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***Seeing the pen as a bayonet: The extremities of Vladimir Mayakovsky's utopian imagination***

Abstract:

When examined retrospectively, some poetry can be seen as using scandal and rebellion to defy social norms. Vladimir Mayakovsky's poetry criticised the repression and conservatism ingrained in the fabric of Tsarist Russia; a society defined by bourgeois, capitalistic and heteronormative values. As a passionate Bolshevik, the alienation induced by the restrictive external world caused Mayakovsky to use poetry for its most extreme, subversive means in inciting revolution. While viewing Mayakovsky as a political voice for the proletariat is a commonly held view, an often overlooked aspect is how poetry was used to convey his sexual expression. When considered amidst the repressive views on sexuality that were characteristic of both Tsarist and even Soviet Russia, the flamboyant poet was consistently prone to controversy.

Biographical note:

Mark Markovic is from Sydney/Gadigal land. While Markovic's literary interests vary between critical and creative ventures, they tend to be associated with poetry. In the past, Markovic has been featured in *Verandah*, *Verandah Offset*, *Sick Leave* and *Cordite Poetry Review* whilst also being the recipient of the Matthew Rocca Poetry Prize (2021).

Keywords:

Utopianism, social critique, sexuality, extremity, Russian poetry

## Introduction

### *Utopic musings and ontological twists*

The twentieth century is known for containing a symbiotic connection between rapid change, upheaval and transformation. The century's cataclysmic topography is arguably indicative of an accelerating human desire for change, which, while so often manifest in political destruction, is in essence a poetic principle. Creative expression contains what Alain Badiou posits as "the artistic truth" (Hallward, 2003, p. 195), the most individual, and in a sense human form of truth he identifies, and one that correlates with extreme forms of poetry that resist the status quo. For Badiou, this individual and poetic truth is able "to be achieved only by going against the grain of the world and against the current of history" (p. 24). While originally a Marxist formulation, this polemical sense of resistance is broadly pertinent to both the struggle for freedom and the formal labour of poetry. The connection between these phenomena is the key focus of this article, which aims to clarify the way in which the utopian inclinations of one of the century's most transgressive poets, Vladimir Mayakovsky, mediated the oppressive intersection between capitalism and heteronormativity.

The radical nature of Mayakovsky's poetry stems from his ability to synthesise ideology, biography, myth and art into an iconoclastic self-portrait. The Russian's self-expression was characterised by an experimental form congruent with his Futurist inclinations, balanced against wry humour, and an occasionally surreal commentary on his context. That context was marked by the radical shift from conservative monarchy to revolutionary socialism, and this external political environment resonated with his internal psychological dynamics. Mayakovsky's life was characterised by his penchant for "poetic and lived hyperbole" (Holquist, 1967, p. 130) which underpinned forays into varied emotions, social upheaval and political revolution. In this article, Mayakovsky is approached as a figure who used his ideological expression, socio-political critique and revolutionary affirmation to quarrel "with the bearers of authority ... who ... distort the idea of the people's sovereignty" (Mikhailov & Tittler, 1992, p. 127). In the context of poetry and extremity, Mayakovsky's quarrelsome nature bears immense significance. This influence stems from how his poetry was critical in shaping countercultural thought that continued in the pursuit of individuals striving to uphold sovereignty.

Mayakovsky encountered and opposed limitations in regard to class, sexuality and gender by using poetry as a way of challenging these barriers. While the utopian politics of desire is paramount to Mayakovsky's poetics, the individuality of its expression, as a negotiation of a discrete political moment, is central to this article. This principle guides the broader inquiry into how Mayakovsky's writing articulated the complex inter-valences of the poetic, sexual, and utopian impulses. The correlation between Mayakovsky's utopic vision and his writing as a means of mediating the stigmatisation, categorisation and subsequent division (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 339) of a capitalistic, heteronormative world conveys the omnipresence of the utopian impulse in poetry.

In *The Principle of Hope*, Ernst Bloch outlined his concept of the “working utopia” which arrives from the individual sense of political dissatisfaction. When viewed from a Blochian lens, a poet’s utopian imagination is one of robust aspiration, due to it possessing unclosed possibilities for new spaces of social and humanistic development (Bloch, 1986, p. 197). Bloch’s Marxist background aligns his working utopia with Karl Marx’s theory of alienation caused by the inequities of the material world (Marx, 2007, p. 29). Marx’s writing on alienation (derived from his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*) serves as both a referential point for other theorists and a key conceptual argument of this article. Marx’s suggestion that the more an individual gives towards a capitalist world, the more it diminishes their sense of self-fulfilment (2007, p. 30) emphasises the oppressive nature of the societies that have inadvertently produced profound works of poetry. Marx equates this oppression to the self-renunciation (p. 51) that an overbearing focus on capital produces, at the expense of one’s ability to “buy books... think, love, theorize, sing, paint” (p. 51). For Marx, these intellectual and emotional aspirations enrich humanity’s ability to grow in an ontological sense. Hence, he views capitalism as a force that stifles this growth, causing self-estrangement and alienation to emerge (p. 58). The philosophical insights that Marxist theory provide, factor into Bloch’s argument of the merits of utopic thought lying in the struggle to change one’s world and to mediate their sense of alienation through poetic expression. Like Badiou, the Blochian approach towards utopia and Marxism shows how these concepts can be related to a more humanistic domain, or in Peter Thompson’s view, shows how Bloch and Badiou both intertwine a “speculative ontological twist to the arid thought experiments of the analytic world” (2013, p. 31).

The two linked channels aligning this 20<sup>th</sup> century alienation are the overbearing influence of capitalism and heteronormativity. In considering that the century relied heavily upon ideological and social movements, the impacts of both capitalistic and heteronormative agendas are a given. Janice Habarth’s definition of heteronormativity as “the enforced compliance with culturally determined heterosexual roles and assumptions about heterosexuality as ‘natural’ or ‘normal’” (2015, p. 166) means that within hyper capitalistic society, heteronormativity can be viewed as an enforced social construct. The rigidity of these expectations and the limitations they placed on individuals throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century resulted in a critical point of difference between those who met the heteronormative expectation and those who deviated from it. The interconnectivity between Habarth’s writing and Marxist theory allows the key concepts of this article’s inquiry into Mayakovsky’s writing to become clearer. This, in turn, causes the examination of Mayakovsky’s reactive poetry to be seen as an “ontological twist” (Thompson, 2013, p. 31) in articulating a utopia in place of the perceived failures of the stringently conservative Tsarist and by extension, modern, capitalistic world.

### ***Poetry, sexuality and a vanguard***

Mayakovsky’s poetic oeuvre conveys the limitations that capitalistic environments and bourgeois attitudes place on an individual’s utopic desires. The utopic desire is something that aligns with politics, ideology and the “working utopia” (Steinberg, 2018, p. 85) that individuals can access in alleviating disillusionment. In *The Spirit of Utopia* Bloch unifies ideology and utopian thought, suggesting that what constructs a utopia is a dialectics that uses these concepts

as interlocked forces to dismantle the oppressive status quo (Hempel, 2019, p. 266). Bloch's writing is crucial in a consideration of Mayakovsky's extreme approach to poetics as he argues that the working utopia's correlation with ideology provides insights into the undisclosed potential, or "surplus" of human thought (Geoghegan, 2007, p. 124). While the ability to access a working utopia is a cornerstone of the individual's intrinsic pursuit of truth and ability to harness the potential of this "surplus," it also relates to sexuality. Sexual expression contains utopic undertones, due to the assistance it provides in helping individuals come to terms with their own identity. In light of Alison Jaggar's view on the inseparability of the patriarchy and capitalism (Marik, 2004, p. 946), it is clear that both forces limit poetic and sexual fulfilment. While Soma Marik acknowledges traditional Marxism's elision of sexuality, she views Postmodern Marxism as contributing to the exploration of the relationship between class struggle and a variety of issues related to sexuality (2004, p. 946).

Mayakovsky's writing combines his worldview and poetry's innate ability to channel self-expression. The tumultuous Russian landscape that Mayakovsky found himself in at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is crucial to an analysis of his reactive poetry as he fuses a resistance against the social world with the intimacy of his poetic voice. Mayakovsky's utopia is heralded by his hyperbolic poetic persona that uses declamations to present ideological views in a grandiose fashion. Mayakovsky's politics are undeniably shaped by Bolshevism but an understanding of his sexuality becomes apparent when his poetry in the early Soviet age is examined. From his formative days in the *Stray Dog Cabaret* of Tsarist Russia's avant-garde scene to his futurist impulses that led to his coronation as a voice of the Soviet people, Mayakovsky was consistently prone to controversy. A consideration of Mayakovsky's flamboyance reveals this controversy in both the worlds he fought against and helped build as the heteronormative status quo was something that Mayakovsky consistently (and at times, subconsciously) resisted – regardless of the overarching regime (Tsarist or otherwise) that shaped his environment.

### *Academic Review*

The broadest concept this article explores is associated with the relationship between societal alienation and the individual form of utopian poetics, which Mayakovsky's resistance to the status quo of a capitalistic, heteronormative world captured. Whilst the dominant concept of an individual recognising the alienation wrought from the material world (Marx, 2007, pp. 29-30) is a Marxist principle, this article extends this idea to a broader, more humanistic sphere in order to question the extent to which thoughts and feelings are invariably linked to their surroundings. This article argues that some individuals who feel disenfranchised by heteronormative, capitalistic culture turn to writing poetry as a means of creative rebellion that supplements criticism regarding their world. As history has proven, disillusionment wrought from a restrictive world results in rebellion, as poetry is a bridge that can connect individuals to a greater understanding of their views and desires.

The analysis of the chosen poetry explores how the characteristics of heteronormative capitalist society are reflected in what is broadly defined as non-heteronormative poetics. Michel Foucault's identification of the bourgeois (and by extension, capitalistic) order's suppression of sexuality (1978, p. 5) in *The History of Sexuality* shapes this article's commentary on the

manifestation of heteronormative characteristics in society. The “sterile body” discussed in Jean-Francois Lyotard’s diversification of Foucault’s theory in the *Libidinal Economy* explores the societal link between capitalism and heteronormativity (Lyotard, 1993, p. 98) and expands the parameters relating to the “social capital of heteronormativity” (Habarth, 2015, p. 169). Despite the Marxist attitudes typically aligned with a capitalistic critique, Lyotard’s position in the 1970s must be acknowledged as *Libidinal Economy* was published in a period associated with his own disillusionment with Marxist theory. With this in mind, while it is more fitting to acknowledge Lyotard as a postmodernist/poststructuralist rather than an avowed Marxist, his writing on capitalism’s perceived sense of sterility as well as the conception of “Marx’s desire” (1993, p. 95) contributed to the theoretical basis that more postmodern Marxists draw upon. Therefore, the coinage of “non-heteronormative poetics” reflects the broad range of ideas explored by Mayakovsky while also cementing how a critique of heteronormativity is in many cases inadvertent. Poetry’s inherently evocative and expressive form makes it a suitable channel for the exploration of emotions and when considered in the social sphere, makes “Marx’s desire” innate in hierarchically structured, prejudicial worlds.

The clash between social norms and an individual’s desires is inherent to the process of writing transgressive poetry, while the notion of articulating a utopia as a means of sexual acceptance is a cornerstone of humanistic achievement. Foucault’s writing on the bourgeois order’s suppression of sexuality (1978, p. 5), when coupled with Lyotard’s view of capitalism’s inherent “sterility,” deepens this theoretical context and understanding of how capitalist society’s conservative treatment of gender and sexuality can diminish one’s understanding of themselves (Marx, 2007, p. 31).

While the main channel for a poet’s capitalist critique is Marx’s writing on alienation, the more modern contextualisation of this traditional philosophy with Mayakovsky’s twentieth-century context is equally beneficial. Badiou’s ontological suggestion of artistic truth as achieved through resistance and Kieran Allen’s writing in *Marx: The Alternative to Capitalism* allow for a deeper analysis. Allen situates the tension emanating from disillusionment and societal critique as lying in the idea that “since the birth of capitalism, attempts have been made to deny the reality of class conflict” (2017, p. 55). Like many of his predecessors, Allen sees this as a willing obduracy that results in disenfranchisement. One of Allen’s forbearers is Lyotard, which is why his exploration of “Marx’s desire” (1993, p. 95) as an inherently disruptive presence in the capitalistic status quo is important in the study of the correlation between poetry and transgressive utopia. Despite Lyotard being heavily sardonic (and critical) at times, the left-wing enthusiasm casting Marx’s public figure as a near-mythologised “work of art” (1993, p. 96) allows for an ample examination of how desire functions within an individual experiencing disillusionment with their material world. From a postmodern perspective, Lyotard’s view of Marx’s philosophical legacy intertwining humanity’s hidden desires with his own (p. 95), accommodates for an alignment with the Badiouan focus on resistance catalysing hope. Hence, the hope that emanates from Mayakovsky’s critique of the classist dichotomies of both aristocratic and capitalistic societies allows the notion of “Marx’s desire” to be inextricably linked with poetry’s ability to articulate utopian visions. For Mayakovsky, the limitations of his world impacted negatively on his utopic desires, which is why poetry has

a sense of authority in mediating this conflict. While the Tsarist Russia that Mayakovsky occupied was not as overtly capitalist as other nations, there is a unifying thread between these disparate cultural contexts that is associated with this article's theoretical framework.

This article's focus on exclusion, while serving as an extension of the Bourdieuan concept of social distinction, is also critical to the examination of utopianism in poetry. This idea is reflected in Frederic Jameson's writing. Jameson writes that "the fundamental dynamic of any Utopian politics ... will ... always lie in the dialectic of Identity and Difference ... the degree to which such a politics aims at imagining, and sometimes even at realizing, a system radically different from this one" (2005, p. 12). This means that the utopian impulse wrought by poetic expression is crucial in understanding how Mayakovsky sought to mediate the alienation generated by heteronormative codes in capitalistic societies. While the identification of the alienation induced by the cross-section of capitalism and heteronormativity is not identified by Habarth, her predecessors, Foucault and Lyotard comment on the social implications emanating from bourgeois (and by extension) capitalist culture, which deepens the dialectical ability of poetry to mediate alienation and disillusionment.

### **Mayakovsky's world vs. Mayakovsky's utopia**

Mayakovsky's view of Russia was inflected by a utopian idealism critically informed by revolutionary Bolshevism. This vision is described by M. D. Steinberg (2018) not as a state of perfection, but a process of engaging in "a critical analysis of conventional constructions of ... the possible and impossible in the present" (p. 83). Bloch's *Principle of Hope* describes the "utopian imagination" as a form of robust hope possessing unclosed possibilities for new spaces of social and humanistic development (1986, p. 197). From a theoretical basis, Steinberg's view of Mayakovsky embodies Bloch's union of Marxism with hope, as he argues that his poetry revealed "the new and unexpected ... the possibility of an explosive leap in the open air of history" (2018, p. 83). This parallel indicates the incontrovertible contextual link between Mayakovsky and strident Bolshevik ideology, for as Walter Benjamin in *On the Concept of History* states, this "explosive leap" is dependent on a view of dialectics enabling revolution (Benjamin, 1940) – a sentiment that Mayakovsky's writing attests to. On a more humanistic basis, Mayakovsky's own poetic leap portrays how he encapsulated dissatisfaction with the restrictive environment encouraged by aggressive capitalistic ideals. The Russian Empire embodied agricultural, hierarchical and economic factors that resulted in the alienation of the working classes, making it an antagonistic embodiment (Kappeler, 2014, p. 371) of both bourgeois and capitalist culture. Mayakovsky's lambasting of the Russian aristocracy and hence the "bourgeois order" (Foucault, 1978, p. 5) is why his countercultural exploration of discontent aligns with philosophical commentary of how poetry can mediate the tension between alienation and affirmation.

Mayakovsky's utopian vision of Russia's future melded a revolutionary fervour with a transgressive or avant-garde visual poetics that helped mediate his alienation. Within his hierarchical context, Mayakovsky's poetics criticise "the blasphemies of Decadent heritage and looks forward to the grotesque psychic disfigurations of Surrealism" (Kouididis, 1980, p. 169).

While Virginia M. Kouidis makes this comment concerning fellow poet Mina Loy, Mayakovsky's distaste for a Russia impacted by aristocratic decadence is comparably reflected in his surreal descriptions and deviation from poetic convention. Steinberg (2018) describes Mayakovsky's poetic world as one "of cold fogs, dismal rains, and cutting winds (nature was an enemy, resisting human imagination and will), oppressive objects ... abused bodies and spirits ... melancholy and despair" (p. 85). This overwhelmingly negative description mirrors the poet's blunt criticism of his external world. From a Foucauldian understanding, one can attribute Mayakovsky's despondency to what *The Subject and Power* describes as a state fixated on political self-interest rather than the benefits of the citizen (1982, p. 782). On a symbolic level, this self-interest illustrates the tension in many of his poems existing between the individual and an environment that is "holding back the future, crushing it under the weight of everyday reality" (Steinberg, 2018, p. 89). From a Marxist standpoint, this tension elucidates how the distortions generated by one's lived experiences in "the dark reality of the present" (p. 86) exacerbate an individual's feeling of alienation (Allen, 2011, p. 42). Mayakovsky's unflinching view of a nation resistant to socialist change highlights how the tension between social criticism and the utopian ideal informs his transgressive poetics. This tension is present in Mayakovsky's *Cloud in Trousers* (henceforth referred to as *Cloud*), whose persona navigates a world characterised by gloom, darkness and paranoia:

The evening drew  
back from the windows,  
afraid of the dark,  
gloomy,  
Like December...

The rain falls, I am jostled by it...  
I wait,  
spattered by the town's shoreline thunder...

Midnight comes with a knife,  
catching up,  
cutting-...

Grey raindrops screech down  
the window and distort my face...

And the night in the room gets murkier and marshier-  
a heavy eye couldn't drag itself out of here. (VM, p. 38-40)

The tetraptych's opening uses pathetic fallacy to depict weather as an oppressive presence connotative of the regressive forces that the Bolsheviks opposed. The negative descriptions of the evening drawing itself away in fear, a constant presence of rainfall and predatory darkness parallel Mayakovsky's poetic world with the feelings that both he and the alienated individuals he was writing for held. Steinberg's suggestion of "abused bodies" (p. 85) in Mayakovsky's writing is accommodated by overlapping the abrasive environment with the individual. In *Cloud*, Mayakovsky often depicts the impacts of the external world (and hence pre-

revolutionary Russia) on the individual, with a key example being the suggestion of grey raindrops “distorting” the speaker’s face. Here, Mayakovsky distorts the archetypal representation of the human face for identity in showing the consequences between alienation and reification for individuals restricted by an oppressive environment. Mayakovsky’s *Me* also portrays this connection between setting and individual, through its opening:

The footsteps  
of lunatics  
beat out their cruel  
phrases on the worn-down  
pavements of my soul. (VM, p. 6)

Here, Mayakovsky imbues Moscow's concrete landscape with the speaker's identity by highlighting "worn-down pavement" as characterising their soul, in what is a highly personal, mock-biographical poem that shows how the interconnectivity between place and persona illustrates alienation. While *Me* resides as a more personal depiction, the proximity of *Cloud's* publication with the Revolution propels the persona to serve as an embodiment of pre-revolutionary energy and excitement, despite the presence of an exterior world that actively seeks to hinder the individual. This clash between the external and the internal is a clear means of encapsulating Mayakovsky's utopian passion and imbues *Cloud's* narrator with a sense of defiance and optimism:

I walk along - handsome, twenty-two years old  
I threaten the world  
with my powerful voice...

I'll be impeccably light of touch,  
not a man, but a cloud in trousers! (VM, p. 37)

The youthful hubris of Mayakovsky's poetic voice "sets the ego of the poet at odds with the external world" (Brown, 1973, p. 183). This serves as a means of affirmation for Mayakovsky as well as the masses he wished to radicalise and draw towards Bolshevism, hence the buoyancy of the narrator's cloudlike self mirrors the elevation that he believed the revolution would bring.

The confidence of *Cloud's* speaker is largely indebted to their ability to place themselves in higher esteem than the world around them as unlike the poet's reflection of themselves, the world is shown to be oppressive. In conjunction, Mayakovsky's boisterous tone also stems from his continued attack on conservative poetic history in favour of avant-garde experimentation, which is another criticism of the tastes of the "bourgeois order" (Foucault, 1978, p. 5). For instance, the aristocratic favouritism of certain romanticists like Alexander Pushkin, is one that Mayakovsky challenges through his writing. Mayakovsky negates the opulence stereotypically associated with poetry "with his use of images and themes from a lower, 'unpoetic' universe" (Brown, 1973, p. 181). This imagery becomes apparent through



his idiosyncratic melding of the “unpoetic” environment with one’s soul, as evidenced in his treatment of Moscow’s footpaths and urbanity in *Cloud* and *Me*.

### A slap in the face of bourgeois taste

Despite Mayakovsky’s critique often focusing on broader socio-political factors, rather than threats toward sexual expression, viewing him as a purely political writer is not entirely accurate. When considering his context, the sentiments within Alain Badiou’s *Subject to Truth* can be ascribed to Mayakovsky’s dialectics; “like all truth, an artistic truth begins with an event and is sustained by a subject” (Hallward, 2003, p. 195). Badiou’s writing shows how Mayakovsky’s relationship with the revolutionary events of his time is indicative of a humanistic pursuit towards an artistic truth, which also embodied political emancipation from oppressive class structures. While Mayakovsky’s writing resonates with many heteronormative ideals, his overtly masculine reimagining of himself (Mikhailov & Tittler, 1992, p. 123) used his declamatory tone, clownish play and experimentation with sound, sense and image (Brown, 1973, p. 174) to generate irony. Mayakovsky’s play of writerly bravado does not relish in his own masculinity, as his self-affirming “utopian spirit” (Steinberg, 2018, p. 85) that exists within his “strident, lyric self-dramatisation” (Holquist, 1967, p. 132) carried his revolutionary views rather than a heteronormative agenda. This notion of Mayakovsky’s hyperbolic characterisation elucidating his ethos is something Steinberg describes as a version of “Vladimir Mayakovsky” that serves as a “utopian antithesis to the merely factual reality of the present” (p. 83). In cementing his antithetical stance in a Tsarist reality, Mayakovsky channelled the Futurist movement’s “anarchistic rejection of every ... habit, value and structure that stood in the way of the new” (2018, p. 85), hence his rejection of what he described as the “shit of the present” (p. 86) conveyed his dissatisfaction with a Russia embodying an “age of repression” (Foucault, 1978, p. 5). In combatting this environment, Mayakovsky’s desire to transform his pen into a “bayonet” (Mikhailov & Tittler, 1992, p. 114) reflected an antagonistic stance toward the status quo of both Russian society and poetry. This position was encapsulated by the desire to jettison Pushkin from the “ship of modernity” (Mayakovsky, 1917), as articulated in his 1917 manifesto. In a retrospective analysis, the masculinity of Mayakovsky’s poetic persona can be considered as one that does not conform to a heteronormative expectation, due to his vocal criticism of the aristocratic ideology that encouraged certain gendered behaviours. This transgressive attitude is why Mayakovsky’s influence can be seen in queer-identifying poets like Frank O’Hara, who named a 1954 poem after the Russian.

From a stylistic perspective, Mayakovsky’s formal experimentation achieves a similar outcome to his countercultural search for artistic truth in an unpoetic universe. For instance, the jarring aesthetic achieved by enjambment and line spacing/breaks, colloquial language (such as the usage of “takeout” and “wanker” in *Cloud*), and favouring humour/irony over grandiose introspection is used to “vent his own malaise” (Brown, 1973, p. 176) with bourgeois culture. It is with this approach that Mayakovsky uses “the so-called ladder form... (where) the poems are intended for *declamation*” to “violate the classical canons of nineteenth-century rhyme” (p. 173). In *Cloud*, Mayakovsky subjects canonical literary figures to humorous critique.

Who gives a toss  
that in Homer or Ovid  
there's no one like us,  
covered in soot? (VM, p. 47)

When juxtaposed to his glorification of everyday citizens (and by extension, workers covered in “soot”) this excerpt reveals how ideologically, Mayakovsky used the bombastic, transgressive sentiments of Futurism to solidify his own utopia. Mayakovsky's idealistic nature is why as a Marxist, he favoured sovereignty in the form of a “worker's democracy” (Marik, 1991, p. 904) over monarchical rule, as established by the collective that he associated with gold in *Cloud's* declaration:

I know that the sun would go dark if it  
just once saw the seams of gold in our spirit! (VM, p. 47)

The sun is commonly targeted in Mayakovsky's poetry as, like the literary figures of bourgeois culture, he saw “the stars, the moon, and so forth” (Brown, 1973, p. 181) as a “matter of high poetry” (p. 181). Brown's description of Mayakovsky's dismissive attitude towards the sun as being emblematic of this matter is perhaps most clearly identified in the dialogue in *A funny thing that happened to Vladimir Mayakovsky in the country*:

And I yelled at the sun: “You scrounge!  
What makes you so proud?  
All you do is float around  
on a big fat cloud! (Schmidt, 2007, p. 61)

This humorous dialogue again places the poetic persona at an equal level with a powerful external force (the sun). Through this, Mayakovsky's disregard for an element steeped in mythological significance and synonymous with profound expressions of poetic insight signals his Futurist impulse to recontextualise poetry and establish his own anti-bourgeois motive. Yevgeny Zamyatin's description of harmful literature being more “useful than useful literature” (Masing-Delic, 2012, p. 109) in *On Literature, Revolution, Entropy, and Other Matters*, parallels the disregard that Mayakovsky expressed towards tradition. This idea of harmful literature as essential for an emerging socialist Russia is reflected in Mayakovsky's manifesto, *A Slap in the Face of Public Taste*, which signalled his desire to shift public consciousness away from traditional poetic conventions. It is for this reason that Mayakovsky expresses an indifference for the pastoral in this poem, as despite the poem's pleonastic title, there are no vivid descriptions of the countryside. When compared to Russian forbearers like Pushkin, the attention Mayakovsky makes towards urban elements like sidewalks articulates his artistic and ideological focus on championing the quotidian elements of Moscow. While Mayakovsky does depict the urban world as heavily characterised by suffering, his futurist inclinations lead him to romanticise it at times. If one is to consider the correlation he creates between the individual and the world around them, this is a device used by Mayakovsky to acknowledge his audience's suffering in the world of Tsarist Russia. It is for this reason, that

Mayakovsky's justification of the role of a revolutionary poet in *The Poet Worker* metaphorically aligns poets with a symbol of the working class.

Maybe  
work  
is more vital  
to us than anything else.  
I am a factory as well. (VM, p. 91)

In associating the poet with a factory, Mayakovsky again distances himself from the aristocratic favouritism of Pushkin, in order to reimagine poetry as belonging to the proletariat. When considering Mayakovsky's political stance, this sentiment attests to how crucial the poet was for dismantling a Tsarist society in favour of the utopic future encouraged by a communist revolution. From a Marxist perspective, Mayakovsky placing labour at the centre of his poetry allows the capitalistic distortions impacting oppressed individuals to become clear (Allen, 2011, p. 42). These distortions correlate with the consequences of a classist dichotomy that cause labour to appear as an estranging alien power, rather than a means of emancipation (Marx, 2007, p. 79). Like Marx, Mayakovsky's radical approach to poetry emphasises how crucial labour is to the proletariat's empowerment, which allowed those subjugated by oppressive social norms to reconsider their place in Russia's future.

### The poetic ideologue

Mayakovsky's ability to align the poet with the worker under the guise of an ideological revolution attests to his ability to use simplistic language in writing "agitational verse for the proletariat" (Cipiel, 2007, pp. 19-20). This didactic approach towards poetry is manifested in blunt criticisms of bourgeois decadence, as exemplified by the accusatory title of *You!* and its lambasting polemic:

You, as from orgy to orgy you stagger -  
you, with your heated toilets and private bathrooms! -  
aren't you ashamed to flick through the newspaper  
and see the list of military decorations? (VM, p. 62)

Here, Mayakovsky employs an objectifying second-person repetition of "you" to emphasise the corrosive class divisions of his time. Furthermore, the accumulation of elements relating to bourgeois life, ranging from "heated toilets and private bathrooms" to their disregard of working-class concerns such as wartime casualties, echoes Mayakovsky's ability to poetically depict the reality of his own situation (Holquist, 1967, p. 126). In further influencing his proletariat audience, Mayakovsky embedded militaristic imagery within *Our March*, which from a titular perspective, uses a collective pronoun to focus on the strength of collectivisation:

Is our treasure, our gold, not the loftiest thing?  
Can we ever be stung by the wasp of a bullet?  
Our weapon's the songs that we sing.

Our voices are our gold bullion. (VM, p. 85)

As in *Cloud*, Mayakovsky uses imagery relating to immense worth (through the use of gold), as well as elevation (through the use of “loftiest thing”) to energise readers in affirming their importance within the revolution. In supplementing this praise of his audience, Mayakovsky casts the “song” as a weaponised metonym for poetry in showing how crucial the reciprocal relationship between poet and audience is. Mayakovsky sustains the weapon symbolism in conveying how their impassioned thoughts and voices outweigh any form of weaponry and retaliation from the opposing forces, hence his dismissive metaphorical comparison of a bullet to a wasp’s sting.

The “gold bullion” entrenched in the efforts of the proletariat is subjected to a heroic reimagining in Mayakovsky’s suitably titled *The Revolution*, where the image of an eagle (a key element of Russian nationalist identity and insignia [Werness, 2006, p. 153]) conveys the changes wrought by the Bolshevik insurrection. In *The Revolution*, Mayakovsky uses a disparaging description in conveying the eagle associated with Tsarist Russia as an “imperial eagle” with a “black two-headed body” (VM, p. 79). When contrasted with the phoenix-like creature that appears from “a halo of broken dust” (VM, p. 79) to extinguish this imperialistic threat and that operates with virtue rather than cruelty, the poet instils the Revolution with affirmative and heroic qualities:

Wider and wider the wings extend.  
Bread for the hungry,  
water for those who thirst,  
here she is:  
‘Take up your arms, citizens!  
Citizens, take up your arms!’ (VM, p. 79)

Perhaps the greatest means of Mayakovsky’s ability to elevate the efforts of the proletariat stem from what Edward James Brown (1973) describes as the poet’s “fascination with the story of Christ” (p. 179), as well as similarly valorous stories from Biblical mythology. Mayakovsky applies a near-religious level of importance in both *Our March* and *The Revolution* in celebrating the efforts of workers and Bolsheviks alike. *Our March* uses the idea of “cleansing” the world (“We’ll cleanse all the cities around the world/with a flood even greater than Noah’s” [VM, p. 85]) to suggest the efforts of a vengeful God in the Noah’s Ark story serve as a metaphorical parallel to the ideological “cleansing” of Russian society wrought by the Revolution. *The Revolution* similarly draws from the Old Testament in paralleling the bloody-mindedness of Futurism’s desire for change and Biblical melodrama:

While the finger does not relax on the trigger,  
a different will shall guide our way.  
We will bring new tables of the law  
down from our grey Mount Sinai. (VM, p. 82)

Here, the story of Moses delivering the commandments from atop Mount Sinai is paralleled to the Bolsheviks establishing communist ideology. Both of these instances demonstrate Mayakovsky's playfully allusive approach to mythology, and his ability to relish in hyperbole. This application of religious allusions to a socio-political revolution emphasises the near-messianic regard that Mayakovsky held the Bolsheviks in and how strongly his scandalous poetics resisted Tsarist conservatism.

### Defiance as an act of flamboyance

While Mayakovsky's poetic and personal environments are important elements to consider, it is the attitude that he expressed towards these external factors that provide insights into the characteristics of his poetic persona and revolutionary worldview. Instances of the larger-than-life persona that Mayakovsky projected can be traced from his emergence in Russian poetry circles through St Petersburg's *Stray Dog Cabaret*, a venue in which Futurists and other avant-garde practitioners gathered to recite poetry, theatre and discuss politics. Catherine Ciepiela, when describing the collective's significance in marrying pre-revolutionary fervour with bold artistic experimentation, describes it as being "part of an epochal transformation in artistic culture that ... broke the hold of nineteenth-century realism and restored the prestige of artifice and mythmaking" (2007, pp. 7-8). Mayakovsky's involvement in this group was used to position himself antithetically to bourgeois values, through what Ciepiela identifies as his "allegiance to the Bolsheviks" (p. 9) and an outsized personality characterised by him attracting crowds by "striding around Moscow in greasepaint and a striped yellow blouse with a radish stuck in the buttonhole" (p. 9). While the flamboyance embodied by Mayakovsky's public appearance is reflected in and conducive to his writing, it eventually presented issues within the socialist "utopia" that he clamoured for. Irrespective of their later controversies, these eroticised performances are paramount within Mayakovsky's writing, with the following declaration in *Cloud* serving as a suitable example:

My  
mouth is golden,  
my words and figments  
make your body happy,  
rejuvenate your soul (VM, p. 46)

As in other instances in the poem, Mayakovsky relates the prestige and allure of "gold" to personal significance and in this case, the persona declares that their rhetoric incites both sexual excitement (hence the suggestion of making the body "happy") and a spiritualistic rejuvenation. When this luminescent imagery is considered amongst the dark overtones of Mayakovsky's poetic world, the development of his utopian impulse becomes apparent, which can be aligned to the Bolsheviks's successes. While the poem's overt hyperbole renders a comical tone to this proclamation of his poetry's seemingly transformative ability, it still embodies Mayakovsky's ability to challenge the repressive sexuality endorsed by society following the Victorian era (Foucault, 1978, p. 30). Foucault's *History of Sexuality* attributes repression to modern society's view of sexuality as having to be "economically useful and politically conservative" (1978, p. 37), hence Mayakovsky's anti-capitalist stance and sexually charged self-confidence

embodies a dissatisfaction with conservative ideology. While Foucault argues that, paradoxically, bourgeois society is one historically associated with perversion (p. 47), he identifies the manifestation of the bourgeois order's "centres of power" (p. 49) as being responsible for the limitations placed on sexual expression and desire in society. For Mayakovsky, this societal repression attests to how his desires could not be diminished by powerful external forces, which in turn justifies his heavy use of formal irony. The influence of a countercultural figure like Mayakovsky on other poets is undeniable and correlates heavily with a Foucauldian ethos. Foucault's notion of reconceptualising the "forms of resistance against different forms" (1982, p. 780) in helping individuals move "further toward a new economy of power relations" (p. 780) is an idea that relates to subversive poetry that operates within extreme parameters. This empirical notion of resistance catalysing progression is a Marxist principle, hence the application to Mayakovsky's own radical approach towards art.

### Love in the time of the Russian Revolution

Mayakovsky's countercultural ethos did not dissipate following the revolution, however, as his sexual desires became clearer, which his *Letter to Tatiana Yakovleva* (henceforth referred to as *Letter*) shows. Unlike *Cloud*'s ability to meld biography with poetry through an anonymous persona's endless pursuit of "Maria," *Letter* draws upon Mayakovsky's intense relationship with Yakovleva during his time in Paris in clear detail:

In a kiss on the hands,  
a kiss on the lips,  
the trembling of a dear body,  
the red  
of my republics  
should also burn brightly. (VM, p. 216)

Mayakovsky's description of his intimate encounters with Yakovleva is not the "provocative declaration" (Mikhailov & Tittler, 1992, p. 113) in question, but rather it is his brazen description of an affair with a daughter of White Russian émigrés in a period of emerging Soviet identity and policy that proves how Mayakovsky's ideas on individual expression differed to that of the system for which he advocated so passionately.

Mayakovsky's description of his ardent love for an enemy of the state solidifies how in a Foucauldian context, the poet's continued rebellion against the "centres of power" (1978, p. 49) enforced how the tension, cause of alienation and later suicide for the poet stemmed from the limitations placed on expression. From a historical perspective, Mayakovsky's continued flamboyance following the Revolution placed him at odds with the bureaucracy of the Soviet state. Vladimir Lenin believed that "Mayakovsky's bohemian life and experimental poetry were not consonant with the high ideals and noble sacrifices of the Revolution" (Holquist, 1967, p. 130) and that his writing constituted what he disparaged as "hooligan-communism" (p. 128). In his *Letter*, Mayakovsky was aware of the provocative nature of his expression in a Soviet context, hence why he used the momentum of the revolution to strengthen and develop provocations in adding to his own glory (p. 129). Holquist's suggestion is found in Mayakovsky

paralleling the sexual ecstasy of kissing his lover to his ideological passion as a Bolshevik, which can be classified as a key utopian dialectic used within the poet's craft. With this in mind, the poem's colour symbolism of the Soviet "red" emerges in his description of how his love for Yakovleva "burns brighter" than his political alignment. Mayakovsky's *Letter* parallels his personal and political views as he continually refers to his own nation in his recollections of her:

We are gentle with those who suffer now:  
you can't force people to be better;  
we need to have you  
                                with us  
                                in Moscow,  
there aren't enough long-legged girls there. (VM, p. 218)

The collective pronoun of “we” initially casts Mayakovsky as a mock-diplomat of sorts, as he sets off to encourage the French émigré to return to the Soviet Union, suggesting a changed attitude and increased gentleness towards the exiled. Symbolically, Mayakovsky’s placement of Yakovleva above the other “girls in Moscow” is a suggestion of the precedence that he associated with personal, rather than political affairs while his characteristic “ladder-form” (Brown, 1973, p. 173) uses line spacing to emphasise the geographical distance between the lovers as well as the growing alienation he felt from the state that limited his personal affairs.

## Individual angst in a collectivised world

Instances of placing the interests of the individual above those of the state are not limited to Mayakovsky's growing disillusionment with the Soviet state, but can also be traced to his pre-revolutionary poems, which reflect how his countercultural ethos was not limited to a Tsarist Russia. An example of this pre-revolutionary discontent can be found in *Cloud's* fourth and final stanza, which sees the spurned lover experience a mental breakdown following Maria's continued rejection. The iconoclastic depiction of Mayakovsky as a larger-than-life figure that questions convention whilst glorifying themselves is noticeably absent towards *Cloud's* ending:

Maria! Maria! Maria!  
Let me in, Maria! I can't  
stay out on the street...

Look Maria, I've already started to stoop. (VM, p. 54)

The repeated exclamations form a distinct juxtaposition to the speaker's overt confidence whereas the diction of "stoop" encapsulates the impact that unrequited love has placed on the speaker, as their pre-revolutionary excitement is replaced by a self-pitying tone. Mayakovsky's characteristic use of pathetic fallacy is present towards the poem's end as the rain is described to be sobbing "onto the pavement in pools" (VM, p. 54), wherein the personified rain reflects the narrator's despondency. What ascertains the pre-revolutionary Mayakovsky as placing a

woman's love above the revolution is the harrowing image that ends *Cloud* of a disinterested world rejecting the concerns of the persona:

The universe is asleep,  
and one huge ear -  
covered in stars like fleas -  
flops over its paws. (VM, p. 59)

The metaphorical reimagining of the universe as a slumbering animal is used to encapsulate the disregard of a pre-revolutionary society regarding matters of love, as the indifference of the "sleeping" universe is used to symbolise how love is impacted within any society possessing repressive centres of power (Foucault, 1978, p. 49). The struggle against societal expectations that Mayakovsky faced following the revolution (as *Letter* conveys) illustrates the paradox that emerged in the formulation of Soviet identity and culture as the robust optimism of Bolshevism slowly gave way to overbearing bureaucracy. It is this contradictory outcome that arguably resulted in the disintegration of Mayakovsky's utopian idealism (Steinberg, 2018, p. 83) in the latter stages of his life. Irrespective of this disillusionment, a consideration of Mayakovsky's ability to tie himself with his work aligns with the Badiouian principle of seeking artistic truth, which is an inherently utopic premise. Like Marx, Badiou is aware of the difficulties of human thought achieving objective truth due to its not being a mere question of theory but rather a series of questions grounded in both practicality and subjectivity (Hallward, 2003, p. 15). This conceptual framework underpins how Mayakovsky's pursuit of an artistic truth was marred by continued struggles with a Soviet state that he initially clamoured for but later opposed. What this ultimately reveals is an omnipresent complication associated with the tension between societal alienation and a desire for affirmation that seems to be wrought by modern Russia and Western society, irrespective of its socio-political stance.

While the sexual focus of the aforementioned examples is indicative of a stereotypically heterosexual male lens, Mayakovsky's continued focus on the emotive resonances and impact of the love associated with the women in his life exhibits a sensitivity that one would not typically align with a male stereotype. While his physical attraction towards Yakovleva is made abundantly clear in *Letter*, Mayakovsky acknowledges her as an equal within their relationship:

You are  
the only person  
tall as me -  
you stand  
brow-to-brow  
next to me (VM, pp. 216-217)

Within this view of his lover, there is a metatextual irony at play as Mayakovsky acknowledges his tendency to glorify his iconoclastic vision of himself by attributing an immense "height" to himself. This is significant in showing his love for Yakovleva as he attributes her with this same level of significance that throughout his *Letter*, is not even applied to the Soviet state. Despite the state's ideological focus on equality, in practical terms, it tended to embody



patriarchal values akin to that of a capitalist, heteronormative society, reflecting some of the internal tensions that contradicted the communist “utopia” that the Bolsheviks established. Olga Voronina’s exploration of Soviet patriarchy affirms this claim; “The myth that women had equal rights and were emancipated in the Soviet Union masks the reality that the Soviet state, like all totalitarian states, is a manifestation of patriarchal ideology” (1993, p. 97). Mayakovsky’s ability to place an exiled woman at the same level as that of an esteemed Soviet poet is somewhat anomalous within the bureaucratic confines that he found himself living in and ultimately disillusioned with. While a retrospective analysis may grant a feminist undertone to Mayakovsky’s writing, a consideration of his personal context encourages a more political approach. The heteronormative status quo appearing within what Mayakovsky hoped would be a utopic Soviet state is indicative of the antagonisation that the poet faced for his flamboyant public figure. However, this is a tension that Mayakovsky did not shy away from critiquing due to his continued criticism of the ruling bureaucratic system (Mikhailov & Tittler, 1992, p. 127) and hope for a Russia free from division.

While the argument of Mayakovsky establishing a sense of equilibrium between himself and his lover in *Letter* can be disputed by the argument of the poem merely expressing his desires, within his poetic self-representation in *Me*, he acknowledges the importance of a feminine presence for his hyperbolic character. Structurally, the poem is split up into sections that describe the key elements of the “Mayakovsky” myth; first, a surrealistic depiction of what the Revolution would look like and then three successive sections titled, “A few words about my wife”, “A few words about my mother”, “A few words about me”. Despite Mayakovsky never having married, the structural placement of these dedications to the significant women in his life (the “wife” can be assumed to have been one of Mayakovsky’s many romantic pursuits), demonstrates that despite his overtly masculine projection of himself, a certain sensitivity is present in his writing. *Me*’s placement of women in conjunction with the male presence describing the inner-workings of an iconoclastic figure is anomalous within the context of pre-revolutionary/early Soviet poetry. This approach conveys the utopian impulse that Mayakovsky held, which on a theoretical basis, positions a Marxist-based society as looking towards gender harmony, rather than Soviet bureaucracy. The omnipresent female presence within Mayakovsky’s body of work operates on what Beatrice Brodsky Farnsworth describes as the “pre-revolutionary myth” regarding the liberation of women (1976, p. 292), which caused other idealists in the Soviet Union like Alexandra Kollontai to become alienated from a party they advocated for due to its totalitarian “negativism” (p. 293) and tendency to antagonise continued pursuits for an egalitarian future despite their utopian roots.

### **The artistic truth prevails**

While the overarching focus of this article is to examine how heteronormativity and capitalism correlate, Mayakovsky’s biography and poetry demonstrate how even a revolutionary world resembling a “working utopia” (Steinberg, 2018, p. 85) can continuously subject an individual to restrictive issues. In mediating his dismay with the limitations that society placed on him, Mayakovsky’s extreme poetics conveyed a confident revolutionary spirit that rejected literary anachronism in favour of viscerally optimistic proclamations of love and ideology. While in

the modern age, the acknowledgment of Mayakovsky's poetry tends to be marred by disillusionment with the Soviet bureaucracy that led to his tragic end, a diverse application of Marxist and postmodern theory allows readers to understand how poetic praxis can be used as a means of reimagining one's own disillusionment. In relation to the tension between the external world and individual desire, Mayakovsky conveys a clear message relating to the bridge he placed between himself and poetry, which illustrates the necessity of creative expression as a release from the external world. While Mayakovsky's earlier writing shows how some of these desires were fulfilled through social upheaval, many were unachievable. Therefore, while he embodied revolutionary energy, the seemingly irresolvable tensions wrought by the modern world are emblematic of the forces that restricted Mayakovsky's poetic utopia.

Thus, returning to the Badiouan commentary that opened this article, the tensions caused by the relationship between the world and an alienated individual illustrate poetry's powerful truth. While this does make the utopian impulse that underpins Mayakovsky's writing clear, it also exposes a paradox. This contradiction conveys how despite the rapidly progressive nature of the twentieth century, limitations on sexual expression are a constant, seemingly inextinguishable feature in modern human history. The reasons for this expand beyond a simple critique of society, as the dissatisfaction wrought by modern society in matters related to sexual expression is associated with a more ontologically based tension between the individual and the state. When placed in either a Tsarist or more democratically aligned sphere, this conveys how certain systems are designed to suppress and thus condition human behaviour. This is a notion that Badiou's *Communist Hypothesis* supports, as he argues that individuals are alienated by the "unbridled capitalist economy and the parliamentary politics that support it" (2010, p. 64). Badiou further argues that individuals must learn to accept the oppressive intersection of economics with politics as a way of understanding the "other possibilities that are inherent in the situation in which we find ourselves" (p. 64), which renders a poet's working utopia as possessing an idealistic dexterity. In Badiou's words, rather than being centred on a revolutionary overthrow of a system, this utopia ushers individuals into the idealistic pursuit of "a pure idea of equality" (p. 53). A retrospective study of Mayakovsky shows how this purity can help strike a balance between the fallibilities of an individual's world and the robust idealism of their utopic desires.

If Mayakovsky's utopia is then considered through a more individualistically oriented lens, it can be seen as providing an "ontological security" (Jameson, 2005, p. 45) that allows self-expression to be viewed as what Jameson states is more of a "daydream" rather than an achievable future (p. 45). This consideration of a poetic utopia as speculative rather than achievable is not to disparage Mayakovsky but rather highlights humanity's inherently idealistic nature. In conjunction, it elucidates how the security that Mayakovsky sought may not have necessarily come from the external world, but instead emanated from a self-awareness of his own desires that existed in spite of oppressive surroundings. When individuals as deeply self-aware as Mayakovsky are considered amidst this theoretical supposition, its merits have the capacity to become even clearer for an attentive audience.

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