

the poet and the revolution

The news of Mayakovsky's suicide reached us, a small quasi-illegal group of left-wing writers in an Eastern European country, only a few weeks after we had had the poet as our guest in our midst. We were depressed and bewildered. . . . Suicide was anathema to our revolutionary code of behavior. The revolutionary's duty was to live in order to struggle. This seemed so plain and elementary a truth that Mayakovsky's sudden "withdrawal from the battlefield" was in our eyes almost a blasphemy. But it was more than that—it was a disturbing enigma. Here he had sat with us, bursting with energy, enthusiasm and sarcasm, only a few weeks ago. He drew before our eyes the grandiose prospects of that second year of the first Five Year Plan. He recited his latest verses on industrialization at the top of his overwhelming metallic voice; that voice without whose sound his poems may be read and perhaps understood, but not *heard* and felt. The ring of

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that unique voice was still in our ears. The *élan* of his gestures was still before our eyes. His untamable tall and massive figure still stood in front of us. We searched our memories and recalled the details of the days spent with him. Not a trace could we find of that hidden worm that must already have gnawed his heart while he was with us. Not even the slightest doubt seemed to have clouded his thoughts. Not once did moral weariness seem to have crept into his mind and mood. . . . And yet suicide *was* petty-bourgeois cowardice. It was an act of capitulation which could spring only from faint-hearted and weak-kneed pessimism. It spelled unworthy dread of life. . . . But was Mayakovsky a coward? Was *he* poisoned with pessimism and fear?

—"Impossible."

But the "impossible" was a fact. The details of the poet's erotic life which had been given as the motives of his suicide appeared to us trivial and unconvincing. We had been trained to look to the social background hidden behind the personal motives of human deeds. Soviet historians of literature used ironically to dismiss the accepted explanations of the deaths of the greatest poets of old Russia—Pushkin and Lermontov. The romantic personal motives, they said, had been nothing but the immediate reasons for their quasi-suicides. The deeper cause was the stifling atmosphere of the tsarist autocracy which had left no scope for the poets' urge and which had impelled them to seek an escape in adventures and duels. Both Pushkin and Lermontov were mercilessly drowned by the moral and political squalor of their epoch.

Somebody hinted at the analogy. Surely, Mayakovsky's sense of solidarity with the new revolutionary community must have been sapped or weakened if personal frustrations could have prevailed over it. And the disquieting question emerged: why did death through virtual or actual suicide rob Russia of her best poets after the revolution just as it had done before the revolution? Mayakovsky's was not the first suicide. A few years earlier Essenin had chosen the same path to nothingness. What was the fate that hung over both of

them? The question mark was drawn; but none of us would answer it. None of us would let his doubts take on the definite shape of words. . . . It seemed so obviously nonsensical to draw a comparison between Stalin and Nicholas the First.

To formulate the question along that line was certainly rather too narrow. It was not only Mayakovsky's death—his life, too, was stamped with tragedy. Mayakovsky's poetry has remained as the unconscious testimony to a great and very painful *quid pro quo*, which occurred between the poet and the Revolution. The suicide was hardly more than an epilogue which threw the problem into sharper relief. The problem itself has by far surpassed the poet's personal fate. It bears on the role of the poet amid the convulsions and changes of our age. It is connected directly with what might be called the social homelessness of modern poetry.

It is futile to portray Mayakovsky as the orthodox, perfect Communist or—as his English translator puts it*—as “the poet who expressed in his work the vast gamut of the Socialist Revolution.”

True, almost at the threshold of his poetical life Mayakovsky wrote:

I,
jeered at by tribal contemporaries,
like a lanky
discarded rhyme,
see that which nobody sees,
coming over the mountains of time.

There where man's cut short of vision
by the heads of the hungry that surge,
in the thorny crown of revolution
I see nineteen sixteen emerge.

* All the Mayakovsky verses in this article are quoted from *Mayakovsky and His Poetry*, compiled by Herbert Marshall (The Pilot Press).

Thus, the anticipation of the revolution colored Mayakovsky's poetical vision at a very early stage. It would not do justice to his artistic sincerity to suggest that the "thorny crown of revolution" was merely a literary metaphor, and that it was used just in order to refresh the poetical vocabulary of Russian poetry which had then been made barren by the symbolists' detachment from life. No, the poet was out for something more than *épater les bourgeois*. In fact, the "thorny crown of revolution" was then unmistakably casting its shadow ahead. The Russian volcano was restive. The fumes after its recent grandiose eruption of 1905-1906 were not yet altogether dispersed. The great disturbances of 1912 and the St. Petersburg barricades of the 1914 summer were portending the brewing storm. In the second year of the war which tsardom precipitated, without being able to cope with the most elementary tasks of modern warfare, Russian life was anything but stable. The poet's sensitive intuition absorbed the atmosphere of growing uneasiness; and, because his was not a passive but a highly active intuition, he was able to translate the prevailing mood into words of dynamic expectation and hope. The poet's intuition certainly showed more political acumen than could be found in the views and calculations of the official legal politicians of that time; and this justified his claim to "see that which nobody sees coming over the mountains of time."

Yet, there were only very weak links between the poet's vision and that shape of a new Russia which was then being forged in the underground circles of the Bolshevik "professional revolutionaries." True, in his teens Mayakovsky came in contact with some of the clandestine revolutionary groups; and that contact could not have failed to leave some mark on the poet's outlook. But the contact was on the whole superficial and casual—one of the many "eccentric" experiences which served the unruly youth as raw material for his "poetical output." He could find very little inspiration in the stern rules of organization to which the professional revolutionary of the Bolshevik school had to submit. Nor could the inter-

minable interfactional arguments on the future structure of Russian agriculture, the trends in international socialism and the political tactics of the Social-Democratic deputies to the Duma capture his imagination. To see the mole of revolution burrowing at the bottom of the social pyramid was surely for the young Mayakovsky an exciting and joyful experience. But he could have been only very remotely concerned with the specific program and the scheme of action of the revolutionary mole.

The poet's rebellion had its own motives as well as its own independent logic. Its immediate target was the accepted traditional code of literary style—the poetic *bon ton*. His “class foe” was not the landlord nor the capitalist, it was rather Konstantin Balmont, the exquisite symbolist, or Dymitry Mereshkovsky, the “decadent mystic.” The sphere in which he strove to achieve a radical upheaval was the technique of verse-making and the vocabulary of the poet. His *Cloud in Trousers*, written on the eve of the First World War, was a bold challenge to nostalgic lyrics:

Gentle souls!
You fiddle sweet loves
But the crude club their love on a drum.

Do you know that
Francois Villon
when he finished writing
did his job of plundering?
And you,
who quake at the sight of a penknife
boast yourselves guardians of a splendid age.

Gentlemen poets,
have you not tired
of pages,
palaces,
love
and lilac blooms?

If such as you
 are the creators
 then I spit upon all art.
 I'd rather open a shop,
 or go on the Stock Exchange . . .

The rebellious bohemian was insulting the "contemptible pack of the literary brethren," but, in spite of all appearances to the contrary, he remained of and in it. The literary bohemia had few reasons, if any, to addict itself to the defense of the rotting social system of tsardom. It lived uneasily on the outer fringe of that system. Nor did it feel any particularly strong urge to leave the ivory towers of art and to plunge into the whirlpools of social strife. The refined subtlety of the symbolist and neoromanticist poetry reflected an attitude of individualist haughtiness and social equanimity. But the quietism of the literary Olympus could hardly satisfy the young political innovator. The peaks of recognized poetry repelled him by their majestic immobility. The style of Balmont, Sologub and Mereshkovsky was as finished and polished and smooth as the unruffled surface of a dead pond. The young Mayakovsky was desperately trying to trouble that surface by throwing hard stones of futurism into it. The literary Olympus frowned upon or ignored those attempts on its tranquillity. But on the other hand, did not each of its legitimate lodgers start climbing the pathless mountain in a similar manner? Standing at the bottom one used to swear that one would climb the slope not in order to enter the temple at the top, but in order to destroy it. In the process of climbing, weariness was overcoming the wanderer until, when the top was reached, the initial fury had petered out. And the temple itself looked much more attractive when seen from the top than looked at from the bottom. In the literary threats thrown out by the vigorous and young Russian futurist the historian of literature might easily detect some features familiar to almost any conflict between two literary generations and two artistic styles. The annals of art are full

of similar episodes. There was, therefore, little connection between the poet's artistic ego, which sought to assert itself by breaking the conventional codes of the literary milieu, and the stern collectivist creed of Lenin's underground Marxian circles. The common feature was a negative one: hatred of an established hierarchy. But the struggle was being conducted on widely different planes. Had there been no revolution in Russia, the bohemian youth might in the course of time have finished his career as a recognized luminary of Russian poetry, just as his Italian confrère Marinetti, who also started by storming the fortresses of literary tradition, has ultimately won his place in the Parnassus of fascist Italy.

But the Russian revolution broke out before that act of literary reconciliation could materialize. Mayakovsky's poetical opposition had not yet been tamed by official recognition when it received new momentum from the tremendous social upheaval of 1917. The revolution appeared the most gigantic futurist spectacle that the poet could dream of. History itself was throwing overboard the old-fashioned mode of life—ergo the old-fashioned style of writing and painting and building. The new reality was crying out for new rhymes, new metaphors and new words. Who could provide them if not the author of the *Cloud in Trousers*? The quietist style of the traditionalist poet was suddenly reduced to a miserable relic of a doomed past; and the aggressive futurist metaphor found itself in harmony with the spirit of the time. Only yesterday it sounded an eccentric freak of poetic fancy—today the new reality imparted to it a compelling genuineness and a new weightiness:

Does the eye of the eagle fade?
Shall we stare back to the old?
Proletarian finger
grip tighter
the throat of the world.

Words which in 1916 might have been regarded merely as an arbitrary violation of the conventional now had the

backing of the social atmosphere of the country; and thus the alliance between futurism and Bolshevism became a fact. Mayakovsky was the ardent flagbearer of that alliance.

The heroic period of revolutionary strain and stress marked the climax of Mayakovsky's poetry. The alliance with Bolshevism elevated Russian futurism to intellectual heights it would never otherwise have reached. It opened before the poet vistas which would probably have remained sealed to him in a quieter era. The fate of human masses, the potentialities hidden in them, the grand trends of history, the grappling of opposed social orders, these were the problems which the revolution brought home to the rebel of the *bohème*. The ethos of the civil war, the unparalleled selflessness of the Red Guards, the upsurge of mighty "heaven-storming" hopes, the moral appeal inherent in the endeavor to put an end to the exploitation of man by man—all these could not fail to capture the poet's mind and heart. True, there was also the squalor of the revolutionary terror, the outbursts of age-long and hitherto suppressed hatreds, the merciless anger of rising slaves whom life had not trained to exercise mild justice and human pity. This was but the dark lining to hopeful events; and the poet welcomed the revolution for its good as well as for its evil—as one mighty whole of the proudest human endeavor. At the end of the sanguinary path, there loomed the realm of freedom, the "Mystery Bouffe" in which man had conquered the world of things to which he had before been subjected.

The bohemian did not dissolve in the roaring wave of the revolution. He retained his personality and remained true to his irrepressible individualism. He sang, of course, of the masses and despised the self-centered outlook of the pre-revolutionary lyrics. But, in a sense, he remained even more self-centered than his older literary brethren. He was not concerned with the subtle shades and half-shades of private and intimate emotions. He beat the drum of the revolution instead. But in doing so he remained self-assertive to a rather unusual degree. The favorite pattern of the poetic drummer

was to talk about *himself* and the army of the revolution; not about his love, his human joys and sorrows, but about his, the drummer's, contribution to the battle, "at the top of his voice"—as if he wanted to overshout the raging elements of history. Even when he tried to become one with the collectivist orchestration of the revolution he remained true to a deeply-seated individualism. This did not prevent Mayakovsky from becoming the poet of the revolution *par excellence*, but this was the germ of his tragedy. He would never be able to merge with it to the end. Some false tone in the drummer's poetry could hardly have escaped the revolutionary trained in the Marxist school. Lenin himself dismissed Mayakovsky with the somewhat passéist observation that Pushkin's verses had been much better. The *quid pro quo* between the poet and the revolution could not be easily disentangled.

When the storm of the civil war was at last over, the poet found himself in a blind alley. The heroic epic of 1917-21 gave place to the prose of the NEP. Lenin proclaimed the Bolshevik's duty "to learn from the bourgeois how to trade and to do business." The new prose of the revolution was outwardly gray and uninspiring. This was hardly the truth. The manner in which the revolutionaries of yesterday turned from destruction to construction, from the negative to the positive part of their task, was indeed one of the most dramatic chapters of the revolution. The writer with a more philosophical approach might have found in this the subject matter for the true masterpiece of fiction. The onlooker with the élan of a Balzac or a Tolstoy might have put the new characters in the grandiose setting of history. The brilliant drummer of the revolution was, however, helpless. His voice, which harmonized so well with the tumult of the civil war, was now strangely out of tune with the new phase. His inclination and liking for hyperbole contrasted uncannily with the changed style of Bolshevism. The literary critics wrote of the crisis in Mayakovsky's development. His aggressive egocentricism was obviously alien to the philosophy of

dialectical materialism and his bustling metaphors carried little conviction in that quieter era. The poet responded violently and scathingly. He accused the critics of passéism and once again proclaimed futurism to be the style of the socialist society. But this did not help him much in overcoming the spiritual crisis in whose throes he found himself. The crisis was not invented by the critics. It sprang from the tension between the poet and the revolution.

The rebel was no longer able to revolt. Not because censorship or external pressure forbade him to do so; the inhibition was of an internal and psychological nature. He was unable to keep abreast with all the twists and turns of new Russia, but he was equally unable to detach himself from them. He could not revolt against the greatest revolt in human history.

It is interesting to follow the poet's attempts to adapt himself to the new conditions. He tried to strike a utilitarian and didactic note. He turned to satire. The new world was not yet altogether new and it definitely called for some satirical whipping. The audience of that time was extremely receptive to the topical pointed verse which ridiculed the vices of the new rulers. Mayakovsky proved himself a master at that genre, as the English reader can perhaps judge from his verse "In re conferences." But this definitely gave too little scope for his poetic temperament. In spite of the poet's claim to have inaugurated a new era of socially utilitarian poetry, his Muse was utterly un-utilitarian. Curiously enough, his best verses of that period were written on the journeys to capitalist Europe. There the Bastille stormer found his Bastilles still standing. He was again able to give vent to his combative temper and his poetic élan revived somewhat. In the atmosphere of the past, his futurist tirades and apostrophes were regaining their old defiant ring. It was in front of the Eiffel Tower, for instance, that he could again afford to indulge in the iconoclastic style:

It's not for you—
model genius of machines—

here
to pine away from Apollinairic verse
No place
for you—
this place of degradations
this Paris of prostitutes,
poets,
bourse.

The subtle escapism underlying such verses can hardly be missed. That the poet needed such escapes from the reality of the revolution was certainly no fault of the revolution; but it was the tragedy of the poet.

Years ago, it was fashionable in Russia to contrast Mayakovsky and Essenin. Indeed, the contrast between the two is in some respects very striking; but this merely stresses the ultimate analogy. Essenin was definitely "passéist" in the social as well as in the poetic sense. His poetry was full of despair and longing after the old and doomed Russian village. It was, of course, not the feudal village of the old Russian literature, it was the muzhik's melancholy which filled the cup of his poetry to the brim. And, like the muzhik of 1917-19, he too was shaken by and drawn into the vortex of the revolution.*

Hey, Russians!
Trappers of the universe,
Trapping the sky in your net,
Blow loud your trumpets.
A modern sower
Roams in the fields,
Casting new seed
Into the furrows.

* Essenin's verses are quoted from *Modern Poems from Russia*, translated by Gerard Shelley (Allen & Unwin; London, 1942).

But the muzhik was not the master of that revolution. After the storms of the civil war, he was again reduced to that state of political muteness, or semi-muteness, which had always been the lot of the peasantry. The shape of a new reality was destined to be forged in the town and to be imposed on the countryside. In the long run, the Russian peasantry could submit, only more or less reluctantly, to the schemes of collectivization and industrialization. The village was unable to produce its own independent revolution; it could only bow to a revolution from without. The sociologist may state the rule in detached, exact and cold terms. What the sociologists' formulas cannot express is the deep and endless sorrow of that Russian village which now belongs to the past, but which was still awaiting the *coup de grâce* in the twenties. Essenin's poetry was an infinitely beautiful elegy on the doom of that village whose Russian name (*derevnya*) is in its very sound associated with words like "wood" (*derevo*) and "yore" (*drevlye*). Here was the drunken and desperate poet whom the old wooden Russian village had sent to meet with a mournful swan-song the onslaught of the steel columns of tractors and harvester combines on its moldering palisades.

I am the countryside's last poet,
 A bridge of planks with lowly songs.
 I stand at the farewell Mass of the birches
 With quivering leaves like incense clouds.
 My body like a waxen light
 Will burn away in golden flame,
 And like a wooden clock the moon
 Will grind out my last twelfth hour.
 An iron guest will soon appear
 Along the track of the azure steppes.
 His swarthy hand will gather the crops
 Spilt all around like the golden dawn.
 O lifeless cold and alien hands!
 My songs can never live with you.
 Only the ears of corn like steeds

Will mourn their tender master of old.
The wind will gather their plaintive neighs
And hold with them a memorial dance.
Soon . . . soon . . . the wooden clock
Will grind out my last twelfth hour.

“O lifeless cold and alien hands”—this was the greeting and the curse with which the poet met “the iron guest.” In a sense, it is, therefore, true that Mayakovsky and Essenin were on the different sides of the barricade. They were certainly on the opposite sides of the poetical barricade. One was the drummer and the other the flautist. Both saw a world crumbling and old shapes pulled down by the avalanche of the revolution. Hence, their common disbelief in the solidity of any “realistic” shapes. But here the difference begins. It would perhaps be difficult to find a poetic contrast sharper than that between Mayakovsky’s hyperbolism and Essenin’s “Imagist” style. Essenin’s verse is permeated with that image and color that were almost entirely lacking in Mayakovsky’s rugged poetical *paysage*. It breathed the elemental lyricism of the shepherd forlorn amid the dawn of Russian urbanism.

To every cow on the sign of a butcher’s shop
He doffs his hat from the distance,
And when he meets a cabman in the square,
Recalling the smell of his native fields,
He’s ready to carry the tail of the horse
Like the train of a bridal gown.

Essenin’s poems are now almost proscribed in Russia. This is surely one of those gross abuses in which postrevolutionary bureaucratic wantonness excels. In a historical perspective, cleared of the distortions of bureaucratic omnipotence and omniscience, Essenin will appear as the peak of contemporary Russian poetry. True, this is a highly *passéist*, one might say reactionary peak, but not more so than, for instance, Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, which nobody has yet

dared to suppress on account of its underlying sorrow and sympathy for the early feudal world of knights-errant. The obtuse postrevolutionary cacique "in charge of literary affairs" has proved unable to sense the beauty of Russia's last peasant poet; he has not even been able to approach Essenin's poems with the detachment of a sociologist—which he purports to be—who may ponder with genuine curiosity over a most unusual and authentic document of the life of his generation. He has unscrupulously pigeonholed Essenin as the bard of the counterrevolutionary kulak. The next Russian generation will surely take to re-reading the numerous palimpsests of Russia's postrevolutionary era and, from under the clumsy daubs of the official scripture, it will rescue and recover—among many other names—the name and the memory of Essenin. True, it will find in Essenin's verse the beauty of decay and death rather than the grandeur of strife and endeavor—but it will be civilized and generous enough to allow the Muses the right to mourn their dead—a right which poetry has never ceased to claim—and to remove from the graves the policeman who now forbids access to them.

Essenin's capitulation to death was in a sense natural. Too deeply had he been rooted in the past and in a passing social environment (only poets and artists so deeply rooted in a social milieu can be emotionally so genuine and convincing) to be able to reconcile himself to the new age. Not so Mayakovsky. He was in fact socially uprooted, and this ought to have made it easier for him to merge with the new reality of the revolution. Seemingly, he had very little, if anything, to suppress in his own mentality. In 1924, when Communist Moscow was burying Lenin's dead body in the mausoleum on the Red Square, he was still able to burst out:

The fist of Europe
is clenched
in vain
We'll crush them to dust.

But below the surface of the blustering rhetoric, there

was already an uneasy misgiving about the bureaucratic
Frankenstein which had been emerging from the revolution-
ary chaos.

I
clean myself
 by Lenin
to cruise
 still further
 in revolution's sea.

Yet I fear
 the lines I'm penning
as a youngster
 fears hypocrisy.
That head is now laurel-wreath illumined
I'm only anxious
 it shouldn't shroud
the genuine
 wise
 human
tremendous
 Lenin
 brow.

I fear
 the mausoleum
 the official functions,
established statute
 servility
may clog
 with cloying unction
Leninist
 simplicity.

And further:

We
 bury
 now
 the most earthly,

of all
 who have lived
 on this earth of men.

This vision of the new orthodoxy—the State-Church—which was to overshadow the revolution and subdue it to lifeless uniformity and thoughtless discipline—was in his poem on Lenin perhaps the most genuine and sincere flash coming from the depth of the poet's experience and emotion. In its intuitive strength and historical sensitiveness, it might be compared with that image of the "thorny crown of revolution" which, almost a decade earlier, the poet had projected upon the screen of 1916. Then, he greeted his own vision and was ready to give himself up to it. Now, his vision was hunting him and he was trying to escape it and seeking to reassure himself. If need be, he would still be able to exorcise the ghost of the new orthodoxy with "curse-words" and blasphemies: and "they" would hardly be able to smother his cry and to drown him. But what if they would? What if the heavy, massive, relentless and blind Inquisition of the new Church proved—as it was bound to—the stronger side? It would, perhaps, mean reading too much into Mayakovsky's apostrophes to assume that the poet did ever put that question quite so clearly to himself. But there can be no doubt that he was acutely aware of the problem; and there can be no doubt, too, that his suicide gave, by implication, his reply.

The new Church was to gain an amazing hold both over the minds of its adherents and over those who rebelled against it. It was to leave no room for schisms, heresies and iconoclastic sects. Its spiritual strength was—in spite of its utter lack of spirit—to become so compelling because it had never definitely severed the links with its revolutionary origin. In this one respect, it still stands almost unique among the older churches. True, it has already been able to lure the conservative with its obvious denunciation of revolutionary leaders and to exact the most ghastly confessions from them. The rebels of Bolshevism found themselves in a blind alley in

which to fight the new Church was psychologically almost as impossible for them as to serve it. This was the background of their spectacular mass suicide in the trials of 1936-38. Mayakovsky's suicide in 1930 may be regarded as the poet's lonely prelude to the drama. Certainly, the poet was made of different stuff. He had no programs and no slogans to pound. He would probably have been unable to reason over the conflict against which his life and poetry were about to founder. He simply sensed it with the infallible instinct of the rebel; and—without even trying to talk it out—he went under.

Thus, his death, like his life, was an unconscious testimony to the *quid pro quo* of the poet and the revolution and to the strange mixture of enthusiasm and frustration which filled him as he saw the land of his "Mystery Bouffe" coming so near, and yet being conquered by the priests of the new orthodoxy. In this last gesture, he nevertheless remained true to himself and to the *credo* of his youth. *Habent sua fata, poetae*. The other drummer of European futurism, Marinetti, has, in the meantime, been swallowed and absorbed by the tide of fascism. In the autumn of 1942, he landed as a major of the Italian army somewhere on the steppes between the Don and the Volga. There, he stared into the face of bleeding, embattled Russia. There he was—as he said in an interview with the *Journal de Genève*—awestruck by the vastness of the Russian distance and the incomprehensible spirit of the Russian people. His confessions from the Russian front did not contain any note even slightly reminiscent of the blustering optimism of his youthful manifestoes. On the contrary, their pessimism was as unintentional as genuine. Did this "crusader" in the uniform of an Italian major stop for a while to catch and recognize in the great Russian holocaust the rhythm of Mayakovsky's verse:

There—
beyond sorrow seas
Sunlit lands uncharted.
Beyond hunger,

beyond plague's dark peaks,
marching of millions imprint!
Let armies of hirelings ambush us,
streaming cold steel through every rift,
L'Entente can't conquer the Russias,
Left!
Left!
Left!