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Mayakovsky's Voices: Futurist Performance and Communication in Verse

Isobel Palmer

Abstract: This essay examines the formative rôle played by performance in the evolution of Russian Futurist poetics. While Russian Futurist performance is often discussed in terms of its outrageous content, I argue that these performances were part of the broad effort in the Modernist period to re-imagine the possibilities of poetic speech by returning to earlier models of poetry consumption, when a poem's voice belonged to whomever chose to inhabit it. The paper focuses on the example of Vladimir Mayakovsky, offering readings of three early poems ("But Still", "Listen!" and "But Could You?") that demonstrate the way in which performance and the spoken word shaped experiments with the structure of poetic address. Seeking to engage audiences as (inter)locutors and to make them active participants in poetry-as-communicative-exchange, Mayakovsky's pre-revolutionary poems and their concern with the interstices between utterance, speaker and hearer respond to the larger process of renegotiating the function and cultural status of public space during a period when art institutions, audiences and norms of spectatorship were in constant flux. The Futurists' enthusiasm for the medium of performance emerges from a desire to equip audiences with alternative models for politically and socially engaged speech.

Key words: Vladimir Mayakovsky, poetry recitations, Futurist tour through Russian provinces (December 1913 – March 1914), audience participation, poetic voice, *zaum'*

Russian Futurist performance: An introduction

12 February 1912: the date of the first Russian Futurist debate in the Grand Auditorium of the Moscow Polytechnical Museum. The organizers are a group of little-known avant-garde artists that goes by the name "Jack of Diamonds". At 8pm, "there [i]sn't room to swing a cat" in the crowded hall; more people wait on the street outside.¹ Several strangely dressed figures appear on stage and begin to lecture the audience in a shocking and confrontational manner on the subject of modern art. At one point, a woman bursts in, apparently unexpected; she attacks the organizers of the debate, spits on the crowd and announces that there is soon to be an exhibition mounted by a new avant-garde group, "The Donkey's Tail".² There is indignation and heckling, both on the stage and off. The debate continues until one in the morning.

24 February 1913: another debate, again organized by "Jack of Diamonds". As before, the hall is packed; several strangely dressed figures take to the stage. One, "a man of enormous size, with a voice like a trombone", declares that he wishes to speak first. He is told that he must wait his turn; the man turns to the audience: "Gentlemen, I beg you to defend me against the despotism of this gang that smears spit over the aspic of art." Although "they don't seem really to understand what's going on", the audience is on the huge man's side:

¹ Livshits: *The One and a Half-Eyed Archer*, p. 78. My thanks to Günter Berghaus for his generous comments on this essay, and to Luba Golburt, Anna Muza and Harsha Ram for their thoughtful responses to the longer project from which it comes.

² Livshits: *The One and a Half-Eyed Archer*, p. 78. The woman was Natalia Goncharova, erstwhile collaborator of Mikhail Larionov, the leader of the Jack of Diamonds group. For more on these artists and their use of performance, see e.g. Dadswell: "The Spectacle of Russian Futurism"; Markov, *Russian Futurism*; Sharp: "Moscow, 1913".

“For a whole quarter hour the hall [roars] with applause, shouts of “Down with...!”, whistles and boos.”³

13 October 1913: “The First Evening of the Speech-Creators”. Another jam-packed hall, another sold out show: “ ‘Full House’ signs, mounted police, squabbles at the entrance, the crush in the auditorium – these things were now no longer casual elements of our performances but constant attributes.”⁴ Inside, “the heroes of the evening” – and especially, a man in “an elegant yellow-and-black-striped shirt and without a belt” – walk through the audience, further stoking the excited atmosphere. “We are destroying your old world... You hate us...”, the “striped futurist” declares;⁵ later, during the performance, he will mingle insults thrown at the audience (“folds of fat in the stalls” who “have cabbage stuck in [their] mouths”) with his latest poetry.”⁶

For the scholar of the historical avant-garde, these descriptions of Russian Futurist performance will strike a familiar chord. Such performances had much in common with the Italian Futurist *serate*⁷ and the historical avant-garde more broadly.⁸ In Russia as elsewhere, avant-garde artists viewed the anarchic potential of performance as a weapon against the limitations of traditional forms and the bourgeois social order. Often overlooked, however, are the ways in which this “permissive, open-ended medium with endless variables”⁹ also suggested to these artists ways not to destroy but rather to revive established artistic conventions and to harness them for their own ends. Of particular significance for Russian Futurist poetry of this period, this essay will argue, is the renewed interest fostered by performance in poetic voice. Mingling insults and intellectual argument with lines of poetry, the Futurists explored and exploited the intersection between the physically sounding voice and its metaphoric counterpart in their search for alternative modes of speech.

The Russians were not alone in their interest in poetry declamation. The Modernist period saw a resurgence of interest in this practice, and especially in large-scale public declamation. From the public recitals of Symbolist poetry at the *samedis populaires* organized by Gustave Kahn at Théâtre Sarah-Bernhardt in Paris (and attended by Marinetti in 1898),¹⁰ to Futurist, Dadaist, and Expressionist declamations of sound poetry, Modernists of all stripes sought

³ See reports in *Moskovskaia gazeta*, 25 February 1913 and *Russkoe slovo*, 26 February 1913, cited in Katanian: *Maiakovskii*, p. 47. All translations are my own, except where existing translations are cited.

⁴ Livshits: *The One and a Half-Eyed Archer*, p. 148.

⁵ *Russkie vedomosti*, 15 October 1913, cited in Katanian: *Maiakovskii*, p. 52.

⁶ For a more extended description of the evening, see Livshits: *The One and a Half-Eyed Archer*, pp. 148-51. The cabbage insult is from Mayakovsky's poem, *Nate! (Take That!)*. The tea-tosser is Aleksei Kruchenykh, the inventor (with Velimir Khlebnikov) of *zauim*, a ‘transrational’ or ‘beyonsense’ language consisting of “chopped-up words, half-words, and their artful combinations”, as the 1913 manifesto *Slovo kak takovoe* (The Word as Such) explains. Lawton and Eagle: *Russian Futurism through its Manifestoes*, p. 61.

⁷ A detailed analysis of some twenty such events has been offered in the chapter “The Beginnings of a Futurist Performance Art: The Early Serate” in Berghaus: *Italian Futurist Theatre, 1909-1944*, pp. 85-155.

⁸ Thoughtful comparisons of Italian and Russian Futurism are to be found in Ram: “Uneven Geographies” and Lawton: “Russian and Italian Futurist Manifestoes”. Markov provides a summary of Russian coverage of the Italian movement in *Russian Futurism*, pp. 147-48. A detailed account of the Russian Futurists' response to Marinetti's 1914 visit to the Russian capitals is found in Khardzhiev: “Turne kubo-futuristov 1913-1914 gg.” [The Cubo-Futurists' 1913-1914 Tour]. On the transnational impulses and implications of Futurism and the avant-garde, see Perloff: *The Futurist Moment*.

⁹ Goldberg: *Performance Art*, p. 7. For a thorough history of avant-garde performance, see Berghaus: *Theatre, Performance, and the Historical Avant-Garde*.

¹⁰ See Berghaus: *The Genesis of Futurism: Marinetti's Early Career and Writings, 1899-1909*, pp. 36-38; Berghaus: *Italian Futurist Theatre*, p. 31.

new ways to use voice and gesture to bring the printed word to life.¹¹ Clearly, the avant-garde did not invent poetry declamation, a practice that extends back at least as far as Ancient Greece; indeed, it was only with the ascent of Romantic literary theory and practice that the lyric ceased to be a genre intended primarily for each reader to perform and became firmly attached to an individual subject.¹² The Modernist return to the spoken word was a reaction against this Romantic notion of the lyric as the utterance of a unique consciousness and the monologic mode of poetry declamation to which it gave rise. Modernist poets and performers rebelled against the elitist modes of poetry declamation in bourgeois salons by performing poetry in public venues and to large audiences. More fundamentally, bringing poetry's metaphoric voice back into contact with physically sounding speech, they sought to untether poetry from a singular, authoritative source and return to an earlier, iterative mode of poetic practice and performance.

This essay elaborates this claim and its consequences by examining the early work of the 'yellow-and-black-striped' Futurist poet, Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893-1930). As I shall briefly describe in its first part, the question of how to democratize poetry was a particularly urgent one in early twentieth-century Russia. The period following the 1905-7 revolution and leading up to that of 1917 was one during which writers not only sought for alternative ways of addressing their increasingly diverse urban audiences but also, and more importantly, to give these audiences the authority and a voice with which to speak.¹³ The second part of the essay argues that Mayakovsky's engagement with this issue is most apparent in the axes of address that structure his poetry of this period. Mayakovsky has often been treated in terms of the relationship between, and apparent intertwinement of, biographical and textual elements in his work and myth.¹⁴ As I shall show, this neo-Romantic emphasis on poetic personality masks his intense concern with the new relationships between poet, text and audience, which performance suggested and made possible.¹⁵ Returning to the conventional structures of poetry and repurposing them, Mayakovsky harnesses the traditional authority of the Russian poet to model a new mode of speech for a society in turmoil.

Public speech and the poet's voice

Public lectures and literary readings were a staple of Russia's pre-revolutionary cultural milieu, so ubiquitous in the first decade of the century as to move the Symbolist poet Alexander Blok to complain of Saint Petersburg's "raging literary-musical-vocal epidemic."¹⁶ These evenings resurrected a trend that had flourished briefly during the era of the Great Reforms before tsarist authorities deemed such events too subversive.¹⁷ A number of factors contributed to the early twentieth-century resurgence of this phenomenon. These include the emergence of new arenas for political speech in the wake of the 1905-7

¹¹ The Modernist turn to Free Verse was also in part a revolt against the 'metronome' imposed by nineteenth-century declamation practices. See Steele: *Missing Measures*, pp. 59-62.

¹² For fuller accounts of this history, see Huot: *From Song to Book*; McCarthy: "First-Person Poetry"; Wesling: *The Chances of Rhyme*; Zumthor: *Oral Poetry*. A useful overview is provided in Culler: *Theory of the Lyric*, pp. 49-55.

¹³ I build here on Sharp: "Moscow 1913". Joan Neuberger is also attentive to the importance of performativity in "Culture Besieged".

¹⁴ See, for example, Boym: *Death in Quotation Marks*.

¹⁵ Paul Schmidt comments on this shift in passing in "Some Notes on Futurist Performance", p. 495.

¹⁶ Blok: "Evenings of 'The Arts'". Lotman discusses the culture of large-scale poetry readings during this period in "Blok i narodnaia kul'tura", pp. 659-661.

¹⁷ Public lectures were prohibited in 1862. See Ely: *Underground Petersburg*, pp. 45-47.

revolution, efforts to institutionalize the Russian academy, the commercialization of the entertainment industry and the growing popularity of new technologies such as the cinema and the gramophone.¹⁸ Whatever their specific cause, these public cultural events brought audiences into public spaces, supplying speakers with visible and responsive listeners and placing the question of the relationship between the production of speech and its reception at centre stage. It was no longer the tsarist authorities alone that attempted to control public speech; a variety of figures and institutions now struggled for authority over culture and its consumption.¹⁹

The Futurists threw themselves into this scene with gusto. Four main categories of performance characterized the early years of Russian Futurism, roughly 1910-1914: spontaneous (or purportedly so) street happenings; advertised lectures and debates in university and museum lecture halls; advertised and impromptu performances in cabarets, restaurants and other middle- and upper-class venues; and, finally, more formal performances in traditional theatre settings, such as the 1913 performance of Mayakovsky's *Vladimir Maiakovskii: Tragediia* (Vladimir Mayakovsky: A Tragedy, 1914) and Aleksei Kruchenykh's *Pobeda nad solntsem* (Victory Over the Sun) in Saint Petersburg's Luna Park.²⁰ These categories attest to the varied nature of the Futurists' target audience and to the wide net these renegade artists knew they had to cast were they to succeed commercially despite their position on the fringes of the main art market.²¹ Unable to print their writing in large runs due to limited financial means, they undertook instead to appear in public as often as possible (almost every day during the period 1913-15, according to Kruchenykh's account), and even to tour the country in person – a sort of living radio *avant la machine*, designed to broadcast their artistic programme to as wide an audience as possible.²²

Yet performance was not merely a means for the Futurists to attract publicity. Emerging at a historical moment marked by intense fluidity, when large sections of the public – many newcomers to the city and still experiencing the aftershocks of the 1905 unrest – struggled “for a sense of identity and [...] their own destiny,”²³ the Futurists were acutely aware of their performances' function in an age of democratic awakening. Despite their iconoclastic and deliberately shocking methods, the Futurists felt that literature had an important social responsibility. This apparent contradiction will become clearer if when analysing one of their performances in more detail.

¹⁸ See Bulgakova: *Golos kak kul'turnyi fenomen*, pp. 156-164; Byford: *Literary Scholarship in Late Imperial Russia*; McReynolds: *Russia at Play*. Innovations in the theatre also played a part. See Frame: *School for Citizens*, esp. Ch. 7, “Theatrical Revolutions”.

¹⁹ See Neuberger: “Culture Besieged” and Sharp: “Moscow: 1913”.

²⁰ Dadswell: “The Spectacle of Russian Futurism”, p. 19. A detailed account of the Futurist's theatrical performances can be found in Kruchenykh: “Pervye v mire spektakli futuristov”. See also Bartlett and Dadswell: *Victory Over the Sun*.

²¹ The oft-cited fact of the provincial and low-class backgrounds of many of the avant-garde's foremost figures is relevant here; lacking social standing as well as funds, the artists were conscious of the insecurity of their patronage (which came, typically, from newly rich Moscow merchants) and became astute self-promoters. See Dadswell: “The Spectacle of Russian Futurism”.

²² The Futurists' tour ran from December 1913 to March 1914. It comprised a total of seventeen stops, from provincial Russian cities such as Vologda to the far-flung Tbilisi (then Tiflis) and even Baku. The most detailed account of the Futurists' tour of Russia can be found in Khardzhiev: “Turne kubo-furistov 1913-1914 gg.”. Lev Shilov notes the Futurists' plan (never realized) to release a group ‘phonobook’ of poetry. *Golosa, zazvuchashchie vnov'*, p. 93.

²³ Dadswell: “The Spectacle of Russian Futurism”, p. 28.

The event I shall describe here took place in the Khar'kov (Ukrainian: Kharkiv) public library on 14 December 1914, is one of the few Futurist performances for which a relatively neutral and complete description exists (to be found in the local newspaper, *Utro*).²⁴ Being the first leg of the poets' tour, it offers a clear idea of the methods and aims employed during this period. Broadly speaking, the evening followed a pattern already well established during the poets' early period of activity in the capitals. The Futurists (on this occasion, Mayakovsky, David Burliuk, Vasily Kamensky, Vladimir Burliuk, and an unnamed fourth) appeared on stage in garish outfits, "with faces covered with drawing [and] strange long flowers in their lapels" and proceeded to give a series of speeches, followed by a poetry recital.²⁵ In addition to their shocking costumes, each reciter goaded the audience by insulting establishment critics ("anchors, chains, brakes, and ropes" on innovation and progress in art)²⁶ and respected poets such as the Symbolists Konstantin Balmont and Valery Bryusov in colourful language. The evening ended with the poets reciting from their own work and that of absent fellow-Futurists.²⁷

The antics during this event were designed to shock and entertain in equal measure, prompting boos, whistles, shouts and applause from the audience. But there were also more complex ways in which the poets sought to educate their audience and to provoke engagement, evident in the evening's insistent contradictions. The most striking is the contrast between the evening's high-spirited frame and the serious, even scholarly discourses it entailed. Kamensky may have insulted critics, but he also provided a detailed exposition of Futurist aesthetics. David Burliuk, meanwhile, presented "a treatise on the history of art, accompanied by projections of the best examples of art from Raphael to the Futurists",²⁸ and Mayakovsky, for his part, spoke at considerable length about intricate questions of metrics.²⁹ Lecturing with expertise on aesthetic matters while dressed in ridiculous outfits, attacking traditional art even as they sought to assert their own work's continuity with it³⁰ and seeming to be at variance even with one another, the Futurists refused their audience any stable platform from which to judge the works presented. Rather, they challenged their audience's notions of cultural authority and invited this audience to insert itself into the vacated position. The Futurists sought to educate their audience as well as to enrage them, and they viewed that education as a matter of form as well as content.

And indeed, the evening in Khar'kov produced, as *Utro* reports, a lively response: "The public, their interest piqued, caught the speakers after the lecture in the vestibule and had a

²⁴ Descriptions of these events are somewhat difficult to piece together, given the partial and often-contradictory nature of eyewitness accounts, newspaper reports and the Futurists' own memoirs. Joan Neuberger in "Culture Besieged: Hooliganism and Futurism" cautions further that accounts of Futurist activities are often coloured by the intense cultural anxiety that marks public discourse in Russian society of this period. I supplement the account of the evening in Kharkov published in *Utro* (16 December 1913; see Appendix I) with Khardzhiev's commentary in "Veselyi god", pp. 108-111.

²⁵ The Futurists' exact outfits varied from performance to performance, although there were some elements (Mayakovsky's yellow shirt) that remained constant. In Baku, the "modern barbarians", as one newspaper dubbed the poets, each hung a bundle of radishes from their coat buttons. See *Kaspîi* (Baku), 1 April 1915, cited in Khardzhiev: "Turne kubo-futuristov 1913-1914 gg.", p. 426.

²⁶ *Utro* (Khar'kov), 16 December 1913, cited in Khardzhiev: "Veselyi god", p. 109.

²⁷ *Utro* (Khar'kov), 16 December 1913, cited in Khardzhiev: "Veselyi god", p. 111.

²⁸ *Utro* (Khar'kov), 16 December 1913, cited in Khardzhiev: "Veselyi god", p. 109.

²⁹ *Utro* (Khar'kov), 16 December 1913, cited in Khardzhiev: "Veselyi god", p. 110. The fullest description of this speech, repeated at an evening in Nikolaev, can be found in the local *Trudovaia gazeta* of 26 January 1914, cited in Katanian: *Literaturnaia khronika*, p. 56.

³⁰ Mayakovsky even read Futurist poetry aloud, pausing to point out the elements it shared with nineteenth-century poetry. See Khardzhiev: "Veselyi god", p. 110.

long and lively debate with them.”³¹ The Futurists were not received with quite such interest in every city (the auditorium in Kerch’ was reportedly half-empty);³² nor did they refrain from deliberately inciting the audience, throwing insults and tea at them in equal measure. Yet while the audience often booed, whistled and shouted at the Futurists, the evenings never devolved into the all-out brawls so frequent at the Italian *serate*; indeed, the fiercest scuffles at these events were between warring factions of Futurists.³³ The Futurists were out to offend, but they were also interested in engaging the audience in serious debates about poetry and its function in society. They transformed the lecture hall into an interactive forum in which audiences were invited to experiment with new modes of communication designed to serve as models for politically and socially engaged speech.³⁴ The many positive responses to these performances suggest their success in doing so.³⁵ Most significant, however, as the rest of this essay will describe, are the consequences of these performances for the more durable models of speech and address provided by Futurist poetry and that of Mayakovsky in particular.

Mayakovsky's ‘performance poems’

Information as to precisely which poems Mayakovsky recited at poetry evenings and during the Futurists’ tour of the provinces is scarce, although his slim *œuvre* in these early years limits the pool of possibilities.³⁶ Newspaper reports occasionally quote some lines of verse, but rarely mention poems by name, presumably because reporters were hearing these poems for the first time. Accounts in Futurist memoirs suggest that there were around ten poems which Mayakovsky recited on a regular basis.³⁷ From now on I shall refer to these poems as ‘performance poems’, in part to differentiate them from earlier lyrics published in such collections as *Poshchekhina obshchestvennomu vkusu* (A Slap in the Face of Public Taste, December 1912) and in volume two of *Sadok sudei* (A Trap for Judges, February 1913), but also because I want to emphasize the centrality of the performance dynamic to their genesis and intent. I focus on just a few of these performance poems, namely, *Eshche ia* (Me Again, 1914), *Poslushaite!* (Listen! 1914, and *A vy mogli by?* (But Could You?, 1913). These I have selected as representative of some of the concrete ways in which poetry recitations seems to have shaped Mayakovsky’s understanding of poetry’s communicative possibilities during his

³¹ *Utro* (Khar’kov), 16 December 1913, cited in Khardzhiev: “Veselyi god”, p. 112.

³² *Iuzhnaia pochta* (Kerch’), 15 January 1915, cited in Khardzhiev: “Turne”, p. 410.

³³ Indeed, audiences were reported to be disappointed that performances were not more scandalous:

“Mayakovsky’s appearance disappointed [...] many people. They expected from him as a ‘Futurist’ some kind of wild outburst” [*dikaia vykhodka*]. Cited Katanian: *Literaturnaia khronika*, p. 74.

³⁴ Sharp: “Moscow, 1913”. I do not assess the success of these efforts, as they are difficult to quantify.

³⁵ Mayakovsky’s voice was frequently singled out for praise by newspaper reports, which repeatedly remarked upon his “great oratorical mastery”, “clear and informative” speech (*Saratovskii vestnik* [Saratov], 21 March 1914, cited in Katanian: *Literaturnaia khronika*, p. 61), his “very convincing and sensible” explanations of Futurist aesthetics and his success in “winning over” the audience with his “passionate call to action” (*Priazovskii krai* [Rostov-na-Donu], 19 March 1914, cited in Katanian: *Literaturnaia khronika*, p. 60). Grigory Vinokur, a member of Jakobson’s literary theoretical group, the Moscow Linguistic Circle, argued in a 1923 essay “Futurists: Builders of Language” that these poets absorbed and transformed the “spoken language of the masses” to create a new “language of the street”. *Filologicheskie issledovaniia*, p. 16.

³⁶ The philological apparatus accompanying Mayakovsky’s early work is correspondingly slim, attesting to the ephemeral, largely oral basis of his poetic practice during these years.

³⁷ Exemplary accounts include: Kamensky: “Iunost’ Maiakovskogo”; Livshits: “Maiakovskii v 1913 godu”; Katanian: *Maiakovskii: Khronika*.

early period of his public appearances, which I treat here as beginning in March 1913 and ending in the mid-1910s.³⁸

The shift in emphasis caused by the practice of performance is illustrated most clearly by the titles of Mayakovsky's poems. Where earlier poems are titled with nouns, often featuring the urban landscape, those composed during the period of intense public appearances bear titles that have a more explicit confrontational nature and address a (listening) audience ("Take That!" and "Listen!") or refer to a distinct lyric subject; that is, they focus squarely on a situation of utterance and define either the speaker himself or the space between him and his audience. This is also confirmed by the poem's content, marked by a strong lyrical "I" who demarcates himself clearly from those to whom he speaks. The polarizing tone is clearly designed to provoke a bourgeois public. Luxuriating in the "velvet of [his] own voice" even as he uses this voice to describe lurid and grotesque scenes, this larger-than-life speaker seeks deliberately to shock his listeners and to goad them into response, mingling brazen statements with mocking exposure of the audience's ultimate inability to resist this boor's charms: "Ladies love my meat", as the speaker of *Kofta Fata* (A Fop's Blouse, 1914) has it. Arrogant and ostentatiously lacking concern for the limits of good taste, the speaker of these poems epitomizes avant-garde *épatisme*.

Typically, the aim of avant-garde aesthetics – the manner in which it seeks to 'work' on its audience – has been understood as primarily to shock or to offend: art is constructed as a communicative event, but one designed precisely in such a manner that it occasions a moment of *non-communication*, in which each party, rejecting the other, acquires the freedom of self-affirmation.³⁹ This is an argument supported by a superficial reading of Mayakovsky's performance poems. Yet if avant-garde poetry seeks to orchestrate a communicative event in which the participants fail to communicate and yet nonetheless emerge from the exchange somehow the wiser than before, what are the mechanisms of this paradoxical moment of (non-)communication, and what precise rôle does shock – that liberally applied but vague emotive – play in the exchange? A more nuanced picture of the avant-garde dynamic is to be found in the way in which shocking content interacts with medium and form to make readers think about their own position in the communicative exchange. This effect emerges from the avant-garde practice of performance, which shifts the emphasis from *what* a poem says and even *how* it says it to the question, central to pragmatics, of how the act of utterance *works* (including in the sense, "how powerfully?").⁴⁰ The importance of this dynamic for Mayakovsky's avant-garde poetics is one indication of the importance attached to voice and "the conditions of rhetorical and representational empowerment" by artists working in late Imperial Russia.⁴¹

³⁸ The "First Public Debate about the New Russian Literature" took place in the Troitskii Theatre in Saint Petersburg on 24 March 1913. However, Mayakovsky's first public appearance was in fact on 24 February 1912 at the second of three "disputes" about modern art organized by the Bubnovyi valet [Jack of Diamonds] group at the Polytechnical Museum in Moscow in February 1912. (Though Mayakovsky's name does not appear on the poster for this event, reproduced in Dadswell (fig. 48), newspaper accounts of the evening confirm his participation. See e.g. "An Evening with 'The Jacks' (Second Dispute)", *Moskovskaia gazeta* (Moscow), No. 239, 1913.) Given the long gap between this appearance and the poet's second, I have decided not to take this date into account.

³⁹ See Shapir: "Chto takoe avangard?"

⁴⁰ For a discussion of the centrality of pragmatics to the avant-garde project and aesthetic, see e.g. Shapir: "Chto takoe avangard?", pp. 3-9.

⁴¹ Sharp: "Moscow, 1913", p. 94. Mayakovsky's continued return to such questions throughout the 1920s attests to the importance they continued to hold for his poetics. See, for example, Mayakovsky's 1926 essay-cum-ars-poetica, "How to Make Verse?", in which – in the context of remarks about the revolution's dramatic effects on everyday language ("[it] threw the coarse speech of the millions onto the street, the slang of the

“Me Again”, “Listen!” and “But Could You?”: Poetic communication as dynamic exchange

I begin with *Eshche ia* (Me Again) as it appeared in *Futuristy: Pervyi zhurnal russkikh futuristov* (Futurists: The First Journal of the Russian Futurists):

Ещё я

Улица проваливалась как нос сифилитика
 Река сладострастие растёкшееся в слюни
 Отбросив белье до последнего листика
 Сады похабно развалились в июне.
 Я вышел на площадь выжженный квартал
 Одев на голову как рыжий парик
 А людям страшно что у меня изо рта
 шевелит ногами непрожеванный крик
 Как трактир мне страшен ваш страшный суд
 Ведь меня одного сквозь горящие здания
 проститутки как святыню на руках понесут
 и покажут богу в свое оправдание
 И бог заплачет над моею книжкой
 Не слова а судороги смешивая комом
 и побежит по небу с моими стихами под мышкой
 и будет задыхаясь читать их своим знакомым.⁴²

Me Again

The street caved in like the nose of a syphilitic
 The river lust oozing outward into strings of spit
 Bed sheets stripped off down to the last leaf
 Gardens lasciviously collapsed in June.
 I came out into the square the scorched block
 Placed on my head like a red wig
 And people are frightened that out of my mouth
 with swarming feet a half-chewed shout
 Your last judgment is as frightening to me as a tavern
 After all, I am the only one who through burning buildings
 prostitutes will bear in their arms like a saint
 and show to God in their defence
 And God will burst into tears over my book
 Not words a sticky lump of clotted spasms
 And run across the sky with my poems under his arm
 and read them breathlessly to his acquaintances.

Several preliminary remarks can be made regarding the layout of the poem itself, which, printed without stanza breaks or punctuation, displays a certain carelessness towards potential readers; it is as though the author, the sound of his performances still ringing in his ears, does not deem it necessary to provide ‘instructions’ as to intonation or pace. This is a poem that remains attached to the physical voice of its author-performer, with the paradoxical result that its graphic form possesses only a weak link to the poem as voiced event. It is a poem still at an intermediary stage between poetry-as-performed and poetry-as-read. This interpretation is reinforced by the title: “Me Again”, it declares, unabashedly self-centred in a manner that Mayakovsky established as a pattern in his May 1913 cycle *Ia* (Me), and given tragic proportions in *Vladimir Mayakovsky: A Tragedy*, which premiered at the Luna Park in Saint Petersburg on 2 December 1913. The poet is capitalizing on his notoriety as public persona, appearing here again as the impudent Futurist hooligan who shouts frightening and incomprehensible words at the gathered crowd: that same Mayakovsky whom the public so much enjoyed abusing, in the press and on the stage.

Existing readings of Mayakovsky’s self-promotional titling tendencies pitch the repeated use of his own name and personal pronouns as evidence of “a kind of fear that there might be an ‘I’ which is not ‘myself’, an ‘I’ which has become pure poetic convention.”⁴³ This may be so. What, though, if the obsessive return to the first-person were read from the other direction: as a reflection of the relationship not of “I” with “myself” but of “I” with “you” or “them”? I mean this not in terms of the poet’s tortured relationship with an unsympathetic audience, a matter that has, in any case, already been the object of many a critic’s concern.

outskirts flooded the central prospects”) – he asks, “how can conversational language be introduced into poetry and how can poetry be extracted from these conversations?” *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 12, p. 84.

⁴² *Futuristy: Pervyi zhurnal russkikh futuristov* 1-2 (1914), p. 67.

⁴³ Boym: *Death in Quotation Marks*, p. 126.

Rather, I am getting at the issue of communication, and the question of how the “I” of a poem speaks to a “you” (singular or plural), and how that “you” is called upon to respond to this address. Mayakovsky’s egocentric performance poetry paradoxically reactivates the essential *availability* of the pronominal shifters so central to every poem’s communicative act.

The project of *épatisme* might seem to dictate that the avant-gardist adopts a stance diametrically opposed to his audience, a position seemingly exemplified in “Me Again”. Closer examination, however, reveals the encounter between speaker and addressee here to be quite complex. The oozingly repulsive landscape of the first stanza, for example, is clearly calculated to provoke the reader’s disgust; precisely for this reason, however, it also forces this reader to examine his or her own aesthetic tastes and value judgments. The reader who is outraged by the inclusion of such distasteful material in art moves to blame the speaker, yet is stopped short by the speaker’s own clear revulsion before the landscape he describes and the diseased society it implies. Do readers condemn the speaker or the society he himself condemns – are they to trust their aesthetic instincts, or their moral ones?

This ambiguity is heightened in the fifth line as the speaker acquires body and strides out into this horrifying landscape, not least given the thin line this figure walks between arrogant joker and tragic cannibal.⁴⁴ Again, the reader’s emotional and aesthetic responses flounder as she attempts to identify her position in relation to the scene: is she one of the insensitive crowd, an extension of the repulsive street, or one of the few who understand the unintelligible mouthings of this prophet?⁴⁵ Does she side with the cliquish literary culture of the Symbolists, evoked here via the poet Konstantin Bal’mont’s collection *Goriashchie zdaniia* (Burning Buildings, 1900), or this loutish poet’s retinue of down-and-outs? And if the reader is to understand the poem as an essentially sincere call for sympathy and understanding, what is she or he to make of the comical depiction of God with which the poem ends? For even as the speaker declares the affective power of his own poetry – it touches even God – he undermines its value by parodying in this portrait its claim to divinity.

Clearly, this particular avant-garde speech act cannot be said to have straightforwardly negative effect on its audience, but functions as perlocutionary gesture through the very incongruity of the conflicting emotions it evokes. In other words, the poem prompts readers into an active analysis of their attitude, aesthetic and social, but also, and more importantly, that, undermining the notion of fixed (opposed) positions, it models a particular kind of ‘flexible’ communicative event (not “shackled” but “in essence dynamic”, as Mayakovsky has it in one 1913 article⁴⁶) and, in this sense, brings art into active relation with life.

⁴⁴ The square-as-wig is a reference to the Russian carnival tradition, the Lenten folk holiday that involves street festivities and costumes. For discussion of Futurism’s relationship with the carnival tradition, see Neuberger: “Culture Besieged”.

⁴⁵ Pushkin’s “Prophet” is the best-known instantiation of the topos of poet-as-prophet in the Russian tradition. The poet-prophet’s tongue is ripped out and a burning hot coal placed in his chest. The “half-chewed shout” may also be a reference *zaum’*.

⁴⁶ “The art of the actor, in essence dynamic, is shackled by the dead backdrop of the set”. Vladimir Mayakovsky. “Teatr, kino, futurizm” [Theatre, Cinema, Futurism] in *Kine-zhurnal*, 27 July 1913. In the same article, Mayakovsky describes a “premonition of a special art of the actor, where the intonation even of words that don’t have a definite meaning and invented, but rhythmically free movements of the human body express the most intense inner feelings.” Marjorie Perloff in *The Futurist Moment*, p. 155, views this as a reference to *zaum’*; given Mayakovsky’s avoidance of *zaum’* in his own work and his emphasis on the dynamic nature of communication, “words that don’t have definite meaning” may equally refer to the different meanings words may have in different contexts. Mayakovsky writes: “I am just describing the process of creation and exploring the reasons for the writer’s influence on life. This influence, in contrast to the influence of sociologists or politicians, is explained not by the presentation of prepared complexes of

Two years after the publication of *First Journal of Russian Futurists*, the poem was republished in Mayakovsky's *Prostoe kak mychanie* (Simple as Mooing, 1916). In this printing, the poem is fully punctuated, divided into quatrains and gains a stanza, the third of the new version:

Но меня не осудят, но меня не облают,
как пророку, цветами устелят мне след.
Все эти, провалившиеся носами, знают:
я – ваш поэт.⁴⁷

But I will not be judged, I will not be howled down
as for a prophet, they'll line my path with flowers
All these, caved-in-nosed ones, know:
I – am your poet.

The truncated line with which the stanza ends sounds a commanding and suddenly serious, even lyrical note – an abrupt change of tone that is simultaneously the poem's first real moment of direct address. The moment might be regarded as an intensification of the self-fictionalization already noted as a feature of the earlier version of the poem, a moment of self-aggrandizement that bestows upon the poet an extra authority loaned from the centuries-long tradition that positions him, maligned though he may be, as divine emissary of the mob. Viewed from another angle, however, this simplest of lines represents the climax of the perspectival confusion which I identified as one of the poem's central effects in its earlier incarnation. Quite apart from the question of who constitutes the "you" here (presumably not the same group that, in the first line of the next stanza, cast final judgment on the speaker, although the proximity of these two instances of "your" – the only two in the poem – seems intended to prompt precisely this confusion), the sudden switch in perspective, from "they know" to "I – am your poet", imbues the statement with a mobility that belies the static positions it marks out. The crowd is addressed via a statement that simultaneously implies the crowd's own power of speech. "I" and "you" exist only in relation to one another, as the line's striking dash makes graphically clear.

The disorienting series of shifts I have just described and the stratification of emotional response they induce call upon the reader to constantly assess his or her own position in relation to what is being said, as well as to the figure saying them: the poem and its imagery are designed to shock and anger, yes, but its main intent lies less in its content than in the act of provocation it performs to a reaction that need not be so conscious as self-analysis but may be identified simply as a kind of self-awareness.⁴⁸ This self-awareness emerges from the fluidity of the communicative situation, in which the position of both speaker and listener constantly shift in relation to one another and to a series of other existing or projected aesthetic and moral values. This provides one key to understanding the new title under which the second redaction appears, *A vse-taki* (But Still). Suggesting a discourse hovering somewhere between connective and contrastive conjunction, this title points toward the poem's underlying concern with the interstices between utterance, speaker and hearer. It models the constant modifications of response that the poem demands and implicitly identifies as central to any communicative exchange.

Importantly, too, the vagueness of this new title's relation to the poem's content means that it could as easily be the imagined response of the reader as the speaker's own words. And

ideas, but the weaving of verbal baskets, in which you can, at will, convey any idea to another person." Maiakovskii: "Dva Chekhova" [The Two Chekhovs], *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 1, p. 297.

⁴⁷ Maiakovskii: *Prostoe kak mychanie*, p. 20.

⁴⁸ See Sharp's comment: "Larionov's projects did not simply reflect the politics of culture in Russian daily life, nor did they advance a specific political agenda. Instead, the debates and exhibitions he organized made questions of self-representation sensible and necessary to his public." Sharp: "Moscow, 1913", p. 105.

indeed, despite the bewilderment or dismissal that the poem's content might prompt, its sonic texture redeems it. The reader (or listener) is shocked by the poem's content, but still... there is something about the poem that appeals, a somatic pleasure of the sort that the poem's first stanza seems to condemn but that ultimately seduces its readers into indulging. I would locate this pleasure in the perlocutary act. The bristling texture of the poem's words, combined with its strong four-stress accentual meter, encourages an oral enactment that can be the source of the other, more basic, kind of self-awareness, which it might be said to awaken. This shifts the emphasis away from the presence of the poet ("me again") toward the presence of the poem itself. It is not, therefore, that the poet is modelling himself upon such nineteenth-century poet-guardians of the downtrodden as the nineteenth-century civic poet Nikolai Nekrasov, nor that he is straightforwardly mocking this tradition; rather, this penultimate stanza is a reminder that we are not so distant from the prostitutes we (affect to) pity or despise: we read poetry and enjoy the pleasures of the flesh it provides. With this in mind, the final stanza is not simply parodic in intent. Rather, the image of God breathlessly reading Mayakovsky's poem to his acquaintances serves as a model for the audience's response. The physicality of poetry itself ("not words – a sticky lump of clotted spasms"), as well as of God's reaction to it speaks of the bodily fulcra so central to poetic communication.⁴⁹

Challenging audiences to examine their own aesthetic and moral values, "Me Again" exploits the potential ambiguity of the personal pronoun to encourage an awareness of and flexibility with regard to the individual speaker's position in relation to the text. One important result of this is to make the poem's "I" available to all readers. If my conjecture regarding the earlier version's lack of graphically-inscribed intonation and its proximity to performance is plausible, moreover, the addition of stanza breaks and punctuation in the poem's later redaction emerges as a means by which to facilitate this kind of readerly reproduction – a further encouragement to poetic voicing that bears the trace of the poem as performed event while at the same time making it available for re-performance, thus embodying the communicative principles I have argued it lays out.⁵⁰

A similar set of effects can be seen in the poem "Listen!", another of those to appear in *The First Journal of the Russian Futurists*:

Послушайте!

Ведь если звезды зажигают
Значит это комунибудь нужно?
Значит кто то хочет чтобы они были?
Значит кто то называет эти плевочки
жемчужиной
И надрываясь в мятелях полуденной пыли
Торопится на небо боится что опоздал
Плачет и целует жилистую руку
И просит чтоб обязательно была звезда
Клянется что не перенесет эту беззвездную
муку
А после ходит тревожный и
Спокойный наружно
И говорит кому то ведь теперь тебе ничего не
страшно

Listen!

I mean if stars are lit
does that mean somebody needs it to be that way?
Does that mean someone wants them there?
Does that mean someone calls those spitballs
pearls
And sobbing in storms of midday dust
Rushes to the sky fears he's late
Cries and kisses the veiny hand
And asks that there definitely be a star
Swears that he won't survive this starless torture
And afterwards goes agitated and
Superficially calm
And says to someone I mean you're ok now not
afraid

⁴⁹ In this sense, the stanza's humorous aspect is important: laughter is primarily a somatic reflex.

⁵⁰ Note also the more exaggerated emotional emphases put in place by punctuation in later editions; conjunctions are replaced by dashes, simultaneously preserving the gestural aspect of performance.

Да?
Послушайте?!

Ведь если звезды зажигают
Значит это кому нибудь нужно
Значит это необходимо чтобы каждый вечер
над крышами
загоралась хоть одна звезда!⁵¹

Yes?
Listen?!

I mean if stars are lit
that means somebody needs it to be that way
That means it's absolutely necessary that every
evening over the rooftops
at least one star lights up!

The poem's imperative title is followed by a series of rhetorical questions, which in critical accounts are often taken at face value, both thematically (it is a reflection on "[the poet's] experience with the thought of a starless night" that expresses his "sense of worried wonder about the origin of the world") and tonally (with reference to its fabric of "alarmed questions and agitated, half-spoken thoughts").⁵² Alerted by the phatic orientation of the poem's title as well as the avant-garde aesthetic from which it emerged,⁵³ this reader, however, sees here questions that echo those posed by "Me Again": an inquiry into the nature of the night sky, but also of poetic communication itself.

Like "Me Again", "Listen!" seems superficially to be a straightforward attack on worn-out cultural models (the ubiquitous starry night sky of poetry past) and readers' attachment to them (the main body of the poem imagines a weeping man rushing to beg God to deliver him from the "starless torture" of a world, or a poem, from which they are absent).⁵⁴ More subtly, the poem and its preoccupation with (f)utility criticizes the ineffectiveness of old poetry and its ability to communicate effectively. If the poem's emphasis on necessity, logic and utility appears absurd, given the stars with which it is concerned, there is a more serious motivation for the juxtaposition. After all, if the starry sky, that most useless – poetic, aesthetic – of backdrops, is not necessary, then poetry is not necessary either. This begs the question: how can poetry be written that is useful but does not have to reject stars and to eschew the aesthetic element that gives it 'poetic' quality? Mayakovsky's poem is making a case for poetry's usefulness and for the kind of communication it ought to constitute.

This concern with poetic communication is illustrated, firstly, by the circular structure of the poem. The opening questions of the poem return at its close, with slight variation, and this time posed as statements ("If stars are lit / that means somebody needs it to be that way / That means it's absolutely necessary that every evening over the rooftops / at least one star lights up!"). Little substantial, though, has happened between these two moments to assuage the 'agitation' of the initial questions; indeed, the repetition of the poem's title, this time with more emphatic punctuation ("listen?!"), suggests that the man's anxiety has been only heightened by the protagonist's visit to God ("I mean you're ok now not afraid / Yes?"). Unconcerned with its perlocutionary weight, the star-filled poetry of the past assumes that the fact of poetic utterance is sufficient in and of itself.

⁵¹ *Futurist: Pervyi zhurnal russkikh futuristov*, No 1-2 (1914), p. 4.

⁵² Brown: *Mayakovsky*, pp. 94-6.

⁵³ The poem was one of those recited by Mayakovsky during Futurist 'street happenings'. See Tolmachev: "Poslushaite!!!".

⁵⁴ The poem's exaggerated emphasis on finding the meaning behind stars and logically defending their existence reads also as a parody of the "common sense" that Mayakovsky identifies elsewhere as "every philistine's only weapon". Maiakovskii: "Otnoshenie segodniashnego teatra i kinematografa k iskusstvu" [Contemporary Theatre and Cinema and Their Relationship with Art], *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 1, p. 281.

The nature of this particular utterance draws further attention to the mechanisms of poetic communication. If all poetry is uttered with a listener in mind, this is excessively – obsessively – the case for “Listen!”: the speaker and the weeping figure he describes seek above all some kind of affirmative response; they are hyper-sensitive to the question of whether they are being heard. In this sense, the poem acts as a melodramatization of poetry’s typical axis of communication – from speaker to listener – and the priority it affords the lyric ‘I’. In this poem, by contrast, despite the emphasis being placed on speaking, it is actually hard to tell who is the source of the words at different points in the poem. Does the “listen!” of the title, for example, come from the same mouth as the “listen?!” repeated later in the text? The latter seems to belong to the desperate “someone” who returns from his visit to God, “agitated and / superficially calm”. This does not necessarily imply that the title is also this figure’s speech, but it alerts the reader to the title’s multiple layers; it acts as an exhortation to listen to the lyric utterance that will follow, but also, in retrospect, offers a mocking echo of the desperate appeal embedded in the text. What at first sight appears to be a direct entreaty, takes on extra layers in the ‘now’ of the lyric utterance and draws attention to the utterance as utterance – to the mechanisms of lyric voicing, and the artifice it always involves.

When “Listen!” was performed by Mayakovsky at ‘street happenings’, this effect was further emphasized:

When the “strange people” saw that people were listening to them, they became silent, apart from the tallest one, dressed in a yellow blouse. He stepped forward and in a sonorous baritone intoned: “Listen! If stars are lit does that mean – somebody needs it to be that way? Does that mean – someone wants them there?...” And again, deafening everything and everyone, the others set off chattering: “O den’ dzen’ children die... ubeshchur der bul [sic]... a pregnant man... euy, euy, euy...” And again passers-by pass by, and again ‘yellow-shirt’, when the hysterical cries of his comrades have grown quiet, intones in a sonorous baritone: “Listen! If stars are lit does that mean – somebody needs it to be that way? Does that mean – someone wants them there?...”⁵⁵

Here, “listen!” is an injunction to pay attention to the words and poems of the other speakers present, whose ‘simultaneous poem’ relies on the chaotic mingling of barely discernible words for its effect. That is, Mayakovsky’s poem calls the audience to listen to the production of voice, rather than coherent speech; it is in the act of speaking rather than the spoken word that meaning is found. If the Futurists “used public space in ways that precluded passive responses”, their poetry was no less oriented towards the active participation of an audience.⁵⁶ Paradoxically, Mayakovsky’s confrontational work sought to engage this audience as (inter)locutors, and to make them active participants in a form of poetry designed to foster an exchange.

I shall end this discussion with an interpretation of one of Mayakovsky’s best-known early poems, *A vy mogli by?* (But Could You?, 1913), which is usually seen as the apotheosis of the poet’s dismissive attitude towards his readers and as evidence of the poet’s painterly (Cubist) inclinations. The work will thus serve to summarize the arguments I have made so far regarding the importance of public performance for Mayakovsky:

А ВЫ МОГЛИ БЫ?

But Could You?

⁵⁵ Tolmachev: “Poslushajte!!!”, p. 259. The account misquotes several *beyonsense* poems: Khlebnikov’s *O den’ i dzen’ i din’!* (Sea Surf), and Kruchenykh’s *Dyr bul shchyl* and *Vysoty* (Heights). The “pregnant man” is by David Burliuk; the dying children are an image from Mayakovsky’s cycle, *Ia*.

⁵⁶ Neuberger: “Culture Besieged”, p. 201.

Я сразу смазал карту будня,
 плеснувши краску из стакана;
 я показал на блюде студня
 косые скулы океана.
 На чешуе жестяной рыбы
 прочёл я зовы новых губ.
 А вы
 ноктюрн сыграть
 могли бы
 на флейте водосточных труб?⁵⁷

I suddenly smeared the weekday map
 splashing paint from a glass;
 On a plate of aspic I pointed out
 the ocean's slanted cheeks.
 On the scales of a tin fish
 I read the summons of new lips.
 And you
 perform a nocturne
 could you
 on a drainpipe flute?

The poem is typically viewed as exemplary of Mayakovsky's Cubo-Futurist vision, offering a fragmentary depiction of traditional pictorial images in a cubist search for opened spatial form.⁵⁸ This is clearly an important part of the poem's intent. This focus on the pictorial has led to the neglect of the poem's equally striking and important engagement with the aural dimension. Indeed, the poem's central tension is precisely that between its visual and its auditory elements – a tension figured in the poem by the dramatic shift from its first half, more visually oriented, to its second, which, reiterating the outwardly turned question of the poem's title, turns explicitly to the production of sound and its connection with human actants. The poem is not simply a still life in verse; it is an exploration of the conventions of poetic speech. Its arrogant title seeks to establish a new relationship between speaker and audience by asking the latter not only to listen or to read, but to actively respond to the challenging work.

If the poem hinges upon the axis it sets up between the poetically creative 'I' and the implicitly useless 'you' challenged by its title, no indication is given as to who is 'speaking' in the poem, despite the swagger of its declarations – nor to whom. Faced with the ambiguity produced by the poem's constant switches of scale, perspective and position, we can at best identify the speaker as the generalized artist, someone able to transform the contours of everyday life. Even then, the speaker-artist not only repeatedly points away from himself at various objects in his vicinity, but is at pains also to emphasize his passive rôle with regard to his utterances, as verbs such as 'point' and 'read' suggest; 'smear' and 'splash', meanwhile, suggest actions that imply randomness and chaos. He is above all a conductor, as suggested by the poem's reference to music (the nocturne, the flute), the arm gesture implied by the verb 'point', as well as by Mayakovsky's references to it as "a lullaby [Fr.] by an orchestra of drainpipes".⁵⁹

This being the case, there is little sense in attributing lyric utterance to any particularized fictional speaker. This is a meditation on the act of lyric speech and the production of poetic sound, with the poetic voice emerging not from a human figure but from the text itself. As clusters of consonants (most notably, s, k, and, r) slide through the poem and rearrange themselves around repeated open 'a' and 'u' vowel sounds in a series of near anagrams, the poem's words gather a self-generating momentum. The potentially chaotic result of these cascading words – where shifting letters threaten to produce an effect as spattered as the paint that is spilled in the poem's first lines – is kept in check by the verse lines, the regularity of the poem's rhyming couplets fortified as these rhymes echo through other words in the lines

⁵⁷ Maiakovskii: *Prostoe kak mychanie*, p. 41.

⁵⁸ For a full discussion of the poem in these terms see Stapanian: *Mayakovsky's Cubo-Futurist Vision*, pp. 58-68. Less detailed are Lotman: *Analiz poeticheskogo teksta*, pp. 87-89; Khardzhiev and Trenin:

Poeticheskaiia kul'tura Maiakovskogo, pp. 195-197; and Brown: *Mayakovsky*, p. 22.

⁵⁹ Maiakovskii: "Perchatka" [The Gauntlet], *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 1, p. 366.

that follow (for example, the chain ‘budnia’ [l.1], ‘bliude’ [l.3] ‘skuly’ [l.4]). Opened spatial form is complemented by the poem’s lyric voice, in the sense suggested above: the voice becomes an attribute not of a particular speaker, but is suggested by the poem’s phonemes. However, there is also a more specific meaning, which I shall turn to now.

The clear break between the first and second half of the poem occurs on the level of sound patterning, too. This sonic turn is highlighted by the sudden appearance of foreign words: the most jarring is *noktiurn* (nocturne), but *fleita* (flute) also departs from vowel sounds native to Russian. More importantly, there is both a shift in content and mode: the first half’s passive verbs (revealing, showing, reading) are replaced by an active verb, ‘play’. When bearing this in mind, the apparently dismissive question with which the poem ends takes on an additional meaning: it is a gesture to the outside world, but also an invitation to enter the speaker’s world. Mayakovsky himself has not, after all, managed to play anything as delicate as a nocturne; he has crafted an instrument which he now offers to the audience for their production of sound. Even though their ability to perform this task remains under some doubt, it is still not completely pointless to encourage them to engage in this creative act.

The pivotal line for this move toward an opening-out or a ‘distribution’ of poetic voice is the sixth, in which the speaker “read[s] the calls of new lips”. The poem’s voice, which is emitted by multiple sources, at multiple volumes (if one compares the possible silence of reading and the ‘cries’ of the ‘new lips’), and on multiple temporal planes (in the past [I read], the present of lyric utterance, and the future projected by “new”), becomes radically multiple.⁶⁰ The line points to the common goal of the poem’s two distinct parts: the first models poetic speech, in which regular rhymes and repeated sonic clusters create an easily-memorized sound fabric; the second, with its varied and foreign sounds turning toward the creation of new patterns, challenges the reader to partake in its genesis.

Conclusion

In my interpretation, the seemingly confrontational and polarized communicative situation set up in “But Could You?” turns out to be an invitation to an act of co-creation. The poem’s final question is left unanswered, an open space into which an audience can assert itself – either in insulted outrage, or responsively taking up the challenge it poses. In both instances, the poem is not complete without the audience’s participation. This dynamic is common to all of Mayakovsky’s performance poems, whose ultimate intent lies not so much in their outrageous content as in this revitalization of the traditional axes of poetic address and of poetry’s ability to provoke speech and to facilitate exchange.

“It is no coincidence that Mayakovsky’s ‘sounding word’ (*zvuchashchee slovo*) had the greatest social resonance during the tour”, Nikolai Khardzhiev comments at the end of his survey of this tour. “This is due not only to the poet’s great oratorical talent, but also to his ‘vocal’ [*golosovoi*] poetry’s orientation toward its public.”⁶¹ This essay has attempted to describe the mechanics of this publicly oriented poetry. Mayakovsky’s experiments with poetic voice are not as radical as those of his *zaumnik* contemporaries or their Western European counterparts, but his lyrics of this period are equally interested in finding the poetic means by which a new language, a new relation to things, and even a new world might not

⁶⁰ The original version makes this future orientation even more apparent, the adjective *veshchii* (prophetic) occupying the position later given to *novyi* (new).

⁶¹ Khardzhiev: “Turne kubo-futuristov”, p. 427.

only be discovered but also made available to the public at large. The resulting poetics encouraged audiences to consume poetry not so much for its content as for its ability to encourage speakers to take momentary ownership of it – to take its words into his or her mouth and to give voice to them.⁶²

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⁶² This becomes apparent in one telling misquotation of Akhmatova: "I have a certain smile / like this, a barely audible movement of the lips", against Akhmatova's original, "a barely visible movement". Brik: "Iz vospominanii", p. 143.

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