

## Vladimir Mayakovsky. “At the Top of My Voice”

*This mailing was very long. It considered a six-page poem and it includes the poem – twice. The poem, Vladimir Mayakovsky’s “At the Top of My Voice,” is exuberant, fun, and not (with one exception) very difficult. I hope you will embark on it with pleasure and without being dissuaded by its length.*

*As for the one difficulty: it has to do with Mayakovsky’s transgression of what we expect of a poet’s ‘voice.’ Before entering the poem let us consider how his use of radically different (and I think joyously exciting) multiple voices makes the poem extra-ordinary.*

*One of the central ‘fictions’ of the lyric poem is that it issues from a single voice. That is, to my mind, part of the lyric’s great power: The poet tells us, in direct or indirect ways, who she is, what concerns her, how she feels and experiences. We enter the private world of another human being, one different from ourselves. And, as I have written previously, that entrance can either ratify our own being (There is another like me in the world!) or take us out of our narrow and confined self (Look! This is the way others feel and experience!).*

*Robert Browning, the later nineteenth century British poet, moved the lyric in a somewhat different direction. His ‘dramatic lyrics’ did what lyric poems do, but in the voice of a person other than Browning. In his poems, often, the speaker does what Shakespeare’s Hamlet does in his famous soliloquy, “To be or not to be”: He reveals himself (a self that is not Browning’s own self, as Hamlet was not Shakespeare) to the reader, often with an added irony that the speaker does not realize that he is so thoroughly revealing himself. The speaker’s words present the attentive reader with someone the speaker had not intended to portray, the ‘real speaker’ as well as his careful (and contrived) self-presentation.*

*At the dawn of the twentieth century, the idea of a self’s unified voice began to unravel. For T.S. Eliot, who began with dramatic lyrics like Browning’s, it led to The Waste Land, a poem that was originally called “He Do the Police in Different Voices.” A seeming cacophony of voices – fragments from literary works, embedded dramatic lyrics, that residue of past experience we call memory, prophetic pronouncements – were laid side by side to indicate that civilization, and also the poet himself, were fragmented and not whole.*

*The great modern Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa asserted that the self was not ‘unitary’ by writing poems under a variety of what he called ‘heteronyms,’ each a character who represented some ‘self’ that was in the poet. To read Pessoa is to read poems by Alvaro da Campos, Ricardo Reis, Alberto Caeiro and a dozen others.*

*This brings us to Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893-1930), a Russian poet of surpassing greatness who wrote at the time of – just before, during, and for about a decade after – the Russian Revolution of 1917. Artistically, Mayakovsky was a Futurist: he embraced the city as the center of human life, he prized speed and change, he embraced new technologies. Politically, he was a revolutionary socialist and, significantly, a Bolshevik.*

*He had a dramatic life. In love for many years with a woman named Lili Brik, championed by her husband (and his good friend) Osip Brik, he ultimately committed suicide by shooting himself with a revolver. His suicide note contained these lines, addressed to the Brik:*

And, as they say, the incident is closed.  
Love's boat has smashed against the daily grind.  
Now you and I are quits. Why bother then  
To balance mutual sorrows, pains, and hurts.

*The lines come from a poem that Mayakovsky had recently composed. It is a marvelous lyric.*

Past one o'clock. You must have gone to bed.  
The Milky Way streams silver through the night.  
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.  
Now you and I are quits. Why bother then  
To balance mutual sorrows, pains, and hurts.  
Behold what quiet settles on the world.  
Night wraps the sky in tribute from the stars.  
In hours like these, one rises to address  
The ages, history, and all creation.

*This is not the poem I mean to discuss. I quote it entire for two reasons. One is that it is such a stunning short poem.*

*As the poem opens, it is deep into the night and a great multitude of stars are shining. At this late hour, surrounded by the Milky Way, the speaker is not harried by the concerns of daily life: "I'm in no hurry." Telegrams and storms, both momentary phenomena, are conflated into one memorable image of lightning flashes; both pale before the immensity of the universe: "with lightning telegrams I have no cause to wake or trouble you." Whatever has troubled him is over: "the incident is closed." He acknowledges the concerns of everyday life have wrecked him: "Love's boat has smashed against the daily grind." But now he's done, no longer trying to balance the ledger book which contains "the sorrows, pains, and hurts" that hover between the speaker and his listener. Now, now, there is nothing but the night and its glorious sky. "Night*



you,  
possibly,  
will inquire about me too.  
And, possibly, your scholars  
will declare,  
with their erudition overwhelming  
a swarm of problems;  
once there lived  
a certain champion of boiled water,  
and inveterate enemy of raw water.  
Professor,  
take off your bicycle glasses!  
I myself will expound  
those times  
and myself.  
I, a latrine cleaner  
and water carrier,  
by the revolution  
mobilized and drafted,  
went off to the front  
from the aristocratic gardens  
of poetry -  
the capricious wench.  
She planted a delicious garden,  
the daughter,  
cottage,  
pond  
and meadow.  
Myself a garden I did plant,  
myself with water sprinkled it.  
Some pour their verse from water cans;  
others spit water  
from their mouth –  
the curly Macks,  
the clever Jacks –  
but what the hell's it all about!  
There's no damming all this up -  
beneath the walls they mandoline:  
“Tara-tina, tara-tine,  
tw-a-n-g . . .”  
It's no great honor, then,

for my monuments  
to rise from such roses  
above the public squares,  
where consumption coughs,  
where whores, hooligans, and syphilis  
walk.

Agitprop  
sticks  
in my teeth too,  
and I'd rather  
compose  
romances for you –  
more profit in it  
and more charm.

But I  
subdued  
myself,  
setting my heel  
on the throat  
of my own song.

Listen,  
comrades of posterity,  
to the agitator  
the rabble-rouser.

Stifling  
the torrents of poetry,  
I'll skip  
the volumes of lyrics;  
as one alive,  
I'll address the living.

I'll join you  
in the far communist future,  
I who am  
no Esenin super-hero.

My verse will reach you  
across the peaks of ages,  
over the heads  
of governments and poets.

My verse  
will reach you  
not as an arrow

in a cupid-lyred chase,  
not as worn penny  
reaches a numismatist,  
not as the light of dead stars reaches you.  
My verse  
by labor  
will break the mountain chain of years,  
and will present itself  
ponderous,  
crude,  
tangible,  
as an aqueduct,  
by slaves of Rome  
constructed,  
enters into our days.  
When in mounds of books,  
where verse lies buried,  
you discover by chance the iron filings of lines,  
touch them  
with respect,  
as you would  
some antique  
yet awesome weapon.  
It's no habit of mine  
to caress  
the ear  
with words;  
a maiden's ear  
curly-ringed  
will not crimson  
when flicked by smut.  
In parade deploying  
the armies of my pages,  
I shall inspect  
the regiments in line.  
Heavy as lead,  
my verses at attention stand,  
ready for death  
and for immortal fame.  
The poems are rigid,  
pressing muzzle

to muzzle their gaping  
pointed titles.  
The favorite  
of all the armed forces  
the cavalry of witticisms  
ready  
to launch a wild hallooing charge,  
reins its chargers still,  
raising  
the pointed lances of the rhymes.  
and all  
these troops armed to the teeth,  
which have flashed by  
victoriously for twenty years,  
all these,  
to their very last page,  
I present to you,  
the planet's proletarian.  
The enemy  
of the massed working class  
is my enemy too  
inveterate and of long standing.  
Years of trial  
and days of hunger  
ordered us  
to march  
under the red flag.  
We opened  
each volume  
of Marx  
as we would open  
the shutters  
in our own house;  
but we did not have to read  
to make up our minds  
which side to join,  
which side to fight on.  
Our dialectics  
were not learned  
from Hegel.  
In the roar of battle





And here is the second:

My most respected  
comrades of posterity!

The first is spoken softly to an intimate friend; the second is a Bolshevik's public address to his future "comrades." One is quiet and lyrical, the other is rhetorical and even formulaic. The first we might call the voice of contemplative lyrical love. The second, the voice of a politically active public persona. (Mayakovsky, famously, read his poems to large Russian audiences, in the country as well as the city, proclaiming them in a deep bass voice<sup>1</sup>.)

The two openings point to two voices, one person. If we continue with "At the Top of My Voice" we discover in that single poem voice after voice, all coming from the poet who is named 'Mayakovsky.'

Let me re-present the whole poem with marginal notations that attempt to identify the multitude of voices that Mayakovsky avails himself of. Which is the 'real' Mayakovsky? My suspicion is that they are all Mayakovsky, and that part of what is going on in this poem is his resolute determination to show us his various selves.

As a lover of lyric poetry, I probably give primacy to the lyrical cry that occurs a third of the way through the poem, which I shall identify. But part of what I so admire in the poem is that the words of the socialist dreamer, the revolutionary comrade, seem just as deep and just as real. In the poem the two voices struggle for primacy. Is Mayakovsky the thwarted poet, betrayed by the politics of the Bolshevik Revolution and by Stalin's draconian policies, or is he the revolutionary who dreams of a better world and is committed to that world-to-be so deeply that his poetry must shape itself to making it a reality<sup>2</sup>? Likely, Mayakovsky is both, is each one, the thwarted poet and the poet of revolution, just as he is the lyric voice facing the night and the immensity of the stars and also the Bolshevik addressing his future comrades.

All of us are our pompous, trashy, superficial, bragging selves – as well as sons (or daughters), lovers, persons of honor and commitment. Mayakovsky has the size and the courage to accept all the 'selves' that are contained in what we

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<sup>1</sup> That voice was remarkable, as the Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko wrote decades later, in homage: "Give me, Mayakovsky,/your boulder-lumpiness/your turbulence/ your deep bass."

<sup>2</sup> "O which one? is it each one?" as Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote so trenchantly on a different situation.





romances for you –  
more profit in it  
and more charm.

**Practical**

But I  
subdued  
myself,  
setting my heel  
on the throat  
of my own song.

**Poetic, lyrical, personal,  
confessional**

Listen,  
comrades of posterity,  
to the agitator  
the rabble-rouser.

**Return to the start:  
Official Soviet voice**

Stifling  
the torrents of poetry,  
I'll skip  
the volumes of lyrics;  
as one alive,  
I'll address the living.

**Personal**

I'll join you  
in the far communist future,  
I who am  
no Esenin super-hero.

**Revolutionary rhetoric**

**Confessional**

My verse will reach you  
across the peaks of ages,  
over the heads  
of governments and poets.

**Prophetic (like Whitman)**

My verse  
will reach you  
not as an arrow  
in a cupid-lyred chase,  
not as worn penny  
reaches a numismatist,  
not as the light of dead stars reaches you.

**Poetic (negative metaphors)**

My verse  
by labor  
will break the mountain chain of years,  
and will present itself

**Prophetic**

ponderous,

**'Realistic'**



raising  
the pointed lances of the rhymes.  
and all

these troops armed to the teeth,  
which have flashed by

victoriously for twenty years, **Poetic triumphalism**  
**(metaphor dims, but will**  
all these, **continue)**

to their very last page,

I present to you,  
the planet's proletarian.

The enemy **Bolshevik and yet personal**  
of the massed working class **Revolutionary yet personal**  
is my enemy too **(deeply personal)**

inveterate and of long standing.

Years of trial **Personal history**  
and days of hunger **(merging into the social)**

ordered us

to march  
under the red flag.

We opened **Poetic (metaphor,**  
each volume **surprisingly personal**  
of Marx **yet collective)**

as we would open  
the shutters

in our own house;  
but we did not have to read **Anti-intellectual, practical,**  
to make up our minds **comradely**

which side to join,  
which side to fight on.

Our dialectics  
were not learned  
from Hegel.

In the roar of battle **Poetic, explanatory**  
it erupted into verse, **(metaphor reappears)**  
when, **Poetic, comradely**  
under fire,

the bourgeois decamped

as once we ourselves  
had fled  
from them.

Let fame **Self-abnegating**

<p>trudge              after genius          like an inconsolable widow                                            to a funeral march –          die then, my verse,                                            die like a common soldier,</p> <p><b>conceit</b>          like our men                                            who nameless died attacking!          I don't care a spit                                            for tons of bronze;          I don't care a spit                                            for slimy marble.          We're men of a kind,                                            we'll come to terms about our fame;          let our                                            common monument be</p> <p><b>dimension</b>          socialism                                            built</p> <p><b>historical</b>                                            in battle.          Men of posterity                                            examine the flotsam of dictionaries:          out of Lethe                                            will bob up                                            the debris of such words          as "prostitution,"                                            "tuberculosis,"                                            "blockade."          For you,                                            who are now                                            healthy and agile,          the poet,                                            with the rough tongue                                            of his posters,          has licked away consumptives' spittle.          With the tail of my years behind me,                                            I begin to resemble          those monsters,                                            excavated dinosaurs.</p>	<p><b>proclamatory</b></p> <p><b>Poetic – simile</b></p> <p><b>Exhortation – simile</b>  <b>turns into a poetic</b></p> <p><b>Street jargon</b>  <b>Honest (?) self-criticism</b></p> <p><b>Comradely</b>  <b>Comradely with a</b>  <b>strong personal</b></p> <p><b>-- the personal merging</b>  <b>into the social-</b></p> <p><b>Address to future readers</b></p> <p><b>Revolutionary dreamer</b></p> <p><b>Prophetic, speaking to</b>  <b>future generations</b></p> <p><b>Realistic</b></p> <p><b>Unpoetic poetic</b>  <b>Self-derogatory</b></p>
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Comrade life,	<b>Rhetorical</b>
let us	
march faster,	
march	
faster through what's left	
	of the five-year plan. <b>Satiric of Stalin</b>
My verse	<b>Practical</b>
has brought me	
	no rubles to spare:
no craftsmen have made	
	mahogany chairs for my house.
In all conscience,	<b>Revolutionary 'comrade'</b>
I need nothing	
except	
a freshly laundered shirt.	
When I appear	<b>Satiric and self-critical</b>
before the CCC	
	of the coming
	bright years,
by way of my Bolshevik party card,	
	I'll raise
above the heads	
of a gang of self-seeking	
	poets and rogues,
all the hundred volumes	
of my	
	communist-committed books.

Whew! Now you have read this poem twice – or maybe read it once and skimmed it once? The constant and abrupt switches of voice are, to me, astounding. We hear such switches in plays when the dialogue moves from character to character, but even then the characters are usually speaking similar languages. It is primarily in the novel – this is a claim made by the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin in 1934 – that we find a mixture of truly different voices speaking out of different language communities, something he called ‘heteroglossia.’

But “At the Top of My Voice” is not a novel. It is a poem, one which proclaims to us that its author and speaker Vladimir Mayakovsky is not univocal, but a ‘self’ that is comprised of many selves with many different desires and purposes, selves which exist in different milieus. Fifty years before, Thoreau had written a poem that began, “I am a parcel of vain strivings tied/ By a chance bond

together,” intuiting that the ‘self’ was composed of various pieces. But, and it is an important but, he still believed in a unitary self, and his poem was what I would call univocal.

Not so with Mayakovsky. He is many selves, and his poem, as my marginal annotations were meant to show, his poem reveals an extraordinary multivocalism. There are many voices here, and they are all ‘Mayakovsky.’ Which one is he really? Is there one voice which is ‘real’ so that the rest of them are masks? The question of the ‘real’ Mayakovsky cannot be answered. He is all of the voices he presents to us.

O.K. Let’s get down to the poem. We have addressed what, by far, is hardest about it, its multivocal character.

It begins with Mayakovsky addressing future generations. This is the situation of the poem, and it affords the poet the opportunity to confront a central conflict, the struggle between the personal and the political, the needs of the self and the needs of the larger body (society) in which the self resides. The poem gives equal weight to each side of this conflict. No ‘revolutionary’ has ever uttered a more anguished cry than this:

But I  
    subdued  
        myself,  
            setting my heel  
on the throat  
    of my own song

Ever. He is suppressing himself, choking off the song he wants to sing. In a very different context the poet Rilke proclaimed, “For somewhere there is an ancient enmity between our daily life and the great work.” Rilke wanted art to be more important than life: Mayakovsky recognizes in this poem that if he is to recognize the needs of other people, an agenda he wants to address politically, he must choke back his own song. More than choke: step hard with his own heeled boot on his own throat. Aieee! He knows he is “stifling/ the torrents of poetry” that seek to voice themselves.

All for the common good, as Mayakovsky allows us to see. Here are lines as powerful, as moving, as those I have just cited.

let our

common monument be  
 socialism  
     built  
         in battle.  
 Men of posterity  
         examine the flotsam of dictionaries:  
 out of Lethe  
         will bob up  
             the debris of such words  
 as "prostitution,"  
         "tuberculosis,"  
             "blockade."

Only someone who is inured to human dreams could ignore the power of this revolutionary dream: to build a world where exploitation, sickness and war are no more. A world where no one knows the words *prostitution...tuberculosis...blockade* any longer because sexism and sexual exploitation, lack of health care and military battles no longer exist. Mayakovsky in these lines reveals his dream of a better world, one more hospitable to human life and human fulfillment. It is the desire to create such a "common monument" that has led him to his dire situation, where he recognizes he has been "setting my heel on the throat of my own song."

This conflict, and his choice to write a poetry that is a combatant in the struggle to make a better world, are at the heart of the poem. Though his suicide occurred as he was ending a tumultuous love affair, we are perhaps justified in sensing that the tension between his self-throttling and his commitment to building a socialist future might have been a contributing cause to his self-inflicted death<sup>3</sup>.

Let me stress how important that conflict is. Not just to Mayakovsky, but to the history of our times. It was central to the poem assessed in the previous chapter, Seamus Heaney's "Summer, 1969." It runs, as if it was the key in which musical compositions are written, throughout the work of such diverse poets as William Butler Yeats, Anna Akhmatova and Robert Lowell.

Since this poem is so long and I have already presented it a second time in its entirety in order to reveal how many voices the poet uses, I will not go through it again line by line, section by section, as I usually do in these essays. There are

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<sup>3</sup> I should note that, even though he had talked about suicide for years, there is controversy over whether he killed himself, or whether his death was at the hands of Soviet state security, and masked to look as a suicide.

of course particulars in the poem, but I am not sure they matter deeply as we try to understand the poem.

Do we need to know, in reading the poem, that Mayakovsky was a wonderful graphic artist who made posters exhorting Russian workers to drink clean water? That he was less accepted by the literary establishment in the Soviet Union than less talented poets who strictly adhered to the party line, “the curly Macks/ the clever Jacks”? That the CCC is the Central Committee of the Communist Party? That Sergey Esenin<sup>4</sup> was one of his most accomplished contemporaries, a poet of rural life?

We should, however, note the remarkable extended military metaphors, meant to establish his poetry as a conscript in the army of revolution. This series of metaphors is hinted at when he compares his lines of poetry to “some antique/ yet awesome weapon” and then begins in earnest with “In parade deploying/the armies of my pages.” It does not end, as metaphor piles on metaphor, until it winds down a page and a half later.

Do we need annotate his rejection of statuary (“tons of bronze . . . slimy marble”) as a revolutionary’s recognition that inanimate monuments are an inadequate memorial for a revolutionary poet?

We can, I think, understand his commitment to “the planet’s proletarian,” even if ‘proletarian’ is no longer a term in current use. Even ‘working class’ is not a comfortable part of our contemporary vocabulary. Yet the ‘proletarian’ for whom he struggles is more defined but not so very different from ‘the people’ to whom Lincoln referred at the end of his Gettysburg Address as the basis of democracy (‘of the people, by the people, for the people’), although ‘proletarian’ has a ‘working-class’ connotation that Lincoln’s words did not have?

We have (ah, an editorial comment here) sometimes forgotten that greed is not the only standard by which we can judge the functioning of a society, so we may be disinclined to acknowledge Mayakovsky’s assertion that “the enemy/ of the massed working class/ is my enemy too.” And, although none of us can see Karl Marx without the lenses of the very Bolshevism which Mayakovsky often attacks in this poem, there is a remarkable image of enlightenment in these lines,

We opened

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<sup>4</sup> Esenin preceded Mayakovsky in committing suicide. Irrelevant but interesting: Esenin wrote his last poem in his own blood. And then hanged himself. Maybe. Once again, there is the possibility that Soviet security forces were responsible for this death.

each volume  
of Marx  
as we would open  
the shutters  
in our own house;  
but we did not have to read  
to make up our minds  
which side to join,  
which side to fight on.

Those final two lines above, don't they prefigure Florence Reece's contemporary song (Mayakovsky's poem was written in 1930, Reece's song in 1931) of Harlan County, Kentucky when workers fought all-powerful mining interests in Appalachia: "Which side are you on, boys,/ Which side are you on?/ Which side are you on boys,/ Which side are you on?//They say in Harlan County/There are no neutrals there/You'll either be a union man/ Or work for J.H. Blair."<sup>5</sup>

Let's move, however, beyond Reece to the power of Mayakovsky's verse to influence the course of literature in the twentieth century. The illuminating beam of Mayakovsky lies over much of modern poetry, a lighthouse beacon and a shining example.

This is true of the greatest 'Marxist' poets who followed him, Brecht and Neruda and Hikmet.

The opposition between political dedication and the life one might otherwise live was to be explored along similar lines by Bertholt Brecht – he too talks to future generations – in his centrally important "To Those Born Later<sup>6</sup>." And, of course, Brecht's decision to write overtly political poetry is much influenced, I think, by Mayakovsky's example of revolutionary commitment.

The invocation of what men and women do with their hands helped shaped Pablo Neruda's values, political and poetic. When Mayakovsky writes,

My verse

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<sup>5</sup> Pete Seeger sings that 'revolutionary' song, "[Which Side Are You On.](#)"

<sup>6</sup> Brecht's great poem is available in English on the web, including a fine translation by Willett, Manheim and Reed. '[Truly I live in hard times](#)'. Brecht, it should be noted, was himself one of the greatest poets of the twentieth century.

by labor  
will break the mountain chain of years,  
and will present itself  
ponderous,  
crude,  
tangible,  
as an aqueduct,  
by slaves of Rome  
constructed,  
enters into our days.

he established a relation between poetry and the things of this, our shared human world, that Neruda celebrates in his "[Ode to Criticism](#)"

The great and under-appreciated Nâzım Hikmet<sup>7</sup>, a giant of Turkish poetry, followed Mayakovsky's example, taking Marxism into the vernacular and at the same time erasing the sometimes seemingly insurmountable division between lived life and the world of the poem.

But there is more. It is not just that Mayakovsky was political poet. There is his experimentation, his exuberance, his performative inclination.

Most importantly of his legacies, to my mind, and not political at all, the indented lines we saw in "At the Top of My Voice," and particularly in the triad of increasing indents we saw in lines 3-5, paved the way for William Carlos Williams' discovery in the late 1940's of a what he called "the variable foot." Here are lines 3-5:

Rummaging among  
these days'  
petrified crap

I've often wished I could read Russian, so I could write about the impact of Mayakovsky on Williams, to my mind the greatest American poet of the twentieth century. Mayakovsky visited New York in 1925, where he and Williams met<sup>8</sup>. Even though Mayakovsky's lines rhyme and Williams' lines don't, even though one wrote in Russian and the other in English, there is a deep bond. When

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<sup>7</sup> The Academy of American Poets website provides [a short biography and several of his poems](#).

<sup>8</sup> The American poet heard the Russian poet declaim his work at a reception on September 19<sup>th</sup> of that year, an event that remained memorable for Williams in later years.

Williams sought a new meter for American verse, he adopted the indented triad we find in Mayakovsky, the verse form we saw above (and which recurs throughout “At the Top of My Voice,” and which characterized many of Mayakovsky’s longer poems from “Brooklyn Bridge<sup>9</sup>” onward. Williams’ new ‘meter’ was, like Mayakovsky’s, not at all concerned with counting syllables.

Williams said this new meter, “the variable foot,” first came to him when he wrote the following these lines for his epic poem, *Paterson*<sup>10</sup> in 1948, lines later published separately as “The Descent.” Once again, don’t worry about the ‘meaning.’ Just look at the shape of the lines: there seems to be a reincarnation of lines we have already seen in Mayakovsky, right?

The descent beckons  
          as the ascent beckoned.  
                  Memory is a kind  
of accomplishment,  
          a sort of renewal  
          even  
an initiation, since the spaces it opens are new places  
          inhabited by hordes  
                  heretofore unrealized,  
of new kinds—  
          since their movements  
                  are toward new objectives  
(even though formerly they were abandoned).

No defeat is made up entirely of defeat—since  
the world it opens is always a place  
          formerly  
                  unsuspected. A  
world lost,  
          a world unsuspected,  
                  beckons to new places  
and no whiteness (lost) is so white as the memory  
of whiteness .

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<sup>9</sup> Written during Mayakovsky’s three month visit to the United States in 1925.

<sup>10</sup> *Paterson* was Williams’ effort, sometimes rewardingly successful, sometimes not – to write an American epic. His poem cohered about the first center of American manufacturing, Paterson, New Jersey, a city not far from his own home in Rutherford. The epic, in four books, later five, looks at Paterson – its history, its geography, its people – and encompasses a huge mélange of voices and sources. It would appear to owe much to Mayakovsky (whom Williams admired) and to T. S. Eliot (whom he did not). Eliot was Williams’s great contemporary poetic rival; Williams continuously disparaged his impact on modern writing.

Although I have reservations that Williams' new line was as 'measurable' as he thought it was, I have no doubt at all about either its power or its revolutionary effect on the prosody of poetry in the second half of the twentieth century. No one in that time frame, in English language poetry, exerted as strong a tidal pull on the voicing and rhythms of poems as Williams. It is my strong conviction that Williams became the 'godfather' of American verse in the later twentieth century through his creation of this flexible triad that promised rhythmic order but at the same time paid great heed to the supple measures of American speech. Mayakovsky, in my view, was centrally important to the creation of Williams' new line.

Mayakovsky as we have seen embraced the Russian vernacular and the poem as a performance. Allen Ginsberg learned from Mayakovsky, in part, to declaim poetry; in Ginsberg's instance it was in long bardic lines that depended on American speech. It is as if, in *Howl*, Walt Whitman and Vladimir Mayakovsky meet to usher in a new American poet.

Ginsberg also followed the Russian poet in his move to make the private, public. Mayakovsky was not a poet of literary journals: he proclaimed poetry out loud and often before thousands of listeners. His at times public ("My most respected/comrades") confessional mode ("I/ subdued/myself,/setting my heel/on the throat/of my own song") surely was a model for America's most widely-known poem of mid-century, *Howl*, which famously begins, "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked,/dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix . . . "

Then, there was in America a move toward American speech and exuberance (and not just in Ginsberg) very similar to Mayakovsky's exploitation of the Russian vernacular and to his manic energy.

We see this at work in another great New York poet, Frank O'Hara, who learned from Mayakovsky to use the language of everyday life and to embrace the spontaneity of the poet-in-the-moment. That spontaneity, which is intimately connected to Mayakovsky's willingness to speak in multiple voices – whichever feels right at the moment – was also determinative for O'Hara's close friend John Ashbery. One could connect Mayakovsky, as well though circuitously, to the 'action painting' of Jackson Pollock and to other abstract expressionists. Who themselves were models for O'Hara and Ashbery.

Two O'Hara poems<sup>11</sup>, "[Mayakovsky](#)" and his "[A True Account of Talking to the Sun on Fire Island](#)" make O'Hara's deep connection to the Russian poet abundantly clear, though Mayakovsky's powerful example relation undergirds all of O'Hara's poems.

The second of the two poems I just referred to is an imitation/homage/response to the most joyous poem I know, even though the poem begins in depression and despair. That poem is Mayakovsky's "An Extraordinary Adventure Which Befell Vladimir Mayakovsky In A Summer Cottage." Long-time recipients of these emails may remember I sent that poem out as a holiday gift four and a half years ago.

Mayakovsky's "An Extraordinary Adventure" seems a good place to say farewell to him, one of the great poets of the twentieth century. In it we find relief from, and an antidote to, the tensions of the riven and decomposed self we encounter in "At the Top of My Voice." Presciently, and perhaps unhappily, Mayakovsky often wrote out the fractured selves we encounter within as we face post-modern life. Yet in "An Extraordinary Adventure," he reveals that our role, whatever we are or may be, is to sing our existence, to celebrate the self's multiple shinings.

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<sup>11</sup>The first is a tribute to the closeness of the two poets, and seems to me a mediation on Mayakovsky's suicide. The second is likewise a tribute, as deeply enjoyable and wonderfully readable, as is the Mayakovsky poem it responds to, which is mentioned in the next paragraph and which appears in Chapter IX of this book