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MAYAKOVSKY AT MIRAFORI *OPERAISMO* AND THE NEGATION OF POETRY

Alberto Toscano

A textile worker wrote to Tretyakov, that Mayakovsky's death was like a bad incident at the factory. He died in the midst of making lyric poems, as a result of poisoning from his own poetry. It is difficult to be a poet. Mayakovsky wrote that he was a factory and that it was harder for him if he had no chimneys.

- Viktor Shklovsky, A Hunt for Optimism

[W]here could artistic harmony come from in these decades of catastrophe, across the unsealed chasm between two epochs?

- Lev Trotsky, 'The Suicide of Vladimir Mayakovsky'

Though many of the watchwords and guiding axioms of Italian *operaismo* and its successors have percolated into critical discourse on aesthetic production, and multiple analyses of its intersections with visual art and architecture in the 1960 and 1970s have been advanced, little has been made of its specific approach to the question of poetics. This essay aims partially to correct this tendency by exploring the arguments about the unhappy marriage between avant-garde poetry and communist politics sketched out in some interventions by the key literary critic and historian in the collective of militant intellectuals that made up “classic” *operaismo*, as propagated through the journals *Quaderni Rossi*, *Classe Operaia* and *Contropiano*: Alberto Asor Rosa.

In the wake of his densely researched assault on the “populism” pervading Italian progressive literature from the Risorgimento all the way to the literature of the Resistance, *Scrittori e popolo* (1965)¹ – a book that pursued Mario Tronti’s break with Gramscianism into the literary terrain, while developing comprehensive stylistic and ideological polemics against prominent contemporaries on the left, namely Pier Paolo Pasolini and Franco Fortini² – Asor Rosa, along with intellectual comrades such as Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co in the field of architecture, undertook a kind of prophylactic archaeology of the revolutionary avant-gardes. The explicit aim of this exercise, articulated around the journal *Contropiano*, was to counter the romantic atavisms manifest in the “cultural” dimensions of ’68, to reassert the centrality of the working-class to anti-capitalist struggle and to articulate a conception of the specificity (or indeed “autonomy”) of the political able to impose a sober strategic realism on

the diffuse tendency among new movements to aestheticise, molecularise and personalise politics.

This effort to clear the path of a new and effective proletarian politics from the encumbrance of a populist or anarchistic politics of revolt was largely formulated in terms of that very problem that had demanded so much of Gramsci's attention during his incarceration, that of "intellectuals". Togliatti's "populist" interpretation of Gramscianism (and the PCI's enlisting of literati as neo-traditional or para-organic intellectuals) had been the object of *Scrittori e popolo's* animus. The rallying of students and intellectual workers, however wishfully, to the cause of revolution in the late 1960s, recalibrated the *operaista* criticism of literature to concern itself with the "dry flower of the avant-garde". It compelled Asor Rosa in particular to retrace a path he portrayed as at once glorious and sterile in order forcefully to assert the prospect of a revolution that would no longer need to be cultural; a revolution in which a fundamental asymmetry between the invention of political and artistic forms had to be recognised, and in which the intellectual worker (whether scholar, poet or artist) could no longer seek redemption.

Far from being of merely archival interest, Asor Rosa's writings on the avantgardes, and on Mayakovsky and Soviet literature in particular, shed significant light on the moment when the various political and aesthetic tendencies within *operaismo* come unglued. It is around 1968 that at the political and theoretical levels it becomes impossible, if it ever was, to speak of a single *operaismo*. As the likes of Cacciari, Tronti and Asor Rosa take up the path that will lead to their re-entry into the horizon of the PCI, while Toni Negri (present as co-editor for issue 1 of *Contropiano*) embraces the insurrectionary option with Potere Operaio first and Autonomia later, the ideological stakes shift. No longer is the conservative Gramscianism of the PCI's policy toward the nexus between intellectuals and working class the primary concern for the likes of Asor Rosa. The target shifts to an emergent leftist adventurism, the product of a diversion of the class struggle into the well-trodden furrow of (petty-)bourgeois intellectual revolutionism. Though this is not yet the Asor Rosa who opposed the movements of the late 1970s with the stark polemical separation between the "two societies" – the proper negativity of the organised working class against the amorphous insurgence of students and subproletarians – many of the themes that will congeal in the divorces and confrontations of the *anni di piombo* (years of lead) are already in place.

What is the place of Mayakovsky and his poetry in this ideological and generational imbroglio? In the wake of Mario Tronti's injunctions to read 'Marx in Detroit' and 'Lenin in England' (from his landmark 1965 text, *Operai e capitale* [Workers and Capital]), what would it mean to read the Russian poet from the vantage point of that *topos* of workerist theory and practice, the FIAT Mirafiori factory in Turin? We could hazard that at a point when the *operaismo* of Asor Rosa is precariously poised between the proud extremism of his assault on Gramscian populism, on the one hand, and 'infantile' left insurrectionism, on the other, the politically over-determined trajectory synthesised by the name "Mayakovsky" is uniquely placed to allow for a critical stance that ultimately identifies "Stalinist" cultural policy (however soft its Mediterranean variant) and an avant-garde "panpoetic" politics of everyday life as two sides of the same devalued coin. Or rather, it allows one to depict the impossibility of the avant-garde truly to resist its integration into the party-state as the symptom of an original flaw, the inability properly to distinguish the poetic from the political. The contradiction that Mayakovsky embodies – futurist *enfant terrible* posthumously anointed by Stalin, exploding utilitarian language only to put it at the service of socialist construction – becomes emblematic

of the very contradiction, impossibility, or naivety of a literary or poetic politics which an integral, anti-romantic *operaismo* should emancipate itself from.

This identification, in spite of intentions and appearances, of Stalinist control over literary production with the poetic insurgency of the avant-gardes, but also with “left oppositions” of sundry stripes, is evidenced by the very construction of Asor Rosa’s *Contropiano* essay on Mayakovsky and Soviet literature. The essay employs a kind of regressive-progressive strategy, moving backward from the congealing of a recognisably Stalinist framing of the politics-literature nexus in the Soviet Congress of Writers of 1934 to the seeds of that aesthetic capitulation in the avant-gardes’ orientation toward the proletarian revolution, as well as in what retrospectively appear as paths not taken (namely, the conditional freedom of literary experimentation outlined in Trotsky’s *Literature and Revolution*). Dominating Asor Rosa’s panorama is the relationship between revolutionary art and poetics, on the one hand, and its bourgeois counterpart, on the other. In the Congress’s claims to align literary work with anti-fascist politics, Asor Rosa does not simply discern a familiar instrumentalism (literature *at the service* of the revolution). He identifies a complete asynchrony between form and content when it comes to poetic technique and invention – such that the anti-fascist cultural worker would be required to learn the *forms* of the bourgeoisie, but against its contents, with no dialectical development of the ideological contradictions harboured by this very asynchrony. In the crystallised form of Stalinist literary policy, this debilitating poetic unevenness, with its attendant instrumentalism of form, is compounded by the feeble historical-materialist (or better, historical-mechanicist) axiom that literature follows in step with social development, and the deontological claim that judgment about literature should be subordinated to the present-future relation, to its *progressive* figure. At its core, the formation of a Stalinist literary ideology (with its non- or indeed anti-Stalinist revolutionary precursors) involves, in Asor Rosa’s view, a total misrecognition of the precious if explosive legacy that the bourgeoisie, despite itself, hands over to the workers’ movement, namely its *negativity*.

And yet, rather than grasping the way in which bourgeois ‘negative thought’, from Nietzsche to Joyce, enacts a pitiless, destructive investigation of the reification-alienation of bourgeois society from within its confines,³ the dominant socialist perspective on literature opts instead to imitate what it misperceives as bourgeois literature’s *positive* relationship to society. In a bad analogy, made possible by an undialectical instrumentalism, with the notion that the proletariat can just take the capitalist’s machines and use them to emancipatory ends, so is bourgeois literature grasped in the Soviet context primarily in a pedagogical-communicative model. This not just true of its Stalinist ossification, but can be registered in both Lenin and Trotsky’s claims about the need to spread this literary material among the working-classes in their process of cultural maturation. Asor Rosa’s provocation – perhaps inadvertently echoing the early Russian futurist call to throw Pushkin et al. from the ship of modernity – is to remark that “no one asked themselves whether, as a matter of principle or in keeping with a precise programmatic demand, it was correct to try and put in the hands of Soviet socialist proletarians literary or artistic works,”⁴ which at their most accomplished were an intense, ‘aristocratic’ variant of bourgeois reification-alienation.

The harnessing of the forms of bourgeois thought, and of literature and poetry in particular, to the aims of proletarian cultural development is identified here with a twofold loss: of political energy and artistic quality. As Asor Rosa declares: “Distrust with regard to praxis and diffidence with regard to political discourse are the two features that characterise every programme aiming at the “spreading of culture”. And every programme of spreading culture, even when it is carried out in the name of socialism, involves a lowering and flattening of the

initial cultural levels.”⁵ Mayakovsky’s trajectory – from his pre-revolutionary futurist work, through to his lyrical odes on the death of the old world and explosive birth of the new, and moving on to his increasing alignment with the pedagogical-constructive vision of Soviet art and final crisis – is taken here by Asor Rosa as emblematic, and indeed instructive, of the avant-garde’s fraught and ultimately impossible relationship to revolutionary politics. Likewise, the attempt to integrate poetic work to the programme of the revolution is regarded as symptomatic of the inability properly to develop the moment of proletarian political praxis, the mark of a kind of self-incurred immaturity.

Now, Asor Rosa’s critical approach vis-à-vis Mayakovsky has two principal foci. The first is Mayakovsky’s claim that futurism embodies a parallel and affine revolution in poetry and the arts to the Bolshevik revolution in the political domain, an equivalent destruction of the old order and formation of the new. The corollary of this position is the imperative to marry and synchronise these two revolutions, so that the political revolution does not come to be accompanied by the anachronism of bygone aesthetic forms. The second, and crucial focus, is the classed relation between the poet/man of letters as (bourgeois or petty-bourgeois) intellectual and the class he pretends to give voice to, to represent, figure or empower. All of Asor Rosa’s effort will turn out to be an effort at separation: there is no parallel or analogy between the form of (revolutionary) politics and the (revolutionised) form of art or poetry; the artist or intellectual’s claim to unite with the insurgent working class is always haunted by the desire to reproduce or sublimate one’s subjective position, one’s lyrical “I”, and to subsume or instrumentalise the revolution in a gesture of utopian literary messianism; the separate and autonomous character of an *intrinsically* bourgeois literary and artistic practice needs to be assumed and accepted in order to emancipate proletarian politics from any of the pedagogic, culturalist, progressive or populist baggage that its subalternity to the bourgeoisie produces.

The most evident reason for choosing the figure of Mayakovsky turns out to be his tragic experience of the impossibility of maintaining the specificity of the poetic revolution, along with his ultimate recognition, articulated in terms of the division of cultural labour, of the separation of poetry’s formal autonomy at the level of true invention from its “social mandate” – with the attendant identification of different (classed) social audiences. Whence the emphasis given by Asor Rosa to the conflicted lecture, and ensuing Q&A, delivered by Mayakovsky at Krasnaya Press Komsomol Club on the occasion of an exhibition on two decades of his cultural work, shortly before his suicide. It is there that Asor Rosa sees displayed in stark terms the unbearable contradiction between literature as aesthetic invention and as political instrument. The pretence of becoming revolutionaries and remaining literati is identified as the original sin of the revolutionary intelligentsia and avant-gardes, whose ambiguities and contradictions lie behind the Zhdanovist aberration. This means that, at least implicitly, Stalin’s own celebration of Mayakovsky, albeit a horrific distortion, is also made possible by the problems inherent to the avant-garde orientation towards politics.

For Asor Rosa, it is the utopian premise of the “revolutionary-intellectual” which sets the stage for the triumph of instrumentalism, and every instrumentalism ends up in a Stalinist position. Art is intrinsically bourgeois in its autonomy-separation, and is only worthwhile in non-functionality. The plane of culture is one of detachment and isolation, not sociality, and separation from the dream of cultural revolution is a premise for revolutionary political maturity. It is not difficult to locate animus of this call for the death of agitprop and of the utopian messianism of intellectuals in the political struggles of the Italian *Sessantotto*. This is evident in Asor Rosa’s concluding declarations, addressed as they evidently are to Italian anti-capitalist and not their Russian forebears. “To avoid the impasse which today merely distorts

the relations between literature and politics, it is necessary to be able to affirm that the effort to construct a revolutionary project of the working class covers the entirety of the political field that can be of interest to us. ... The use of literature and art as instruments for the communication of political discourse is in our eyes to be totally excluded”⁶ since, without revitalising either literature or the arts it leads to a vulgar, ideological, incorrect political discourse. Political form and aesthetic form are thus to be mutually emancipated – de-sutured to use a different theoretical vocabulary – as though the termination of the avant-garde dream were a cultural (or perhaps, better said, *anti-cultural*) precondition for revolutionary maturity:

We will not go back to the Congresses of socialist writers. In order to make good literature socialism was not essential. To make the revolution, writers will not be essential either. Class struggle – when it is class struggle, and not populist protest, peasant agitation, sensuous admiration for the virgin force of the masses – takes a different road. It has other voices with which to express itself, to make itself understood. And poetry can’t keep up with it. Because poetry, great poetry, speaks a language in which *things* – the hard things of struggle and daily toil – have already taken on the exclusive value of a symbol, a gigantic metaphor of the world: and the often tragic price of this greatness is that what it says departs from praxis, never to return.⁷

It is Asor Rosa’s gamble and provocation here that a consequent rejection of the Stalinist ordering of the arts must also involve an abandonment of the entire utopian *forma mentis* of the avant-gardes. So, farewell to Mayakovsky? To gauge this negation of a political poetics, it is interesting to turn to the text of Mayakovsky’s 1930 address at the Komsomol Club.

A number of elements transpire from it which – notwithstanding Asor Rosa’s insights regarding the complicated continuities in the politics-poetry nexus from 1917 to the consolidation of Stalinism – cast some doubt on the account. First, by contrast with a purified great poetry that would transcend derivative or politicised forms, Mayakovsky reasserts his practice of an incompressible plurality of writerly and visual forms, cutting across social and aesthetic divisions of labour *while never abandoning judgment regarding poetic forms*. While Mayakovsky’s work was certainly subject to instrumentalisms both imposed and self-inflicted, it was also intensely involved in debates that could be seen as seeking, though not necessarily succeeding, to distinguish between *bourgeois autonomy* and *revolutionary specificity* when it came to poetic forms. On the one hand, we have a para-political equalization of forms – of the kind that Jacques Rancière has associated with the aesthetic regime, most effectively in his analysis of a poet crucial in his influence over the development of 20th century Russian poetry: Walt Whitman.⁸ As Mayakovsky declared, in the Foreword to the 1930 exhibition:

The work of the revolutionary poet does not stop at the book: meetings, speeches, front-line limericks, one-day agitprop playlets, the living radio-voice and the slogan flashing by on the trams – are all equal and sometimes very valuable examples of poetry.⁹

The address goes on to stress the vastness and diversity of Mayakovsky’s production, with an emphasis on the intensity and quantity of work that is both a genuine reflection of Mayakovsky’s character and a harried Stakhanovite apologia for his craft in increasingly ‘instrumental’ times. As he declaims:

Comrades, my ... task is to show the amount of work I've done. Why do I find this necessary? To show that not an eight-hour day but a sixteen-to-eighteen-hour working day is typical for a poet who is faced with the enormous tasks that now confront the Republic. To show that we haven't time to rest, that we must work with the pen day after day, without respite.¹⁰

He proceeds to tell of the back-breaking improvised and highly individual work producing window posters for the ROSTA telegraph agency, boasting of laying his head down on a log to avoid sleeping more than two or three hours ('Only when engaged in intensive work of that kind should the poet declare himself to an audience of workers'). But he also narrates of the vicissitudes of *Alphabet*, a text-and-image parodic appropriation of pornographic alphabets created for the Red Army during the Civil War and later confiscated when it was mistakenly sent to orphanages ('This is how poetry can be misused when distributed to a reading public different from the one it is meant for, and the author is bombarded with accusations').¹¹ Yet this defense of the poet's role in building revolution is accompanied by a poetic and political judgment on failed forms, those uncontroversial, propagandistic, kitsch lyrics in praise of revolution that do not antagonise anyone. It is here that the personal, stylistic testimony of the poet is indispensable:

It's easy enough to write poetry that does not irritate anybody: - March, march again you working men – Comrade Komsomol build a great mole. The Red Flag waves higher like the flame of a fire – etc. It will be liked very much and forgotten the next day. I did not work all my life to caress the human ear by writing pretty poetry. No, on the contrary, I have always managed to upset somebody. My main work – is criticising all that I think is wrong, against which I must fight. And twenty years of my literary work has actually been a literary boxing match in the best sense of the word.¹²

The boxing match continues, in critical castigations of kitsch Soviet verse (*Down in the south of Soviet Land, / Amid the steppes and grasses there, / Semyon Mikhailovich Budyonny / Gallops upon a grey stud-mare, or The great stoker walked away from the burning blast-face of the Revolution*). It is in the context of the affirmation of the plurality of poetic practices and the resolute criticism of moribund sentimentalism whose form betrays revolutionary content that Mayakovsky avers the difficulty of fashioning great mass poetry in ways that do not undermine either of those adjectives (*great* and *mass*), and which thus insist on refusing that separation (between great politics and great poetry) which for Asor Rosa is instead a sign of revolutionary maturity:

It is very difficult to work in the way I want to work, trying to establish real contact between the working auditorium and big poetry, poetry genuinely created and without ever lowering its standard of meaning.¹³

But the key to Mayakovsky's address and his struggle is perhaps best conveyed by a passing anecdote, which says much about the life of words and forms in a post-revolutionary time.

Today, during her report, Comrade Koltsova, Chairman of the meeting, offered me a sweet with 'Mosselprom' printed on it and the same old Venus above it. Which means that what we are fighting and have been fighting these twenty years is creeping into our lives today. That same mangled old beauty, even through a sweet

wrapper, is being distributed among the masses here, poisoning our brains once more and poisoning our conception of art.¹⁴

What is at stake here is something that was at the heart of Russian futurism's political turn, of its confluence with constructivism in the moment of *LEF*, its emphasis on art and poetry's place in the construction of the new post-revolutionary life, and its incessant practical and ideological conflict against a hierarchy and division of the arts, namely everyday life in its specific Russian acceptance, *byt*. Its meaning and place in the poetry (and the politics) of Mayakovsky and his comrades was perhaps most strikingly articulated by Roman Jakobson in his brilliant and painful retrospect 'On a Generation that Squandered Its Poets':

The ego of the poet is a battering ram, thudding into a forbidden Future; it is a mighty will "hurled over the last limit" toward the incarnation of the Future, toward an absolute fullness of being: "one must rip joy from the days yet to come." Opposed to this creative urge toward a transformed future is the stabilizing force of an immutable present, overlaid, as this present is, by a stagnating slime, which stifles life in its tight, hard mold. The Russian name for this element is *byt*. It is curious that this word and its derivatives should have such a prominent place in the Russian language (from which it spread even to the Komi), while West European languages have no word that corresponds to it. Perhaps the reason is that in the European collective consciousness there is no concept of such a force as might oppose and break down the established norms of life. The revolt of the individual against the fixed forms of social convention presupposes the existence of such a force. The real antithesis of *byt* is a slippage of social norms that is immediately sensed by those involved in social life. In Russia this sense of an unstable foundation has been present for a very long time, and not just as a historical generalization but as a direct experience.

The centrality of *byt* to Mayakovsky's poetics has no more famous testament than his suicide note and the verse fragments it comprises:

I'm in no hurry; with lightning telegrams

I have no cause to wake or trouble you.

And, as they say, the incident is closed.

Love's boat has smashed against the daily grind [*byt*].¹⁵

As Anatole Kopp, an intellectual comrade of Henri Lefebvre, brilliantly showed in his study *Changer la ville, changer la vie*, it was around the thematic of *byt* that the bonds of struggle and experimentation between poetry, urbanism and architecture were forged, and that Mayakovsky could play such a prominent role in the debates on the revolution or reconstruction of everyday life. Jakobson provides a very illuminating compendium of *byt*'s place in his poetry:

as Majakovskij put it:

. . . laws/ concepts/ faiths

The granite blocks of cities
And even the very sun's reliable glow
Everything had become as it were fluid,
Seemed to be sliding a little-
A little bit thinned and watered down.

But all these shifts, all this “leaking of the poet's room” are only a “hardly audible draft, which is probably only felt by the very tip of the soul.” Inertia continues to reign. It is the poet's primordial enemy, and he never tires of returning to this theme. “Motionless *byt*.” “Everything stands as it has been for ages. *Byt* is like a horse that can't be spurred and stands still.” “Slits of *byt* are filled with fat and coagulate, quiet and wide.” “The swamp of *byt* is covered over with slime and weeds.” ... Only in the poem “About That” is the poet's desperate struggle with *byt* fully laid bare. There it is not personified as it is elsewhere in his work. On the contrary, the poet hammers his verbal attack directly into that moribund *byt* which he despises. And *byt* reacts by executing the rebel “with all rifles and batteries, from every Mauser and Browning.” ... If we should try to translate the Majakovskian mythology into the language of speculative philosophy, the exact equivalent for this enmity would be the antinomy “I” versus “not-I.” A better designation for Majakovskij's enemy could hardly be found.¹⁶

This crucial Mayakovskyan theme, at once poetic and political – for *byt* is materialised in objects, just as it is woven of social relations, and structured both in and as language – is signally unaddressed in Asor Rosa's rejection of any (panpoetic or pansocial) ‘utopia’, such as the Russian futurist one, that would ignore the separation between the poetic and the political. Yet it is precisely in *byt* that, as Mayakovsky's quip about the wrapper indicates, the question of the asynchronies, arrhythmias and asymmetries between different facets of revolutionary transformation make themselves felt.

It is this dimension which is both brilliantly indicated and polemically disavowed in Trotsky's critical dissection of Mayakovsky's poetic practice in *Literature and Revolution*. Asor Rosa – in what is no doubt a reflection of internecine demarcations within the Italian communist Left – had tried in his *Contropiano* essay to pre-empt any claims that Trotsky represented the path not taken. He took pains to emphasise how Trotsky's position remained very much internal to the antinomic horizon, encompassing the avant-garde and Stalinism alike, especially in what concerned the question of art's cultural service. For Asor Rosa, Trotsky is ultimately only “an intelligent ideologue of the possibilities for the instrumentalisation of intellectuals in the phase of the violent breakup of bourgeois power.”¹⁷ And yet Asor Rosa severely underplays how much his own diagnosis repeats a number of Trotsky's insights, especially in what concerns the unhappy marriage or temporary alliance between the avant-garde and proletarian revolution.

Trotsky, with regard to Mayakovsky and the futurists, but also in relation to Aleksandr Blok and his great poem ‘Twelve’, provides a precise and theoretically rich take on the tension between revolutionary and poetic form and its class determinations. While anticipating Asor Rosa's comments about the way in which avant-garde poets (qua petty-bourgeois intellectuals

in revolt) affirm the revolution as the destruction of the old order – leading them to mistake the rationalism of socialist traditions for “the ancient myth of barbarian regeneration”¹⁸ (present not just in Mayakovsky, but also in Blok and Esenin) – Trotsky offers a more nuanced explanation of the way in which this rich if volatile alliance of poetry and politics was determined (by contrast with the reactionary fate of Italian futurism) by the *timing* of the revolution.

Russian Futurism was born in a society which passed through the preparatory class of fighting the priest Rasputin, and was preparing for the democratic Revolution of February, 1917. This gave our Futurism certain advantages. It caught rhythms of movement, of action, of attack, and of destruction which were as yet vague. It carried its struggle for a place in the sun more sharply, more resolutely, and more noisily than all preceding schools, which was in accordance with its activist moods and points of view. To be sure, a young Futurist did not go to the factories and to the mills, but he made a lot of noise in cafes, he banged his fist upon music stands, he put on a yellow blouse, he painted his cheeks and threatened vaguely with his fist. The workers' Revolution in Russia broke loose before Futurism had time to free itself from its childish habits, from its yellow blouses, and from its excessive excitement, and before it could be officially recognized, that is, made into a politically harmless artistic school whose style is acceptable. The seizure of power by the proletariat caught Futurism still in the stage of being a persecuted group.¹⁹

This analysis doesn't make Trotsky's criticisms any less acerbic than Asor Rosa's, nor does it stop him from acknowledging the greater vitality – including in depicting the moment of revolution – of pre-revolutionary or bourgeois poetry,²⁰ even when it comes to capturing the revolution itself (in the signal case of Blok's 'Twelve').²¹ But it does allow him to identify, in the uneven rhythms of formal transformation across politics and the arts the critical nub of the question of poetry's nexus with communism. That this nexus is (and here Asor Rosa is not wholly on the wrong track) subsumed under the synchronising project of cultural maturation and art-as-pedagogy, with its 'classical' ideals of organic integration and harmony, doesn't undermine the analytical force of his position, and its possible uses beyond the polemics of the 1920s – or, indeed, beyond Trotsky's own ideological configuration and his judgment concerning the impossibility of a revolutionary art specific to the transition itself.

The success and the limits of Mayakovsky as a revolutionary poet are identified by Trotsky (who also provides much more detailed and even technically precise readings of the poetry than Asor Rosa) with the volatility of his conjunction with the revolution as a phenomenon steeped in this different rhythms of development.

Mayakovsky came by the shortest route, by that of the rebellious persecuted Bohemia. For Mayakovsky, the Revolution was a true and profound experience, because it descended with thunder and lightning upon the very things which Mayakovsky, in his own way, hated, with which he had not as yet made his peace. Herein lies his strength. Mayakovsky's revolutionary individualism poured itself enthusiastically into the proletarian Revolution, but did not blend with it. His subconscious feeling for the city, for nature, for the whole world, is not that of a worker, but of a Bohemian. “The baldheaded street lamp which pulls the stocking off from the street” —this striking image alone, which is extremely characteristic of Mayakovsky, throws more light upon the Bohemian and city quality of the poet than all possible discussion. ... Mayakovsky is closer to the dynamic quality of the

Revolution and to its stern courage than to the mass character of its heroism, deeds, and experiences. Just as the ancient Greek was an anthropomorphist and naively thought of the forces of nature as resembling himself, so our poet is a Mayakomorphist and fills the squares, the streets and fields of the Revolution with his own personality. True, extremes meet. The universalization of one's ego breaks down, to some extent, the limits of one's individuality, and brings one nearer to the collectivity—from the reverse end.²²

This matter of the poetic forms taken by the dialectic of individual and collective are among the most interesting problems raised by Mayakovsky's poetry – Trotsky challenges them with some critical brutality when it comes to the personifications of capital ('Wilson') and the revolution ('Ivan') in '150,000,000', but they are perhaps most forcefully articulated, in all their contradictions (including with regard to the very form of the ode to the revolutionary leader) in 'Vladimir Ilyich Lenin', Mayakovsky's poem on Lenin's death ('I fear / these eulogies / line upon line / like a boy / fears falsehood and delusion').

What Trotsky's text recognises, in spite of its own judgment that Mayakovsky fatally lacks the sense of *measure*,²³ is that the lyrical magnification of the poet's "I" is also an effect of the effort to give form to, precariously if boisterously to synthesise, the temporal unevenness that poses the signal aesthetic problem of the revolution. The relation of Mayakovsky and of futurism more broadly to communist revolution is crystallised by Trotsky in a profoundly insightful corporeal metaphor that mediates the asynchrony of political and poetic forms in a way that cuts across the distinction between utopian fusion and ascetic separation which transpires from Asor Rosa's later text:

When one breaks a hand or a leg, the bones, the tendons, the muscles, the arteries, the nerves, and the skin do not break and tear in one line, nor afterwards do they grow together and heal at the same time. So, in a revolutionary break in the life of society, there is no simultaneousness and no symmetry of processes either in the ideology of society, or in its economic structure. The ideologic premises which are needed for the revolution are formed before the revolution, and the most important ideologic deductions from the revolution appear only much later. It would be extremely flippant to establish by analogies and comparisons the identity of Futurism and Communism, and so form the deduction that Futurism is the art of the proletariat. Such pretensions must be rejected. But this does not signify a contemptuous attitude towards the work of the Futurists. In our opinion they are the necessary links in the forming of a new and great literature. But they will prove to be only a significant episode in its evolution.²⁴

Some of the limits of Trotsky's reading of Mayakovsky were voiced in a rejoinder by one of the poet's futurist comrades, Nicholas Gorlov. Crucially, Gorlov, writing in issue 4 of *LEF*, articulated the stakes of this debate in terms of *byt*, everyday life – incidentally, in ways that would not have sounded amiss in situationist declarations four decades thence. Writing in the midst of the New Economic Policy (NEP), which Mayakovsky had emphatically attacked as a regression in the struggle against *byt*, Gorlov declares: 'Our revolution has slowed its pace, but has not stopped. In deepening, the revolution has come closer to everyday life. Everyday life is our new front. Art is our weapon on this front'.²⁵ Intriguingly, he also addresses, in a more forceful manner than Asor Rosa, the problem of the proletariat's necessary resistance to great bourgeois culture.²⁶ But what is most striking for our purposes is how Gorlov counters Trotsky's criticism of Mayakovsky's lyrical "I", as well as his analysis of the supposed

disharmony inhering in Mayakovsky's verse and his overall resistance to the idea of a fully-formed revolutionary art. To begin with, Gorlov denies that the revolution can coexist with an 'everyday art' that would conserve the forms of the pre-revolutionary past. In so doing, Gorlov breaks with a certain representational realism inhering in Trotsky's opposition to Mayakovsky's '150,000,000'. In a striking metaphor, which twists Trotsky's claim that Mayakovsky's poetry was ultimately a static one, Gorlov writes:

Everyday art – predominantly representative – corresponds to the statics, and not the dynamics of social life. In dynamic eras, such as ours, representation is the same thing as photographing the bricks of a building under construction. Bricks can only be photographed by someone who stands apart from the building work – even more so, by someone who likes the bricks as bricks ... This kind of everyday art is always an admiration of life ... To build in art means presenting not the maximum of resemblance, but the maximum of expressiveness and class evaluation. The art of today is not analysis, but synthesis, not a portrait of a brick, but the plan of a building.²⁷

In a sense, Gorlov will turn Trotsky's understanding of the uneven character of the revolutionary process against him, asserting that it is indeed the new art's task to give expression, if not representation to it – rather than subjecting revolution to an anachronistic classical idea of harmony. Trotsky's claim against Mayakovsky's verse that a work of art should 'not hurl the reader from one end to the other' elicits this riposte from Gorlov: 'But that is the equivalent to saying that one cannot give expression in art to revolution, as it always hurls us about in zig-zags like that'. When we break with a normative classicism, and the way it has sedimented itself in our perceptual apparatus ('one is simply unaccustomed to perceiving a new thing which is quite unlike the old'), we can then recognise in Mayakovsky's works a different 'unity and wholeness'. For instance, '*Cloud in Trousers* is a synthesis of a whole era, the sum-total of the old culture, all chipped and cracked on the eve of the revolution. Its social meaning is the preparation of the militant'.²⁸ As for '150,000,000', Trotsky's objections to its allegories (Wilson is not fat, a Soviet revolutionary would never hold one hand in his belt, etc. etc.) are categorised as naturalistic regressions in an era that has dispensed with such requirements: 'Photographing the revolution (or the counter-revolution) means not presenting even one per cent of it and, in the other 99 per cent, presenting what does not characterise it at all'.²⁹ Looking back at this rich debate, we could hazard that an attention to *byt* as a force-field marked by the unevenness of formal times and creative rhythms – in the poetry of Mayakovsky and his futurist comrades, as well as in the criticism of the time – makes it possible to recast the questions posed by Asor Rosa in a way that does not issue into the false radicality and asceticism of the separation between politics and the literary vaunted by Asor Rosa at the close of his *Contropiano* essay.

By way of conclusion, it is worth turning to Asor Rosa's continuation of his determinate negation of the very prospect of a revolutionary poetry, in a 1971 essay on the predicament of intellectual labour under socialism that once again takes the case of Mayakovsky as emblematic. While the essay continues Asor Rosa's efforts to undermine the progressivist and utopian tendencies that identify the revolution as an occasion for the transfiguration, sublimation or apotheosis of the artist-qua-bourgeois-intellectual, his argument is now anchored in a much more value-theoretical vein, placing the messianic poet-intellectual on the side of an intellectual labour which is both residually 'concrete' (in the Marxian sense) as well as functional to the reproduction of capitalist (including state-capitalist) domination, while the proletariat's manual labour becomes increasingly abstract.

What Asor Rosa identifies is an antagonism between these two forms of labour (abstract and concrete) that attains its pitch when intellectuals seek and fail to ‘qualify’ a labour without qualities – often by creating an “ideology of labour” functional to the conjunction of state and capital – while workers in turn become indifferent to intellectual labour. It is in this context that Asor Rosa seeks to puncture the artists’ and intellectual’s myth of the October Revolution, at whose core lies an aporia: “the will to make intellectual labour function as a component of the working-class revolution, leaving *unaltered*, or rather empowering, its character as intellectual labour”³⁰ – with the effect that the most sublime, but also most pre-capitalist, product of the current evils of the bourgeoisie, namely its aesthetic practice, is transfigured into the source of redemption. (Ironically, it may be noted that Asor Rosa’s diagnosis of this effort to generalise the artistic condition to the whole of society can be seen as a repudiation, much *avant la lettre*, of the entire post-*operaista* thematic of immaterial labour, especially in its explicitly aesthetic variants.)

Much could be said, by way of critique, of the way in which Asor Rosa, here anticipating many recent tendencies in the aesthetic projection of value-categories, fallaciously substantialises Marxist form-determinations into social groups (abstract and concrete labourers in mutual antagonism). Yet more pertinent to our argument is the way in which his neglect of the specific forms of temporal unevenness that pervade revolutionary transition, and the way these are materialised and thematised as everyday life (*byt*), enfeebles his diagnosis of Mayakovsky’s poetry, and of Mayakovsky’s politics. One need only have a passing acquaintance with the material conditions of intellectual and artistic production during the post-revolutionary period – as strikingly captured, for instance, in the opening piece of Viktor Shklovsky’s *Knight’s Move* – to recognise the weakness of this schematism of the intellectual labourer as applied to the Soviet context, notwithstanding Asor Rosa’s otherwise astute insights into the later selective subordination of artists, poets and intellectuals into the management of Stalinism.

As Asor Rosa himself acknowledges with regard to Mayakovsky’s plays in particular, it is bureaucratism which serves as a key political theme of the work of the 1920s (leading to Lenin’s grudging compliment about the poem ‘All Meetinged Out’). Accordingly, any rigid projection of Marxist categories onto the predicament of the revolutionary poet fails the test of analytical precision. No greater testament to this can be offered perhaps than the 1926 poem ‘Conversation with a Tax Collector About Poetry’. The emplotment of the verse already runs afoul of any value-theoretical temptation – yes, it is all about the value of poetic labour, but it is addressed at a functionary of the state, and it is filled with both pride and deep irony about the identification of poetic and proletarian work, leavening the productivist élan of the *LEF* manifestos with bitter humour. Mayakovsky begins from the offensive identification of the poet with the remnants of bourgeois relations of production:

Along with
owners
of stores and property
I’m made subject
to taxes and penalties.

The claim for equality with any other work, charged with political valence, is then carried out through all of its consequences, both accepting and perverting the ideology of labour. Take rhyme:

In your idiom,

rhyme

is a bill of exchange

to be honored in the third line! –

that's the rule

And so you hunt

for the small change of suffixes and flections

in the depleted cashbox

of conjugations

and declensions.

[...]

Citizen tax collector,

Honestly,

the poet

spends a fortune on words.

[...]

Poetry

is like mining radium.

For every gram

you work a year.

For the sake of a single word

you waste

a thousand tons

of verbal ore.

[...]

These

verses and odes

bawled out

today

amidst applause,

will go down

in history

as the overhead expenses

of what

two or three of us

have achieved.

[...]

So at once

my tax

shrinks.³¹

‘Conversation’ dramatizes the very aporias of the revolutionary poet-intellectual anatomised by Asor Rosa, while cautioning against a solution that would involve severing the formal, temporal and affective ties between the political and the poetic. It does so not just by performing and thus destabilising the projection of economic onto literary categories,³² but by making us painfully aware that the actuality of revolution did not (and will not) have the synchronicity ascribed to it by Asor Rosa and a dominant strain of *operaismo*. It is only this synchronism, this transcendence of unevenness, and of the materiality of that unevenness in and as everyday life (*byt*), which would permit the outcome envisaged by Asor Rosa. Notwithstanding the caustic astuteness of many of his asseverations against the ideology of the avant-garde, this horizon of synchronisation is perhaps the ultimate utopia, the ultimate failure of political and aesthetic realism. *Contra* Asor Rosa, and his dream that working class revolution may be finally purged of its para-political and meta-cultural appendages, rid of the curse of that megalomaniac fellow-traveler, the intellectual worker, we may instead wish to dwell on the insight, so central to Mayakovsky’s work, that poetry in an age of revolutionary transition has to be envisaged as an incessant work, imagined as industrial but practiced both as individual craft and collective agitation, on the broken and healing tendons, tissues and bones of everyday life. It is on that background that we can perhaps reflect on the contemporary valence of Mayakovsky’s specific formulation of poetry’s ‘social mandate’, namely: “The presence of a problem in society, the solution of which is conceivable only in poetical terms.”³³

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- 1 Alberto Asor Rosa, *The Writer and the People: Populism in Modern Italian Literature*, trans. Matteo Mandarinini (Calcutta and London: Seagull Books, 2019).
 - 2 I have explored the controversies over politics and poetics between Asor Rosa and Fortini in ‘The Labour of Division’, my introduction to Franco Fortini, *A Test of Powers: Writings on Criticism and Literary Institutions* (Calcutta: Seagull, 2016).
 - 3 On ‘negative thought’, see especially Massimo Cacciari, *Pensiero negativo e razionalizzazione* (Venice: Marsilio, 1977), and, in English, his *Architecture and Nihilism: On the Philosophy of Modern Architecture*, trans. Stephen Sartarelli (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993).
 - 4 Alberto Asor Rosa, ‘Majakovskij e la “letteratura sovietica”’, in *Le armi della critica. Scritti e saggi degli anni ruggenti (1960-1970)* (Turin: Einaudi, 2011), 78. Originally published in *Contropiano* 1 (1968).
 - 5 Asor Rosa, ‘Majakovskij e la “letteratura sovietica”’, 78-9.
 - 6 Asor Rosa, ‘Majakovskij e la “letteratura sovietica”’, 91-2.
 - 7 Asor Rosa, ‘Majakovskij e la “letteratura sovietica”’, 92.
 - 8 Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, trans. Zakir Paul (London: Verso, 2013), 55-74.
 - 9 Vladimir Mayakovsky, ‘Address at the Krasnaya Presnya Komsomol Club at an Evening Dedicated to *Twenty Years of Work: An Exhibition of the Life and Work of Mayakovsky*, 25 March 1930’, in *Volodya: Selected Works*, ed. Rosy Carrick (London: Enitharmon, 2015), 267. I am very grateful to Enitharmon Press for permission to quote from this collection.
 - 10 Mayakovsky, ‘Address at the Krasnaya Presnya Komsomol Club’, 273.
 - 11 Mayakovsky, ‘Address at the Krasnaya Presnya Komsomol Club’, 273-4.
 - 12 Mayakovsky, ‘Address at the Krasnaya Presnya Komsomol Club’, 268.
 - 13 Mayakovsky, ‘Address at the Krasnaya Presnya Komsomol Club’, 269.
 - 14 *Ibid.*
 - 15 Mayakovsky, ‘Past One O’Clock’, in *Volodya*, 218. For another version, see ‘Verse Fragments’, 220: ‘I’m in no hurry and why should I send / express telegrams to wake you with fear / As they say the incident is cloves / the love-boat wrecked on reality [by]’.
 - 16 Roman Jakobson, ‘On a Generation that Squandered Its Poets’, in *Language in Literature*, ed. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), 277-9.
 - 17 Asor Rosa, ‘Majakovskij e la “letteratura sovietica”’, 81.
 - 18 Asor Rosa, ‘Majakovskij e la “letteratura sovietica”’, 85.
 - 19 Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, ed. William Keach, trans. Rose Strunsky (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005), 127.
 - 20 On Mayakovsky, for instance, he writes: ‘his poem, “A Cloud in Trousers,” a poem of unrequited love, is artistically his most significant and creatively his boldest and most promising work’. *Literature and Revolution*, 148.
 - 21 For further commentary on this, see my ‘The Broken Music of the Revolution: Trotsky and Blok’, *Crisis and Critique* 4(2) (2017): 404-26.
 - 22 Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, 142-3.
 - 23 ‘Mayakovsky has one foot on Mont Blanc and the other on Elbrus. His voice drowns thunder; can one wonder that he treats history familiarly, and is on intimate terms with the Revolution? But this is most dangerous, for given such gigantic standards, everywhere and in everything, such thunderous shouts (the poet’s favorite word) against the horizon of Elbrus and Mont Blanc—the proportions of our worldly affairs vanish, and it is impossible to establish the difference between a little thing and a big.’ *Literature and Revolution*, 143.
 - 24 Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, 147-8.
 - 25 Nicholas Gorlov, ‘On Futurisms and Futurism (Concerning Comrade Trotsky’s article)’, in *The Futurists, the Formalists & the Marxist Critique*, ed. Christopher Pike (London: Ink Links, 1979), 169. Thanks to Steve Edwards for making me aware of this rich collection of texts.
 - 26 ‘It is clear that only by standing on the basis of his class culture can the worker not only assimilate Pushkin, but also overcome him. Otherwise ... Pushkin will throw him to ground. This gives rise to the question: is the worker sufficiently well armed by his culture to withstand this competition? There can only be one reply: from the political point of view (after six years of mass struggle with the old order) he is armed, but from the

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- aesthetic point of view (in relation to the old way of life) he is almost unarmed; politically he will overcome Pushkin, but aesthetically he will be crushed by him, as from this angle he has nothing with which to resist Pushkin. Parodying a little (but just a little) the thought expressed by Comrade Trotsky, I could say thus: to the intellectual Marx it was necessary and important to escape from the clutches of bourgeois economics, but the worker, leaving to one side Marx's experience, needs to adhere to it' Gorlov, 'On Futurisms and Futurism', 173.
- 27 Gorlov, 'On Futurisms and Futurism', 175.
- 28 Gorlov, 'On Futurisms and Futurism', 177. This resonates with Shklovsky's observation: "A great poet is born out of the contradictions of his time. He is preceded by the inequality of things, their dislocations, the course of their changes. Others do not yet know about the day after tomorrow. The poet defines it, writes and receives no recognition." Viktor Shklovsky, *Mayakovsky and His Circle* [1940], ed. and trans. Lily Feiler (London: Pluto, 1972), 10.
- 29 Gorlov, 'On Futurisms and Futurism', 179.
- 30 Alberto Asor Rosa, 'Lavoro intellettuale e utopia dell'avanguardia nel paese del socialismo realizzato', in *Intellettuali e classe operaia. Saggi sulle forme di uno storico conflitto e di una possibile alleanza* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1973), 211. See also 'Avanguardia' (1977) in *Un altro Novecento* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1999).
- 31 Mayakovsky, 'Conversation with a Tax Collector About Poetry', in *Volodya*, 177-185.
- 32 For a version of the analogy of poetry and manufacture which is not animated by the same kind of irony, and which is perhaps more open to Asor Rosa's objections, see the concluding theses to 'How Are Verses Made?', in *Volodya*, 263-5.
- 33 Mayakovsky, 'How Are Verses Made?', 230.