potential value in poetry. Similarly, on the journey home mentioned above, from *How I Made Her Laugh*, on noticing that nobody in those carriages adjoining his own speaks his language, since they are all either Japanese or French, Mayakovsky writes, 'for the orator, the cross-border train is a bad investment.'<sup>251</sup> By comparison, at the hotel, although – as in the case with the girl from Saratov – Mayakovsky is speaking conversationally and with just one individual, the fact that he has by this point spent a long time being able to converse with nobody, has 'chewed over' his raw material and perfected his example of 'the hilarious power of words', means that in this instance the hotel worker represents the highest value economic exchange of language possible. Mayakovsky's constant consideration of the need for his language to be *at its most valuable* in this way explains the enormity of the impact felt by him when that value was arbitrarily removed in the last few years of his life. All writers want to feel that their work has a value of some sort, but the fact that Mayakovsky, a writer of thousands of poems, literally never completed another poem after the bullying he endured for 'Very Good!', that he asked of Katanyan at the time, 'perhaps the poem is really good for nothing?'<sup>252</sup>, indicates the extent to which, for Mayakovsky that value was not determined by his own individual sense of what was and was not successful, but was externally fixed, by the inconstant measure of the political party for whose aims he vehemently volunteered his support.

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<sup>251</sup> Ibid., p. 111.

<sup>252</sup> Woroszyński, *The Life*, p. 435.

## Final Thoughts

Throughout the texts by Mayakovsky under discussion in this chapter there exist clear and frequent parallels with the language and critique of Marx in *Capital*. The notion that these parallels are made by Mayakovsky deliberately is supported not only by records of explicit discussion of Marxist ideas by the poet himself, but also by numerous accounts of his familiarity with Marx given by his contemporaries. This leads to certain questions: why Mayakovsky might choose to explain the process of writing in this way; and how we, the readers of his work, might consider it differently as a result. Trotsky, in *Literature and Revolution*, describes what he calls the act of ‘Mayako-morphism’ in Mayakovsky’s work. That is, he explains:

[the poet] fills the squares, the streets and fields of the Revolution with his own personality. [...] At every step [he] speaks about himself, now in the first person, and now in the third, now individually, and now dissolving himself in mankind. When he wants to elevate man he makes him be Mayakovsky.<sup>253</sup>

This view, that the primary driving force in the poet’s work is his own ego, is similar to that of Brown, quoted earlier, when he suggests that ‘Mayakovsky found the propagation of [Marxist] ideas a perfect method of self-expression on a grand scale.’ One interpretation then might be that it was merely Mayakovsky’s fantasising ego which was drawn to the sense of power and control implied by this capitalistic approach to writing poetry. And yet, regardless of the extent to which Mayakovsky the individual might be present in his works, it seems that those works were worthless to him so soon as they were deemed incapable of existing as a useful part of the communist struggle as a whole. Nevertheless, by creating the analogy he does, Mayakovsky undeniably ‘dissolves himself’ into every aspect of the production of poetry while at the same time explicitly seeking to elevate it to the greater social status of political economy via Marxist theory, in which sense Trotsky is right in what he says – although the same cannot be said of Brown, who conflates Mayakovsky’s creative egocentricity with political immaturity. Much has been written on the contradiction of the poet’s inescapable individualism on the one hand, and his commitment to communism on the other. Victor Erlich, for example, is of the opinion that, ‘[Mayakovsky’s] radicalism was that of a bohemian rather than of a

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<sup>253</sup> Leon Trotsky, ‘Futurism’, *Literature and Revolution*, ed. William Keach, trans. Rose Strunsky (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005), p. 129.

doctrinaire Marxist.[... T]he image of the lone rebel is more akin to Francois Villon or Verlaine than it is to either Marx or Lenin',<sup>254</sup> whilst the Russian *Literary Gazette*, following the poet's suicide, stated that:

[t]he death of Mayakovsky showed how great was still his inner contradiction, how strong in him were still the petty bourgeois individualistic forces which he had wished to strangle by attacking the throat of his own song.<sup>255</sup>

This strangling is of course a reference to Mayakovsky's own admission in the 1930 poem 'At the Top of My Voice' that:

I'd rather  
     compose  
     romances for you –  
 more profit in it  
     and more charm  
 But I  
     subdued  
     myself,  
     setting my heel  
 on the throat  
     of my own song.<sup>256</sup>

And yet – in what might seem initially to be a contradiction (or more effective suppression perhaps) of this longing for 'romances', Gleb Struve recounts the poet's exasperated statement that 'I do not give a hoot about being a poet. I am not a poet, but first of all a man who put his pen at the service [...] of [...] the Soviet government and the Party.'<sup>257</sup> In fact, far from being contradictory, the two statements work together to describe Mayakovsky's aims in writing poetry (elsewhere in 'At the Top of My Voice' the poet describes himself as having been 'mobilised and drafted [...] from the aristocratic gardens of poetry' into the role of 'a latrine cleaner and water carrier'<sup>258</sup>). Both allude to the comparison between the aesthetically-focussed lyricism of his youth and that which he sees as the main purpose of poetry – the labour of the pen at the service of one's people.

<sup>254</sup> Victor Erlich, 'The Dead Hand of the Future: The Predicament of Vladimir Mayakovsky', in *Slavic Review* 21:3, (Sept 1962): p. 433.

<sup>255</sup> Michael Holquist, 'The Mayakovsky Problem', in *Yale French Studies* 39 (1967): p. 132.

<sup>256</sup> 'At the Top of My Voice', trans. George Reavey, in *Volodya*, pp. 210-211.

<sup>257</sup> Gleb Struve, quoted in Erlich, 'The Dead Hand of the Future', p. 437.

<sup>258</sup> *Volodya*, p. 209.

An interesting question is raised in the light of Mayakovsky's discussion of poetry in these terms, about whether he really does believe that such work is essentially the same as factory work – as a kind of intellectual manual labour – or whether he is equating their value theoretically, as political equivalents, in order to elevate poetry up among the forms of 'necessary labour'. If the former, one might argue that just as the charge of incomprehensibility to the masses was levelled at him as a way of undermining his stated communist aims, so might his own identification as the heroic proletarian – toiling night and day at his labour – may constitute something more insultingly patronising, a yearning for working class inclusion born of bourgeois privilege, than it would engender a sense of identification with actual factory workers. Mayakovsky certainly plays on this closeness; outside of 'Verses' he alludes to it too. For example, Lev Kassil's description of one of Mayakovsky's poetry readings recounts that:

Mayakovsky is warm. He takes off his jacket, and folds it accurately.  
Puts it on the table. Hitches up his trousers.  
"I'm at work here. I'm hot. Have I the right to improve my conditions of  
work? Undoubtedly."<sup>259</sup>

However, despite frequently creating this analogy between writing poetry and manual labour, Mayakovsky does nevertheless recognise the limits of their potential similarities. In his final lecture, given in Moscow in 1930, he insists that writing about production absolutely does not mean inserting oneself arbitrarily into a factory setting and recording one's impressions afterwards:

It's been often said that an author must go and study production. But it does not mean that some fellow, having bought a sixpenny note-book, goes to the factory, gets into everybody's way, gets into a mess amongst machinery and then writes all sorts of rubbish in the newspapers. Then the factory organizations start swearing about misinformed writing of factory life.<sup>260</sup>

Rather, he explains, one must find a way to be *a part* of that everyday production in a useful way. For Mayakovsky, this way is to put his poetry to work *in* the workplace, rather than, as above, simply to look at that workplace and write about it afterwards:

I believe that you have got actually to work in production, but if that is not possible at least to take part in all the everyday occurrences of the working class. I understand this work about the importance of obeying

<sup>259</sup> Trans. Herbert Marshall, in *Volodya*, p. 304.

<sup>260</sup> 'Address at the Krasnaya Presnya Komsomol Club', trans. Herbert Marshall and Dorian Rottenberg, in *Volodya*, p. 272.

the slogans about safety, those that tell you not to put your hands into machinery, the greatest care about electric currents endangering the life of the workmen, care that nails should not be left lying on staircases, not to touch engineering belts, etc.

This appeals to my pen and my rhymes and I consider it's more important than the most inspired themes of the long-haired lyricists. Why must I write about the love of Jack and Jill but not consider myself as a part of this state that is building a new life? The main object of this exhibition is to show you that a poet is not one who goes about like a curly lamb bleating on love themes, but one who in our sharp class battle gives his pen up to the arsenal of the proletariat and does not scorn any dirty and hard work, any theme about the Revolution, or about building a people's management of agriculture, and writes propaganda verse on any of these themes.<sup>261</sup>

In this practical sense it is much easier to see what Mayakovsky means when he speaks of the role of literature as being something intertwined with and central to the physical construction of communism, just as we may consider poetry to be central to physical health if that poetry comes in the form of an easily comprehensible rhymed cartoon strip on minimising the risk of cholera for the barely-literate working class during a cholera epidemic, such as Mayakovsky produced in 1921:



<sup>261</sup> Ibid., p. 272.

The rhyming captions read:

1. Cholera's transmitted by filth and raw materials
2. Take action – conquer and kill the bacteria
3. In order not to die from cholera
4. Heed my course of action and follow it
5. Don't drink raw water – remember, it's soiled
6. Water should only be drunk when it's boiled
7. Likewise, never buy street-sold kvass
8. For some, boiling water's too much of a task
9. In order to get their kvass prepared early
10. They just use their taps, but tap water's dirty!
11. Never eat fruit and vegetables raw
12. Place under a jug of boiled water, and pour.
13. If flies are buzzing around like crazy
14. Cover your food to protect from contagion<sup>262</sup>

This part of the thesis is not concerned with the question of whether Mayakovsky was or was not a dedicated communist in his writing – as far as I am concerned that much may be assumed. However it is certainly interesting that the tension in this 'contradiction' in his poetic writing is mirrored by that in his *theory* of writing. In 'Verses', those torn loyalties between individualism and communism are replaced by the pull between capitalist and proletarian identification, the key difference being that Mayakovsky displays nothing in the way of that remorse or internal conflict which is made explicit in some of his poetry itself, and by the critics of his poetry in general.

To understand this approach as the playing out of some kind of ego-driven social fantasy though, implies a lack of self-awareness in the poet's theory in 'Verses', in that his inherently capitalist model of poetry production appears to run counter to the stated aims of his poetry as described in this essay, those being to further the cause of one's class, i.e. the proletariat, and this does not seem plausible. If, as seems to be the case, Mayakovsky was familiar with the language and politico-economic concepts in *Capital*, then it seems far more likely that this language, and his self-positioning within that language, was adopted deliberately. Another possible theory on his motives for doing so then is that it was perhaps intended as a subtle joke at the expense of those very critics who attacked the "bourgeois individualism" of his communist identification, or as a defence of the seriousness with which he took the writing of poetry, in the face of State-sponsored "true" proletarian writing such as that produced by the various groups and publications

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<sup>262</sup> 'What to do in order not to die from cholera?', trans. Rosy Carrick, in *Volodya*, p. 71.

Proletkult, *The Smithy*, *October*, *Na Postu*, VAPP and, the organisation which Mayakovsky would eventually join, RAPP. In *Lef*, Mayakovsky describes the proponents of this form of Prolet-art as having ‘degenerated into trite writers, wearying you with their bureaucratic language and repetition of their political ABC’,<sup>263</sup> a view which stands in stark contrast to the ‘skill and workmanship’ that he considers central to the creation of good art. At the same time, the judgement that Mayakovsky failed to become a “true” proletarian poet himself has been made by some on the grounds that his own poetry is simply too good to exist in that context. Pasternak, for example, states that ‘[t]here will hardly be found another example in history when a man who was so far advanced in a new proficiency would renounce it so fully’,<sup>264</sup> while Max Eastman describes ‘the obvious fact’ that ‘Mayakovsky failed as a leader of the proletarian culture because he was a momentous poet, and momentous poets are not institutions for cherishing other people’s poetry’.<sup>265</sup> It is interesting that in Eastman’s view, the ‘momentous’ proficiency of Mayakovsky’s poetry was the thing that *prevented* him from ever being able to be a true leader of proletarian culture – a perspective that not only implies a separation between the production of Mayakovsky’s own poetry on the one hand and on the other his status as a key, and therefore – in a literal sense – ‘leading’ figure in proletarian culture, but also that the two were thoroughly incompatible, when in fact Mayakovsky made a significant and explicit move away from his more innovative personal style, writing hundreds of poems and captions of simply-written manifestly communist content. Indeed, it is this very move to which Pasternak is referring; for him, Mayakovsky’s dogged efforts to maintain his position at the forefront of proletarian culture was the very thing that, in necessarily precluding his artistic ‘proficiency’, ultimately destroyed it.

With this in mind, it is significant that Mayakovsky would argue for a method of writing poetry which not only openly exposes that conflict in himself, and in a way which provocatively figures him as controlling and organising the proletariat, as it were, under his capitalist discipline, but which *at the same time* figures him as the hard-working proletarian ceaselessly working under his own bourgeois conditions. This suggests not only the acknowledgement that, for Mayakovsky, successful writing requires not the smothering of the individual by the collective, but a blending of the two – it also, by

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<sup>263</sup> ‘What is *Lef* Fighting For? (Manifesto)’, p. 34.

<sup>264</sup> Boris Pasternak, quoted in Holquist, ‘The Mayakovsky Problem’, p. 131.

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.



extension, suggests a conscious retaliation against bureaucratic control over the arts. In the latter case, an additional barb is attached when one considers that the similarities between *Capital* and 'Verses' could only be identified by those with a good knowledge of Marx's work; the fact therefore that they were *not* identified by his contemporaries may perhaps be seen as a subterfugal victory by Mayakovsky against state control and the rehearsed complaints of his critics, for whom good poetry was secondary to good communist poetry. After all, in the years following the revolution, Mayakovsky's cultural value was tied directly to his appearance of identification with the Soviet State, and such an allegiance was impossible to maintain – not because Mayakovsky did not strive exhaustingly to maintain it but because the conditions by which he must prove his allegiance were made increasingly impossible; the game changed around him. In his early career it was threatened by his so-called 'individualistic' writings, which were less manifestly about the immediate experience of communist life than they were aesthetically and thematically avant-garde and personal, and, at the end of his career, by the unworkable politically-motivated artistic constraints placed upon him by the cultural regime under Stalin – and this latter threat could not be overcome. Indeed, it escalated in part from the dizzying height of Mayakovsky's own success – the enormous value of his productions. As Guy Daniels writes of the poet's final works:

The poet who wrote *The Bedbug* and *The Bathhouse* showed with amazing clarity that he despaired of the Soviet system, its artificialities, its remoteness from life, and its terrible dogmas. As his legend grew, he became more powerful, more heretical, and more dangerous to the Soviet State, which had embraced him and could not let him go. The Soviet officials realised too late that they had canonised a heretic.<sup>266</sup>

If cultural retaliation did play a part in the Marxist analogy of writing used by Mayakovsky in 'Verses', then, given his ultimate refusal to submit himself to the ever-shifting regulations of artistic production, it is perhaps not surprising to see that the poet revisits the analogy of economy in the four lines of poetry with which he closed his suicide note:

As they say, the incident is cloved.  
The love boat, crashed against *byt*.  
Life and I are quits, so why bother to list  
mutual sorrows, pains, grievances.<sup>267</sup>

<sup>266</sup> Daniels, *Plays*, Introduction, pp. 17-18.

<sup>267</sup> My translation.



The colloquial phrase ‘to be quits[with]’, is ‘*raschetye*’ in the Russian. This word, from ‘*raschyot*’, means variously calculation, accounts, settlement, or payment transaction. Its meaning is usually financial and in this instance means, ‘we have settled our accounts’. The rendering of this final sentiment into economic terms seems to mark a very different perspective from that given in ‘Verses’, in which Mayakovsky’s main ‘accounting’ concern was an insistent fear of squandering reserves – of not having enough material at his disposal for the creation of new poetry. Here, by comparison, he admits defeat altogether, and that defeat describes not merely his poetry but *himself*. The notion of ‘life and I [having] settled our accounts’ implies that he, Mayakovsky, the producer of poetry for the purpose of new Communist life, has now been stripped of all value and rendered obsolete. His reason for storing reserves before had been to make a profit on them at a later time. The implication in these lines, by contrast, is that there is no longer any scope for ‘profit-making’; that, whatever the method, his poetry has no further use for the class he wants to support. The pun in the first of these four lines of poetry – ‘[a]s they say, the incident is cloved’ – also points towards Mayakovsky’s cultural and literal demise. In Russian it is a play on the common phrase *intsident ischerpan*, meaning ‘the case is closed’. In Mayakovsky’s version *ischerpan* (closed) is replaced with the very similar sounding *isperchen*, meaning ‘too heavily peppered’ [and therefore ruined]. This altered line points towards the hostility Mayakovsky faced at that time from the State literary bureaucrats – a situation that for him had become ‘too hot to handle’, while the line’s allusion to cliché phraseology, emphasised at the start with ‘as they say’, suggests the inevitability of his ruin. A rhyme is created by Mayakovsky at the end of the third line with ‘*perechen*’, which I, for the purpose of maintaining some of the assonance of the original, have translated as ‘list’ but which, extending the economic analogy, equally translates as ‘to balance’ or ‘to enumerate’.

There is no way to know definitively the motives behind Mayakovsky’s vigorously political-economic approach to writing poetry. Regardless of the reasons however, what emerges from a detailed study of that approach is not a portrait of a poet whose ‘understanding of Marx was elementary’, someone who was ‘no more a Marxist than a Christian’, someone for whom Marxism was merely ‘a way out of his personal dilemma’. Rather, Mayakovsky seems likely to have had an intimate understanding of Marxist principles, theory and practice. He is a poet who *wants* and *encourages* us to read his

work as the product of labour in the context of a Marxist framework and who represents this labour not simply by describing it, but by embodying the whole system himself and encouraging other writers to do the same. In this light, although it is interesting to speculate on why Mayakovsky might have used this approach, more significant consideration should perhaps be given to the question of why, in the face of such evidence, his status as a Marxist poet has been so uniformly misrepresented in western criticism since the time of his death, and how we might now begin to give that status the attention it deserves. It seems that just as, in Soviet Russia, Mayakovsky fell into the ideological gap that developed between revolutionary art and “proletarian” art, a duality of cultural domains which ostensibly worked towards similar ends but which, in the face of growing paranoia under Stalin became wholly incompatible, so, in the west, the distinction between the two has worked against him. Attempts to rescue him from potential Stalinist identification have largely involved, as we have seen, a westernising emphasis on Mayakovsky’s individuality and rebellious nature. When Victor Erlich, for example, suggests that ‘the image of the lone rebel is more akin to Francois Villon or Verlaine than it is to either Marx or Lenin’ he may be right – but nevertheless the description does not apply to Mayakovsky because Mayakovsky was no ‘lone rebel’ – he was a poet who situated himself at the very centre of the revolution, of the Russian people and of the myriad possibilities in early Soviet Russia for a new communist way of life. The fact that his own character and the endurance of his communist convictions – that is, *communist* as distinct from *Stalinist* – are strikingly discernible in his work should no more be seen as a sign of his ‘personal’, or ‘individual’ rebellion against Marxism for western critics than they ought to have been considered symptoms of ‘bourgeois individualism’ by the Russian critics of his own lifetime.

The name given to this ‘new communist way of life’ – or indeed any way of life – is *byt*, and it is that concept that the next part of my thesis will address. Mayakovsky’s (lack of) status as a Marxist poet and his attitudes towards *byt* are so closely linked in western representation that it is impossible to discuss one without the other. With this in mind I will close this discussion here in order to revive and discuss these closing comments with greater scope at the end of Part 2.

**Part 2**

**Mayakovsky And *Byt***

## Introduction

Communism  
                                   does not merely exist  
 on the ground,  
                                   in the sweat of the factories.  
 It is at home  
                                   at the table,  
 in family,  
                                   in our relationships:  
   it is in *byt*.<sup>268</sup>

In this excerpt from his 1925 poem ‘Drag Forth the Future!’, translated here by me for the first time into English, Mayakovsky makes explicitly clear that, for him, communism is inseparable from all aspects of daily life. In the same poem, he further insists that ‘[w]e need to grab [communism], head to toe – [...] take aim – and let’s go at it, even if only at the minuscule stuff.’

Edward Brown, in 1963, wrote that ‘*[b]yt*, which means ingrained habit, social custom, hallowed prejudice, routine and regularity, the established pattern of life, was [Mayakovsky’s] personal enemy’.<sup>269</sup> Victor Terras, in 1983, wrote that ‘*Byt*, the eternal routine of everyday living, was hateful to Mayakovsky’.<sup>270</sup> As recently as 2015, Bengt Jangfeldt wrote that ‘*byt*, that is, daily life with its routine and its insipidity [...] had always been Mayakovsky’s existential enemy’.<sup>271</sup> These are three of many similar accounts, all of which stem from a highly influential and, in its discussion of *byt*, significantly mistranslated essay published by Roman Jakobson in 1931: ‘On a Generation That Squandered Its Poets’.<sup>272</sup> Since his death and up until the present day, Mayakovsky’s western critics and biographers have insisted that he hated every aspect of domestic existence. In fact, Mayakovsky believed passionately in the active creation of a new domestic life. They have insisted that he hated the idea of family, children and even

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<sup>268</sup> ‘Drag Forth the Future!’ (‘Выволакивайте будущее!’), *Полное собрание сочинений Том 6*, p. 129, ll. 16-24. My translation.

<sup>269</sup> Brown, *Russian Literature*, pp. 21-22.

<sup>270</sup> Terras, *Vladimir Mayakovsky*, p. 139.

<sup>271</sup> Jangfeldt, *Mayakovsky*, pp. 259-260.

<sup>272</sup> Roman Jakobson, *Language in Literature*, trans. Edward Brown (Cambridge Mass and London: Harvard University Press, 1987). The claims made by Jakobson in this essay have issues of their own besides their mistranslation by E. Brown, which are discussed later.

biological production itself. In fact, Mayakovsky was very close to his own family and those of his friends, including David Burliuk – with whose children, by their own testimony, Mayakovsky had a friendly and loving relationship. Shortly before his death the poet had been engaged to be married. He also had a daughter of his own, about whom, in 1928, he confided in despair to his old friend Sonya Shamardina:

I've never thought it possible to long for a child so much. The girl is three years old already. She has rachitis. And I cannot help in any way. [...] I can not do anything to prevent it. I'm not considered to be her father.<sup>273</sup>

About this child Mayakovsky's last partner Veronika Polonskaya recalls him saying privately to her in 1930 that at least 'in her, I have a future'.<sup>274</sup> Between 1925 and 1928 Mayakovsky published thirteen poems for children – some of considerable length – which Elsa Triolet describes as becoming 'extremely popular'.<sup>275</sup> Only three of these have ever been translated into English, and they have been out of print for over thirty years.<sup>276</sup>

These same critics and biographers explain Mayakovsky's hatred of domesticity, family life and children by constructing an explicitly gendered binary split between a thrilling, phallically thrusting revolutionary force on the one hand, and the endless, monotonously draining "daily grind" of home life on the other. In claiming Mayakovsky's hatred of the latter, they suggest that he felt not just a lack of interest and consideration within his revolutionary outlook for the circumstances of those whose main concern *was* with domestic life, i.e. primarily women, but that he was actively repulsed by this section of society; that he saw it as unimportant and non-revolutionary – antithetical to revolution even. Moreover, in presenting these two domains as immovable and mutually exclusive, one of which must be vehemently discarded in favour of the other, domestic life (which is frequently described by western critics in relation to Mayakovsky as "static",

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<sup>273</sup> S. Kemrad, 'Daughter' ('Дочка'), trans. Tatyana Eidinova, in Thompson, *Mayakovsky in Manhattan*, p. 97. Thompson is Mayakovsky's daughter; the name by which she is known in Russia is Yelena Vladimirovna Mayakovskaya.

<sup>274</sup> Recorded from conversations with Patricia J. Thompson, September 2012.

<sup>275</sup> Triolet, *Mayakovsky – Russian Poet*, p. 57.

<sup>276</sup> 'What Is Good and What Is Bad', trans. P. Breslin, was published in Herbert Marshall's collection *Mayakovsky and His Poetry* in 1942 (and again in its revised edition of 1945), and Dorian Rottenberg's three-volume *Selected Works* of 1985 includes 'What Shall I be', 'Meet the Beasts' and 'What Is Good and What Is Bad?'. Rottenberg's translation of the latter was brought back into print in 2015 in *Volodya*,

“concretised” and “unchanging”) is represented as little more than dead nature – a fact of existence which cannot be altered. In fact, for its time, Bolshevism was radically feminist in its ambitions;<sup>277</sup> in the early Soviet period significant emphasis was placed on the social, cultural and political potential of revolutionising and positively valuing everyday life, a key element of which was the emancipation of women from domestic drudgery. This aim, of the programmatic transformation of all aspects of daily life, was firmly rooted in the conviction that life was indeed alive, malleable and open to change, a conviction which there can be no doubt Mayakovsky was keenly aware of – and, indeed, of which he was an active and vocal proponent.

A gross misrepresentation of Mayakovsky’s political, personal and poetic character has developed in the west over the eighty-six years since his death. The widely documented “fact” of his extreme hatred of everyday existence (*byt*), which is repeatedly and explicitly presented as an intrinsic element of the poet’s character (and, in many critics’ views, also a key factor in his suicide) has morphed from biography into mythology. And yet, of the thirty-two poems (and the two plays) in which Mayakovsky explicitly addresses the complex concept of *byt*, only five have ever been brought into discussion. In this part of the thesis I present an alternative picture of Mayakovsky’s relationship to *byt*, one which is rooted in the concrete evidence of his own writings on the issue, and which is recognisable as a common and complex strand of thought in the broader context of early Soviet politics. Further to this, I address the question of what is at stake for those who seek to mythologise Mayakovsky in this way, who are stubbornly determined to perpetuate his image as a static icon of pure machismo in spite of the considerable bulk of evidence to the contrary, and of what, conversely, is at stake now in the act of cutting the poet free from such a tendentious, inaccurate and sexist representation.

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alongside my translation of another of Mayakovsky’s children’s poems, ‘This Here Little Book of Mine’s About the Sea, About the Lighthouse’.

<sup>277</sup> For an excellent account of the complex and often contentious development of issues of gender equality at this time, and of its most prominent figure, Alexandra Kollontai, see Beatrice Farnsworth, *Aleksandra Kollontai: Socialism, Feminism and the Bolshevik Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1980).

## I

## What Is Byt?

The concept at the heart of Mayakovsky's misrepresentation in the western world is that of *byt* (быт).<sup>278</sup> Before it is possible to compare the manner in which he addresses *byt* in his poetry to the ways in which western critics explain his attitude towards it, and to assess the effects of these discrepancies, we must first understand the multifarious significance of the word itself. The unstable and complicated history of *byt* makes any single comprehensive definition impossible, and it is clear that many of the inaccuracies in existing accounts of the concept's alleged role in Mayakovsky's life are the result of a widespread western ignorance of this history, as well as some confusion over the difference between *byt* as a precise and definable word and *byt* as a shifting and controversial historical concept, an issue to which I will return at the end of this introduction. Deriving from the almost identical word *byt'* (быть), meaning 'to be', *byt* translates at its most basic level as 'everyday life', or 'way of life' as *The Oxford Russian Dictionary* has it (as distinct from 'life' itself, which is 'zhizn')<sup>279</sup>. But this basic definition is also implicitly an evaluation, namely that of the dullness or dreariness of the monotony of everyday life, or that which we might refer to in English as 'the daily grind', and it is the nature of that negative connotation which has developed and altered over time. In *Common Places*, Svetlana Boym writes that the Russian people have, throughout history, viewed the term with suspicion, and suggests that the origins of this suspicion are twofold. Firstly, dating back to the period of Russian Orthodox Christianity, the notion of *byt* has existed in binary opposition to another word *bytie*, the latter of which represents the human ideal: a higher spiritual existence, in which context mere *byt* has been considered inferior and fleeting in its concerns with earthly existence. Secondly, Boym raises the argument that Muscovite culture may have 'developed out of the experience of East Slavic peasants in the nearly impossible conditions of life in the northern forest and in response to external aggression' – a level of hardship which developed a particular 'conservationist mentality [which] did not seek to preserve a traditional or idealised

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<sup>278</sup> Pronounced 'bweet'.

<sup>279</sup> This qualification, and its untranslatable nature, is highlighted by Catriona Kelly as she considers that "[l]ife without daily life' would sound absurd in English; [whereas the Russian phrase] *zhizn' bez byta* makes perfect sense.' From Catriona Kelly, 'Byt: identity and everyday life', in *National Identity in Russian Culture An Introduction*, eds. Simon Franklin and Emma Widdis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 167.

Slavic ‘way of life’ but [only] to preserve life itself’.<sup>280</sup> Such a mentality is inherently opposed to the notion of *byt*, on the grounds that *byt* is an element of life – or rather a way of experiencing life – that only those who have not endured such hardship may pursue or value. These historically negative aspects can be seen in Vladimir Dal’s *Explanatory Dictionary of the Live Great Russian Language*, in which the word does not have its own entry, being rather subsumed (alongside ‘быть’) under the entry for ‘byvat’ (meaning ‘to occur’, ‘to happen’). The part of that entry which refers to *byt* describes it as ‘existence, alive in the flesh, life. Our earthly existence, no match for heaven. [...] Life, at its lowest value. [...] custom, habit, ritual.’<sup>281</sup> This definition, which is taken from the second edition of 1880-83, indicates that even at this relatively late date in history the concept of *byt* remained simple and unchanging from that of the much earlier time described by Boym. It is this, and only this, basic historical understanding of *byt* to which western critics and biographers of Mayakovsky refer when they discuss the term in relation to the poet’s work. That is, the *byt* that Brown, for example, refers to as ‘ingrained habit, social custom, hallowed prejudice, routine and regularity [and] the established pattern of life’,<sup>282</sup> and that Stahlberger describes as ‘the concretisation of time’ [... appearing] in everything that is habit and routine’ [...] the repeated or monotonously-similar events of existence – day-to-day family life, routine occupations and pleasures, bureaucratic procedures, the succession of generations.’<sup>283</sup> The *byt* that, for Almereyda, is ‘the Russian word for daily life and, by extension, the tired and complacent domestic routines’,<sup>284</sup> for Wakeman is ‘the banality of everyday life [...] mere material existence’,<sup>285</sup> and for Hyde is ‘a very Russian concept of dullness, meaning “everyday life”, the commonplace”, “the familiar”’.<sup>286</sup>

None of these definitions takes into account the enormously significant multiplicity of meanings accumulated and understood by the term *byt* in more recent years. Catriona Kelly describes the beginning of these changes: the increasingly socially divisive nature

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<sup>280</sup> Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp. 30-31.

<sup>281</sup> *Толковый словарь живого великорусского языка*. From the online version, based on the 2nd edition of 1880-83, available at: <http://slovardalja.net/word.php?wordid=2455>, accessed 14/11/2014. My translation.

<sup>282</sup> Brown, *Russian Literature*, pp. 21-22.

<sup>283</sup> Stahlberger, *The Symbolic System*, p. 135.

<sup>284</sup> *Night Wraps the Sky*, 2008, p. 177.

<sup>285</sup> *Pro Eto*, Foreword, pp. 9, 12.

<sup>286</sup> *Pro Eto*, Introduction, p. 17.



of the concept of *byt*, as she traces its shifting status in her excellent essay, ‘Byt: identity and everyday life’.<sup>287</sup> Starting in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, she writes, the ostensibly socially neutral term ‘household *byt*’ began to be used most commonly – and pointedly – by ‘conservative nationalists [...] to evoke the precious tradition of Russian household practices: the way of life preserved in patriarchal extended families, [as opposed to] the atomised households to be found in the modern city’.<sup>288</sup> She further notes the development of relativistic uses such as ‘gentry *byt*’, ‘peasant *byt*’ and indeed ‘English/German *byt*’, and relates these subcategories to:

the uneasy employment of the term *kul'tura* in the late Soviet period, or of ‘culture’ in contemporary Britain or America: it meant at one and the same time any way of life, however lived, and the ideal of how life should be lived.<sup>289</sup>

The practical side of this duality between *any* way of life and the *ideal* way of life, Kelly writes, was reflected in the vast numbers of printed manuals and treatises which were produced at that time and which, by the early twentieth century, had developed into a ‘full-scale rift [...] between one type of manual, advocating streamlined and ascetic forms of ‘rational living’, and a second type which with equal vehemency propounded high spending and elaborate decoration.’ Levels of culture and intelligence became at this time strongly linked with a frugal lifestyle, a view which, as Kelly puts it, ‘carried over directly into the Soviet era’.<sup>290</sup> Indeed, as a pre-revolutionary trend, the negative attitudes of the intelligentsia towards extravagant living anticipated the revolution insofar as they became a way of demonstrating one’s egalitarian and collective spirit. Just as Boym describes an early cultural ambivalence towards *byt* as a construct which fails to reflect the real life hardships of rural Russian survival, so Kelly notes that:

Russian intellectuals themselves understood their ascetic intolerance of *byt* as [...] a gesture of solidarity between the intelligentsia and the working class. [...] An ideology based on self-restraint was indeed more accessible to the disadvantaged than one based on relentless acquisition.<sup>291</sup>

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<sup>287</sup> Kelly, *National Identity in Russian Culture*, p. 149.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid., p. 154.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid., p. 154.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid., p. 156.

Whether or not these demonstrations of solidarity truly sought to engage with – or were welcomed by – the proletariat in practice is debatable. At any rate, at this early point of the twentieth century when the idea of *byt* had not yet been subjected to a radical reinterpretation, as would be the case following the revolution, such ostensible support from the intelligentsia itself came under criticism as hypocritical and ignorant of the real circumstances of working class life. Mikhail Gershenzon scathingly attacks the liberal intelligentsia on this front in his 1909 essay ‘Creative Self-Consciousness’:

A handful of revolutionaries has been going from house to house and knocking on every door: “Everyone into the street! It’s shameful to stay at home!” [...] At home there is dirt, destitution, disorder, but the master doesn’t care. He is out in public, saving the people – and that is easier and more entertaining than drudgery at home. [...] It was a strange sort of asceticism, which renounced not personal sensual life itself, but merely all guidance over it. Sensual life would proceed on its own, [...] then suddenly consciousness would recollect – and somewhere there would be an outburst of savage fanaticism. Someone would begin to abuse a friend for drinking a bottle of champagne, and a group with some sort of ascetic purpose would spring up.<sup>292</sup>

Regardless of the actual authenticity or otherwise of this left-leaning trend for fraternal-frugality however, its existence paved the way for further development. It is in the early Soviet years that the concept of *byt* altered most dramatically; indeed, the notion of it ceased altogether to represent one singular concept pertaining to dull domestic life (however disparate that domestic experience might be in practice between the different strata of Russian society), and instead to be split into two opposing concepts: *old byt* and *new byt*. The definitions of these two opposing ideas themselves had various meanings. Initially, *old byt* referred to the stagnant daily life before the revolution, the practical conditions of the culturally and industrially backward, largely illiterate and impoverished population and, alongside that, the parasitic greed and extravagance of the bourgeoisie, whilst *new byt* represented the ideal communist way for the “new soviet man”<sup>293</sup> to live: a life of classless equality which embraced technology, education and good physical health.

<sup>292</sup> Mikhail Gershenzon, ‘Creative Self-Consciousness’, in *Vekhi: Landmarks*, Trans. & ed. M.S. Shatz and J. E. Zimmerman (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1994), p. 58.

<sup>293</sup> It is worth noting that in Russian this phrase is not specifically gendered as is always the case in its English translation. The Russian word ‘chelovek’, usually translated into English as ‘man’, is actually more similar to ‘person’ in meaning, and denotes both men and women.

A good description of this first major shift is given in the introduction to *Everyday Life in Early Soviet Russia*:

*Byt* denotes the material, repetitive, unchanging, and therefore deeply conservative activities associated with the domestic sphere and the body, in opposition to the progressive, inventive, emotional, spiritual, and transcendent activities of *bytie*. The very concept of making *byt* into something *novyi* [new] – a progressive force for cultural change – defies the cultural logic of *byt*. The [Soviet *new byt*] campaign represents, in a deeper sense, an attempt to abolish *byt* and raise all aspects of everyday life to the level of transcendence of *bytie*. For the Bolsheviks, however, the transcendence would be ideological rather than spiritual, with the goal of collective happiness in a Communist future in this world. [...] It is in the repeated, routine practices of everyday life rather than party edicts that the incomprehensible, world-shattering concept of revolution begins to take on meaning for subjects, begins to be lived by them, and begins to transform them.<sup>294</sup>

It is important to bear in mind that intolerance of *byt* did not mean intolerance of everyday life in general – after all, domestic life is, in one way or another, an inescapable part of being alive. Rather, it meant intolerance of – and the desire to remove oneself from – the everyday life of the past, in favour of a better and more productive way of life for the present and the future. In this way, the very manner in which one organised and conducted one's everyday life became in itself politically significant – it seemed possible to actively take part in the promotion and growth of the Soviet Union merely by working to maintain its principles within the home. As Orlando Figes argues in *The Whisperers*, '[a]ccording to the Bolsheviks, the idea of 'private life' as separate from the realm of politics was nonsensical, for politics affected everything; there was nothing in a person's so-called 'private life' that was not political.'<sup>295</sup> He offers as an example the story of how Lenin 'loved' to be told and retold by Bolshevik party member Elizaveta Drabkina the infamous tale of how in 1917, having not seen her father for twelve years since he had disappeared into the revolutionary underground when she was five, she identified him across the Smolny Institute dining hall and approached him only to say, 'Comrade Gusev, I am your daughter. Give me three roubles for a meal', to which he simply replied, proffering a three rouble note, 'of course, comrade'.<sup>296</sup> Drabkina's acceptance of the fact that:

<sup>294</sup> *Everyday Life in Early Soviet Russia: Taking the Revolution Inside*, Eds. Christina Kiaer and Eric Naiman (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), pp. 10, 2.

<sup>295</sup> Orlando Figes, 'Children of 1917 (1917-28)', in *The Whisperers* (London: Allen Lane, 2007), p. 4.

<sup>296</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.

[i]n these circles, where every Bolshevik was expected to subordinate his personal interests to the common cause, it was considered 'philistine' to think about one's private life at a time when the Party was engaged in the decisive struggle for the liberation of humanity<sup>297</sup>

reflects the drastic legal and practical changes being made particularly in relation to family structure at that time, which aimed to overhaul *old byt* on that front by replacing small, traditional, self-focussed family units with communal living spaces and 'collective personalities' – i.e. to encourage the development of a people which considered all other community members as one extended family, and which was not distracted from its communist goal by matters relating to its own narrow concerns and responsibilities. The shift was instigated in part by such moves as the legalisation of abortion and homosexuality, the removal of the power to perform marriages from the church to the state, and the right to divorce and to have equal work opportunities for women, the latter of which was to be supported by practical initiatives designed to emancipate women from the drudgery of household labour, including childcare, on which point Lenin insisted:

Notwithstanding all the laws emancipating woman, she continues to be a domestic slave, because petty housework crushes, strangles, stultifies and degrades her, chains her to the kitchen and the nursery, and she wastes her labour on barbarously unproductive, petty, nerve-racking, stultifying and crushing drudgery. The real emancipation of women, real communism, will begin only where and when an all-out struggle begins (led by the proletariat wielding the state power) against this petty housekeeping, or rather when its wholesale transformation into a large-scale socialist economy begins.<sup>298</sup>

This campaign for *new byt* inaugurated by Lenin additionally involved things like education for everybody – particularly in technical science, an emphasis on cleanliness, exercise and healthy habits, functional, sparse living quarters, and the implementation of the State Commission for Electrification of Russia (GOELRO). The need for electrification was of particular significance insofar as its existence would provide the means for Russia's vast regions to feel a sense of solidarity – in particular, to bridge the

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<sup>297</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>298</sup> Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, 'A Great Beginning', in *Lenin's Collected Works Vol. 29*, trans. G. Hanna (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), p. 437.

gap between the dual spheres of industry and agriculture, as Lenin describes in his 1920 ‘Report on the Work of the All-Russia Central Executive Committee’:

We must show the peasants that the organisation of industry on the basis of modern, advanced technology, on electrification which will provide a link between town and country, will put an end to the division between town and country, will make it possible to raise the level of culture in the countryside and to overcome, even in the most remote corners of the land, backwardness, ignorance, poverty, disease, and barbarism.<sup>299</sup>

Whereas the aims and goals of *new byt* remained relatively static throughout the twenties, its “enemy”, the perceived embodiment of *old byt*, did not – with the most notable shift after 1918 occurring in 1921. Initially, at the start of and during the Civil War, the main focus of widespread attacks on *old byt* was on the kulaks, landowners, former tsarist officials, and so on, whose violent removal was required to speed up the creation of a new and equal communist society. However, when Lenin replaced the state-controlled acquisition and redistribution of basic food resources with the New Economic Policy’s limited reintroduction of free trade, as formally introduced at the Tenth Party Congress in March 1921,<sup>300</sup> feelings shifted. Now the face of *old byt* was no longer simply an anachronistic type to be stamped out and moved swiftly away from, but one which bloomed freely in the present, ostensibly with the blessing of the very leader of the Communist party himself, and this co-existence between the old ways on the one hand and the strived-for new ways on the other attracted vitriolic attack. For example, shortly after the Tenth Congress, Bogdanov and the ‘Workers’ Truth’ Group claimed that the revolution had ended in a

complete defeat for the working class; [... that] the bureaucracy, along with the NEP men had become a new bourgeoisie, depending on the exploitation of the workers and taking advantage of their disorganisation[, ...; that t]he Communist Party [...] after becoming the ruling Party, the party of the organisers and leaders of the State

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<sup>299</sup> Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, ‘Report on the Work of the All-Russia Central Executive Committee’, in *Lenin’s Collected Works Vol 30*, trans. G. Hanna (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), p. 335.

<sup>300</sup> Bolshevik publicist R. Arsky describes the new policy thus: ‘The tax consists of this: having handed over a certain amount of grain for the needs of the soviet authority, the rest may be disposed according to whim [*po proizvolu*]. You can use it for minor consumption, or for sowing, or feed it to livestock, or exchange it for state products, or even sell it at the market or bazaar.’ From ‘Налог вместо разверстки’ (‘Tax Instead of Surplus’), cited by Lih, Lars T., *Bread and Authority in Russia, 1914-1921* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), <http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft796nb4mj/>, accessed on 25/06/2014.

apparatus and of the capitalist-based economic life [...] had irrevocably lost its tie and community with the proletariat.<sup>301</sup>

Those who took advantage of this capitalist leeway and accumulated wealth by it, the NEPmen, as they became known, were derided for their anti-communist way of life, their nouveaux-riches emulation of the pre-revolutionary bourgeoisie. They were the worst kind of *old byt*, and were disparaged and derided accordingly, as philistines who existed apart from the communist ideal. In Figes's words:

In the popular imagination, formed by Soviet propaganda and cartoons, the 'NEPmen' dressed their wives and mistresses in diamonds and furs, drove around in huge imported cars, snored at the opera, sang in restaurants and boasted loudly in expensive hotel bars of the dollar fortunes they had wasted at the newly opened race-tracks and casinos. The legendary spending of this newly wealthy class, set against the backdrop of mass unemployment and urban poverty in the 1920s, gave rise to a bitter feeling of resentment among those who thought that the Revolution should end inequality.<sup>302</sup>

It was not simply that the existence of the NEPmen was an affront to the ideals of the revolution – there was also the great fear that, at a time of great poverty and social upheaval, the pleasurable lifestyles of these 'philistines' would appear more attractive than the struggles of communism by comparison. As Valentin Pluchek notes in 'The New Drama':

Under the New Economic Policy, the State's immediate concern was now the struggle with growing private-property instincts, with rotten, parasitic attitudes of mind, with bourgeois influence on the younger generations. It was vitally necessary to reject philistinism outright, to brand the philistine in all his "many shapes and forms".<sup>303</sup>

And so, a dual-pronged propaganda campaign to revolutionise *byt* ensued. Effective communist development required at one and the same time publicly attacking and

<sup>301</sup> Karev, N., 'O gruppe "Rabochya Pravda"' ('On the "Workers Truth" Group'), in *Bolshevik* 7-8 (1924), pp. 31 ff., trans. Maurice Brinton in *The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control: The State and Counter-Revolution*, Solidarity, London, 1970. Reproduced by the *Marxists Internet Archive*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/brinton/1970/workers-control/06.htm#n24>, accessed on 16/09/2014.

<sup>302</sup> Figes, *The Whisperers*, p. 7.

<sup>303</sup> Valentin Pluchek, 'The New Drama', in *Innovator*, trans. Alex Miller, p. 102.

diminishing the values of *old byt*, and promoting and solidifying those of *new byt*, a point which Trotsky reinforces:

We need culture in work, culture in life, in the conditions of life. After a long preliminary period of struggle we have succeeded in overthrowing the rule of the exploiters by armed revolt. No such means exists, however, to create culture all at once. The working class must undergo a long process of self-education, and so must the peasantry [... I]t is necessary to repair bridges, learn to read and write [...] combat filth, catch swindlers, extend power cables into the countryside, and so on. [...] We must help the masses through their vanguard elements to examine their way of life, to think about it critically, to *understand* the need for change and to firmly *want* to change.<sup>304</sup>

Examples of this cultural self-education, of both the *old* and *new byt* varieties, are abundant. Maliutin's 1922 cartoon, *NEP Types*, for example, draws critical attention to the NEPman "in all his many shapes and forms": the cooperative owner, the coquette, the shashlik seller, and the cigarette boy:

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<sup>304</sup> Leon Trotsky, *Problems of Everyday Life* (New York: Monad Press, 1973), pp. 16-17, 59.

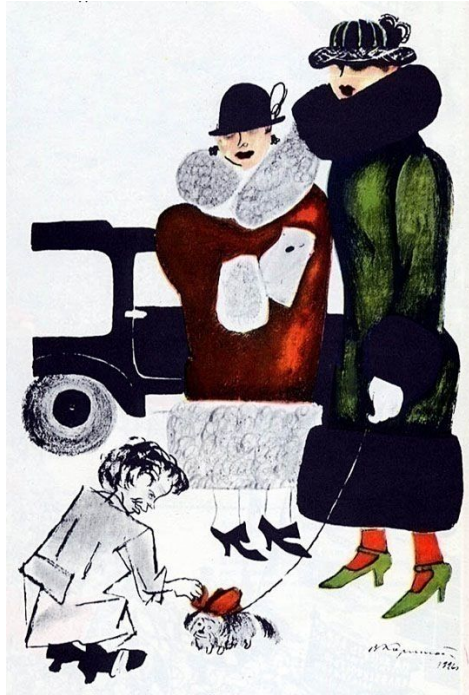


and Kardovsky's 'NEPmen' image of 1924, in which the fat strutting couple have become almost completely obscured by their extravagant clothing, strongly resembles those NEPmen of 'popular imagination' described by Figs:





Meanwhile, the explicit contrast between such individualistic (and by extension selfish and insensitive) prosperity on the one hand, and the realities of urban poverty on the other is exposed in Vladimir Kozlinsky's painting, 'Sympathy', in which one of the two finely clothed NEPwomen exclaims, 'Girl! Don't touch the dog, please! It might catch something from you':



This divide is presented more effectively still in the 1926 newsreel video *Homeless Children in Moscow*, which flits back and forth between scenes of extravagant NEPmen nightlife and footage of urban workers and children.<sup>305</sup> Dziga Vertov, meanwhile, takes the anti-philistine stance a step further in his 1924 film *Soviet Toys*, which acts as an explicit rallying cry for workers and peasants to unite on the basis that their combined strength alone is able to overcome the bloated and grotesque capitalist NEPman who, following this triumphant defeat, is hanged as a decoration (called ‘toys’, in Russia) from a Christmas tree formed of red army soldiers, alongside his attendant priests and self-made NEPwoman.<sup>306</sup>

Several examples of the kinds of social and cultural measures designed to instigate *new byt*, with regard to changes in family life, legal structures and electrification, have been mentioned already in this chapter, so I will not repeat them here. However, the level of seriousness with which those measures were treated with regard to their practical social implementation – a seriousness expressed explicitly, for example, by Trotsky, who in

<sup>305</sup> *Homeless Children in Moscow*,

<http://soviethistory.macalester.edu/index.php?page=subject&show=video&SubjectID=1924nepmen&Year=1924&navi=byYear>, accessed 30/08/2016.

<sup>306</sup> Dziga Vertov, *Soviet Toys*, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yw\\_pnBy9dfg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yw_pnBy9dfg). Accessed 30/08/2016. Editor of *Kinonedelya*, the first Soviet weekly newsreel, Vertov is best known for his experimental feature film *Man with a Movie Camera*. For an in-depth exploration of his films, documentary work and essays – and contemporary reactions to these works – see *Lines of Resistance: Dziga Vertov and the Twenties*, by Yuri Tsivian (ed.) (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).

1923 devoted an entire book to the matter: *Questions of Byt*,<sup>307</sup> which included such topics as ‘Habit and Custom’, and ‘From the Old Family to the New’ – produced significant ripples in all areas of early soviet life, both theoretical and practical. Figes describes the manner in which ‘the most radical Soviet architects’ were working together to put theory into practice by designing the ‘commune houses’ which would effect a ‘complete obliteration of the private sphere’<sup>308</sup>, whilst, on the practical or social function of art more generally, Christina Kiaer notes that:

[t]arrying with the traditionally feminine domains of everyday life and commodity consumption was part and parcel of one whole strand of Constructivist practice in the early 1920s. Vladimir Tatlin [...] was designing stoves and pots and pans for proletarian kitchens; Popova and Stepanova were designing fabrics destined for women’s dresses at the First State Cotton-Printing Factory; and Rodchenko was making cookie, sweets and cigarette packaging and advertisements to promote the ‘socialist’ products of Mossel’prom, the state-owned agricultural trust. Productivist theorists such as Boris Arvatov were publishing theoretical essays on the need to transform the material culture of everyday life within socialism. All of this Constructivist activity was allied with, and drew much of its rhetorical and financial support from, the Bolshevik campaign for a ‘new everyday life’.<sup>309</sup>

Probably the most famous propaganda advertisement of the sort described here by Kiaer is Rodchenko’s 1924 advertising poster for the State Publishing House, ‘Leningrad Department of Gosizdat’ (or ‘Lengiz’). The poster, which features Lily Brik shouting the word ‘Books’, followed in smaller font by ‘in all the branches of knowledge’, serves a dual purpose: promotion of the state’s major literacy initiative and promotion of state produced books and manuals over those sold for personal gain by the NEPmen:

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<sup>307</sup> *Вопросы быта (Voprosi Byta)*.

<sup>308</sup> Figes, *The Whisperers*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>309</sup> Christina Kiaer, ‘His And Her Constructivism’, in *Rodchenko & Popova: Defining Constructivism*, ed. Margarita Tupitsyn (London: Tate Publishing, 2009), pp. 146-7. Kiaer further notes that ‘[t]his Productivist entry into everyday life is unprecedented in the history of the avant-garde. We could even call it a kind of domestication of the avant-garde: domestication not in the negative sense of taming or lessening, but in the sense of bringing the formal experimentation *home*, or bringing it into everyday life, where it can be experienced by everyone.’



Meanwhile, the stripped-back, functional qualities described by Kiaer as being required specifically for ‘proletarian kitchens’ had, by 1928, sparked off a full-scale campaign in *Komsomolskaya Pravda* (*Komsomol Truth*) against their opposite: ‘domestic trash’. This campaign, as Boym notes, included even such concerns as ‘[the singling out] for their ugly aesthetics [of] “fat-bellied” chests of drawers[, ... for] what could be worse than to be “fat-bellied” at a time of national infatuation with sports and physical fitness’,<sup>310</sup> and even ‘an article entitled “What Are We Demanding from a Plate?”[, the answer being] “we demand that the plate fulfill its social function”’.<sup>311</sup> As the official organ of the Komsomol (the Youth Communist League), this paper, the first issue of which was produced in 1925, was aimed primarily at young people aged 14-28 as a defence against those ‘parasitic attitudes of mind [and] bourgeois influence on the younger generations’, as threatened by the alternative lifestyles of the NEPmen. These strict guidelines on household items ran alongside aggressive slogans, which proclaimed ‘Let us stop the production of tasteless bric-a-bracs! With all these dogs, mermaids, little devils and

<sup>310</sup> Ibid., p. 147. The extension of this view to the construction of art can be found in the article ‘Whom Is Lef Alerting?’, in which it is stated that, contrary to the good ground of post-revolutionary Russia, ‘the slippery, globular belly of the bourgeoisie was a bad site for building [new art].’ *Screen*, p. 35.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

elephants, invisibly approaches meshchanstvo [philistinism]. Clean your room! Summon bric-a-brac to a public trial!’<sup>312</sup>

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a historical account of the specific nature of early soviet *byt*, before moving on to the ways in which Mayakovsky’s work in particular operates within this wider context. However, in the case of *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, it is necessary to bring Mayakovsky into the discussion prematurely, because the poet’s work was directly influential on it. In fact, the paper’s campaign against “domestic trash” began largely as a result of his own poetry on this problem, the promotion of which the newspaper continued to support and reflect. Boym notes that ‘[it] launched the campaign [...] to implement in real life Mayakovsky’s poetic battle with [old byt]’<sup>313</sup>, whilst Oleg Lekmanov records that:

[f]or Mayakovsky, *Komsomolskaya Pravda* was a permanent place of publication: in 1928 the poet published 46 poems in it, more than in any other publication. Some of these poems were written on the direct instructions of the editorial board, others suggested themselves. However, in all cases they were closely related to the content of the magazine.<sup>314</sup>

However, the role of art and literature in reinforcing the *new byt* was of key importance beyond Mayakovsky’s own contribution – as Marietta Shaginian charts in her 1926 book *The New Everyday Life and Art*,<sup>315</sup> which addresses the increasing impact of concerns about *byt* on artistic practice. Tretyakov’s 1926 play *I Want A Baby!* is one such work which has the demands of *new byt* as its central conceit. The play’s starting point involves:

Milda, the chief protagonist, a young Muscovite of Latvian origin,  
[who] is disgusted by the anti-social trends she witnesses in the capital

<sup>312</sup> Cited in Boym, *Common Places*, pp. 35-37.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>314</sup> Oleg Lekmanov, ‘Уточнение про (из) газеты’, *Независимый филологический журнал* 75 (2005), <http://magazines.russ.ru/nlo/2005/75/>, accessed 07/07/14. My translation. The quote in this extract is taken from V. A. Arutcheva’s introduction to the notes to Mayakovsky’s *Полное собрание сочинений Том 9*, 1955-61, p. 538.

<sup>315</sup> *Novyi Byt i Iskusstvo*.

and seeks to counter some of the corrosive influences of NEP culture on everyday life by breeding a new race of Soviet citizens.<sup>316</sup>

Nikolai Zabolotsky's 1927 poem 'New Byt' similarly figures the new way of life as a growing child:

The sun rises over Moscow  
Old women are running in awe  
where could they go now?  
The New Byt is at the door.  
The baby is big and well groomed  
he sits in the cradle like a sultan.  
.....  
The baby becomes strong and virile  
He walks across the table  
and jumps right into Komsomol.<sup>317</sup>

Likewise, one of the primary objectives of the avant-garde journal *Lef*, the inaugural issue of which appeared in the same year as *Problems of Everyday Life*, and which was supported by the party and published by the state publishing house, was to vigorously forge links between the arts and social change, an aim which relates directly to Trotsky's own writings on the matter. Tretyakov's insistence in this inaugural issue, for example, that the purpose of art was to create a new man by 'exerting emotionally organizing influence on the psyche in connection with the objective of the class struggle',<sup>318</sup> echoes that of Trotsky, when he asserts (following a discussion of different ways of exploring the psyche) that:

[t]he significance of art as a means of cognition – including for the mass of people, and in particular for them – is not at all less than its "sentimental" significance. [... C]ulture was the main instrument of class oppression. But it also, and only it, can become the instrument of socialist emancipation.<sup>319</sup>

<sup>316</sup> Alexandra Smith, 'Reconfiguring the utopian vision: Tret'iakov's play I Want a Baby! (1926) as a response to the revolutionary restructuring of everyday life', in *Australian Slavonic and East European Studies* 25:1–2, <https://miskinhill.com.au/journals/asees/25:1-2/reconfiguring-utopian-vision>, accessed 30/06/2014.

<sup>317</sup> This translation taken from *Common Places*, pp. 32–33. The original poem ('Новый быт') can be found in full here: <http://lib.ru/POEZIQ/ZABOLOCKIJ/poems.txt>.

<sup>318</sup> Sergei Tretyakov, 'From Where and to Where', in *Lef 1*, quoted in V. Margolin, *The Struggle for Utopia: Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, 1917-1946* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 105.

*Byt*, then, in early Soviet Russia, means more than just “base existence”, or “the monotony of everyday life”, and cannot simply be equated to that simpler meaning of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The *byt* of Mayakovsky’s time, like Janus, has two faces. It looks both to the past and the future – and maps out the transitional space between. On a practical level it represents both the corruption and the salvation of the present state and future potential of physical, intellectual and moral wellbeing, by way of a myriad specific examples and practical actions. As an ideological concept it represents the elevation, centralisation and cultural perpetuation of that aspect of life which previously was considered irrelevant to politics, to art, to serious discussion; the urgent attempt to construct – via modernisation and collectivisation – a grand utopian vision: the communist revolution of the human race itself; the collective personality. It is with *this* information in mind that one must approach a study of the way Mayakovsky uses the term *byt* in his poetry. That is to say, we must recognise the *byt* of Mayakovsky’s time as an unstable, rapidly developing and enormously high profile *concept*, into which uncertain and potentially fragile terrain political and historical disagreements were played out. In doing so, we move away from the manner in which this subject has been approached thus far by Mayakovsky’s critics and biographers, whose treatment of *byt* has been static and reductive, useful only for defining certain alleged character traits of the poet himself, who refuse to acknowledge its volatile and contestable nature in favour of maintaining a meaning which may be neatly and easily defined in a dictionary by other words and phrases which expose absolutely nothing of its turbulent history.

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<sup>319</sup> Trotsky, ‘Culture and Socialism’ in *Problems of Everyday Life*, pp. 235-236.

<sup>321</sup> Ibid., ll. 26-44.



electrification of the whole country' directly into a domestic context.<sup>322</sup> The emphasis on 'stirring up *byt*' with the modern tool of electricity, moreover, reflects the motto of Krzhizhanovsky's 1920 pamphlet *The Main Tasks of the Electrification of Russia*: 'The age of steam is the age of the bourgeoisie, the age of electricity is the age of socialism.'<sup>323</sup> Furthermore, it puts into stark contrast the difference between *byt* as something static, repugnant and easily definable, as heretofore understood by the poet's western critics and biographers, and *byt* as a concept whose meaning and bearing on life can be contested and reshaped. Mayakovsky is talking about practical and conceptual change here – not just lexical redefinition. The *byt* in question is of course *old byt*; he is proclaiming the need to disrupt, to 'stir up', Russia's old traditions of *byt*, in order that it may be revolutionised, may be transformed into the *new byt*. Indeed, if we were to apply the notion of using modern machinery to 'stir up' that *byt* described by Brown et al, the message would appear comical, as though the bulb might provide a novel form of relief from the anti-communist daily grind: Comrades! You must stir up the dull and never-ending monotony of your lives by using a lightbulb in your kitchen – for by this act you continue the work of October! Not only does this interpretation run counter to the generally expressed idea that *byt* was Mayakovsky's "own personal enemy" (as I shall discuss in the following chapter), insofar as here he is not speaking of his own struggles with it but is, rather, appealing to *everyone* to share in this change, it also limits Mayakovsky's perceived "battle" against *byt* to a process of inoculating oneself against the boredom of one's day-to-day life by purchasing new household appliances – an appeal more akin to that very petit-bourgeois philistinism about which the poet is frequently so scathing than to the encouragement to improve the living conditions of the working class which this poem actually represents. With this in mind, it is clear that Mayakovsky is explicitly taking the party line on this particular element of *byt* propaganda. Indeed, the propaganda poster that he and Rodchenko released five years earlier specifically promotes the sale of electric lightbulbs at GUM:<sup>324</sup>

<sup>322</sup> Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, 'Our Foreign and Domestic Position and Party Tasks', in *Collected Works Vol. 31*, trans. G. Hanna (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), p. 419.

<sup>323</sup> Quoted by Lenin in 'Report on the Work of the All-Russia Central Executive Committee', in *Lenin's Collected Works Vol 30*, p. 334. Lenin follows this quote with the supportive statement, '[w]e must have a new technical foundation for the new economic development. This new technical foundation is electricity, and everything will have to be built on this foundation.'

<sup>324</sup> The text reads: "Let the Sun Shine at Night!"; "Where can you find it?"; Buy it from GUM!"; "Dazzling and Cheap". My translation.



It is at home  
   at the table,  
 in family,  
   in our relationships:  
   it is in *byt*.<sup>327</sup>

This poem similarly expresses the pressing and serious need for a shaking up and reformulation of daily life; the idea that domestic existence should not be disregarded as something politically unimportant or something that simply “happens”, but rather something that must be actively worked at in parallel with the other more manifestly historical domains of military battle and industrialisation. Both the command to focus on ‘the minuscule stuff’, and the insistence that ‘the future will not arrive by itself’, addressed in this instance to the communist youth groups Komsomol and Pioneers, are resonant of Trotsky’s urgent assertion of the need for the working class to ‘examine their way of life, to think about it critically’, in order both to guard themselves against the trappings of the bourgeoisie and to play an active and self-conscious role in the construction of their own communist way of life.

The emphasis on *byt* in these two poems, as a contestable and essential battleground for revolution, is not unusual in Mayakovsky’s work; roughly one third of his output consists of straight propagandist verses and captions, many of which deal with educating people in the day-to-day practicalities of post-revolutionary life. Indeed, to an extent the poet defines himself by this element of his work: in the 1930 poem ‘At The Top Of My Voice’ he describes himself as ‘a certain champion of boiled water, and inveterate enemy of raw water.’<sup>328</sup> The relationship between Mayakovsky and *byt* is also widely discussed by the poet’s western critics and biographers; to many of them too it is his defining attitude. However, although the term itself is used by both Mayakovsky and those who write about Mayakovsky, there is a vast gulf between these two bodies of work with regard to what *byt* actually represents in the poet’s work.

<sup>327</sup> Mayakovsky, ‘Выволакивайте будущее!’, in *Полное собрание сочинений Том 6*, p. 129, ll. 1-24. My translation.

<sup>328</sup> ‘At the Top of My Voice’, trans. G. Reavey, in *Volodya*, p. 209. Mayakovsky produced many ROSTA posters on the dangers of drinking unboiled water, in which advice is given via simple rhyming couplets. For example, the instructions in ‘How not to die from cholera’ (1921) include ‘Don’t drink raw water – remember, it’s soiled, Water should only be drunk when it’s boiled’, and ‘Never eat fruit and vegetables raw, Place under a jug of boiled water, and pour.’ In *Volodya*, trans. Rosy Carrick, p. 71.

I will begin by looking at what has been written so far on this subject. In the chapter ‘What Is Byt’ I listed a few of the various definitions of the term by western critics and biographers, offered by them by means of introduction to Mayakovsky’s work on this subject. I further noted that none of these definitions mention anything other than the early basic meaning of the *word*: routine and regularity, family life, domestic stability, and so on. Contrary to those definitions given by historians such as Figes, Kiaer and Boym, none of the sources which discuss *byt* solely in relation to Mayakovsky take into account the significance of this term for the early Soviet people in general, or even begin to make links between *byt* as a general concept and the massive political campaigns for its revolution during the particular time that Mayakovsky was writing about it. How is it possible then that critics should write about the critical significance of Mayakovsky and *byt* if, from the outset, they demonstrate a lack of knowledge about what the very word means – and, more to the point, in the absence of this knowledge, what can they possibly have to say about *byt* in relation to Mayakovsky’s poetry, in which it is clear – even from the two isolated examples given above – that the poet himself is talking about more than regularity and domestic stability? In both of these two poems, although *byt* is the central point, it is not domestic or family life *itself* which is being attacked, but its current backward incarnation. The emphasis is not on the disposal of home life and family dynamics altogether, but rather on how it is possible to remodel this domain in a way that supports the new communist state. And yet, in the considerable bulk of existing accounts of Mayakovsky’s relationship to *byt*, not a single one refers to either of these two poems; in fact neither of them has been translated into English before now. And they are not the only instances of omission. Mayakovsky refers to the term *byt*, in various contexts, in thirty-two of his poems and in two of his plays, all of which were written between 1920 and 1930, and yet out of all these thirty four works, a total of six have been translated into English. Amazingly, only two of these poems have been used by western critics and biographers as the central evidence to support their position that Mayakovsky’s relationship to *byt* is so significant – and, more importantly, to support the particular ways in which they allege it is significant, and yet these two are discussed with such forceful rhetoric and authority that Mayakovsky’s whole character in the western world has been shaped by them.<sup>329</sup> Often however they are not referenced at all; Mayakovsky’s

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<sup>329</sup> ‘About This’ and ‘Past One O’Clock’. A further two poems (‘On Trash’ and ‘Summing Up’), and the play *The Bathhouse*, have also been supplementarily mentioned alongside these two, but these are not used to implement the argument in the same way.

relationship to *byt* is simply discussed as though it is a fact. In these discussions, the consensus is that this relationship equates not to his forming part of the general discussions on this subject in early Soviet Russia, but rather to his own personal battle against everything that is stable, domestic, family oriented; to the idea that, for him, relationships were abhorrent; that everyday life was boring; that children were hateful; and even that his own suicide was an attack on, or a rebellion against these elements of *byt* that he hated so much. By stark comparison, I have found no Russian account which speaks of Mayakovsky's hatred for domesticity and daily life, because to Soviet Russians such a misunderstanding of the poet's discussion of *byt* is simply impossible.<sup>330</sup> What follows is a comprehensive digest of everything critics and biographers have said about Mayakovsky and *byt*, from oldest to most recent. Presenting them in chronological order in this way shows how little conceptual development has taken place over the years, and, out of necessity, some extracts are rather lengthy.

Roman Jakobson's 1930 essay 'The Generation That Squandered Its Poets'<sup>331</sup> (translated into English in 1973 by Edward J. Brown) is the starting point for western criticism on Mayakovsky and *byt*:

The ego of the poet is a battering ram, thudding in to a forbidden Future; it is a mighty will "hurled over the last limit" toward the incarnation of the Future, toward an absolute fullness of being: "one must rip joy from the days yet to come."

Opposed to this creative urge toward a transformed future is the stabilizing force of an immutable present, overlaid, as this present is, by a stagnating slime, which stifles life in its tight, hard mold. The Russian name for this element is *byt*. [...]

Inertia continues to reign. It is the poet's primordial enemy, and he never tires of returning to this theme. "Motionless *byt*." "Everything stands as it has been for ages. *Byt* is like a horse that can't be spurred and stands still." "Slits of *byt* are filled with fat and coagulate, quiet and wide." "The swamp of *byt* is covered over with slime and weeds." "Old little *byt* is mouldy." "The giant *byt* crawls everywhere through the holes." "Force booming *byt* to sing." "Put the question of *byt* on the agenda." [...]

Majakovskij's most intense poems, "Man" (1916) and "About That" (1923), are dedicated to [suicide]. Each of these works is an ominous song of the victory of *byt* over the poet; their leitmotif is "Love's boat

<sup>330</sup> A discussion of these Russian accounts can be found at the end of this chapter.

<sup>331</sup> Roman Jakobson is of course a Russian critic, and not a westerner. I include this essay here nevertheless, on account of its extremely influential effect on all subsequent English language sources, and because of the consistent mistranslation of the concept of *byt* by its translator Edward Brown.

has smashed against the daily grind” (a line from his suicide note). The first is a detailed depiction of Majakovskij’s suicide. [...] Propaganda pieces were necessary in order to slow down the inexorable movement of that theme.<sup>332</sup>

Jakobson’s article was first published in the book *The Death of Vladimir Mayakovsky* [*Смерть Владимира Маяковского*] in 1931, which makes his description of Mayakovsky’s relationship to *byt* the first in existence following the poet’s death, although it was not translated into English until 1967.<sup>333</sup> Other writings on Mayakovsky and *byt* have appeared in English before 1967, but I list this essay first nevertheless because the themes discussed in it have been so extremely influential on those accounts which follow, as has Jakobson’s nomination of the poems ‘Man’ and ‘About This’ as prime examples of them. Particularly influential, as we will see, are his unsubstantiated accounts of Mayakovsky’s alleged battle against time (‘Majakovskij’s conception of the poet’s role is clearly bound up with his belief in the possibility of conquering time and breaking its steady, slow step’<sup>334</sup>), suicide as a weapon against *byt-as-stagnant-time* (‘[t]he motif of suicide [...] continually recurs in the work of Majakovskij, from his earliest writings, where ‘madmen hang themselves in an unequal struggle with *byt* [...] in the *Tragedy*’<sup>335</sup>), and his hatred of children (‘[t]his constant infatuation with a wonderful future is linked in Majakovskij with a pronounced dislike of children, [...] and with undying hostility to that “brood-hen”<sup>336</sup> love that serves only to reproduce the present way of life. [...] Majakovskij] bristled whenever an actual “kid” ran into the room [...] and] never recognized his own myth of the future in any concrete child. [...] There’s no doubt that in Majakovskij the themes of child-murder and suicide are closely linked’<sup>337</sup>).

Jakobson does in fact, as we can see above, quote from a number of other poems which really do have the early Soviet concept of *byt* as their main subject, but he gives no context to these lines, and as, prior to the translations made by me for the purpose of this thesis, none of them have ever been translated into English before, it is impossible for the reader to know that in each one of the poems from which these lines are taken

<sup>332</sup> Brown, *Language in Literature*, pp. 277, 278, 290.

<sup>333</sup> The 1967 translation was made by Dale Peterson, but as it only exists in fragments I have used instead this later complete version by Edward Brown, published in 1973.

<sup>334</sup> Brown, *Language in Literature*, p. 288.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid., p. 289. In fact *byt* is not mentioned at all in this play.

<sup>336</sup> This is a reference to ‘About This’. In neither the lines from which this phrase is taken nor the poem as a whole are children referred to in a negative or hostile manner.

<sup>337</sup> Brown, *Language in Literature*, pp. 227-288.

Mayakovsky's revulsion is levelled quite explicitly at the seemingly immovable characteristics of *old byt*, a natural connection instead being suggested between Mayakovsky's views on *byt* and domestic life in general. This is exacerbated by Brown's mistranslation in places. For example, that line of Mayakovsky's poetry which he translates as '[s]lits of *byt* are filled with fat and coagulate, quiet and wide' is misleading; it suggests that it is *byt* itself which 'coagulates, quiet and wide'. In fact, in the poem from which this quote is taken ('The Stabilisation of Byt'), Mayakovsky describes the ways in which, following the struggles of the revolution, the excessive fat of good health risks filling up (and thus contaminating) the cracks of *byt*, and that, having done so, it is the *fat* that will coagulate, 'quiet and wide'. It is a warning not to let comfortable living stagnate the new *byt*, and *not* a criticism of *byt* itself, as is suggested by Brown's translation. Likewise, although Jakobson acknowledges that, according to the outline of Mayakovsky's poem 'The Fifth International', 'the first stage of the revolution, a world-wide social transformation, has been completed, but [... *b*]yt still survives. So a new revolutionary act of world-shaking proportions is required' – and even quotes from Mayakovsky's published introduction to that poem, which, in reflection of communist plans for *new byt* at that time, states that what is required is: "A revolution of the spirit" in the name of a new organization of life, a new art, and a new science."<sup>338</sup>, these admissions do not even scratch the side of his lengthy and otherwise misrepresentative account of Mayakovsky and *byt*. The inaccurate simplification by Brown, quoting from Mayakovsky's suicide letter, in translating *byt* as "the daily grind" further cements this misrepresentation, inextricably linking the concept of *byt* to "everyday life" in the minds of almost every subsequent writer on Mayakovsky.<sup>339</sup>

The following extract is from Edward J. Brown's own book, *Russian Literature Since the Revolution* (1963). This book, which precedes his translation of Jakobson's essay, was nevertheless published over three decades after the latter first appeared in Russian, and is clearly influenced by it:

It is a word Mayakovsky often used in his poetry, referring to the alien element of encrusted habit and custom in which human beings live. *Byt*, which means ingrained habit, social custom, hallowed prejudice, routine

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<sup>338</sup> Ibid., p. 281.

<sup>339</sup> This extract of Jakobson's also raises the interesting question of which of Mayakovsky's poems may be considered "the most intense", and of how this intensity is measured, a question I'll come back to in the final chapter.

and regularity, the established pattern of life, was his personal enemy. The life he lived and the poetry he wrote were an effort to overcome for himself the social routine that channels and controls the lives of most men. [...] Marx was one weapon against *byt*, and others were soon found. [...]

[T]here can be no doubt about the general import of the line ['Love boat/Smashed on convention']. The poet's own life was, at the time he wrote, caught in the web of new conventions and tangled by routine. Marxian ideas, once a weapon against rigidity, had been reduced to fixed formulas. Mayakovsky had discarded the mock haberdashery of Futurism for conventional jackets and properly invisible ties. He had become one of the writers of the vast organization of proletarian writers[.]<sup>340</sup>

Brown's assertion here that '*there can be no doubt* [that] the general import of this line in Mayakovsky's suicide letter [refers to the poet having been] caught in the web of new conventions and tangled by routine' is based, it seems, purely on his own misunderstanding that *byt* refers to matters of social convention and daily routine. It is difficult to imagine how Brown justified this conclusion. Mayakovsky himself was certainly not tangled by routine at the time of his death – he was not long out of an engagement to a much younger Russian emigrée living in Paris, he was the father of an "illegitimate" child living in New York, he was having a tempestuous relationship with a married woman in Moscow and had just written a play so explicitly scathing of the Soviet government that it elicited a total boycott from the State press on his subsequent Twenty Years of Work exhibition. The 'convention', if one can call it that, under attack by Mayakovsky in this line is far more likely to be those increasingly debilitating levels of Soviet bureaucracy which had prevented the poet's obtaining a passport to visit his fiancée in France – a circumstance which had contributed to the demise of their romance – and, in parallel, the strict tightening of cultural regulations which had curtailed his freedom of expression and necessitated his unwilling membership to the State proletarian writers group, RAPP. Bureaucratic philistinism and the hypocrisy of the so-called 'proletarian poets' were key elements of the realm of *old byt* attacked by Mayakovsky in his poetry, in the context of which that often-quoted line from the suicide letter makes far more sense. In the absence of such context, the conclusions to be made are, as we see in Brown's account and the many others that follow it, tenuous at best. Yes, Mayakovsky was 'tangled' in these external circumstances, under which the conditions of his life had, in many respects, ceased to be his own, but this is a very different situation to the one

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<sup>340</sup> Brown, *Russian Literature*, pp. 21-22, 23.



implied by Brown – that he was simply bored of the routine and regularity of his own existence and committed suicide as a rebellious diversion from it.

It is Lawrence Leo Stahlberger however whose writings on Mayakovsky and *byt* most explicitly echo and expand on those of Jakobson. Indeed, providing no concrete evidence from either the poems themselves or any other sources, the claims made by Stahlberger in his 1964 book *The Symbolic System of Mayakovsky* seem ludicrous but for the validity afforded them by their association with that earlier, ostensibly reliable source:

Children in Mayakovskij's view are the carriers of the past and present, the generation-by-generation continuators of the bourgeois world, "this world", and the triumph of the species at the expense of the individual. Children are another example of the concretisation of time, of "la vie quotidienne", of *byt*.<sup>341</sup>

Majakovskij, with complete consistency, is hostile to children. Children, as natural events, are non-novel events – the orderly succession of the generations imprisons man within the flow of time measured out by repeated events. [...] children for Majakovsky are repeated natural events in the human sphere and mere repetition [...] always implies the power of the past. It is only past events which can be repeated, not those of the future and hence Majakovskij's attitude is directly contrary to those who look upon children as "the hope of the future".<sup>342</sup>

For the bombastic and inaccurate claims that Mayakovsky was 'with complete consistency, hostile to children', Stahlberger offers no supporting evidence. As his account continues meanwhile, the absence of any acknowledgement of the practical concerns actually addressed by the poet on the subject of *byt* makes it feel increasingly abstract in its interpretation:

Much of the poetry that follows the second version of *Mystery-Bouffe* and culminates in *About This* of 1923 is one long protest against the non-novel event within a formal meaningless duration of time, or what the poet called *byt*. [...]

*Byt*, in Mayakovskij's poetry, has ontological significance – it is a quality of being. Therefore *byt* appears in nature, in history, and in the life of the individual. In individual life, *byt* appears in everything that is habit and routine, contained within a process of aging: in nature, *byt* is all the cyclical repetitions contained within a process of evolution: in history, *byt* appears as custom, tradition, repeated social patterns [...]. *Byt*, in other words, is that which makes time both visible and effective. It is necessary to Mayakovskij that *byt* be at least opposed – if not overcome[.] [...] the Revolution was welcomed by Mayakovsky as a weapon against *byt*. But for the revolution to be meaningful, *byt* would

<sup>341</sup> Stahlberger, 'The Poet and Love', in *Symbolic System*, p. 107. Here, in a footnote, Stahlberger references Jakobson's 1930 essay.

<sup>342</sup> Stahlberger, 'The Poet and Time', in *Symbolic System*, pp. 119-120.

have to be vanquished, “the march of time” abolished, and the future achieved.

Therefore, Majakovskij’s relation to the Revolution can only be understood on the basis of his own expectations and not the imposed systems of Marxist theoreticians. Mayakovsky was no more a Marxist than a Christian[.]<sup>343</sup>

Stahlberger is right in his acknowledgement that ‘*byt* is a quality of being’, but his limited understanding of the concept precludes the understanding expressed by Mayakovsky that it is, therefore, also capable of development. For example, his assertion that for Mayakovsky the abolition of *byt* – “the march of time” – was necessary in order for ‘the future [to be] achieved’, is antithetical to Mayakovsky’s own writings on the matter: In Stahlberger’s account, Mayakovsky’s route to communism involves simply trying to leapfrog over the ‘meaningless duration’ of *byt* into a glorious future. By direct contrast, in ‘Drag Forth the Future!’ Mayakovsky explicitly insists that ‘The future / will not arrive by itself, / it requires particular action!’<sup>344</sup> It is true that the lines ‘One must tear / happiness / from the days to come’, from ‘To Sergey Esenin’, suggest a kind of grasping over the head of the present into an imagined future life, but this is not a practical demand to ignore the present in favour of the future, but a reminder that in the face of the necessary hardships involved in *transforming* the present, during which time happiness may be in scarcity, one must bear in mind the joy and satisfaction which will accompany its achievement in the future – again, the emphasis is on *reshaping* the present, not on refusing to engage with it. Stahlberger continues:

Mayakovsky’s expectations of the Revolution were a form of secular chiliasm, in which he looked for the imminent realisation of the millenium, his Futurist utopia. [...] When the revolution succumbed to *byt*, the enemy more dangerous than the White Army generals, in Majakovskij’s poem *Trash (O Driani)* [...] then the revolution is over, and the poet is once more back in the historical process, imprisoned in time. [...] Majakovskij’s unfinished poem, *The Fourth International*, is a protest against the reappearance of *byt* in history and life, and an anticipation of a future revolution that will make good the promise of October. [...] This] tone of ecstatic expectancy [...] which feels a new life to be at hand – the complete obliteration of the past and the immediate realisation of the future – has disappeared by 1921. The second version of *Mystery Bouffe*, the poem *Trash*, and the *Fourth International* show an increasing realisation of the seizure of life by *byt* and the remoteness of the future. [...] In *About This*, the triumph of *byt* is assured [...]. The unique event in historical time [revolution] has been conquered by the many events of *byt* [...] In both the *Tragedy* and *Man*, tears appear in relation to love, suicide and *byt*, although only in *About This* is the term *byt* actually used.<sup>345</sup>

<sup>343</sup> Ibid., pp. 124-125.

<sup>344</sup> Mayakovsky, *Полное собрание сочинений Том 6*, p. 129, ll. 1-3. My translation.

<sup>345</sup> Stahlberger, ‘The Poet and Time’, pp. 126-128.

In Stahlberger's opinion, Mayakovsky's poem 'On Trash' describes the way that, for the poet, the revolution has 'succumbed to byt' and is therefore 'over'; that it 'has been conquered by byt'. This poem is indeed the first of Mayakovsky's to address the subject of *byt*, and it strongly criticises the 'philistine' characteristics of cosy bourgeois home life. By no means does this equate to the revolution being 'conquered by byt' though, and nor does it imply that daily life *as a whole* is dangerous and must be eradicated – on the contrary it marked the start of Mayakovsky's vigorous and far-reaching campaign to educate and instruct people on how to avoid such philistine behaviour in favour of a more actively communist lifestyle. It is clear from Stahlberger's account that he is not aware of the differentiation that existed between the concepts of *old* and *new byt* at the time Mayakovsky's poem was written, a misunderstanding that is made clearer still as his description continues:

[...A]nother symbol for an aspect of *byt* [...] which appears in the *Tragedy, Mystery Bouffe*, the *Fourth International* and *About This* [...] is "tea", which symbolises the ritual of family life celebrated around the *samovar*' and the tea table. [...] The ubiquitous family circle with its tea is another type of daily repeated event contained within the flow of time and represents another aspect of the victory of *byt* over the Revolution.

Since the Revolution had not fulfilled the requirements of an immediate realisation of the Future, Majakovskij was again faced with *byt* [...]. There was no hope for a collective solution – at least at the time of the writing of *About This* – to the problem of *byt*. But Majakovskij, like the good gambler he was, always had one final card he was prepared to play if his resources in the game with *byt* were only sufficient for one more hand. From revolution in historical time, Majakovskij, in desperation, turned to the revolution in individual time – suicide. [...] Both suicide and revolution are directed against *byt* and both disrupt the orderly succession of events and (subjectively) the steady flow of time.

When it appeared to Majakovskij [...] that *byt* and time still ruled [...] the poet had no recourse but to return to an attitude of individual rebellion. In *About This* [...] the poet fights a duel with *byt* [...] Majakovskij's suicide is an act of refusal, of not being able or willing to accommodate himself to *byt* and time. Majakovskij thought that Russia had yielded to *byt* and time in history. The poet, as an individual, was determined not to permit *byt* and time to control his life, for this would mean yielding to death, natural death. [...] The people and the nation were, in Majakovskij's view, content to pass from maturity to old age characterised by a sort of philistine hedonism. This "mere customary life (the watch wound up and going on of itself)" is in Majakovskij's poetry the *byt* of social life – the repeated or monotonously-similar events of existence – day-to-day family life, routine occupations and pleasures, bureaucratic procedures, the succession of generations. [...] Majakovskij, unlike the society, refused to abandon his aspirations towards a new life and a victory over natural death. Suicide results from

a refusal to bow to *byt* and time and – paradoxically enough – a refusal to accept natural death.<sup>346</sup>

Mayakovsky did not consider ‘the revolution [to be] directed against *byt*’. On the contrary, he recognised *byt* to be a central element of political and cultural revolution, which is why he wrote so many poems on the subject of its reformulation. Meanwhile, Stahlberger’s assertion that, for Mayakovsky, the drinking of tea was simply ‘another symbol for an aspect of *byt*’; a ‘daily repeated event [which] represents another aspect of the victory of *byt* over the Revolution’, is directly refuted by the poet himself, in whose final public address, to the Krasnaya Presnya Komsomol club in 1930, the drinking of tea is proposed not as an act opposed to the revolution but, on the contrary, as a means of bringing revolutionary comrades *together*:

[O]ur discussions are worthless, comrades, if I give an account of myself and have a chat with you, and at that point contact is broken off. [...] The comrades suggest that I should read each of my new works here. I shall be delighted to do so and in return I shall suggest a longer-lasting contact, namely, the creation of circles in which it would be possible to work on the elaboration of literary problems, not even in the form of lessons, but simply as chats over tea with comrades truly interested in literature.<sup>347</sup>

In an interesting information time-loop, Dale E. Peterson’s 1967 partial translation of ‘On a Generation That Squandered Its Poets’ appeared *before* Brown’s full 1973 version but *after* Brown and Stahlberger’s own (heavily Jakobson-influenced) publications (above), and contains a definition of *byt* which both reinforces and seems to have been informed by the dominant interpretation of Mayakovsky and *byt* at the time he translated it:

A virtually untranslatable Russian word whose wide semantic umbrella covers such concepts as Philistinism, vulgarity, the commonplace, the daily grind, and so on.<sup>348</sup>

Meanwhile, Brown’s full-length biography, *Mayakovsky A Poet In the Revolution*, emerged in 1973 – the same year that he translated Jacobson’s essay – and elaborates on its contents:

<sup>346</sup> Ibid., pp. 132-135.

<sup>347</sup> ‘Address at the Krasnaya Presnya Komsomol Club at an Evening Dedicated to Twenty Years of Activity 25 March 1930’, in *Volodya*, trans. Herbert Marshall and Dorian Rottenberg, p. 271.

<sup>348</sup> Dale E. Peterson, ‘On a Generation That Squandered Its Poets’, in *Yale French Studies* 39 (1967): p.119. This definition is offered as a ‘translator’s note’.

In discussing the poem *Man*, Jakobson defines the poet's mortal contest with *byt* as unresolvable opposition to everything that exists outside the self [...] Jakobson also points out that it is only in the poem *About That* that the struggle with *byt* is given directly: in his other works *byt* is usually personified [...] No doubt the reason [...] is that at the time of writing it, his spirit was depressed by the immediate evidence that the revolutionary explosions of the century had changed nothing, that the old way of life had settled firmly into its old established ruts, that bureaucrats and policemen still held sway under the "new" regime, and that the immemorial enemy, just as he had once appropriated the symbols of Christ, now held sway under the aegis of Marx.

Repeatedly we find the poet rebelling against the fact that sexual love is part of a larger plan not devised by the poet himself, the terms of which he cannot accept. A family, stability, children, the home were never part of the bargain entered into by the frantic lover. Maria wants to get married, with all that implies as to regularity of life and provision for the consequences of sexual acts [...] The exercise of sex brings about situations and consequences that do fetter the poet. Even the revolution, in the course of propagating and defending itself, has had to organise, define, and regulate life, and it had placed the poet in a confining niche.<sup>349</sup>

This statement by Brown, which suggests that 'Pro Eto' represents the purest expression of Mayakovsky's 'struggle' with *byt*, seems, by extension, to persuasively justify why *this* poem is the focus of his study of that dynamic, at the expense of all the other poems in which *byt* is mentioned. On the contrary, I suggest that it is precisely *because* of the personification of *byt* in Mayakovsky's other poems that the full weight of its conceptual meaning may be understood, and why, by comparison, it is so frequently *misunderstood* in this poem. Furthermore, although Jakobson does make such a remark in his 1930 essay, he nevertheless acknowledges that this personification (in the other poems) does not take the form of 'a living person, but an animated tendency.'<sup>350</sup> In this respect, the "tendencies" towards *byt* which appear so ubiquitously in 'Pro Eto' may be understood in the wider context of those "tendencies" towards which the poet was opposed more generally, i.e. he speaks of them in 'Pro Eto' as they appear amongst the particular tendencies he criticises in society at large, and not simply because he himself feels that merely his own personal life is dominated and surrounded by *byt*. After all, *byt* is personified in *Pro Eto* too: 'the grey mare of *byt* canters serenely on', etc. That Brown links this explanation of *byt* in 'Pro Eto' with the character of Mayakovsky 'the frantic lover' in 'A Cloud in Trousers' – a poem which has not a single mention of *byt* in it, and which was written nearly a decade earlier when Mayakovsky was only twenty-two years

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<sup>349</sup> Brown, *Mayakovsky*, pp. 257-8, 259.





by electricity  
and communism.<sup>353</sup>

After all, if *byt* is ‘the embodiment of everything routine and unchanging’ then how can it be possible to be on the precipice of a ‘new’ *byt*; ‘an imminent *byt*; a *byt* that is capable of being ‘multiplied by electricity and communism’? Furthermore, on the basis of McLean’s definition – and all those that precede it, the idea of ‘*byt* multiplied’ ought to represent pure unbridled horror for Mayakovsky, if indeed for him ‘*byt* was the enemy incarnate’, and yet here we see him outlining the prospect with an air of excitement and anticipation.

Bengt Jangfeldt’s brief mention of *byt* in his introduction to *Love is the Heart of Everything*, published in 1986, is more ambiguous, at least in the part which refers to Mayakovsky’s attitude to the family:

Love for Lili Brik changed Mayakovsky’s life. Before he had lived a Bohemian life without a proper home. He was not a family man in the traditional sense of the word, he shunned routine (*byt*), but with Lili and Osip Brik he formed a close and warm relationship.<sup>354</sup>

It is certainly true that ‘in the traditional sense of the word’ Mayakovsky was not a family man, and is also true to say that he ‘shunned’ routine insofar as he strained towards a new way of living, a new kind of routine. His attitude towards the family, as towards *byt*, was not one of censure but of engagement and reformulation, as he outlines to Lili in a letter printed in this volume: ‘There are no ideal families. All families break up. All there can be is ideal love. But you can’t establish love through any sorts of “musts” or “must nots” – only through free competition with the entire world.’<sup>355</sup> However, Jangfeldt’s translation of the term *byt* as ‘routine’ in Mayakovsky’s letters in this collection muddies their meaning and, by putting that term into the poet’s own mouth, gives weight to the inaccurate idea that *byt* does indeed mean simply ‘routine’ and that, by extension, routine is the thing Mayakovsky hated:

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<sup>353</sup> Mayakovsky, ‘Письмо Писателя...’ *Полное собрание сочинений Том 7*, p. 206, ll. 110-114. My translation.

<sup>354</sup> Jangfeldt, *Correspondence*, p. 11.

<sup>355</sup> Ibid., letter no. 113, p. 129. The capitalistic tone of Mayakovsky’s suggestion that love ought to be established through ‘free competition’ is an interesting reflection of the links he makes between political economy and poetry – the subject of Part 1 of this thesis. In this instance, as in the case of poetic production, the poet embodies both capitalist and worker in the economic dynamic – at one time *competing* for love and representing the *object* of it.



I find it incomprehensible that I have become like this.  
 I, who for a year threw even the mattress, even the bench out of my  
 room, [...] – how could I have, how did I dare be so moth-eaten by a  
 flat?

This is not a justification, Lichika, it's only a new piece of evidence  
 against me, a new confirmation that I really have sunk low. [...]

There will never be *anything routine* [any kind of *byt*] about anything!  
 No aspect of the *old routine* [old *byt*] will insinuate itself – I give you  
 my firm word about THIS. [...] If I turn out to be incapable of doing  
 that, then I shall never see you; if I [...] see again the beginning of  
*routine* [*byt*], I shall run away.<sup>356</sup>

These letters were written in 1923, when Lili Brik had insisted on a two-month separation from the poet, on the grounds that 'we were living well; we had grown used to each other, to the fact that we were shod, dressed and living in the warm, eating regular tasty meals, drinking a lot of tea with jam. 'Little-old, grotty-old *bytik*' had been established.'<sup>357</sup> Mayakovsky's self-reproach in this extract does not appear to be at his living a life of routine *in general* – after all, routine may be maintained in any degree of comfort, or lack of it – but at, despite in the past throwing out 'even the mattress, even the [bed]' in pursuit of the ideal Soviet ascetic lifestyle, his having now become thoroughly 'moth-eaten' by the comforts of his home. It lies in the realisation that he himself has, without noticing, come to resemble those very philistines so derided elsewhere in his poetry:

On the wall is Marx  
 The little frame is crimson  
 Lying on *The News*, a kitten is getting warm  
 And near the ceiling  
 Chirps  
 A frantic little canary  
 From the wall Marx watches and watches  
 And suddenly  
 Opening his mouth wide,  
 He starts howling:  
 The revolution is tangled up in philistine threads  
 More terrible than Vrangal is philistine *byt*.<sup>358</sup>

The mistake on Jangfeldt's part is understandable – with nothing to go on except the limited definitions offered by previous critics, Mayakovsky's promise in this excerpt that 'there will never be any kind of *byt*' really does lend itself to the popular understanding that he would seek to remove himself from *all* daily life, *all* 'routine'. But this kind of ambiguity is precisely why contextual information is necessary. Mayakovsky's

<sup>356</sup> Ibid., letter no. 113, pp. 125-126. My italics. 'Bench' in this context refers to a simple bed.

<sup>357</sup> Ibid., Introduction, pp. 20-21. Jangfeldt translates the final phrase as 'little old routine'; my alternate translation is of the Russian text, *Илепенушка*, also edited by Jangfeldt, p. 27.

<sup>358</sup> 'On Trash', trans. Svetlana Boym, in *Common Places*, p. 34.

qualification of ‘*old byt*’ slightly later in this account echoes the phrase used by Lili in her explanation for their separation. The exact wording used by the latter, ‘starenkiy starenkiy bytik’, is made up of neologisms whose purpose is to emphasise the oldness, negativity and insignificance of *old byt* (*bytik* here suggesting not only a diminutive form of *byt* but also a variation on the Russian word *starik*, or ‘old man’, thus producing, in the one word, an expression for *old byt*. That expression, when preceded by the repeated word *starenkiy*, which again takes its root from the word for ‘old’ – *stariy* – and also implies a negative connotation, leaves the reader in no doubt as to the particular kind of *byt* under discussion by Lili and Mayakovsky in these letters. The pair of neologisms is exactly replicated by Mayakovsky in his 1926 poem ‘Love’, as a criticism of the hypocritical discrepancies between forward-thinking Party life and backward-looking attitudes to women and home life:

We *adore* the rallies  
                   such *elegant* anthems!  
 Leaving the meetings,  
                   we speak with such beauty,  
 but often  
                   beneath it,  
                           covered in mould,  
 is [starenkiy starenkiy bytik].<sup>359</sup>

The next account of Mayakovsky and *byt* comes from Svetlana Boym, in her 1991 book *Death in Quotation Marks: Cultural Myths of the Modern Poet*. Speaking about André Breton’s 1930 essay ‘The Love Boat Crashed on Byt’,<sup>360</sup> which reflects on Mayakovsky’s suicide in relation to the problematic relations between devotion to the revolutionary cause and the fate of the specific individual, she writes:

There appears to be a certain tension between the title and the rest of his essay. In the Mayakovsky quote the revolution is not even mentioned; rather it is “la vie courante”, the daily grind, that engulfs and destroys the “love boat”. The Russian original for “la vie courante” is *byt* – a very common word that according to Jakobson is all too Russian, hence untranslatable, not linguistically but culturally. [...] It is a tantalizing presence of omnipotent ordinariness in its most static and conservative forms, pettiness, philistinism and slime[...]

<sup>359</sup> Mayakovsky, ‘Любовь’ *Полное собрание сочинений Том 7*, p. 146, ll. 11-18, my translation.

<sup>360</sup> This title is a line of poetry written by Mayakovsky in his suicide letter. I have translated it here, but the Breton essay uses the Russian for its title: ‘Lyubovnaya lodka razbilas’ o byt’, *Break of Day*, trans. Mark Polizzotti and Mary Ann Caws (Lincoln NE and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), p. 54.

In many of Mayakovsky's poems about love, death, and revolution, it is *byt* that is the main hero, as Jakobson remarks, a primordial enemy of the poet. [...]

In Mayakovsky's works *byt* appears to be immune to the most radical social revolutions. This uncontrollable sphere of everyday practices and ordinary routines resists [...] political change[.]<sup>361</sup>

Yet again, *byt* is simply defined as 'the daily grind' and 'routine'. Several years later in *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia*, in which Boym discusses – and therefore is clearly aware of – the Soviet drive for *new byt* over *old* (albeit only in the context of bourgeois 'domestic trash'), she nevertheless reverts back *again* to the static idea of *byt* as 'the daily grind', both in the title of the chapter itself, and in her discussion of it in relation to Mayakovsky in particular:

[Mayakovsky] attributed his failure not to Stalinist bureaucracy, neither to the women who did not live up to his love nor to the public that betrayed him, but to the monstrous daily grind – *byt*.<sup>362</sup>

How can it be possible for Boym to reduce *byt* so simply in this way – to suggest that the *only thing* it means for Mayakovsky is 'the daily grind' – when in that very same chapter she writes:

The Soviet iconography of New Byt was based on a complete restructuring of both time and space; from Gastev's utopian schedules of everyday life to the total design of new communist space [...] [the] rather innocent domestic setting [of the poem 'On Trash'] turns into a battleground where the ferocious struggle for New Byt must take place [...] The new beauty was expressed in Mayakovsky's catchphrase: "Elegance is 100 percent utility, comfort of clothes, and spaciousness of dwellings." [...] The campaign for New Byt touched just about every trifle of daily decoration[.]<sup>363</sup>

On the basis of these descriptions it is very difficult to imagine *byt* as being at one and the same time 'the daily grind' and something that incorporates 'a restructuring of time and space' or a 'ferocious struggle' for one kind of *byt* over another. These latter accounts describe a process of active change and development which directly contradict the passive unchangeability implied by 'the daily grind'.

<sup>361</sup> Svetlana Boym, *Death in Quotation Marks: Cultural Myths of the Modern Poet* (Cambridge Mass and London: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 164-165.

<sup>362</sup> Boym, *Common Places*, p. 29.

<sup>363</sup> Ibid., pp. 33,34, 36, 37.

Meanwhile, Menno Kraan makes *byt* one of the central aspects of her 1995 essay ‘Love and Martyrdom in Vladimir Majakovskij’s Poem Pro Eto’ – without mentioning any of Mayakovsky’s numerous poems in which the concept plays a more central role:

[A] striking aspect of this confrontation with the “self”, as I would like to define it, is the reproachful doubt the man on the bridge expresses about the “I”’s changed attitude towards the world: has the “I” perhaps deserted to the camp of the enemy. This is, as we will see, not the only reference to the fact that the “I” has fallen victim (at least partially) to “byt”:

Ты, может, к ихней примазался касте?  
 Целуешь?  
     Ешь?  
         Отпускаешь брюшко?  
 Сам  
     в ихний быт,  
         в их семейное счастье  
 намёреваешься пролезть петушком?!<sup>364</sup>

[...] Driven by its desperate wish to use love to rescue the man on the bridge, the “I” looks to its relatives for help, begging them to follow him. This attempt, however, fails: they say that the “I” has to “calm down”, a reaction which induces the “I”, in its turn, to reproach them for substituting “love for tea and the darning of socks” [...], in other words, for attributing more value to “byt” than to the “I”’s mission of love. The “I” rejects this kind of family and homely life, stating that the “whole universe is full of family” [...]. On the other hand, as appears from the fantastic and imaginary voyage the “I” makes with its mother, the whole world is pervaded by “byt”: even the negro drinks tea with its family. The power of this detested way of life is enormous:

Сомнете периной  
                     и волю  
                                 и камень.<sup>365</sup>

Kraan’s interpretation, with its attention firmly on ‘the “I”’ and ‘the “self”’, often makes for a politically narrow reading of ‘Pro Eto’, although the discussion does open up at times to include Mayakovsky’s position in wider Soviet society:

Even post-revolutionary society has proven not to be immune to the influence of “byt”. In *Pro èto* we find a sharp criticism of the “commune”. [...] The family can offer only “chicken’s love” and therefore the “I” prolongs its quest; however, after entering a house full of people having a Christmas eve party, the “I” again is confronted with “byt”:

Все так и стоит столетья,  
                     как было.

<sup>364</sup> ‘Are you sort of flogging / a dead horse? / Can you still kiss? / Eat? / Grow a paunch? / You, / with your fixation / on entering their [daily] lives, / their family happiness, / like an escaped cock!’ (Trans. Hyde and Gureyeva in *Pro Eto*, p. 63.) NB. Marshall’s translation of the first line of this extract offers a more direct sense of the original Russian: ‘You too’ve become a hanger-on to their caste?’, *Mayakovsky*, p. 176.

<sup>365</sup> ‘A feather quilt turns your will to stone.’ (Trans. Hyde and Gureyeva, *Pro Eto*, p. 81.)

Не бьют –  
и не тронулась быта кобыла.<sup>366</sup>

However, even more terrible is that the “I” recognises itself among the guests, i.e. as one of “them”, victims and at the same time representatives of “byt”. [...] Love, the “I” proclaims, should be emancipated from “marriage and lust”, i.e. from the destructive force of “byt”. [...] The ‘topical’ element of the poem is expressed in the “I”’s rejection of post-revolutionary society, which in no respect distinguishes itself from pre-revolutionary “byt”. The conclusion to be drawn from this is that this is apparently not the proclaimed utopia the “I” perceived, but, in fact, an anti-utopia. The “I” now transfers its utopia into a distant future[.]<sup>367</sup>

In this passage Kraan moves towards a more accurate understanding of *byt* – particularly in the distinction between post-revolutionary society and pre-revolutionary *byt*, in relation to which Kraan’s acknowledgement that Mayakovsky feels he ‘has fallen victim (at least partially) to “byt”’ offers a far truer account of the poet’s struggle with *byt* in this poem than all those that precede it. However, constrained by its wider definition as the detested ‘family and homely life’, this useful insight can only be taken so far.

By 2002 the reader is instructed by Susan de Muth in her translator’s notes to *Mayakovsky – Russian Poet* by Elsa Triolet that *byt* is ‘a key concept in understanding Mayakovsky and his work’, and yet her definition of it – yet again – remains limited to that of the basic ‘everyday routine’. However, in citing Lili Brik’s stated reasons for wanting to separate from Mayakovsky, de Muth, like Kraan before her, does touch a little more closely on the concept of *old byt* – on the disgust directed towards old bourgeois ways of living – and the importance of removing oneself from that cosy trap in favour of a Soviet *new byt*:

**everyday routine** – *byt* in Russian. A key concept in understanding Mayakovsky and his work. A kind of paralysing, cosy, bourgeois ordinariness which can also extend to social and literary matters. Mayakovsky despised and feared it. In his suicide note, “the love-boat” is “wrecked on the everyday” {*byt* again}. *About This* was composed during the agonies of a two-month separation imposed on him by Lili Brik in 1923. The reason she gave him was that they were becoming too immersed in *byt*, too cosy with slippers and tea.<sup>368</sup>

<sup>366</sup> ‘So it was / And ever shall be / World without end. / The old mare / of [byt] / canters on serenely.’ (Trans. Hyde and Gureyeva, *Pro Eto*, p. 89.)

<sup>367</sup> Menno Kraan, ‘Love and Martyrdom in Vladimir Majakovskij’s Poem Pro Eto’, in *Russian Literature* 37:4 (1995): pp. 523–534, 526, 528–9, 531, 532.

The next three extracts all come from introductory essays, to a non-academic book about Mayakovsky in Almereyda's case, and to Hyde and Gureyeva's translation of 'Pro Eto' in the following two. Like so many of the accounts which precede them, they not only matter-of-factly rehash the phraseology of the earliest publications in favour of concrete supporting evidence, but also use Mayakovsky's suicide letter as a "proof" of these assertions. Firstly then, in 2008 Almereyda writes:

Disenchantment with the compromises of everyday life, an awareness of an ebbing of revolutionary intensity, had infected Mayakovsky's relationship with Lili. Or rather, it might be fair to say that the inconsistencies of the relationship contributed to a sense of anxiety that collided squarely with the ragged pieties of *byt* – the Russian word for daily life and, by extension, the tired and complacent domestic routines that postrevolutionary culture was supposed to cancel or leave behind. According to Christina Kiaer [...] *About This* is nothing less than an indictment of *byt*. Throughout the poem, the literal and symbolic ingredients for domestic bliss are presented as embodiments of an oppressive force, referred to as "the endless hum-drum morass" or, more simply, "domestic shit". (The problem of *byt* persisted, of course, past the perimeter of this poem. Mayakovsky's final poetic statement – his suicide note – features this central line: "*Lyubovnaya lodka razbilas o byt.*" Love's boat has smashed against the daily grind.)<sup>369</sup>

Almereyda's description of *byt* as 'the Russian word for daily life' is not *altogether* inaccurate – as we know, it does refer to one sort of daily life or another. However, by coupling this statement with the idea that *byt* refers more specifically to 'the compromises of everyday life, [...] domestic routines that post revolutionary culture was supposed to cancel or leave behind', his misunderstanding is made clear. This interpretation is inconsistent not only with Mayakovsky's poems on *byt*, in which, far from being 'cancelled out or left behind', the concept's reformulation is brought into central discussion for the *benefit* of post-revolutionary culture, but also with the historical fact of *byt*'s conceptual reorganisation, for it is a contradiction in terms to suggest that it is possible for post-revolutionary culture to cancel out everyday life – that is to say, the current culture. It is true that in the previous chapter I noted Kelly's remark that the distinction in Russian between 'life' ('zhizn') and 'way of life' ('byt') means that it is possible in that language to speak of 'zhizn bez byta' – whereas 'life without daily life' sounds absurd in English. Nevertheless, even in Russian that phrase refers specifically to a primitive way of living, with an emphasis on the preservation of life over any kind of

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<sup>368</sup> Note to a line in de Muth's translation of 'Pro Eto', in Triolet, *Mayakovsky*, p. 98. Interestingly, de Muth goes on to note that '[Brik's] letters to Elsa Triolet from this period disclose that the real cause of her dissatisfaction with Mayakovsky was his enthusiasm for playing cards!'

traditional or idealised ‘way’ of life – being ‘alive’ over being part of a ‘culture’. Almereyda, by comparison, seems to be saying that post-revolutionary culture is (or ought to be, in Mayakovsky’s eyes) able to cancel out *byt*; and yet *byt* refers to cultured living as a whole. The notion, therefore, that *byt* may be ‘cancelled out’ by post-revolutionary culture *only* makes sense if, by *byt*, what we mean is *old byt*, or *old way of life*. By this formulation it makes perfect sense that the *old way of life* ought to be cancelled out to left behind and replaced by a post-revolutionary *new way of life*.

One year later, George Hyde and Larisa Gureyeva’s translation of ‘Pro Eto’ is published by Arc Press. In the foreword to this poem, John Wakeman writes:

In his “autobiographical tragedy” *Vladimir Mayakovsky* (1913), [Mayakovsky] portrayed the poet romantically as a prophet in heroic conflict with the banality of everyday life (the Russian word for this is “byt”, and it recurs in his suicide poem.) [...] Undoubtedly the reasons for the depression that led to his death were many and various. [...] But the theme of the poet’s suicide, of art as an impassioned dicing with death, of gambling one’s life away for the sake of those moments of intensity that banished the nothingness of “byt” (dullness), mere material existence, had haunted Mayakovsky’s poetry from the beginning.<sup>370</sup>

Yet again, here we see *byt* figured as ‘the banality of everyday life’, and so on. Inexplicably, given that it makes not a single mention of *byt*, Mayakovsky’s 1913 play ‘A Tragedy’ provides the counterpoint to that ever-recurring line from the poet’s suicide letter as the textual evidence of his ‘conflict’. Indeed, contrary to Wakeman’s assertion that the problem of *byt* had ‘haunted Mayakovsky’s poetry from the beginning’, it is mentioned for the first time only in 1921 – nine years after his first publication in 1912 – in his poem ‘On Trash’. In relation to the line from Mayakovsky’s final letter, the representation of the poet’s suicide as ‘an impassioned dicing with death’ via which he might ‘banish the nothingness of *byt* (dullness)’ is clearly taken from Stahlberger’s account (and those that echo it). Wakeman is not a Mayakovsky scholar so it makes perfect sense that he would seek to gather his information from previous writings on the poet for this Foreword, and that, given the sheer number of corroborating accounts of the

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<sup>369</sup> Almereyda, ‘About About This’, in *Night Wraps the Sky*, p. 177.

<sup>370</sup> *Pro Eto*, pp. 9, 12.

poet's attitude to (and indeed the definition of) *byt*, that he should assume their accuracy.

In his introduction to the same work, George Hyde shows the extent to which he too has been influenced by the work of previous critics on this subject:

[T]he decision to live apart for a while came (characteristically) from the sense they both had, while living together in Berlin, that their intimacy was threatened by the “byt” condemned by Mayakovsky in his suicide poem (“byt” is a very Russian concept of dullness, meaning “everyday life”, the commonplace”, “the familiar”). For the arch-Romantic Mayakovsky, there was no possible reconciliation between the transfiguring intensity of his desire, a mad sort of ego-mania, and day-to-day “married” life. [...] It was specifically love's boat that was wrecked, in Mayakovsky's farewell poem, against the rocks of “byt”.<sup>371</sup>

Hyde might not consider himself a scholarly translator of Mayakovsky, but his translations of the poet's work nevertheless constitute a significant and truly extraordinary contribution to Mayakovsky's appearance in English – particularly ‘A Cloud in Trousers’, ‘To Sergey Esenin’ and ‘How Are Verses Made’, all published in 1972. For this reason, introductory remarks such as these assume an authoritative position, particularly when, as I shall discuss below, certain parts of Hyde's translation of ‘Pro Eto’ themselves appear to be coloured by misrepresentation and thus provide their own ‘proof’.

Bengt Jangfeldt's 2015 biography of Mayakovsky offers nothing new on the subject of Mayakovsky and *byt*:

“Man” is the culmination of the existential theme that characterises Mayakovsky's writing from the very beginning: the solitary I who battles against the enemy of poetry and whose name is legion: “necessity”, philistinism, the triviality of everyday life, what in Russian is called *byt* – “my invincible enemy”, the “Ruler of all.” [...] One of Lef's stated aims was to combat *byt*, that is, daily life with its routine and its insipidity – Mayakovsky's “invincible foe” in “Man”. [...] *Byt* had always been Mayakovsky's existential enemy, and when he discovered to his horror that nothing had changed with the Revolution, he renewed his attacks on its various manifestations. [...] Mayakovsky really believed that the “red-flagged society” offered no better way out than the situation before the Revolution. [...] Mayakovsky toned down the private motifs in “About This” and maintained that the main theme

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<sup>371</sup> Ibid., pp. 17, 20.



was in fact *byt* – “that *byt* which has not changed in the least, that *byt* which is our worst enemy because it turns us into philistines.”<sup>372</sup>

Although it was certainly true that *Lef* sought to combat [*old*] *byt*, ‘daily life with its routine and its insipidity’ had nothing to do with that combat. Furthermore, as Mayakovsky and his contemporaries only started to write about *byt* in 1921 it can hardly be said that he was “renewing” his attacks ‘on its various manifestations’ after the revolution. Although contempt for the bourgeoisie and their philistine way of life is one of the major themes of ‘Man’, that work neither alludes to nor explicitly mentions the concept of (or even the word) *byt*; indeed the communist plan for a shift from the old to the new way of life had not yet been conceived of at the time that poem was written in 1917.

The most recently published remarks on Mayakovsky and *byt*, by Harry Gilonis in his 2015 collection of translations of the poet’s works, are very interesting in that they demonstrate not only how the popular misconception has been unquestioningly maintained in the English language without development now for over eighty-six years, but also how the very misconception itself has accumulated such power that Mayakovsky’s own work may no longer be considered a base point from which to (however inaccurately) pinpoint evidence relating to his “hatred of everyday life”, but is in fact now, in the translation process itself, at the very mercy of that presupposition. Just as Brown and Peterson’s initial translations of the word *byt* as the ‘daily grind’ and so on have sealed that wrong interpretation in place for half a century, so, now, do we see translators such as Gilonis translating *the poetry itself* through the lens of that misconception. In the Introduction to this collection, *For British Workers: Versions of Vladimir Mayakovsky (and Others)*, Gilonis writes:

Part of Mayakovsky’s zeal comes from his life-long detestation of *byt*, that untranslatable Russian notion which is like a hypostatized, intensified ‘daily grind’, a compound of a bad ‘everyday’ and Pope’s ‘Dulness’. The word recurs in Mayakovsky’s poetry up until his last poem, and produces extremes of disavowal, sometimes literally visceral: “like solidifying fat, the everyday / coagulates / quietly, everywhere”, or “foetid / slime / covers the swamp / of everyday dulness, the same old sludge”. [...] Mayakovsky understood as well as anyone why love – and tedium – are social, and thus political; and that the political should be intimately personal (not the task of a self-seeking, self-selecting cadre). Anyone who hasn’t understood this has never been political; and never loved. As Mayakovsky wrote, trying to refute societal as well as

<sup>372</sup> Jangfeldt, *Mayakovsky*, pp. 111, 259-621.

personal despondency: “You have to wrench / joy / from the day-to-day”. (For once, he doesn’t employ the word *byt*.)<sup>373</sup>

In a footnote to these remarks, Gilonis writes ‘[f]or more on *byt*, see what is probably the single most important essay on Mayakovsky, by his friend, Roman Jakobson, ‘On a Generation that Squandered its Poets’’. He points readers specifically towards Brown’s English translation of that essay, the influence of whose misrepresentation is clear not just in Gilonis’s introductory essay but in his rendering of Mayakovsky’s own words too. The lines from ‘To Sergei Esenin’ which Gilonis translates here (and which he explicitly says refer to *byt*) as ‘You have to wrench / joy / from the day-to-day’, in fact have nothing whatsoever to do with ‘the day-to-day’. Mayakovsky’s phrase, ‘gryadushix dni’, refers unequivocally to the future – literally, ‘the coming days’, as in: Yes, currently our situation may be too difficult to take joy from, so you must grab your joy from the future’s quota instead. The ‘societal and personal despondency’ the poet is refuting is *not* the general despondency of the day-to-day; he is specifically addressing the spate of suicides which followed that of Sergei Esenin and attempting to undo the damage done by Esenin in his pessimistic suicide letter, which, according to Mayakovsky, was largely responsible for these subsequent deaths. This purpose is made clear in the poem itself and is also the subject of elaborate explanation in Mayakovsky’s essay ‘How Are Verses Made’.

Another example of this kind of mistranslation can be found in Hyde and Gureyeva’s 2009 version of ‘Pro Eto’. The lines they translate as:

Headfirst  
                   into life’s dreariness  
   I thrust again  
 With floods of words

are reminiscent of Jakobson’s view that:

The ego of the poet is a battering ram, thudding into a forbidden  
 Future[... opposed to which] is the stabilizing force of an immutable  
 present [... :]*byt*.

This is particularly so in Peterson’s version, in which ‘forbidden future’ is translated as ‘impregnable future’, but in fact, just as ‘*byt*’ has been (as usual) mistranslated as ‘life’s

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<sup>373</sup> Gilonis, *For British Workers*, pp. 11-12.

dreariness', so is the word 'thrust', which fits squarely into the forcefully phallic mould with which Mayakovsky is so commonly associated in the west, Hyde and Gureyeva's own rendering. The actual word used by Mayakovsky ('vbivat') means to 'hammer home' or 'drive in', as with a nail for example. The lines express his attempts to hammer into, to *pierce* *byt* (which, in this part of the poem, refers to the various bourgeois ways clung-onto by a group of partygoers, who remain incapable of seeing their philistine lifestyle for what it is) with the pressure of his words. The meaning is broadly similar in both cases, but the phrase 'to thrust' inevitably suggests a sexual allusion which simply isn't present in Mayakovsky's own words, and, further, figures *byt* as the dreary domestic feminine which must be dissipated by the hard thrust of masculine revolutionary language.

Unlike the misrepresentation of *byt* in Mayakovsky's work, the urge to amp up the poet's language into something more forcefully *masculine* in this way is not limited to English translators. The Russian critic Victor Pertsov, whose writings on Mayakovsky and *byt*, discussed further below, are firmly situated in their historical (and therefore more accurate) context, does something very interesting in his English rendering of certain lines from the 1928 poem 'Letter to Comrade Kostrov on the Essence of Love', which he translates as:

To love means to rush out  
into the yard  
and right until ravening night  
with a flashing axe  
  to chop faggots hard  
in a fireworks of manly night.<sup>374</sup>

The urgent force of Mayakovsky's 'rushing' out into the yard, the intensity of his day-long act of 'chopping *hard*' with his 'flashing axe' in the unavoidably ejaculatory setting of the 'fireworks of manly night' – *manly night!* – plus the explicit statement from the poet that this is what it 'means' 'to love' – here we are faced with a hyper-testosteroned version of Hyde's 'thrusting' representation of Mayakovsky above. And yet, consider by comparison this quite different translation of the same lines by George Reavey:

To love

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<sup>374</sup> Victor Pertsov, 'Certain Aspects of Mayakovsky's Innovative Art' in *Mayakovsky: Innovator*, pp. 146-147.

means this:  
to run  
into the depths of a yard  
and, till the rook-black night,  
chop wood  
with a shining axe,  
giving full play  
to one's  
strength.<sup>375</sup>

In addition, there has long been controversy surrounding Mayakovsky's attitude towards women – usually with scant evidence to back it up. At the time he was writing, as Sheila Fitzpatrick notes, despite the official Bolshevik drive for equality, women were often subjected to a gendered way of thinking about revolutionary status:

Revolutionary vanguardism had always been a male prerogative. The image of the revolutionary proletarian had strongly marked male characteristics in Bolshevik mythology. [...] Zealous young (male) Komsomols tended to suspect that there was something intrinsically bourgeois about the female sex.<sup>377</sup>

Given this broader sexist cultural context in addition to the way Mayakovsky is so often presented in the west, it is perhaps little wonder then that '[m]ost critics', as Connor Doak puts it, 'tend to assume that his work accords fully with the misogynistic spirit of the times'<sup>378</sup>, but this is an unfair assessment, and one to which Doak himself to some extent succumbs. For example, although he accepts that Mayakovsky is 'conscious at a deep level of the political resonance of gendered metaphors[, ...] know[ing] both how to comply with the existing sex/gender system and how to present a powerful critique of it in verse'<sup>379</sup>, and, further – in describing how 'Naiman cites Maiakovskii in passing as an example of a writer whose work is infused with a 'misogynistic intoxication with sex and power'<sup>380</sup> – acknowledges that assumption rather than evidence is often at play on this matter, he nevertheless asserts that it is 'impossible to ignore the [...] endorsement of misogynistic violence'<sup>381</sup> in Mayakovsky's 1920 poem 'The Story of the Bagels and the Baba Who Did Not Recognise the Republic'. In this poem a group of red army soldiers beg an old woman for the bagels she is taking to sell at market. Her refusal leads to the soldiers losing their next battle with the Whites, who subsequently storm the village and eat both the bagels and the woman. It is true that the woman is shown to be self-serving, and is explicitly referred to as 'stupid',<sup>382</sup> but the moral offered at the end of the poem is this:

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<sup>377</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 237.

<sup>378</sup> Doak, 'One Man's Meat', p. 250.

<sup>379</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 259.

<sup>380</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 250.

<sup>381</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 251.

<sup>382</sup> Mayakovsky, 'История про бублики...', in *Полное собрание сочинений Том 3*, p. 143. My translation.



A rape had taken place and Lili thought the man ought to be shot, but Mayakovsky said that “he understood him, that he could rape a woman himself, that he understood there might be occasions when one couldn’t restrain oneself, that if he was with a woman on a desert island, etc.” Lili reacted with disgust: “Of course I don’t remember the exact words that were spoken, but I see, I see the expression on his face, his eyes, his mouth.”<sup>386</sup>

This abhorrent sentiment cannot be ignored. It certainly complicates the way we might think about Mayakovsky as a champion of gender equality, and it is problematic for my argument in this thesis. Nevertheless it is important that, without diminishing the significance of a statement like this, in treating it as a piece of evidence we bear in mind not only that – contrary to the assertions of Doak, Zholkovsky et al – it represents the sole available example of misogyny from the poet, but also that it is unclear exactly what was said by Mayakovsky, what by Brik and what by Jangfeldt himself. After all, this is something written by Jangfeldt *on behalf* of Brik, who ‘doesn’t remember the exact words’ Mayakovsky used. Jangfeldt, who has been criticised for his disproportionate focus in this book on Mayakovsky’s ‘womanising’, and other ‘juicy themes’,<sup>387</sup> lists the source of this conversation as unpublished, from his own archive, making it impossible to get an accurate sense of Lili’s own version. Notwithstanding this, it is clear that she referred to the dialogue in extremely negative terms, and to whatever extent the details have been rephrased by Jangfeldt, this must not be disregarded. Equally, it must not be disregarded that the excerpt represents one brief, private conversation amongst many thousands that took place between the two – a conversation from their early acquaintance when the poet was in his very early twenties. As far as we know, nothing else in Mayakovsky’s personal or poetic life reflects its sentiment – on the contrary, in his later years the poet put significant effort into representing and supporting women’s voices against abuse in its many forms. With this in mind, the question must be asked whether this one instance is enough to justify the mythology of Mayakovsky as a heroic masculine figure – or for that matter whether it is even consistent with that image.

Aside from his poetry, accounts of the poet’s *personal* conduct with women are also inconsistent – to some extent, it seems, because his reputation on this front was

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<sup>385</sup> Mayakovsky, ‘Вызов’, in *Полное собрание сочинений Том 7*, p. 74. My translation.

<sup>386</sup> Jangfeldt, *Mayakovsky*, p. 80.

<sup>387</sup> Anna Aslanyan, ‘Both lyricist and agitator: the split personality of Vladimir Mayakovsky’, review of *Mayakovsky: A Biography*, by Bengt Jangfeldt, *The Spectator*, Feb 21 2015, <http://www.spectator.co.uk/2015/02/both-lyricist-and-agitator-the-split-personality-of-vladimir-mayakovsky/>.

exaggerated even at the time. There exist various accounts by women of his acquaintance which describe on the one hand his rumoured status as a womaniser and on the other the fact of his extremely attentive and considerate behaviour towards those with whom he was in a relationship. For example, Elly Jones, with whom Mayakovsky went on to father a child, recounts that initially she had been reluctant to meet the poet, having been warned by their mutual friend Isaiah Khurgin that ‘although he was an “amusing person”, he was also a “devourer of women’s hearts”, what we might call a “womanizer”’.<sup>388</sup> Of their first encounter she writes, ‘I can see why he has a reputation as a ‘lady killer’. Right away he establishes that he is married. Yet he insists on getting my telephone number’,<sup>389</sup> She describes further how Mayakovsky, ‘practically on his knees’, pleaded with her to go for dinner with him. However, of their time spent together the following day, she writes with a different tone: ‘We went to his apartment, and he had a lot of books. [...] He was absolutely correct with me, and I had a wonderful time’. ‘[A]fter that first day’, Elly’s daughter relays, ‘Elly and Mayakovsky were “together”. He asked her to promise that they would see no one but each other.’<sup>390</sup> Francine du Plessix Gray, the daughter of Mayakovsky’s last great love Tatiana Yakovleva, also hints at the contradictions inherent in Mayakovsky’s reputation with women. In her memoirs, she notes that in his Lubyanka Passage office the poet both ‘worked and carried on his numerous liaisons with other women’, and yet the description of her mother’s first meeting with him belies the flippancy of this remark:

Upon one of the few occasions my mother mentioned Mayakovsky to me, she said that he insisted on taking her home in a cab, spread his coat over her knees to keep her warm, and upon depositing her at the front door of her grandmother’s flat fell on his knees to declare his love. (“Yes, on his knees on the sidewalk”, my mother commented when telling the story, “and it wasn’t even lunchtime yet.”)<sup>391</sup>

Of course, the act of falling to one’s knees by no means precludes one’s having ‘numerous liaisons’ with women – indeed, having appeared in both accounts so far, we might justifiably assume it to have been Mayakovsky’s – very successful – pulling technique, but Yakovleva’s letters to her mother following the poet’s necessary return to

<sup>388</sup> Thompson, *Mayakovsky in Manhattan*, p. 42.

<sup>389</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45. The ‘wife’ in question is Lili Brik, although by this time she and the poet had ceased to have a sexual relationship.

<sup>390</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 51, 55.

<sup>391</sup> Plessix Gray, Francine du, *Them: A Memoir of Parents* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2005), p. 52.



Moscow six weeks after their meeting grant further insight into the serious dedication with which he pursued his romantic relationship with her:

He's a remarkable man, totally different from the way I'd imagined him to be. He's wonderful to me [...] A telegram arrives every day, and flowers every week... Our entire house is filled with flowers, it's adorable of him [...] However spoiled I am, he was absolutely amazing in his thoughtfulness and concern for me and I long for him terribly [...] He's such a colossal figure, both physically and morally, that after him, there is literally a void. He is the first man who has been able to leave his mark on my soul.<sup>392</sup>

The fact that Yakovleva's admission – that Mayakovsky had been 'totally different from the way [she had] imagined him to be' – is followed by a stream of appraisals of his 'thoughtful' and 'morally colossal' character, suggests that what she *had* imagined was something similar to that 'womanising' description of him supplied to Elly Jones. In both cases the reputation proved false. Elsa Triolet meanwhile, makes it clear in her own memoirs that Jones and Yakovleva were not unusual in having received such fine attention. She recalls that although there were many women in Mayakovsky's life, there was nothing casual about his attitude towards these women – indeed, she explicitly states that 'Mayakovsky entirely lacked that sort of rugged, seductive, insinuating and suggestive approach that women seem to love so much', echoing instead his combination of gentlemanly charm and almost masochistic tendency towards self-sacrifice:

Then there were all the other women [besides Lili]. Preferably very young and very pretty. Considering his enormous size, his manner with women was surprisingly gentle. Even more so if that woman had done him some kindness. Then he was terrified of not showing her enough respect, of hurting her in some way. He never just dropped a woman. He would let her go with the greatest delicacy. He would become most eloquent about it. Ah, the way Mayakovsky treated a woman! His concern with making her life easier – especially if she was working – the presents he'd bring her, the flowers [...] He didn't have a movie star's success with the ladies. He entirely lacked that sort of rugged, seductive, insinuating and suggestive approach that women seem to love so much.<sup>393</sup>

Of course – again – it is entirely possible have a great number of sexual or romantic partners and still be a respectful, caring and (for however short-lived a duration) monogamous partner oneself. Indeed, from the accounts given above it seems that these very qualities account in part for Mayakovsky strong attraction for women. In this sense

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<sup>392</sup> Ibid., pp. 59-60.

<sup>393</sup> Triolet, *Mayakovsky: Russian Poet*, pp. 80-81.

one might say that to slightly accentuate Mayakovsky's projection of masculinity by – to return to the example from George Hyde – using the term 'thrust' rather than 'pierce' is not tremendously significant, and to some extent this is true. After all, translators' approaches vary on many aspects of Mayakovsky's poetry, not just this one. Furthermore, given that translation is a process of interpretation, the desire to accentuate the 'meaning' of a given interpretation by emphasising and adding certain words or phrases can be a useful and interesting technique. One of the many strengths of Hyde's brilliant translations of Mayakovsky's work is the freedom and creativity with which he approaches it. Like Womack, he is not afraid to be flexible with Mayakovsky's language, a move which sets him apart from translators such as McGavron, whose versions – as we saw in the introduction to this thesis – sometimes appear rather rigid and awkward in their attempts to stick as closely as possible to the original. The idea of 'faithfulness' to an original text is one which Mayakovsky himself views with some elasticity. In the introduction to the second version of *Mystery-Bouffe: A Heroic, Epic and Satiric Representation of Our Era*, published in 1921, he insists:

In the future, all persons performing, presenting, reading, or publishing *Mystery-Bouffe* should change the content, making it contemporary, immediate, up-to-the-minute.<sup>394</sup>

However, when an accentuation of Mayakovsky's masculinity, amidst the wider perspective of him as a 'macho womaniser' (with all the casual, primarily sexual and self-interested connotations attached to that term) is presented alongside a firmly entrenched western narrative of Mayakovsky's hatred for traditionally feminine values, it cannot help but imply a misogynistic attitude, and this is problematic when both the accentuation *and* the hatred are distorted or inaccurate representations of the poet's own words. For Hyde, who is particularly keen on the idea of Mayakovsky's womanising status (elsewhere he writes, 'The poet's relationships with women seem to have been difficult, limited and strictly on his own terms until he met Lily Brik. [... a]ll women, for Mayakovsky, seem to have been one woman.'<sup>395</sup>), it is not the first time his translations have been influenced by this perspective. The following lines from 'A Cloud in Trousers' have also been sexually masculinised in translation:

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<sup>394</sup> *Plays*, from Introduction, trans. Guy Daniels, p. 39.

<sup>395</sup> Hyde, *How Are Verses Made*, from notes 2 and 17 to 'A Cloud', pp. 116,118.

For oneself, of course, it's small comfort  
 That one is bronze-hard  
 That one's heart is a cold lump of iron.  
 At night you want just to muffle  
 Your ringing hardness  
 In something soft, something woman.<sup>396</sup>

In this instance, the terms 'bronze-hard' (as opposed to simply 'bronze') and 'hardness' are both inserted by Hyde, again in an act that – surely not by accident – alters the meaning of Mayakovsky's line into an explicit expression of desire for sexual activity. The desire expressed in the original poem is 'to muffle (or hide away: 'spryatat') the ringing (or jangling: 'zvon') of [Mayakovsky's] cold iron heart' in the softness of a woman; even in the sexual context offered by the phrase 'at night', this comes across as as much a longing for maternal comfort as for sexual union. By comparison, the dislocation of 'ringing' from its accompanying image of a *literal* metal object, in which context it describes, as an extended metaphor, the *sound* a metal heart might make, and its repositioning alongside 'hardness' – 'muffle your ringing hardness in something soft, something woman' – creates a new image altogether, not merely of an erect penis but an *urgently* erect one, as 'ringing' becomes more physical than aural in its new context. The woman's 'softness' – that is, her body, her presence, in taking on the role of the place *in* which this *ringing hardness* wants to be – is necessarily reduced to a vaginal orifice only.

In fact, contrary to the hyper-masculinity suggested by Hyde and Pertsov in their respective translations, it is most frequently the case that in Mayakovsky's poetry – as in his relationships themselves – he figures himself more as the victim of love's transgressive violence, and not as its forceful perpetrator. For example in 'I Love':

Enter me with your passions!  
 Climb in with your loves!  
 Now I have lost control of my heart.  
 I know where lodges the heart in others.  
 In the breast – as everyone knows!  
 But with me  
 anatomy has gone mad:  
 nothing but heart  
 roaring everywhere.<sup>397</sup>

And again in 'A Cloud':

<sup>396</sup> 'A Cloud', in *Verses*, trans. George Hyde, p. 17.

<sup>397</sup> 'I Love', in *Volodya*, trans. George Reavey, p. 83.

Give instructions to the firemen:  
 Burning hearts to be scaled gently.  
 I'd better do it myself, and  
 Pump out my tearfilled eyes by the barrelful,  
 Just let me force my way here through my ribs, and  
 I'll jump! I'll jump! I'll jump! I'll jump!  
 But they've collapsed.  
 You can't jump out of your heart!  
 On my scorched face  
 Out of the slit of my lips  
 A little charred kiss struggled out and flung itself free.<sup>398</sup>

The critical excerpts in this chapter present a radically different account of *byt* both from that which has been well documented since the concept's major developments in early Soviet Russia, and that which is echoed by Mayakovsky in the two poems which appear at the beginning of this section. What is strikingly clear is that every one of these accounts treats *byt* as a concept which is static and uncontroversial; they each offer a series of dictionary definitions to describe it, and use these definitions as their primary guiding structure from which to understand its role in Mayakovsky's poetry. Looking chronologically at them, from Brown's first definitions of it as 'ingrained habit', 'routine and regularity', and 'social routine' in 1963 to its most recently offered dissection in 2015 by Jangfeldt, as 'the triviality of everyday life', 'daily life with its routine and its insipidity', the influential accumulating force of each predecessor in this consecutive line of (mis)information becomes transparent. If we were to line up every definition in one comprehensive unit, in the order in which they were published, including all repetitions, we would be left with this condensed impression of *byt*:

stabilizing force, stagnating, inertia, motionless, mouldy, the daily grind, encrusted habit and custom, ingrained habit, social custom, hallowed prejudice, routine and regularity, the established pattern of life, conventions, routine, the concretisation of time, la vie quotidienne, social routine, mere repetition, everything that is habit and routine, cyclical repetitions, repeated social patterns, daily repeated event[s], orderly succession of events, repeated or monotonously-similar events of existence, day-to-day family life, routine occupations and pleasures, bureaucratic procedures, philistinism, vulgarity, the commonplace, the daily grind, old established ruts, regularity of life, [that which will] organise, define and regulate life, the eternal routine of everyday living, the business of daily living, the embodiment of everything routine and unchanging, routine, la vie courante, the daily grind, ordinariness in its most static and conservative forms, pettiness, philistinism, slime, [the] uncontrollable sphere of everyday practices and ordinary routines, the monstrous daily grind, everyday routine, [a] paralysing, cosy, bourgeois ordinariness, daily life and, by extension, [...] tired and complacent

<sup>398</sup> 'A Cloud', in *Verses*, trans. George Hyde, p. 21.

domestic routines, the banality of everyday life, dullness, dullness, everyday life, the commonplace, the familiar, necessity, philistinism, triviality of everyday life, daily life with its routine and its insipidity, a hypostatized, intensified 'daily grind', a compound of a bad 'everyday' and Pope's 'Dulness', the day-to-day.

The effect of this sort of definition, contrary to Mayakovsky's rallying cry in 'Are You Paying Attention to Technology?' to 'stir up *byt*', is to pin it down: a dramatic limitation of its powerfully fluid significance. Not one of them explicitly (or even implicitly in most cases) acknowledges the emphasis on a shift from *old byt* to *new byt* for example, or even mentions the wider struggle against *byt* into which context Mayakovsky's own efforts exist. In place of those historical facts, the accumulative force of a series of almost exactly repeated definitions have worked to develop a convincing argument about the significance of *byt* to Mayakovsky, and, by extension, about how to understand the poet, both *as* a poet and as a man, on the basis of this significance. Of course, when the complex concept of *byt* is explained only in such limited terms, then it follows that discussion of Mayakovsky's poetry in relation to this concept can also only be understood insofar as it relates to the strict definitions of those terms, and it is on this basis that the specific direction of the bulk of material above has been produced. It is impossible for these critics to talk about Mayakovsky's poetry about *byt* in the context of the NEPmen, or education, or the designing of 'proletarian kitchens', because none of these elements could be comprehended under the static umbrella term of 'the daily grind'. Instead, it is simply said that *byt* means habit, domesticity, routine, etc, that it is clear from Mayakovsky's poetry that he hates *byt*, and that – by necessary implication – Mayakovsky hates domesticity and routine, and so on. Several critics have moved slightly closer to Mayakovsky's own definitions of *byt* by referring to it as 'philistinism', 'pettiness' and 'vulgarity', but, with no elaboration on these definitions and no real differentiation in any account between *old and new*, it is difficult to grasp what in particular they signify in the context of *byt*'s overwhelming description as 'the daily grind'.

In fact, we know not only that, at the time Mayakovsky was writing, *byt* could not be so simply defined but also that the poet speaks positively about the *new byt* as well as negatively about the *old*, which raises the question of how, given that the various accounts refer to a number of Mayakovsky's poems to support their claims, such misrepresentation can have been so consistently maintained. That is to say: how can the

proof be in the poems if the understanding of the concept itself is incorrect? The answer lies in the unquestioning replication of theories which take as their particular focus a small number of poems which address *byt* in a way that, taken out of context, appear to support the dominant western interpretation, alongside several more poems and plays in which *byt* is not mentioned at all but which nevertheless ostensibly adhere to the set of ideas that have now been simplistically categorised as “*byt*” (but which actually, as we know, are not representative of early Soviet *byt* at all). The works which, in the accounts above, have been used to “demonstrate” the various elements of Mayakovsky’s struggle with this western notion of *byt* are: *A Tragedy*; *Mystery Bouffe*; ‘I’; ‘A Cloud in Trousers’; ‘Man’; ‘The Fourth International’; ‘On Trash’; ‘About This’; ‘Summing Up’; *The Bathhouse*; and ‘Past One O’Clock’ (“the suicide poem”). Of these eleven works only the final five actually mention *byt* at all. The most commonly invoked by far are ‘About This’ and ‘Past One O’Clock’, the latter of which is significantly anomalous to its *byt*-referencing counterparts insofar as it is the only one in which Mayakovsky does not make explicit what he means by the term, instead invoking it more abstractly: ‘the love boat crashed on *byt*’. Of the remaining three, both ‘Summing-Up’ and ‘The Bathhouse’ have simply been misinterpreted, either purposefully or otherwise. For example, let’s take another look at Terras’s account of these two works. Firstly his remarks on ‘Summing Up’:

[Mayakovsky] hated holidays, seeing them as *byt* in concentrated form: “Grab them by the gills, / and together with unsavoury, dirty *byt*, // Sweep out / these holidays too” (Summing-Up,” 1929 {10: 13}). Linked to this is Mayakovsky’s dislike for children: the child recalls man’s subjection to time, it is a hindrance to an idealized future, it means more *byt*.

The poem to which Terras is referring comprises a sustained criticism of the widespread excessive drinking involved in Christmas and New Year celebrations, and an evaluation that such behaviour is antithetical to communist living. Written in 1929, it is typical of the Soviet position at that time; not only was excessive drunkenness commonly linked to bourgeois degeneration, it also posed significant barriers to productive work schedules in all areas of industry and agriculture. This issue was particularly problematic to tackle because, as Kathy Transchel notes, ‘according to Soviet rhetoric, a socialist worker was a sober worker, [and yet] according to working-class cultural norms, *real* workers

drank.’<sup>399</sup> Mayakovsky’s description (in my translation, which precedes those lines quoted by Terras), in which,

between the swearing and the puking  
the shitfaced world  
cheerfully praised  
the new year.<sup>400</sup>

sounds very similar, for example, to the 1924 cartoon ‘The Dining Hall as It Really Is’, which, published in the *Kharkov Proletariat*, is described by Transchel thus: ‘The cartoon depicted a scene of chaos with drunken workers retching on the floor, others passed out on tables, still others engaged in drunken fights.’<sup>401</sup> Furthermore, Mayakovsky’s assertion (again in my translation, and which immediately follows those lines given above), that

[t]his slippery road  
does not lead  
to socialism

strongly suggests that the poet does not ‘hate holidays’, or see holidays *themselves* as ‘*by* in concentrated form’, but rather is opposed to the ‘slippery road’ of drunken hooliganism, and is explicitly situating himself within the wider Soviet struggle against the prevailing ritual whereby holidays (and, more specifically, the working time around holidays) are used primarily as excuses for alcoholic obliteration at the expense of revolutionary progress. The poem is similar in theme to another written by Mayakovsky in 1929, ‘We Vote for Non-Interruption’. A critique of the manner in which people celebrated commemorative feasts – simply sitting at home ‘like flies in jam’, drinking vodka and doing nothing, in spite of the work which urgently needed to be done to push forward the Five Year Plan. This poem acted as the poetic counterpart to specific new changes in communist work policy; in Jangfeldt’s words, it was written ‘in the wake of the introduction of the “uninterrupted working week” or “five day week” on the 26<sup>th</sup> of August 1929[, a government measure which meant that] “Saturdays” and “Sundays” were

<sup>399</sup> Kathy Transchel, 'Under the Influence: Drinking and Temperance Among Soviet Workers 1900 - 1930' (PhD diss., NCEER, 1998), p. 2.

<sup>400</sup> Mayakovsky, 'Итоги', in *Полное собрание сочинений Том 10*, p. 12, ll.52-62.

<sup>401</sup> Transchel, 'Under the Influence', pp. 10-11.

abolished and days off fell on various days of the five day week.<sup>402</sup> As in the case of ‘Summing-Up’, therefore, the poem does not represent Mayakovsky’s hatred of holidays and days off in general, but rather is an appraisal of a revolutionary policy which ensured that there would never again be two days per week in which everyone together ceased to work.

Contrary to its actual position then of making up, as per Lenin’s instructions of 1905, a part of that ‘[l]iterature [which] must become *part* of the common cause of the proletariat, “a cog and a screw” of one single great Social-Democratic mechanism set in motion by the entire politically-conscious vanguard of the entire working-class’,<sup>403</sup> Terras has represented ‘Summing-Up’ as simply an expression of Mayakovsky’s own personal hatred for, and desire to get rid of, holidays. He even – inexplicably – goes on to suggest that ‘[l]inked to this is Mayakovsky’s dislike for children’ – an assertion for which there is absolutely no basis whatsoever in this poem. In fact, there is no evidence anywhere to support a single one of the surprisingly frequent descriptions of Mayakovsky as a hater of children, in his work or out of it. Instigated by Jacobson’s unsubstantiated comment about the poet ‘bristling’ around real children, Terras’s suggestion follows Stahlberger’s subsequent assertion that the “proof” of Mayakovsky’s child-hate can be found in his notorious line in Section 4 of the 1913 poem sequence ‘I’: ‘I love to watch children dying’. Marjorie Perloff shares this view: “I love to watch children dying,” the speaker declares offensively in 1913’s “A Few Words about Myself.”, she writes, and later explicitly refers to the line more than once as an example of ‘child-murder’.<sup>404</sup> This purposefully controversial statement, written by Mayakovsky when he was nineteen years old, was one of many contentious bits of poetry scrawled on the walls of the pre-revolutionary Poetry Café in Moscow by the Russian Futurists, to shock and offend unsuspecting bourgeois intruders. Quoted out of context by so many western critics, it seems to still be serving that function even today. In fact, contrary to traditional interpretations, it is made clear in the poem that the voice of that line in the poem is not Mayakovsky’s own, as Bolshukhin and Alexandrova succinctly explain:

<sup>402</sup> Jangfeldt, *Correspondence*, p. 276 note 4.

<sup>403</sup> Lenin, Vladimir Ilyich, ‘Party Organization and Party Literature’, quoted in *Marxism and Art*, ed. Maynard Soloman (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1979), p. 180.

<sup>404</sup> Marjorie Perloff, ‘Over the Last Limit: Resurrecting Vladimir Mayakovsky’, *The Boston Review* (July/Aug 1998), <http://new.bostonreview.net/BR33.4/perloff.php>. Accessed 31/08/2016.



Forward my country,  
                                move on faster!  
Get on with it,  
                                sweep away  
  old junk!  
Stronger, my commune,  
                                strike at the enemy,  
Make it die out,  
                                that monster, *bvt.*

<sup>405</sup> Leonid Bolshukin and Maria Alexandrova, “I love to watch children dying” in the context of Mayakovsky's poetic cycle “I”, *Новая русистика* 2:2 (2009): p. 79, <https://digilib.phil.muni.cz/handle/11222.digilib/116116> Accessed 30/08/2016.

a)

Mezalyansova: Yes, of course art must reflect life – the beautiful lives of beautiful, live people. Show us beautiful lively creatures against beautiful landscapes, and bourgeois decadence, in general. In fact, if it's necessary for propaganda, you could even show us a belly dance. Or you could let us see, for instance, how the new struggle against the old way of life [*starim bytom*] is being waged in the putrefied Western world. You could use the stage to show us, for example, that in Paris they don't have an Organization for Political Work Among Women – they have the foxtrot instead.<sup>406</sup>

b)

Pobedonosikov [as he is leaving his wife, Polya]: You should hide those bourgeois, old-womanish bad moods of yours that have made our marriage so unequal! [...] There was a time when we used to go out on patrol together, and sleep under the same army coat. That was enough, then. But things are different now. I've come up the intellectual and professional ladder – and up the apartment-house stairway to a better place. You, too, should be able to educate yourself and learn to zigzag dialectically, like me. But what do I see in your face? Only vestiges of the past – the chains of the old way of life [*starogo byta*]<sup>407</sup>

c)

Pobedonosikov [to Polya, after she has been describing their relationship to the Phosphorescent Woman]: What – you here? Did you report me? Did you complain? [...] You told her the important things, of course? How we marched together, shoulder to shoulder, towards the rising sun of communism? How we struggled against the old way of life [*starim bytom*]? Women go for sentimentality. She must have liked that, eh?<sup>408</sup>

In all of these, the *byt* to which Mayakovsky repeatedly refers is pointedly *old byt*, and not simply everyday life in general. In fact, there is a double-pronged attack on *byt* happening in these passages, neither of which is aimed at 'daily living'. Firstly, there is the explicit criticism of the old way of life versus the new, which takes place in the dialogue between the characters themselves. (The very existence of this conversational thread itself strongly supports the fact that, contrary to the interpretations of Mayakovsky's western critics, the contestable nature of *old* and *new byt* was commonly acknowledged and debated in Russia at that time.) Secondly, in both the second and third of these extracts, Mayakovsky uses this critical position of *old byt* versus *new* as a base from which to satirically attack the hypocritical and philistine discrepancies between Pobedonosikov's public party life and his private domestic life, with an emphasis on his poor treatment of Polya. Both of these more complex elements of *byt* have been explicitly

<sup>406</sup> Mayakovsky, *The Bathhouse*, in *Plays*, trans. Guy Daniels, Act III, pp. 228-229. 'Starim bytom' literally translates as 'old byt'.

<sup>407</sup> Ibid., Act IV, p. 237. Again, 'starogo byta' literally translates as 'old byt'.

<sup>408</sup> Ibid., Act V, pp. 247-248.



in one day.

We have, after all,  
     our freedom,  
     in place of the old monogamy.  
 Down with philistinism  
     and prejudice!  
 From flower to flower,  
     the young dragonfly  
 flutters,  
     flaps  
     and tosses itself exhausted after the fragrance.  
 For him  
     the world's one evil  
     is a woman seeking maintenance.

He'd sooner be dead  
     than relinquish his earnings,  
 spend three years in court than face up to the music:  
 Who, me? No, not me,  
 and no, she is not mine –  
 and in any case,  
     I am a eunuch!<sup>410</sup>

Reading these two accounts in parallel makes clear that, for Mayakovsky, the issue of tackling the insidious perpetuation of domestic drudgery and gender inequality of the sort usually associated not with progressive communism but with *old byt* was of great significance in the restructuring of everyday life – a surprisingly, and explicitly, feminist outlook for a poet so commonly represented as being sexist and misogynistic. Indeed, in the opening section of this poem he explicitly refers to the fact that, although a new 'Spring' has arrived, gender issues have by no means also been renewed:

The world  
     is again  
     overgrowing with flowers,  
 the world  
     has Spring in its look.  
 And with Spring  
     arises that  
     unresolved thing –  
 the question  
     of women  
     and love.<sup>411</sup>

It was certainly not the case that only men engaged in polyamorous relations and turned from the idea (or even the actuality) of children; as Figes describes in *The Whisperers*, those who 'renounced their families to serve the working class', of whom there were a great number, comprised both men and women, an example of the latter being 'Liuba

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<sup>410</sup> Mayakovsky, 'Любовь', in *Полное собрание сочинений Том 7*, p. 146-147. My translation.

Radchenko, who left her husband and their two young daughters because, as she put it in her diary, ‘it was the duty of the true revolutionary not to be tied down by a family’.<sup>412</sup> Nevertheless, on a practical and biological basis women remained more vulnerable than men. The 1927 silent film *Bed and Sofa*,<sup>413</sup> written by Victor Shklovsky and Abram Broom (and directed by the latter), also explores this unequal gender dynamic. Following the trajectory of a “free” relationship which develops when a married man invites his male friend to come and live with him and his wife Lyuda, it transpires that, although ostensibly the latter appears to be in the stronger position – always able to sleep in the bed, and free to choose which of the two men she wants to have sex with – she is nevertheless ultimately subjugated by both. Whilst Lyuda is predominantly seen performing housework, the two consecutive “husbands” (a role they each inhabit depending on their sleeping position on the sofa or the bed) are oppressive and dictatorial towards her and, on discovering that she is pregnant, she is pressured by both of them into having an abortion, for which procedure she is sent to a clinic alone. By no means does *Bed and Sofa* depict a weak or submissive representation of women however – in fact, at the end of the film, Lyuda leaves both men and decides to have the baby alone and go out to work to support herself, leaving a note which reads ‘I will not return to our philistine life’.<sup>414</sup> Rather, as in Mayakovsky’s ‘Love’, it is the self-serving and hypocritical behaviour of the men which is under scrutiny. In response to her husband’s discussions with his friend on the necessity of the abortion, on the grounds that they would never know which man had fathered the baby, Lyuda, in scathing desperation, cuts in with ‘club together [to pay] for an abortion? Is that what you had in mind all along?!’<sup>415</sup> The responsibility of child maintenance became a major concern in the mid-twenties following a change in the law in 1925-6 which stated that even in cases of de-facto, unregistered marriages, women were eligible to a portion of her partner’s assets (or men to their wives’, although this was far less common) following divorce, and to a third of his income as child maintenance. This replaced the initial 1917 legislation, in which only in the case of State registered marriages could maintenance be claimed. In general, men were against this change, and commonly evaded their financial obligations. In the

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<sup>411</sup> Ibid., p. 146, ll. 1-11.

<sup>412</sup> Figes, *The Whisperers*, p. 3.

<sup>413</sup> The Russian name of this film is *Третья мещанская* [*Tret’ya Meshchanskaya*]. Ostensibly a reference to the address of the three characters: 3 Meshchanskaya Street, the closeness of this name to the word “meshchanstvo” – the petty bourgeoisie (or “philistinism” in early Soviet terms) would undoubtedly have forced an alternative title, *The Third Philistine* unavoidably into its audience’s ears.

<sup>414</sup> ‘Ya ne vernus’ na nasha meshchanskaya.’ My translation.

case of Mayakovsky's writings on the matter it is clear that his support lies with the mothers, and not their errant partners.

In stark contrast then to Terras's account of Mayakovsky's attack on *byt* in *The Bathhouse* as a violent admonition of 'the business of daily living', a phrase we might generally understand to mean the sort of domestic activities, day-to-day work and childcare predominantly undertaken at that time by women – which, understood in accordance to the lines Terras quotes, literally constitute 'the enemy' of communism – Mayakovsky in fact portrays female domestic experience very sympathetically, and, making no attack on 'everyday life' in general whatsoever, is clearly levelling his criticism instead at *old byt* and its perfidiously lingering manifestations in certain hypocritical (male) party members. Indeed, in Act II of this same play the poet presents a situation in which government bureaucrats fail to help a woman who is a victim of domestic violence at the hands of her alcoholic husband, who is himself a party member. Explaining to them that 'they're all afraid to lay a finger on [her husband] because he's in the Party', her situation is nevertheless met with scorn and rejection:

Damn it all! Now you just listen to me! I don't want to see you around here again pestering a big government agency with your petty problems. We can't be bothered with trifles. The government is interested in big things: various kinds of Fordism, other speed-up systems, and so on.<sup>416</sup>

In exposing the failure of the government to tackle these kinds of domestic problems, Mayakovsky makes explicit that, as far as he is concerned, they represent a significant issue, and yet the government's attitude in this scene, to which he is clearly in opposition, is the very same as that of which he himself is accused by Terras.

This example is just one of many misrepresentations to be found in the bulk of material about Mayakovsky and *byt*, the repetitious details of which I have broken down into what seem to be four key areas, a couple of which I have already addressed above:

1) Exact repetition of a group of particular dictionary definitions which are persuasively used to explain the meaning of *byt* and which include 'the daily grind', 'repetition', 'habit', 'routine', 'regularity' etc.

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<sup>415</sup> 'Abort v skladchinu – o chem vy ran'she dumali?' My translation.

2) The argument, based on Mayakovsky's use of the term *byt*, that the poet is opposed to family life (and 'the family' in general), the home, marriage, children and stability.

3) An explicit link between Mayakovsky's use of the term *byt* in his poems (and, by extension, his attitude to *byt* in his own life, aside from the poems) on the one hand, and his suicide on the other.

4) An emphasis on *byt* as Mayakovsky's own *personal* enemy, as opposed to an acknowledgement of its existence as a widespread social, cultural and political concern.

Many of the inaccuracies which fall under these four areas are self-evident when they are read in the context of the previous chapter in this section, about the history of *byt*.

Moreover, the particular agendas at play in western criticism are particularly highlighted if we compare its accounts of *byt*, and Mayakovsky's relationship to it, with Russian ones. For example, in stark comparison to the western tendency to pin down and limit *byt*'s significance, which is what makes such a distorted image of Mayakovsky possible, Yulia Mareeva (who, in her essay 'Byt as a Specifically Linguistic Concept' refers to the same Jakobson text as Boym does) makes clear that the purpose of her work is

to analyse not the dictionary definition, but rather to reveal the national-cultural component of the concept of 'byt', which is not fixed in the dictionaries, but is to a large extent determined by the use of the word. As a matter of fact, the emergence of this concept comes in the first quarter of the 20th century, in the works of the poets of the Silver Age. For the Russian intelligentsia *byt* becomes a special word, of multiple values and multi-significance, on the basis of which specific concept, a philosophy of life is in some sense formed.<sup>417</sup>

Likewise, contrary to the western interpretations of 'About This' referred to so far in this chapter, Alexei Metchenko understands the poem very much as a product of its early Soviet context:

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<sup>416</sup> Mayakovsky, *The Bathhouse*, in *Plays*, trans. Guy Daniels, Act II, p. 213.

<sup>417</sup> Yulia Mareeva, 'Быт как лингвоспецифичный концепт', *Социальные варианты языка – VII. Материалы международной научной конференции* (14-15 апреля 2011): pp. 186-189, [http://culturolog.ru/index2.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=493&pop=1&page=0](http://culturolog.ru/index2.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=493&pop=1&page=0), accessed 20/10/2014. My translation.

It is above all the conflict between the greatness of the ideals in whose name the Revolution was accomplished and the difficulties of accomplishing them that face people who have the rust of the old world in their souls and are often slaves to the philistine way of life and to the philistine notion of “family happiness”.<sup>418</sup>

This historically-rooted approach to Mayakovsky’s work, which highlights his position not as one of isolation – standing alone against his ‘personal’ enemy: *byt* – but as being very much *with* and *on behalf* of the Russian people, is echoed by Victor Pertsov:

Mayakovsky’s asceticism [...] was dictated by his own particular era, the historically transitional period of “war communism”. [...] Mayakovsky created a lofty and socially-oriented love poetry which did not fence off man, let alone the poet, from the world; on the contrary, it drew him into competition with the whole world.<sup>419</sup>

The specific conditions of early Soviet *byt* – in particular this difficulty of successfully transitioning between the *old* and *new* forms of it – are also central to Valentin Pluchek’s account of *The Bedbug*. Pluchek – again – writes about it from a socio-political angle which simply isn’t present in western accounts of the same work:

Mayakovsky takes a young man from a working class environment and makes him into the leading character of the comedy, because he wants to show how harmful are the germs of philistinism, how deeply they can hit at the hitherto healthy organism. After mercilessly denouncing Prisyarkin, Mayakovsky contrasts him with the residents of a youth hostel, young people, who are “quick on the move”, but will not crawl out with the white flag, will not sell their birthright for a mess of philistine pottage. And this accurately corresponded to the actual deployment of forces at that historical moment. [...] Successfully disclosing all the various “faults in the machinery”, [Mayakovsky] jealously and scrupulously guarded it from contamination, damage and hostile tendencies, and he was in this sense the outstanding master-craftsman of a fundamentally new and affirmative satire. [...] His] plays compel people not only to laugh at the idlers and parasites who, in the final analysis, punish themselves, but to rejoice full-heartedly at the victory of the new principles in our life.<sup>420</sup>

There are many instances such as these from Russian sources, in which Mayakovsky is described as a ‘poet [who] foresees the prospects for the development of man in the future’<sup>421</sup>, in which ‘what matters most [in Mayakovsky’s work is] his use of artistic means to encourage the social and moral qualities that go into the making of the “new

<sup>418</sup> Alexei Metchenko, ‘The Poetry of Mayakovsky’, in *Innovator*, trans. Alex Miller, pp. 44-45.

<sup>419</sup> Victor Pertsov, ‘Certain Aspects of Mayakovsky’s Innovative Art’, in *Ibid.*, pp. 142-3.

<sup>420</sup> Valentin Pluchek, ‘The New Drama’, in *Ibid.*, pp. 102-3, 108-9.

<sup>421</sup> Fainna Pitzkel, ‘Mayakovsky and the Development of Twentieth-Century Lyrical Poetry’, in *Ibid.*, p. 175.



man”, the “socialist personality””.<sup>422</sup> This development and reformulation of man is the aim of *new byt*. Russian critics therefore do not mirror the western narrative about Mayakovsky’s hatred for domesticity and daily life – indeed they *cannot* – for the simple reason that this narrative is based on a misunderstanding of the concept of *byt* that, to Russians (particularly Soviet Russians), is impossible. Indeed, although Mayakovsky wrote a good deal on the matter, the fact that he was one of many writers and artists to do so means that in Russia it simply does not figure as such a central and defining aspect of his character, as it has come to do in the west. In *Memories and Portraits* for example, Ivan Bunin writes, ‘Mayakovsky shot himself [...], explaining in a note that his “love-boat had grounded”’.<sup>423</sup> Bunin doesn’t even mention that the word *byt* is in that line, and yet to every western critic who has written on the matter, it is the both the heart of line and the crux of the suicide itself – invoked as proof not only that Mayakovsky hated the ‘dullness’ of ‘everyday life’ but, further, that he hated it so much that it was at least partially responsible for his death.

Of course, Mayakovsky’s Soviet critics are not without their own agendas, and it is perhaps telling that ‘byt’ is omitted from the line in this account, given that at the time of his death Mayakovsky’s attacks on *byt* were closely linked with his attacks on the bureaucracy and hypocrisy of the communist party itself. Indeed, Mayakovsky’s suicide, an affront to the very principles of communism, had potentially dangerous implications, and the State was keen to distance itself from the act. On this matter Trotsky notes that

[t]he official report on the suicide hastens to declare, in the language of judicial protocol [...] that the suicide of Mayakovsky “has nothing in common with the public and literary activity of the poet.” That is to say that the willful death of Mayakovsky was in no way connected with his life or that his life had nothing in common with his revolutionary-poetic work. In a word, this turns his death into an adventure out of the police records. This is untrue, unnecessary, and stupid.<sup>424</sup>

However, this work is not concerned with the Russian agenda; I present these accounts to highlight by contrast the (predominantly British and American) western approach, and how unchanged it remains even now. It is, however, by considering this approach

<sup>422</sup> Alexei Metchenko, from ‘Mayakovsky’s Heritage in the Modern World’, in *Ibid.*, p. 210.

<sup>423</sup> Ivan Bunin, ‘Mayakovsky’, in *Memories and Portraits*, trans. Vera Traill and Robin Chancellor (London: John Lehmann Ltd., 1951), p. 194.

<sup>424</sup> Leon Trotsky, ‘Mayakovsky’s Suicide’, *International Socialist Review* 31:1 (Jan-Feb 1970): pp. 44-46, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/05/mayakovsky.htm> Accessed 10/11/2015.

alongside Mayakovsky's own writings that the extent of western misrepresentation may be fully elucidated. The following chapter comprises a comprehensive digest of Mayakovsky's usages of the word *byt* in his work in date order, from oldest to most recent.

## III

Mayakovsky's Representation of *Byt*

The respective translators of the poems 'On Trash', 'About This' and 'With the Whole Voice', and of the plays *The Bedbug* and *The Bathhouse*, are referenced in each instance. The remaining twenty-nine poems are all translated by me. With the exception of 'The Flying Proletarian' which has been previously translated by James H. McGavran III, the translations of mine are the first ever to be made of these poems in the English language (and, for the most part, in any other language besides).

## 1920-21 – 'On Trash'

The first time Mayakovsky addresses the subject of *byt* in his work, in his 1920-21 poem 'On Trash', coincides with the start of the New Economic Policy, and expresses the disjunct between the preoccupation with trivial decorative knick-knacks and communism – with Marx himself declaring from his own portrait amidst such a scene that 'the revolution is tied up in philistine threads!':

On the wall is Marx  
 The little frame is crimson  
 Lying on *The News*, a kitten is getting warm  
 And near the ceiling  
 Chirps  
 A frantic little canary  
 From the wall Marx watches and watches  
 And suddenly  
 Opening his mouth wide,  
 He starts howling:  
 The revolution is tangled up in philistine threads  
 More terrible than Vrangeli<sup>425</sup> is philistine *byt*  
 Better  
 To twist off canaries' heads –  
 So communism  
 Won't be struck down by canaries.<sup>426</sup>

This is one of the few poems used by critics in their accounts of Mayakovsky and *byt* that does actually contain the term itself. In the absence of knowledge about that wider anti-NEPmen context into which the poem fits, it is easy to understand how those writing on the subject (such as Stahlberger, for example) might instead assume Mayakovsky to be

<sup>425</sup> Commanding General of the White Army during the Russian Civil War.

<sup>426</sup> 'О дряни', in *Common Places*, trans. Svetlana Boym, p. 34.



How can we reckon  
the whole harmless procession?  
They all go their way, a harmless troupe.  
They shine forth from the flat's  
spidery beards.  
So it was  
And ever shall be  
World without end.  
The old mare  
of byt  
canters on serenely.  
Only instead of the familiar *lares* and *penates*  
There's a red guardian angel:  
a lodger with trousers  
tucked in his boots.<sup>428</sup>

Vanish!  
My parents' house  
my dear native place!

Farewell!  
Shaking off the last dust  
of the doormat.

What use is my family to me now?  
With its scrawny old  
chicken-shit love

its broody old hen  
of lovey-dovey love?<sup>430</sup>

<sup>428</sup> Ibid., pp. 87-89.

one extended national community, but, as discussed earlier in this section, this was a broader Soviet standpoint and not merely a manifestation of Mayakovsky's personal hatred of domestic home life. That the poet was not against personal domestic relationships in toto is made clear by Jangfeldt, in his introduction to *Correspondence*. Citing Lili Brik, he writes:

According to Lili, the model for their experiment in living was Chernyshevsky's novel *What is to be Done?* Like Chernyshevsky's "new people", they really tried to struggle against jealousy and other manifestations of "the old routine"; a prerequisite of real love and friendship was respect for the freedom and independence of each of them.<sup>431</sup>

Given this, it's interesting to note that Jangfeldt (like so many others) writes, in the context of his discussion of this poem, that 'byt had always been *Mayakovsky's* existential enemy' – and indeed does so alongside a quotation from the poet's own introduction to it, in which Mayakovsky clearly outlines the problem as a broader social one, not one that simply relates *to himself*: 'byt [...] is *our* worst enemy [...] it turns *us* into philistines'.<sup>432</sup>

Mayakovsky's criticism in the 'old mare of *byt*' passage meanwhile is levelled at a different kind of backward-looking behaviour – the hypocrisy of bourgeois lifestyle-emulation. These people with the 'red guardian angel' are actively engaging in bribery and corruption in order to avoid sharing their living quarters as the law at that time demanded. Mayakovsky continues this scene by describing their home, in a manner very similar to that offered in both 'On Trash' and 'Forwards Komsomol':

Little cherubs playing horns  
sounded a fanfare,  
pink burns bright  
in the icon's gleam.  
Jesus, raising  
his thorn-crown hat,  
Bows politely.  
And even Marx  
harnessed in his scarlet frame  
tugged on  
the reins of philistinism.<sup>433</sup>  
Birds sing

<sup>431</sup> Jangfeldt, *Correspondence*, p. 36.

<sup>432</sup> Ibid., p. 261.

<sup>433</sup> The Russian word here is 'obyvatel'stvo', meaning philistinism or narrow-mindedness. In his translation, Hyde calls it 'routine'.

from every perch.  
Geraniums slither  
up your nostrils  
from flowerpots.<sup>434</sup>

### 3)

In the section 'Pointless Requests', Mayakovsky attempts to impress upon a group of people the importance and urgency of language in revolutionising society, but his 'words struck people's foreheads like peas on a plate', as they drunkenly refuse to listen:

Cut out the whining!  
Let's eat! Let's drink!  
Let's drink! Let's eat!  
[...]  
the debate continued,  
drawing from  
Artesian torrents,  
filling the glass  
of poetic licentiousness.  
Bedbugs  
exchanged greetings  
as they crawled into the mattress.  
The dust of centuries settled once more.  
[...]  
Headfirst  
into byt<sup>435</sup>  
I thrust again  
With floods of words  
on the attack  
this way, that way...  
But it's funny:  
my words just slip through  
without touching the sides.<sup>436</sup>

### 4)

Mayakovsky here describes himself leaving the Montmartre cafe La Rotonde, & walking along the Seine alone:

On the boulevards  
I yell through the military helmets:  
– Under the red banner!  
March!  
For [the sake of] byt!<sup>437</sup>

<sup>434</sup> Hyde and Gureyeva, *Pro Eto*, p. 93.

<sup>435</sup> Translated by Hyde and Gureyeva as 'life's dreariness'.

<sup>436</sup> *Pro Eto*, pp. 99-101.

<sup>437</sup> My translation.

There is some discrepancy between translations here. Hyde says ‘March! / For a better way of life!’<sup>438</sup>, whilst Marshall uses, ‘March! / Over life out-dated!’<sup>439</sup> – i.e. *away* from *byt*. The implication in both cases, as in Mayakovsky’s own, is that a new way of life is being marched towards, in preference to an old way, an aspect which, aside from the brief, vague intimations of Kraan and deMuth, has never been picked up on in the numerous published accounts of *byt* in this poem.

## 5)

In this final instance the stagnation of *old byt*, indicated by Mayakovsky’s reference to that which is ‘everything past slavishness driven’ is represented as being something which ought to be wholly anachronistic with post-revolutionary life:

[I]n summer,  
                                 in autumn,  
   in winter,  
   in spring,  
 awake,  
                                 or asleep,  
   I accept not,  
   I hate  
 all of it,  
                                 everything.  
 Everything  
                                 into us  
   past slavishness driven,  
 everything,  
                                 that in swarming trifles teem  
 ossifying  
                                 and assifying *byt*<sup>440</sup>  
 even in our own  
   red-flag society.<sup>441</sup>

## 1924 – ‘On Account of Every Smallest Thing (Pair of Publishing Companies)’

This poem is an appeal to people to keep their eyes open, and remember that it is the little, seemingly inconsequential elements of life which are ripe for *byt*’s corruption more than the big, obvious elements of communist living:

<sup>438</sup> *Pro Eto*, p. 125.

<sup>439</sup> Marshall, *Mayakovsky*, p. 202.

<sup>440</sup> Here the term ‘living’ is used by Marshall.



Byt  
       doesn't come rushing in at the door –  
 byt  
       worms its way  
                                   through the cracks.  
 [...]
 The slimy ripples  
                                   pull you under,  
 [just as] the weak  
                                   get knocked off their horse shoes.  
 [...]
 Beat it off,  
                           be strong,  
                                   seize  
 byt!<sup>442</sup>

This short poem is in two parts, and the lines given above appear at the end of both sections, to hammer home their message. It represents an appeal to put *more*, not *less* emphasis on the business of daily living, and indeed by describing *byt* in this quite horrific and almost literally living way – as something that ‘worms its way’ in, that ‘pulls you under’, but also as something that, through individual vigilance, may be ‘beaten off’ and ‘seize[d]’ – Mayakovsky is, himself, essentially helping to shape the very concept he describes. By presenting a figurative representation of the literal work to be done to take control of the movement or direction of *byt*, and, essentially, to put it to work *for* rather than *against* one’s own interests, he gives a very visual and tangible sense of what needs to be done. In the following poem this sense is made more concrete and explicit still:

### 1925 – Drag Forth the Future!

The future  
       will not arrive by itself,  
 it requires  
       particular action.  
 We have to grab it –  
                           head to toe –  
 by the ears, Pioneers!  
 by the tail, Komsomol!  
 The commune’s  
       no fairytale princess  
 for you to dream about

<sup>441</sup> Marshall, *Mayakovsky*, p. 209. I use his translation here because, although the phraseology is a bit clunky, the meaning is more literally presented than in Hyde and Gureyeva’s.

<sup>442</sup> ‘На учет каждая мелочишка (пара издевательств)’, in *Полное собрание сочинений Том 6*, p. 39, ll. 76-88 and 172-184, my translation. This title is a pun on accounts, keeping records.

in your sleep.  
 Calculate it,  
     keep a plan,  
             wishful thinking isn't enough.  
 Take aim  
     and let's go at it –  
             even if only at the minuscule stuff.  
 Communism  
     does not merely exist  
 on the ground,  
     in the sweat of the factories.  
 It is at home  
     at the table,  
 in family,  
     in our relationships:  
 it is in *byt*.  
  
 [...]

Through both fur coats  
     and time  
             alike,  
 byt,  
 the insatiable clothes-moth,  
             gobbles its way.  
 The material of our present day  
     is yet stale  
             and musty...

Komsomol!  
 Take it –  
 and shake out the dust!<sup>443</sup>

In this poem, which I have discussed more than once already in previous chapters and so shall not dwell on too much here, Mayakovsky explicitly asserts *not* that communism and *byt* are mutually exclusive, but contrariwise that communism is in fact to be found *in byt*; that a focus on *byt* is necessary for its realisation. In the second excerpt, the dynamic between the *old* and the *new* is implicitly brought into discussion as Mayakovsky refers to *byt* as an 'insatiable clothes-moth'. Without actively shaking out one's clothes, he insists, it is impossible for them to lose their long-standing parasitic contamination and become fresh and healthy. Again, here there is an implicit distinction between the shift from old to new – 'the material of the present day' stands in the balance between the passive mustiness of the past and the vigour of the future, and only the actions of its 'owners', in this case communist adolescents, can effect the transition. Moreover it seems pertinent that in this poem – which is addressed specifically to the young people of the Komsomol – *byt* is presented as something tangible – something it is *possible* to 'shake out'. To revisit Kiaer and Naiman's comment, that '[i]t is in the repeated, routine practices of everyday life rather than party edicts that the incomprehensible, world-



How might western critics of Mayakovsky account for his hope that ‘that is who surely must *remake anew* our sardiney doleful byt’ when, according to them, *byt* by its very nature is static and unchanging? The second excerpt is interesting however, in that by linking ‘no such thing as byt’ to ‘no such thing as kitchens’ – albeit in the specific context of no longer needing to use kitchens to make dinners – the suggestion is made not only that *all* byt has been abolished, but that the *byt* in question is of the domestic routine variety so keenly focussed on in the west. Accordingly, James McGavran III translates these lines as ‘No kitchen, / no tedious domestic bustle!’<sup>447</sup> In this instance, the emphasis lies on reassuring the children that thanks to futuristic technology, mealtimes are no longer a lengthy ceremonious occasion, but rather a quick, convenient and functional activity:

You show up  
and sit down.  
You get some grub  
and eat it up.  
If you want, take two;  
if you want, take five –  
to meet anyone’s taste,  
for every appetite.  
The dishes  
                    are self-clearing.  
                                    You finish eating  
  and you’re off!<sup>448</sup>

### 1926 – ‘Four-storey Hackwork’

In this poem, Mayakovsky attacks the State-sponsored so-called ‘proletarian poets’ who, in his opinion, pay vehement lip service to the problems of *byt* whilst themselves remaining very much a part of those problems: self-importantly rehashing political ideas for a fee, and treating the work as an excuse for social gatherings. This indicates that, contrary to the suggestion of western criticism, the subject of *byt* was addressed by many more poets than just Mayakovsky himself – and the poem itself relates to the notion of philistinism, and not daily living:

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<sup>446</sup> ‘Летающий пролетарий’, in *Полное собрание сочинений Том 6*, p. 311, ll. 1070-1087, 1305-1317, my translation.

<sup>447</sup> McGavran, *Selected Poems*, p. 300.

In Russia  
                there's only one kind of fun  
  – drinking... –  
And for drinking  
                you bring a loaf  
  and a slice of cheese.  
And writers yell themselves  
                hoarse  
  about byt,  
carried away  
                on the byt  
  of the State publishing house cashiers.<sup>449</sup>

in this case – food and drink  
determine consciousness.<sup>450</sup>

The phrase, ‘Byt’ye – a u etogo – eda i pit’ye opredelyaet coznanie’, as a direct reference to Marx’s ‘existence determines consciousness’ (‘Byt’ye opredelyaet coznanie’), invokes the image of critics for whom Marxist theory is practised literally, even down to the eating of one’s dinner – just as children learn by rote at school without any proper thought to the matter of their subject. For such critics, even the discussion of well-known poets such as Lermontov (whom they only discover by accident, while leafing through their poetry books and arriving at the “L” section) amounts solely to this:

The critic debates, what did he eat on the first  
and what – on the third.  
– Did he drink champagne?  
Let us assume that he did.<sup>451</sup>

Further, such critics, for whom the *appearance* of culture trumps real knowledge, have:

always  
on the table  
covered in dust  
an uncut volume of Plekhanov.<sup>452</sup>

and although

[h]e attacks bourgeois glut  
[...] his  
love  
of pickled cabbage  
exposes  
a landowner's taste.<sup>453</sup>

<sup>450</sup> ‘Марксизм – оружие, огнестрельный метод. Применяй умеючи метод этот!’, in *Ibid.*, p. 106, ll. 41-43.

<sup>451</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 50-55. A similar attack is made in *Mystery-Bouffe*, when the bourgeois German describes his experience of the revolution thus: ‘When I’d finished my soup, I looked at the Eiffel towers of bottles on the shelf, and I asked myself: What kind of beef shall I have today? Or should I have beef at all? I looked again, and my food stuck in my throat: something was wrong out there in the street!’ (*Plays*, trans. Guy Daniels, Act I, p. 49.) The theme also arises in *The Bathhouse*, when Velosipedkin’s response to the unveiling of Chudakov’s time travel machine is limited to his plans for the rapid rearing, cooking and eating of giant chickens. Chudakov’s astounded reply to these plans: ‘What incubators? What chickens? I’m telling you –’ is misinterpreted by Velosipedkin, whose imagination stretches no further than the prospect of food: ‘OK, OK! You can think in terms of elephants or giraffes if you want to – if little barnyard beasts aren’t good enough for you. But the rest of use will go ahead and use all these ideas on our little gray baby chicks.’ (Act I, in *Plays*, trans. Guy Daniels, p. 201.)

<sup>452</sup> ‘Марксизм...’, ll. 32-36. My translation.

<sup>453</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 56-61.

## 1926 – ‘Horrific Familiarity’

In this poem, Mayakovsky appeals to people to cease the commodification and trivial appropriation of the names of key communist figures, such as Meyerhold, Semashko, Kollontai, and even, for “mongrel dogs”, the half human/half horse/dog folklore creature Polkan:

Every inch  
                                     of the earth’s *byt*<sup>454</sup>  
 refamiliarised  
                                     and de-referenced.  
 [...]  
                                     About Meyerhold they will ask:  
   “Which one?”  
 Is that the one that’s a comb?”<sup>455</sup>

Here – unusually for Mayakovsky – *byt* is used more generally, to indicate all the many elements that make up day-to-day existence around the world. He is of course however referring specifically to material things and not daily routines: a comb in the case of the above excerpt and, elsewhere in the poem, an avenue named after Marx, an alley named after the Commissar of Enlightenment Anatoly Lunacharsky, a cream named after the Bolshevik Zhenotdel (Women’s Sector) founder Aleksandra Kollontai and braces named after the People’s Commissar of Public Health Nikolai Semashko. Again, by suggesting that the elements of *byt* may be ‘refamiliarised and de-referenced’ the implication is made that *byt* is something socially transformable.

## 1926 – ‘Love’

This poem, which was discussed in the previous chapter, outlines the various manifestations of the *byt* type – predominantly hypocritical men who abuse or take advantage of women. The final extract, which echoes the sentiment of the ‘chicken-shit love’ passage from ‘About This’, admonishes young couples who enter immediately into

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<sup>454</sup> ‘bytiya zemnogo’.

marriage for the sake of tradition, and in doing so effect a social stultification which is obstructive to socialist progression:

We *adore* the rallies  
       such *elegant* anthems!  
 Leaving the meetings,  
       we speak with such beauty,  
 but often  
       beneath it,  
               covered in mould,  
 is little-old-grotty-old bytik.

At the parades he sings out:  
       “Forward, Comrades...”  
 but forgetting  
       his solo arias  
               at home  
 he yells at his wife for her faults:  
       that her cabbage soup has got no fat  
 and the pickles  
       have got no salt.  
 He’s got a girl on the side –  
       as big as a bus,  
 dressed as fine  
       as an opera diva.  
 But for her thin stockings  
       he chides his wife:  
 don’t compromise me  
       before the collective –  
                                   purlease!

The next [byt-type]  
       meanwhile,  
 will slyly crawl up anyone’s  
                                   pair of legs,  
 five different women  
                                   he’ll take  
                                   in one day.

We have, after all,  
       our freedom,  
       in place of the old monogamy.  
 Down with philistinism  
       and prejudice!  
 From flower to flower,  
       the young dragonfly  
 flutters,  
       flaps  
       and tosses itself exhausted after the fragrance.

For him  
       the world’s one evil  
       is a woman seeking maintenance.

He’d sooner be dead  
       than relinquish his earnings,  
 spend three years in court than face up to the music:  
 Who, me? No, not me,

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<sup>455</sup> ‘Ужасающая фамильярность’, *Полное собрание сочинений Том 7*, p. 165, ll. 17-20, 40-43. My translation.



and no, she is not mine –  
 and in any case,  
     I am a enuch!  
 [...]
 They<sup>456</sup> practice  
     their love like a kind of sport,  
 with no time  
     to enrol in the Komsomol.  
 And then on  
     to the village,  
     byt without progress –  
 they live, as before,  
     from one year to the next.<sup>457</sup>

This is an interesting (and more difficult) poem to translate, because in it Mayakovsky introduces *byt* as a physical manifestation that, ‘covered in mould’, lies threateningly beneath progressive public and political behaviour as a contamination of private lives, and then as a series of personifications, or ‘byt-types’ of that manifestation, the three included in this excerpt being: the type whose behaviour towards his wife exposes the hypocrisy of his public persona; the type who uses the Soviet ideal of sexual freedom to have sex with as many women as he possibly can, only to refuse to take responsibility for ensuing pregnancies; and the type (both male and female) who get married in church purely for the sake of tradition, rather than pursuing a revolutionary ‘marriage’ with all comrades for the sake of communism. In this final ‘type’ *byt* is presented in yet another, and this time more literal, way as a way of life – specifically the *old* way of life: ‘byt without progress’. As in previous poems, the idea that it is possible, by contrast, to have a *byt with* progress is antithetical to western criticism on this subject.

### 1926 – ‘On the Agenda’

In this poem of the same year, Mayakovsky returns to the theme of getting rid of trivial clutter, promoting instead sparse, clean ascetic living quarters as a central concern of the *new byt*. His direct appeal to adolescents, ‘the makers of the future’, in this work (and indeed in many of his later poems about *byt*), stands in stark contradiction to Stahlberger’s assertion that ‘children for Majakovsky are repeated natural events in the human sphere and mere repetition [...] always implies the power of the past. [...] H]ence

<sup>456</sup> Here Mayakovsky is referring to young couples entering into marriage.

<sup>457</sup> ‘Любовь’, *Полное собрание сочинений Том 7*, p. 146, ll. 11-63, 118-126. My translation.







The tsar  
     sleeps  
         serenely in his grave...  
 We shot down Milyukov,  
         shot down Kerensky...  
 But when it comes to byt  
         we progress like crabs  
 Many people are moving backwards  
         in their lives out of uniform.  
 And here I am, opening  
         my poetic lips  
 in order to describe  
         these jerks.  
 Cufflinks and buttons,  
         at the front and the back.  
 They get lost,  
         they fall off  
             up to ten times a day.  
 It appears  
         that in fashion  
             one's buttons are crucial,  
 Without your brain however –  
         you'll be a-okay.<sup>462</sup>

*Byt* in this poem is described as being in a state of progress, and Mayakovsky's concern is simply that it is not progressing quickly enough. The sentiment is to some extent reminiscent of that in 'On Account of Every Smallest Thing'. Just as, in that earlier poem, Mayakovsky impresses upon his reader the necessity of paying attention to the little things, of insisting that 'byt doesn't come rushing in at the door, byt worms its way in through the cracks', so in these lines does he draw a distinction between the immediate – and clearly visible – nature of acts such as the execution of the tsar and other key white army generals, compared to the many small accumulative daily acts that are just as important to ensure the continued development of communism. Once more, in presenting *byt* as something capable of both progression and regression, Mayakovsky's understanding of its developmental character is made clear.

## 1927 – 'The Stabilisation of Byt'

<sup>462</sup> “Дашь изячную жизнь”, in *Полное собрание сочинений Том 8*, p. 35, ll. 26-48. My translation. This character trait also appears in *Mystery-Bouffe*, when the Lady, preparing to join the revolutionaries, rushes off to her hatboxes, crying, 'I'll make haste to put on my red ribbons. (One must, after all, keep up with the Revolutionary style!) But I'll return in a minute – no more! – to the people I so adore.' (Act II, from *Plays*, trans. Guy Daniels, p. 77.)





THE PHOSPHORESCENT WOMAN: Whose lips?  
 TYPIST: My own.  
 THE PHOSPHORESCENT WOMAN: And you didn't do anything else?  
 TYPIST: I typed and took shorthand.  
 THE PHOSPHORESCENT WOMAN: Did you do it well?  
 TYPIST: Yes.  
 THE PHOSPHORESCENT WOMAN: Then why aren't you working anywhere?  
 TYPIST: They fired me.  
 THE PHOSPHORESCENT WOMAN: Why?  
 TYPIST: I painted lips.  
 THE PHOSPHORESCENT WOMAN: Whose lips?  
 TYPIST: I already told you – my own!  
 THE PHOSPHORESCENT WOMAN: What business was it of theirs?  
 TYPIST: They fired me.  
 THE PHOSPHORESCENT WOMAN: Why?  
 TYPIST: Because I painted lips, they said.  
 THE PHOSPHORESCENT WOMAN: Why did you?  
 TYPIST: Because if you don't, they won't give you a job in the first place.<sup>469</sup>

Given the frequency with which accusations of sexism and misogyny are levelled at Mayakovsky, explicit instances of feminist identification such as these are significant. Unlike the majority of the poems here, which have never been available before in English translation, Daniels's collection of Mayakovsky's plays, which includes *The Bathhouse*, is both in print and readily available – a fact which has not prevented it from being excluded from discussions about Mayakovsky's attitudes towards women until now.

### 1927 – 'Educational Business – Nice and Confusing'

This poem represents a simple reiteration for the need for electricity and cleanliness in order to combat the poor conditions of *old byt*:

Fight  
 for a clean table and chair!  
 Comrades,  
 we need greater attempts  
 to enter  
 electricity and cleanliness  
 into the misery of our current *byt*!<sup>470</sup>

Yet again, by referring specifically to 'current *byt*', the contestable nature of *byt* is made explicit.

<sup>469</sup> Ibid., pp.248-250.

<sup>470</sup> 'Дела вузные, хорошие и конфузные', Ibid., p. 123, ll. 160-166. My translation.



1928 –

‘Poetry

Not about Rubbish,

But about Utter Shit.

Shit

Slashes

the Final Rhyme’

The final line of this title is a play on words. It a) insinuates that, by using the “poetic” device of rhyming, hacks can get away with calling any old ‘shit’ “poetry”, and b) implies that ‘shitty’ content diminishes the potential power of strong rhymes. In this poem Mayakovsky again admonishes his contemporaries for focussing their poetic attention on the bloated trash of *old byt* and thus preserving it, rather than working to eradicate it from the new society. He also cleverly inoculates himself against attacks on the arguably ‘bourgeois’ focus on love and other ‘trivial’ matters in his own poetry, both by alluding to that work and reinforcing his move away from it, and by creating the distinction between ‘rubbish’ (in his own case) and the rather more severe ‘utter shit’ of his contemporaries:

Everyone knows  
   that in my  
   early youth  
 I was spouting  
   rubbish.  
 But rubbish doesn’t get translated.  
   “The new” bursts with a crash  
 with verse...  
   about the new trash.  
 Teensy byt  
   creeps its way  
   into the gaps of everything.  
 [...]
 This  
   byt,  
   bloated and greasy –  
 is that what the tongue of poetry  
   spends its time  
   upholstering?!

Inventor,  
   give us  
   a Universal powder,  
 to kill  
   at once

both bedbugs and philistines.<sup>471</sup>

This kind of poem highlights the extraordinary stylistic range with which Mayakovsky approaches this one concept. The kind of fantastic extended metaphor set up in these lines is of the sort we might perhaps associate most readily with poems like ‘A Cloud in Trousers’ – and yet in the same breath Mayakovsky denounces the poetry of his ‘early youth’. By deriding “‘the new’” poetry of his contemporaries meanwhile, as ‘burst[ing] with a crash with verse... about the new trash’ – and doing so in a style that most readily resembles that of his own younger self, Mayakovsky manages to scathingly attack both the form *and* content of the work of his targets, at the same time as protecting himself against counter-attacks on his previous, more immature works *and* meanwhile defending his innovative stylistic approach (commonly attacked by those ‘philistines’ to which he refers for its ‘individualist’ nature) as one that, contrary to their view, is absolutely suitable for the task at hand.

1928 was the year in which Mayakovsky wrote the greatest number of poems about *byt*, on matters ranging from avoiding corruption, maintaining good physical health and avoiding philistine behaviour. Here, the representation of *byt* tends to be more abstract and general than in his previous poems on the subject, particularly in the following three, in which the focus is on the specific circumstances that may breed and, conversely, dispel *byt*, rather than on presenting the concept itself as a character in its own right:

### 1928 – ‘Crud’

There,  
     where there is byt,  
                     and where there is bickering,  
 roams  
     common bribery,–  
 the heart  
     gnaws the soul to shreds.  
 [...]
 In order for us to break out,  
                     away from the stinking corruption  
 of this lice-ridden  
     dirty byt –  
 Let us  
     not take bribes[.]<sup>472</sup>

<sup>471</sup> ‘Стих / не про дрянъ / А про дрянцо. / Дрянцо / хлещите / рифм концом’, in *Полное собрание сочинений Том 9*, p. 219, ll. 10-12, 87-98. My translation.

In the next poem Mayakovsky describes the way in which, by maintaining good physical health, by doing sports, ‘frivolous little *byt*’ may be overcome:

### 1928 – ‘The Benefits of Earthquakes’

Frivolous  
little *byt*  
is gnawed away by sports.<sup>473</sup>

### 1928 – ‘Suck-Up’

These lines follow a description of excessive flattery in the workplace on the part of the worker described. As in the case of ‘Crud’, it is a warning against the socially corruptive dangers of bribery and underhand behaviour for personal gain:

And of course – to him<sup>474</sup>  
went all the promotions,  
And those  
still mired in *byt*  
quickly followed suit.<sup>475</sup>

### 1928 – ‘Forwards Komsomol’

In this poem Mayakovsky again appeals to young people to train themselves in communist values in order to combat the ‘vodka’, ‘swearing’, ‘grime’ and ‘fleas’ of old *byt*:

Old *byt* –  
is ferocious  
Vodka and grime –  
that’s *byt*.  
But lead the young,  
To the MYuD<sup>476</sup>  
And the old –

<sup>472</sup> ‘Мразь’, in Ibid., p. 399, ll. 25-31, 49-54. My translation.

<sup>473</sup> ‘Польза землетрясении’, in Ibid., p. 233, ll.38-40. My translation.

<sup>474</sup> I.e. to the one who blindly sucks up to authority.

<sup>475</sup> ‘Подлиза’, in *Полное собрание сочинений Том 9*, p. 359, ll.67-72. My translation.

<sup>476</sup> ‘МЮД’. A working holiday camp for young builders of socialism.

will be obliterated!  
Forward, Komsomol,  
On the All-Union campaign!  
In the trenches  
our enemies –  
are stirring.  
Let your desire for combat  
flare up  
at byt –  
At the vodka!  
At the swearing!  
At the grime!  
At the fleas!<sup>477</sup>

on it went in moderation.

But –  
     I know:  
         that the revolution  
                                 is not yet grey,  
 that byt  
     is no sightless mole, –  
 revolution  
     is always,  
 always  
     young and prepared.<sup>478</sup>

Here it is clearly *new byt* to which Mayakovsky refers – with his reference to it as ‘no sightless mole’ perhaps a reminder once more not to under-estimate or diminish the power and significance of the new way of life.

### 1928 – ‘Leninist Arsenal’

In this poem Mayakovsky states (in opposition to what he refers to as the “bureaucratic army of the Whites”) that:

the strongest  
                     of all our  
                                 weapons –  
 Is the Bolshevik idea.  
 [...]
 Go,  
     and overcome this Russian nonsense!  
 Stand against –  
     flea-ridden byt!<sup>479</sup>

The qualification of *byt* as ‘flea-ridden’ once more indicates that it is *byt* of a particular sort that must be stood against – although if this poem were seen in isolation, confusion on the variations would be understandable in the context of our current western criticism, as Mayakovsky is not as explicit here as elsewhere with regard to his meaning.

### 1928 – “‘The Community’ And ‘Me’”

<sup>478</sup> ‘Дачный случай’, Ibid., p. 142, ll. 79-95. My translation.

<sup>479</sup> ‘Арсенал ленинцев’, in Ibid., p. 114, ll. 7-10, 47-50. My translation.

This poem describes a typical “philistine” bureaucrat. He plays lip service to communist ideals, putting on a big show of his commitment to the party, but in fact his main concern lies with how he, as an individual, is seen within the party. As soon as he returns to the privacy of his home his hypocrisy is revealed. For example, while in public he repeats mantras about women’s rights, in private he shouts at his own wife over the quality of her soup. Likewise his own lifestyle, contrary to the ascetic ideal he preaches in public, is very comfortable, selfishly organised and typically bourgeois. The poem ends with the lines:

In going  
                    through byt  
                                    in philistine cliques,  
with exaggerated  
                                    fastidiousness,  
we  
    change  
                    the face of life  
both public  
                                    and private.<sup>480</sup>

### 1928 – ‘Two Cultures’

In this poem Mayakovsky draws the distinction between the power of women in bourgeois households, who enjoy trips to Paris and are dictatorial over the servants they keep, and those of the proletariat, who are being led by ‘new Soviet byt’ to positions of genuine power and equality:

That madame  
                    and her family  
                                    are currently in Paris,  
whilst the new  
                    Soviet byt  
leads  
    the female worker  
                                    to new days  
away from the stove  
                                    and the kitchen floor.  
[...]  
New  
    culture,  
        Hi!  
See how  
    in the Soviets

---

<sup>480</sup> ““Общее” и “Мое”” (literally “The Common” And “Mine”, i.e. public life versus private), Ibid., p. 152, ll. 151-160. My translation.

of both Moscow and Kharkiv – The peasant women  
and the cooks  
control the state.<sup>481</sup>

The language of these final two lines (pravyat gosudarstvom / krest'yanka / i kyxarka) echoes that of Lenin, in his 1917 pamphlet 'Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?':

The proletariat, we are told, will not be able to set the state apparatus in motion. [...] However,] we have a “magic way” to enlarge our state apparatus *tenfold* at once, at one stroke, a way which no capitalist state ever possessed or could possess. This magic way is to draw the working people, to draw the poor, into the daily work of state administration. [...] We are not utopians. We know that an unskilled labourer or a cook cannot immediately get on with the job of state administration. [Myi znaem, chto lyuboi chernorabochiy i lyubaya kuxarka ne sposobni seychas zhe vstupit’ v upravlenie gosudarstvom.] [...] But] we demand an immediate break with the prejudiced view that only the rich, or officials chosen from rich families, are capable of *administering* the state, of performing the ordinary, everyday work of administration. We demand that *training* in the work of state administration be conducted by class-conscious workers and soldiers and that this training be begun at once, i.e., that a *beginning* be made at once in training all the working people, all the poor, for this work.<sup>482</sup>

Mayakovsky had previously (and more explicitly) invoked this phrase in his 1924 poem 'Vladimir Ilyich Lenin', in which, describing a triumphant scene in which the upper classes slink back to their 'kingdoms and dukedoms', he declares:

Even every cook  
we'll teach  
to run the state.<sup>483</sup>

Not only do we have here an account of – specifically – a ‘new Soviet’ *byt*, but of a real, tangible, transformative social movement that itself will lead women away from the drudgery involved in waiting on the upper classes and into work that involves real power and agency.

## 1928 – ‘Are You Paying Attention to Technology?!’

<sup>481</sup> 'Две культуры', in *Ibid.*, p. 60, ll. 78 - 87, 118-126. My translation.

<sup>482</sup> 'Удержат ли большевики государственную власть?', trans. Yuri Sdobnikov and George Hanna, *Lenin Internet Archive*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/oct/01.htm>, accessed 06/02/2014.

The modernisation of everyday life as a revolutionary act is the subject of this poem, which I have discussed at length elsewhere in this part of the thesis and so will not linger on here except to say that once again Mayakovsky is calling unequivocally for the ‘stirring up’, the revolution of *byt* – an impossible act according to his western critics:

Proritise  
                                 into first place –  
 the workers,  
                                 the technicians,  
   the inventors!  
 Flood  
                                 the philistines’  
   little mouse holes,  
 shake out and pester them  
   with new  
   slogans.  
 Remember,  
                                 that by stirring up  
   byt  
   with modern machines,  
 you  
                                 continue  
   the work of October.<sup>484</sup>

### 1928-30 – ‘With The Whole Voice’

The following lines appear twice, in a selection of verse fragments labelled ‘Incomplete’ at the bottom of what has since become recognised as the “end” of ‘With The Whole Voice’: Part III, ll. 3-4 of 7, & also Part IV ll. 5-6 of 12. They were also reproduced in Mayakovsky’s suicide note, and represent one of the most-quoted examples of his so-called hatred of *byt*. Indeed, Brown tells us that ‘there can be no doubt [that] the general import of the line [refers to Mayakovsky’s life being] caught in the web of new conventions and tangled by routine’, despite the complete lack of any explicit context given by the poet as to what kind of *byt* he refers to here:

As they say, the incident is cloved.  
 The love boat, crashed against *byt*.<sup>485</sup>

<sup>483</sup> From ‘Vladimir Ilyich Lenin’, trans. Herbert Marshall, in *Mayakovsky*, p. 305.

<sup>484</sup> ‘Технике внимание видать ли?’, in *Полное собрание сочинений Том 9*, p. 403, ll. 26-44. My translation.

<sup>485</sup> ‘Во весь голос’, *Полное собрание сочинений Том 10*, p. 279. My translation.



Brown assumes that the ‘love-boat’ Mayakovsky is referring to is himself, a conveniently romantic and rather melodramatic self-description against which to translate *byt* as the ‘conventions and [...] routine’ he believes the poet to have been ‘smashed’ on. Of course it may be that Mayakovsky *is* referring to himself in that line – certainly he is no stranger either to romanticism *or* melodrama – but it seems unlikely given that in the preceding two lines he refers to himself explicitly in the first person:

I’m in no hurry; with lightning telegrams  
I have no cause to wake or trouble you.<sup>486</sup>

Looking at this reference to *byt* in the context of Mayakovsky’s considerable body of work that preceded it on the same concept, and taking into account the fact that at the time *this* one was written Mayakovsky had spent two years being mercilessly hounded by those State-sponsored “philistines” who, for the poet, were prime examples of the lingering effects of *old byt* against that *new byt* for the realisation of which he had been, for almost a decade, fighting on behalf of the proletariat, a more plausible interpretation might be that the ‘love-boat’ refers to the trajectory of the new communist society – or rather to the proletariat in the *boat* of the Soviet State – and that *byt* refers to the insurmountable obstacles faced by that society by the corruption of its vessel under Stalin.

### 1929 – ‘The Results’

Here, Mayakovsky appeals to the Komsomols to avoid alcoholic behaviour. As with ‘Forwards, Komsomol’, alcohol is linked to swearing, filth and poor living. Meanwhile the *byt* itself is presented, as elsewhere in Mayakovsky’s poetry aimed at young people, in very physical terms. The tangibly disgusting notion of ‘slimy [...] filthy byt’ here is matched by the ‘marshy puddle of byt’ in ‘On the Agenda’ and the ‘vodka and grime’ of ‘Forwards Komsomol’. Of course Mayakovsky also uses such descriptions in poems not explicitly aimed at the young, but it is interesting that he uses them without fail in those that are:

And between the swearing

---

<sup>486</sup> ‘Past One O’Clock’, in *Volodya*, trans. George Reavey, p. 218.

Here, Mayakovsky admonishes the slovenly drunken nature of people's weekend hours and commemorative feasts, particularly with regard to the negative effects such behaviour carries over into working days:

In this poem, which is written from the point of view of a car driver, Mayakovsky criticises the Soviet people, many of whom, he says, are dangerously oblivious to cars on the road; who, for example, recognise the presence of hubcaps only insofar as they provide a mirror with which to touch up one's make up; and who, as pedestrians, step blindly out into the road where not even a machine gun, let alone a car horn can, could

<sup>487</sup> 'Итоги', in *Полное собрание сочинений Том 10*, p. 12, ll. 52-70. My translation.

Citizens,  
                it's beginning to seem  
  to me  
that you are unworthy  
                                    of industrialisation.  
[...]  
And comrades,  
                we must get on with this  
  in our daily life [byt]  
in order to re-shoe  
                            our human material.<sup>489</sup>

## 1929 – ‘Let’s Denounce’

<sup>489</sup> 'Стих как бы шофера', in *Ibid.*, p. 144, ll. 1-6, 85-89. My translation.

In this poem (which is dated very precisely: 22-23<sup>rd</sup> November 1929), Mayakovsky describes an incredibly cramped, dirty, unhygienic home, in which there is no proper ventilation, the bath tub is inhabited by a goat, and the walls are held together by nails. He appeals to people living in these conditions that relocating to new [State-controlled] apartments ought to end these kinds of conditions, stating in the final lines:

– Comrades,  
by moving  
to new homes,  
let us denounce  
the old *byt*!<sup>490</sup>

This appeal is a reiteration of the concerns about cleanliness in communist housing raised by Trotsky seven years before:

Many houses which had been allotted to families living in communes got into filthy conditions and became uninhabitable. People living in them did not consider communistic housing as a beginning of new conditions – they looked upon their dwellings as upon barracks provided by the state. As a result of unpreparedness, hasty methods, lack of self-discipline, and want of culture, the communes very often have proved an utter failure.<sup>491</sup>

The poem's title meanwhile is undoubtedly a reference to the revolutionary anthem 'The Workers' Marseillaise' which, set to the tune of 'The Marseillaise', was first published in 1875 by Pyotr Lavrov. Commonly used amidst (and during the years following) the 1905 revolution, and up until the early soviet period, its opening lines, which echo Mayakovsky's frequently-made link between dust and *old byt*, are:

Let's denounce the old world  
Let's shake its dust from our feet!<sup>492</sup>

### 1929 – 'Life and Soul of The Party'

In this poem Mayakovsky undermines the "cool" popular image of the heavy drinker in Russian culture, stating that those who, throughout history, have been labelled

<sup>490</sup> 'Отречёмся', Ibid., p. 135, ll. 97 - 101. My translation.

<sup>491</sup> Trotsky, 'Against Bureaucracy, Progressive and Unprogressive', in *Problems of Everyday Life*, p. 61.

<sup>492</sup> 'Otrechyomsya ot starogo mira / Otryaxnem ego prax s nashix nog!' Translator unknown.

Of all the many drinking songs you may hear, Mayakovsky states, the only one you ought to remember is this:

## 1929 – *The Bedbug*

The matter of ‘philistine byt’ is contextualised by A.V. Fevral'sky in his notes to this play:

Fevralsky's comments highlight the status of *byt* as both a 'widely developed' cultural topic and an enemy of the Soviets as a whole – it is clearly not the case that *byt* existed only as Mayakovsky's 'personal' enemy, as western criticism suggests. Just as he does in

<sup>495</sup> A. V. Fevral'sky, Notes to *Клоп*, in *Полное собрание сочинений Том 11*, p. 662. My translation.

*The Bathhouse*, Mayakovsky here satirises the hypocrisy of party members by exposing their own philistine behaviour as they ineffectually denounce the trappings of *old byt*:

Prisipkin: Comrade Bard, I'm against all this philistine byt – lace curtains and canaries... I'm a man with higher needs. What I'm interested in is a wardrobe with a mirror...<sup>496</sup>

Even in passages of *The Bedbug* in which the specific term *byt* is not used, the 'danger' of such unrevolutionary philistinism remains explicit, for example in the following excerpt from Act II, sc. v, which raises the question of whether or not Prisypkin ought to be resurrected:

In view of the danger of the spread of the bacteria of arrogance and sycophancy, which were epidemic in 1929, we demand that the exhibit remain in its refrigerated state.<sup>497</sup>

Speaking of *old byt* characteristics in this way – as something which may be physically infectious – is reminiscent of Pluchek's description of the early Soviet fear that 'rotten, parasitic attitudes of mind' could effect a 'bourgeois influence on the younger generations'. Mayakovsky alludes to this parasitic potential in the specific context of art in his final Komsomol Club speech in 1930:

Twenty years ago, I remember, we started a discussion about the new beauty. We said that the marble beauty of the museums, all those Venuses de Milo with the amputated arms, all that classical Greek beauty could not satisfy the millions who are starting on a new life in the roaring city and will take the path of Revolution in the future. Today, during her report, Comrade Koltsova, Chairman of the meeting, offered me a sweet with "Mosselprom" printed on it and the same old Venus above it. Which means that what we are fighting and have been fighting these twenty years is creeping into our lives today. That same mangled old beauty, even through a sweet wrapper, is being distributed among the masses here, poisoning our brains once more and poisoning our conception of art.<sup>498</sup>

Mayakovsky's insistence here on the need to remove the 'mangled old beauty' from Soviet commodities is similar – in a reversed sense – to the sentiment of his 1926 poem 'Horrific Familiarity'. In that poem he suggests that the names of key communist figures

<sup>496</sup> *The Bedbug* Act I sc. i, p. 248, in *The Bedbug*, trans. Max Hayward. The phrase used by Mayakovsky is 'meshchansogo byta' – 'philistine byt', although in Hayward's translation it is called 'petty bourgeois stuff'.

<sup>497</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 274.

<sup>498</sup> 'Address at the Krasnaya Presnya Komsomol Club...', in *Volodya*, trans. Marshall and Rottenberg, p. 269.

are diminished by their association with common everyday things; here he speaks of the culturally poisoning effects of bourgeois decoration on new Soviet products. This issue was a common one in early Soviet Russia. In *Common Places* Boym describes how the *Komsomolskaya Pravda* office ‘put its own editorial byt on trial and condemned the office ashtray.’ The old one, which depicted ‘two horses, a reduced version of the Russian troika’, was replaced by one that ‘depicted sportsmen, thereby discarding old-fashioned pseudo-Russian hobbies like sleighing and horse-back riding and substituting more modern athletic pursuits.’<sup>499</sup>

### 1930 – *The Bathhouse*

These extracts, which were discussed in the previous chapter, are Mayakovsky’s final writings on *byt*:

#### a)

Mezalyansova: Yes, of course art must reflect life – the beautiful lives of beautiful, live people. Show us beautiful lively creatures against beautiful landscapes, and bourgeois decadence, in general. In fact, if it’s necessary for propaganda, you could even show us a belly dance. Or you could let us see, for instance, how the new struggle against [old byt] is being waged in the putrefied Western world. You could use the stage to show us, for example, that in Paris they don’t have an Organization for Political Work Among Women – they have the foxtrot instead.<sup>500</sup>

#### b)

Pobedonosikov [as he is leaving his wife, Polya]: You should hide those bourgeois, old-womanish bad moods of yours that have made our marriage so unequal! [...] There was a time when we used to go out on patrol together, and sleep under the same army coat. That was enough, then. But things are different now. I’ve come up the intellectual and professional ladder – and up the apartment-house stairway to a better place. You, too, should be able to educate yourself and learn to zigzag dialectically, like me. But what do I see in your face? Only vestiges of the past – the chains of [old byt]!<sup>501</sup>

#### c)

Pobedonosikov [to Polya, after she has been describing their relationship to the Phosphorescent Woman]: What – you here? Did you report me? Did you complain? [...] You told her the important things,

<sup>499</sup> Boym, *Common Places*, p. 37.

<sup>500</sup> *The Bathhouse* Act III, in *Plays*, trans. Guy Daniels, pp. 228-229.

<sup>501</sup> *Ibid.*, Act IV, p. 237.





#### IV Moving Forwards

It is quite clear from the side-by-side comparison of all western criticism on the subject of Mayakovsky and *byt*, and the poet's own writings on *byt*, that from the time of Mayakovsky's death to the present day the version of him that we have inherited is one characterised by distortion and inaccuracies. Yes, Mayakovsky wrote many things on the subject of *byt* – and many of them in damning fashion; but these writings are not simply ceaseless complaints about the eternal humdrum of 'the monstrous daily grind'. He did not hate children, he was not a misogynist, and he certainly did not consider the realm of domestic living to be a static lump of dead nature, impervious to change and antithetical to revolution. In place of the dully repetitious, thoroughly limiting and explicitly sexist set of definitions of *byt* which for over eighty-six years has been maintained as fact – definitions which, ironically enough, themselves embody those very characteristics they seek to impose upon the poet – Mayakovsky both attacked and supported *byt's* contradictory manifestations in a broad, detailed and politically rigorous manner which covered the following areas:

A] A criticism of the hypocrisy of excessive bourgeois lifestyle (the notion of 'cosy *byt*', 'bourgeois philistinism', and so on) and its emulation, including the reduction of revolutionary figures to icons/decoration, being overly concerned with trinkets in the home, reproducing bourgeois styles of dress. The admonition of such ways of life as rotten and parasitic: 'flea-bitten *byt*'.

B] The hypocritical discrepancies between (predominantly male) public party life and private married/domestic life, in particular issues of domestic abuse, infidelity and the shirking of child support payments. A criticism of traditional marriage and insular, inward-looking family life as anti-communist.

C] The invocation of *old byt* in reference to female drudgery; new *byt* as a way out of this towards a better, more gender-equal life.

D] Domestic life as politically significant; an appeal to people in general to be vigilant against the assumption that small domestic matters are politically unimportant. A warning

against the un-revolutionary behaviour of accumulating home comforts, versus the promotion of clean and functional ascetic living quarters.

E] Appeals against giving in to corruption and taking domestic bribes – an acknowledgement that the misery and squalor of the still remaining *old byt* can make one susceptible to such behaviours, but that to do so will obstruct one's transcendence to *new byt*. Tied to this are warnings against dishonesty at work such as false flattery to gain promotion, and its potential for moral contamination amongst other workers desperate for promotion.

F] Promotion of the power of technological advances as a means to speed up the modernisation of Russian society, including washing machines, electricity and cars. An emphasis on backwards, dirty, cramped ways of life, versus new sanitised modern living. Cleanliness and health in general, including an emphasis on exercise and warnings about the dangers of alcohol, lazing around and hooligan-like behaviour.

G] An attack on the hypocrisy of the so-called proletarian poets, publishers and critics who ostensibly attack the bourgeois trappings of *old byt* even as they themselves live in comfort – who extoll the virtues of 'proletarian literature' with zero knowledge or skill in what they are doing artistically or politically, and who pay lip service to the ideas of communism with no real communist substance behind it: the bureaucratic philistine.

H] The criticism of poetry which, in Mayakovsky's opinion, is overly concerned with the trivial matters associated with the pre-revolutionary bourgeoisie – the 'new trash' – and which, in being so, stagnates and undermines communist progress.

With such a significant contrast between these two bodies of evidence, the question of how western critics of Mayakovsky have been able to misrepresent him so systematically and for so long necessarily arises, as does the prospect of how, with this evidence now in mind, Mayakovsky scholarship might move forwards. One problem often cited in the difficulty of explaining *byt* is its allegedly untranslatable meaning. However, although several critics and biographers state that *byt* is untranslatable, specific translations are nevertheless given. The result of this is that, as readers, we assume it must simply be impossible to translate that one word '*byt*' into *one equivalent word* in English, and that

that is why it is ‘untranslatable’, and *not*, as is actually the case, that although at a basic lexical level it is relatively straightforward to translate and define the *word itself*, it is much less straightforward to incorporate into that translation the concept’s dramatic history, and everything that history incorporates. It is not simply that we cannot fit this complex history into a single word that gives it a sense of the untranslatable – although this is certainly true. It is additionally that the particular details which formed the crucible of this concept’s most radical and explosive development, namely the experience of being in revolutionary and post-revolutionary Russia at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, form an experience for the likes of which we have no equivalent in our own history, which makes it, at the level of cultural equivalence at least, arguably ‘untranslatable’. It is strange that every critic who claims untranslatability even as they are offering up a range of dictionary definition translations maintains silence on that very element which cannot be translated, which can only be described – as though that experiential context is *so* untranslatable that they do not, or cannot, even begin to speak of its Russian significance in the English language. Boym demonstrates this when she acknowledges (paraphrasing Jakobson) that *byt* is ‘untranslatable, not linguistically but culturally’, and yet, in her elaboration of this idea, falls short of the very point that she herself has initiated. By insisting in spite of her nod to Jakobson that, in the title of Breton’s essay (‘*Lyubovnaya lodka razbilas o byt*’), ‘the revolution is not even mentioned, [that] rather it is “la vie courante”, the daily grind, that engulfs and destroys the “love boat”, [...] a tantalizing presence of omnipotent ordinariness in its most static and conservative forms’,<sup>504</sup> she is explicitly denying *byt* any claim to political significance and, moreover, is suggesting that *byt* and the revolution are two mutually exclusive phenomena. To her, the use of this line as the essay’s title is simply inexplicable.

However, to suggest that a sort of culture-gap blind spot is the explanation for Mayakovsky’s misrepresentation in the west is too simplistic a conclusion to take from those who perpetuate it. It is true that the almost total lack of development in critical discussions of Mayakovsky and *byt* over the last eighty-six years exposes, via the excuse of untranslatability, a general ignorance of both early Soviet political, social and cultural life, and the breadth of Mayakovsky’s poetry – in and out of that context – but there is something more conscious going on too. In spite of the allegedly untranslatable nature of *byt*, the proffered descriptions of it are nevertheless explicitly used to construct – and

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<sup>504</sup> Boym, *Death in Quotation Marks*, p. 164.

almost revel in – a very particular image of Mayakovsky as a misogynistic and vigorously hyper-masculine icon of passionate individuality, which strongly suggests that there is a cultural and political agenda at play beyond the simple act of all critics trying their best to render an indecipherable word into English and – coincidentally – all coming to exactly the same tendentious and narrow conclusions. It seems to me that this is linked to, and has done a very good job of supporting, another more explicit agenda in relation to Mayakovsky: In Section 1 of this thesis I discussed the ways in which, during the Cold War years, the poet was consciously repackaged in the west by critics and translators keen to remove him from the negative connotations of his Soviet context, and to focus instead on his individual character, his avant-garde innovation and his lyrical love poems over his manifestly political material. By focussing almost exclusively on poems like ‘The Backbone Flute’, ‘A Cloud in Trousers’, ‘Love’, ‘Past One O’Clock’, and so on, Mayakovsky’s potentially dangerous status as communism’s ‘ideological dupe’ was replaced by a far more capitalism-friendly (and politically immature) figure: no longer bogged down by his ‘hollow, unconvincing and coarse [...] unalloyed agitprop’,<sup>505</sup> or with, in the specific context of *byt*, the perhaps not very ‘exciting’ day-to-day minutiae of promoting the social implementation of a new political system to the Soviet masses, Mayakovsky became instead the independent thinker, the lover, the free spirit – parallel to but by no means at one with communism<sup>506</sup>. This partial representation of the poet *as a (non)political poet* cannot help but engender and feed into misunderstanding around his commitment to revolutionising *byt*. In minimising his Bolshevik connection, the historical context of Mayakovsky’s *byt* poems is inevitably lost – the widely-held misconception that *byt* was Mayakovsky’s ‘personal enemy’, an ostensibly natural fit with his western characterisation, is only viable for so long as his poems on the subject are not recognised as part of a broader cultural campaign at the time they were written. Meanwhile, the combination of Edward Brown’s mistranslation of *byt* in Jakobson’s ‘On a Generation That Squandered Its Poets’ and the dubious and unfounded claims about Mayakovsky’s character put forward by Jakobson himself in that essay (which, written shortly after the poet’s death and by a man who knew him, has all the appearance of

<sup>505</sup> Almereyda, *Night Wraps the Sky*, pp. xxiii, xxv.

<sup>506</sup> In this reformulation the smouldering Mayakovsky becomes something akin to the James Dean of poetry – destined to live fast and die young. Indeed, Almereyda in particular is full of this kind of Americanised description: Mayakovsky with his ‘proto-punk ferocity’, his ‘tough-guy tenderness’, his ‘soulful defiance’ ... This could just as well be a description of Rocky Balboa as of Mayakovsky (and indeed sums up the very characteristics with which Stallone seems to single-handedly end the Cold War

being a reliable source), acts as a kind of *byt* commandment tablet: subsequent critics have both taken their cue from it and used it as their primary source of evidence to such an extent that even as recently as 2015 it is considered to be ‘the single most important essay on Mayakovsky’. In fact, although Jakobson’s essay does focus disproportionately on Mayakovsky, it is not about him alone but traces the sheer number of young talented writers who, during the years of early Soviet Russia, lost their lives in one way or another, including, alongside Mayakovsky, Gumilev, Blok, Xlebnikov and Esenin. Failing to take into account the fact that the limited scope of this essay necessarily situates Jakobson’s discussion of Mayakovsky and *byt* *specifically* as it relates, in his view, to the poet’s *death*, critics have indiscriminately spread it outwards into the fulness of his *life*. Subsequently, Jakobson’s view, that Mayakovsky’s ‘most intense poems’ are ‘Man’ and ‘About This’, takes root and multiplies. “Intensity” in relation to Mayakovsky comes in the west to mean the intensity of romantic passion, the intensity of suicidal thought, and so on. What is it that makes these works ‘the most intense’? Is it not possible that those which express the intensity of a vast political drive to consciously revolutionise everyday existence might be ‘the most intense’? One could argue that it is simply a matter of cultural translation; that the intensity of romantic passion is more widely identifiable for westerners than the intensity of, for example, consciously working every day towards maintaining an ascetic lifestyle. But if this is the objective behind selective translations, it does not explain their selective – and de-Sovietising – contextual discussion.

In reality there is no need to de-Sovietise Mayakovsky to improve his palatability anyway. His criticism of the crass work of the ‘proletarian poets’, his refusal to risk artistic limitation by becoming an official member of the communist party, his abuse at the hands of the State-run press and his suicide itself all make absolutely clear that his position within the Soviet Union was complex and challenging. The western perspective does not reflect this complexity, it simply de-emphasises Mayakovsky’s commitment to those Marxist principles which, in spite of his criticism of the communist party itself, remained solid to the end of his life. The conflation of unMarxism and anti-*byt* is (unwittingly) succinctly expressed by Marjorie Perloff when she writes that, for Mayakovsky, ‘Revolution, in other words, comes to be regarded as a permanent state of

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when he defeats Ivan Drago’s communist threat, with all its connotations of corruption, brain-washing and soulless, clinical violence, in *Rocky IV*).

excitement, countering the boredom of everyday routine.<sup>507</sup> Clearly influenced by critics such as Stahlberger, for whom ‘Majakovskij’s relation to the Revolution can only be understood on the basis of his own expectations and not the imposed systems of Marxist theoreticians’,<sup>508</sup> for Perloff it is the chaotic and routine-destroying chaos of revolution that Mayakovsky craves, of which he is deprived in the dust-settling reorganisational post-revolutionary period. In her estimation, in which, as in Boym’s above, *byt* and the revolution are diametrically opposed, the poet would have perpetual revolution: revolution maintained as a tool for unending social motion, as an inoculation against complacency and regular living. This interpretation, of Mayakovsky as a politically immature, backwards-looking thrill-seeker, is, as we have seen, overwhelmingly contradicted by the many forward-thinking, practical and collective solutions to *byt* developed by the poet in the last ten years of his life. Mayakovsky did not use Marxist theory as a tool to *escape byt*; he used its practical implementation as a means to *overturn and reinvent* it.

While the question of Mayakovsky’s political status and his attitudes to *byt* are clearly linked, the difference between them is that although his status as a Marxist poet, now no longer considered such a threat, is beginning to be partially reappropriated in the west (in left-wing anti-capitalist circles at least), the reigning interpretation of his alleged hatred of domesticity etc, is yet firmly entrenched. Thus translators like Harry Gilonis, who are committed to the active restoration of Mayakovsky’s political poems in the English language, and whose work raises the suggestion that perhaps *these*, and not ‘Man’, etc, might in fact be the poet’s ‘most intense’, are nevertheless still limited by this important misconception. Mayakovsky’s hatred of *byt* is, after all, as central to Gilonis’s characterisation of the poet *as a Marxist* as it has been to all those who, on the contrary, have denounced the poet’s Marxism. It seems therefore that the introduction of previously unknown poems is not enough in isolation. If Mayakovsky’s work on *byt*, and by extension the shape of his character, poetically, politically and personally speaking, is to be discussed accurately, then a new, accurate framework is required in which to situate it. In *Volodya: Selected Works*, this new framework has begun to take shape. One of my aims with this book, which I will describe in more detail in the Afterword, was to redress the general imbalance of English language translations by presenting a more

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<sup>507</sup> Perloff, ‘Over the Last Limit’.

<sup>508</sup> Stahlberger, *Symbolic System*, p. 125.

representative selection of Mayakovsky's work, and I did this not only by including examples of Mayakovsky's children's poetry and his positive appeals for the development of *new byt* alongside his better known lyrical works, but also by explaining how this imbalance came to exist, and by simply – for the first time in the context of Mayakovsky and his poetry – outlining both the correct meaning of the concept of *byt*, in both its *old* and *new* incarnations, and Mayakovsky's relationship to both. The explanation is brief; this is a Selected Works, not a scholarly publication, but to me it felt like a significant first step.

If it once seemed that Mayakovsky was in need of being rescued from his Soviet association, he now urgently needs to be cut loose from his western rescuers. The exciting distinction between these two missions is that, in the case of the former, the excision of a great number of the poet's works was required in order to maintain his de-Sovietised characterisation, whereas in the latter we simply need to look more fully, more openly and with greater understanding at all of his works as a complex whole. It is now impossible to summarily refer to Mayakovsky as a man who despised women, who was repulsed by children and who hated the very notion of family and domesticity. Instead, we may accurately say that for Mayakovsky the act of restructuring daily existence in its many and various manifestations was a hugely exciting prospect which for him lay at the very heart of communism itself, that he loved and cared for his family and friends and was passionately engaged in wider contemporary debates around the development of progressive models for relationships and the family, and that he was overtly and actively a feminist man.

### Afterword

It wasn't until I was some way through Part 2 of this thesis that I fully realised the connection between western depoliticised representations of Mayakovsky and Mayakovsky as a hater of domesticity – they came together by accident after I visited Mayakovsky's daughter Yelena in New York for the first time in September 2012. We had been in contact since the start of that year and she had been extremely kind and supportive of my work. At that time I had just completed a draft of Part 1 and, initially berating me for writing such a thing, given that 'Mayakovsky had no real interest in Marx',<sup>509</sup> she came away from it convinced that he did indeed show a significant engagement with Marxism, and that for whatever reason this engagement had been seriously downplayed in western literature on the matter (which, as a non-Russian speaker, was the only literature she had read). During the same visit, and attached to the question of Mayakovsky's misrepresentation, many of our conversations would return to her feelings of sadness about the fact that her father was so consistently characterised as a man who hated the family, children and home life in general. From what her mother had told her, she said, and from what she had learned from both Veronika Polonskaya, and the children of David Burliuk, in addition to things she had heard and read about Mayakovsky's relationship with his mother and sisters – her grandmother and aunts – she strongly believed that this assessment of his character was incorrect, and that its perpetuation did a great injustice to the poet. Although her anecdotal reasons for believing so were compelling, my main feelings at the time were that her opinion was the natural hope of a woman who desperately didn't want to believe that, to the father she barely knew, she had counted for nothing. After all, so much was written on the subject and even, it seemed, written by Mayakovsky himself, that his disgust for domesticity seemed a solid and incontrovertible fact. It stayed with me however until, by means of an introduction to the comparison of certain translations I was studying, I decided to write a brief history of the concept of *byt*. I quickly realised that actually something very interesting *had* been taking place unchecked in Mayakovsky scholarship, and that perhaps Yelena's doubts were well-founded. The links between the western interest in hyper-masculinising the poet and the de-Sovietising effect I had already explored, as a way to actively remove him from his Bolshevik context into the safety of western ideology, seemed clear in retrospect, but without the many interesting conversations I had



shared, and continued to share, with Yelena my eyes would perhaps not have been open to it. She died in April 2016, not long before her 90<sup>th</sup> birthday, and although for this reason she did not get the chance read my thesis in its completion, she did see an earlier draft of Part 2 on Mayakovsky and *Byt*, and shared my excitement for the potential this new research held for the future of Mayakovsky scholarship.

The publication of my book *Volodya* last year gave me the opportunity to begin to realise this shift. The premise of this collection, which I edited and co-translated, was to bring together, for the first time, all Mayakovsky's key translators into one volume in order to 'celebrate and draw attention to their diversity as the positive and inevitable result of Mayakovsky's own extraordinary range'.<sup>510</sup> In doing so, it made for a useful starting point to discuss the ways in which Mayakovsky's representation has been limited in the west until now. By providing the critical framework of the introduction alongside the presentation of a broader and more radical range of Mayakovsky's work than is traditionally found, my aim was to start a new conversation about the poet, one that is firmly rooted in the context of his own writings, and I feel that, on the basis of the evidence in this thesis, it is a conversation that now cannot be ignored.

The issue of *Pravda* published on the anniversary of Mayakovsky's death in 1940 offers a beautiful – and unexpectedly liberal – description of the poet:

The world-wide revolutionary significance of Mayakovsky, as we see it, is that he succeeded brilliantly in depicting himself in his works as a freely developing socialist personality.<sup>511</sup>

I agree with Yelena that a great injustice has been done to Mayakovsky in the west since the time of his death. It's interesting that in this description the poet is celebrated for the very qualities that, during his lifetime, seemed so impossibly oxymoronic – the Marxist notion of individual developmental freedom against the maintenance of a 'socialist personality'. Nevertheless, the strange qualification the account includes, that this is how Mayakovsky succeeded in '*depict[ing]* himself in his work' (as opposed to, we may assume, any success with regard to his *real* self), suggests that the ideological friction between the poet and the State literary press was still keenly felt. For us too the perceived

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<sup>509</sup> Recorded from conversations, 2012.

<sup>510</sup> Carrick, *Volodya*, p. 21.

inconsistencies between all the various elements of Mayakovsky's life and work have seemed too incongruous to work with – for which reason we have picked out those which suited our politics and discarded those which did not. I don't want Mayakovsky's 'world-wide revolutionary significance' to be based, in the west, on the systematic erasure of his enormousness. I want everything, in all its complexity, brought irrevocably into the light.

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<sup>511</sup> Becher, in *Pravda* April 14, 1940, quoted by Fainna Pitzkel in 'Mayakovsky and the Development of Twentieth-Century Lyrical Poetry', in *Innovator*, trans. Alex Miller, p. 175.

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