

The Poet Takes Himself Apart on Stage: Vladimir Mayakovsky's Poetic Personae in  
*Vladimir Mayakovsky: Tragediia and Misteriia-buff*

By  
Jasmine Trinks

Senior Honors Thesis  
Department of Germanic & Slavic Languages and Literatures  
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

March 2015

Approved:

---

Kevin Reese, Thesis Advisor

Radislav Lapushin, Reader

## CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER I: Mayakovsky's Superfluous Sacrifice: The Poetic Persona in <i>Vladimir Mayakovsky: Tragediia</i> .....	4
CHAPTER II: The Poet-Prophet Confronts the Collective: The Poetic Persona in Two Versions of <i>Misteriia-buff</i> .....	25
CONCLUSION.....	47
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	50

## INTRODUCTION

In his biography of Vladimir Mayakovsky, Edward J. Brown describes the poet's body of work as a "regular alternation of lyric with political or historical themes," noting that Mayakovsky's long lyric poems, like *Человек* [*Man*, 1916] and *Про это* [*About That*, 1923] are followed by the propagandistic *Мистерия-буфф* [*Mystery-Bouffe*, 1918] and *Владимир Ильич Ленин* [*Vladimir Il'ich Lenin*, 1924], respectively (Brown 109). While Brown's assessment of Mayakovsky's work is correct in general, it does not allow for adequate consideration of the development of his poetic persona over the course of his career, which is difficult to pinpoint, due in part to the complex interplay of the lyrical and historical in his poetry. In order to investigate the problem of Mayakovsky's ever-changing and contradictory poetic persona, I have chosen to examine two of his plays: *Владимир Маяковский: Трагедия* [*Vladimir Mayakovsky: A Tragedy*, 1913] and both the 1918 and 1921 versions of *Mystery-Bouffe*. My decision to focus on Mayakovsky's plays arose from my desire to examine what I termed the "spectacle-ization" of the poet's ego—that is, the representation of the poetic persona in a physical form alive and on stage. As Mayakovsky himself played the roles of "Vladimir Mayakovsky" and "the Man" at the respective premieres of the *Tragedy* and *Mystery-Bouffe*, I feel that an investigation of the persona in the poet's plays is very much needed, as Mayakovsky obviously felt that his peculiar position as a poet on stage before the public and the world informed his artistic creation.<sup>1</sup> Rather than presenting Mayakovsky's poetic persona as a duality of lyricism and militaristic propaganda, these two plays trace the complex trajectory of the poetic persona from its devotion to the anarchic political aesthetic of Cubo-Futurism to its glorification of the Communist utopia and advocating of art with a social purpose. This study seeks to reveal that, despite his apparently wholehearted dedication to several political and artistic groups, Mayakovsky's poetic persona is comprised of

---

<sup>1</sup> I will henceforth be referring to *Vladimir Mayakovsky: A Tragedy* simply as the *Tragedy*.

elements that prevent him from being confined to any one of them. The three central aspects of the persona that will be examined in the *Tragedy* are the treatment of material objects, Mayakovsky's involvement or lack thereof with the achievement of a utopian future, and his assertion of himself as a Christ-figure. My analysis of the personae of the two versions of *Mystery-Bouffe* will be focused on their disdain for the concept of heavenly utopia and their respective depictions as distinct revolutionary Christ-figures. An analysis of these two plays in concert will illustrate that the transformation of Mayakovsky's poetic persona from the impotent poet-prophet of the *Tragedy* to the divine revolutionary orator of *Mystery-Bouffe* reveals that his essential concerns—the superhuman abilities of the poet, the role of the poet in society, and the poet's relationship to the achievement of utopia—remain constant, despite the conflict of the poet's individuality with the demands of the collective that inevitably accompanies his devotion to the revolution.

In his 1914 article “Живопись сегодняшнего дня” [“Contemporary Painting”], Mayakovsky establishes his commitment to the idea of absolute artistic freedom. The article is largely devoted to the criticism of his fellow artists who, at least according to Mayakovsky, had not fully embraced the rejection of conventional artistic forms in order to ensure the freedom of transrational art. Mayakovsky criticizes the Peredvizhniki school of visual art, specifically the artist Vereshchagin, whose art was explicitly meant to serve a social purpose. Mayakovsky even goes so far as to criticize fellow members of the Russian avant-garde. He bitingly observes that Larionov, the artist famous for creating the school of Rayonism (лучизм), only ever amounted to being a “talented impressionist” despite his efforts: “Ларионов же каждый день придумывает новые и новые направления, оставаясь талантливейшим импрессионером” [Larionov thinks up new trends every single day, remaining a most talented impressionist<sup>2</sup>] (Mayakovsky 1955, 1: 292). These criticisms on

---

<sup>2</sup> All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

Mayakovsky's part are meant to stress the importance of "art as such" at the expense of social purpose, artistic school, and, most importantly, to support the idea of absolute artistic freedom. In the same article, Mayakovsky directly states as such: "Свободная игра познавательных способностей – вот единственная вечная задача искусства" [The free play of the cognitive faculties: this is the only eternal aim of art] (ibid. 288). Based on the content of this article, it would seem that Mayakovsky was as sincere a devotee of the anarchic political aesthetic of Cubo-Futurism as it was possible to be. However, the inherent contradictions of Mayakovsky's poetic persona complicate matters, suggesting that an investigation of different aspects of this persona in plays from both his pre- and post-revolutionary periods will bear fruit.

## CHAPTER I:

### Mayakovsky's Superfluous Sacrifice: The Poetic Persona in *Vladimir Mayakovsky: Tragediia*

Mayakovsky's *Tragedy* takes the form of a drama in two acts with the central character being the poet "Vladimir Mayakovsky" himself. This poetic persona is surrounded by various disfigured characters in a city that is entrenched in suffering and threatened by the impending "Revolt of Things," or the shattering of the conventional contexts of material objects through animation. In the early Cubo-Futurist context of the *Tragedy*, there are three aspects of Mayakovsky's poetic persona that shed light on the poet's political-aesthetic position in the play: the persona's relationship with material objects and "obsolete" concepts, the existence of two distinct worlds, and the persona's casting of himself as a poet-martyr. The first of these is most directly connected with the anarchic aesthetic of the Cubo-Futurists, specifically Kruchenykh's idea of "the word as such" and what Nina Gurianova calls the "theater of alogism" in *The Aesthetics of Anarchy*. The second aspect establishes a discrepancy between Mayakovsky's *Tragedy* and Kruchenykh's Cubo-Futurist opera *Победа над Солнцем* [*Victory over the Sun*, 1913]. Rather than a successful "Revolt of Things" resulting in a decisively altered universe comparable to the abolishment of time and space that occurs in the aforementioned opera, the "new city" of the *Tragedy* is the result of a failed revolt. The final and most salient aspect of Mayakovsky's poetic persona in the *Tragedy* is the explicit parallels that are drawn between the character of Vladimir Mayakovsky and Christ.

The central conflict of the first act of the *Tragedy* is the abetting of the "Revolt of Things" by the poet "Vladimir Mayakovsky"<sup>3</sup> and the disfigured city-dwellers who follow him. The Man with One Ear describes the terrors of the city, which are made up of

---

<sup>3</sup> The character "Mayakovsky" is placed in quotation marks to distinguish him from the author of the play.

malevolent objects that cause his “unaccountable and disturbing anguish” to “grow like a tear on a weeping dog’s snout”:

Схватишься за ноту –  
пальцы окровавишь!  
А музыкант не может вытащить рук  
из белых зубов разъяренных клавиш . . .  
Даже переулки засучили рукава для драки.

[You’ll grab onto a note / and you’ll bloody your fingers! / The musician can’t pull his hands out / of the white teeth of the enraged piano keys . . . / Even the alleys have rolled up their sleeves for a fight.] (Mayakovsky 9: 10-11)

The violent imagery of the piano keys attacking the musician’s hands emphasizes the physical harm that the Things in revolt are capable of inflicting. Not only are concrete objects like the keyboard of a piano and the street personified, possessing malevolent characteristics that terrorize the city’s inhabitants, but concepts like a musical note, love, the shame of sisters, and the wrinkles of mothers are characterized as Things that should be destroyed. When the Ordinary Young Man tries to dissuade “Mayakovsky” and the city-dwellers from making a bonfire on which to burn these concepts, he declares that “Mayakovsky” and his new followers want to destroy everything:

У меня братец есть,  
маленький,  
вы придете и будете жевать его кости.  
Вы всё хотите съесть!

[I have a brother, / a little one-- / you’ll come and chew his bones. / You want to eat everything up!] (ibid. 14)

Here the objections of the Ordinary Young Man to the establishment of a new order of Things create a dichotomy between the preservation of old world concepts—sentimentality, love, feelings of shame, the weakness of old age—and the destruction of these concepts in favor of the abstraction of objects and concepts into transrational forms. In this way, the Ordinary Young Man and “Vladimir Mayakovsky” are pitted against each other as respective proponents of preservation and destruction.

As Nina Gurianova describes in *The Aesthetics of Anarchy*, the tendency of the Cubo-Futurists to divorce objects from their traditional contexts freed drama from the world of the rational and drove it into the realm of alogism: “In alogism objects exist as such, and the artist deprives them of an everyday context as though to restore to them their phenomenological essence represented by the pure physical features of texture, form and color” (Gurianova 114). In the *Tragedy*, the existence of “objects as such,” freed from their worn traditional context, results in the aforementioned feelings of terror among the city-dwellers. When the Things finally revolt at the end of the first act, the phenomenon is described by the Man with One Eye and One Leg:

И вдруг  
все вещи  
кинулись,  
раздирая голос,  
скидывать лохматя изношенных имен.

[And suddenly / all of the Things / lashed out, / ripping their voices apart, / to throw off the rags of worn-out names.] (Mayakovsky 9: 16)

The Man with One Eye and One Leg continues, describing pants walking of their own volition (“без человеческих ляжек!” [without human thighs!]), a drunken bureau toppling from a window, and corsets climbing down from shop signs (ibid. 16). When the Things “throw off the rags of their worn-out names,” they free themselves from what the Cubo-Futurists considered to be the stagnant old-world representations of objects. The crux of the anarchic nature of the artwork and poetry of the Cubo-Futurists is the absolute freedom of the artist to dismantle the conventional patterns of representation of things. Gurianova summarizes this phenomenon well: “In [the Cubo-Futurists’] artworks, the object is “animated” (as in a children’s game) and individualized. In this respect, the avant-gardists are rather like savages who know how to invoke, worship, and play with objects. For them, to draw something means to possess and control it and create it anew” (Gurianova 35). In his *Tragedy*, Mayakovsky has made the material object his own and lent it characteristics that are



completely divorced from its conventional contexts. By representing the chaos of the “Revolt of Things,” and having the character-representative of his poetic persona contribute to this revolt, Mayakovsky places his poetic persona within the realm of the anarchic political aesthetic.

However, as I intend to prove in this study, Mayakovsky’s poetic persona defies attempts to classify himself as belonging completely to one political aesthetic. The *Tragedy* is particularly illuminating in this regard, as the play’s cast of characters consists of several “Mayakovskys.” As Viktor Shklovsky states in his biography of the poet, *О Маяковском* [*On Mayakovsky*, 1940]: “Поэт сам – тема своей поэзии. Поэт разложил себя на сцене, держит себя в руке, как игрок держит карты. Это – Маяковский двойка, тройка, валет, король” [The poet himself is the subject of his poetry. The poet, having taken himself apart on stage, holds himself in his hand like a gambler holds his cards. It is Mayakovsky the Deuce, the Trey, the Jack, the King] (Shklovsky 55). Mayakovsky’s *Tragedy* should be considered as a long lyric poem, the subject of which is the poet himself, who is manifest in several distinct versions. It is clear that not all of the characters in the *Tragedy* are in favor of the Revolt of Things. The Ordinary Young Man is the most vocal in his discontent, and praises the benefits of banal material objects:

Я придумал машинку для рубки котлет.  
Я умом вовсе не плох!  
У меня есть знакомый –  
он двадцать пять лет  
работает  
над капканом для ловли блох.

[I thought up a little machine for the cutting of cutlets. / I’m not a bad thinker in the least! / I have an acquaintance-- / he for twenty-five years / has been working / on a trap for capturing fleas.] (Mayakovsky 9: 14)

For the Ordinary Young Man, the existence of conventional Things is necessary to improve the lot of humanity through technological innovation. The Old Man with Cats is also enamored with the power of technology, and describes a world where humanity has

conquered the universe by means of electricity. In this world, “flowers will fan out like the tails of peacocks in every window” and the inhabitants of the future world will be able to “fasten the Sun on [their] loved ones’ dresses” (ibid. 10). Both of these characters are in favor of the use of technology, but there are discrepancies between their ideal visions of the future. The Ordinary Young Man adheres to the old-world concepts of sentimentality and humility, and cannot bear to see the destruction of the things and concepts that he holds so dear. The Old Man with Cats, however, proposes that “Things must be cut down” [вещи надо рубить], suggesting that he is in favor of the annihilation of the conventional world and the construction of a utopia where humanity has subjected all of nature to its bidding. In the three characters of the Ordinary Young Man, the Old Man with Cats, and “Vladimir Mayakovsky,” we see the splintering of Mayakovsky’s poetic persona into contradictory “selves,” each of which responds in a distinctive way to the “Revolt of Things.” The contradictory nature of these split personalities lends the poetic persona a kind of hopelessness and impotence that cannot be accounted for by the political aesthetic of the Cubo-Futurists. The indecisiveness on the part of Mayakovsky’s poetic persona with regard to the problem of the “object as such” serves to differentiate the *Tragedy* from works produced according to the anarchic anti-teleological aesthetic of the poet’s fellow artists.

The ultimate failure of the revolt encouraged by “Mayakovsky” in the first act of the *Tragedy* marks yet another discrepancy between the poet and his contemporaries. In the Cubo-Futurist opera *Victory over the Sun*, for example, the victory of the Strong Men over the Sun results in a complete subversion of the forces of the Universe. Time and space are irrevocably altered, resulting in the death of the weak and the successful establishment of the Tenth Country by the Strong Men. In the *Tragedy*, there is no victory. By the beginning of the second act, “Mayakovsky” has been made a prince of the “new city.” In contrast to the end of the first act, in which material objects have come alive and shed their worn-out names

and the concept of familial tenderness has been burned on a bonfire, the characters continue to be burdened by Things and by their own grief.

The first manifestation of the burden of the “new city” is the tears of its inhabitants: three women approach the newly-crowned and robed “Mayakovsky” with their “unneeded” tears and present them to him. Unlike his fellow Cubo-Futurists Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov, who exclude female characters from their drama in favor of an entirely masculine poetic language, Mayakovsky does not refuse to depict women. However, in his play, women and the concepts associated with them—the aforementioned shame and tears—are synonymous with sentimentality: an emotion despised by the Cubo-Futurists, Mayakovsky included. The fact that Mayakovsky uses tears to represent the failure of his revolt is telling, as the tears of women can be viewed as analogs to the “shame of sisters” and the “wrinkles of mothers” that are burned on a bonfire at the end of Act One. The women present their tears of various sizes to the poet-prince, and the gesture disturbs him immediately, as illustrated by the stage directions (“беспокойно” [uneasily]) as he utters a reluctant response to the first woman:

Не нужна она,  
зачем мне?

[I don't need it. / Why give it to me?] (Mayakovsky 9: 19)

The second woman approaches him with an even bigger tear, suggesting that “Mayakovsky” wear it on his shoe like a buckle (ibid. 19). This image brings to mind the vision of the future of the Old Man with Cats, in which the Sun is fastened on girls’ dresses. While these two images might seem similar, as they both involve the transformation and trivialization of unlikely things into mundane adornments, there is a fundamental difference between them. In the Old Man’s speech, the motivation for such a trivialization of the Sun arises from future humanity’s mastering of the Universe through the use of technology. The Sun, rather than being a source of life, is no longer needed as such and is reduced to a trinket in the Old Man’s hopeful vision of the future. The woman’s tear, on the other hand, is trivialized as a result of

her grief and the aftermath of the unsuccessful Revolt of Things, in which grief is so plentiful that it can be given away as a fashionable commodity. Instead of representing the end of an impotent and destructive universe, as in the case of the Old Man's trivialization of the Sun, the women's tears reinforce the stagnant state of the "new city," in which the city's inhabitants continue to be tormented by the burdens of Things.

The failure of the revolt in Act One begs the question: If the city's inhabitants continue to be tormented by Things, why does Mayakovsky call it the "new city"? Recall that in Act One, the animation of the objects is characterized by violent bodily harm inflicted by the piano keys on the musician. In the "new city," however, the Things are empty and ineffectual burdens that bring about emotional distress rather than bodily harm. The third woman who approaches "Mayakovsky" with her tear calls it "...an indolent / great big tear" (ibid. 19). In the new city, Things are no longer animated as violent entities—rather, they are inescapable burdens of grief and symbols of impotent human emotion. The appearance of the Man with Two Kisses [Человек с двумя поцелуями] further illustrates the new horrors of the burdens of Things in the new city. He describes how the clouds, "the young women of the air," are greedy for money:

Тучи отдаются небу,  
рыхлы и гадки.  
День гиб.  
Девушки воздуха тоже до золота падки,  
и им только деньги.

[The clouds are giving themselves up to the sky; / they are doughy and repulsive. / The day is no more. / The young women of the air are greedy for gold, / and they only want money.]  
(Mayakovsky 9: 20)

It makes no sense that any kind of entity should be greedy for money in a new world where things have "thrown off the rags of worn-out names"; this supports the assertion that the vision of a new existence from Act One remains unrealized. Again, this ineffectual new city of which "Mayakovsky" is the crown prince complicates the notion that the poet

Mayakovsky's persona resides firmly in the realm of Cubo-Futurism. The tears of the new city burden its inhabitants not only through their existence as concrete objects, but also through their associations with emotions considered by the Cubo-Futurists to be obsolete. The city of Act Two thus contradicts the political aesthetic of the Cubo-Futurists, supporting the assertion that Mayakovsky's poetic persona diverges from that particular aesthetic.

While the second act of the *Tragedy* establishes the unsuccessful Revolt of Things, it most directly concerns itself with the image of Mayakovsky as a Christ-figure. This feature of Mayakovsky's poetic persona is the most salient of the play. Among the poet's central plays, the development of the image of the poetic persona as a Christ-figure is the most revealing of Mayakovsky's complex relationship with the role of the poet in the achievement of utopia, and is therefore essential to the analysis of his poetic persona. The character of the Man with Two Kisses plays an important role in establishing "Mayakovsky's" position as a poet-martyr generally and as a parallel to Christ specifically. The story of the Man with Two Kisses acts as a parable that reflects the tortuousness and superfluity of this position. The man in the parable is given two kisses, and is described as not knowing what to do with them:

Человек был неловкий,  
не знал,  
что с ними делать,  
куда их деть.

[The man was awkward, / and didn't know / what to do with them, / or where to put them.]  
(ibid. 21)

The kisses, although they are meant to be parallels of the tears, are a less abstract burden than grief: lips and kisses are inseparable from physicality in Mayakovsky's universe, as they are "the most common metaphor for love and sex" in his poetry (Reese 110). The prevalence of lips as a sexual metaphor is particularly apparent in Mayakovsky's first long poem, *Облако в штанах* [*A Cloud in Pants*, 1915], in which the poetic persona uses the act of kissing to convey the agony of sexual desire:

Всемогущий, ты выдумал пару рук,  
сделал,  
что у каждого есть голова, --  
отчего ты не выдумал,  
чтоб было без мук  
целовать, целовать, целовать?!

[Almighty, you thought up a pair of hands, / made it / so that everyone has a head— / why didn't you think / to make it so that one could without torture / kiss, kiss, kiss?!] (Mayakovsky 1: 248)

The essential physicality of the kisses is illustrated in the parable by the fact that they gain repulsively child-like characteristics once the man in the parable tries to throw them away. Examining the imagery of this passage even more closely, we discover that the Man with Two Kisses is the unwilling father in the parable. Kisses in this case symbolize not only the pure physicality of sexual intercourse, as they do generally in Mayakovsky's poetic universe, but in this case are also associated with procreation, which is the often undesirable outcome of the demands of the flesh. The man in the parable is so unprepared and frightened at the prospect of fatherhood that he hangs himself. Meanwhile, we see that women described as "factories without smoke and chimneys" are "manufactur[ing] kisses by the millions"—that is, having childlike grotesques<sup>4</sup> at an alarming rate, and thus continuing the vicious cycle that leads to the suicide of the man in the parable.

This parable serves to show that "Mayakovsky," too, is an unwilling father in that he is unprepared to take on the suffering of his children, or his "flock." The *дети-поцелуи* [child-kisses] described in the parable even appear to "Mayakovsky" himself, asking him to take them and their own tears. He responds by crying out:

Господа!  
Послушайте, --  
я не могу!  
Вам хорошо,  
а мне с болью-то как?

---

<sup>4</sup> Here I have borrowed Edward J. Brown's translation of "детообразные гротески" found in Roman Jakobson's "О поколении, растратившем своих поэтов" ["On a Generation That Squandered its Poets"], which is used to describe creatures in Mayakovsky's works that possess the characteristics of children, but which cannot be described as such (Jakobson 154).

[Gentlemen! / Listen, / I can't do this! / It's fine for you, / but what am I to do with my pain?] (ibid. 22)

Perhaps this outburst is the Mayakovskian equivalent to Christ's prayer in Gethsemane before his crucifixion: "Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me" (*King James Bible*, Luke 22.42). As Christ's outburst is a reflection of the human in the Savior, "Mayakovsky's" appeal to his "children" serves to reflect the character of the Ordinary Young Man, who is against extreme measures and violence. If we accept, as Shklovsky argues, that Mayakovsky populates his *Tragedy* with different versions of himself, then it follows that, as there is a "poet-martyr Mayakovsky," there is also an earthly and "ordinary Mayakovsky" who is unwilling both to participate in the violent Revolt of Things and to sacrifice himself for his followers.

Despite "Mayakovsky's" appeal to them, there is no mercy to be found from his "children." Instead of allowing him to sit down, they admonish him, saying "you alone can sing songs," and command him to carry their tears to his "beautiful God" (Mayakovsky 9: 23). "Mayakovsky's" children, to whom he declared in Act One that he would "teach uncompromisingly and strictly" (ibid. 12), have now rejected not only him, but also the Revolt of Things that he helped bring about in the first act. Perhaps the tension of living in a world with Things as such, which seemed like such a freeing prospect in the first act, has turned out to be unbearable. "Mayakovsky" is thus alone and superfluous in his suffering, and there is nothing left for him to do but martyr himself. He describes how he "will go out through the city, leaving shred after shred of [his] soul on the spears of houses":

...выйду сквозь город,  
душу  
на копьях домов  
оставляя за клоком клоч. (ibid. 23)

Here the ripping of the poet's soul into shreds corresponds to the injuries suffered by Christ at his flagellation before his arduous journey to Golgotha: "Then Pilate therefore took Jesus,

and scourged him” (John 19.1). Later in the same monologue, “Mayakovsky” refers to the tears that he has been commanded to carry away to God as his “burden”:

Я  
с ношей моей  
иду,  
спотыкаюсь, . . .

[I / with my burden / go along, / I stumble...] (Mayakovsky 9: 23)

The tears have become “Mayakovsky’s” cross, which he bears as he leaves the city that has rejected him. Recall also that, at the beginning of Act Two, “Mayakovsky” has been crowned a prince by his followers, which parallels the title given to Christ in the Gospels, most notably by Pontius Pilate at the Crucifixion: “King of the Jews.” In the cases of both “Mayakovsky” and Christ, the followers of each give them the respective titles of “prince” and “King of the Jews,” and each of these titles is ironically used against them before their respective acts of self-sacrifice. In “Mayakovsky’s” case, this irony takes the form of his followers using his poetic powers—for which they had crowned him prince in the first place—to mock him, reminding him when he searches for a way out of his predicament that “only [he] can sing songs.”

The striking parallel that Mayakovsky draws between the poet’s journey out of the city and the Crucifixion is not the only resonance to be found between the poet-martyr of Mayakovsky’s poetic persona and Jesus Christ. According to Christian doctrine, one of the offices of Christ is that of a prophet, as evidenced by the prophesy of Moses in the Old Testament: “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites” (Deuteronomy 18.15). In the *Tragedy*, it is clear that, rather than being appointed a prophet by God, “Mayakovsky” has granted himself his prophetic status by the sheer force of his poetic talent. In effect, “Mayakovsky” has robbed God of His almighty power and has taken it upon himself to distribute it among human beings, beginning with himself. The demotion of God is a frequent theme in Mayakovsky’s poetry, notably in “Hame



воскресенье” [“Our Sunday,” 1923], in which it is not God, but man who “controls the world” (Mayakovsky 2: 91). In the case of the *Tragedy*, Mayakovsky has portrayed God as an incompetent and even insane figure, and Mayakovsky’s poetic persona, rather than following his orders, has taken it upon himself to control the world of the play. The Old Man with Cats declares the insanity and impotence of God in the first act:

А с неба на вой человеческой орды  
глядит обезумевший Бог.

[But from heaven, over the wailing of the human horde, / watches God, who has gone mad.]  
(Mayakovsky 9: 9)

In the prologue to the play, Mayakovsky’s character acts as the heralding mouthpiece of the future order of things in the absence of a benevolent God:

...я вам открою  
словами  
простыми, как мычание,  
наши новые души,  
гудящие,  
как фонарные дуги.

[I will open to you / with words / simple, like mooing, / our new souls, / humming, / like the arcs of streetlamps.] (ibid. 7)

Here “Mayakovsky” explicitly unites the art of his poetry with the act of prophesying. It is specifically his title of poet that renders him capable of such a feat.

The idea of the poet as an entity that possesses a unique communion with the forces of nature and the Universe is an established convention of modern poetry, and holds many precedents in Russian literary Romanticism. Evgeny Baratynsky’s poem “Последний поэт” [“The Last Poet”] (1835) serves as a notable example of the Poet’s<sup>5</sup> knowledge of the mysteries of the Universe<sup>6</sup>. In this poem, Baratynsky offers up a vision of what would now be

---

<sup>5</sup> I have capitalized “Poet” here to differentiate the Romantic concept from the word in the traditional prosaic sense. For consistency’s sake, “Prophet” receives the same treatment here.

<sup>6</sup> Baratynsky’s poem “Что за звуки, мимоходом...” [“What sounds are these? In passing...”] provides yet another perspective on the fate of the Poet-Prophet. In contrast to “Последний поэт” and Lermontov’s “Пророк”, which portray his fate as a tragedy, and Pushkin’s “Пророк,” which concerns itself primarily with the Poet-Prophet’s divine powers, “Что за звуки” depicts a more complex Poet-Prophet, who, while having become a pariah, is described by the speaker of the poem as “the chosen one” [избранник]. The speaker goes on

called a dystopian future in which poetry has been forgotten, and in which there remains only one Poet who urges people to open themselves to the poetic world beyond the prosaic one in which they live:

Верьте сладким убеждением  
Вас ласкающих очес  
И отрадным откровеньям  
сострадательных небес.

[Trust in the sweet convictions / of the eyes that caress you / and in the comforting revelations / of the sympathetic heavens.] (Baratynsky 174)

It is worth noting that in Baratynsky's poem, the Poet meets a fate very similar to that of "Mayakovsky" in the *Tragedy*. After being laughed at and misunderstood by the people of this world without poetry, the Poet sacrifices himself by abandoning his "useless gift" [бесполезный дар] to the sea, as "Mayakovsky" martyrs himself and goes to the sea to give up his burden of tears:

Я добреду –  
усталый,  
в последнем бреду  
брошу вашу слезу  
темному богу гроз  
у истока звериных вер.

[I will drag myself-- / exhausted, / in my last delirium / I will throw your tear / to the dark god of storms / at the source of bestial faiths.] (Mayakovsky 9: 24)

The figure of the Poet is joined with explicitly Christian imagery and prophetic gifts in Pushkin's "Пропок" ["The Prophet"] (1826). The Poet is a wanderer who, after his tongue is ripped out and replaced with a serpent's tongue and his heart with a burning coal, is given a command by the voice of God:

«Восстань, пророк, и виждь, и внемли,  
Исполнишь волею моею,  
И, обходя моря и земли,

---

to declare that the Poet-Prophet's voice may finally be heard in the "heavenly choir" [Там, быть может, в горнем клире, / Звучен будет голос твой] (Baratynsky 187). The suggestion in this poem that the Poet-Prophet belongs not among people, where he cannot be understood, but rather in an otherworldly realm, is reflected in the flight of Mayakovsky's poetic persona from the city and into his own distinctive "heaven" at the end of the *Tragedy*.

Глаголом жги сердца людей.»

[“Rise, prophet, behold and give ear, / Be filled with my will, / And, traveling over land and sea, / Burn the hearts of people with the Word.”] (Pushkin 2: 149)

Lermontov’s “Пропок” (1841) presents us with another example of the Poet-Prophet resigning himself to suffering due to his God-given gifts. This Prophet, much like Baratynsky’s Poet and Mayakovsky’s poetic persona, is “despised and rejected of men” (Isaiah 53.3), and ends up living alone in a wasteland due to his complete alienation from humanity brought on by his God-granted knowledge of the mysteries of the Universe.

Like the Romantic Poet-Prophet, it seems that it is “Mayakovsky’s” lot to wander the earth as well, as if fulfilling the command of some outside force. In the first act, “Mayakovsky” describes how, before his arrival to the city where the action unfolds, he has exhaustively traveled all over different lands, as the voice of God had commanded Pushkin’s Prophet to do:

Я  
ногой,  
распухшей от исканий,  
обошел  
и вашу сушу  
и еще какие-то другие страны. . .

[I, / on a foot swollen from searching, / have traveled all over / not only your land, / but also some kinds of other countries...] (Mayakovsky 9: 12)

We know from the Gospels that Christ spends the end of his short life wandering to spread God’s word, performing miracles on the way. To follow this comparison further, we also know that suffering the derision of others falls to Christ’s lot before His Crucifixion, particularly when the crowd of onlookers demands the release of Barabbas rather than of Christ. The scorn of the martyr-figure’s fellow men finds expression in the Poet-Prophets of certain Romantic poets as well as in the character of “Mayakovsky.” We have already seen how Baratynsky’s Poet is met with the laughter of his listeners when he demonstrates his gift. The element of derision is not present in Pushkin’s “The Prophet,” but one might argue that

Lermontov's poem of the same name serves as a continuation of the life of the same Prophet. Miller asserts in *Лермонтовская энциклопедия* [*The Lermontov Encyclopedia*] that Lermontov's and Pushkin's "The Prophet" are connected in both fabulaic and thematic content: "In the poem 'The Prophet,' Lermontov emphatically begins his development of the 'Pushkinian' theme precisely from the moment on which his predecessor stopped. [...] Thus is the fate, Lermontov shows, of the one who, having heeded the 'word of God,' appeared in the world to 'burn the hearts of people with the Word'" <sup>7</sup> (Miller 449). As is made clear in the *Encyclopedia*, Lermontov's "The Prophet" begins precisely where Pushkin's ends, after God has granted the Prophet his powers:

С тех пор как вечный судия  
Мне дал всеведение пророка,  
В очах людей читаю я  
Страницы злобы и порока.

[Since the Eternal Judge / Gave me the omniscience of a prophet, / I can read in people's eyes / The pages of malice and wickedness.] (Lermontov 2: 85)

Here the scorn directed toward the Prophet by others is a direct result of the power he possesses. At the end of the poem, the speech of the ordinary men who have rejected the poet is quoted directly:

«Смотрите: вот пример для вас!  
Он горд был, не ужился с нами:  
Глупец, хотел уверить нас,  
Что Бог гласит его устами!

Смотрите ж, дети, на него:  
Как он угрюм, и худ, и бледен!  
Смотрите, как он наг и беден,  
Как презирают все его!»

["Look: here's an example for you all! / He was proud and did not get along with us: / A fool, he wanted to convince us / That God speaks through his lips! Just look at him, children: / How morose he is, how thin and pale! / Look at how naked and poor he is, / Look at how all despise him!"] (ibid. 86)

---

<sup>7</sup> "В стих. «Пророк» свое развитие «пушкинской» темы Л. подчеркнуто начинает именно с того момента, на к-ром остановился его предшественник [...] И вот, показывает Л., судьба того, кто, вняв «гласу бога», явился в мир «глаголом жечь сердца людей»."

Significantly, the only instances of direct speech in both Pushkin's and Lermontov's poems are those of God in the former and the ordinary men in the latter. Both instances occur at the end of each poem, strengthening through structural parallels the idea that Lermontov's "The Prophet" depicts the events following Pushkin's poem.<sup>8</sup> While God's direct address to the Prophet is the crowning moment of the Prophet's transformation, the scorn of the ordinary men is the nadir of his inevitable suffering and superfluity. We gather, then, that although the Prophet may possess gifts that allow him to speak with the voice of God and become privy to the secrets of the Universe, it is precisely these gifts that cause him to be despised. In the above passage, the ordinary men scorn the Prophet precisely because he is not ordinary—that he is "proud," that he distinguishes himself from ordinary men. This is also the case with Christ—He makes no attempt to hide that He is the Son of God, and it is precisely this refusal to present Himself as an ordinary man that results in His Crucifixion.

We have already seen that in the *Tragedy*, "Mayakovsky" places himself in opposition to what is ordinary. He is at odds with the Ordinary Young Man, who simply wants to continue living life as it is, who has a brother and a sister, who values sentimentality and family and wants to utilize objects for his own mundane and prosaic purposes. "Mayakovsky," who wants to bring about a revolt to completely alter the order of objects and everything the Ordinary Young Man stands for, presents himself as a pioneer paving the way for a new future in this city of deformed people burdened by fear and grief. These people are initially enchanted by "Mayakovsky's" gifts and by his desire to destroy the ordinary, and subsequently become his followers and crown him prince of the new city. In Act Two, these followers allow the Poet-Prophet no relief from the distress of his position, which leaves him no outlet save that of self-sacrifice.

---

<sup>8</sup> I credit the original idea about the creation of structural parallels between the two poems through their analogous dialogues to an astute observation made by Dr. John Wright of Kenyon College.

The essential link in Mayakovsky's poetry between Poet and Prophet is not limited to the *Tragedy*. This relationship is also present in Mayakovsky's early poem "А все-таки" ["And Yet", 1914]. In it, Mayakovsky's poetic persona describes the frightening physical feats he is capable of performing as a result of his poetic gifts—like putting a city block on his head "like a red-haired wig" [как рыжий парик] in one of many examples of Mayakovsky's poetic gigantism—and proclaims that his position as Poet raises him to the level of a Prophet:

Но меня не осудят, но меня не облают,  
Как пророку, цветами устелят мне след.  
Все эти, провалившиеся носами, знают:  
Я – ваш поэт.

[But they will not condemn me, they will not hound me, / Like that of a prophet, my path will be paved with flowers. / All of them, with their sunken-in noses, know: / I am your poet.]  
(Mayakovsky 1: 87)

The poetic persona's brandishing of the superhuman abilities granted him by his position as Poet is a prominent aspect of Mayakovsky's *Tragedy* as well. These "miracles" are often essentially physical in nature and involve the transformation of parts of the body. In the prologue, "Mayakovsky" proclaims that he has the power to fundamentally alter the physicality of others:

Я вам только головы пальцами трону,  
и у вас  
вырастут губы  
для огромных поцелуев. . .

[I'll just touch your heads with my fingers, / and you / will grow lips / for enormous kisses...] (Mayakovsky 9: 7)

The miracle described here involves lips, which, as has been established, are the most common metaphor for sex in Mayakovsky's poetry. While Christ performs miracles of a physical nature in the Gospels (healing the sick and raising the dead), "Mayakovsky's" abilities are carnal, and as such they carry with them the burden of sexual passion. The ubiquitous metaphors of lips and kisses are often paired with suffering in Mayakovsky's

universe, as they symbolize the inescapable demands of the flesh. This is the case of the despair of the Man with Two Kisses—the physicality of the kisses ultimately leads to his suicide. In the excerpt from the prologue quoted above, the very enormity of the lips that “Mayakovsky” is capable of granting lends an aspect of deformity and ponderousness to his offering. The miracle, then, turns out to be an affliction of insatiable sexual desire. This contradiction contributes to the idea of “Mayakovsky” as an ineffectual rendering of the Christ figure. There is much that he is capable of, but his actions are powerless to assuage the despair of the inhabitants of his *Tragedy*, and in this case even intensify it.

In the above passage from “And Yet,” it is clear that the poetic persona is confident that his superhuman abilities, despite the fright they inspire in the people around him, will grant him love and recognition not only from humanity at large, but even from God himself. In this poem, Mayakovsky casts God as an ardent admirer, whom he believes will read his poetry to all of his heavenly acquaintances, and thus will become one of the “disciples” of the poetic persona. As we have seen, however, none of the Prophets examined in this study have had their paths strewn with flowers as described by Mayakovsky in this poem. In the *Tragedy*, “Mayakovsky” is made a prince by the inhabitants of the “new city” and is clothed in a toga and a laurel wreath. While his new attire serves as an ironic reference to the poets of antiquity, it is also a reflection of the poetic persona’s newly-acquired position as poet-prince. We know, however, that his privileged position is short-lived, as the townspeople reject and scorn him in the second act. The “Mayakovsky” of “And Yet” refuses to acknowledge the possibility that his abilities would result in a negative reaction from those surrounding him. The position of the poetic persona in the prologue and first act of the *Tragedy* is a similar one—the Poet is convinced that the mysterious powers he possesses will lead to a successful Revolt of Things. Despite his ability to reveal humanity’s “new souls,” “Mayakovsky” is unable to divine the rejection of his followers that awaits him, as well as his subsequent

martyrdom. Conversely, the Old Man with Cats foresees “Mayakovsky’s” fate almost as soon as the Poet appears at the beginning of Act One, and addresses him:

Оставь.  
Зачем мудрецам погремушек потеха?  
Я – тысячелетний старик.  
И вижу – в тебе на кресте из смеха  
распят замученный крик.

[Leave off. / Why offer sages the merrymaking of rattles? / I am a thousand-year-old man. / And I see that in you, on a cross of laughter, / a martyred scream is crucified.] (Mayakovsky 9: 9)

By reducing “Mayakovsky’s” miracle-working only to so much nonsense and foreseeing the humiliation and scorn to which the Poet will be subjected, the prediction of the Old Man with Cats serves as evidence that he is ineffectual as a poet-martyr despite the fact that he is “golden-mouthed”<sup>9</sup> and capable of performing feats of miraculous transformation. From the outset, the poetic persona is cast as capable only of accomplishing that which is unneeded.

Recall his opening words in the prologue:

Вам ли понять  
почему я  
спокойный,  
насмешек грозою  
душу на блюде несу  
к обеду идущих лет.  
С небритой щеки площадей  
Стекаая ненужной слезою,  
я,  
быть может,  
последний поэт.

[Can you understand / why I, / calm, / by way of a storm of jeers, / am carrying my soul on a platter / to the dinner of the coming years? / From the unshaven cheek of city squares / dripping like an unneeded tear, / I, / perhaps, / am the last poet.] (Mayakovsky 9: 6)

By drawing a comparison between himself and an “unneeded tear,” the poetic persona likens himself to the burden of tears that serves as his metaphorical cross, attributing to himself an element of the oppressive superfluity that is a major thematic element of the second act. The

---

<sup>9</sup> From *Облако в штанах* [A Cloud in Pants, 1915]: “златоустейший” (Mayakovsky 5: 237), the simple superlative of “златоустый”, meaning “eloquent.”



poetic persona offering up his soul on a platter for the people of the future to feed on encapsulates his tragic position in a single image. As Poet and Prophet, he offers his soul to the people around him—his words, his miracles, and his revolt are all presented to them. He is capable of seeing a future world where human souls hum with electricity, but this future is not for him. He continually offers his soul for humanity to “dine on,” and after his unsuccessful attempts at building this new future, his place is not in the distant bright future that he has imagined. Instead of ensuring that he has a place in this imagined future, he will banish himself to his own “shabby little universe”<sup>10</sup>:

А я, прихрамывая душонкой,  
уйду к моему трону  
с дырами звезд по истертым сводам.  
Лягу,  
светлый,  
в одеждах из лени  
на мягкое ложе из настоящего навоза,  
и тихим,  
целующим шпал колени,  
обнимет мне шею колесо паровоза.

[But I, limping a little in my soul, / will go out to my throne / with the holes of stars in the worn-out vault. / I will lie down, / radiant, / in clothes of laziness / on a soft bed of real manure, / and quiet, / kissing the knees of the railway ties, / the wheel of a locomotive will embrace my neck.] (Mayakovsky 9: 7)

The tragedy of “Vladimir Mayakovsky” is the fruitlessness of his sacrifice. Herein lies the fundamental difference between his and Christ’s respective acts of martyrdom: while Christ’s results in the forgiveness of all of humanity’s sins and in the prophetic agent’s Resurrection and Assumption, “Mayakovsky’s” sacrifice results in nothing. Despite the promise of a bright new future in the first act of the *Tragedy*, no indication is given that the society depicted within it will ever reach this point. Here the utopian vision is as ineffectual as the Poet-Prophet who has proclaimed it.

---

<sup>10</sup> I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Kevin Reese, for supplying me with this phrase, which I believe is particularly apt in describing the mood of this last section of the prologue.

The complexity of Mayakovsky's poetic persona prevents one from reducing his qualities to their manifestation in one single work. It has been shown here that, despite Mayakovsky the poet's dedication to the political aesthetic of the Cubo-Futurists, the expression of the poetic persona reflects contradictions that prevent us from restricting it to the realm of Cubo-Futurist aesthetics. Having interrogated this work from the beginning of Mayakovsky's artistic career, one might be tempted to conclude that its treatment of the harm that is inflicted by material objects, the dichotomy of dystopia and utopia, and the strong religious imagery connected with the poetic persona are marked aspects of the poet's early work alone and cannot be fruitfully examined in Mayakovsky's post-revolutionary works. In the following chapter, I intend to prove that this is not the case. The depiction of utopia, the function of Mayakovsky's highly self-conscious poetic persona, and Mayakovsky's use of religious imagery will all be complicated further as Mayakovsky becomes further dedicated, both ideologically and institutionally, to the ideal Communist future.

## CHAPTER II:

### The Poet-Prophet Confronts the Collective: The Poetic Persona in Two Versions of *Mysteria-buff*

We have seen thus far that the poetic persona of Mayakovsky's *Tragedy* is an assertion both of the poet's individuality and superfluity that, having been influenced by the anarchic political aesthetic of his fellow Cubo-Futurists through the half-hearted depiction of the "Revolt of Things," cannot be confined to it. The version of "Mayakovsky" that appears in the *Tragedy* is one for whom the anarchy of alogism is attractive, but is too confining for his idiosyncratic portrayal of the poetic persona as a Christ-figure. As evidenced by the failure in the play of the Revolt of Things, the alogism espoused in the first act of the *Tragedy* is ineffective. Instead it is Mayakovsky's self-conscious portrayal of himself as a poet-martyr that dominates the play. However, the assertion of "Mayakovsky's" position as poet-martyr cannot be described as effective, as his martyrdom results in nothing. The pre-revolutionary "Mayakovsky" finds himself in a predicament: there is no solution, not for his own despair, nor for the despair of humanity in general. The October Revolution and the accompanying promise of an idealized Communist society provides a potential solution for the psychological torment felt so acutely by the poetic persona of the *Tragedy*. In *Mysteria-Bouffe*, the focus is shifted from the psychological torment of the poetic persona and the other characters of the *Tragedy* to the plot-driven and ideologically didactic struggle of the proletarian Unclean against the bourgeois Clean and the forces of *byt*. Although the clearly ideological depiction of the industrious and atheistic workers' triumph over the greedy capitalists and irresolute alarmists is the focus of the later play, an in-depth examination of its two versions reveals that Mayakovsky's poetic persona is present in this play as well, but is distributed among various characters and features of the play. By considering several of the marked differences between the two versions of the play, the existence of the persona is revealed, as are the distinctions between the 1918 and 1921 "Mayakovskys." The central

distinctions between the two versions of the play are most apparent in the completely dissimilar prologues and the development of the parallel characters of “Человек просто” [Simply a Man] and “Человек будущего” [The Man of the Future].

The prologues from both the 1918 and 1921 versions of *Mystery-Bouffe* differentiate themselves from that of the *Tragedy* in that Mayakovsky has, in what seems an attempt to downplay or remove “Mayakovsky,” replaced himself first with “we” (1918) and then with “they” (1921). Rather than using the prologue to begin to “take himself apart on the stage” as he—according to Shklovsky—does in the *Tragedy*, Mayakovsky establishes from the outset that the play will follow the attempts of the Unclean to achieve an ideal Communist future through revolution. In the prologue of the 1918 version of *Mystery-Bouffe*, the Clean and Unclean are explicitly connected to the idea of revolution, but are more than just a political symbol: the Unclean are described in the prologue as having been “expelled from the earth’s womb by the cesarean section of war” [Стоим, / исторгнутые из земного чрева / кесаревым сечением войны] (Mayakovsky 9: 26), but they do not outright assert their position as that of the proletariat, though their description of their unfashionable clothing and their glorification of the revolution suggests this. It is made evident by their respective character designations that the Clean and Unclean are representatives of the bourgeois class and the proletariat. The Clean are made up of such characters as a Russian merchant, a fat Frenchman, a priest, and an American, while the Unclean consist of a chimney sweep, a cobbler, a blacksmith, and other clearly ignoble workers. Mayakovsky’s character designs for the play also support the political distinction between the Clean and Unclean. The Clean are drawn like the bumbling capitalists of Soviet propaganda posters, with comical round bodies and stick-thin legs.<sup>11</sup> The Unclean are depicted as dynamic geometric figures with tools in-hand, strikingly reminiscent of Kazimir Malevich’s character designs for *Victory over the*

---

<sup>11</sup> Interested readers may find examples of such caricatures of the bourgeoisie in Maria Lafont’s *Soviet Posters: the Sergo Grigorian Collection*, Prestel, 2007.

*Sun*, in which the characters, as a result of their abandonment of the old world, resemble not so much human beings as colorful composites of cubes and pyramids, as in the sketch of the “Будетлянский силач” [Strong Man of the Future] (Malevich 54). As Malevich’s designs represent characters who are intent on the destruction of the conventional world and the creation of a new order of things, Mayakovsky’s markedly similar design choices cannot be accidental. Significantly, Mayakovsky’s *Tragedy* and *Victory over the Sun* were performed on the same bill in 1913, and Mayakovsky therefore would have been familiar with Malevich’s character and set designs for the opera. Having been actively involved with the visual arts himself, it is reasonable to conclude that Mayakovsky had been influenced by Malevich’s designs, and that the representation of human beings as bold geometric figures grew to become a kind of stylistic shorthand through which ideas of radical progression and rejection of the past were expressed. The existence of a sustained correlative discourse between Malevich’s artwork and Mayakovsky’s poetry is evidenced by the fact that Malevich designed the sets for the 1918 version of *Mystery-Bouffe* (Mayakovsky 9: 302). While the Clean and Unclean are thus visually depicted in a way that aligns them with Communist ideology, in the 1918 version of *Mystery-Bouffe* Mayakovsky does not completely confine his characters to these narrow classifications. This reluctance to restrict the ideological scope of his characters is realized through Mayakovsky’s use of Christian imagery in the prologue of this version.

A similar permutation of religious imagery exists in the *Tragedy*, but, as has been stated above, the sacrifice of Mayakovsky’s Christ-like poetic persona does not result in the creation of a utopia, and thus the assimilation of the religious imagery is ineffectual in achieving a Kingdom of Heaven on Earth. Conversely, the Unclean successfully reach the Promised Land as a result of their rejection of the concept of heavenly paradise. In the

prologue, the Unclean declare in unison that their destiny is both a response to and subversion of the religious canon:

Нам написали Евангелие,  
Коран,  
«Потерянный и возвращенный рай»,  
и еще,  
и еще —  
многое множество книжек.  
Каждая — радость загробную сулит, умна и хитра.  
Здесь,  
на земле  
хотим  
не выше жить  
и не ниже  
всех этих елей, домов, дорог, лошадей и трав.  
Нам надоели небесные сласти —  
хлебище дайте жрать ржаной!  
Нам надоели бумажные страсти —  
дайте жить с живой женой!

[The Gospels were written for us, / the Koran, / *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* / and more, / and still more— / a great multitude of little books. / Each one promises joy beyond the grave; each one is shrewd and cunning. / Here / on earth / we want / to live no higher / and no lower / than all of these spruces, houses, roads, horses, and grasses. / We are fed up with heavenly sweets— / give us a huge loaf of rye bread to eat! / We are fed up with paper passions— / let us live with a living wife!] (Mayakovsky 9: 26-27)

In the above passage, the reduction of the formidable religious texts in question to the diminutive “little book” [книжка] rather than simply “book” [книга] is one indication of the belittlement of these mythologies at the hands of the Unclean. This diminutive form is often used to convey an attitude of affection on the part of the speaker, as described by Viktor Vinogradov in *Русский язык* [*The Russian Language*], but its usage here reveals the Unclean’s patronizing view of humanity’s central religious texts as nothing more than “nice little books.”<sup>12</sup> Another example of this degradation is the Unclean’s description of religious ideology as “heavenly sweets” of which they refuse to partake. For them the promise of utopia beyond the grave is not sufficient. Such a promise cannot nourish the Unclean, and they demand an earthly paradise instead, symbolized here by vast loaves of rye bread. The

---

<sup>12</sup> Vinogradov describes the productive feminine suffix “-ka” as having a “diminutive affectionate meaning” [уменьшительное-ласкательное значение] (Vinogradov 121).

Unclean have transformed what Mayakovsky views as the distant and ineffectual religious concept of paradise into something immediate and powerful. The characterization of religious texts in general as “paper passions” in the prologue contributes further to the impotency of the conventional heavenly paradise. Here the Unclean contrast the lifelessness of books with the vitality of a living woman. A notable early example of the aversion felt by Mayakovsky’s poetic persona toward the obsolescence of the past as symbolized by books occurs in *A Cloud in Pants*:

Славьте меня!  
Я великим не чета.  
Я над всем, что сделано,  
ставлю «nihil».

Никогда  
ничего не хочу читать.  
Книги?  
Что книги!

[Glorify me! / The great are no match for me. / Over everything that has been done, / I place nihil. / I never / want to read anything. / Books? / To hell with books!] (Mayakovsky 1: 11)

While Mayakovsky’s poetic persona is preoccupied in this excerpt with the inherent worthlessness of books in general, the Unclean concern themselves with the deceit of the religious texts enumerated in the prologue. The Unclean’s rejection of these religious texts can be viewed as a more targeted variation of the views of Mayakovsky’s poetic persona in *A Cloud in Pants*. In this poem, as in the *Tragedy*, the persona’s focus is himself as a poet and martyr. In *Cloud*, one of the manifestations of this fixation is the pronouncement of his own greatness at the expense of the great authors of the past. Later in the poem, the poetic persona declares that “a nail in [his] boot is more nightmarish than Goethe’s fantasy”:

Я знаю —  
гвоздь у меня в сапоге  
кошмарней, чем фантазия у Гете! (Mayakovsky 1: 13)

This characterization reduces *Faust* from a formidable work of Christian literature to practically nothing. While the disdain of the poetic persona in *A Cloud in Pants* is motivated

by his assertion of his poetic ability, this disregard for literature of the past is fundamentally altered in *Mystery-Bouffe*. Mayakovsky banishes the fierce individuality of his poetic persona from the prologue and places his contempt for books in an explicitly Soviet ideological context. This is not to say, however, that Mayakovsky's pre-revolutionary works did not contain much in the way of defiance against God and religion. Even in Mayakovsky's earliest poetry, God appears as the persona's enemy. In the *Tragedy*, the Old Man with Cats urges the inhabitants of the city in the first act to do away with God, who refuses to relieve humanity's suffering:

Он – Бог,  
а кричит о жестокой расплате,  
а в ваших душонках поношенной вздошек.  
Бросьте его!

[He is God, / and screams about cruel atonement, / but in your little souls there is a worn-out little sigh. / Get rid of Him!] (Mayakovsky 9: 9)

While the poetic persona's view of God as cruel and impotent is clearly apparent in his early poetry, it is not until *Mystery-Bouffe* that he successfully foments a rebellion against Him, assisting the Unclean in throwing off the yoke of their oppression. Not only is the revolution of the Unclean a victory of the proletariat over the unjust and ineffectual demands of religion: it is also the victory of Mayakovsky's poetic persona over God—his ever-present nemesis.

By casting themselves as the population to whom these central religious texts are addressed, the Unclean assert that the bringing about of an earthly paradise through revolution will serve as the necessary addendum to these texts. As the biblical New Testament can be viewed as a nullification of the stringent laws of the Old Covenant in favor of the redeeming Law of Christ, the demands of the Unclean for a more substantial and tangible paradise render the ideology of these religious texts obsolete—theirs is a kind of Third Testament. The divine mission of the proletariat to create a utopia is described by



Nikolai Berdiaev in *Истоки и смысл русского коммунизма* [*Origins and Essence of Russian Communism*] as “the soul of Marxism”:

И активным субъектом, который освобождает человека от рабства и создаст лучшую жизнь, является пролетариат. Ему приписываются мессианские свойства, на него переносятся свойства избранного народа Божьего, он новый Израиль. Это есть секуляризация древне-еврейского мессианского сознания. Рычаг, которым можно будет перевернуть мир, найден.

[And the active entity who frees mankind from slavery and creates a better life is the proletariat. To it is attributed messianic characteristics; to it the characteristics of God's chosen people are transferred; it is the new Israel. This is a secularization of the ancient Jewish messianic consciousness. The lever by which it will be possible to turn the world upside down has been found.] (Berdiaev 81)

The seemingly paradoxical marriage of Communism and religious traits is not Mayakovsky's invention; Berdiaev emphasizes that, from the first appearances of Russian Communism in the mid-nineteenth century, the phenomenon contained marked aspects of religious fervor, apocalyptic imagery, and asceticism. The materialist revolutionary Rakhmetov in Nikolai Chernyshevsky's 1863 novel *Что делать?* [*What Is to Be Done?*] exemplifies this synthesis of piety and socialist ideology: his character description contains elements of the hagiography, and at one point describes him sleeping on a bed of nails as a form of self-mortification (Chernyshevsky 288). While the revolution of the Unclean in *Mystery-Bouffe* corresponds to Berdiaev's characterization of the proletariat as the salvation of humanity and reflects the long-standing relationship between socialist ideology and religious imagery, Mayakovsky does not entirely relinquish his poetic persona's position as the savior of the oppressed. As the Unclean take their destiny into their own hands, they seem to have little need for a Christ-figure, particularly one as impotent as Mayakovsky's poetic persona in the *Tragedy*. However, religious imagery continues to play an important role in the 1918 version of *Mystery-Bouffe*, and the poetic persona himself returns later in the play in the form of “Simply a Man,” who subverts the teachings of Christ by declaring a “new Sermon on the Mount” and glorifying the use of violence against the enemies of Communism.

While the prologue of the 1918 version of *Mystery-Bouffe* places the Unclean into dialogue with religious texts and ideas and combines religious and revolutionary imagery, the prologue of the 1921 is more “prosaic,” and is largely devoted to a summary of the major events of the play and descriptions of the characters. In this version, the speaker of the prologue, a single member of the Unclean, divides the characters into the proletarians, the bourgeois, and “the Compromiser,” who is referred to as a Menshevik:

Семь пар нечистых  
и чистых семь пар,  
то есть  
четырнадцать бедняков-пролетариев  
и четырнадцать буржуев-бар,  
а меж ними,  
с парой заплаканных щечек —  
меньшевичочек.

[There are seven pairs of the Unclean / and seven pairs of the Clean, / that is, / fourteen pauper-proletarians / and fourteen bourgeois-barons, / and among them, / with a pair of little tear-stained cheeks— / a little Menshevik.] (Mayakovsky 9: 108)

While in the earlier version of the play, the roles of the characters are more abstract, Mayakovsky’s portrayal of the victory of the Unclean is markedly topical. Rather than being the highly symbolic depiction of a group of resourceful and hard-working people battling their oppressors and fighting their way to the Promised Land, the 1921 version of *Mystery-Bouffe* is the portrayal of an explicit Communist victory. The Promised Land of the earlier version becomes the glorified and idealized Commune. The Clean are joined by Georges Clemenceau and Lloyd George in the 1921 version, giving the play a contemporary and unambiguously political context. Mayakovsky has distanced himself even further from the persona of the *Tragedy* by including within the play caricatures of historical figures and events that are far removed from the early persona’s highly self-conscious preoccupations.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Western political figures make frequent appearances as targets of Mayakovsky’s ridicule in his later poetry, but I argue that this characteristic of his work is not a pivotal component of his dynamic poetic persona, as these figures are distant from the persistent problem of the poet’s individuality. This tendency is present in the minor play *Чемпионат всемирной классовой борьбы* [*World Championship of the Class Struggle*, 1920], in which a number of political figures fight each other as the champions of various countries and entities: Woodrow Wilson

In the introduction to the second version of the play, Mayakovsky expresses the desire that *Mystery-Bouffe* always remain relevant to the political and cultural climate of the time in which it is performed: “В будущем все играющие, ставящие, читающие, печатающие «Мистерию-буфф», меняйте содержание, — делайте содержание ее современным, сегодняшним, сиюминутным” [In the future, all players, producers, readers, and printers of *Mystery-Bouffe*: change the content—make it contemporary, modern, up-to-the-minute] (ibid. 106). By requesting that *Mystery-Bouffe* always include ever-changing aspects of the environment in which it is performed, Mayakovsky distances his poetic persona further from the focus of the play. As Edward J. Brown describes in his biography of Mayakovsky, “the individual ego of the author seeks to screen itself behind the mass, the Party program, the political matters of the passing moment” (Brown 199). Such a shift in focus is starkly present in Mayakovsky’s long poem *150,000,000* [1919] in the form of the collective authorship of the one hundred and fifty million Russians who make up the colossus Ivan. Ivan travels to Chicago to do battle with Woodrow Wilson, who is cast as the champion of world capitalism. At the beginning of the poem, a supposedly anonymous author declares that “no one is the composer of this my poem”:

Так  
и этой  
моей  
поэмы  
никто не сочинитель. (Mayakovsky 1: 317)

Mayakovsky indeed published the poem anonymously, emphasizing in his autobiography that, as with the second version of *Mystery-Bouffe*, anyone might have the opportunity to alter it: “Кончил «Сто пятьдесят миллионов». Печатаю без фамилии. Хочу, чтоб каждый пописывал и лучшил” [I’ve finished *150,000,000*. I’m printing it without my name. I want anyone to be able to add to it and improve it] (Mayakovsky 1: 37). Proof of Mayakovsky’s

---

is cast as America’s champion, Lloyd George as the champion of the Entente, and the Revolution as the world champion. This play illustrates Mayakovsky’s zeal in lampooning political figures, but the poetic persona as has been discussed thus far in this study is not closely connected to this tendency.

authorship is starkly present in every aspect of the poem. His established tendency to utilize ancient literary forms is manifest in the poem in his transformation of the ancient Russian folk epic, or *bylina*, into a highly symbolic and stylized depiction of the victory of the collective Russian proletariat over the malevolent forces of world capitalism (Brown 205). The bold imagery of the poem also gives away Mayakovsky's authorship, particularly the lurid moment in which Wilson hacks a four-verst-long wound into Ivan's shoulder, from which issue people instead of blood (Mayakovsky 1: 351-2). Based on the unmistakably Mayakovskian attributes of the poem, it is unlikely that the question of Mayakovsky's authorship could ever have been in doubt. It is reasonable to assume that Mayakovsky, knowing that his work would be immediately recognizable in any case, left off his name as a kind of artistic statement: that the individual artist must yield to the collective.

As in *150,000,000*, in the 1921 version of *Mystery-Bouffe* Mayakovsky has shifted his focus away from the poetic persona who dominates his *Tragedy*. The other characteristics of the partially-concealed poetic persona that remain, while revealing themselves in the most impressive parts of *Mystery-Bouffe*, do not allow for the extreme degree of explication and self-reflection that are present in the *Tragedy*. We have seen that, when Mayakovsky allowed himself to take advantage of what he calls "the free play of the cognitive faculties" in his article "Contemporary Painting," what resulted was a play in which practically every character was a different "Mayakovsky." Mayakovsky's poetic ego demands space, a fact that is made clear in the epilogue of the *Tragedy*:

Я – блаженненький.  
Но зато  
кто  
где бы  
мыслям дал  
такой нечеловечий простор!

[I'm a bit touched in the head.<sup>14</sup> / But on the other hand, / who / and where / would have given his thoughts / such inhuman vastness!] (Mayakovsky 9: 24)

Mayakovsky denies his poetic persona such “inhuman vastness” in *Mystery-Bouffe*, particularly in the more explicitly political 1921 version of the play. The world of the play is simply not expansive enough to house the victory of the Unclean and their attainment of the Promised Land as well as Mayakovsky’s poetic persona, together with his contradictions and preoccupation with himself. However, the mission of the persona of the *Tragedy* to achieve a utopia and to relieve the suffering of humanity remains present in *Mystery-Bouffe* in the form of the Unclean’s striving toward the Promised Land of the Commune. The central motivation for the Unclean to reach their goal is manifest in the character referred to as “the Man” in both versions of the play. Parallel scenes in both versions, in which the Man appears to the Unclean on the ark in Act Two, function as the turning point of the action and present the character in which most of Mayakovsky’s poetic persona is concentrated.

Although *Mystery-Bouffe* was written after Mayakovsky had aligned himself with the group of avant-garde artists who would later come to comprise *LEF*, a journal devoted in theory to art that served a social purpose, the bold assertion of the poet’s individuality remains potent, as it would continue to do in one way or another until the end of the poet’s life.<sup>15</sup> The character of the Man, who mysteriously appears to the group of the Unclean and tells them of a Communist Promised Land, bears a striking resemblance to the poetic persona of the *Tragedy*. Although the Man does not give himself a name, and in the 1921 version

---

<sup>14</sup> The adjective “блаженный”—“blessed”—carries connotations of the religious phenomenon of the holy fool, or “юродивый,” in the Russian Orthodox tradition. Holy fools would generally “feign madness in order to produce religious or moral reflection in others,” and were often believed to possess prophetic powers (Thompson 246).

<sup>15</sup> The platform of *LEF* was based in part on the desire of the artists involved to “re-examine the theory and practice of so-called ‘left’ art, freeing it from individualistic distortions and developing its valuable Communist aspects” (Brown 212). While Mayakovsky appeared to be dedicated to this ideal as evidenced by the exacting revolutionary and artistic demands presented in his poem “Приказ № 2 армии искусств” [“Order No. 2 to the Army of Arts,” 1921], his strong individuality led to controversy within *LEF*. In publishing the lyrical and highly individual poem *Про Эмо* [About That] in the journal in 1923, Mayakovsky did not follow his own demands, illustrating the contradiction that exists between the poetic persona’s individuality and the demands of art that serves the Communist state.

declares that he is “without name and patronymic,” it is clear that the character of the Man is strongly imbued with essential characteristics of Mayakovsky’s poetic persona, specifically his tendency to create parallels between himself and Christ. Mayakovsky himself played the role of the Man at the premiere of the first version of the play on November 7, 1918, and the scene in which he appears to the Unclean apparently made the strongest impression on the audience:

В роли Человека просто Маяковский показал себя превосходным актером-чтецом. И перелом в действии пьесы, который создает появление Человека просто, и огромная концентрированная сила его монолога, и вдохновенное, мощное исполнение роли поэтом – все это делало сцену Человека самой впечатляющей в спектакле.<sup>16</sup>

[In the role of Simply a Man, Mayakovsky showed himself to be an excellent actor and reader. The breakthrough moment in the action of the play that results in the appearance of the Man, the enormous concentrated strength of his monologue, and the inspired and powerful performance of the role by the poet—all of these made the Man’s scene the most impressive in the play.] (Mayakovsky 9: 302)

The fact that Mayakovsky’s appearance in the role of the Man was particularly affecting is not surprising, as his character’s monologue is the moment of the play in which the presence of his poetic ego is explicitly present on stage. As in the *Tragedy*, the poetic persona is clearly a parallel to Jesus Christ in his reflection of Mayakovsky’s continued preoccupation with the poet’s supernatural powers and his ability to relieve the suffering of humanity. The Unclean even mistake the Man for Christ when he first appears in the distance, and are prepared to reject him, calling him a “con man”:

Не надо его!  
Не пустим проходимца!  
Не для молитв у голодных рты.

[We don’t need Him! / We won’t let this imposter on board! / The mouths of the hungry are not meant for prayers.] (Mayakovsky 9: 71)

---

<sup>16</sup> Commentary by Fevral’sky in the notes to the 1978 *Sobranie sochinenii*. The original source is unknown.

As in the prologue, the Unclean emphasize that the empty promise of religion is not sufficient for life. In order to reach an earthly Promised Land, the Unclean require a tangible and potent savior instead of Christ, who promises eternal life and yet allows terrible suffering on earth.

Mayakovsky's poetic persona is intent on relieving the suffering of the Unclean, a goal which, according to Russian socialist thought popularized in the mid-nineteenth century and remaining amid the Russian political consciousness well into the twentieth century, could be brought about through militant atheism and the nullification of Christian doctrine. In his discussion of the atheistic origins of Russian Communism, Berdiaev touches on the revolutionary atheism of prominent nineteenth-century critic Vissarion Belinsky, calling him "the forerunner of Bolshevik morals" and the "intellectual ancestor of Russian communism" (Berdiaev 34-5). According to Berdiaev, Belinsky's atheistic socialism is a result of the rejection of a Creator who could allow suffering in the world, and Belinsky's godlessness is therefore based on the lofty feelings of hatred for humanity's suffering and the desire to relieve it. The poetic persona in *Mystery-Bouffe* can be viewed as a twentieth-century iteration of the seemingly paradoxical phenomenon of the exaltation of the human spirit through atheism. Rather than allowing the Unclean to continue to suffer after their many tribulations on the ark with the Clean, the poetic persona appears to them in the guise of the Man in order to help them reach the Promised Land. He walks on water and offers them a new Sermon on the Mount, blatantly and irreverently appropriating Christ's words from the Gospels of Matthew and Mark:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5.3)

"But I say unto you, love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; [...]." (Matthew 5.44)

"It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." (Mark 10.25)

In the Man's new Sermon, Mayakovsky transforms the words of Christ into an annulment of the Christian virtues of suffering, humility, forgiveness, and non-violence. The Man ridicules the weak and humble and encourages the Unclean to destroy their enemies without the slightest qualm:

Мой рай для всех,  
кроме нищих духом,  
от постов великих вспухших с луну.  
Легче верблюду пролезть сквозь иголье ухо,  
чем ко мне такому слону.  
Ко мне –  
кто всадил спокойно нож  
и пошел от вражьего тела с песнею!

[My paradise is for all  
except the poor in spirit,  
who have swelled to the size of the moon from the great fasts.  
It is easier for a camel to creep through the eye of a needle  
than for such an elephant to enter my kingdom.  
Come unto me,  
he who calmly put a knife in his enemy  
and went away from his body with a song!] (Mayakovsky 9: 73)

This new Sermon on the Mount indicates that the Man, as the most salient representative of Mayakovsky's poetic persona in *Mystery-Bouffe*, prioritizes the suffering of the proletariat over his own. Rather than Mayakovsky-the-Christ-figure ultimately emphasizing the superfluity of his sacrifice as in the *Tragedy*, this post-revolutionary Christ-figure is a mobilizing force for the revolution of the Unclean. Unlike in the *Tragedy*, the revolt of Mayakovsky's poetic persona allows for the fulfillment of a political mission: the triumph of the proletariat over the forces of capitalism. However, the goal of the Man is very much a physical one, which reflects Mayakovsky's sustained fixation on the corporeal self in his poetry. He helps the Unclean "prepare their body-columns" by "dress[ing] himself in [their] muscles" in order to achieve a Communist utopia (Mayakovsky 9: 72). Rather than being capable of miracles that resemble infection and affliction, this "Mayakovsky" is capable of using his own body to arm the Unclean for battle. These abilities attributed to the Man are



acts of compassion for humanity, whereas the persona's abetting the Revolt of Things and performing of horrifying miracles in the *Tragedy* are his ineffectual and self-indulgent attempts at playing Christ. The Christ-figure of Mayakovsky's *Tragedy* is a talented and self-conscious buffoon. The Man is quite different: his supernatural poetic abilities are used to help the Unclean seize power from the evil bourgeois and to usurp an ineffective and immoral God. He is a military leader.

In both the 1918 and 1921 versions of *Mystery-Bouffe*, the Man offers the Unclean a utopia that is suitably grounded in the physical world:

Не о рае Христовом ору я вам,  
где постнички лижут чай без сахару.  
Я о настоящих земных небесах ору.

[It's not Christ's paradise I'm yelling to you about, / where little fasters lick up teas without sugar. / I'm yelling about real earthly heavens.] (Mayakovsky 9: 72, 160-1)

This description of the Promised Land as a physical realm echoes the prologue of the 1918 version of the play, in which the Unclean declare that they “want to live on the earth, no higher or lower than all of these pines, houses, roads, horses, and grasses” (ibid. 26). The Man of the 1921 version of the play, who is specified as the Man of the Future, explicitly proclaims that his Promised Land is not heavenly, but earthly, while the Man from the 1918 version fluctuates between referring to his kingdom as both earthly and heavenly:

Иди, непростивший!  
Ты первый вхож  
в царствие мое небесное.

[Come, he who has not forgiven! / You are the first to enter / into my heavenly kingdom.] (Mayakovsky 9: 73)

Иди, непростивший!  
Ты первый вхож  
в царствие мое  
земное —  
не небесное.

[Come, he who has not forgiven! / You are the first to enter / into my kingdom / earthly— / not heavenly.] (ibid. 161)

This fluctuation seems to indicate that, while both iterations of the Man show that Mayakovsky's poetic persona is dedicated to the idea of achieving a Communist utopia as a physical reality, the poetic persona of the earlier version continues to be preoccupied with his own Christ-like supernatural abilities. As soon as the Man appears to the Unclean in the 1918 version of the play, he declares that he is capable of a number of miraculous feats, several of which are clear parallels of Biblical imagery and further establish the poetic persona's resemblance to Christ:

Кто я?  
Я – дровосек  
дремучего леса  
мыслей,  
извитых лианами книжников,  
душ человеческих искусный слесарь,  
каменотес сердец булыжников.  
Я в воде не тону,  
не горю в огне –  
бунта вечного дух непреклонный.

[Who am I? / I am the lumberman / of the dense forest / of thoughts, / of scribes wound all over with vines, / the skilled machinist of human souls, / the stonemason of the cobblestones of hearts. / I do not sink in water, / do not burn in fire— / I am the unbending spirit of the eternal revolt.] (ibid. 72)

The Man of the 1918 version of the play emphasizes his supernatural abilities as the poetic persona from the *Tragedy* had done. The parallels that the Man draws between himself and images from the Bible—Christ's ability to walk on water, his work as a carpenter, and the burning bush of Exodus—clearly indicate that the persona of the 1918 version continues to affirm his miraculous capabilities. However, the miracles of which the Man is capable are used exclusively to help the Unclean reach the earthly kingdom of heaven that he describes. A similar portrayal of the Poet-Prophet as a revolutionary is present in another work from 1918: the poem “Поэт рабочий” [“The Poet-Worker”]. In this poem, Mayakovsky's persona argues that a poet's work in service of the revolution is even more difficult than manual labor, using religious imagery to convey the potency of his poetic abilities:

Знаю –  
 не любите праздных фраз вы.  
 Рубите дуб – работать дабы.  
 А мы  
 не деревообделочники разве?  
 Голов людских обделываем дубы.  
 Конечно,  
 почтенная вещь – рыбачить.  
 Вытащить сеть.  
 В сетях осетры б!  
 Но труд поэтов – почтенный паче –  
 людей живых ловить, а не рыб.

/ [I know—/ you do not like empty phrases. / You chop an oak—in order to work. / But are we really not woodworkers? / We work the oak of people’s heads. / Of course, / being a fisherman is an honorable thing. / To pull in the net. / Let there be sturgeon in our nets! / But the labor of poets is more honorable still: / to catch living people, and not fish.] (Mayakovsky 1: 180)

Here the abilities of the poet are directly linked to the work of Christ and his disciples, whom he instructs to be “fishers of men” (Matthew 4.19). The recurring imagery of the poet’s ability to shape minds and souls like a carpenter would shape wood reveals that, at this point in his literary career, Mayakovsky’s persona continues to be connected to the putative superhuman abilities possessed by the poet. The later version of the Man, on the other hand, seems to have abandoned his flair for miracles, casting himself instead as an inhabitant of the future. Rather than a being who possesses supernatural powers, Mayakovsky’s poetic persona is presented in the Man as a kind of faceless entity from centuries far into the future:

Кто я?  
 Я не из класса,  
 не из нации,  
 не из племени.  
 Я видел тридцатый,  
 сороковой век.  
 Я из будущего времени  
 просто человек.  
 Пришел раздуть  
 душ горны я,  
 ибо знаю,  
 как трудно жить пробовать.

[Who am I? / I am of not of any class, / not of any nation, / not of any tribe. / I have seen the thirtieth, / the fortieth century. / I, from the future, / am simply a man. / I have come to fan / the furnaces of souls, / because I know / how difficult it is to try to live.] (Mayakovsky 9: 160)

Unlike the Man of the 1918 version of the play, the Man of the Future does not endow himself with many defining characteristics. Apart from his “Sermon on the Mount,” he does not draw explicit parallels between himself and Jesus Christ. Here Mayakovsky has removed many of the traces connecting this iteration of his poetic persona to his past versions, and therefore also from the poet Mayakovsky himself. Rather than calling himself a “skilled machinist of human souls” or a “stonemason of hearts” as in the Man’s speech in the 1918 version, the Man of the Future establishes a connection with the Unclean based on their respective revolutionary abilities. He constructs this alliance by demonstrating his connection with the revolutionary poetic persona of “The Poet-Worker” when he describes his intention to “fan the furnaces of souls.” The persona of this poem, although he characterizes his poetic abilities using religious imagery, also emphasizes his parity with workers who “burn above the furnace,” once again asserting the strenuousness of the poet’s labor:

Огромный труд — гореть над горном,  
железа шипящие класть в закал.  
Но кто же  
в безделье бросит укор нам?  
Мозги шлифуем рашпилем языка.

[It is enormous labor—to burn above a furnace, / to temper hissing iron. / But just who / will throw us reproach for idleness? / We hone brains with the rasp of the tongue.] (Mayakovsky 1: 180)

While the poetic persona has relinquished his affinity for performing miracles in the character of the Man of the Future, he equates his position as a poet with that of the proletarian laborer and constructs a kind of kinship between himself and the Unclean. He has changed from the “unbending spirit of the eternal revolt” of the first version of *Mystery-Bouffe* to “simply a man.” This diminishment of the superhuman capabilities of the poetic persona reflects the considerable changes undergone by the persona from the *Tragedy* at the beginning of the Mayakovsky’s career to the second version of *Mystery-Bouffe*.

Despite these differences, there remain in the character of the Man of the Future certain characteristics that can be traced to Mayakovsky's early poetic persona. The most significant of these is the Man's glorification of technology and his desire for the subjugation of nature. We have seen that in the *Tragedy*, aspects of the persona are reflected in various characters, particularly the persona's attitude toward technology. The Old Man with Cats praises electricity and describes the wonders of a utopia in which the forces of nature are made compliant through the use of technology:

...заскачут трамваи,  
пламя светилен  
зареет в ночах, как победные стяги.  
Мир зашевелится в радостном гриме,  
цветы испавлинятся в каждом окошке,  
по рельсам потащат людей,...

[...trams will start to gallop, / the flame of fuses / will glow in the nights, like victory banners.  
/ The world will start to move in joyful face-paint, / flowers will colorfully fan out like  
peacocks in each little window, / people will be carried along the rails...] (Mayakovsky 9: 10)

The Man of the Future also preaches the marvels of a universe in which nature is subject to the will and technological prowess not of humanity in general, but of the Unclean in particular:

Как смеет играть ковчегом ветер?  
Долой природы наглое иго!  
Вы будете жить в тепле,  
в свете,  
заставив волной электричество двигать.  
А если  
ко дну окажетесь пущены  
не страшно тоже, —  
почище луга  
морское дно.  
Наш хлеб насушный  
на нем растет —  
каменный уголь.

[How does the wind dare to play with your ark? / Down with nature's brazen yoke! / You will live in warmth, / in light, / having made electricity move the ocean's wave. / But if / you wind up sunken to the ocean floor / that's fine too— / cleaner than a field / is the sea's bottom. / Our daily bread / grows on it: / stone coal.] (Mayakovsky 9: 163)

In the 1921 version of *Mystery-Bouffe*, the utopia imagined by the Old Man with Cats has become a reality in the proclamations of the Man. However, the utopia that the Man describes is intended for the Unclean, who are a representation of the proletariat and are therefore “the lever by which it will be possible to turn the world,” according to Berdiaev. Rather than simply describing a utopia as the Old Man with Cats does, the Man gives the Unclean the capability to realize this utopia. After he disappears, several of the Unclean exclaim that they feel as if the Man has entered their bodies and endowed them with the power to reach the Promised Land:

Сапожник

Где он?

Кузнец

По-моему, он во мне.

Батрак

По-моему, влезть удалось и в меня ему.

[Bootmaker: Where is he?

Blacksmith: I think he is in me.

Farmhand: I think he even managed to climb into me.] (Mayakovsky 9: 163)

Although the Man ceases to exist as a character in the play after this moment, he has offered himself to the Unclean as a means by which they might reach the Promised Land, having entered the Unclean and become part of them. At the beginning of his Sermon in the 1918 version of the play, the Man declares that he is the “spirit of the eternal revolt,” echoing the preoccupation of Mayakovsky’s early poetic persona with his highly individual poetic abilities. However, in this moment from the 1921 version of *Mystery-Bouffe*, the poetic persona yields his individuality to the collective force of the Unclean. The Man’s last words to them indicate that, although he has imbued them with the potential to fulfill their mission,

whether or not they reach the Promised Land is contingent on their own efforts rather than on his capabilities as a savior:

Правая и левая —  
эти двое  
спасут.  
Конец.  
Слово за вами.  
Я нем.

[Your right and left hand—  
these two  
will save you.  
That is all.  
It's your turn to speak.  
I am mute.] (Mayakovsky 9: 163)

This iteration of Mayakovsky's persona as a Christ-figure is quite different from that of the *Tragedy*. While the persona of the early play cannot distance himself from the achievement of a utopia until he is rejected and banished from the city by his former followers, the Man disappears early on in the play having provided only the potentiality of the achievement of utopia. As in *150,000,000*, the ego of the 1921 version of *Mystery-Bouffe*, while having kept his potent poetic imagination, yields to the collective. It must also be noted that, while the Man assists the Unclean in both versions of the play and casts himself as the entity to whom the utopia belongs, he is not depicted as an active agent in that utopia. The Unclean reach the Promised Land in both versions of *Mystery-Bouffe*, but the Man is nowhere to be found within it. Rather than ensuring a permanent place for himself in this utopia, he has given it over completely to the Unclean. This is the essence of the Man's sacrifice. Unlike the sacrifice of the persona in the *Tragedy*, the sacrifice of the Man has no physical component. Neither does the Man resign himself to a pitiful existence in a "shabby little universe." The entirety of his martyrdom is encapsulated in the deferment of his poetic individuality to the needs of the Unclean. He grants the proletariat a paradise in which they are the only rulers. This fact is the ultimate opposition that exists between Mayakovsky's poetic persona and God: for him, a paradise with an all-powerful deity is no paradise at all. The persona has used

the Unclean to “turn the world upside down,” securing a victory over God not for himself, but for the proletariat.



## CONCLUSION

In this study, I have sought to extrapolate the central features of Vladimir Mayakovsky's poetic persona as they appear in his two central verse plays and to trace the development of these features from the poet's Cubo-Futurist beginnings to his post-revolutionary support of art that serves a social purpose. The result is an examination of the acute individuality of the poetic ego, particularly with respect to his use of religious imagery to establish this individuality. In my discussion of Mayakovsky's *Tragedy*, the close reading of the poetic persona's position as an ineffectual Christ-figure reflects his absolute artistic freedom, not only from established artistic convention, but even from his fellow Cubo-Futurists, who themselves advocated for the anarchic ideal of the free play of the artistic faculties. In my analysis of the two versions of *Mystery-Bouffe*, Mayakovsky's use of religious imagery is considerably altered, as is his poetic persona's position as humanity's savior. The artist's freedom is given less focus in favor of the demands of the collective, but this does not mean the end of the poetic persona's preoccupation with himself as an active agent in the achievement of the earthly paradise of the Commune. Thus the myth of the dichotomy of the "two Mayakovskys" is proven insufficient to explain the poet's artistic output.

In order to complete a thorough analysis of Mayakovsky's poetic persona in his plays over the course of his entire artistic career, it would be necessary to examine not just *Vladimir Mayakovsky: A Tragedy* and the two versions of *Mystery-Bouffe*, but also the 1929 plays *Клон* [*The Bedbug*] and *Баня* [*The Bathhouse*]. One of the main obstacles of such an analysis is the fact that the two latter plays are not in verse. In this study thus far, I have confined my treatment of the poetic persona to Mayakovsky's central verse plays because they contain the most robust aspects of that persona while providing a balanced point of departure for my analysis: that is, the examination of one pre-revolutionary play and one

post-revolutionary play. In order to analyze all four of the central plays in one project, I would have to justify including *The Bedbug* and *The Bathhouse* on the grounds that they are in prose, and that Mayakovsky was a poet first and foremost. He directly states as such in his autobiography: “Я – поэт. Этим и интересен” [I am a poet. This alone makes me interesting] (Mayakovsky 1: 43). However, I believe that sufficient material exists to include these plays in an in-depth analysis of Mayakovsky’s poetic persona, particularly where the problem of the poet’s relationship with utopia is concerned. The character of Prisyarkin in *The Bedbug*, while he is certainly unfavorably characterized as a philistine of the post-NEP period of the Soviet Union, is also imbued with qualities that link him to the poetic persona of Mayakovsky’s early artistic career. The infectious feelings of love and passion that Prisyarkin is capable of inspiring in the inhabitants of the year 1979 are analogous to the ability of the persona in the *Tragedy* to “infect” his followers with various sexual deformities. Prisyarkin’s desperate appeal to the unsympathetic inhabitants of the future at the end of the play and the simple fact that he is resurrected should be examined as variations on aspects of the poetic persona as discussed in this study. An in-depth analysis of the transformation of the poetic persona’s relationship with the idea of utopia in *The Bedbug* is another potential direction for future research on Mayakovsky’s work, and the above example illustrates that such research is insightful with respect to the development of his poetic persona despite the fact that the play is in prose.

An analysis of the poetic persona of *The Bathhouse* would constitute a discussion of the relative absence of the subject in question as compared to the other plays. Edward J. Brown emphasizes the anomaly of the play as such: “*The Bathhouse* ... is derivative in its plot, deficient in action, devoid of dramatic suspense or interest, and, what is worst of all, Mayakovsky himself is not present in it” (Brown 333). What is telling about this play with respect to the poetic persona is not what is included within it, but rather what is absent from

it. Rather than offering the direct depictions of the Communist utopia that exist in the other two post-revolutionary plays, Mayakovsky provides a secondhand account of it through the character of the Phosphorescent Woman. Also conspicuously absent from the play is Mayakovsky's tendency toward contradiction. Rather than a contradictory representation of the poetic persona's various preoccupations, *The Bathhouse* is a pointed satire of post-NEP Soviet bureaucracy. While this subject is closely related to Mayakovsky's struggle against *byt* and philistinism, the absence of the other subjects with which the persona is preoccupied in his plays and poetry constitutes a continuation of the trend already present in the second version of *Mystery-Bouffe*, in which, as Brown explains, the poetic ego "screens itself" behind topical matters. The absence of the poetic persona from the last major play of his career is the logical conclusion of this pattern.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Baratynsky, Evgeny. *Polnoe sobranie stikhotvorenii*. Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel', 1957. Print.
- Berdiaev, Nikolai. *Istoki i smysl russkogo kommunizma*. Parizh: YMCA-Press, 1955. Print.
- Brown, Edward J. *Mayakovsky: A Poet in the Revolution*. Princeton University Press, 1973. Print.
- Chernyshevsky, Nikolai. *What is To Be Done?* Trans. Michael Katz. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989. Print.
- Gurianova, Nina. *The Aesthetics of Anarchy: Art and Ideology in the Early Russian Avant-garde*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012. Print.
- Jakobson, Roman. "On a Generation that Squandered its Poets." *Twentieth-century Russian Literary Criticism*. Trans. Edward J. Brown. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1975. Print.
- The King James Bible*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House.
- Lermontov, Mikhail. *Polnoe sobranie stikhotvorenii v dvukh tomakh*. Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel', 1989. Print.
- Malevich, Kazimir. *Budetlianskii silach*. 1913. Pencil and watercolor on paper. Russian Museum, Saint Petersburg. *Kazimir Malevich and the Russian Avant-garde*. Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum. 54. Print.
- Mayakovsky, Vladimir. *Sobranie sochinenii v dvenadtsati tomakh*. Moskva: Pravda, 1978. Print.
- Mayakovsky, Vladimir. *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v trinadtsati tomakh*. Moskva: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1955. Print.
- Miller, O. V. "Prorok." *Lermontovskaia entsiklopediia*. Ed. V. A. Manulov. Moskva: Sovetskaia entsiklopediia, 1981. Print.
- Pushkin, Aleksandr. *Sobranie sochinenii v desyati tomakh*. Moskva: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1959. Print.
- Reese, Kevin. "Immortals Are Not Men: Maiakovskii, the Strugatskiis, and the New Soviet Man." Diss. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2010. Web. 20 Nov. 2014.
- Shklovsky, Viktor. *O Maiakovskom*. Moskva: Sovetskii pisatel', 1940. Print.
- Thompson, Ewa. "The Archetype of the Fool in Russian Literature." *Canadian Slavonic Papers*. 15.3 (1973): 245-273. Web.

Vinogradov, Viktor. *Ruskii iazyk: grammaticheskoe uchenie o slove*. Moskva: Vysshaia shkola, 1972. Print.