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A GREAT POET OF THE SOVIET EPOCH

In 1917, at the time of the Great October Socialist Revolution, Vladimir Mayakovsky was twenty-four years old, but had already accumulated extensive and manifold social and literary experience. "My revolution"—so he defined his attitude to the historic events in Russia and directly went to work at the Smolny. The building of the former Smolny institute, a boarding school for daughters of the nobility, now housed the headquarters of the October uprising guided by V. I. Lenin. Here throbbed the heart of revolutionary Russia, here, in the Smolny, her future destinies were being decided.

The poet immediately found his place in the ranks of Lenin's followers, applying all his poetical fervour to the inspired and inspiring everyday work of building a new socialist society. The dream he had long cherished as a poet and revolutionary was coming true. "And he, the free man of whom I'm yelling—he'll come, believe me, believe, he will," Mayakovsky prophesied back in 1915 in his early poem War and Peace. In the revolution Mayakovsky's forceful revolutionary oratory and soul-searching lyricism acquired full scope and he became the first poet of the Soviet era. The ideas of the revolution made Mayakovsky's poetry what it was: an expression of Russia's new national culture, in which her great classic heritage was developed in new forms. Mayakovsky's work may be correctly understood as a manifestation of the Russian national spirit and national art, only in the light of the struggle for the humane and universally significant ideals of the revolution.

A reader making his first acquaintance with Mayakovsky's poetry will naturally ask himself what kind of man the poet was, how he came to accomplish his great artistic mission. Let us, therefore, throw a cursory look at the main landmarks of his life and work.

*  

Mayakovsky spent his childhood in the remote Georgian village of Baghdadi, renamed after the poet's death into Mayakovsky. The village lies in a deep pic-
turesque valley surrounded by tall mountains protecting it from the cold winds. Mayakovsky’s father, a forester, drew his lineage from impoverished nobility, but snobbery was foreign to his nature and he was very good to the local peasants. In this Russian, who spoke to them in their own Georgian (he knew other languages of the Caucasus too), they saw not a hostile agent of the tsar’s administration, but an exacting teacher and friend.

In the simple work-a-day atmosphere of the family, the future poet enjoyed an uninhibited childhood, playing with the peasant boys from whom, incidentally, he picked up an excellent knowledge of Georgian. Later, when he went to school in Kutaisi, he felt an alien among the snobbish progeny of Russian officials and, contrarily, quite at home among the Georgian boys who became his dearest friends. This friendship manifested itself most markedly during the first Russian Revolution of 1905. Together with other revolutionary-minded pupils Mayakovsky hid in his desk and distributed revolutionary leaflets.

In 1906 his father unexpectedly died of sepsis, having pricked his finger when filing documents in the forestry office. The family moved to Moscow where Vladimir’s elder sister was studying. “Russia was the dream of my life,” Mayakovsky later recalled. “Nothing ever had such a terrific pull on me.” Moscow became the starting-point of the future poet’s revolutionary career. Here, in the gymnasium (secondary school), he joined the Social-Democratic Party. The next three years—1907, 1908, 1909—were packed with events that had a decisive influence on his spiritual make-up. Mayakovsky took part in many hazardous revolutionary undertakings which more than once ended in his arrest. “Party”, “Arrest”, “Third Arrest”, “Eleven Months in Butyrki” (in the Butyrsky prison Mayakovsky was kept in solitary confinement)—so he entitled the chapters of his autobiography referring to that period.

The impressions of childhood and adolescence, which are always vital in the development of an artistic personality, became the foundation-stones of Mayakovsky’s poetry. The fact that he was born and bred among
the mountains, on the soil of revolutionary Caucasus, and that he became a convert to the ideas of the Communist Party in adolescence, had an all-important formative influence on his character and his talent.

* *

Vague artistic inclinations (much more definite towards painting than poetry) became apparent in Mayakovsky when he was still at school, but were staved off by his passionate urge to participate in revolutionary work. Apparently it was in prison, in solitary cell No. 103, where, by his own confession, he "pounced upon belles-lettres" and "read all the latest", that Mayakovsky arrived at the view that his vocation was to be the revolution's artist, "to make socialist art". In the Moscow school of painting and sculpture which he entered upon release from prison, Mayakovsky got acquainted with artists and poets, a milieu that was quite new to him. Eventually, poetry prevailed over his interest in painting. He joined the futurists, the most extreme trend in Russian modernism which took shape during the crisis of bourgeois culture, in the period of preparation for the proletarian revolution. The futurists postulated the primacy of form, declaring war on both classic and modern art, proclaiming themselves in their manifesto to be the enemies of the "fat bourgeoisie". However, while pursuing their quest for new forms, throwing the "old great off the steamship of modernity", the futurists were far removed from any idea of class struggle. For Mayakovsky, however, the concept of a revolution in artistic form stemmed from his social revolutionism, viz., the new subject matter of socialist art demanded new formal means for its expression. The romantic notion of revolt against bourgeois culture and traditions preached by futurists had a definite attraction for Mayakovsky, and although the futurists had no intent of altering contemporary reality, their arrogant nihilism was in some ways emotionally akin to the young poet's revolutionary rebelliousness. They played a certain role in Mayakovsky's quest for new form, but could not and did not become his spiritual guides. He followed his own path of a revolutionary poet who had nothing to do
with the futurists’ formalistic jugglery and their indifference to the issues of social life.

Mayakovsky the innovator was called forth by the revolution, the expectation of which provided his inspiration. He first spoke out as a poetic apostle of the revolution in his poem _Cloud in Pants_ written in 1915. Mayakovsky read it to Gorky, whom he visited at his Mustamäki country house near Petrograd. Gorky was delighted with Mayakovsky’s rebellious fervour, discerning in this unusual, impetuous young man the traits of that poet whose advent he foretold in 1913: “Russia is in need of a great poet, a poet that must be both democratic and romantic, for we, Russians, are a young and democratic nation.”

In manuscript, _Cloud in Pants_ had a different title—_Thirteenth Apostle_, which was at once pathetic and ironical, elevating the image of the poet himself as an apostle of the revolution. Later Mayakovsky summed up the essence of this piece in four slogans: “‘Down with your love!’, ‘Down with your art!’, ‘Down with your system!’, ‘Down with your religion!’ are the four cries voiced in the four parts.” This pattern reveals the ideological message of the poem in which he challenged the whole structure of bourgeois society, the source of national evils and calamities and all the misfortunes of the hero himself. Its first part (Down with your love!) discloses the personal drama of the hero jilted by the woman he loves. “You know, I’m getting married,” she tells him coming to their rendezvous. What response could such words evoke in a man whose whole being was taut with anticipation of love? He addresses Maria with a question and reminder:

Remember—
you used to ask,
“Jack London,
money, 
love, 
passion—
aren’t they real?”
And I—all I knew
was that you’re the Gioconda
that somebody’s got to steal.
Who, then, are the poet’s true rivals? Those who “pay for women”—the bourgeois world, the power of money which cripples every human emotion.

The hero regards Maria’s rejection not only as his own defeat in love, but as a declaration of war on him, the rebel, by the entire bourgeois society. And he accepts the challenge, charging into attack, deriving strength from the awareness of his affinity with other people. The dispossessed, poverty-stricken and labour-exhausted outcasts must be made to realise their moral superiority over the oldbourgeois world:

I know, the sun would fade out, almost, stunned with our souls’ Hellenic beauty.

Thus the hero of the poem, whose beloved has been stolen, turns out to be not only an apostle of big, true love, but an apostle of struggle against a world founded on falsehood and exploitation of man by man. The main characters of the tragedy are not “he” and “she”, but society and the individual, whose humiliation is consecrated by the church and contemporary decadent art. Hence the urge to blast all outworn concepts, including religious and aesthetic ones.

In the middle of 1915, assuming the half-pathetic, half-sarcastic posture of a poet-oracle “jeered at by the tribe of today”, Mayakovsky prophesied the coming of the revolution, in dating which he was mistaken only by a year.

Crowned with the thorns of revolt, the year 1916 draws nigh.

*

Mayakovsky called the October Revolution “my revolution”, and the young Soviet country acquired in his person a master whom it could justly call “my poet”. Mayakovsky was not the only poet to welcome the revolution enthusiastically. Among the poets of the older generation there were Alexander Blok, who in The Twelve expressed the hopes and aspirations of the best
part of progressive Russian intelligentsia, and Demyan Bedny who produced the poem *Land, Liberty and the Workers’ Lot*. Sergei Esenin was also wholeheartedly in favour of the revolution even though, in his own words, he accepted it “with a peasant’s bias”.

In the years following the revolution Mayakovsky’s activities were extremely manifold. He was deeply convinced that “a poet of the revolution cannot confine himself to writing books”. Accordingly, he turned to the theatre and cinema, which attracted him as media of mass appeal, and wrote more than a dozen screenplays. He also contributed to newspapers and magazines, and produced political posters—an invariable item of urban scenery in the first years after the revolution.

During 1919-1920 Mayakovsky worked in the “Satirical Windows of ROSTA” (Russian Telegraph Agency), writing captions to pictures—verse propaganda on the most urgent issues of the civil war and the life of the young Soviet republic. “The ROSTA windows were a fantastic affair,” wrote the poet, “a handful of artists serving, manually, a hundred-million-strong giant of a people.”

Soviet Russia was entering a new period of her life. The civil war ended in victory. The war-wrecked economy had to be rebuilt from scratch. Mayakovsky’s work in ROSTA prepared him for embarking on a satirical campaign in the period of NEP (New Economic Policy), which allowed a certain freedom of private enterprise in economic rehabilitation. While his earlier satire was aimed against external enemies and “all sorts of Denikins”, now he levelled his fire at shortcomings within the country. The ideals of the October Revolution had to be defended from the onslaught of petty proprietors who fancied they had won the day. It was imperative to bolster the new generation’s faith in the future presaged by Lenin in his last public speech: “NEP Russia will become socialist Russia.”

During this period Mayakovsky wrote the love-poem *It*, which was evoked by the tragic end of his relationship with the woman he loved. As he says in his autobiography, however, he wrote *It* “about himself and all”.
Just as in Cloud in Pants Mayakovsky had hurled his indignation at capitalism: "Down with your love!", he now thundered at the philistines who raised their heads under NEP. But if in the earlier poem this slogan was followed by "Down with your system!" which he thought an essential condition for the triumph of true love, this time everything was radically changed. Now Mayakovsky saw his only hope in "our red-flagged system", whose power, he believed, extended to the sphere of personal relationships: "Confiscate, abrogate my suffering!" But here the obstacle was "slave-hood that ages had hammered into our souls". The conflict between the old and the new in the poet's soul is a source of much agony. At times the forces of the past seem unconquerable. The legacy of whole ages cannot be rooted out "at one go". In this lies the tragedy and the emotional crisis of the hero of It.

However, in the very process of writing the poem Mayakovsky sought and found the way out of his spiritual impasse by ridiculing and exorcising the remnants of the past in social life and in his own self, thus discovering new, optimistic prospects.

The poem It is autobiographical throughout. Agreeing with the woman he loved not to meet for a time, Mayakovsky withdrew into his study for a month and a half, refusing to see friends, and, "incarcerated in his nutshell of a room", concentrated wholly on his poem, trying to find in it a solution to agonising problems in his personal life and life in general. On finishing the poem in February 1923, he came out of his voluntary confinement and with his usual fervour plunged once more into the turbulent life of a literary polemicist, "agitator, brazen-mouthed ring-leader". Seven years later, on April 14, 1930, he shot himself in the same "nutshell of a room" in Lubyansky Proyezd. The involved circumstances of his private life and the extremely inauspicious atmosphere created around him by his literary ill-wishers, were further aggravated by the failure of the first production of his wonderful play The Bathouse. "I'm quits with life, and no need to list mutual troubles, offences, hurts," says the poet in his farewell letter.
From the poem *It* we may gather an idea of the part played by love in Mayakovsky's life, in the "mutual troubles, offences, hurts", which in his own words, there was no need to list. "Love is the heart of everything. If it stops working, all the rest dies off, becomes superfluous, unnecessary.... Love can't be regimented by any sort of *must* or *mustn't*—only by free competition with the rest of the world," Mayakovsky wrote in a letter-diary which he kept for L. Brik while working on *It*. The poem is concluded with an *Application to*...—an attempted escape into fantasy, a programme for the future. He paints his lofty ideal of creative love which asserts itself in "competition with the world". Mayakovsky evolved an imagery of enormous expressive power, employing his favourite devices—hyperboles and materialised metaphors—to convey the immense force of emotion common to his contemporary—the new man, whose love is "a far sight grander than Onegin's love".

In *It* the poet carries on a dialogue with himself. The old individualistic contraposition of love to the world had already been discarded, but the new concept of love as a form of competition with the world had not yet become fully shaped in his mind. And this explains his spiritual crisis. However, in his *Application to*... Mayakovsky did finally discover a way out, producing a pattern of love-ethics capable of linking that most personal of emotions with the aims of society. The idea of the creative power of love later found expression in the famous stanza:

To love
is to break from insomnia-torn sheets, with jealousy of Copernicus swallowing saliva, him, not the husband of Mrs. Sugar-and-sweets regarding as your most deadly rival.
One of the first Soviet poems dedicated to Lenin was Mayakovsky’s “Vladimir Ilyich Lenin”, written in 1924, the year when the founder of the Soviet state died. Mayakovsky had begun planning a poem about Lenin long before. The government bulletin on the leader’s illness, posted up in the streets of Moscow in March 1923, made the poet respond with *We Don’t Believe*, a short poem full of love and anxiety. Mayakovsky was present at the Congress of Soviets held on January 22, 1924, where Chairman Mikhail Kalinin announced that “yesterday at 6.50 a.m. died Comrade Lenin”.... The first shock of this terrible news was followed for Mayakovsky by a state of frightening depression with which he was able to cope only through his art, by putting in words the vastness of the common grief, and poetically recreating Lenin’s image.

“Never have I wanted to be understood so much as in this poem. This, perhaps, is the most important piece of work I have ever done,” he said to his friends. In many respects, Mayakovsky’s poem remains unsurpassed, despite the fact that the artistic portraiture of Lenin has since been augmented by many remarkable works whose number is constantly growing.

Mayakovsky’s work holds one very essential advantage which will carry weight forever. His enormous talent apart, Mayakovsky was a contemporary of Lenin and of the entire epoch which saw the establishment of the new socialist society. He painted from life. He was in the Smolny on the day of the October uprising, saw Lenin there, and heard him speaking on many occasions. His poem is not only the work of a master-poet, but a document, the testimony of a rank-and-file contemporary. Mayakovsky recreates the thoughts and feelings of one of those millions who followed Lenin, helped him to accomplish his historic task, shared his joys and sorrows, and now felt unutterably grief-stricken and bereaved.

We are burying the earthliest of beings
of all that ever walked this earth of ours.
For all its expressiveness, this formula would be far too general, had not the poet posed the question "what has he done, where did he come from, this most human of all humans?" Replying to his own question in the first and second parts of the poem, he depicts Lenin’s life against the background of the history of the revolutionary movement. Compositionally speaking, this was fully justified from the standpoint of a poet-contemporary portraying the leader’s image. Only so could he help the readers to rationalise, as it were, their grief, which in many was still in a primal state of unconscious, elemental anguish—and gain a deeper mental grasp of their emotions, converting their sorrow into revolutionary energy. The portrayal of this energy of millions rallied round the memory of Lenin, an energy born of sorrow, was the life-asserting artistic task which Mayakovsky set himself in his poem. It was a work simultaneously epic and lyrical in nature.

What a joy it is
to be part of this union,
even tears from the eyes
to be shared en masse
in this,
the purest,
most potent communion
with that glorious feeling
whose name is
Class!

Then comes the description of a street in Moscow during Lenin’s funeral. Mayakovsky gives an account to History, having imbibed with all his senses, “with all the billion pores his body holds”, every detail of the day which “will keep its tale of woe for ever throbbing”. The despair that seized the people at the news of Lenin’s death gives way to a demonstration of restrained, profound emotion. The image of boundless silence permeates the entire picture. Silence in the streets, in broad daylight—the silence of millions which rang with the emotion of “child and adult wrung by grief’s insistence”. Silence and movement—slow,
speechless, and therefore immensely eloquent, palpable
in its internal rhythm, directed by the slow music of
the revolutionary funeral march: “Farewell to you,
comrade, who have passed from a noble life away”.

The poet-contemporary brings out unforgettable
details—symptoms, tokens of popular reverence and
love, manifesting themselves in the absence of any
outward expression of grief, in the magnificently dig-
ified orderliness of this “all-human” sorrow.

The frost,
unheard-of,
scorched one’s feet,
yet days
were spent
in the tightening crush.
Nobody
even ventured to beat
hands together to warm them—
hush!

Self-discipline and restraint in the expression of feel-
ings symptomatise the strength of those who follow
Lenin’s hearse, who will go on marching along his
road. The procession across Red Square is epitomised
in a remarkably dynamic, impetuous image of the surg-
ing masses inspired by Lenin’s ideas:

Like a giant banner
the huge Red Square,
millions of hands
welded into its staff,
soars
with a mighty sweep
into the air.

Red Square comes to life symbolically in the swell-
ing silk of an enormous banner, from every fold of
which the living Lenin calls the world proletariat to
rise in a holy war against the oppressors.
Mayakovsky’s poem about Lenin is not a requiem, but a hymn to life. Reciting it to the most varied audiences—at factory clubs, Party meetings and student gatherings—the poet won many new friends and admirers, and this gave him the moral support which he so lacked in literary circles. The poem about Lenin, warmly acclaimed by the Party and reading public, became an event not only in the literary life of the country, but in the life of the people in general. With this poem, Mayakovsky could appeal for and find understanding and sympathy among working people in any of the world’s capitals, in the remotest corners of the planet. With this poem he could undertake the journey round the globe which he had long been planning.

An “envoy of poetry”, he travelled abroad, reciting Vladimir Ilyich Lenin and other works, telling people about life in the Soviet Union and the great upsurge of Soviet culture. He visited Latvia, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Germany, France, and, finally, the United States. His encounters with mass audiences in New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Detroit and other American cities were a triumph of his poetry and, actually, a revelation of the new Russia for his listeners. Mayakovsky’s trips to the USA and France gave birth to his “American cycle” and his series of poems about Paris.

On arrival in New York, the city of skyscrapers, Mayakovsky paid tribute to the genius of American engineers (“Brooklyn Bridge”). But soon his admiration gave way to a sober awareness of those aspects of life which usually evade a visitor’s first glance—the seamy side of everyday existence, the refined forms of exploitation, which make up the essence of American capitalism. The Soviet poet was insulted and outraged by the debasement of human dignity in this money-mad world. Thus, one of the most tragic poems of the American cycle is devoted to a Negro-mother selling her body to “festerling Mr. Smith” to save her starving family.

Most typical of Mayakovsky’s style in this cycle is the poem Atlantic Ocean.
Nearer and dearer you are to my heart. . . .
. . . in breadth,
in blood,
in cause,
in spirit
my revolution’s elder brother.

Mayakovsky endows the elemental forces of nature with human features. For him the ocean is a living being with the sturdy ways of a soldier or factory-hand: “Now with nose to the grindstone, now drunk as a lord”, terrible in rage and dreadful when drunk, but easily recovering its good humour and forgiving offences. This kind-hearted, wayward giant wants to be useful to men, dreams about irrigating parched deserts: “O to reach the Sahara—it isn’t so far-off!”

Logically—after the image of the Atlantic—Mayakovsky took up the theme of Columbus.

There’s one single thought that gladdens me now;
that these same waves hugged Columbus as well,
that tired drops of sweat from Columbus’ brow
into this same water fell.

But the poem is also alive with the painful regret that today, in the age of the arrogant all-powerful dollar, “you’ve dwindled, Atlantic, proud in your youth, any scum can spit at your grey-whiskered visage”. The pithy end-pun of another poem in the American cycle presents, as it were, the conclusion he arrived at in his transatlantic voyage, his “discovery of America”.

You’re an ass, Columbus, yes, I mean it.
As for me, if I were you, here’s what I’d do:
I would shut America and slightly clean it,
then I would reopen it anew.

The sharper the satirical pungency of the American cycle, the clearer and keener becomes his awareness of his own country’s historic mission: “I and my country, we throw the gauntlet to all of your drab United States.”

Mayakovsky was the leader of the artistic movement known as LEF—the left front of arts. What he longed for was not to work alone, but in a team bound together by a single purpose and idea. And although the LEF movement was marred by aesthetic prejudices which left their imprint on Mayakovsky’s poetry too, still, without the support of friends who were enthusiastic about his work and believed in him, Mayakovsky would have found it far more difficult to assert himself in that vast artistic movement which began to take shape under the banner of revolutionary innovation. In those days Mayakovsky became the standard-bearer of a new and immensely potent trend in Soviet art, joined by such gifted poets as Nikolai Asseyev, Boris Pasternak, Semyon Kirsanov, Sergei Tretyakov, and attracting masters in other fields of art, among them Meyerhold, Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, Dovzhenko and Shostakovich. Mayakovsky drew wide sections of the artistic youth into the work of creating Soviet patriotic art, infecting them with his own enthusiasm. The author of this preface himself was among those who experienced his beneficial influence.

Meeting Mayakovsky, who invited me in 1927 to co-operate in his magazine as a critic and historian of Soviet literature, was an unforgettable event in my life, which determined the purport of all my subsequent literary work. I shall never forget the first recital of Fine! at Mayakovsky’s flat. Written for the tenth anniversary of the Revolution, it seemed to have absorbed the entire historical experience of the people as
well as the life experience of the poet himself. It presented, as it were, a sequel to the poem about Lenin, an artistic development of Lenin’s ideas about the socialist country. The rumour that Mayakovsky was engaged on a poem about the revolution set astir the motley literary world where, along with ardent admirers, he had a great many ill-wishers. Besides his close friends and associates he had invited a number of special guests to listen to his recital. I don’t know how so many people could have crowded into his tiny flat. The listeners sat on window-sills and stood packed in the hall, where hats and coats were piled on chairs almost up to the ceiling. Among those present were Anatoly Lunacharsky, Alexander Fadeyev, and many people I did not know, who must have met Mayakovsky during his public appearances and lecture tours, or had simply become his enthusiasts after reading his poetry.

The debates following the recital were extremely noisy; the atmosphere was a miniature replica of what usually occurred at the Politechnical Museum where Mayakovsky often recited his poems, involving the audience in heated discussions. The most clearly sympathetic response was that of Anatoly Lunacharsky who accepted the poem with wholehearted enthusiasm. “It is the October Revolution itself cast in bronze”, were the words in which the People’s Commissar of Education, a shrewd art critic, expressed his opinion of Mayakovsky’s new poem.

Fine! relates how in the unimaginably hard conditions of the civil war, economic ruin and blockade the feeling of socialist patriotism developed in the people, how under the Party’s leadership, the “land of youth” paved its way to the triumph of socialism and the “fatherland-to-be”.

Always hostile to any varnishing of reality, Mayakovsky also set himself the task of showing what was “bad” in the life of the young Soviet society, and even contemplated writing a poem under that title.

In his satire Mayakovsky waged a relentless day-to-day war against evils and shortcomings. The most obstructive among such evils was bureaucracy (Paper Horrors, etc.). The characters of Mayakovsky’s satiri-
cal gallery—Soviet philistines and bureaucrats—were admirably shown and chastised in his satirical dramas, *The Bathhouse* and *The Bedbug*, which were restored to stage-life in the 1950s at the Moscow Satire Theatre and many other theatres throughout the country and abroad.

*

On quite a number of occasions Mayakovsky depicted his own self in his poems, dramas and screenplays, giving the hero his own name. And, of course, even when remaining behind the scenes, he, like any true poet drawing on the material of his own life, presented the kind of lyrical hero who leaves his hallmark on everything taking place “on stage”.

In *Aloud and Straight*, his last work, which was to be a prelude to a big poem that remained unwritten, Mayakovsky declared: “I myself will speak of me and my time.” In this poem one cannot fail to see a number of features reflecting his own literary biography; the poet clearly defined his “place in the workers’ ranks”, he was together with those “who had come out to build and sweep in perpetual work-a-day fever”, those who fought for the cause of the Party, for the triumph of revolutionary ideas in Soviet literature.

*Aloud and Straight* sums up the poet’s artistic experience, the back-breaking toil of extracting “precious words from artesian human depths”. Mayakovsky reviews a parade of his “word-troops” always alerted for action. As hostile as ever towards the aesthetes and literary adversaries who refused to acknowledge that the revolutionary ardour of his poetry was the essence of his life, Mayakovsky defended his honour as a poet of the revolution: “The enemy of the colossus working class—he’s mine as well, inveterate and ancient.”

The honour of a poet of the revolution... What did it imply? It implied the poet’s ability to rally the people for heroic exploits. Poetry itself is an act of heroism. In *Aloud and Straight* Mayakovsky asserted this attitude towards contemporaries, comrades-in-arms and descendants, and the literary wrangles of the day appeared petty and insignificant.
We’re comrades all—so let us share our glory,
one common monument
let’s have
to tell our story
in socialism
built in battle
for all time.

Giving himself entirely to the people, totally contemptuous of his own fame ("the hell I care for marble’s shiny sludge")—such is Mayakovsky, the poet of the Revolution, wholly identifying his colossal personality with the cause of his country and people.

*

Mayakovsky’s artistic programme is vast; it is a poet-innovator’s programme of world-discovery. He rallied legions of impassioned followers, poets who carried on his cause and developed his traditions in all the multinational offshoots of Soviet poetry. At the same time he broadened the poetic mainroads, so that many other poets with a different creative vision could go shoulder to shoulder with him, working for the common aim—the triumph of socialism.

It is extremely difficult to translate Mayakovsky into foreign languages, but the impact of his imagery is powerful enough to break down linguistic barriers.

In the careers of many poets in Europe and America a role of major importance was played by their translations of Mayakovsky’s works. In France, excellent translations were made by Elsa Triolet; in Britain by Herbert Marshall (published recently in India and America); in Germany by Hugo Hupert. The Moscow foreign language magazine Soviet Literature has printed a series of translations from Mayakovsky by the best Soviet workers in the field.

In 1960 Progress Publishers put out a book of Mayakovsky’s selected poetry rendered into English by Dorian Rottenberg. In 1967 the same translator produced the first complete English version of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, which has just come out in a third
edition. This book, too, will be a new and, we hope, welcome gift to admirers of Mayakovsky's poetry.

Mayakovsky's influence on world poetry is enormous. According to Pablo Neruda, his "power, tenderness and wrath remain unparalleled as models of poetic accomplishment". Mayakovsky helps progressive poets to denounce false idols, to seek new revolutionary pathways for the development of their national culture. This is well reflected in the words of the French poet Jean Chabault. "In medieval days the trip from Marseilles to Paris was made by ox-cart. Today it takes 50 minutes by air. And yet in medieval times we had François Villon. If we survey the best poetry of our own day, it scarcely appears to have scored any such miracles of progress.

"Only when I read Mayakovsky I felt that now our hearts, our poetry can at long last dispense with the old ox-cart. I think he is still half-a-century ahead of us all."

While dedicating "all his resonant power of a poet" to the fight for a better future for all mankind, Mayakovsky also marked a new stage in the development of Russian poetry, and a big step forward in world art in general. He glorified "the joy of life, the buoyancy of the hardest of marches—the march into communism".

It's hardships that really give taste to our life.
This song, then, will be a song of our worries, triumphs and everyday strife.

Mayakovsky's entire work is just such a song which shall sound forever, calling men to create, to work, to perform new feats in the name of communism.

VICTOR PERTSOU, Ph. D.
MORNING

The sullen rain
cast a glance
askance.
Beyond the still
clear grille—
the iron reasoning of wires strung overhead—
a featherbed.
And on it
rested lightly
the legs of rising stars.
But as
the streetlamps—tsars
in crowns of gas—
began to die,
they made more painful for the eye
the petty wars
of the bouquet of boulevard whores.
And horrid,
the lurid
pecking laughter
that jokes leave after
arose
from the yellow roses’
poisoned rows
in a zig-zag.
But at the back
of all the wrack-
ing horror
and the squalor
the eye rejoiced, at last;
the slave of crosses
sufferingly-placidly-indifferent,
the coffins
of the brothels
full of riff-raff
were flung into one flaming vase by the
dawning East.

1912
WHAT ABOUT YOU?

I splashed some colours from a tumbler
and smeared the drab world with emotion.
I charted on a dish of jelly
the jutting cheekbones of the ocean.
Upon the scales of a tin salmon
I read the calls of lips yet mute.
And you,
    could you have played a nocturne
with just a drainpipe for a flute?

1913
GREAT BIG HELL OF A CITY

Windows split the city's great hell into tiny hellets—vamps with lamps. The cars, red devils, exploded their yells right in your ear, rearing on their rumps.

And there, under the signboard with herrings from Kerch an old man, knocked down, stooping to search for his specs, sobbed aloud when a tram with a lurch whipped out its eyeballs in the twilight splurge.

In the gaps between skyscrapers, full of blazing ore, where the steel of trains came clattering by, an aeroplane fell with a final roar into the fluid oozing from the sun's hurt eye.

Only then, crumpling the blanket of lights, Night loved itself out, lewd and drunk, and beyond the street-suns, the sorriest of sights, sank the flabby moon, unwanted old junk.

1913
LISTEN!

Now, listen!
Surely, if the stars are lit
there’s somebody who longs for them,
somebody who wants them to shine a bit,
somebody who calls it, that wee speck
of spittle, a gem?

And overridden
by blizzards of midday dust,
tears in to God,
afraid that it’s too late,
and sobbing,
kisses the hand outthrust,
swears
that he can’t, simply can’t bear a starless
fate:

There must be a star, there must!
...Then goes about anxious,
though tranquil seeming,
whispering to somebody,
“You’re better?
Not afraid?
All right?”
Now listen,
it must be for somebody stars are set gleaming,
somebody who longs
that over the rooftops
one star at least should come alight?

1913
YOU

You, wallowing through orgy after orgy, owning a bathroom and warm, snug toilet! How dare you read about awards of St. Georgi\(^1\) from newspaper columns with your blinkers oily?!

Do you realise, multitudinous nonentities thinking how better to fill your gob, that perhaps just now Petrov the lieutenant had both his legs ripped off by a bomb?

Imagine if he, brought along for slaughter, suddenly saw, with his blood out-draining, you, with your mouths still dribbling soda-water and vodka, lasciviously crooning Severyanin\(^2\)!

To give up my life for the likes of you, lovers of woman-flesh, dinners and cars? I’d rather go and serve pineapple juice to the whores in Moscow’s bars.

1915
AN ODE TO JUDGES

Convicts row their galley along
over the sea in a sweltering crew
covering the chain-clang with a snarling song
about their home—Peru.

About Peru, the flower of the planet
full of dances, birds and love,
where blossoms crown the green pomegranate
and baobabs reach to the sky above.

Bananas! Pineapples! Joy galore!
Wine in sealed bottles shining through....
But then, God knows where from and what for,
judges overran poor Peru.

They came along and imposed their bans
on birds, dances and Peruvians' sweethearts;
the judges' eyes glinted like old tin cans
picked up by pavement sweepers.

A peacock painted orange and blue
was caught by their eye, as strict as Lent;
a moment, and off through its native Peru
with his tail bleached white, the peacock went.

It's said in the prairies there once had been
wee little birds—colibri they're called.
Well, the judges caught them and shaved them
clean,
down, feathers and all.

In none of the valleys today will you find
live volcanoes, those wheezy croakers;
the judges choked them by putting up signs:
"VALLEY FOR NON-SMOKERS".

Even my poems, by the law's letter
are banned in Peru. What for, do you think?
The judges, you see, declared them "no better
than alcoholic drink".
Shaking the equator, chain-gangs trudge. . . .
Poor people-less, birdless Peru!
Only, scowling under the penal code, a judge survives, hearty and well-to-do.

Those galleys,—things could scarcely be worse!
I pity Peruvians! don't you?
Judges are a bane for dances and birds,
for me, for you, for Peru.

1915
LILY

DEAR! IN LIEU OF A LETTER

The room’s a chapter of Kruchonikh’s Inferno.
Air
gnawed out by tobacco smoke.
Remember—
at the window,
for the first time,
burning,
with tender frenzy your arms I’d stroke?
Now you’re sitting there,
heart in armour;
a day,
and perhaps,
I’ll be driven out.
To the bleary hall:
let’s dress: be calmer,
crazy heart, don’t hammer so loud!
I’ll rush out, raving,
hurl my body into the street,
slashed by despair from foot to brow.
Don’t,
don’t do it,
darling,
sweet!
Better say good-bye right now.
Anyway,
my love’s a crippling weight
to hang on you
wherever you flee.
Let me sob it out
in a last complaint,
the bitterness of my misery.
A bull tired out by a day of sweat
can plunge into water,
get cooled and rested.
For me
there’s no sea but your love,
and yet
from that even tears can’t wrest me a respite.
If a weary elephant wants some calm,
 lordly, he’ll lounge on the sun-baked sand.
I’ve
only your love
for sun and balm,
yet I can’t even guess who’ll be fondling your hand.
If a poet were so tormented
he might
barter his love for cash and fame.
For me
the world holds no other delight
than the ring and glitter of your dear name.
No rope will be noosed,
no river leapt in,
nor will bullet or poison take my life.
No power over me,
your glance excepting,
has the blade of any knife.
Tomorrow you’ll forget
it was I who crowned you,
I
who seared out a flowering soul.
The pages of my books will be vortexed
around you
by a vain existence’s carnival whirl.
Could my words,
dry leaves that they are but,
detain you
with throbbing heart?
Ah,
let the last of my tenderness carpet
your footfall as you depart!

1916
OUR MARCH

Beat the squares with the tramp of rebels!
Higher, ranges of haughty heads!
We'll wash the world with a second deluge,
Now's the hour whose coming it dreads.

Too slow, the wagon of years,
The oxen of days—too glum.
Our god is the god of speed,
Our heart—our battle-drum.

Is there gold diviner than ours?
What wasp of a bullet us can sting?
Songs are our weapons, our power of powers,
Our gold—our voices; just hear us sing!

Meadow, lie green on the earth!
With silk our days for us line!
Rainbow, give colour and girth
To the fleet-foot steeds of time.

The heavens grudge us their starry glamour.
Bah! Without it our songs can thrive.
Hey there, Ursus Major, clamour
For us to be taken to heaven alive!

Sing, of delight drink deep,
Drain spring by cups, not by thimbles.
Heart, step up your beat!
Our breasts be the brass of cymbals!

1917
CLOUDS UP TO TRICKS

High
   in the sky
sailed clouds.

Just four of them—
   none of your crowds.
From the first to the third
   they looked men,
while the fourth
   was a camel.
   Then,
when they were well adrift,
they were joined
   on the way
   by a fifth,
from which,
   absolutely irrelevant,
ran elephant
   after elephant.
Till—
   perhaps a sixth
   came and gave them a scare—
the clouds
   all vanished
   into thin air.
And after them,
   champing the clouds into chaff,
galloped the sun,
   a yellow giraffe.

1917-1918
KINDNESS TO HORSES

Hoofs plod
seeming to sing,
Grab.
Rib.
Grub.
Rob.
Ice-shod,
wind a-swing,
the street skidded.
On the roadway a cob
toppled,
and immediately,
loafer after loafer,
sweeping the Kuznetsky
with trousers bell-bottomous,
came mobbing.
Laughter rang over and over,
“Horse flopped!
Boo, hippopotamus!”
The Kuznetsky guffawed.
Only I
didn’t mix my voice in the bestiality.
I came up, glimpsed in the horse’s eye:
the street, up-turned,
swam in all its reality.
I came up and saw
huge drop after drop
roll down the muzzle,
hide in the growth....
And an animal anguish
I couldn’t stop
spilled out of me, rippling,
and flooded us both.
“Now, don’t, please, horsie!
You know what remorse is?
They’re human,
but why do you suppose you’re worse?
Pet,
we’re all of us a little bit horses,
each of us in his own way’s a horse.”
Perhaps she didn’t need a nurse, old nannie,
perhaps even laughed at my words
—too trite!—
but the horse made an effort,
heaved,
up-dragging,
neighed, and went on,
all right.
Tail a-swishing,
great big baby,
she came light-hearted,
back to her stall,
and she felt a colt—just two years, maybe,—
and life worth living
despite it all.

1918
AN AMAZING ADVENTURE
OF VLADIMIR MAYAKOVSKY

at Pushkino, Akulov Hill,
Rumyantsev’s dacha,
27 versts from Moscow
by Yaroslavl railway.

The sunset blazed like sixty suns.  
July was under way.  
The heat was dense,  
the heat was tense,  
upon that summer’s day.  
The slope near Pushkino swelled up  
into Akulov Hill,  
while at the foot  
a village stood,  
roofs like a warped-up frill.  
Behind the village  
was a hole;  
by evening, sure though slow,  
into that hole  
the sun would roll,  
to sleep, for all I know.  
And then,  
next morning,  
crimson-clad,  
the sun would rise  
and shine,  
till finally it made me mad—  
the same each blasted time!  
Till once  
so crazy I became  
that all turned pale with fright.  
“Get down, you loafer!”  
to the sun  
I yelled with all my might.  
“Soft job, sun,” I went on to shout,  
“this coming up to roast us,  
while I must sit,  
year in, year out,  
and draw these blooming posters!”  
it's time you changed your ways.
Why not step in for tea, instead
of rise, and set, and blaze?"
My lucky stars!
What have I done!
Corona, beams and all,
*itself,*
with giant strides
the sun
is coming at my call.
I try to cover up my fear,
retreating lobster-wise;
it's coming,
it's already near,
I see its white-hot eyes.
Through door and window,
chink
and crack
it crammed into the room.
Then stopped
to get its hot breath back,
and blimey, did it boom!
"I'm changing my itin'rary
the first time since creation.
Now, poet,
out with jam and tea,
else why this invitation?"
Myself scarce fit
to match two words,
half-barmy with the heat,
I somehow nodded
kettlewards:
"Come on, orb,
take a seat!"
That hollering won't come to good.
My impudence be dashed!
Thought I
and sat
as best I could
upon the bench, abashed.
But strange to say,
with every ray
I felt the stiffness ease,
"Look here," I cried, "you Goldy-Head, it's time you changed your ways. Why not step in for tea, instead of rise, and set, and blaze?"

*An Amazing Adventure*
and cramped formality gave way
to frankness by degrees.
I spoke of this
and spoke of that,
about the beastly ROSTA⁶
“There, there,” he said,
“don’t sulk, my lad,
there’s things worse than a poster.
You s’pose it’s easier to shine
all day up there?
Just try.
But since the job’s been earmarked
mine,
my motto’s
do or die!”
This way till dark we chatted on,
till former night, precisely.
Huh,
dark indeed!
All shyness gone,
we got along quite nicely.
And pretty soon right chummily
I thump him on the shoulder,
and he hits back,
“Why, you and me,
that’s two, so let’s be bolder!
Come, poet, up!
Let’s sing and shine,
however dull the earth is.
I’ll pour the sunshine that is mine,
and you—
your own,
in verses!”
The walls of gloom,
the jails of night
our double salvo crushed,
and helter-skelter,
verse and light
in jolly tumult rushed.
The sun gets tired
and says good night
to sleep away his cares,
then I blaze forth with all my might,
and day once more upflares.
Shine up on high,
shine down on earth,
till life's own source runs dry—
shine on—
for all your blooming worth,
so say
both sun
and I!

1920
ORDER No. 2 TO THE ARMY OF ARTS

This is to you,
well-fed baritones,
from Adam
to the present day
shaking the dives called theatres with the groans
of Romeo and Juliet or some such child’s play.

To you,
maitres painters
fattening like ponies,
guzzling and guffawing salt of the earth,
secluded in your studios,
forever spawning
flowers and girlflesh for all you are worth.

To you,
fig-leaf-camouflaged mystics,
foreheads dug over with furrows sublime,
futuristic,
imagistic,
acmeistic,
stuck tight in the cobwebs of rhyme.

To you,
who abandoned smooth haircuts for matted,
slick shoes for bast clogs a-la-russki,
proletcultists7
sewing your patches
on the faded frock-coat of Alexander Pushkin.

To you,
dancing
or playing the tune,
now openly betraying,
now sinning in secret,
picturing the future as an opportune
academic salary for every nitwit!

I say to you,
I,
whether genius or not,
working in ROSTA, 
abandoning trilles; 
quit your rot 
before you're debunked 
with the butts of rifles!

Quit it, 
forget 
and spit 
on rhymes, 
arias, 
roses, 
hearts 
and all other suchlike shit 
out of the arsenals of the arts.

Whoever cares 
that "Ah, poor creature, 
how he loved, how his heart did bleed!"
Master-craftsmen, 
not long-haired preachers, 
that is what we need.

Hark! 
Locomotives groan, 
draughts 
through their floors and windows blow; 
"Give us coal from the Don, 
mechanics, 
fitters 
for the depot!"

On every river, from source to mouth, 
with holes in their sides, river-boats too 
lie idle, dismally howling out: 
"Give us oil from Baku!"

While we kill time, debating 
the innermost essence of life, 
"Give us new forms, we're waiting!" 
everything seems to cry.
We're nobody's fools
till your lips come apart
to stare, expectant, like cows chewing cud.
Comrades,
wake up,
give us new art
to haul the Republic out of the mud!

1921
Spanish stone rose in cliff and wall
dazzling white, jagged as saw-teeth.
Till twelve the steamer stood swallowing coal
and drinking its fill of water.
Then it swung round its iron-clad snout
and exactly at one
weighed its anchors and wheezing pulled out.
Europe shrank to a pin and was gone.
Great mountains of water run past me, thundering.
Enormous as years, at the ship they pound.
Birds fly over me. Fish swim under me.
Water lies all around.
For weeks, heaving its athletic chest,
now nose to the grindstone, now drunk as a lord,
the Atlantic Ocean, never at rest,
perpetually sighed or roared.
"Oh, to lap the Sahara!"
It isn’t so far-off....
A funny old trinket
this ship on the blue!
Carry or sink it—
what shall I do?
If I leave them dry—
in the sun they fry.
No good, these men,
too small to feed on.
O.K.—bien,
let them speed on.”
There’s nothing
like waves
to thrill and stir one.
To some
they bring childhood,
to some—
a loved voice.
I, though,
see banners
once more unfurling.
There it starts—
the commotion—
go to it, boys!
Then again
all’s quiet
and the hubbub’s through:
no doubts,
no excitement,
just nice and warm.
But suddenly—
how,
if I only knew—
from the depths
arises
the sea revkom.⁸
And the militant spray—
like water-guerillas—
go clambering up
from the ocean’s bed,
hurtling skyward,
then downward spilling,
tearing
the crowns
of froth
into shreds.

Then again
the waters
fuse into one
commanded to boil
by somebody's power.
And from under the clouds
a wave dashes down
pouring orders and slogans
in a ceaseless shower.
And the billows swear
to the sea CEC
not to down
their battle arms
till the end.
Now they've won
and throughout the equator—
see—

droplet Soviets
their limitless power
extend.
The last little rallies
of quietening waves
keep debating
something
in lofty style,
and now the ocean,
washed clean and shaved,
for a time relaxes
with a peaceable smile.
I look through the railings:
on with it, boys!
Under the gangway
hanging
like a latticed bridge,
the waves' T.U. local
its wisdom employs
on issues
on which
ocean-destinies hinge.
And under the water in business-like quiet
grows a coral palace with spire and gable
weaving its wickerwork to make things more bright
for the hard-working whale, his wife and baby.

There now—

the moonbeams their carpet spread
as if on dry land—

just step down, go ahead!

Not for enemies, though;
the Atlantic’s eye,
watchful as ever,
looks up at the sky.

Chilly and still,
all varnished with moonshine,
or groaning
and tossing
when old wounds smart,
the longer and closer

I look at you, Ocean,
the nearer and dearer
you are
to my heart.

Your tumult—
forever I’m glad to hear it;
your blue
my eyes
drink in
like no other—
in breadth,
in blood,
in cause,
in spirit,

my revolution’s elder brother.

1925
CONTAGIOUS CARGO

The steamer hove in, hooted, roared, and, runaway convict, they’ve chained ’er.

700 humans on board. Negroes — the remainder.
Out of a launch to the steamer decks.
Popping up for inspection, the doctor squints through tortoise-shell specs:

“Anyone got infection?”
Pimples well-powdered, features well-washed, swaying and swaggering coyly, the first class filed as the doctor watched with smile urbane and oily.
From double-barreler nostrils exhaling blue smoke in a cunning ring, headmost came in a diamond halo Swift — the porker king.
A yard from his snigger the stinkpipe stuck.

Go, pry into clients like these! Under cambric vest, under silken trunks,
go and discern disease.
Island! To abstinence take recourse.
Don’t let him beyond the docks.
But no—
the captain salutes, in due course,
and Swift is let loose with the pox.
First class done with,
the second class goes in for examination.
The doctor pokes into ear and nose,
the picture of irritation.
The doctor sneered, and the doctor scowled,
jowls all askew with spleen,
then sent three blokes from the second class crowd
for a couple of days’ quarantine.
After the second class loomed the third,
black with niggers as ink.
The doctor looked at his watch, disturbed,
“Cocktail-hour,
I should think.
Off!
and shut ’em up in the hold.
Ill—
clear as day!” he stated.
“Dirty vagabonds! And, all told,
not one of 'em

vaccinated.”

Down

in the hold

he sprawls, Tom Jackson,
hell of a pain

in his noodle.

Tomorrow

they’ll jab him

with smallpox vaccine

and home

Tom Jackson’ll toddle.

Tommy,

he’s got a wife on shore;

hair—like a soft black cushion,

and skin—

the sleekest you ever saw,

just like

Black Lion shoeshine.

While Tom

went tramping

for work

abroad

—Cuba’s got eyes

for beauty—

his wife

got sacked

for what the boss called
dodgin’ her nat’ral duty.
The moon chucks coins

on the ocean bed—

dive in

and all ills will mend.
No meat whole weeks,

no meal ‘n’ no bread,

just pineapples

weeks on end.

Another steamer

screwed in by its screw—

’s weeks

till the next’ll be comin’.
Hunger’s no help

in pulling through.
Ah, Tommy don’t love me, Tommy ain’t true, shares his mat with a white, does Tommy.
No way of earning, no chance to steal—
police under parasols everywhere.
And Swift— those exotics make him feel lascivious as a terrier.
Old Sallow perspired under trunks and vest
at flesh so juicy and black.
He poked his bucks at the face, the breast—
at the moons with famine slack.
Then grappled hunger, that lifelong foe,
with heavy-weight faithfulness.
Inside was the clear decision NO,
yet lips broke huskily: YES. . . .
Already pushing the door with his shoulder was festering Mister Swift.
And time wasn’t a minute older when up they were whisked by the lift.
Tom turned up in a week or so and a fortnight through slept fast, glad that they'd be with bread and dough and the smallpox bogey was past. But there came a day when on Negro skin ominous patterns were etched and children their mothers' wombs within grew dumb, blind and wretched. The calendar skimmed from day to day crippling legs and arms, eating half their bodies away, stretching their palms for alms. And special note of the Negro was made when the flock collected for prayer. Pointing towards this visual aid Parson Dry would declare: "It's God who punishes man and wife for her bringing visitors home." And rotting black flesh for the rest of life
peeled from rotting Negro bone.
Nosing in politics?
   Not my vocation.
I just
   jot down
what I see.
Some folks
call it
   CIVILISATION,
others—
   CO-LO-NIAL PO-LI-CY.

1926
A SKYSCRAPER DISSECTED

Take
the biggermost New York house,
scan it through from bottom to top:
you'll find age-old cubbyholes fit for a mouse,
a very
pre-October Yelets or Konotop.40
First floor—
jewellers in unrelieved vigil.
Locks hitched fast to the shutter's brow.
Film-star policemen, grey-clad, rigid;
hound-like they'll die guarding others' dough.
Third floor—
offices, gains and losses.
Blotting-paper rotting in slavish sweat.
So the world shan't forget who the boss is—
doorsigns in gold: "William Sprat".
Fifth.
After counting the slips in her trousseau
an over-ripe miss lies in dreams about grooms.
Her bust raising lace whose finesse rouses awe,
she scratches
her armpits' prodigious brooms.

Seventh.
Having built up
his strength through sport

a mister

towers
over the domestic hearth;
discovering
marital infidelity of some sort,

he gives a polishing
to his better half.

Tenth.
A honeymoon-couple in bed.
Connubial bliss written large on their faces.

Busy reading a New York Times ad:
"Buy our cars on a monthly basis."

Thirtieth.
Shareholders in conference jam,
dividing billions with snarl and scuffle—
the profits of a firm manufacturing ham
out of top-quality Chicago dog-offal.

Fortieth.
By the bedroom of a music-hall beaut',
fockussing his fervour on the keyhole of the said,
to wrest a divorce from Coolidge, a sleuth
waits to catch a husband red-handed in bed.

A free-lance painter
of bare-arse portraits
dozes in the ninetieth,
contemplating
how to win the favour
at the landlord’s daughter
and simultaneously
get him
to buy a painting.

Penthouse.
Tablecloth
white past believing.

Alone
in the restaurant
next to the sky
a Negro cleaner
eats sizeable leavings,
while rats
clean up crumbs
of lesser size.

I look
in a blend
of anger and boredom
at the inmates
of the ninety-storey shack.
I’d meant
to go 7,000 miles forward,
but it looks,
I’ve been taken
seven years back.

1929
BROOKLYN BRIDGE

Coolidge, old boy,
give a whoop of joy!
What's good is good—
   no need for debates.
Blush red with my praise,
   swell with pride
till you're spherical,
though you be ten times
United States
of America.
As to Sunday church
   the pious believer
walks,
   devout,
by his faith bewitched,
so I,
in the grisly mirage
   of evening
step, with humble heart,
on to Brooklyn Bridge.
As a conqueror rides
through the town he crushes
on a cannon
   by which himself's a midge,
so—
drunk with the glory—
   all life be as luscious—
I clamber,
proud,
on to Brooklyn Bridge.
As a silly painter
   into a museum Virgin
infatuated,
   plunges
his optics' fork,
so I
   from a height on heaven verging
look
   through Brooklyn Bridge at New York.
New York,
till evening stilling and bewildering.
forgets both its sultriness and its height,
and only the naked soul of a building
will show in a window’s translucent light.
From here the elevators hardly rustle,
which sound alone, by the distance rubbered,
betrays the trains as off they bustle,
like crockery being put by in a cupboard.
Beneath, from the river’s far-off mouth,
sugar seems carted from mills by peddlars,
it’s the windows of boats bound north and south—
tinier than the tiniest pebbles.
I pride in the stride of this steel-wrought mile.
Embodied in it my visions come real—
in the striving for structure instead of style,
in the stern, shrewd balance of rivets and steel.
If ever the end of the world should arrive,
and chaos sweep off the planet’s last ridge,
with the only
lonely
thing to survive
towering over debris
this bridge,
then,
as out of a needle-thin bone
museums
rebuild dinosaurs,
so future's geologist
from this bridge alone
will remodel
these days
of ours.
He'll say:
this mile-long iron arch
welded
oceans and prairies together.
From here old Europe
in westward march
swished
to the winds
the last Indian feather.
This rib will remind
of machines by its pattern.
Consider—
could anyone with bare hands
planting
one steel foot
on Manhattan
pull Brooklyn
up
by the lip
where he stands?
By the wires—
those tangled electric braidings—
he'll tell:
it came after steam, their era.
Here people
already
hollered by radio,
here folks
    had already soared up by aero.
Here life
    for some
        was a scream of enjoyment,
for others—
    one drawn-out,
        hungry howl.
From here the martyrs of unemployment
    dashed headlong
        into the Hudson’s scowl.
And further—
    my picture unfurls without hitch—
by the harp-string ropes,
    at the stars’ own feet,
here stood Mayakovsky,
    on this same bridge,
and hammered his verses
    beat by beat.
I stare like a savage
    at an electric switch,
eyes fixed
    like a tick on a cat.
Yeah,
    Brooklyn Bridge. . . .
It’s something, that!

1925
SERGEI ESSENIN

You've departed,
as they say,  
  to another world.
Emptiness...  
  Fly on,  
with stars colliding.
No money to collect.  
  No beershops.  
    In a word—
Sobriety.  
No, Esenin,  
  this is not a sneer.
No shortles in my throat,  
  but a lump of woe.
A sagging bone-bag  
  in my vision  
you appear,
red runnels  
  from your slashed-up wrist-veins flow.
Stop,  
  leave off!  
Are you in your right mind?
To let your cheeks be smeared  
  with deathly lime?
You,  
  who'd pull off pranks  
that no one  
  could have matched at any time!
Why?  
  What for?  
    There's really no accounting.
Critics mumble,  
  it was all because  
this and that—  
  but chiefly poor class-contact
which resulted  
  in too much strong drink,  
    of course.

64
“Had he given up
bohemians
for the class
it’d influence him,
he’d have less time for fights....”
But that class—
you think it slakes its thirst
with kvass\textsuperscript{13}?
Yeah—
the class—
it doesn’t
mind a booze
on pay-day nights.
If, they say,
he had been supervised
by someone “at the post”\textsuperscript{14}
he’d have got
a lot more gifted
as to content.
He’d have written verse
as fast as prose
(long-drawn-out and dreary as Doronin\textsuperscript{15}).
But if some such thing had happened,
I should think
you’d have done it—
slit your wrist-veins—
long before.
I’d rather,
if you ask me,
die of drink
than be bored to death
or live a bore.
Whether it was boredom
or despair
neither you
nor penknife
can explain.
Maybe,
had there been some ink
in the Angleterre
there’d have been no cause
to slit a vein.
Imitators jumped at it—

Dozens hurried
to repeat the bloody deed.

But, listen,
why increase
the suicidal score?

Better make more ink
to meet the need!

His tongue’s now locked
between his teeth forever.

To bandy words
is just a shame
and waste of breath.

The people,
that supremest language-weaver,
has lost a lusty
young apprentice with his death.

So now
they bring along
funereal scrap,

verses
scarce rebotted
since the last decease,

and line the grave
with lines
obtuse and drab.

Is that the homage
that a poet should receive?

Although the monument
that you deserve
has not been cast—

where is it,
ringing bronze
and hard-grained granite?—

The drain of memory’s
already thick with dust;

remembrances
and dedications
set upon it.

66
Your name
   is being snivelled
   into hankies.
With your words
   maestro Sobinov\(^{16}\)
   hanky-pankies
and trills
   beneath a stillborn birch,
   as if he'd die,
"Oh not a wo-o-ord,
   my friend,
   ah, not a si-i-igh!"\(^{17}\)
Bah!
   I'd like to talk
   a bit more briskly
with that selfsame
   Leonid V. Loengrinsky\(^{18}\)
I'd stand up in their way,
   a thundering brute:
"How dare you mumble verse
   like cows chew cud?"
I'd deafen them—
   I'd whistle and I'd hoot:
"Your blank-blank mother,
   grandmother,
   your blinking soul and God!"
So all the giftless scum
   skedaddle off to hell,
flapping
   their inflated
   jacket-skirts,
so P. S. Kogan\(^{19}\)
   should go scattering
   pell-mell,
piercing
   all he meets
   with whisker-darts.
Riff-raff
   hasn't scarced much
   as yet.
There's lots to do,
   so hurry, mates,
   along.
Life must first be thoroughly rest,
rebuilt—remade—and only then extolled in song.
These days—they are a little hard upon the pen.
But tell me, cripples, crippresses, if it please you,
whoever of the great ones, where and when chose paths that were both better-trod and easier?

Words command and muster human strength.

March!
Let time explode like gunshells, far behind,
so that back to the old days the wind should fling only hairscreaps,
twisted up and twined!
It isn’t much equipped for merriment, our world.

Let’s wrest joy from the grips of a future day!

Dying in this life is not so hard.
Building life is harder, I daresay.

1926
TO COMRADE NETTE—STEAMER
AND MAN

Not in vain I start.
No ghost-tale rubbish, reader.
Through the harbour’s molten sunshine,
past the jetty
steams
the very self
of Comrade THEODORE NETTE.
Yes, it’s he;
all in a hurry to arrive,
through those lifebuoy-saucer spectacles
he looks.

“Hullo, Nette!
How I’m glad that you’re alive
with the smoking life of funnels,
ropes
and hooks.

Pull up here!
I hope it’s not too shallow.

Tired,
I fancy,
boiling all the distance from Batum.
Once you were a man...

Remember,
dear old fellow,
the tea that on a train we would consume?
One eye cocked
towards your red-sealed cargo,
nights on end,
while others snored away
about old Romka Yakobson
you’d argue,
memorising poems
in your funny way.
Off you’d drop at dawn.

Is that revolver there?
Better mind their business,
if they’re wise!
Could I think
that only in a year
I should meet you
in this cargo-steamer guise?
There’s the moon come up.
A stirring sight, I’ll say!
Slashing space in two,
astern she’s looming;
as if, it seems,
from that last battle in the passageway
your deathless hero-track
were trailing,
blood-illumined.

Your print-and-paper communism’s not believed so readily.
“Balloney, boy!
It’s true in books alone.”

But things like these
will show you communism bodily
transforming “fancies”
all at once
to flesh and bone.

We live under a pledge
that grips in iron unity,—
no crucifix will nail,
no guns on earth will crush us,—
that’s for humanity
to live in one community,
not in a world all parcelled into Latvias and Russias.

Blood
runs in our veins,
not lukewarm water.

Marching
through revolver bark and blast,
when we die,
it’s to become immortal,
cast in steamers,
verse
and other things that last.

I could forge ahead
through years and years,
but when life is done,
there’s nothing better
I should wish than meet the end when my time nears
in the way that death was met by Comrade Nette.

1926
DON'T YOUR SHOULDER BLADES ITCH?

Whenever a rainbow
    hangs down its bow
or the sky
    shines blue
    without patch or stitch,
tell me,
    don't your shoulder blades—
    both
begin to itch?
Don't you wish
    that from under your jersey
where a drudge-born hump
    used to hide,
throwing off
    the shirt's dull burden,
a pair of wings
    would go winging wide?
Or when night
    with its nightliest stars
rolls along
    and the Bears—
    Great and Little—
    prowl and growl,
don't you feel restless?
    Don't you long...?
Oh yes, you do,
    and how!
We're cramped.
    And the sky
    has no bounds,
    no border.
Oh,
to fly up
    to God's apartments
and show
    old Savaoh
    an eviction order
from the Moscow Soviet's
    Housing Department!
Kaluga,  
dug in  
among meadow  
and grove,  
dozing  
down  
in your earthly pit!  
Now then, Kaluga,  
come on, Tambov!  

Skyward  
like sparrows  
flit!  

Isn't it fine,  
with marriage on your mind,  
swish!—  
to wing off  
over land and sea,  
to pluck out  
an ostrich's feather  
from behind  
and back  
with a present  
for your fiancé?  

Saratov!  
On what  
have you fixed an eye?  
Charmed?  
By a birdie's dot?  
Up—  
soar swallow-like  
into the sky;  
it's time you grew wings,  
that's what!  
Here's a good thing to do—  
no deed more audacious;  
choose a night  
and dash through it,  
death-me-dare,  
to Rome;  
give a thrashing  
to a Roman fascist
then back
    in an hour
    to your samovar in Tver.
Or else—
    the dawn's opened up
    you see
    who's faster—
    it or me?
But...
    all this is nothing
    but imagination.
People
    so far
    are a wingless nation.
People
    are created on a lousy plan:
    a back
    good for nothing but pains.
So to buy an aeroplane each,
    if you can,
    is really
    all that remains.
Like a bird then with tail,
    two wings
    and feathers
you'll whet your nose
    all records to beat.
Tear off the ground!
    Fly, planes, through the heavens!
Russia,
    soar up
    in a sky-bound fleet!
Quicker!
    Why,
    stretching up like a pole,
admire from earth
    the heavenly hole?
Come,
    show your bravery,
avio!

1923
PAPER HORRORS

(experienced by Uladimir Mayakovsky)

If I held
in my hands
the planet’s reins
I’d stop the earth for a minute:
“Hark,
d’you hear
pens scraping,
fountain- and plain,
as if
the earth’s teeth
were grating in the dark?”

Men’s pride,
subside,
be forever forgot!

To a dot
humanity’s future
tapers.

Man
is gradually
becoming a blot
on the margins
of enormously important papers.

Men are wedged like shadows
in domestic cubbyholes.

Ten square feet per nose—
yet for papers’ glee—
whole castles of offices—

sprawl over tables

or lie back in safes
as content as can be.

Queues trail out
for cloth
at a shop.

No galoshes for feet,
not a glove for your paw.

Yet for papers
there’s baskets,
a bumper crop,
No more to beg for one day as a dole
And then to age in endless sorrow drowned,
but to see all the world at the first call
of "Comrade!"
      turn in glad response around.
and for “cases” carcasses—folders galore.
Rubles for travel—how many have you?
Ever been in Madrid? I bet you no!
Yet for papers, to enable them to sail and travel they’re even erecting a new G.P.O.!
Thin as clips turn the legs of the former strong.
Instructions oust brains—no one feels the loss.
Men degrade into errand-boys running along in the service of paper turned boss.
Papers burst from portfolios stodgy, baring their white-toothed hem; soon people will crawl into portfolios for lodgings, as for flats—papers will move into them. I foresee in the future—no fantasy of mine, but a prophecy blared out by paper trumpets:
papers shall sit at tables and dine and mannikins lie under the tables crumpled.
I'd unfurl
    a storm
    of rioting banners—
tear papers with my teeth
and, indignant, yell:
“Every inch
    of useless paper,
proletarians,
hate like your enemy,
    abhor like hell!!”

1927
A CHAT IN ODESSA HARBOUR

between s.s. *Soviet Daghestan*
and *Red Abkhazia*

Clouds,
come,
lend the sunset west,
canary-feathers!

Fall on sea and land,
black yoke of southern night!

Two ships at anchorage
begin a chat together:

one blinks—
the other answers with a light.

What are they signalling?
I strain my forehead’s furrow;
a red light flashes on
then fades
and turns to green.

Probably
he wants a date tomorrow,
or perhaps
just frets in jealous spleen?

Or perhaps
he’s asking,
“*Red Abkhazia,*
it’s me,
the gunboat
*Soviet Daghestan.*

Sulking all alone—
what can be crazier?

Come here, baby,—
let me hold your hand.”

Silence.

Then *Abkhazia* replies at last,
“Can’t get on alone?
You’ll have to learn.
‘Coz I’m now in love
up to the mast
with the grey
three-funnelled cruiser
*Komintern.*”

80
“All you women are just sluts and nothing else.
What’s she see in him, that lumbering old braggart?”
And again he signals with short yells:
“Hear me, someone, send us some tobacco!
It’s dull here, on the searoads—dripping wet.
Fit to give one cramps and rust one’s armour.”
The whole world sleeps, the shimmering Black Sea shed—
a giant tear of blue—upon Odessa harbour.

1926
TASTES MAY DIFFER

The horse saw the camel and laughed herself hoarse.

"Such a tremendous freak of a horse!"

The camel rejoined:

"You—a horse? not nearly!

You're an underdeveloped camel, merely."

And only God, omniscient indeed,

knew they were mammals of different breed.

1929
A LETTER FROM PARIS
TO COMRADE KOSTROU
ON THE ESSENCE
AND MEANING OF LOVE

Comrade Kostrov,

I’m sure you won’t mind—

I know,
generosity’s one of your merits—
if part of the lines
for Paris assigned
I’ll squander
on petty lyrics.

Imagine:
a beauty
enters a hall
framed
in necklace and furs,
and I
says to her
with no preface at all
these very selfsame words:
I’ve
just come
from Russia, comrade.

In my country
I’m a figure.
I’ve seen women
far more comely,

women
prettier
and slimmer.

Girls
go crazy
over poets,
and I’m
vociferous
and smart.

Come along!
Just watch me go it.

Snub me?
No one’s got the heart.
You won't catch me
double-dealing,
dabbling
in petty lust.
Deep down in my heart's
that feeling,
carry it through life
or bust!
I'll not measure
love by weddings.
Leave me, would you?
Very well.
I don't give a damn,
I've said it,
for a bleeding wedding bell.
So, my girl,
don't let's be dainty.
Let's not joke,
Almighty God!
Mademoiselle,
I'm long past twenty—
better call it thirty odd.
Love doesn't mean
just eternal unrest,
nor the way
one can burn and flare.
It's that
which heaves
under mountain-breasts,
behind
the jungle of hair.
To love means to rush out
into the yard
and right until ravening night
with a flashing axe
to chop faggots hard
in a fireworks
of manly might.
To love
is to break
from insomnia-torn sheets,
with jealousy of Copernicus
swallowing saliva;
him,
not the husband
of Mrs. Sugar-and-Sweets
regarding
as your most deadly rival.
Love
for us
isn’t Eden and so on.
Love
for us
booms that once again
our heart’s
too-long-cooling engine
will go on
working
against
all odds
and pain.
You’ve severed
with Moscow
every thread,
it’s years
since you
and it came to part.
Then how shall I hammer
into your head
the gist
of that state of heart?
Lights cover the earth
right up to the sky.
The sky’s full of stars—
go, count the lot.
If I wasn’t
already a poet
I
would turn astronomer,
honest to God!
A hubbub fills
both alley and square.
The traffic
speeds past
like mad,
while I 
go sauntering here and there
and jot down rhymes in a pad.
The cars that race along the street
won’t knock me down by chance.
They understand, and so take heed:
the bloke’s in a lyric trance.
A vortex of images, ideas, and visions
the sizzling city brings.
Why, even a bear in such conditions
would grow a pair of wings.
And then out of one of the third-rate bars
after stewing inside for a time
a word zooms upward straight to the stars
like a comet, all ashine,
its tail stretched out over half the skies,
itits plumes—the heavens’ highlight,
for lovers to sit and feast their eyes
while smelling their arbour’s lilac;
to rouse
    and lead
and enthuse
    and uphold 'em,
those
    whose spirit is wavering,
to saw off enemies' heads
    from their shoulders
with a glittering
    long-bladed
sabre.
I'll stand
    till the very last beat in my breast
as if
    on a rendezvous,
and listen
    to love
booming on in its nest,
simple,
    human
and true.
Sea-tide,
    hurricane,
    tempest
and flame
rumble inside me
    and swell!
Who'd take such a pet
    to own and tame?
You would?
    Very well!

1928
MY SOVIET PASSPORT

I'd rip out
bureaucracy's guts,
I would.

No reverence for mandates—
good riddance!

Pack off to very hell
for good
any old paper,
but this one. . . .

Past berths and compartments
drawn out in a line
moves a customs official,
most courteous-looking.

Folks hand in their passports
and I hand in mine,

my crimson-jacketed
bookling.

Some passports
bring smiles
in a matter of instants.

Others
are fit but to die on.

Special deference
is shown,
for instance
for those
with the double-bed
British Leo.

Bowing non-stop,
as if rocked by a ship,
eating their eyes
into the "kind old uncles",
they take,
as if they were taking a tip
the passports
of lanky Yankees.
At Polish passports
they bulge out their eyes
in thick-skulled
policemen's
donkeyness,
as if to say:

what

the devil are these

geographical

novelties?

Without even turning

their cabbage-like heads,

hardly deigning

to touch them,

they take,

absent-minded,

the passports of Swedes

and all sorts

of other Dutchmen.

But suddenly

Mr. Officer's face

turns awry,

as if

he has smelled disaster.

You've guessed it:

the officer’s taken my

red-skinned hulk of a passport.

He handles it

like a hedgehog

or bomb,

like a bee

to be nipped

by the wings,

like a twisting rattlesnake

three yards long

with a hundred

deadly stings.

The porter winks;

to tell the truth,

he'd carry your luggage

free

all the way for you.

The gendarme

looks questioningly

at the sleuth,

the sleuth looks back:

what to do with this wayfarer?
With what delight, by the gendarmes, damn it,
I'd be flayed, crucified, hanged
for the crime of holding a sickled, hammered
Soviet passport in my hand!
I'd rip out bureaucracy's guts, I would.
No reverence for mandates—good riddance!
Pack off to very hell for good
any old paper, but this one...
As the most valuable of certificates
I pull it from the pants where my documents are:
read it—envy me—I'm a citizen
of the USSR!
1929
CLOUD IN PANTS

PROLOGUE

Your thoughts
day-dreaming in a pudden'-soft head
like an overfed lackey on a greasy sofa,
I'll tease with my heart's blood-streaming shred,
deride you, audacious, till you smart all over.

In my soul there isn't a single grey hair,
no senile tenderness does it hold!
My voice thundering everywhere,
I go,— handsome,
twenty-two-years old.

Tender lovers
with violins vie.
The ruder compete with cymbals.
But can anyone turn inside out like I
to be nothing but lips, bodiless and limbless?

Come and I'll teach you,
Miss Now-Now-No-Fooling,
angelic, stiff as the wall of a precipice.
Come you, too, who skim over lips as coolly
as a cook skims through books of cooking recipes.

If you want—
I can be all crazy flesh,
the antipode of polite romance.
Or
sweet and delicate as you wish;
not a man but a cloud in pants.

I'll never believe there's a flowery Nice.
Today once again I sing glory
to men who've sinned till they're sick of vice,
to women worn as a trite old story.

I

You think it's delirium? Malaria?
No!
It happened
in Odessa
when
"I'll come at four," said Maria.
Eight.
Nine.
Ten.

Already the evening,
gloomy, decemberly,
departs from the windows
into the horror of night.

Into its flabby back, shortling with devilry,
chandeliers stick their light.

You wouldn’t recognise me—
a sinewy mountain
groaning and contorting,
jowls all knots.
What can a hulk like that be wanting?
Lots!

For myself, you know, it doesn’t much matter
that I’m all bronze,
that my heart’s steel and ice.
At night one wants to hide one’s metal
in something feminine,
soft and nice.

So,
enormous,
hunched,
in the window I show,
my forehead smelting the windowpanes shiny.
Will there be love or no?
Big
or tiny?

It can’t be a big one in such a brute;
must be just a lovekin,
timid as a lamb,
thrown into jitters when motorcars hoot.
adoring the tinkle of a tram.

I wait and wait,
poking my face
into the rain’s pocked hide.
The minutes race
as I stand there, splashed
by the thunder of the city's tide.

Midnight, rushing along with a dagger,
caught up,
stabbed the day—
ready!

The twelfth hour
staggered
and fell
like the head of a felon beheaded.

Raindrops landing on the windowpane,
fusing into a monstrous grimace,
howled in alarm
like the scowling chimeras
On the Notre Dame.

Damn!
Isn't she coming yet?
Yells tear my mouth—
it's too much to stand.

Then I hear:
as softly
as a patient from a bed
slips out a nerve

and

first slowly,
scarce creeping,
then running
here and there,
it and a couple of others go leaping
in a crazy dance of despair.

Crash!—went the plaster from the ceiling downstairs

Nerves,
barmy,
gallop and stampede,
little,
big,
single and in pairs,
race till, exhausted,
they fall off their feet.

Night oozes into the room, in quagmire fashion.
My leaden eyes stick
in the sludge of the night.

The doors in the corridor suddenly start gnashing
as if the hotel’s teeth
chattered with fright.

You entered,
curt as a knife-thrust unparried,
torturing the kid of your glove.
“You know,
I’m getting married!”
There now, talk about love!

All right. Go ahead.
No harm.
Of course.
Look at me—
I’m calm
as the pulse of a corpse.

Remember—
you used to ask:
“Jack London,
money,
love,
passion—
aren’t they real?”
And I—all I knew
was that you’re the Gioconda
that somebody’s got to steal.

And so they did.

Again, love-crazy, I’ll plunge into games,
illumining my eyebrows’ arches with hellfire.

94
What of it?
A house that has been in flames
can also sometimes give vagabonds shelter.

You tease me?
“A beggar can boast more pennies
than you have emeralds of insanity.”
Remember
the fate that befell Pompeii
when Vesuvius was roused into rage by humanity?

Hey,
gentlemen,
lovers
of sacrilege,
massacre,
crime;
have you seen
the most horrible of all horrors—
my face when it’s absolutely serene?

I feel
that “I”
is too small for me;
irresistibly, I’m turning into somebody or other.

“Hullo!
Who’s talking?”
Who can it be—
Mother?

Mother!
Your son is beautifully sick.
There’s no time to wait.
His heart is on fire.
Go, tell it to both his sisters, quick!
Or else it may be too late.
Every word,
be it even a joke,
that his scorched mouth belches out, Mother,
leaps like a naked whore through the smoke
out of a burning brothel.
People sniff—
something’s frying.
A brigade comes in helmets
and suits
of asbestos.
Look out with your boots, Messrs. firemen,
hearts on fire should be handled with caresses!

Wait,
I’ll roll out my tearfilled eyes for watertubs.
Just let me gain hold on my ribs.
Stand by; I’ll escape, though escape be torturous.
They’ve collapsed!
This heart holds me fast in its grips.

From my lips
jammed tight like a fire-licked door
struggles a kislet—the last left whole.
Mother, I can’t go on singing any more:
The smoke is choking the choir of my soul.

Charred words and phrases of all sorts and size
jump to safety from my burning cranium.
So terror once stretched burning hands to the skies
from the fire-gutted decks of the Lusitania.24

To people trembling
in domestic quiet
the hundred-eyed fireglow streaks from the anchorage.
You, at least,
my last cry,
groan out:
“I’m on fire!”
to the coming centuries.

2

Glorify me!
What, to me, are the great?
On all created I set my NULL.

Reading?
The very idea I hate.
Books?
How dull!

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I used to think
that books were made this way:
the poet comes,
unseals his lips with ease
and sings, inspired old ninny, right away—
please!

But actually,
before the singing can start
you walk, beblistered with fermentation,
while softly wallows in the silt of your heart
that silly haddock, imagination.

Doves and nightingales, peppered with rhyme,
he broils in his pot, the doddering nitwit,
while the street goes writhing in dumb pantomime
with nothing to shout or speak with.

Vainglorious, again and again we build
our cities—towers of Babel;
then God comes
and topples city on field
mixing words into a babble.

Its yell
throttled,
as if kidnapped for ransom,
silent, the street heaved in agony,
bloated taxi and gristly hansom
bristling, jammed like a gag in it.

Chest all pedestrianed—
no consumptive’s more flat—
pushing off the churchporch, that trod on its throat,
out on the square the congestion it spat.

God, it seemed, with his choir of archangels following,
robbed, would descend with punishing club.

But the street only squatted, hollering
"LET'S—GET—GRUB!"
Churlish makeup-men, krupps and kruppsies,
paint on the city a grimace boarish,
while in mouths lie words—decaying corpses,
two alone live and fattening—
BASTARD
and, I believe,
BORSHCH.

The poets, slobbering in tears and sobs,
dashed clear of the street, clutching their locks:
“How shall we ever get on with our jobs
with only such two
to sing daisies,
love and pink frocks?”

After the poets—
the street-going nation:
students,
prostitutes,
contractors.

Compatriots!
Stop!
Why this humiliation?
How dare you beg them be benefactors?

We, brawn and sinew,
robust and supple men,
for us to be beggars? Rip them instead,
them, hanging on as a free supplement
to every double bed!

Ask them for favours?
Wait till they grant them?
Beg rhymester-pygmys for anthem and oratory?
We ourselves
are creators in a burning anthem—
the roar of factory and laboratory.

What’s Faustus to me,
though he may scoot
through celestial fireworks beside Mephistopheles!
I know,
the nail in my boot
than any of Goethe’s fancies more awful is.
I, the gold-tongued,  
my every word giving  
new life to the body,  
new birth to the soul,  
I tell you,  
the tiniest speck living  
is more precious than all I have written
—All!

Listen!  
Blaspheming and cursing,  
here  
preaches today's yell-mouthed Zoroaster.

We, lips a-blob like a chandelier,  
faces like grimy plaster,  
we,  
chain-gangmen of the leper-house city  
where gold and filth breed the hideous disease—  
we're purer than Venice in all her purity  
laved and laundered by suns and seas.

Much worry for me  
that the Ovids and Homers  
had nobody like us,  
all coal-pocked and sooty.  
I know,  
the sun would fade out, almost,  
stunned by our soul's Hellenic beauty.

No prayer so sure as muscles and grit.  
To the devil meekness be hurled.  
We—  
each of us—  
hold in our grip  
the transmission belts of the world!  
It was this that hoisted me on the calvaries of rostrums\textsuperscript{25}  
in towns and cities, low and high,  
and there wasn't a soul who with dilated nostrils  
didn't yell,  
"Crucify!  
Cru-ci-fy!"
But to me,
you, people,
even those most hard,
are so near and dear, there's no meting it.
Seen the dog in the yard
licking the hand that's beating it?

I,
laughed at by the contemporary tribe,
like a joke that's endless and obscene,
see coming over the mountains of time
that which nobody yet has seen.

Where, curtailed, the eyes of mortals halt,
at the head of starving hordes,
I espy,
crowned with the thorns of revolt
the year 1916 draws nigh.

And I'm among you
to be its herald,
everywhere where there's pain,
by every tear-drop that falls
imperilled,
crucified again and again.

Today all forgiveness is at the last.
I've burned out souls where softness was instilled.
And that's more difficult to do than blast
a hundred thousand bastilles.

And when,
it's coming
with rebellion acclaiming,
you pour out to meet the Saviour, I
will pull out my soul,
big, bloody and flaming,
a banner for you to lift on high.

Oh why,
through the gaiety and smiling
do fists, so dirty and brutal, thrust?
The thought of a lunatic asylum
struck me,
blinding with despair and disgust.

And,
just as they jump
into hatches agape,
choked by spasms of fear
when a ship’s end is nigh.
So Burlyúk, gone insane, sought escape
through the panic-torn hole of his eye.

From his tear-gutted eyelids,
bleeding and hideous,
he clambered,
straightened his spine
and with tenderness unexpected in so fat an individual
exclaimed,
“Fine!”

It’s fine when your soul is muffled
in a yellow blouse—safe from eyes prone to pry.
It’s fine, when cast into the teeth of the scaffold,
“Drink Van Huten’s Cocoa!”

to cry.

That thundering moment,
brighter than fireworks
I’d not swap for anything,
no, not for any.

But here, like a wineglass,
through the cigar smoke
protruded the wine-sodden face of Severyanin.

How dare you bear the title of a poet
and chirrup like a sparrow, drab and dull?
Today like a blackjack, you should go it,
bashing the world’s rotten skull.

You,
disturbed by the single doubt
whether or not you dance with a limp,
look how I
amuse myself,
I, out-and-out
vagabond, card sharp and pimp.

From you, wallowing in your lovesick idylls,
from you, dribbling tears from the beginning of time,
I’ll withdraw,
sticking the sun for an eyeglass
into my wide-open eye.

And thus,
unimaginably dressed up,
I’ll go through the world
to thrill and enchant,
leading Napoleon for a pup
tied on a string, in front.

All the world will sprawl like a woman at my feet
and wobble its charms invitingly.
Dead things will come alive
and “Darling, sweet!”
their lips will twitter excitingly.

Suddenly the clouds
to the very last cloudlet
started rocking as far as the eye could descry,
as if white workers, seeking an outlet
for their anger,
picketed the sky.

The thunder, maddening, climbed from a cloud,
inhaled and blew its nose briskly,
and the face of the sky for a moment scowled
in the sombre grimace of an iron Bismarck.

And someone
entangled in the clouds’ tenets
extended hands to the café,
simultaneously
soft and tender
and harsh as an auto-da-fé.
You think it was the sun,
maternally tremulous,
patting the cheek of a café?
Not a whit!
Once more, to execute rebels
advances General Galliffet27!

Pub-crawlers, pull your hands out of your pants.
Grab bombs, cobblestones, knives, or instead,
those of you who haven’t got arms and hands
batter at walls with your heads!

Come on, you timidlings,
starvelings,
sweetlings,
festering in flea-ridden horridness!
Let Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays
be dyed with our blood into holidays.

Let the Earth recall under knives
who she wanted to degrade,
the Earth,
bloated like the mistresses and wives
by Rothschilds wedded and laid.

Lamp posts, come on, hoist them higher,
shop-keepers’ bloody bodies,
for flags to flutter in the fever of fire
as besitting proper holidays!

Begging mercy,
with oaths of all size,
they grappled, fighting with claw and knife.

The sunset convulsed,
red as the Marseillaise,
taking its leave of life.

Already it’s madness.

Nought else can happen.
Night’ll come,
bite it off
and swallow.
See—again the heavens, like Judas, are happy
with a handful of stars, treacherous and hollow.

It comes
and feasts like Mamai,\textsuperscript{28} even cruder,
sitting on the city with its huge behind.
That night—no eyes on earth could have screwed it,
blacker than Azef,\textsuperscript{29} the blackest of his kind.

Crammed, I huddle in the corner of a saloon,
spill wine on my soul, on the tablecloth and all,
while there, from across, round as the moon,
the Madonna’s eyes eat into my soul.

Why bless this stinking, pub-crawling herd
with your gaudy stencilled aura?
Can’t you see—
again
Barabbas is preferred
to the spat-at Calvarian—our gracious lord?

Perhaps it was ordained so—
in the human sty
I’m no newer in face than the rest,
yet of all your sons
maybe it’s I
who is the devoutest, most beautiful and best.

Grant them,
rotting in their mundane joys,
a speedy death of time
so that among their children
boys
should grow up to fatherly prime
and girls give birth
and the newborn mature
to the grey-haired wisdom of sages
and go along and christen their seed
with names they find in my pages.
I, who glorify England and its engines, 
perhaps I’m simply a thirteenth apostle 
in the succession of apostles and archangels 
that populate the Holy Gospel.

And when my voice 
goes obscenely booming 
its daily and nightly 
rigmarole, 
maybe Jesus Christ himself smells the blooming 
forget-me-nots of my soul.

Maria! Maria! Maria! 
Let me in, Maria! 
Don’t keep me out in the street.
No?
Waiting until my cheeks sink in, 
till, tasted by everyone, 
I go to waste?—
till I come and mumble with a toothless grin 
that 
“Today I’m 
   extraordinarily chaste”? 

Maria, 
look—
I’m already getting hunched.

All over the city, 
everywhere, 
bunched 
in the four-storeyed gizzards of flats 
people will poke out their eyes through their fats, 
eyes threadbare 
with forty years’ wear 
to giggle and pass on the infallible guess 
that “again he’s chewing like a broken-down mare 
the stale crust of yesterday’s caress”.

All over the pavements the rain slobbers, 
hemmed in by the puddles, a homeless crook,
wet, licking the roads stoned to death by the cobbles, while on its hoary eyelashes—look!—
on its frosty icicle-lashes
Tears from its eyes,
From the downcast eyes of the drain-pipes—tears!—come welling out in spasmodic splashes.

The raindrops every pedestrian licked while in carriages athlete after fat athlete glistened and burst, having grown so stout and slick, fat oozed through the cracks mixed with bits of gristle. Dripping in streamlets the colour of mud, together with spittle-soaked bread and sauerkraut like a sort of thoroughly masticated cud week-old cutlets came flowing out.

Maria!

How thrust a quiet word into their fat-clogged ear? Birds beg for a living by singing, resonant. And I'm just a human being, Maria, just a human, spat out by consumptive night into the dirty hand of the Presnya.

Maria, will you have such a creature near? Let me in, Maria, or with frantic fingers I'll throttle the doorbell, pressing it.

Maria!

The cattleyards of the streets get beastlier. The rabble's stranglehold grips me tight.

Open!

It hurts! See—my eyes are bristling with ladies' hairpins stuck in for spite.
Ha! She’s opened.

Dear, don’t be afraid
that on my bullock neck
sit sweat-bellied women in a mountain wet-skirted—
a burden I’ll drag till I turn to a wreck:
millions of great loves,
pure, without a speck,
and millions of lovelets, tiny and dirty.

Dear, never fear
if in fits of dishonesty
I’ll cling to a thousand pretty faces again.
Mayakovsky’s sweethearts—
why, they’re a dynasty
of empresses ascending a mad heart to reign.

Maria! Come nearer!

In shameless nudity
or in shivering fright,
give me your lips’ unfaded loveliness.
I and my heart never saw May’s delight,
only April’s immature slovenliness.

Maria!
One poet sings sonnets to Tiana\(^\text{30}\)
while I,
all human,
flesh all the way,
just beg for your body
like Christians for manna:
“Lord, give us
our daily bread
this day!”

Maria, give!

Maria!
Your name I fear to forget
as a poet fears
to forget some word
just found, not dry or discoloured yet,
in its glory matching the glory of the lord.
Maria!
Your body
I’ll love and tend
the way a soldier,
stunted by war,
cherishes his only leg;
Nay, more!

No?
You don’t want to?

Ha!

So it means I’ll take up my heart once more
and carry it, tear-sprayed, alone again,
like a dog
goes carrying its paw
overrun by a train.

I bless the road with my blood’s holy water.
The roadside flowers kiss my garment’s shred.
A thousand times will the sun—Herod’s daughter—
dance round the globe—the Baptist’s head.

And when it dances out to the ending
the number of years for my life assigned,
a trail of millions of blood-drops extending
to the home of my father, I’ll leave behind.

I’ll crawl from my grave,
soiled with nights spent in ditches,
bend over and say,
hitching up my britches:

Listen here, Mister Lord!

Don’t you feel bored
in the jelly of clouds
daily dipping soft eyes?
You know what—
let’s set up a merry-go-round
on the tree of knowledge of virtue and vice!
Omnipresent, all bread-bins will be filled up with you
and we'll put such wines on the table
that St. Peter will ache to dance the ki-ka-poo,
sighing for the times when he was still able.
We'll fill up Paradise with Eves once more;
say the word, and this very night
I'll fetch the prettiest girls you ever saw
from the Tverskoy boulevard—all right?

No?
You waggle your head's silver ringlets,
scrawl at me from above?
You think that fellow behind you with the winglets
knows anything about love?

I'm an angel, too; used to be before,
gazing with the look of an innocent lamb.
But I won't make gifts to mares any more
of Sèvres vases, damn!

You invented this pair of hands, Almighty,
made a head to be worn by every duffer.
Then why don't you let us kiss daily and nightly
without ever having to suffer?

You—omnipotent? Deal out death and life?
You're just an ignoramus, a petty brute.
Look—I bend down,
pull a cobbler's knife
from inside the top of my boot.
Let your feathers shiver in St. Vitus' dance;
crouch in heaven,
lip-serving,
wing-flapping rascals!
I'll rip you all up, stinking with incense,
from here right down to Alaska!

Let go!

You won't stop me.
Whether I'm wrong
or right
I can't be calmer and don't think I ought to.
Look—
the stars have again been beheaded,
the sky
all red with the blood of slaughter!

Hey you,
heavens,
I'm coming,
d'you hear?
Take off your hats,
or... 

Silence.

The Universe
sleeps, its huge ear
dotted with star-ticks
laid on its paw.

1914-1915
I LOVE

Usually So

Love's given to anyone born, I've noted,
but between
one's business,
income
and so on,
the heart gets coated
with soil too crusty for love to grow on.
The heart's in the body,
and that has the shirt on.
But, as if it wasn't enough,
somebody—idiot!—
invents the shirtfront,
claps his paps into starch for bluff.
Old age comes on—
she takes to make-up,
while he looks to Müller\textsuperscript{31} to give him a shake-up.
Too late!
The wrinkles crop up all about.
Love sizzles
and sizzles
and—
goes out.

As a Kid

My love-gifts at birth were the average level.
But another's
put to drudge from a kid.
And I'd just bolt to the Rion\textsuperscript{32}—
sheer devil,
loafing around was all I did.
Mother scolded:
to death I'd drive her.
Father:
"My belt'll teach him sense!"
But I'd
get hold of a phoney fiver
and gamble with soldiers under a fence.
Unburdened by footwear,
by shirt untrammeled
I'd broil in the mad Kutaisi heat,
poking sunward
first back
then tummy
until that tummy
would ache to eat.
The sun must have puzzled:
"Scarce seen, the shrimp!
Yet has his feelings,
and quite acute.
Wherever
could there be room in the imp
for me,
river
and mountains to boot?"

As a Lad

Arithmetic, grammar and suchlike lessons,
they keep you busy in adolescence.
I
was kicked out of school
at the fifth year's turning,
then chucked about jails,
to go on learning.
Poets are bred in your wee, snug world
for bedrooms only, petted and curled.
What good can be had from the lapdog lyrics?
Me—
I got taught
to love
in Butyrki.33
To moan that the Bois de Boulogne leaves me
shaken?

To sigh at views of the sea?
Like hell!
I fell in love with an undertaker's
through the eyehole of cell 103.
You see the sun daily,
turn up your chin
"A fat lot of use, those rays!"
And I
for a sunspot
the size of a pin
could have given worlds
those days.

My University

You know your French?
Distinguish clauses?
Tell declinations?
Well, go on telling 'em.
But say—
can you sing
in tune with houses?
Do you know the language
the trams are yelling in?
The human chick,
as soon as it hatches,
gets textbooks and pads
to fix its eye on.
I learned ABC
from signboards,
by snatches,
wading through pages
of tin and iron.
They take the earth,
after pruning and cropping,
then study it,
shrank to a baby's toy.
I got my geography, nightly flopping
down on the ground from a boy.
Grand issues split Ilovaisky's 3/4 head:
"Barbarossa's beard—
was it ginger
or red?"
Much I care for the musty mystery!
Moscow gossip—
that's all my history.
They take Dobrolyubov 35 (the more to hate evil);
kinsfolk, genteel, howl "heretic, sinner!"
I've hated fat bellies so I could kill them
always
selling
myself for dinner.
Once taught,  
you sit  
and be nice to a lady;  
thoughts  
drip sparely  
from pudd’nhead brain.  
I  
had only the buildings  
to aid me,  
only the pumphouses  
to entertain.  
They’d listen  
close,  
chimney and eave,  
eager to hear,  
quick  
to perceive.  
And then  
the weather-vane tongues  
would creak,  
handing over  
the news of the week.

_Grown-Up_

Grown-ups have their business,  
pockets with dough.  
Want love?  
Just pay up—  
a hundred or so.  
And I  
roamed homeless,  
eyes aglare,  
paws in pockets,  
all holes and air.  
Dressed in your best,  
you rest your soul  
on wives and widows  
as the nights draw over you.  
And me—  
all Moscow  
would burn me like coal  
in the vice-like hug of her endless Sadovaya.
Your mistresses’ heart-clock
ticks soft and mild.
For bedfellows—
joy enough and to spare.
But for me—
a capital’s heart beat wild
as I measured my length on Strastnaya Square. 37
Wide open—
heart almost out in the air—
to sunshine and puddle I laid myself bare.
Cram me with passions,
love and lust,
no longer my heart can I rule or trust.
In others’ I know where the heart’s abode is—
it’s in the chest—beneath the pullover.
And mine—
mine’s one of those crazy bodies—
one booming and thumping heart all over.
Springtimes alone—all of 20 were there
stuffed by the time into red-hot me.
Their burden,
unspent,
was too much to bear,
making me ache
for love-to-be.

The Outcome

Bigger than dreamed by any romantic,
a poet’s nightmare
for size and weight,
the heart-lump bulged till it got gigantic,
gigantic in love and gigantic in hate.
Under the burden my legs go bending,
—and, you know, I’m pretty well built—
yet I drag along, my own heart’s appendage,
shoulders—a yard across—just wilt.
Swollen with rhyme milk—no outlet for me,
Brimming—yet still it wells up, darn!
World lyric wet-nurse,—
nothing before me
my puny precursor by Maupassant. 38
Heave-ho! I shouldered it,
throbbing and thumping.
In the manner strikers' meetings are called,
as they sound an alarm when there's flames
a-jumping,
so I yelled out—
it's here!
Take hold!
When such a whopper, knuckles pocketed,
stamped, reckless,
through mud and slush,
off
top-speed
the petticoats rocketed;
"We'd prefer something littler,
softer..."
Tush!
So bore I my burden, though sure I couldn't,
glad to discard it,
knowing I wouldn't.
The strain,
it well-nigh busted the thorax.
Ribs cried for mercy
all in a chorus.

You

Business-like,
fic-ing at growl and grit,
you sized me up at a glance—
mere boy!
Picked up that heart,
dismayed not a whit,
and set off playing—a child with a toy.
And all—
as if they'd witnessed a wonder—
maidens and matrons, their horror displayed:
"Love such a hulk? Why, he's all blood and thunder!
Must be a bear-tamer—look, unafraid!"
And me—I rejoiced—
no load on my back.
All but mad with delight,
I capered about like a newly-wed black,
so jolly I felt, I felt so light.

_impossible_

Alone
I'd find a piano too heavy,
and, of course, a steel safe too.
So with safe and piano;
then how, great heavens,
could I carry my heart got back from you?
Bankers know,
"We're rich without limit.
Pockets filled up—
use a safe—safer in it."
My love hid in you like wealth in steel,
happy-go-lucky, like Croesus I feel.
Just at times,
if I'm short of delight,
I might
take a smile, half a smile or so in that range
and spend on a spree with friends in a night
a handful or two of lyric small change.

_The Same with Me_

Fleets—even fleets sail back to shore.
Trains—even trains pull in at their station.
Well, and I—I'm pulled all the more,
pulled to you by sheer adoration.
Down to his vault goes Pushkin's knight*
to gloat over treasure by candle-light.
So I come back to you, my beloved—
my heart's own strong-box—to cherish and love it.
Men come home happy,
dirt and stubble
removed with the help of soap and razor.
You—you are my home. I come and just bubble
over with joy—
so bright those days are.

* Allusion to _The Covetous Knight_ by Pushkin.—_Tr._

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Earthlings return to the earth,
their mother,
the end
of the way on which we’re started.
So I’m drawn back to you and no other
as soon as I go, the minute we’ve parted.

Summary

No miles,
no quarrels
can blot out love,
tested,
thought out
all through.
With rhyme-fingered verse in oath raised above
I swear I love you, unswerving and true.

1922
IT

For Her and Me

WHAT IT'S ABOUT

In this theme, both private and trivial,
sung time and again before
I've spun round like a sort of poetical squirrel
and now want to spin once more.
This theme sounds today in a Buddhist's prayer,
makes a boss-hating Negro whet his knife.
On Mars, if there's anyone man-hearted there,
he, too, must be scraping with his pen all his life.
This theme will come to a limbless cripple,
grab his shoulders and stick a pencil in his teeth,
shove his nose to a notebook and order: "Scribble!"
and he'll eagle up, leaving the world beneath.
It's a theme that'll come, ring the backdoor bell,
poke its nose in, then vanish again like a ghost,
and, giant or dwarf, all your thoughts go pell-mell
and you drown in a rippling ocean of notes.
It's a theme that'll come and demand: "The Truth!"
It’s a theme that’ll come and order: “Beauty!”
And,
though nailed to the cross, you forget your ruth,
a waltz-tune or something absentely tooting.
Let that theme touch the alphabet as it rolls—
a thing clear enough for the thickest head—
and A becomes as remote as the poles
and you’re dazed— you forget about sleep and bread.
It’s a theme that comes and never grows old,
ever goes out of sight, so without a word
you become a standard-bearer to hold
a red flame of silk high over the world.
It’s a crafty old theme— dives under events;
preparing to leap, among instincts it hides,
then “How dare you forget?” incensed,
shakes our souls right out of our hides.
With a growling demand: “Hand over the reins!”
that theme on my door one day came battering,
commented crossly on my dried-out brains

120
and, enraged, sent affairs and acquaintances scattering.
That theme came along, made all others remote,
and alone assumed undivided preeminence.
It gripped me, that theme, like a thug, by the throat,
like a blacksmith it hammered from heart to temples.
That theme blacked out days and bade: "Ram with your rhyme at the darkness around, beneath and above."
The name of that theme, supreme and sublime:
. . . . .!
BALLAD OF READING GAOL

I remember standing
on the brink of this glitter.
Then
it was called
the Neva.

(V. Mayakovsky, *Man*)

The fashion for ballads
is far from young.
But when words from the heart are wrung
by the pain
with which that heart has been stung
then ballads are young enough
to be sung.

Lubyansky Drive. 39
Vodopyany Lane. 40

Imagine the scene
if you’re able,
She’s in bed.
    Lying awake.
He—
    at the telephone,
    by the table.
My ballad’s subject
is “He and She”.
Not so awfully new,
    I agree.
The awful thing is
that I am that “He”
and that she
    has to do
    with me.
What’s this talk about jail?
    Christmas.
    All hail.

No bars
    to bar
    the light.
That doesn’t concern you.
    I say it’s jail.
A table.
     Across it—       a straw pulled tight.
I touch it to listen:     there—a blister!
The receiver flies from my hand.  
The trade-mark arrows* begin to glisten
     and lightning-like
     whirl round the telephone-stand.
From next-doors
     comes the comment,
     drowsy,       vexed:
     "Where's it come from—
     a real live piglet?
     What next?"

The bell's already         squealing with burns.
The telephone set's         white-hot.
She's ill!      Dying!        Go rescue her!
Out!          Quicker!        By God!
My flesh is smoking.       I can't stop the sizzling.
Lightnings      all over my body
     race.
A million volts!    Things do look grisly
as I poke my lip       at the telephone blaze.
Drilling      holes
     in the house's timber,
making the cable twist and curl,
Bullet-like, speeds the number

* The trade mark on telephones those days were two broken arrows, crossed.—Tr.
I see—

where the earth lies bare today—
nothing but ruins standing about—
under fathoms of rubble hidden away
the Commune’s great edifice starts to sprout.

Fine!
down
to the telephone-girl.
The girl's eye squints at the switchboard wonkily.
Holiday tomorrow;
    yet work like a donkey.
Then—
    all of a sudden
    the red light goes on;
    ting-a-ling!
    goes the bell
    and the light is gone.
Suddenly
    the lamps go crazy again:
Jitters
    the telephone network
    seize:
"67-10!
Connect me please."
"Quick!"
    "Vodopyany?
    Hullo!
    That you?"
Phew!
    No joking with electric installations.
To be blown up
    on Christmas Eve
    too,
    together with the telephone station!
There lived
    an old-timer
    in Myasnitskaya Street,
    ever since then
    all he did was repeat
the story
    to grandchildren willing to hear,
    and surely it did sound queer.
    "I was out
    to buy ham—
    cheap, if I could;
    then it rattled like thunder—
    earthquake,
or what?
You could hardly stand—
no grip underfoot.
Shoe-soles burned—
the ground was so hot."
"Go on, old man!
It can't be, you know.
An earthquake? In winter? At the G.P.O.?
Squeezing by a miracle
through the hair-breadth cord,
stretching the ear-piece
into a gaping maw,
crushing the silence,
the phone-bell roared
in an avalanche of bell-peals
from floor to floor.
The screaming,
deafening hell-bell
pounced
at the walls
which were shattered beyond repair.
Then in millions of echoes
from the walls it bounced,
scattering
under bed and chair.
From ceiling to floor
the monster-bell crashed
and again,
like an out-size ball,
clanging crazily,
upwards it dashed,
again in tinkling splinters to fall.
Windows and chandeliers,
pot and kettle
joined in unison with the clangour,
shaking the house
like a baby-rattle,
the phone-bell raved
like a belfry in anger.

Puffy from sleep,
her dots of eyes
poking their pinpoints
through brick-red cheeks,
cook
makes a half-hearted effort to rise,
waddles to the phone and sniffling, speaks:
"Washa mean? Vladim Vladimich? Washa...?"
Unaccustomed attempts at understanding squash her
face into a semblance of a dried-up apple;
she trundles off, with her slippers flapping.
She goes like a second counting off strides;
her footsteps sound farther, hardly pattering.
All the rest of the world into nothingness slides;
the Unknown alone aims the telephone at me.

The world clears
Speakers at every conference and congress,
interrupting unfinished gestures in mid-air,
froze and, agape, at the most incongruous and ghastliest of Christmases
turned their stare.
They see life only from scandal to row,
their homes one endless
hum-drum morass.
Waiting for the mortal duel, now
they gaped at me, their own looking-glass.
Automobile horns were petrified;
all sounds hushed up through the world's length and breadth
nothing but the duel and Doctor Time
with the boundless bandage
of all-healing Death
Moscow.
Beyond it
the fields lie motionless.
Seas
and behind them the mountains stride.
All the universe seen
through binoculars,
gigantic binoculars
(from the wrong side).
The horizon straightened,
level as can be,
a cord
taut as strings are
in harpsichords,
one phone in my room
connecting me
with the other
with you
in yours.
In between
with a look
never dreamed of in verse
grand,
as if proud of its new white livery,
the Myasnitskaya cut
through the universe,
a miniature
out of carven ivory.
Clarity.
Torture by transparentest clarity.
Under the Myasnitskaya
a cable like a thread,
and everything hangs
on that hair-thin rarity
artistically inlaid
in the street’s white bed.

The duel
One.
The phone’s raised.
If hope had been
it's gone now.
    Two!
Unerringly aiming
the telephone muzzle
points between
my eyes
    half-begging and half-complaining.
I feel I could yell
    at the slow-moving bitch.
Can't you move faster?
    Don't stand like Dantés.42
Quick, shoot through the cable.
    Now what's the hitch?
At least
    this torture
could last a bit less.
More terrible than bullets,
the cable swelling,
dropped by the cook
    between two yawns,
like a swallowed rabbit
    in a python's belly
from there to me
    a dread word crawls.
And dreader than words,
    from times immemorial
when male won female
    by rule of might,
out of the cord
    came jealousy crawling,
a cave-dwelling monster,
    a troglodyte.
And yet, perhaps...
    Not perhaps but of course
nothing crawled from the cord
to test my fettle,
and there weren't any troglodytes' faces
or claws—
just myself in the telephone—
mirrored in its metal.
There now, VTsIK,43
    go and issue your circulars,
try and check the truth of these facts against Ehrfurts'.44
Through the first pangs of pain, 
   wild and ridiculous,
a beast scrapes his way, 
   despite the brain's efforts.
Beautiful sight!
Comrades,
try and digest it!
I,
this summer in Paris due,
a poet 
   and respectable correspondent of Izvestia
scratching the chair 
   with a claw through my shoe!
In yesterday's human 
   at one go
fangs cut through 
   and, 
   a bear, 
   I bare them.
Tufts of hair 
   from my jacket grow.
Roaring into phones— 
   is that all you know?
Off to the Arctic 
   to join your brethren!

Bearification
A bear 
   driven 
   to deadly wrath,
I charge at the phone, 
   turned foe from intimate.
While the trade-mark spear 
   drills its fatal path
through my heart, 
   plunging deeper and deeper into it.
It pours: 
   copper-red torrents fall.
Lap up the growls and blood, 
   my dark flat!
I don’t know for sure 
   whether bears cry at all
but if they do, 
   it must be like that.
Exactly so; no one, falsely compassionate
to watch them, all through the valley they squall,
and exactly so their bear-neighbour Balshin
wakes up and grumbles behind the wall.
Exactly so I picture a bear;
motionless, face turned up, he roars,
howls himself out, then repairs to his lair
clawing the walls with all twenty claws.
Leaves come down in a shower— he’s frightened,
thinks gunshots are starting to crash through the skies
Ycs, only bears can see such nightmares through tears and fur
fuzzying their eyes.

My room leaks A bed.
Bars of iron. The blanket threadbare.
The bear lies in irons. A numb, half-dead bear.
A shudder begins and runs through the iron,
rippling through the bedclothes I lie on.
Water chills my foot with its touch.
Water? Where from and why so much?
It’s I myself crying. Cry-baby, fool!

132
Rubbish.
Nobody
could cry such a pool.
Damned bath!
There's water behind the sofa;
under the table
and wardrobe
it creeps.
From behind the sofa,
turning over and over
out of the window
my suitcase sweeps.
In the fireplace
a fag-end—
chucked it there myself—
got to stamp it out.
But it's flaring up, dash it.
What?
Fireplace?
No fireplace!—
help!—
just a bank—
miles away
with bonfires flashing.
All's been washed out—
even the odour
of cabbage from the kitchen,
sour and rank.
Emptiness.
Only a river,
broader
and broader.
Far off—
the opposite bank.
The wind from the Ladoga
plays its fiddle.
The river's all goose-skinned
because of the chill,
with me,
a white bear,
on a floe in the middle.
Not a soul.
    Not a sound.
        All's dismal,
            still.
The icesloe I'm on,
    it used to be a pillow.
Away run the banks,
    view upon view.
The wind goes raising
    billow after billow.
And away with the wind
    sails my pillow, too.

Feverish,
    on my pillow-floe
        I float.
Only one sensation's not washed away:
I've got to pass under something—
    what—
my bed or a bridge—
    I cannot say.
I've been through this once,
    years before.
Whether bear or not,
    I begin to roar.
I, the wind, this river?
    Not this one?!
A minute or more
    I remain in doubt.
Yes,
    I recall how it used to glisten.
Back!
    But the river
        won't let the raft out.
Closer and closer,
    clearer and clearer,
the same old scene begins to appear.
He (I) on the bridge—
    nearer and nearer.
No going back now.
    He'll be!
        He's here!!!
There,  the waves at its steel feet dancing,  
motionless,  
fearsome and mighty in span,  
in the city  
built of despair  
by my fancy  
on its hundred-storey supports  
it stands.  
With its embroidery  
of trellised girders,  
in the sky’s domain  
the bridge intervenes.  
I shift my eyes  
further and further.  
There, there  
on the iron railings he leans.  
Pardon, Neva!  
No, it drives me back.  
Have pity!  
No, it won’t lift its ban.  
There,  
chained by myself to the bridge’s rack  
on the sky’s flaming background  
stands that man,  
his hair unkempt—  
never cut it, I reckon.  
I paw at my ears—  
in vain, of course—  
it continues,  
my own,  
my own voice’s echo—  
the knife of my voice  
cuts my ears through my paws.  
My very own voice:  
I can hear it beg;  
Vladimir,  
stop!  
Don’t go off and leave me!
Why didn’t you let me dash down then and wreck
my heart on the buttresses—
that would relieve me.

Seven years
I stand here and gaze at the river,
strapped to the bridge
by your verses’ wire.

For seven long years
the river’s eyes drill me.

Say,
when does my term up here expire?
Perhaps you’re worming your way into their caste?
Kissing?
Guzzling?
Grown one of those paunches?

Want
a bit of their pie to taste?
Begging for it
upon your haunches?

Don’t think,
the spectre’s hand motioned downwards,
menacingly,
at the river’s depth;
don’t think of escape!
It’s I that have summoned you;
I’ll find you anywhere,
hound you to death!

There’s a holiday in town.
I can hear the noise of it.

So tell them to come,
the holiday marchers.

Let an act be adopted
by the city Soviet
to confiscate,
abrogate my tortures,
till down this wide
and deep-flowing river

Love
the saviour,
comes
and my spirit arouses.
You’re doomed, too, to wander.         You won’t be loved either.

Just paddle
    and crash
    on the reefs of houses.

Help!
Stop, pillow!
    In vain, though,
    were all my efforts.
I paddled with my paw,
    a sorry oar.
The river was as relentless as ever:
downstream
    my pillow-iceloe
    it bore.
Already I’m far,
    maybe a day
from my shadow there,
    at the bridge’s rails.
Yet his voice—
    it pursues me
    all the way,
throaty menaces
    filling its sails.
You think you’ll forget
    the sparkle of the river?
Replace it by something?
    Try if you can.
Till death you’ll remember the quiver
that ran through the poem Man.
I begin to shout.
    Cover that yell?
A booming storm—
    out-shout it if you can.
Somebody, help!
    Help...
    Help...
    Help!...

There,
    on the riverbridge,
    stands
    a man!
Fantastic reality

The banks flit past, view after view.
Beneath me rocks the pillow of ice.
The wind from the Ladoga howls: *whoo-hoo*

while onward the ice-raft flies.
S.O.S.
I signal with a word-lit flare.
The river ends, grows into a sea.
S.O.S.!
my call pierces the air
like a thundering battery.

It grows into a giant square, the pillow-island that’s under me.
The sound of the waves grows soft and low, dying down after a while.
No seas any more. I’m on the snow.
Dry land all around— mile upon mile.

They call it dry, but the snow’s wet, half-thawed.

I’m caught by a vicious snow-band.

I cudgel my brains: what land is it, lord:

138
Green-,
Lap-,
or Love-land?
From a cloud
the moon-melon,
ripening, falls.
Things sort themselves out,
get clearer a bit.
Petrovsky Park.
Behind me unrolls
the Khodynka;
ahead—
the Tverskaya's white sheet.
O-o-oh!
to the Sadovaya
reaches my "oh!"
Knocked down by a car
or by horses,
my mug's yard-deep in the snow.
Bullet-like,
follow curses:
"Blind with the NEP?
Where's your eyes?
Nep your mother,
can't you watch your step,
you bloody ass in disguise?"
Ah yes—
I'm a bear.
No wonder they swear.
Pretty fix, isn't it?
How to explain
who I was,
who I am,
how and what I became?

Saviour
There comes
a wee little man from the corner,
bigger and bigger
every minute.
Moonshine sits on his head like an aura.
Quick,
get a boat
and bring him in it.
The Saviour—that’s it! Looks like Jesus—
calm and kind, his grace,
crowned with the moon.
He approaches. There’s no moustache on his face!
Not Jesus at all. Younger, softer.
Soon
he’s closer.
Komsomol features displaying,
hatless and coatless. Puttees and khaki.
Now folding his hands,
as if he’s praying,
now,
as if in a speech
the void air hacking.
Woolly snow. The boy, he walked on wool.
Gilded wool. And now the trite old picture’s full.
So sad and snivelly—
just sobbing all along—
you feel you’ll slobber
in a gypsified old song.

On he walked, eyes to the sunset glued.
The sunset
was the yellowest of yellow.
The very snow was somewhat yellow-hued;
with eyes unseeing, on he went, poor fellow.
Then stopped stock still,
arms’ steel in silk.*
The sunset for an hour
stayed focussed to a point,

* In 1914-17 Mayakovskv went about in a yellow silk blouse.
and watched the shadow-streak
he left behind.
The snow kept crunching—
breaking someone’s joints.
Whose joints?

What for?

What reason could it find?
The wind, rude burglar,
sought the boy all round
and read the note
that in his clothes it found
to all Petrovsky Park—
aloud and without shame:

“Good bye . . .
I’ve had enough . . .
There’s nobody to blame . . .”

No option

Could anyone be
so much like me?
Awful.

But there—
I dash to the puddle
to pull off the jacket,
all blood and tears.

Ah well!
That other’s in a deadlier muddle,
watching it all from his bridge seven years.
I pulled on the jacket—
tight—hard to get in;
then shaved the growth
from my cheeks and chin.
The soap wouldn’t lather—
so my jaw went jumping;
my mirror—an iceblock,
my razor—a sunbeam.
Almost the same as him
by my look
I run,
in my mind revolving addresses.
First to the Presnya,47
to the family nook
instinct drives me—
yeah, that’s where the place is.
After me,
into the distance fading,
all-Russian sons and daughters come parading.
“Volodya! Bless us!
Come here for Christmas!”
Corridor darkness.
Room electricity.

Instantly
relatives’ faces go crooked.
“Volodya!
Good heavens!
What is it, eh?
Your coat’s all red.
Your collar!
Look at it!”

“Don’t mind it, Mummy.
I’ll wash it in tears.
There’s plenty at home.
All over the place.

Not that it matters.
Darlings, dears!
You love me, don’t you?
You love me, yes?
Then listen,
Mother,
sisters,
Aunt.

Switch off the Christmas tree.
Lock the door.

I’ll take you....
You’ll go with me....
No, you can’t
put it off.
You’re going.
Immediately,
all four.

It isn’t so far at all—
why,
just six hundred versts—
mere child’s play.
We’ll all be there in the twinkling of an eye.
He’s waiting.
We’ll board a tram straightaway.”

142
"Volodya, calm down, dear!"

But I, a bit rough,

out-yell

the familial squealing.

“So that’s your way?”

Tea instead of love?

Sock-darning

instead of feeling?”

I don’t mean just you,

my own dear Mother;

the whole world’s obsessed

with family fervour.

See there—

the ship’s masts

bristling like sedge;

it’s Germany,

split by the Oder’s wedge.

We’re over Stettin,

engines whirring.

Next stop, Mummy,

and we’re in Berlin.

The plane purrs on,

all tense and eager:

Paris—

America—

Brooklyn Bridge;

The Sahara.

A curly Negress and Negro

sip tea—

a family too, black as pitch.

Featherbeds will squash

both willpower and stone,

the Commune will turn

into comfy bunkum.

For centuries

men tucked their life into home.

Today too,

you’re cosy again with your domkom.49

October’s

storm of judgement

is behind.

And now,

in the shade of its fiery wing,
you set out your china, hang up your blinds,
fire-proof, emotion-proof, proof to heart-ting.
Vanish, home! Fireplace and birthplace,
farewell! I fling all ties to the dickens.
What’s family in my predicament? Worthless!

Chicken-love, fit for children and chickens.
I run on and see: in everyone’s presence
down the Kudrinskaya,⁵⁰ blithe and bland,
my own sweet self, coming loaded with presents
under my arms and in either hand.
Its masts strained taut in the storm like crosses,
all ballast overboard my ship tosses.
Ten times be confounded, emptied-out lightness!

Far houses bare fangs of a chalk-cliff whiteness.
No crowd, no square— the silence is utter.
Silence reigns supreme everywhere.
Only snow all around, and through the shutters
the lighted candles on Christmas trees flare.
I slow down, putting brakes on my toes.
Walls loom tall, with windows in rows.
People’s shadows like targets in shooting ranges
bob in the windows, luring in strangers.
Chilled through, eyes fixed on the Neva,
he stands and waits for aid. . .
Across the threshold—
   door ajar—
I throw my foot come what may.
In the passage a drunkard,
   airing delirium,
suddenly sobered and ran for it, bleary.
Then the whole assemblage proceeded to blare;
"Bear! BEAR! B E A R!"
Twisting his face into a question mark,
the host poked out half an eye with the bark:
"Well-well, Mayakovsky— bear indeed!"
All the bitter-sour faces turned honey-sweet.
"Come in, you’re welcome,"
   he led the way.
"A pleasant surprise, as Blok used to say.
Meet Fyokla Davidovna,
   my wife.
   An’ this is my daughter,
our seventeen-year-old Miss.
And this is so-and-so.
   I believe you’ve met,"
the host went on, true to etiquette.
Card-partners who'd slipped into mouseholes from dread,
still holding their cards crawled from under the bed.
With whiskers on end, stuck up towards the ceiling
from under the table crawled booze-mates, reeling.
And from under the wardrobe— admirers, readers,
all the faceless populace. Name them? Needless!
They come and they come in timid infinity,
their beards with domestic cobwebs glinting.
Age upon age,
the same old sludge:
unwhipped,
domicity's mare won't budge.
In place of a guardian angel\textsuperscript{52} there stood,
their lodger in jodhpurs;
so far, so good.
But what was most awful, in height,
in skin,
in clothes, in gait,
in eyes
in one of them, like as a pin,
myself
I recognised.
From mattresses long deserving a beating
bedbugs raised their forclegs in greeting.
The samovar beamed with its brazen face,
holding its handles out to embrace.

146
All
the things
danced attendance around me.
The fly-blown garlands
from the wallpaper crowned me.
Angels
played
a flourish on their horns,
peeping,
pink,
from the icons' sheen.
Jesus,
lifting his crown of thorns,
bowed,
polite and suavely serene.
Marx himself,
in his red frame harnessed
with the rest
hauled the philistine cart
in dead earnest.
Canaries
began to sing from their perches,
geraniums
with their fragrances smote us.
Posing diligently,
squatting, virtuous,
grandmothers
hospitably
leered from their photos.
All bowed and nodded—
courteous, very!
And in booming basses
and psalm-singing discants:
Merry Christmas!
Merry Christmas!
Merry Christmas!

Christmas!
The host paws the armchairs,
with puff and blow
himself clears the tablecloth
of the last wee breadcrumb.
"If I'd known..."
I thought you'd be home with your own;
if only I'd known!
   It's an honour
   you're welcome!"

My own?
   Ye-ah,
   some specimens, they!

You'd meet them, perhaps,
   if you turned Santa Claus.

My own—
   they're way off
   on the Ob and Yenisei,

lumbering on
   through the woods on all fours.

My home?
   There isn't any home I know.

My home?
   Home?
   No!

I floated away from it
   hours ago,

down the Neva
   on a pillow-floc.

My home now
   is ice
   all stark and bare,
   not very nice,
   but there...

I varied my words,
   now most oratorial,

now tinkling lyricsome,
   now frightfully roaring,

from benefits
   turning to glory eternal,

begging,
   threatening,
   agitating,
   imploring.

"My verse is for all, see?
   for you yourselves.

Say, Mystery-Bouffé—
   not for my own pleasure.
Poetry’s not just to stack on shelves.
All-important— no freak-child of day-dreaming leisure.
Say, perhaps I’m a bear, to put it roughly,
but my poetry— flay me and take it— my hide.
With a lining of rhymes— there’s a coat for you, lovely!”

Then sipping tea at the fire, side-by-side:
“It’s a trifle— ten minutes, no more by boat.
But it must be now, else it might be too late.
P’raps a pat on the shoulder: ‘Don’t lose hope!’
It’s urgent, I tell you, it can’t be delayed.”
Rolling breadballs, in courteous mockery
they listen, smiling, to the eminent buffoon.
My words bounced like peas from foreheads and crockery, till one drank himself maudlin and started to croon:
“Wait a minute... I know which is which. It’s easy as toffee— c’mon, ol’ hoss!
I’m going— you say he waits on a bridge?
I know—
it's the corner of Kuznetsky Most.
Lemme go,
you hear—
lemme...
listen..."

"He's sizzled!
the wine-soaked table
went hissing.

Dammit,
don't whine.
Better have
some wine.
S'pose that's fixed?
Now back to 66!*
To hell with theory—
it's practice, this NEP!
Your glass, futurist,
show us some pep!"

Undaunted by the imminent threat to their jaws,
they set off champing
with hee-hees and haw-haws.

Belched between glasses,
poetic discussions
from their artesian throats
came gushing.

"Good night!" said the bedbugs
and went back to sleep.

Age-old dust
resettled on things, inch deep.
While he
still stood
to the railings nailed,
believing,
waiting,
hoping:
soon!

So I with my word-rams
again assailed
the wall of domestic welfare,
goon.

* Popular card-game.
Again I attacked
both this way and that.
But strangely,
the words went through,
and fell flat.

My bass hushes down
to a mosquito-trill.
Once again
empty,
the china gets still.
Drowning in greys,
into etchings wrinkling,
walls and wallpaper
fade and fade.
Spreading from the walls to the city,

Boecklin

etched out Moscow
in an island of the dead.
It’s been long,
long since,
all the more so
now;
quite simple,
simple as anything.
There in his boat,
cerements round his torso,
sits the Ferryman,
numb as a mannequin.
The fields look like seas—
which is which, you wonder.
Every whisper
silence has erased.
The skeletal poplars,
painted yonder,
their deadness
towards the heavens raise.
All right.
I stepped out
and the poplars stirred
into motion,
marching without a word.
Calm and quiet,
an impressive sight,
they’ve turned into watchmen, militiamen of the night.

White Charon, splitting in four at one go

turns into the columns of the G.P.O.

No escape So murderers burst into people’s sleep, splitting sleepy heads at one sweep, and everything vanishes out of those heads with the first sight of axes glimpsed over beds.

So the streets’ drums break up sleep with their roll and straightaway you recall that here’s despair and there’s the wall and beyond it she who’s to blame for it all.

Covering the windows with the corner’s palm, I pulled out sideways pane after pane.

I’ve staked all my life on these window-cards.

Just overdraw and I lose again.

Night, the sharper, deals out hallucinations marking the glass with merriment’s light.

The pack of windows glares, audacious, from the scurrilous hold of swindler-night.
O,
to be able, as before,
to fly
on rhyme-wings
right through the window-pane!
But no—
just clinging to the wall's damp slime:
neither my rhyme
nor the time's the same.
The wall-stone numbs,
as chilling as the grave.
Brooms here, it seems,
neglect their chores.

On my bare feet,
feeling far from brave,
I climb the spittle-smeared porch.
The chain of heartache
will not break off,
clamping
new link
to new link.

Thus,
after killing,
Raskolnikov went up the steps to ring.
The guest-crowd's filing up the stairs;
I jump off the steps
and float mid-airs,
flattening myself
against the wall,
and then I hear
the guitar-strings' call.
Maybe she simply
sat down to play
for the guests,
the public,
so to say.
And her fingers,
driven by sheer despair,
mocking grief,
picked this rollicking air?
And those ravens, the guests!
The crazy door-wing
strikes the passage wall, grazing and bruising it.
A maelstrom of guffaws, an avalanche of roaring
came staggering down to me, stumbling boozily.
Light appears through a crack:
whispers come from the back.
"Annushka, just turn round!"
I say,
aren’t you a red-cheeked peach today!"
Over in the oven pastry smoulders.
He helps her with her coat, slips it off her shoulders.
The one-step tempo deadens the words,
yet some of them tear through the one-stepping herd:
"What’s there so funny?"
she asks.
"What? Where?"
"Oh no, you don’t say!"
"You want me to swear?"
A gap— then a new phrase blares out in a burst,
its words unintelligible at first,
just gossip,
(not really out of spite):
"You know, a bloke broke a leg here today.
And we—we’re having some fun tonight;
dancing— thank God— in our own small way."
Yes,
it’s their voices, I’ve no more doubt.
In dumb recognition I freeze into stone.
From the hubbub I make whole sentences out,
yes, it’s they
    and it’s me they mean,
    me alone.
“Broke his leg, you say?
    Oh my, what a scream.”
And again goes clinking
    toast after toast;
glass-lit sparks
    hit the cheeks
    of guest and host.
And again the drunken,
    “Oh, goodness me,
so you say
    he just split in two?
    Tee-hee!”
“No, I must disappoint you,
    he didn’t quite split.
Oh no,
    poor fellow—
    just cracked a bit.”
And again the cackling
    and the slamming of doors,
and again the one-step
    shuffling on floors.
And again the walls
    like a blistering steppe
sigh and ring
    with the damned two-step.
Anyone,
    but not you
Let life be ground
    into one long nightmare,
let it get going
    from bad to worse,
anything, anything, God almighty,
but not that unbearable voice of hers!
Days and years
    I’ve betrayed
    to humdrum tedium,
got myself chocked
    with the daily delirium.
It ate out
    my life
    with domestic fumes,
and urged me to jump down to hell from my rooms.
I fled from the yawning window’s lure,
fled to love,

though not all of me fled,

to be sure.
Let it be but in verse,
in pacing the dark:
when you scribble,
your soul lies bare and stark,
and your love becomes verse,

while in prose you are dumb.
No, I couldn’t speak out.

But, darling, come,
say, where in my songs
was I false to my love?
Never—

they weren’t of such fickle stuff.

Every word
confessed and appealed

all along;

but—

not a word can be dropped from a song.
I’ll run in

amid the guitar trills and gamuts,
my both eyes

levelled point-blank

at the targets,
boasting two legs—

as firm as a mammoth’s,

“Stay where you are,
you blinking maggots.
I’m whole!” Then to her,

“See,

love, even here
shattering their humdrum hell with my verses
I spare the name that I hold most dear,
bypassing you in my curses.
Come, love,

respond to the poem’s despair.
I’ve been appealing to all I knew:
Quick! To the bridge! No time to spare!
And now the one last hope is you.
My neck
    like a bull's bowed to meet the blow,
I'll drive myself out where I ought to.
Another second
    and out I'll go,
a volunteer—
    come what may—
    for slaughter.

That very last second,
    the last before—
that second
    became a beginning,
the beginning
    of an incredible roar.
All the North
    joined in
    in the dinning.

By the quiver
    as if
    from a far-off fan,
I can guess—
    it's somewhere over Lyuban.56
By the flapping door,
    by the chilling air,
I feel—
    it's somewhere round about Tver.57
By the windows
    burst ajar from the din
I know—
    it's tearing along to Klin.58
Now
    Razumovskoye's59 under its blast.
And now—
    Nikolaevsky Station,60 the last.
Though only a breath
    and nothing else,
the steps on which I was standing
    foundered,
turned into rocking,
    swerving hells
with foam from the raging Neva surrounded.
The terror’s come,
   it’s filling my brain,
it tightens my nerves
   with a jolt.
Bigger and bigger
   becomes the strain
then explodes and nails me:
   Halt!
I’ve come here
   from seven years ago,
from six hundred versts
   away.
I’ve come all that way
   to command you:
   “No!
Leaving off!”
I’ve come here to stay.
Leave off!
   No need for talking and pleading.
It’s ridiculous—
   you alone succeeding.
What I ache for’s
   the whole loveless world to be happy,
to be joined in a planet-wide human mass.
Seven years
   I’ve been waiting for that to happen,
and I’ll stand on,
   nailed here,
as centuries pass,
on the bridge of time,
   abused and despised,
redeemer of earthly love,
   I’ll keep
my vigil here
   and for all be chastised,
I’ll pay for all
   and for all I’ll weep.

*La Rotonde* The two-step tune
   went splitting the walls
into halves,
   into quarters,
   into a thousand splinters.
Somehow,
in Montmartre,
I,
already old,
clamber on a table—
the umptieth instance.
All the visitors
have long since got sick,
knowing in advance
like a fiddler knows his score,
that again they’ll be called—
the same stale trick!—
to go somewhere,
save someone,
god knows what for.

In apology
for the foozy way
I rush on,
the host explains:
“Don’t you know,
he’s Russian!”

The women,
bundles of flesh and rags,
scream, laughing
and drag me down by the legs.

“Go?
Not us!
Toots!

We’re
prostitutes!”

O that the Seine
were the Neva,
a splash-back
of a future day!
I space the Seine’s black boulevards,
an outcast
of today.
A seven-footer,
jeered at,
jailed
and hit,
I roar over brasshats, in boulevards booming:

"To the Red Flag! March!
From domestic shit!
Through the brain of man, through the heart of woman!"

Today it was something special, the booing.

Wasn’t it hot!
I’m all wet, just stewing!

*Half-death* Got to get out for a bit of fresh air.

I’ll go,
yes, I’ll go,
I don’t care where.

Below me police-sergeants blow their whistles.

Street-cleaners sweep me, corpse-like, listless.

Dawn.
Away from the Seine on my way I set,

veiled by shadows of cinema grey.

There— I saw it long since from a schoolkid’s desk;

France’s map skims by, opaquely picturesque.

Next, by pangs of remembrance seized

I dragged off to take my leave of the East.

*Chance stop* Jerked to a standstill,

like ships on banks,

I’m hitched to something by the seat of my pants.
I inspect it:
    slippery, shaped like an onion,
big,
    all gilded— not a very funny one.
Under the onion bells go boom!
Evening hems
    the wall-teeth with gloom.
I’m on Ivan the Great, it appears.
The Kremlin towers stand around like spears,
with Moscow’s windows on the darkness trespassing.
Jolly!
    Green fir-trees peep out, Christmassy.
The Christmas surge of singing and bells
thrusts its waves at the Kremlin’s bastions.
Rolling down from its seven hills,
like the Terek, Moscow tosses in its festiveness.
My hair’s on end. Like a frog I sit strained,
afraid— at the slightest slip or error
down the Myasnitskaya to be whirled again
amid the familiar Christmas terror.
Recapitulation
With arms spread crosswise— like a cross on the dome—
I catch my balance, waving crazily.
No prayer so sure as muscle and grit
To the devil meekness be hurled.
We—
each of us—
hold in our grip
the transmission belts of the world.

Cloud in Pants
Night thickens. 
Nothing is seen in the gloom.
There's the moon.
Beneath me, the Mashuk looms hazily.
Struggling for balance begins to tire me.
Like a toy doll all cardboard up to my fingertips.
They'll spot me. Here I'm visible entirely,
and the whole of the Caucasus teems with Pinkertons.
Yes, they've spied me, announced it to all by a signal.
Sweethearts, friends stream in, crueller and crueller,
from all the universe the signal brings them.
In a haste to get even with me come duellers,
more and more of them, glaring, bristling.
Spitting on their palms, they slap me juicily
with their hands, with the wind, countless,
past listing,
my cheeks to a bloody mess reducing.
Glove-booths cluster in shopping-centres:
scent-reeking ladies all over the place
take off their gloves and hurl them by centners,
whole gloveshops flinging themselves at my face.
Newspapers! Magazines! Don't stand there gaping,
come to the aid of the slapping leatherware!
Soar up in curses, paper after paper!
Box my ears, 
rumours, 
slurs, catch me everywhere!
As it is
I’m a cripple
that love’s been maiming;
Why can’t you dump your slops in pails?
I’m not in your way,
so why come and flay me?
I’m only poetry, 
soul, 
nothing else.
But below sounds “No, you’re our age-old foe.
One of your sort—
a hussar\textsuperscript{61}— we’ve debunked.
Have a whiff of powder and lead—ho-ho!
Come on, unbutton your shirt! Don’t funk!”
Final death Sharper than a thunderclap, swashier than a shower, lined up, eyebrow to eyebrow, trousers to trousers, from rifles and cannon with all their power, from each of a million brownings and mausers, from a hundred paces, then ten, then two, charge after charge, point-blank, they stop for a breath, then start anew, scattering lead, with a boom and bang. Finish him off! Stuff his heart full of lead!

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Not even a tremor
to flutter through!
In the final end,
everything must end.
So the tremors
ended too.

*Left-overs*
The massacre’s over.
Gaiety ahead,
grinning over details,
they swagger back.
Only on the Kremlin
the poet’s last shred
glows in the wind
like another red flag.
And the stars,
lyrical as ever,

*stare*
from the sky in wonder
—blinking old stars!
The Great Bear, too—
troubladouring up there—
what’s she up to—

*wants to become queen of bards?*
Great sister,
bear me over the ages’ Ararats,
through the sky of the deluge

*in your dipper-ark, Ursus!* Bearwise,
from my starship,

*straining my guts,*
I roar my stanzas
through the noise of the Universe.

*Quicker! Quicker! Quicker!*

*Off into space! Look out sharper!*

Sunbeams
up on the mountains

*flicker,*
new days smile

*from the piers in the harbour.*
APPLICATION TO ..... *(name, surname)*

*(PLEASE, COMRADE CHEMIST, FILL IN YOURSELF)*

The ark heaves in. Arc-lights play on the quay,  
light up the dock where she’s to be moored in.
And here immediately my shoulders give way,  
weighed down by the windowsill’s stony burden.
The sun’s dried the deluge of night with its glare.

At the window the day looks bright and hot.
Kilimanjaro’s all I can see on the map.
Kenya in Africa’s all I can spot.
Like a bald head my globe stands aglow and I pore over it, bent with woe.
The world, piled up with calamities gruesome,
longs to hug some comforting mountain-bosom so tight that from pole-caps through every vein
lava would pour with stones and flame.
Just the same I, too, a communist-bear

167
would hug it now, sobbing in sheer despair.

My father came of hereditary gentry;
it's somewhat too soft, my gentle-born skin.
Perhaps I'll scoop out my days with poetry
and never see a machine-tool spin.
But with every nerve-twitch, voice-trill and pulse,
every hair-pike standing on end, revulsed,
with my nostril-pits, with both eyes— knives aflash,
with my tooth-saw, grated, gritted and gnashed,
with my skin-crawl, my eyebrows' wrath-knit folds—
with the billions of pores that my body holds,
in summer, winter, spring or fall,
while sleeping, at night, and by day, awake,
I denounce and reject, loathe and hate all,
all hammered into us by the slavish past,
all that
though swept off again and again
settled
and settles like domestic dust
even on our red-banne red domain.
I won’t give them the pleasure of seeing me bent,
my spirit broken, my courage spent.
It won’t be soon you’ll start whining and mourning:
“What talent he had, the deceased, God bless him!”
You can get me with a knife, from behind a corner,
but my forehead won’t be a target for Dantés’s.
Four times I’ll age and grow young anew
before the cemetery gets its due.
Wherever I die it’ll be with a song.
In whatever wilderness I may sag
I know—I’m worthy of lying along
with those who lie beneath a red flag.
But whatever for, death’s the same everywhere:
terrible— not to love;
horrible— not to dare.

169
For you
knife and bullet can hush any doubt.
But what about me? Where's my way out?
In childhood, perhaps, in my memory's dregs
I can find ten days not totally wrecks.
The luck others get— wouldn't it be enough?
But I never got it— in life or in love.
Oh, to believe in another world!
Easy to try— just aim a gun back
and instantly to the next world you're hurled,
with a bullet tracing your thundering track.
But what can I do if despite my plight,
with all my mental and spiritual powers,
I've believed and believe, whether wrong or right
in this world, this blessed life of ours.

Faith
Let the waiting be stretched out to desperation,
yet I see it— clear as hallucination.
So clear, it seems just finish with these rhymes
and lo— you land in the most magnificent of times.
Not for me to query on which and what.
I see,
    I see it clearly,  
    to a dot!
Air on air,  
    as if it's stone on stone,  
impervious  
    to crumbling and rust,  
it towers beyond the ages,  
    all aglow,  
the workshop for reviving human dust.  
Here he is,  
    the chemist,  
silent,  
    lofty-browed,  
wrinkling his nose,  
    a new experiment contriving.  
Through the World Who's Who  
    he leafs  
and thinks aloud:  
"XXth century.  
    Let's look who's worth reviving.  
Mayakovsky...  
    surely not among the brightest.  
Decidedly,  
    his face is far too plain."  
Then from today's worn page  
    I'll holler to the scientist,  
Stop turning over pages!  
    Make me live again!  
Put a heart in me,  
    knock thought into my skull,  
pump blood into my veins—  
    give me new birth.  
I had no chance of loving,  
    living to the full.  
Believe,  
    I didn't get  
my earthly share on earth.  
I'm six foot four.  
    Who wants such stature when  
for jobs like mine  
    a guinea-pig would suffice.
Caged in a house,
         I scribbled with a pen
crammed in a room-hole         fit perhaps for mice.
I'd take any old job
         and never ask a bob!
Clean,
         sweep,
         wash,
         scrub
          or simply run around.
Why,
      I'd be glad to get a doorman's job
if doormen
         in your days
      will still be found.
A jolly chap I was;
         much sense in being jolly
when all we knew
         was misery and rigour.
These days,
         when people bare their teeth,
      it's solely
to sink 'em in,
         to bite,
         to snarl,
         or snigger.
Anything may happen—
         any sort of trouble.
Call me, do,
         for joking helps superbly.
I'll amuse you
         till you actually bubble
with ting-a-linging allegory
         and hyperbole.
I loved...
         Sure, raking up the past
      is not much use.
(Painful?
      Never mind!
At least pain lives when all has ceased)
I did love beasts, though.
         Have you still got zoos?
Then let me be a keeper for your beasts.
I love the creatures.

When I spot a pup—
there's a funny one—
all bald—
hangs round the baker's—
I feel like I could cough my own liver up:
Here, doggie,
don't be shy, dear, take this!

Love

And then, perhaps,
some day
down pathways that I'll sweep
(she too loved beasts),
she'll come to see the zoo
smiling the same
as on the photo that I keep—
they'll bring her back to life—
she's nice enough,

Your umptieth century
will leave them all behind,
trifles
that stung one's heart
in a buzzing swarm,

and then
we'll make up
for these loveless times
through countless midnights,

Revive me,
if for nothing else,
because

I,
poet,
cast off daily trash
to wait for you.

Revive me—
ever mind under what clause.
Revive me, really,
let me live my due,
to love—
with love no more a sorry servant
of matrimony, lust
and daily bread,
but spreading out throughout the universe and further,
forsaking sofas, cursing boudoir and bed.
No more to beg for one day as a dole
and then to age in endless sorrow drowned,
but to see all the globe at the first call
of "Comrade!" turn in glad response around.
No more a martyr to that hole one calls one's hearth,
but to call everybody sister, brother,
to see your closest kin in all the earth,
aye, all the world to be your father and your mother.

1922-1923
ULADIMIR ILYICH LENIN

To the Russian
Communist Party
I dedicate this poem

The time has come.

I begin

the story of Lenin.

Not
because the grief
is on the wane,
but because
the shock of the first moment
has become
a clear-cut,
weighed and fathomed pain.

Time,
speed on,
spread Lenin’s slogans in your whirl!

Not for us
to drown in tears,
whatever happens.

There’s no one
more alive
than Lenin in the world,
our strength,
our wisdom,
surest of our weapons.

People
are boats,
although on land.

While life
is being roughed
all species
of trash
from the rocks and sand
stick
to the sides of our craft.

But then,
having broken
through the storm’s mad froth,
one sits
    in the sun
for a time
and cleans off
    the tousled seaweed growth
and oozy
    jellyfish slime.
I
    go to Lenin
to clean off mine
to sail on
    with the revolution.
I fear
    these eulogies
line upon line
like a boy
    fears falsehood and delusion.
They'll rig up an aura
    round any head;
the very idea—
    I abhor it,
that such a halo
    poetry-bred
should hide
    Lenin's real,
huge,
    human forehead.
I'm anxious lest rituals,
    mausoleums
and processions,
the honeyed incense
    of homage and publicity
should
    obscure
Lenin's essential
simplicity.
I shudder
    as I would
for the apple of my eye
lest Lenin
    be falsified
by tinsel beauty.
Write! —
votes my heart,
commissioned by
the mandate
of duty.
*

All Moscow's
frozen through,
yet the earth quakes with emotion.
Frostbite
drives its victims
to the fires.

Who is he?  Where from?
Why this commotion?
Why such honours
when a single man expires?
Dragging word by word
from memory's coffers
won't suit either me
or you who read.
Yet what a meagre choice
the dictionary offers!

Where to get
the very words we need?
We've
seven days
to spend,
twelve hours
for diverse uses.
Life must begin—
and end.
Death won't accept
excuses.

But if
it's no more
a matter of hours,
if the calendar measure
falls short,
"Epoch"
is a usual
comment of ours,
“Era” or something of the sort.
We sleep at night,
busy around by day,
each grinds his water in his own pet mortar
and so fritters life away.
But if, single-handed, somebody can
turn the tide to everyone’s profit
we utter something like “Superman”,
“Genius” or “Prophet”.
We don’t ask much of life, won’t budge an inch unless required.
To please the wife is the utmost to which we aspire.
But if, monolithic in body and soul, someone unlike us emerges,
we discover a god-like aureole or appendages equally gorgeous.
Tags and tassels laid out on shelves,
neither silly
      nor smart—
      no weightier than smoke.
Go
      scrape meaning
      out of such shells—
empty as eggs
      without white or yolk.
How, then, apply
      such yardsticks to Lenin
when anyone could see
      with his very own eyes:
that "era"
      cleared doorways
      without even bending,
wore jackets
      no bigger
      than average size.
Should Lenin, too,
      be hailed by the nation
as "Leader
      by Divine Designation"?
Had he
      been kingly or godly indeed
I'd never spare myself,
      on protest bent;
I'd raise a clamour
      in hall and street
against the crowds,
      speeches,
      processions
      and laments.
I'd find
      the words
      for a thundering condemnation,
and while
      I'd be trampled on,
      I and my cries,
I'd bomb
      the Kremlin
      with demands
      for resignation,
hurling
blasphemy into the skies.

But calm
by the coffin Dzerzhinsky\textsuperscript{62} appears.

Today
he could easily dismiss the guard.

In millions of eyes shines nothing but tears,
not running down cheeks, but frozen hard.
Your divinity's decease won't rouse a mote of feeling.

No! Today
real pain chills every heart.

We're burying the earthliest of beings
that ever came to play an earthly part.

Earthly, yes; but not the earth-bound kind
who'll never peer beyond the precincts of their sty.

He took in all the planet at a time,
saw things out of reach for the common eye.

Though like you and I in every detail,
his forehead rose a taller, steeper tower;

180
the thought-dug wrinkles
    round the eyes went deeper,
the lips looked firmer,
    more ironical than ours.
Not the satrap’s firmness
    that’ll grind us,
tightening the reins,
    beneath a triumph-chariot’s wheel.
With friends
    he’d be
with enemies
    as hard
    as any steel.
He, too,
    had illnesses
    and weaknesses to fight
and hobbies
    just the same as we have, reader.
For me it’s billiards, say,
    to whet the sight;
for him it’s chess—
    more useful for a leader.
And turning
    face about from chess to living foes,
yesterday’s dumb pawns
    he led to a war of classes
until a human,
    working-class dictatorship arose
to checkmate Capital
    and crush its prison-castle.
We and he
    had the same ideals to cherish.
Then why is it,
    no kin of his,
    I’d welcome death,
crazy with delight,
    would gladly perish
so that he might draw
    a single breath?
And not I alone.
    Who says I’m better than the rest?
Not a single soul of us,
    I reckon,
in all the mines
    and mills
    from East
    to West
would hesitate
    to do the same
    at the slightest beckon.
Instinctively,
    I shrink
    from tram rails
    to quiet corners,
giddy
    as a drunk
    who sees the lees.
Who would mind
    my puny death
    among these mourners
lamenting
    the enormousness
    of his decease?
With banners
    and without,
    they come,
    as if all Russia
had again
    turned nomad for a while.
The House of Unions
    trembles with their motion.
What can be the reason?
    Wherefore?
    Why?
Snow-tears run.
from the flags' red eyelids
The telegraph's gone hoarse with humming mournful rumours.
Who is he?
  Where from?
What has he done,
this man,
  the most humane
of all us humans?

*

Ulyanov's short life is well known to men in every country among every race.
But the longer biography of Comrade Lenin has still to be written, rewritten and retraced.

Far, far back, two hundred years or so, the earliest beginnings of Lenin go.
Hear those brazen, peremptory tones with their century-piercing motif? It's the grandfather of Bromley's and Goujon's, the first steam locomotive.
Capital, His Majesty, uncrowned, as yet unknown,
declares
the gentry’s power overthrown.
The city pillaged,
plundered,
pumped
gold
into the bellies
of banks,
while at the workbenches,
lean and humped,
the working class
closed ranks.
And already threatened,
rearing smokestacks
to the sky,

“Pave your way with us
to fortunes,
grip us tighter!
But remember:
he is coming,
he is nigh,
the Man,
the Champion,
the Avenger,
the Fighter!”
And already
smoke and clouds
get mixed together
as when mutineers
turn orderly detachments
into crowds,
until
the tokens of a storm
begin to gather—
the sky brews trouble—
ugly smoke blacks out the clouds.
’Mid beggars
a mountain of goods arises.
The manager,
bald beast,
flips his abacus,  blurts out "crisis!"
and pins up a list:  "DISMISSED:..."
Fly-blown  pastries  in dustbins found graves,
grain—  in granaries  with mildew cloyed,
while past  the windows  of Yeliseyev’s,65
belly caved in,  shuffled the unemployed.
And the call  came rumbling  from shack and slum,
covering  the whimper of kiddies:
"Come, protector!  Redressor, come!
And we’ll go  to battle  or wherever you bid us!"

*

Hey,  camel,  discoverer of colonies!
Ahoy,  caravans  of steel-hulled ships!
March through the desert,  sunsets following,
cleave through the billows  on east-bound trips!
Shadows  of ominous  ugly black

185
start patching the sky
over sun-kissed oases.
Hear the Negro
with whip-lashed back
muttering
among the bananas and maizes:
"Oo-oo,
    oo-oo,
    Nile, my Nile!
Splash up a day
like a crocodile,
let it be blacker
than I at night
With fire
like my blood,
as red
and as bright,
for the fattest bellies
both white and black
to fry and sizzle,
to split and crack!
Each
and every
ivory tusk
hack and poke them
from dawn to dusk.
Don’t let me bleed in vain—
    if only for descendants
come,
    O Sun-Faced,
deal out justice and defend us!
I’m through;
    the God of deaths won’t wait—
    I’ve lived my while.
Mind my incantation,
    Nile, my Nile!”
From snow-bound Russia
to sun-scorched Patagonia
mechanical sweat-mills
went grinding
and groaning.
In Ivanovo-Voznesensk,\textsuperscript{66}
the loom-twirling city,
brickwork mammoths shook with the ditty: "Cotton-mill, my cotton-mill, Gins and looms a-buzzin', It's high time he came along, Another Stenka Razin!"67

*

Grandsons will ask, "What does Capitalism mean?" just as kiddies today, "What's a Gendarme, Dad?"

So here's capitalism portrayed for grandsons as then he was seen, full-size in my pad.

Capitalism in his early years wasn't so bad—a business-like fellow.

Worked like blazes—none of those fears that his snowy cravat would soil and turn yellow.

Feudal tights felt too tight for the younger; forged on no worse than we do these days; raised revolutions and with gusto joined his voice in the *Marseillaise.*
Machines he spawned from his own smart head
and put new slaves to their service:
million-strong broods of workers spread
all over the world’s surface.
Whole kingdoms and counties he swallowed at a time
with their crowns and eagles and suchlike ornaments,
fattening up like the biblical kine,
licking his chops, his tongue—parliament.

But weaker with years his limb-steel became,
he swelled up with leisure and pleasure,
gaining in bulk and weight the same
as his own beloved ledger.
He built himself palaces ne’er seen before.

Artists—hordes of ’em—went through their chores.

Floors—à l’Empire,
ceilings—Rococo,
walls—Louis XIV,
Quatorze.

188
Around him
with faces equally fit
to be faces or the places on which they sit,
keeping the peace, stood buttock-faced police.

His soul to song
and to colour insensate—
like a cow in a meadow abloom with flowers—
ethics and aesthetics his domestic utensils
to be filliped with in idyllic hours.
Inferno and paradise both his possession,
he sells to old dames whose faculties fail
nail-holes from the Cross, the ladder of Ascension,
and feathers from the Holy Spirit’s tail.

But finally he too outgrew himself
living off the blood and sweat of the people.

Just guzzling, snoozing
and pocketing pelf,
Capitalism got lazy and feeble.
All blubber, he sprawled in History’s way.
No
getting over
or past him.
So snug
in his world-wide bed
he lay,
the one way out
was to blast him.
*

I know,
your critics'll

grip their whipsticks,
your poets'll go hysterical:
"Call that poetry?"
Sheer publicistics.
No feeling,
no nothing—
just bare rhetoric!"
Sure,
"Capitalism" rings
not so very elegant;
"Nightingale"
has a far more delicate sound.
Yet I'll go back to it
whenever relevant.
Let stanzas
like fighting slogans resound!
I've never
been lacking in topics—
you know it,
but now's
no time
for lovesick tattle.
All
my thundering power of a poet
is yours,
my class
waging rightful battle!
"Proletariat"
seems
too clumsy for using
190
to those
whom communism
throws into a fright.
For us, though,
it sounds
like mighty music
that’ll rouse
the dead
to get up
and fight.
Sumptuous mansions
huddle closer, shivering.
Up their storeys
goes the cry of basements, quivering:
“We’ll break free
into the sky’s
wide-open blue,
out
of the abysmal stone blind alley.
He will come—
a worker’s son all through,
a leader yet unborn,
the proletariat to rally.”
Look,
the world’s already small for Capital’s ambition;
with his billion-dollar
diamond-studded hands,
doomed
to dream of gain
until perdition,
Capital
goes grabbing other lands.
Off they march,
in clashing steel,
athirst for pillage.
“Kill!”
they shriek;
two moneybags must come to clutches.
Soldiers’ graveyards
blot out every village,
each town
becomes a workshop
making crutches.
When it's over
   they lay their tables, unfinicky.
Victory's
   the cake they carve and share.
But—
   hearken to the burial mounds' ventriloquy,
to the castanets of bones
   picked clean and bare.
"You will see us once again
   in war aflare.
Time will not forgive
   the bloody crime.
He is coming—
   sage and leader—
to declare
war on you,
   to end war for all time."
Lakes of tears
   spread out
   to flood the globe.
All too deep
   grow blood-mires,
   all too copious.
Till at last
   lone day-dreamers
began to probe
the probabilities
   of fancy-bred utopias.
But—
   philanthropists—
they got their brain-pans cracked
against the adamantine rock
   of actual fact.
How could
   footpaths
   blazed by random spurts of brilliance
serve as thoroughfares
   for all the suffering millions?
Now Capitalism
   himself,
   the blundering thief,
can’t tame them,  
so his cogs’ wild tempo rises.  
His system’s carried  
like a yellow wilted leaf  
over the giddy ups and downs  
of strikes and crises.  
What to make  
of all this gold-fed circus,  
whom to blame  
and on whose side  
to stand?  
The million-headed,  
million-handed class of workers  
strains its brains  
itslf to understand.  

*  
Capital’s days  
were eroded and gnarled  
by time  
outblazing searchlight arcs,  
till time  
gave birth  
to a man named Karl—  
Lenin’s elder brother Marx.  
Marx!  
His portrait’s gray-framed sternness  
grips one.  
But what a gulf  
between impressions and his life!  
What we see  
immured in marble  
or in gypsum  
seems a cold old man  
long since past care and strife.  
But when the workers took—  
uncertain yet in earnest—

13—570

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the first short steps
along their revolutionary path,
into what a giant,
blazing furnace
Marx
fanned up his mind and heart!
As if he'd drugged whole shifts
in every factory himself
and,
callousing his hands,
each tool and job had handled,
Marx caught
the pilferers
of surplus value
with their pelf,
red-handed.
Where others quailed,
eyes dropped too low
in awe
to peer up
even as high
as a profiteer's umbilicus,
Marx undertook
to lead the proletariat
into class war
to slay the golden calf,
by then a bull,
immense and bellicose.
Into the bay of communism,
still fogged
with blinding mystery,
we thought
the waves of chance alone
could bring us
from our hell.
Marx
disclosed
the deepest
laws of history,
put
the proletariat
at the helm.
No,
Marx’s books
aren’t merely print and paper,
not dust-dry manuscripts
with dull statistic figures.

His books
brought order
to the straggling ranks of labour
and led them forward,
full of faith and vigour.

He led them
and he told them:
“Fall in battles!
The proof of theories
are concrete deeds.
He’ll come
one day,
the genius of practice,
and guide you on
from books
to battlefields!”

As he wrote
his last
with fingers trembling,
as the last thoughts
flickered in his eyes,
I know,
Marx had a vision
of the Kremlin
and the flag
of the Commune
in Moscow’s skies.

*

Like melons
the years
came on in maturity.
Labour
grew out of childhood
at length.
Capital’s
bastions
lost security
as the proletarian tide

gained momentum and strength.

In a matter

of several years or so

inklings of gales

into tempests grow.

Uprisings break out

as the climax of wrath,

revolutions

come in their aftermath.

Ruthless

are the bourgeois’ bestial ways;

crushed

by Thiers’ and Galliffet’s

inhuman hammer,

from Paris,

from the wall

of Père Lachaise

the shadows

of the Communards

still clamour:

“Look and listen,

comrades!

Learn

from our débâcle!

Woe to single fighters!

Let our lesson

not be missed.

Only by a party

can the enemy be tackled,

clenching

all the working class

in one great fist!”

“We leaders!”

some’ll say,

then turn about and sting.

Learn to see

beneath the words

the spotted skin!

There’ll be a leader

ours to the least thing,

straight as rails, simple as bread,

prepared to go through thick and thin.
A pot-pourri
  of faiths and classes,
  dialects
  and conditions,

on wheels of gold
  the great world
  creaked along.

Capital,
  a very hedgehog for contradictions,
bristling with bayonets,
  waxed fat and strong.

The spectre of Communism
  haunted Europe,
withdrew, then roamed again
  throughout its girth.

For all these reasons
  in Simbirsk,
  half-way from Moscow
to the Urals,

Lenin,
  a boy like any other,
came to birth.

I knew a worker—
  he was illiterate—
hadn’t even tasted
  the alphabet’s salt,
yet he
  had listened
to a speech by Lenin
and so
  knew
all.

I remember a story
  by a Siberian peasant;
they’d seized land,
  held it
  and worked it
into very heaven

They’d never even heard,
  much less read Lenin
but were Leninists all,
  from seven to seventy-seven.
I’ve been up mountains—
not a lichen on their sides.

Just clouds
lying prone
on a rocky ledge.

The one
living soul
for hundreds
of miles
was a herdsman
resplendent
with Lenin’s badge.

Some’ll call it
a hankering for pins.
Fit for girls—
makes a frock
look a bit more rich.

But that pin’ll scorch
through shirts
and skins,
to the hearts
brimful
of devotion to Ilyich.

This couldn’t
be explained
by churchmen’s
hooks and crooks;
no God Almighty
bade him
be a saviour.

Working
step
by step
his way through life and books,
he grew to be
the teacher of world labour.

Look down
at Russia
from a flying plane.

She’s blue
with rivers
as if
lashed all over
or striped
But bluer
were the bruises
Take a sidelong view
wherever
you cast your eyes
mountains,
pit-heads
propping up
her skies.
But worse than jail,
was the lot
of those
who slaved at her benches.
There were countries
richer by far,
more beautiful,
more sane,
but never have I met
in the whole wide world
a land
more full
more full
of sorrow
and pain.
Yet pain and contempt
can’t be borne
forever.
Land and Freedom!
the cry grew strong,
until lone rebels,
believers
in individual terror
took to dynamite, bullet and bomb. It’s well to finish the tsar at a shot, but what if the bullet goes wide? And Lenin’s brother Alexander is caught preparing regicide. Shoot a tsar, and another with all his might will strain to break the record in tortures. And so Alexander Ulyanov one night was hanged by the light of Schlüsselburg torches. Then his brother, a seventeen-year-old youth, swore an oath that was firmer than any. “Brother, we’ll take up the battle for truth and win, but by other means,” pledged Lenin.

* * *

Your usual hero— look at the statues— struts like a peacock: “I’ll show you which is which!”
Not such was the feat, arduous, plain, undramatic,
chosen as the task of his life by Ilyich.
Together with men from the mills and mines
he sought to raise wages to a decent level,
looked for ways of fighting deductions and fines
and teaching good manners to a foreman-devil.
But the struggle’s not merely for some such claim—
to sweep up a puddle and then go slow—
satisfied by a trifle.
No—Socialism’s the aim,
Capitalism the foe
and the weapon no broom but a rifle.
The same things again and again and again
he hammers down into the work-dimmed brain.
And tomorrow those who’ve at last understood
pass it on,
    making
    the lesson
    good.
Yesterday it was dozens,
    today it’s hundreds,
tomorrow
    thousands
    into action rising,
till the whole working world
    will start rumbling like thunder
and break
    into an open uprising.
We’re no longer timid
    as newly-born lambkins;
the workers’ wrath
    condenses
    into clouds,
slashed
    by the lightning
    of Lenin’s pamphlets,
his leaflets
    showering
    on surging crowds.
The class
    drank its fill
    of Lenin’s light
and,
    enlightened,
    broke
    from the gloom of millennia.
And in turn,
    imbibing
    the masses’ might,
together with the class
    grew Lenin.
And gradually,
    enriched
    by the fertile communion,
they bring
    young Vladimir’s pledge
    to realisation.

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no longer each on his own, but a Union of Fighters for Working Class Emancipation.\textsuperscript{71}

Leninism spreads ever wider and deeper. Lenin's disciples work miracle after miracle, the underground's grit traced in blood-drops seeping through the dust and slush of the endless Vladimirka.\textsuperscript{72}

Today we spin the old globe our way. Yet even when debating in Kremlin armchairs there's few won't suddenly recall a day filled with the groans of chain-gang marchers. Remember the none-too-distant past: beyond the eye-hole, trams, droshkies, cars. . .

Who of you, let me ask, didn't bite and tear at prison-bars?

We could smash out our brains on the walls weighing on us:
All they did was mop up
and strew sand.
"It wasn’t long but honest,
Your service to your land...."
In which of his exiles
did Lenin
get fond
of the mournful power
of that song?
*
The peasant—
'twas urged—
would blaze his own tracks
and set up socialism
without hitch or wrangle.
But no—
Russia too
goes bristling with stacks;
black beards of smoke
round her cities tangle.
There’s no god
to bake us
pies in the skies.
The proletariat
must head
the peasant masses.
Over capital’s corpse
Russia’s highroad
lies,
with Lenin
to lead
the toiling classes.
They’d promise heaps,
wordy liberals and S.R.s,73
themselves
not loath
to saddle workers’ backs.
Lenin made
short work of their yarns,
left them bare as babies
in the blaze of facts.
He soon disposed
of their empty prattle
full of “liberty”,
“fraternity”
and suchlike words.

Arming
with Marxism,
mustering for battle,
rose the only
Bolshevik Party
in the world.

Now,
touring the States
in a de luxe coupé,
or footing it through Russia—
wherever you be
they meet you,
the letters
R.C.P.
with their bracketed neighbour,
B.74

Today
it’s red Mars
astronomers are hunting,
telescopes
scanning the sky from a high tower.
Yet that modest letter
on paper or bunting
shines to the world
ten times redder and brighter.

* 

Words—
even the finest—
turn into litter,

wearing threadbare
with use and barter.

Today
I want to infuse
new glitter
into the most glorious of words:

PARTY.

Individual—
what can he mean
in life?

205
Over the world-wide forest of factory stacks
like a giant banner the huge Red Square,
millions of hands welded into its staff,
soars with a mighty sweep into the air.

_Uladiimir Ilyich Lenin_
His voice
    sounds fainter
    than a needle dropping.
Who hears him?
    Only, perhaps,
    his wife,
and then if she’s near
    and not out shopping.
A Party’s
    a raging,
    single-voiced storm
compressed
    out of voices
    weak and thin.
The enemy strongholds
    burst with its roar
like eardrums
    when cannon
    begin their din.
One man alone
    feels down and out.
One man alone
    won’t make weather.
Any old bully
    can knock him about—
even weaklings
    if two together.
But when
    we midgets
surrender,
    enemy,
    fade
    out of sight!
A Party’s
    a million-fingered hand
clenched
    into one fist
    of shattering might.
What’s an individual?
    No earthly good.
One man,
even the most important of all,
can't raise a ten-yard log of wood,
to say nothing
of a house
ten stories tall.
A Party means millions
of arms,
brains,
eyes
linked
and acting together.
In a Party
we'll rear our projects to the skies,
upholding and helping
one another.
The Party's
the compass
that keeps us on course,
the backbone
of the whole working class.
The Party
embodies
the immortality of our cause,
our faith
that will never
fail or pass.
Yesterday an underling,
today
whole empires I'm uncharting.
The brain,
the strength,
the glory of its class,
that's what it is,
our Party.

Lenin
and the Party
are brother-twins.
Who'll say
which means more
to History, their mother?
Lenin
and the Party
are the closest kin;
name one
and you can’t but imply the other.

*

Crowns and coronets still galore,
bourgeois still blacken like wintering crows.
But labour’s lava already starts to pour:
see—
through the Party’s crater it flows.

January 9.
Gapon, the “people’s friend”,
debunked.
We fall in the rifles’ crackle.

Tall tales about the tsar’s royal mercy end
with Mukden’s bloodbath and Tsushima’s débâcle.

Enough! No belief left for twaddle and twiddle.
The Presnya takes to arms, done with ballyhoo.

It seemed the throne would soon snap across the middle
and forthwith the bourgeois easy chair too.
Ilyich is everywhere.

Day after day
he fights with the workers through 1905,
standing nearby
on every barricade,
innervating
the revolution
with his vigour and drive.

But soon
came the treacherous trick:

Red ribbons
blossomed
like a virgin’s cheek.

The tsar
from his balcony
read the Manifesto.\textsuperscript{78}

Then,
after a “free” honey-week,
the speeches,
the singing,
the hooraying and hailing
are covered
by the treble bass of
cannon:
on the workers’ blood goes sailing
the tsar’s butcher-admiral

Dubasov.\textsuperscript{79}

Spit in the faces
of white dross who tell us
about the Cheka’s\textsuperscript{80}
blood-dousings!

They ought to have seen
how, tied by the elbows,
workers
were flogged to death
by thousands.

Reaction ran amuck.

Intellectual bunglers
withdrew,
recluses,
and became the meekest,
locked themselves in
with blinking candles
and smoked incense,
god-damn God-seekers.\textsuperscript{81}
Even Comrade Plekhanov himself raised a whine:

"It’s the Bolsheviks’ fault; it’s theirs, the muddle is.
Shouldn’t have taken up arms at the time
and blood wouldn’t swirl, as it does, in puddles."

But here with his courage never failing

Lenin cut into the traitors’ wail:

"O yes we should have— I’ll repeat it daily—
only far more resolutely— and wouldn’t have failed.
I see the hour of new upheavals arriving
again to bring out the working classes.

Not defence but attack should become the driving
slogan of the masses."

That nightmare year with the bloody bath
and the massacre of the workers’ insurgent millions

will pass and appear as preparatory class
for the hurricanes of future rebellions.

*
And Lenin 
  once more 
turns exile into college,
educating us 
  for the coming battle,
teaching others, 
  himself gaining knowledge,
regathering the Party, 
  unmanned and scattered.
Year after year 
the strikes scored higher:
a spark 
  and the people’d 
flare up again.
But then 
came a year 
that put off the fire—
1914 
  with its deluge of pain.
It’s thrilling 
when veterans 
  twirl their whiskers
and, smirking, 
  spin yarns 
about old campaigns.
But this wholesale, 
  world-wide 
auction of mincemeat—
with what Poltava 
  or Plevna\textsuperscript{83} 
will it compare?
Imperialism 
  in all 
his filth and mud,
false teeth bared, 
  growling and grunting,
quite at home 
  in the gurgling ocean of blood,
went swallowing up 
  country after country.
Around him, 
  cozy, 
social-patriots and sycophants.
raising heavenwards
the hands that betray,
scream like monkeys
till everyone’s sick of it:
“Worker—
fight on—
on with the fray!”
The world’s iron scrap-heap kept piling
and piling,
mixed with minced man’s-flesh and splintered bone.
In the midst of all this lunatic asylum
Zimmerwald stood sober alone.
Ever remembered is the speech Lenin made above the world uproar raising on high
a voice far louder than any cannonade,
thoughts more inflaming than any fire.
On one side were millions writhing in the labour of war
to bring would-be victory forth,
on the other— against both cannon and sabre—
one man of ordinary stature and girth.
“Soldiers! The bourgeois betray and sell you,
send you to slaughter as a thousand times before.

Enough of it!

Hear what I tell you:

Turn this war among nations into civil war.

What are we, peoples, arguing for?

Put an end to catastrophes, wounds and losses.

Raise the banner of holy war against the world-wide bosses!"

It looked as though, infernally booming,

the cannon would sneeze and blow him away.

Who'd ever find the fragile human?

Who would remember his name?

"Surrender!"

one country roared to another.

Looked as if they'd go on fighting for millennia.

But at last it was over, and lo, no winners except for one—Comrade Lenin.

Imperialism, damn you!

You've exhausted our patience, once fit for angels.

Rebellious Russia has rammed you through—

from Tebriz to Archangel.
An empire’s no hen—
no joke bagging it,
the two-headed,
power-vested,
hook-beaked eagle.
And yet
we spat out
like a finished fag-end
their dynasty
with all trappings,
regal and legal.
The nation
scrambling out of the mire,
huge,
famished,
blood-crust all over it—
would it go on
dragging chestnuts from the fire
for the bourgeois,
or would it go Soviet?
“The people
have broken
tsarist fetters.
Russia’s boiling,
Russia’s ablaze!”
Lenin read
in newspapers and letters
in Switzerland
where he lived those days.
But what could one fish
out of newsprint tatters?
O,
for an airplane
skyward to speed—
home,
to the aid
of the workers in battle—
that
was his only longing and need.
But at last
at the Party’s bidding
he’s on wheels.
If only
the murderous Hohenzollern\textsuperscript{85} knew
that the German goods waggon
under German seals
carried
a bomb
for his monarchy, too!

* 

Petrograd citizens
still kept skipping,
exulting
in glee ephemeral.
But already,
red-ribboned
in martial frippery,
the Nevsky\textsuperscript{86} swarmed
with treacherous generals.
Another few months
and they'll reach the limit:
it'll come
to policemen's whistles.
The bourgeois
already itch to begin it,
already
the fur
on the beast's back bristles.
At first
mere fry
at which one might scoff,
then big sharks
emerged
to swallow
the nation.

Next
Dardiansky,
née Milyukov,\textsuperscript{87}
and finally
Prince Mikhail\textsuperscript{88}
agog for coronation.
The Premier\textsuperscript{89}
wields power
with feathery splendour:
none of your commissar’s snarling.  
Sings in a tenor  
    maidenly tender,  
even kicks up hysterics,  
    the darling.

We hadn’t yet tasted  
the sorriest crumbs  
of February’s  
freedom-prodigies  
when
    “Off to the front,  
    working thingamagums!”

the war-boys  
began prodding us.
And to crown  
this picture  
of passing beauty,  
traitors and doublecrossers  
before and after that.

S.R.s and Savinkovs\textsuperscript{90}  
stood on watchdog duty  
with Mensheviks\textsuperscript{91}  
as the Tell-Tale Cat.

When suddenly  
into the city  
sleekening with blubber,  
from beyond  
the broad-banked Neva,  
from Finland Station  
through the Vyborg suburb
rumbled
    an armoured car.
And again  
the gale,  
momentum gaining,  
set the whirlwind  
of revolution spinning.
Caps and blouses  
flooded the Liteiny\textsuperscript{92}:  
    “Lenin’s with us!  
    Long live Lenin!”
"Comrades,"
and over the heads
of the hundreds clapping
forward
a guiding hand
he thrust,
"Let's cast off
the outworn Social-Democrat trappings.
Chuck the capitalists
and their yes-men
into the dust!
We voice
the will
of the toilers
and tillers
of the whole world.
Now's the hour.
Long live the Party
of communism builders,
long live
armed struggle
for Soviet power!"
For the first time ever
without ado
before the flabbergasted
human ocean
arose
as a routine job to do
once unattainable
socialism.
There,
beyond the factories roaring,
there, on the horizon
with blinding force
it shone
before us,
the Commune
of tomorrow
without bourgeois,
proletarians,
slaves
or lords.

219
Through the tangle of tethering yes-men's tenets
Lenin's speech came crashing like an axe, indented with uproar every minute:
"Right, Lenin!
It's time to act!"
Kshesinskaya's palace, earned by twiddling toes,
today's invaded by boots steel-heeled.
It's here the factory multitude flows
in Lenin's smithy to be tempered and steeled.
"Munch your pineapples, chew your grouse!
Your days are over, bourgeois louse!"
Already we demanded the wherefore and why
from those who, lording it, quaffed and guzzled,
and during the dress rehearsal of July tickled their gizzards with revolver muzzles.
The bosses bared fangs, their looks spelt murder;
"Rioting slaves! We'll show 'em!" they thundered.
"Lenin to the wall!" Kerensky penned the order;
“To jail with Zinoviev!”
and the Party
went underground.

Ilyich’s in Finland,
at Razliv,
safe and sound,
hidden securely
in a twig shelter.
It won’t betray him
to the pack of hounds
ready
to snap him up
in the welter.

Lenin’s unseen,
and yet he’s near,
and time and events
don’t stand.

Every slogan
is Lenin’s idea,
every move
is guided
by Lenin’s hand.

Each word
by Ilyich
finds soil most fertile
and falling
forthwith
promotes
our cause,

and see—
alongside
with Leninist workers
millions of peasants
into its orbit it draws.

And when
it remained
but to mount barricades,

having chosen
a day out of many,
back to Petrograd
to the workers’ aid

221
with
  "Comrades,
  we've waited enough!"
  came Lenin.

  "The yoke of capital,
  hunger's prodding,
  the banditry of wars
  and thieving intervention
will seem
  in time
  mere moles on the body
of Grandma History,
  escaping attention."
And looking back
  from the future
  on this day
the first thing seen
  will be Lenin's figure,
  from millennia
  of slavery
  blazing the way
to the age of the Commune
  through want
  and rigour.
These years of privation
  will sink into the past
and the summer
  of the Commune
  warm this globe of ours,
and the huge,
  sweet fruit of happiness
  at last
will mature
  from the crimson
  October flowers.
And then
  the readers
  of Lenin's behests,
as the yellowing pages
  they peruse,
will feel a hot tide
  well up in their breasts,
and in their eyes—
    hot tears,
    long since out of use.

When I look
    for the grandest day
    of my life,
rummaging
    in all
    I’ve gone through and seen.
I name without doubt
    or internal strife

October 25,
    1917.
The Smolny\textsuperscript{96} throb
    in a buzz of excitement.

Grenades
    hang on seamen
    like partridges.
Bayonets zigzag
    like flashes of lightning.
Below stand machine-gunners
    belted with cartridges.

No aimless shuffling
    in the corridors;
with bombs and rifles
    no one’s a novice.

“Comrade Stalin
    wants to see you.

Here’s
    the orders:

armoured cars—
    to the General Post Office.”
“Comrade Trotsky’s\textsuperscript{97}
    instructions.”
    “Right!”
—he dashed forward
and the man’s
    navy ribbons
    flashed:
    “Aurora”.\textsuperscript{98}

Some run with dispatches,
    others
    stand arguing,
still others
click rifle-bolts—
no two figures
the same.

And here,
no token
of greatness
or grandeur,
brisk
but inconspicuous,
Lenin
came.

Already
led
by Lenin
into battle,
they didn’t know him
from portraits
yet;
bustled,
hollered,
 exchanged banter,
with a quickfire of oaths,
hail-fellow-well-met.
And there,
in that long-wished-for
 iron storm
Lenin,
drowsy with fatigue,
it would seem,
pacing,
 stopping,
 hands clasped behind back,
dug his eyes
 into the motley scene.
Once I saw him
stabbing them
into a chap in puttees,
dead-aiming,
sharp-edged
as razors,
seizing the gist
as pincers would seize,
dragging the soul from under words and phrases.
And I knew, everything was disclosed and understood,
everything those eyes were raking for:
where the shipwright and miner stood,
what the peasant and soldier were aching for.
He kept all races within his sight,
all continents where the sun goes setting or dawning;
weighed the whole globe in his brain by night
and in the morning:
"To all, every
and each,
slaves of the rich one another
hacking and carving;
to you we appeal this hour:
Let the Soviets take over government power!
Bread to the starving!
Land to the farmers!
Peace to the peoples and their warring armies!"
The bourgeois, busy drinking their fill of
soldierly blood, shrieked in a frenzy:

"At 'em, Dukhonin and Kornilov, show 'em what's what, Guchkov and Kerensky!"

But both front and rear surrendered without a shot when the decrees hailed down on them, scorching.

Today we know who showed whom what's what;
even at illiterates' hearts they got,
into steel determination forging.

From near unto far it went rolling,
mounting from a whisper to a roar:

"Peace to cottages poor and lowly,
war on palaces, war, war, war!"

We fought in all factories, humble and famous,
shook 'em out of cities like peas, while outside
the October wildfire left flaming manors
for landmarks marking its triumphant stride.

The land— once a mat for wholesale floggings—
was suddenly seized by a calloused hand

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with rivulets,
hilllocks
and other belongings
and held tight—
the long-dreamed-of,
blood-soaked land.
The spectacled white-collars,
spitting in spite,
sneaked off
to where kingdoms and dukedoms
still remain.
Good riddance!
We’ll train every cook
so she might
manage the country
to the workers’ gain.

*

We survived
for the time
by printing,
writing,
bellowing
from the trenches
into the German ear:
“Come out and fraternise!
Finish fighting!
Enough!”
and the front
crumbled off into the rear.
Leaking in torrents
that swelled out of trickles,


it seemed
our boat was about to careen:
Wilhelm’s boot,
far heftier than Nicholas’,
would smash the country
to smithereens.


Then came the S.R.s
with their infantile drivelling,
to catch the runners
in their word-traps preposterous;
dragged them back with toy swords from the scrap-heap of chivalry
picturesquely to vanquish the iron-clad monsters.

But Lenin curbed the gamecocks' zest:

"The Party must shoulder the burden again.

We'll accept the breathing-space of filthy Brest\textsuperscript{401}:

Territory we'll lose, but time we'll gain."

And, so as the breathing-space shouldn't kill us,
to be able, later, to knock them barmy,

let discipline and conscious resolve be our drillers.

Rally in the ranks of the Red Army!

* Historians will stare at the posters with hyd ras\textsuperscript{402}:

"Did those hyd ras exist or not?"

As for us, that same hydra reached out to bite us
and a full-size hydra it was, by god.

"All dangers we'll defy, No limit to our courage, And fighting we will die For Soviet power to flourish!"
First comes Denikin.\textsuperscript{103} Denikin gets a lickin'.

Repair work begins on our ruined hearths.

Then Wrangel\textsuperscript{104} turns up in the wake of Denikin;

the baron kicked out, Kolchak\textsuperscript{105} comes en masse.

Our dinners—bark, beds—any old where,

yet forward the red-starred legion bursts.

In each lives Lenin, each feels Lenin’s care,

each along a front of eleven thousand versts.

That was its breadth— eleven thousand versts,

but who knows its depth and length?

Every door an enemy ambush nursed,

every house to be captured took blood and strength.

S.R.s and monarchists with their tongues and guns sting,

the vipers, or bite like hounds.

You don’t know the way to Michelson’s?

You’ll find it by the blood from Lenin’s wounds.\textsuperscript{106}

S.R.s talk better than they pull a trigger,

their bullets their own ribs ramming.

But a menace beside which bullets were meagre
was the siege
begun
by typhus
and famine.

Look at the crumb-collecting flies:

by far
better off
than we were then,

queueing
in the freeze
for a tiny slice
days
on end.

Fancy
a giant shipbuilding works
working for nothing
but cigarette-lighters!

Jail ’em,
hang ’em,
cut their heads off,

how else
could the workers earn grub,
poor blighters?

But the kulaks
had heaps of both butter and flour.

Kulaks,
they weren’t no boobies;
hid and hoarded
till a fitter hour

their grain
and their greasy rubles.

Hunger
hits harder,
kills surer than bullets.

You need a steel grip here,
not cotton-wool lenience.

So Lenin sets out
to fight the kulaks
by food requisition teams—
grim expedients.

How could the very notion
of democracy
at such a time enter any fool's head?!
At 'em and none of your mincing hypocrisy.
Only iron dictatorship to victory led.
*

We've won, but our ship's all dents and holes,
hull in splinters, engines near end,
overhaul overdue for floors, ceilings, walls.

Come, hammer and rivet, repair and mend!

Where's port?— all the beacons gone dead in the harbour.
We careen, crossing the waves with our masts.

There's risk she'll keel over, such cargo to starboard:
the 100 million peasant class!
While enemies howled with malicious glee

Lenin alone kept his nerve:
turned her twenty points leeward and she
swerved upright and entered port at a curve.
And at once, surprisingly, no more gale;
peasants cart bread and at every step

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the familiar ads:

\[\text{WILL BUY—}\]
\[\text{FOR SALE—}\]

—NEP\textsuperscript{107}

Lenin winks:

\[\text{we’re in for repairs.}\]

Get used to the yardstick—

\[\text{nothing to fear.}\]

The shore

\[\text{rocks the crew,}\]

\[\text{weak with wear and tear:}\]

“Whoah!

\[\text{Where’s the gale?}\]

\[\text{What’s the big idea?}\]"

Lenin

points out

\[\text{a deep bay}\]

\[\text{free of rocks}\]

with the piers

\[\text{of co-operatives}\]

\[\text{looming}\]

\[\text{over it.}\]

And smoothly

\[\text{into construction’s}\]

\[\text{docks}\]

sailed

\[\text{the colossal}\]

\[\text{country}\]

\[\text{of Soviets.}\]

Lenin himself

\[\text{heaves timber and iron}\]

to patch up

\[\text{the breaks and ruptures,}\]

\[\text{marks off and measures}\]

\[\text{with an all-seeing eye on}\]

\[\text{future co-ops,}\]

\[\text{shops}\]

\[\text{and management structures.}\]

Then again

\[\text{he resumes}\]

\[\text{his post}\]

\[\text{on the bridge:}\]
Lights on in front,
at the sides and back!
Since now, systematic everyday siege will replace both storm raid and surprise attack.
At first we withdrew, discreet and sober.
Anyone disgraced—out without a word!
Now forward again—the retreat is over.
R.C.P.—crew aboard!
The Commune'll live centuries. What's a decade for her?
Forward, and this quagmire of a NEP will be past.
We'll move and build a hundred times slower so a million times longer our edifice may last.
The morass of petty "private enterprise" still tethers the tempo of our advance, but through the gathering clouds of the world-wide tempest the first streaks of lightning already glance.
Old enemies drop and give place to new.
Yet wait—
the skies
over the world
we’ll ignite.

But that
is surely
better
to do
than
to write about.
Right?

Today,
whether in the office
of a director
or running a lathe
at a public-owned factory,
we know—
the proletariat is victor.
and Lenin
the architect of victory.
From the Comintern
to the hammer and sickle
on brand-new kopeks
shining in glory,
our achievements
and triumphs
double
and triple,
filling page after page
of Lenin’s great story.

Revolutions
are the business of peoples;
for individuals
they’re too heavy to wield,
yet Lenin
ranked foremost
among his equals
by his mind’s momentum,
his will’s firm steel.

Countries rise
one after the other,
fulfilling
his predictions
each in turn;
men of all races—
white
and dark-skinned—
rally
under the banner
of the Comintern.
The imperialists
and bourgeois
in their thinning crowds,
still pestering the world
and lording over it,
politely tip
their top hats and crowns
to Ilyich’s brain-child—
the Republic of Soviets.
Fearing no effort
or artifice by the rich,
on speeds our engine
in curling smoke.
When suddenly—
the shattering news:
Ilyich
had a stroke. . . .

If
you exhibited
in a museum
a Bolshevik in tears,
all day
they’d flock in the museum
to see him.
Small wonder—
you won’t see the like in years.
With five-pointed stars
we were branded
by Polish voivodes.
Buried alive
neck-deep in the ground
by the bandits of Mamontov.
burned up in engine fire-boxes by Japanese marauders,
mouths plugged with molten tin,
threatened with bullets;
"Renounce it!" they bellowed,
but from
the hell-holes of burning gullets
"Long live Communism!"
was all that would come.

Row
after row,
in its might unreckoned,
this iron,
this steel,
the recess not over yet,
crowded
on January
the twenty-second
the five-storey building
of the Congress of Soviets.

Down they settled,
 joking
and grinning,
affairs talked over
in business-like idiom.

Time to start! Why aren't they beginning?

Here,
what are those gaps in the presidium?
Why are their eyes
red as box-stall plush?

Look at Kalinin\textsuperscript{109}—
hardly keeps his feet.

Something happened? What is it?...

Hush!

What if it's him? No, indeed. . . .

Raven-like,
the ceiling
swooped upon us,
lowering:

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down dropped heads, bent floorward by their fears.

Of a sudden
ghastly,
blackly glowering

grew the swimming lights
of chandeliers.

Silence choked the bell’s unneeded tinkle.
Up Kalinin got, by will alone.

Tears—
go try and chew them from moustache and wrinkle:
they betray him,
shining on the beard’s sharp cone.

Veins ablaze—
no hope of quenching them;
thoughts confused—
like walls his head impenning;

“Yesterday
at 6.50 p.m.
died
Comrade Lenin.”

That year
beheld a sight that ages won’t set eye on.

That day will keep
its tale of woe forever throbbing.

Horror
squeezed an anguished groan from iron.
The rows of Bolsheviks
were swept with waves of sobbing.

What a weight!
Ourselves
we dragged out bodily.

Get the details!
When and where?
Why do they hide it, damn!
Through the streets and lanes, a white hearse modelling, the Bolshoi Theatre swam. Joy
crawls on like a snail. Grief
will never go slow. No sun shone.
No ice gleamed pale.
All the world from the newspapers’ pail was cold-showered with coal-black snow.
On the worker bent at his gears the news pounced and bullet-like burned.
And it seemed a cupful of tears on his instruments overturned.
And the peasant, weathered and wizened by life, whom death more than once just missed, swung round— away from his wife, but she saw it— the dirt he smudged with his fist. There were some— no flint could be harder or colder, yet they too clenched their teeth, lips awry.
Children in a minute grew graver and older and, childlike, the grey-bearded started to cry.
The wind to all the earth in sleepless anguish whined,
and she, the rebel, couldn’t stand up to the notion
that here, in Moscow,
in a frosty room enshrined
lay he— both son and father
of the Revolution.
The end, the end, the end. . .
All persuasion
useless!
Glass and beneath— the deceased.
It’s him they bear from Paveletsky Station
through the city that he from the lords released.
The street’s like a wound that’ll worsen and worsen,
so the ache of it cuts and hacks.
Here every cobble knew Lenin in person
by the tramp of the first October attacks.
Here every slogan on banners embroidered
was thought out and worded by him.
Here every tower his speeches applauded,
would follow him anywhere, staunch and grim.

Here Lenin is known both in works and offices.
Spread hearts like spruce-tree boughs in his way!

He led,
he steeled
with his victory-prophecies,
and see—
proletarians have taken sway.

Here every peasant holds Lenin’s name
dearer than any of kinsmen cherished
for the land that at Lenin’s bidding became
his own—
 a dream for which grandsires rebelled and perished.

And Communards from their graves in Red Square
seemed to be whispering “Dear, beloved,
live,
and no need for a lot more fair.
We’d die ten times for fulfilment of it.”
Let the word be pronounced by a miracle-maker
for us to die
that he be awoken;
the street-streams would swell
and flood their embankments

and all
  go to death
  with a joy unspoken.
But there aren’t any miracles.
    Only Lenin.

Lenin,
  his coffin
  and our bent shoulders.
This man was a human—
  as human as anyone.

So just bear it—
  the pain
  that in humans smoulders.

Never
  was there
  a burden more precious
borne along
  by oceans of people
than this red coffin
  borne by processions
on the drooping shoulders
  of marches and weeping.
The Guard of Honour
  had scarcely been formed
of heroes,
  heirs
  of his wisdom and strength,
when crowds,
  impatient,
  already swarmed
through all the neighbourhood’s
  breadth
  and length.

Into a 1917 breadline
no hunger
  could drive—
  better eat tomorrow.
But into this bitter,
freezing,
dread line
kids,
invalids—
all
were driven by sorrow.
Alongside
village and town
were arrayed,

child and adult,
wrung
by their grief’s insistence.
The world of labour
passed
in parade,

the living total
of Lenin’s existence.

Downcast,
the sunbeams
dropped through the trees,
slanting down
from the house-top slopes,
yellow
as whipped-into-meekness Chinese
bent with their sorrow,
lamenting their hopes.

Nights
swam in
on the shoulders
of days
muddling hours
and confusing dates
and it seemed,
not night
with its star-born rays,
but Negroes
were here
with their tears
from the States.

The frost,
unheard-of,
bronzed one’s feet,
yet days

were spent
in the tightening crush.

Nobody

even ventures
to beat
hands together to warm them—
hush!
The frost grips fast and tortures,
as if
trying how tough
the love-tempered will is,
cuts into mobs,
and, freezing them stiff,
sneaks in
with the crowds
behind the pillars.
The steps expand,
grow up into a reef.
Silence.

Breathing and sighing stop:
how pass it,
fearful beyond belief,
that dismal,
abyssmal
four-step drop?

That drop
from the logic of farthing and penny,
from ages
of thraldom to His Majesty Gold;
that drop
with its brink—
the coffin
and Lenin
and beyond—
the Commune
in its glory unrolled.

Lenin’s forehead
was all you saw
and Nadezhda Konstantinovna
in a haze...

Maybe eyes less full of tears
could show me more.
It's through clearer eyes I've looked on gladder days.
The floating banners bend
honours,
and, silken, sway.
"Farewell to you,
comrade,
who have passed
from a noble life
away... ."
Horror!
Shut your eyes
and blindfold pace
the infinity
of tight-ropes of grief.
As if
for a minute
left face to face
with the only
truth
worth belief.

*  
What joy!
My body,
light as a feather,

drifts
in the march-tune's resonant stream.
I know
for sure—
from now and forever
the light of this minute
in me will gleam.
What a joy it is
to be part of this union,
even tears from the eyes
to be shared en masse,
in this—
the purest,
most potent communion
with that glorious feeling
whose name is Class.
The banner-wings droop one after another, in tomorrow's battles again to rise; "We ourselves, dear brother, closed your eagle eyes..."
Shoulder to shoulder— not to fall!
Flags blackened, eyes reddening, tears agleam, for the last farewell with Lenin came all, slowing down at the Mausoleum. On went the funeral ceremonial. Speeches flowed. Ay, speaking's all right; the tragedy is there's a minute only— how embrace him at one insatiable sight!
Out they file and with dread in their glance look up at the glowering, snow-pocked disk: how madly the clockhands on Spasskaya¹⁴¹ dance! A minute— and past the last quarter they whisk!
Stop at this news, mankind, and grow dumb.
Life, movement, breathing—cease.

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You,  
    with hammer uplifted,  
    be numb.
Earth,  
    lie low  
    and, motionless, freeze.
Silence.  
The end of the greatest of fighters.
Cannon fired.  
    A thousand, perhaps.
Yct all that cannonade  
    sounded quieter  
    than pennies  
    jingling in beggars’ caps.
Straining,  
    paining  
    each puny iris
I stand,  
    half-frozen,  
    with  
    bated breath.
In the gleaming of banners  
    before me arises  
    darkling,  
    the globe,  
    as still as death.
And on it—  
    this coffin  
    mourned by mankind,  
    with us,  
    mankind’s representatives,  
    round it,  
in a tempest of deeds  
    and uprisings destined  
to build up  
    and complete  
    all this day has founded.

*  

But now,  
    from the bowing banners’  
    red arch
comes the voice of Muralov:

"Forward march!"

The command's so apt
it needn't be given:
our breathing firmer,
more even
and rare,
leaden bodies with effort
driven,
we hammer
our footsteps
down from the square.
Each of the banners
above our heads
in steadying hands
soars up
as it ought.
From our marching ranks
the energy
spreads
in circles,
carrying through the world
one thought;
one thought
from a common anxiety
stemming
burns
in the army,
at the lathe,
at the plough:
it'll be hard for the Republic
without Lenin.
He's got to be replaced,
but by whom
and how?
"Enough of dozing
on bug-ridden mattresses!
Comrade secretary,
here's
our application:
put down
the whole of the factory
on the membership list of the Party organisation."
Cold sweat comes oozing from bourgeois flesh as they watch on, grinding their teeth.
400,000 from the workbench fresh—
could the Party bring Lenin a welcomer wreath?

"Comrade secretary, where's your pen?
Replace means replace— why squander words?
If you think I'm too old, here's my grandson then;
Y.C.L.-er, one of the early birds!"

*

Ahoy, my Navy, get into motion!
Off on your missions, submarine molcs!
"Over sea and over ocean travel sailors, merry souls!"
Hi there, Sun, come and be witness!
Hurry on, smooth out the wrinkles of mourning.
In line with parents, children show their fitness—
Tra-ta-ta-ta-aa-aa!
    sing their bugles in the morning.
    "One-Two-Three,
    Pioneers are we:
    We aren't afraid of fascists—
    Let them come and see!"

In vain
    old Europe
    snarls like a cur.

"Back!"
    we warn her,
    "better be wiser!"

Lenin's
    very death
    has turned
into the greatest
    communist-organiser!
Over the world-wide forest
    of factory
    stacks
like a giant banner
    the huge
    Red Square,
millions
    of hands
    welded into its staff,
soars
    with a mighty sweep
    into the air.
And from that banner,
    from every fold
Lenin,
    alive as ever,
cries:
    "Workers,
    prepare
    for the last assault!
Slaves,
    unbend
    your knees and spines!
Proletarian army,
    rise in force!

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Long live
the Revolution with speedy victory,
the greatest and justest of all the wars
ever fought in history!"

1924
FINE!

1

Time
is a thing
that goes endlessly on.
The times of the sagas—
they've been
and gone.
No sagas,
no epics,
no myths—
all extinct.
Fly, verse, like a telegram,
act!
With lips inflamed
drop down
and drink
from the river
whose name is
Fact.
This is time
humming taut
as a telegraph wire,
my heart
alone
with the truth,
whole and sole.
This happened—
with fighters,
with the country entire,
in the depth
of my own soul.
After reading this book
I want you once more
from your tiny
apartment
worlds
to forge ahead
through machine-gun roar
in the bayonet-gleam
of my poem's words.
Shine up high,
shine down on earth,
till life’s own source runs dry—
shine on—
for all your blooming worth,
so say
both sun
and I!

*An Amazing Adventure*
I want this book
    read by joyous eyes
as the testimony of a lucky witness,
to infuse
    tired muscles,
    tonic-wise,
with builders’
    riotous strength
    and fitness.
We won’t hire anyone
    to sing our day.
We’ll crucify pencils
    on the blank page,
so that pages
    rustling
should rustle
    like banners asway
until
    the furthestmost age.

19

I’ve
    been hiking
all over the world,
life’s
    to my liking,
there’s
    no word,
but in our hustle
    with its pep and bustle
it’s better still.
See
    that snaky highroad
    twine
past
    the houses tall?
Well,
    that highroad’s
    mine,
houses
    and all.
Windows aglare, stand the shops.
All kinds of ware, full to the tops.
Flies kept out.
Cheese—not a spot.
Lamps strung about;
"Prices cut!"
Getting operative,
my Co-operative!
Our rubles win the trade-fight in!
Bookstalls bulge with books in a pile;
my name, too, in the list of poetry.
Isn’t that jolly—proud, I smile—there’s my bit in the work of my country!
Swirling the dust with fat-lipped tyre,
men I elect to sittings retire.
Sit
and discuss
my affairs
without fuss,
in my
Moscow Soviet,
and
don't drowse over it!
Countenance
ruddy,
gun-holster
tan,
to guard me
ready
is my
militia-man.
His baton's
direction
is
"Please turn right!"
I've
no objection!
Fine!
All right!
Blue silk heavens
above me
shine.
Sure,
it's never
been half
so fine.
An aeroplane
hops
over humped
cloud-tops.
That man
in the aeroplane's
mine!
I watch him,
glued to the spot.
If
it comes to war,
he'll deal it out fine,
and be sure,
    they’ll get it hot!
I skim
        through the paper:
good boys, Viennese,\textsuperscript{113}
to wallop
        their bosses’
fat bums
    with their knees!
“BURNT
    THE COURT”—
they got
   what they ought!—
Out
    flames
        break,
papers
    alight,
judges
    quake—
serves
   ’em
    right!
Scurvy
    editorials
threaten us with wars. . . .
That
    won’t worry us,
though they
    go hoarse!
There comes
    the Army
marching
   before me:
drum-
mers
    rat-
tle,
ready for
   bat-
tle,
feet
  beat
    loud,
faces
  look
    proud,
bayonets
  bristle,
red stars
  glisten,
I set
  my pace
  to the marching
    feet;
foes
  you
  face
are
  mine
  in-
    deed.
Touch us,
  will they?
We’ll knock them
  silly!
Black smoke
  overhangs
chimney-batteries;
Puff-
    blow,
    blow-
      puff,
go
  my
factories.
Puff away,
  my engines,
    puff,
never
  to cease.
Make me
  heaps of cotton stuff,
my Komsomol girls
  to please!
You feel that breeze
from behind the trees?
It’s
  their perfume’s smell!
My dear,
  how
  swell!
Fields
  far-reaching;
peasants
  in their fields,
cunning
  creatures
with beards
  like shields—
bushy
  as heather!
When
  they turn the loam,
it’s so damn clever,
you’d think
  they wrote a poem.
Take
  any village;
at sowing
  or tillage,
they work away
  the whole
  blessed day;
feeding
  poultry,
milking,
  sowing,
—it’s all
  my country,
building
  and growing.
Some lands
  are centenarian,
for History's
    graveyard
        ripe,
and mine's
    just a lad,
        and a merry one:
just plan
    and invent
        and try!
No end of joy!
    We could spare some
        for you to feel. . . .
Life
    is marvellous,
        life
            is beautiful!
May we live
    to a hundred years
till our first
    gray hair appears,
may the future
    bring
joy in everything.
Verse and hammer
    glory sing
to the land
    of spring!

1927
ALOUD AND STRAIGHT

First Prologue to a Poem of the Five-Year Plan

Comrades,
    honourable descendants!
Raking
    the petrified muck of today,
probing the darkness that once impenned us,
you may chance
    to ask about me,
    I daresay.
And I daresay,
    one of your scientists will utter,
erudition
    hushing
    curiosity to awe,
that, well,
    there was
    such a bard of boiled water
and rabid enemy
    of water raw.¹¹⁴
Now,
    off with your optics' bicycle,
I'll deal with the topic myself,
    Professor!
yessir.
I,
    muck-cleaner and water-carter,
mobilised
    and enlisted
    by the October call-up,
went to the front
    from the manor garden
of Poetry
    (wanton old trollop!)
Cottage,
    pottage,
    lawn and orchard,¹¹⁵
daughter, water—
    what a beaut'!
Fancy-Nancy plants an orchid,
an' she'll water it to boot!
Some grow poems by the acre,
others sow 'em by the pinch.
Curly-whirly like Mitreikin,
fuddle-muddle like Kudreiko.\textsuperscript{116}
Go and tell 'em,
    which is which!
What's to stop
    the beastly dining?
There they'll twang
    till god knows when:
\textit{Tar-ra tin-na,}

\textit{tar-ra, tin-na,}
\textit{Tenn-n-n!}\textsuperscript{117}
Not much of an honour
    for me to rear
my
carvings
amid such roses,
on town squares with whore and hooligan near,
'mid gobs
    of tuberculosis!
Me too
\textit{agitprop}\textsuperscript{*}
    makes sick as hell,
me too
    writing love songs would suit as well—
even better—for palate and purse.
Yet I—
    I'd trample,
myself to quell,
on the very throat
    of my verse.
Listen,
    Comrades descendants,
to the agitator,
    brazen-mouthed ring-leader!
Covering
    all poetry's resplendence,

\textsuperscript{*} \textit{Agitprop}—body responsible for agitation and propaganda.—\textit{Tr.}

262
I shall crash
  across the trash
    of lyric-vendors,
as alive
    as any living reader!
I’ll come to you
  into your far-off communism
not like the sing-song
    of Esenin’s fond creations.
My verse will reach you
  over century and schism
above the heads of poets
    and administrations.
My verse will reach you anyway,
  but not the way
the dart gains goal
    in Cupid’s lyric chase,
not like the coin
    that numismatists will display,
nor like a long-dead star’s
    belated rays.
My verse
  will toil its way
    through aeon-mountain-chains
and,
  virile,
    visible,
      unvarnished,
        be at home
with you
  as are with us
    the water-mains
worked into being
    by the slaves of ancient Rome.
From burial mounds of books
  that smother rhyme
these bits
  of iron poems
    disinterring,
you'll reverently handle them in time
as weapons old,
                 but deadly and unerring.
I'm unaccustomed
to caress the ear with words.
The maiden auricle
    that nestles in its curls
will blush,
     not touched,
                 but shocked with half-obscenity.
See—
in parade my pages' troops unfurl
and I march past
     the stanzas' front
    in proud serenity.
There stand the smaller pieces,
     leaden-grim,
for death
     as well as deathless glory ready.
Muzzle to muzzle,
     loaded to the brim,
big poems
    rear
    their deadly aiming headings.
Best-loved
     of all diversely-weaponed troops,
keen-pointed rhymes whipped out
     and gripped at knee,
on the alert
     to plunge ahead with whoops,
stand puns and quips—
    my fleet-foot cavalry.
And all this army,
     armed up to the teeth,
with twenty years of triumph
     to its merit,
in all its flying might,
     to the last leaf,
I give away to you,
    the planet's proletariat.
The enemy
     of the colossus working class,
he's mine as well, 
detested, 
hated, 
mortal.
We all were bade 
beneath red flags to mass 
by years of toil, 
by days of bread and water. 
We opened Marx' every volume 
in the way 
we open shutters in our homes 
to let in light. 
But even without reading 
we could say 
with whom to march 
and on which side to fight. 
Our dialectics 
weren't derived 
from Hegel's cunning.
Through battle din 
it burst into our verse 
when bullets from our guns 
sent bosses running 
the same as we 
had run from theirs at first. 
Let widow Fame 
drip tears 
on genius' pile 
to stir up awe 
forever and anon in us. 
Die, 
die, my verse, 
like any rank and file, 
like those of us 
who fought and fell anonymous. 
The hell I care 
for bronze's weight memorial, 
the hell I care 
for marble's frozen slime! 
We're comrades all— 
so let us share our glory,
one common monument let's have to tell our story
in socialism, built in battle for all time. Descendants, check your dictionary floats!
You'll fish out from the Lethe such queer words, as prostitution, 
TB
and blockade.
For you of iron health and steely muscle knots
a poet licked away consumptive's clots
with the rough tongue of posters that he made.
With the tail of years I'm getting like a fossil—
a long-tailed monster seen through History's haze.
Come, Comrade Life, let's tramp as fast as possible
along the five-year plan what's left us of our days.
There's not a ruble in my cashbox saved by verse;
I've no mahogany by order carpentered,
and, frankly, friends, a couple of clean shirts
is all I care to have in this our world.
Called to the CCC*

of Future crimson-starred,

* CCC—Central Control Committee of the Communist Party.—Tr.
above the rabble
    of poetic thugs and crooks
I'll hold up
    like a Party member-card
all hundred volumes
    of my party-hearted books!

1930
YOU!
1 awards of St. Georgi—St. George’s Cross—a medal awarded for military merit in pre-revolutionary Russia.

2 Severyanin, Igor—Mayakovsky’s contemporary, a decadent poet, leader of the poetic grouping known as egofuturists.

LILY DEAR! IN LIEU OF A LETTER
3 Dedicated to Lily Brik.

4 A chapter of Kruchonikh’s inferno—allusion to Games in Hell, a futurist poem by A. Kruchonikh and V. Khlebnikov (1919).

KINDNESS TO HORSES
5 Sweeping the Kuznetsky—Kuznetsky Most—fashionable Moscow street.

AN AMAZING ADVENTURE
6 ROSTA—abbr. for Russian Telegraph Agency, forerunner of TASS. Since Autumn 1919, under its auspices, a group of poets and artists headed by Mayakovsky, produced thousands of colourful posters with rhymed captions on current political themes.

ORDER No. 2 TO THE ARMY OF ARTS
7 Proletcult (Proletarian Culture)—a cultural and educational society inaugurated in September 1917 for the development of amateur art among workers. Renouncing the classic heritage, proletcultist theoreticians spread the erroneous view that a “purely proletarian” culture could be created by so-called “laboratory methods”. The Proletcultist doctrine was sharply criticised by V. I. Lenin.

ATLANTIC OCEAN
8 Revkom, military-revolutionary committee, directed the preparations for the October uprising and the uprising itself.

9 C.E.C. (TsIK)—Central Executive Committee—supreme organ of Soviet power before the adoption of the new Constitution in 1936.

A SKYSCRAPER DISSECTED
10 Pre-October Yelets or Konotop small provincial towns, synonymous of stagnation.

11 Calvin Coolidge—President of the USA in 1923-1929.
SERGEI ESENIN

12 . . .slashed up wrist-veins—Sergei Esenin, prominent Russian poet, committed suicide in the Leningrad hotel Angleterre on Dec. 27, 1925, writing his last verse with blood from his opened vein. p. 64

13 Kvass—popular non-alcoholic beverage. p. 65

14 On the Post—magazine, mouthpiece of one of the leading literary groupings of the twenties, the Russian Association of proletarian writers (RAPP). p. 65

15 Nikolai Doronin—poet, contemporary of V. Mayakovsky. p. 65

16 Leonid Sobinov—famous tenor who sang at the Esenin memorial meeting in the Moscow Art Theatre. p. 67

17 Not a word, my friend, not a sigh—initial words of a romance by Chaikovsky to words by Pleshcheyev. p. 67

18 L. U. Loengrinsky—Loengrin’s part in Wagner’s opera was considered one of Sobinov’s finest performances. p. 67

19 P. S. Kogan—Soviet critic, target of many sarcastic quips on the part of V. Mayakovsky. p. 67

20 Dying in this life is not so hard, building life is harder, I daresay—paraphrase of Esenin’s lines: Dying in this life is not so new, yet living, certainly, is not much newer. p. 68

TO COMRADE NETTE, STEAMER AND MAN

21 Theodore Nette—Soviet diplomatic courier who was murdered by foreign secret agents in a train carriage in February 1926. p. 69

22 Roman Yakobson—philologist, Mayakovsky’s and Nette’s friend. p. 69

LETTER TO COMRADE KOSTROV

23 T. Kostrov—then editor of the newspaper Komsomolskaya Pravda. p. 83

CLOUD IN PANTS

24 Lusitania—British steamship sunk by a German submarine in 1915. p. 96

25 . . .calvaries of rostrums. Mayakovsky and other futurists undertook a tour through Russia in late 1913-early 1914. p. 99

26 “Drink Van Huten’s Cocoa!”—the day’s newspapers carried stories about a convict sentenced to death who agreed to shout out these words during his execution, the firm having promised to provide for his family. p. 101

272
27 General Galliffet—sponsor of massacres concluding the existence of the Paris Commune of 1871.

28 ...feasts like Mamai...—allusion to a Tatar custom by which victors feasted sitting on planks laid on the corpses of the defeated. Actually, it was not Khan Mamai of the Golden Horde, but the commanders of Genghiz Khan who did so after the battle on the river Kalka (13th century).

29 Azaf—an agent-provocateur in the pay of the tsarist secret police.

30 One poet sings sonnets to Tiana...—allusion to I. Severyanin’s poem Tiana.

I LOVE

31 Müller—author of popular physical exercise manual.

32 Rion—Rioni—river in Georgia which flows through the town of Kutaisi.

33 Butyrki—former Butyrskaya prison in Moscow where Mayakovskiy was detained in cell No. 103 in 1909-1910 for revolutionary activity.

34 Illovaisky D. I.—author of history-books written in a reactionary, monarchist spirit.

35 Nikolai Dobrolyubov—great revolutionary democrat, critic and writer. The name means literally “lover of good”.

36 Sadovaya—one of Moscow’s chief thoroughfares forming a ring round the city centre (lit., Sadovaya—Garden St.).

37 Strastnaya Square—a square in the centre of Moscow, renamed Pushkin Square (Strast—Passion).

38 ...precursor by Maupassant—allusion to Maupassant’s story The Idyll.

IT

39 Lubyansky Proyezd (drive)—now Serov Proyezd—street in Moscow where Mayakovskiy lived at the time.

40 Vodopyany Lane—place where Lily Brik lived at the time.

41 Myasnitskaya Street—now Kirov Street—the route from Lubyansky Proyezd to Vodopyany Lane.

42 Dantès killed the poet Alexander Pushkin in a duel.

43 UTsIK—Russian abbreviation for Central Executive Committee.
64 *Erfurt* programme—programme of the German Social Democratic Party adopted at a party congress in 1891. p. 130

65 *The man from seven years back*—the hero of *Man*, a poem Mayakovsky wrote 7 years before *It* in 1916-1917. p. 135

66 *Tverskaya*—now Gorky Street. p. 139

67 *Presnya*—Moscow street where Mayakovsky’s mother and sisters lived. p. 141

68 *...six hundred versts*—distance from Moscow to Leningrad. p. 142

69 *domkom*—house management committee elected from the tenants of an apartment house. p. 143

70 *Kudrinskaya*—a square in Moscow, now renamed Vostaniye Square in honour of the 1905 uprising. p. 144

71 *Pleasant Surprise*—title of a collection of verses by A. Blok. p. 145

72 *...guardian angel*—in those days tenants of large flats, afraid of having some of the rooms requisitioned, did their best to get hold of an important lodger. p. 146

73 *Mystery-Bouffe*—a play by Mayakovsky. p. 148

74 *Arnold Boecklin*—Swiss painter, symbolist, copies of whose picture “Island of the Dead” could be found in any middle-class family before the Revolution. p. 151

75 *Raskolnikov*—hero of Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*. p. 153

76, 57, 58, *Lyuban, Tver* (now Kalinin), *Klin*—stations on the way from Leningrad to Moscow. p. 157

79 *Razumovskoye*—Moscow suburb. p. 157

60 *Nikolaevsky Station*—now Leningrad Railway terminal in Moscow. p. 157

61 *One of your sort—a hussar*—refers to the poet Lermontov who served as a hussar and was killed in a duel, in Pyatigorsk at the foot of Mt. Mashuk. p. 165

**VLADIMIR ILYICH LENIN**

62 *Felix Edmundovich Dzerzhinsky*—then People’s Commissar of Internal Affairs, staunch follower of Lenin. p. 180

63 *The House of Unions*—historical public building in the centre of Moscow where Lenin lay in state in January 1924. p. 182
Bromley's and Goujon's—foreign-owned engineering works in old Russia; after the revolution they were nationalised, renamed and considerably expanded. p. 183

Yeliseyev—big food-dealer with huge shops in Russia's principal cities. p. 185

Ivanovo-Uznesensk—big textile centre, scene of mass strikes and revolutionary upheavals for many years. p. 186

Stepan Razin—leader of a peasant uprising in the 17th century. p. 187

The French Prime Minister Thiers and General Galliffet headed the operations against the Paris Commune of 1871. p. 196

Père Lachaise—Paris cemetery where Communards were shot and buried. p. 196

Alexander Ulyanov, Lenin's elder brother, a member of the Narodnaya Volya revolutionary society, was arrested on the eve of an attempt to assassinate the tsar, and executed, after court martial, at the Schlüsselburg Fortress, place of execution of many Russian revolutionaries. p. 200

Name of earliest Marxist workers' organisation in Russia, embryo of the Communist Party. p. 203

Uladiimirka—highway by which political convicts were driven from Moscow to Siberia. p. 203

S.R.s—Socialist-Revolutionary Party, a petty-bourgeois organisation preaching individual terror; after the October Revolution it degenerated into a gang of plotters opposing Soviet power. p. 204

Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks)—name used from 1918 to 1925. p. 205

On January 9, 1905, the gendarmes, killing hundreds, scattered a peaceful manifestation carrying a petition to the tsar. The priest Gapon, its leader, had organised a whole system of police-sponsored workers' circles, spreading the belief that the tsar was unaware of their miserable conditions. p. 210

Mukden, Tsushima—sites of land and naval battles in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05), where tsarism sustained military defeat from the Japanese; one of the main events that set off the revolution of 1905, disclosing the decay of the regime. p. 210

Presnya—industrial district in Moscow where the street-fighting began in 1905. p. 210

275
On October 17, 1905, the tsar issued a manifesto promising certain civil rights—a subterfuge aimed at allaying popular indigination.

Admiral Dubasov—governor-general of St. Petersburg, headed operations against the insurgent workers.

Cheka—Extraordinary Commission headed by Dzerzhinsky, crushed counter-revolutionary plots in the first years of Soviet power.

Some of the intellectuals earlier supporting the revolutionary cause lost heart after the defeat of the revolution and abandoned the militant principles of the movement, indulging in “God-seeking”, i.e., religious mysticism.

Georgi Plekhanov—prominent Marxist scholar and theoretician, who in 1905 drifted to the right and broke with Lenin.

Poltava (Ukraine, 1709) and Plevna (Bulgaria, 1877)—cities near which big historic battles were won by Russian forces.

The international socialist conference held in Zimmerwald (Switzerland, 1915) took a resolute stand against the imperialist war.

Hohenzollern—dynastic name of German Kaiser Wilhelm II.

Nevsky Prospekt—central thoroughfare of Petrograd.

Dardanelsky, née Milyukov—one of the leaders of the Russian counter-revolutionary forces, during World War I advocated war until victory and annexation of the Dardanelles straits.

Prince Mikhail—brother of Nicholas II, made claims to the throne immediately after the tsar’s abdication.

Kerensky, A. F.—Socialist-Revolutionary; from July 1917 headed the bourgeois Provisional Government. In August 1917 Premier Kerensky ordered Lenin’s arrest, secretly planning his murder.

Boris Savinkov—one of the leaders of the S.R. Party; after the revolution headed several counter-revolutionary plots.

Mensheviks—opportunist minority in the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party. The Tell-Tale Cat—folklore cat that could speak and tell stories.

Liteiny Prospekt—one of Petrograd’s main streets.

Kshesinskaya—prima ballerina of the Mariinsky Theatre, the tsar’s favourite, whose palace, a present from the tsar, was taken over by the revolutionary masses.
On July 3-4, 1917, Petrograd workers, soldiers and sailors held a peaceful demonstration demanding complete transfer of power to the Soviets. It was dispersed by gunfire at the orders of the Provisional Government.

Zinoviev, G. Y.—joined the Russian Social-Democratic movement in 1901. After the Second Congress of the R.S.D.L.P. (1903) Zinoviev joined the Bolsheviks. After the Revolution, one of the organisers of the anti-Party Trotsky-Zinoviev bloc.

Smolny—historic building accommodating the Petrograd Soviet; headquarters of the October uprising.

Trotsky, L. D.—headed the Centrist trend in Russian Social-Democracy. On the eve of the October Revolution joined the Bolshevik Party. After the October Revolution headed the opposition elements fighting against the general Party line, against the Leninist programme of socialist construction. In 1927 Trotsky was expelled from the Party and deprived of Soviet citizenship for anti-Soviet activities.

Aurora—famous battleship whose salvo signalled the beginning of the revolution.

Dukhonin and Kornilov—white generals, Guchkov—Minister in the bourgeois Provisional Government; leaders of the planned coup aimed at preventing the imminent revolution.

Decrees on Peace and Land and Decision on the Formation of a Workers' and Peasants' Government—the first to be issued by the revolutionary authorities.

The young Soviet Government was forced to sign the inequitable Brest Treaty with the Germans, which lasted only until November 1918, when the revolution in Germany overthrew the Kaiser.

...posters with hydras—cartoons of the civil war depicted imperialism as a many-headed monster out to devour the Soviet Republic.

General Denikin headed the first whiteguard onslaught from the South; soon after his defeat, Baron Wrangel entered the Ukrainian steppes from the Crimea. Admiral Kolchak led the white armies based in Siberia. With equipment and financial backing from abroad, they successively and simultaneously attempted to smother the Soviet Republic, the results of which are known.

Allusion to an attempt on Lenin's life by the S.R. terrorist Kaplan who chose the moment when Lenin was leaving a workers' rally at the Michelson engineering works in Moscow, August 1918.

NEP—abbreviation for the New Economic Policy proclaimed by Lenin, envisaging temporary permission of free private commerce, purposed to help the economy recuperate; the key positions in the economy being retained by the proletarian state.
108 Mamontov—whiteguard general, notorious for brutality. p. 235

109 Mikhail Ivanovich Kalinin—one of the oldest followers of Lenin; Chairman of the All-Russia Central Executive Committee and later of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR. p. 236

110 Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya—Lenin's wife, staunch Bolshevik. p. 243

111 Spasskaya—Kremlin clock-tower. p. 245

112 Muralov, N. I.—then commander of the Moscow Military District. p. 247

FINE!

113 Good boys, Viennese—an allusion to the Vienna uprising of July 1927. p. 257

ALOUD AND STRAIGHT

114 That there was such a bard of boiled water and rabid enemy of water raw—ironic hint at the sanitary posters which Mayakovsky supplied with captions. p. 261

115 Cottage, pottage, lawn and orchard—free re-hash of a popular sentimental ditty. p. 261

116 Mitreikin and Kudreiko—poets, Mayakovsky's contemporaries. p. 262

117 Tar-ra tin-na, tar-ra tin-na, ten-n-n—from Gypsy Waltz on a Guitar by Ilya Selvinsky. p. 262