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MAYAKOVSKY'S *BEDBUG*: REVOLUTION, TIME, AND UTOPIA* **

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No battle plan ever survives contact with the enemy.
Helmut von Moltke

...История уж кончилась, а ты и не заметил.
(...History has ended and you didn't even notice.)
Andrey Platonov

Irony is just death walking among us.
Kim Stanley Robinson

In Russia, the very idea of a Communist revolution – from 1905 onwards – meant both hope and dread. This attitude is quite clearly shown in a very significant part of the Russian literary process, from 1908 to the beginning of the Stalin era. An obvious thread, in fact, connects Aleksandr Bogdanov (*Red Star*, 1908), Evgeny Zamyatin (*We*, 1921) and Vladimir Mayakovsky (*The Bedbug*, 1929): the growing awareness that the Communist revolution, as Lenin had conceived it, was little more than a model and that a model could not describe – much less forecast – a complex reality (a complex system) like a social and political one. As a result of this awareness, hope and a dark prophecy (Bogdanov) slowly turn into despair (Mayakovsky). The model is subsumed by Vladimir Mayakovsky's dystopian satire of *The Bedbug* and *The Bathhouse* which propose a new paradigm of dystopia: a bottleneck in the flow of the information produced by blind

* This essay is the second 'episode' in a study on Russian dystopian thought in the second decade of the 20th century: the first, *The Algebra of Happiness: Evgeny Zamyatin's We*, was published in *Quaestio Rossica*, n. 4, 2015, p. 19–39. Hopefully, a third 'episode' will follow with an analysis of Andrej Platonov's *Chevengur*. The critical literature about Mayakovsky's *The Bedbug* is quite extensive. In this essay, I chose to refer only to that part which has direct relevance for the interpretative hypothesis I propose. Critical excerpts quotes written in languages other than English (Italian, Russian) were translated by me.

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adherence to a preconceived project that prevents the discovery and the implementation of *la volonté générale* in so complex a system as *human society*.

Keywords: Mayakovsky; *The Bedbug*; *The Bathhouse*; communism; revolution; utopia; dystopia.

Для периода господства революционных идей в России начала XX в. были характерны противоречивые настроения надежды и страха. Это ярко проявлялось и во многих произведениях русской литературы, начиная с 1908 г. и вплоть до сталинской эпохи. Такие представления были связующей нитью для творчества Александра Богданова (*Красная Звезда*, 1908), Евгения Замятина (*Мы*, 1921) и Владимира Маяковского (*Клоп*, 1929): по их изменениям можно проследить то, как в сознании людей росло убеждение, что коммунистическая революция – всего лишь абстрактная модель. А модель не может описать и, тем более, предсказать сложную реальность, включающую в себя социальную и политическую системы. Из осознания этого факта, по мнению автора, и происходит мрачное пророчество А. Богданова (соединенное с надеждой), которое затем перерастает в отчаяние у В. Маяковского. Эта модель представлена в сатире Маяковского – в «Клопе» и «Бане», в которых возникает новая парадигма антиутопии: информационная ограниченность, вызванная слепым следованием заранее заданному замыслу, препятствует открытию и внедрению *volonté générale* (всеобщей воли как результата ограничения людьми своих прав) в такой сложной системе как человеческое общество.

Ключевые слова: В. Маяковский; «Клоп»; «Баня»; коммунизм; революция; утопия; антиутопия.

Unlike the great revolutions in Europe [Hill; Russell C.; Tilly; Goldstone], whose outbreak was sudden, unexpected, and inspired by ideals and 'ideologies' which were not always clearly defined, the future destiny of the Communist Revolution was quite precisely outlined by Karl Marx in his works, from the *Communist Manifesto* to the *Grundrisse* and the *Critique of the Gotha Program*.

'Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement...?' – said Vladimir Ilych Lenin, who, in *State and Revolution* and *What is to be Done*, enriched Marxist theory with all the social and political conditions of Russia [Ленин, с. 24]. In this country, the proletarian workers who needed to become conscious of the chains binding them in order to break them were relatively few in number compared to the vast peasant population.

As a revolutionary theory implies the existence of a 'model' predicting its outcomes,² the Russian Revolution of 1917 was born from a model,

² 'Even in Russia, social democratic doctrine arose and developed among the intellectuals... To their social position, the founders of the contemporary scientific socialism, Marx and Engels, were bourgeois intellectuals' [Ленин, с. 24]. 'So... the political consciousness of class can be brought to the worker only from the outside, i. e., from the outside of the economic struggles of the sphere of relations between workers and owners. The only field from which it is possible to reach this consciousness is the field of relationships of all classes, in all sections of the population with the State and with the Government...' [Ibid.].

a prediction made by intellectuals: this was precisely the engine that would move it along its course.

At some stage, the generations of Russians who had dreamed of a revolution (usually intellectuals raised within a bourgeois culture) found that a worrying question was buried deep in Leninist theory: what would become of them after the advent of Communism? What would proletarian culture be like in a collectivist society? If a vanguard was necessary to foment the revolution in proletarian and peasant Russia because the masses were ignorant of what they had to do, what would become of that vanguard once its 'pedagogical' and political task had been accomplished and a new culture had become hegemonic? Although the peace after class struggle would involve everyone, including revolution-



Vladimir Mayakovsky.
Photo taken by P. A. Otsup

ary intellectuals, the political thought of those years, particularly through the mirror of literature, shows that concern (and sometimes even fear) about the consequences of the revolution was widespread among the leading characters of Russian literary life in the second decade of the twentieth century [Burbank].

It has been said that Romanticism was nothing but the attempt to recover, on an individual basis, a collective *sacrum* [Brook] (faith in an omnipotent God, provident and imposer of an ethics) that, with the birth of the Copernican science and the Enlightenment, had gradually lost its legitimacy. Considered in these terms, the Communist Revolution was an attempt to recreate the collective *sacrum* – namely, an ethics – on the basis of common reason, thus delegitimising the individual *sacrum* of Romanticism. The revolution, therefore, implied nothing less than the abandonment by the individual of the ability to establish his own *sacrum* and the mandate given to a concord and homogeneous body. It was not, consequently, a matter of simply changing the government or regime, but of transforming the individual's attitude towards his own behaviour from a self-determined ethics to a hetero-determined one.

It is true that if a transformation is really harmonious and homogeneous, then it should take place smoothly, but it is also true that over the course of a revolutionary process no one really knows what kind of homogeneity can be achieved. The main figures of Russian culture during the 1917 Revolution felt that the world with which they were dealing was more complex and unpredictable than was written in the 'holy books', and that the revo-

lution would be quite different from a simple and automatic change from an unjust and oppressive world to a just and fair one. Hence the ambivalent attitude mentioned: there was hope for the fulfilment of a dream but also fear of landing in a nightmare.

A Red Star

The first to address this problem was Alexander Aleskandrovič Bogdanov (A. A. Malinin).¹ Leader of the 1905 insurrection in Moscow, Bogdanov was initially Lenin's friend but later became his ideological opponent: it was against him that Vladimir Ilyč wrote the polemic *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*. Bogdanov devoted himself to solving an issue that was not fully analysed in Lenin's programmatic works: once the revolution had been won and the means of production had become collective property, what would the 'superstructure' of the new society be like? What culture would the revolutionary proletariat create? The monumental and unfinished *Tektologya*, the General Science of Organisation, clearly demonstrates Bogdanov's ideas about proletarian culture: to the division of technical knowledge that had allowed the bourgeoisie to dominate production processes by means of the monopoly of the organisational science, Bogdanov opposes multidisciplinary and self-organised proletarian knowledge.

Before the publication of *Tektologya* (1912–1917), Bogdanov wrote a novel in which the fate of revolutionary intellectuals in a communist state was faced dramatically for the first time: this 1908 novel was entitled *Red Star* [Богданов; see also: Basile 1989]. In his *Roman-Utopia*, Bogdanov imagines a Russian revolutionary, Leonid, being taken to Mars (the titular red star) shortly after the failed 1905 insurrection: once there, he learns that a fully communist civilisation has existed on Mars for many centuries. He lives in the new order he had until then only dreamed about, making wonderful discoveries about harmony and 'quiet happiness'. Far from being comfortable though, Leonid gradually goes mad and has to be brought back to Earth in order to heal from the lethal delusions that haunt him on Mars, some of which even lead him to murder. The author himself tells us the reasons for the protagonist's madness: Leonid is a revolutionary intellectual who grew up in a bourgeois culture and therefore belongs to a class culture incompatible with that of the proletarians who built Communism on Mars. The madness of the protagonist is due to his cultural inability to adjust to a proletarian society.

Therefore in 1908 Bogdanov already foresaw the difficulties awaiting the enlightened revolutionary intellectual in a world of where Communism

¹ Dystopian literature, in the form of science fiction, was nothing new when Bogdanov wrote *Red Star* and, *a fortiori*, when Yevgeny Zamyatin wrote *We*. The novels of H. G. Wells were well known [The reception...]. In the first years of the twentieth century, L. B. Afanas'yev (*Putešestvie na Mars. Fantasticheskaya Povest*) [Афанасьев] and N. F. Fyodorov (*Večer v 2217 godu*) [Федоров] described horrendous states, modelled after the Wellesian *The Sleeper Awakes*. For a rich and well-structured bibliography of science fiction utopias and dystopias from the early twentieth century to the thirties, see [Bottero].

had been achieved. As the protagonist of the novel experiences, the communist Red Star is a world where 'quiet happiness' reigns. But what is such 'quiet-happiness' to Leonid Bogdanov?

On Mars, all human activity takes place in silence. Factories emit harmonious sounds rather than metallic clanging; birth and death are regulated in a completely non-traumatic way; children are educated in state schools to put aside the distinction between 'mine' and 'yours'; suicide is allowed and benevolently assisted. Daily life goes smoothly and the work is constituted by truly collective cooperation. Nothing has changed for five centuries, although men and women have become similar to each other in terms of their appearance, to the point that Leonid, much to his embarrassment, mistakes a man for Netti, the Martian woman with whom he falls in love.

Leonid, although he seems to appreciate Martian peace, is unable to integrate into this world of collective work: even the romantic relationship with his second Martian mistress, Enno, is described with such coldness as to freeze the hottest of erotic enthusiasms.

Неизменно кроткая и добрая Энно не уклонялась от этой близости, хотя и не стремилась к ней сама [Богданов].

(Always calm and gentle, Enno did not refuse this intimacy, even though she hadn't asked for it.)²

Был оттенок мягкой грусти в ее ласках – ласках нежной дружбы, которая все позволяет... [Ibid].

(There was always a tinge of sadness in her sweet caresses – the caresses of a tender friendship that allowed everything).

Even the literature is *спокойная и неподвижная, как смерть* (quiet and still as death) [Ibid.]. 'The literature of the new world... did not provide peace nor repose... the themes were simple, the acting excellent, but life remained far away... The dialogues of the heroes were quiet and polite... but the feelings they expressed were subdued, as if they didn't want to evoke any emotion.' All of this seems to have little to do with the dream of true Communism.

However, in *Red Star*, we find a prophecy about the future fate of terrestrial Communism.

Sometime during his visit, Leonid comes across the records of a committee meeting dealing with the energy emergency on Mars. While some members propose asking the people of Earth to share their resources, Sterni, one of Martians who flew the ship that took Leonid to the Red Star, makes a shocking proposal, triggering the insanity of the protagonist: the total de-

² Translation of quotations from Bogdanov's book was made by the author of the article. The full text of the book cf.: [Bogdanov].

struction of humanity on Earth. Sterni's reasoning is linear. A capitalist world like Earth will never spontaneously share its resources and will resist with open warfare, guerrilla combat, terrorism, and any other available means. It is not realistic to hope that a portion of the planet (perhaps Russia if and when Communism is achieved) will accede to the Martian requests. In fact:

Затем отдельные передовые страны, в которых социализм восторжествует, будут как острова среди враждебного им капиталистического, а частью даже докапиталистического мира. <...> Но даже там, где социализм удержится и выйдет победителем, его характер будет глубоко и надолго искажен многими годами осадного положения, необходимого террора и военщины, с неизбежным последствием – варварским патриотизмом [Богданов].

(Where socialism resists and eventually wins its fight, its character will be deeply, and for a long time to come, perverted by long years of siege, terror, and militarism, until the inevitable consequence: a barbaric patriotism.)

Sterni's ruthless analysis is nothing less than a prophecy (formulated in 1908!) of Socialism in One Country. Furthermore, *Red Star* looks like a futuristic intuition of Zamyatin's 'revolutionary entropy' [Basile, 2015].

The Decline of Enthusiasm

From the October Revolution to Vladimir Mayakovsky's *Bedbug*, a decade passed during which revolutionary Russia faced the civil war, the New Economic Policy, and the beginning of Stalinism.

Будущее искусство расцветет в своих возможностях достижений как некий вселенский вертоград, где блаженные и мудрые люди будут хоровадно отдыхать под тенистыми ветвями одного преогромнейшего дерева, имя которому социализм, или рай, ибо рай в мужицком творчестве так и представлялся – где нет податей за пашни, где «избы новые, кипарисовым тесом крытые», где дряхлое время, бродя по лугам, сзывает к мировому столу... [Есенин, 1967, с. 190–191].

(Future art will flourish in all its possibility as a universal city, where people blissfully and wisely will rest in a circle under the shady branches of a giant tree, whose name is Socialism, or Heaven, because Heaven in the creation of the muzhiki is portrayed as a place where there are no tributes on the fields, where the izby are new, roofed with cypress planks, where a decrepit time, wandering through the meadows, invites to a common table every race.)³

Мне очень грустно сейчас, что история переживает тяжелую эпоху умерщвления личности как живого. Ведь идет совершенно не тот соци-

³ Translation of quotations from Yesenin was made by the author of the article.

ализм, о котором я думал, а определенный и нарочитый, как какой-нибудь остров Елены, без славы и без мечтаний. Тесно в нем живому, тесно строящему мост в мир невидимый, ибо рубят и взрывают эти мосты из-под ног грядущих поколений [Есенин, 1999, т. 6, с. 114–116].

(I am very sad now that history is going through the hard time of killing the personality as a living thing, because it is absolutely not the socialism that I thought about, but a precise and premeditated one, like a St Helena, with no glory or dreams. It is hard for a living person, it is hard for those who build bridges towards invisible worlds, because these bridges are cut and destroyed under the feet of generations to come.)

Between Sergei Yesenin's ruminations, only two years had elapsed: only two more years separated the poet from a (suspicious) suicide by hanging in his room at the Hotel Angleterre in Leningrad.

The Futurist movement, led by representatives of art with little experience of politics, is cloaked with the colours of anarchy... October has purged, formed, reorganised. Futurism has become the Left Front of the Arts, i. e.: "We".

...October has taught us the work.

<...>

The revolution taught us many things.

<...>

L. E. F. knows.

N. Aseev, B. Arvatov, O. Brik, B. Kušner, V. Mayakovsky, S. Tret'yakov, N. Chuzhak [Micheli, p. 148].

Just a few years passed between the manifesto of L. E. F. [Levy Front Iskusstv (1923)] and the composition of *The Bedbug* (1928): only two more years separated him from suicide (1930) [Jakobson].⁴

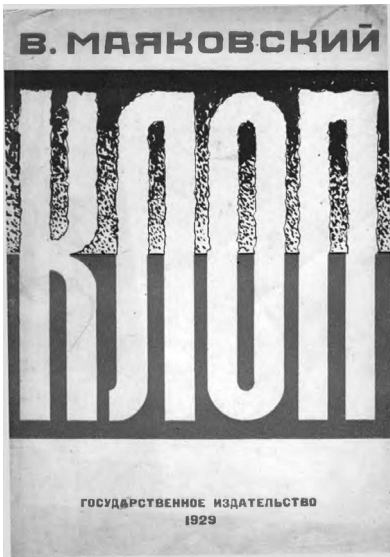
The Bedbug

The Bedbug (*Klop*, 1928) is the first of Mayakovsky's 'extreme maturity' plays, and it is also the deepest and most complex.⁵ *The Bedbug's* subtitle is *Feericheskaya Komedy* (Faerie Comedy): however, it is really an unexpected and extraordinarily bitter comedy against the petty-bourgeois slag remaining in the Soviet society of the late twenties. Equally, it is also a still almost unexplored mine of dystopian themes that go beyond the 'here and now', disguised as the elsewhere – elshen of Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* [Basile, 2015].

The *Feeričeskaya Komedy* has a very complex structure, with a double unity of place and time. The first place is Tambov. The second is

⁴ About Vladimir Mayakovsky's suicide in the [Vitale].

⁵ *Banya* [Bathhouse] (1929) and the second *faerie*, *Moskva gorit* (Moscow is on fire) (1930), the latter an apology for the Revolution from 1905 to 1917, followed later.



First edition of V. Mayakovsky's 'faerie comedy' *The Bedbug* (1929).
Front cover

the whole world. Time is also divided into a double unit, into two 'advents'. In the first, the revolution has been accomplished. The Bolsheviks have won, and one of them, the protagonist of the play Prisyipkin, intends to take advantage of his position as a revolutionary to obtain all the pleasures that the surviving bourgeoisie can guarantee him. So he abandons Zoya Berezkina, his ancient proletarian girlfriend, who then attempts suicide: *Мы разошлись, как в море корабли* ("We came apart like ships at sea") [Маяковский, т. 11, с. 224], says Prisyipkin (soon to marry the daughter of a wealthy hairdresser) to Zoya.

In Tambov market, all kinds of whimsical goods are on sale: perfumes, buttons that attach themselves, fur lined bras. To prepare

for the wedding, Prisyipkin – who now calls himself Skrypkin – must learn to dance the fox-trot [Vitale]. Oleg Bayan, a sort of pimp, tries to teach him, but Skrypkin misses the steps because a bug has slipped under his new clothes and irritates him with its biting. During the wedding party, the guests, more or less drunk, make such a mess that a fire starts: the ballroom floor gives way under their weight and Skrypkin and his bug fall down into the cellar, where they are embedded in a block of ice.

50 years (or ten five-year plans) later, in 1979, Prisyipkin-Skrypkin is thawed out and revived, along with the bedbug. This is the second advent. Our hero discovers that in the world of mature Communism, words like 'love' and 'suicide' have no meaning; indeed, they have been forgotten. The world of the second advent is cold, rational, and devoid of feelings: it is an icy world that gives off a sharp odour of phenol [Ripellino, p. 184]. Prisyipkin ends up in a zoo cage with only the bedbug for company, screaming in despair at his solitude: meanwhile, zoo visitors look at him through the bars while listening to cheerful marching music.

The paradoxical plot of Mayakovsky's *Feeričeskaya Komediya* hides an enormous wealth of meaning, symbols and hidden allusions. The first level of meaning is what Mayakovsky himself says in his commentary to the staging of the comedy directed by Vsevolod Meyerhold:

The problem that we face is the unveiling of today's petty bourgeois. The first four acts take place nowadays. The action takes place around Prisyipkin, a former factory worker, a former member of the party, who

celebrates his 'red wedding' with the daughter of a hairdresser, the manicurist Elzevira Renaissance. This part ends with a fire, which breaks out during the intoxicated and boisterous party organised after the wedding. During the fire, all the characters perish. Only one corpse cannot be found: that of Prisyppkin. In the second part, the spectator is transported into the future, after ten Soviet five-year plans.

Our descendants find Prisyppkin's frozen corpse and decide to revive him.

In this way, a typical middle-class specimen appears in the new world. All attempts to make a man of the future out of him fail. After many vicissitudes, he is finally locked in a cage at the zoo and presented as a unique specimen of 'philisteus vulgaris'. Eventually, the protagonist addresses the zoo visitors and, over their heads, the public of the theatre, inviting them to take a seat beside him in the cage.

This is only the external schema of my work, the plot doesn't say much. I'm reworking it after numerous readings made in circles and by Komsomol workers. <...>

Would you like to know whether I like the comedy? I will love it if the petty bourgeois do not like it [Mayakovsky, 1980, p. 290–291].⁶

Mayakovsky hence self-interprets his Faerie Comedy as a satire of the petty bourgeoisie that exploited the NEP. Ripellino, in his essay on Russian avant-garde theatre [Ripellino], agrees with such an interpretation of *The Bedbug*, noting the harshness of the criticism and the gaudiness and profanity of not only Prisyppkin-Skryppkin before and after his awakening, but also of his mentor Bayan, who teaches him the fox-trot, the Renaissance family, and the guests at the wedding party.

There are numerous indications, however, that tell us that Mayakovsky is actually speaking about something else. This is not only because he declares that *this is only the external schema of my work... I'm reworking it...* but also because some clues lead us in a completely different direction from the one declared by the poet. This places a paradox before the interpreter, the so-called 'Zapp's Paradox'.⁷ This implies that sometimes we have to go beyond the author's statements and look more deeply into the womb from whence meaning emerges so as not to violate, as stated by Umberto Eco, 'the rights of the text'.⁸

For this reason, one must go far beyond Mayakovsky's interpretation. As said before, the clues are many. First, there is the name of the main character, Prisyppkin. *Prisyppka* means dust, soil, talc or powder spread to cover up something. The main character, therefore, seems to have the literary task

⁶ About the anti-bourgeois pre-history of the material, see: [Russel, p. 17].

⁷ 'To understand a message is to decode it. Language is a code. But every decoding is another coding. ... The classical tradition of striptease, however, goes back to Salome's dance of the seven veils and beyond... When we have seen the girl's underwear we want to see her body... but is our curiosity and desire satisfied? <...> gazing into the womb we are returned into the mystery of our own origins. Just so in reading' [Lodge].

⁸ 'The limits of interpretation coincide with the rights of the text (which is not to say that they coincide with the rights of the author)' [Eco, p. 14].

of hiding something under a cosmetic layer, perhaps the middle-class reality concealed under the mantle of the party and the victorious revolution. But Prisyipkin is renamed Pierre Skrypkin, a name that is 'true romance': Pierre perhaps implies Pierre Bezukhov in *War and Peace*, while Skrypkin recalls Mayakovsky's poem *Скрипка и немножко нервно* (*Skrypka i nemnozhko nervno*) (1914).

Then there is the name of Skrypkin's new fiancée, Elzevira Renaissance, a woman of few words as the root of the name, 'Elsevier', suggests. Throughout the Faerie, Elzevira says little more than the phrase *Начнем, скрипочка? Начнем?* ("Shall we begin, skrypočka? Shall we begin?") [Маяковский, т. 11, с. 236]. Above all, however, we should note the name Renaissance: the woman of the Renaissance – between mirrors and the chintzy decorations and amidst the luxury of unnecessary objects bought at the market by the vulgar and reluctant Skrypkin's future mother-in-law. Her name suggests the 'rebirth' that lasts one evening and ends with a fire and the collective death of comrades of the new life.

Mayakovsky's dramatic prose is full of quirks and allusions which are now difficult to decipher. But the fabric of the first advent unfolds without ambiguities. Its world is one where the revolution has been transformed in an orgy of things that Communism should have repudiated: consider how the party card has become a bargaining chip. The gap in time between the present day and the future is actually a long moment of unconsciousness. Skrypkin wakes up immediately after the melting of the ice block in which he had spent 50 years without knowledge of the passage of time. He then undergoes a second Renaissance, again a timeless one.

In the world where Skrypkin wakes up, there are no more horses but only cars: his memories of passion and music may be infectious and generate a disastrous epidemic of banned feelings. Zoya Berezkina, his first girlfriend, no longer remembers why she decided to commit suicide after Prisyipkin dumped her. She does not remember if his eyelashes were soft or if he was a passionate lover. The professor who performs Prisyipkin's thawing has to look in the dictionary for the meaning of the word 'suicide'.

When the bedbug, frozen with him, moves away from our hero, the desperate phrase he utters is the same he used when abandoning Zoya: *Мы разошлись, как в море корабли...* ("Like ships in the sea we grew apart...") [Маяковский, т. 11, с. 256]. Thus, the choice to be put in a zoo cage along with the bedbug is a sign of desperate love and a longing for solitude without respite.

The two lives of Prisyipkin – Skrypkin are two lives without hope, with the intermezzo of a trip inside a block of ice: two lives without time bound to each other in a timeless journey. Time in fact is one of the central elements in Mayakovsky's philosophy and poetry.

Граждане!
 Сегодня рушится тысячелетнее «прежде».
 Сегодня пересматривается миров основа.
 Сегодня
 до последней пуговицы в одежде
 жизнь переделаем снова
 [Маяковский? 1955–1961, т. 1, с. 136].

(*Citizens!*
The millennial 'Before' is now collapsing.
Today's worlds are recreated from their Foundation.
Today until the last button all will bounce back to life again.)

In 1917, when the poem was composed, the counter had rolled back to zero: no 'before' exists, only a future where life can be rebuilt from the ground up. The violent collapse of the 'Before' seems to happen at the end of the third part of *The Bedbug*. The Tambov full of petty-bourgeois vulgarity disappears in the stillness of death. The world of Awakening (of the future) exists as a nowhere, or perhaps as a total-where. The world of ten five-years plans has expanded to Siberia, Shanghai, Rome, Madrid, and Chicago, connected with the proto-telematic links through which Prysipkin's resurrection is decided: the *locus* becomes a non-place, or an all-inclusive place. It is not the happy island of Utopia, but perhaps something rather similar to Zamyatin's Only State: a world without borders or points of reference.

The problem of time is central to the latest production of Mayakovsky and the fulcrum of *The Bedbug* [Thomson; Stahlberger]. It also appears in a poem composed shortly after *The Bedbug* that can perhaps be deemed Mayakovsky's poetic-political testament, *Во весь голос* (*Vo Ves Golos – At the Top of My Voice*).

Уважаемые
 товарищи потомки!
 Роясь
 в сегодняшнем
 окаменевшем г...,
 наших дней изучая потемки,
 вы,
 возможно,
 спросите и обо мне.
 <...>
 агитпроп
 в зубах навяз,
 и мне бы
 строчить
 романсы на вас,–

доходней оно
и прелестней.
Но я
себя
смирял,
становясь
на горло
собственной песне.

<...>

Потомки,
словарей проверьте поправки:
из Леты
выплывут
остатки слов таких,
как «проституция»,
«туберкулез»,
«блокада» [Маяковский, т. 10, с. 279–284].

*(My most respected
comrades of posterity!
Rummaging among
these days'
petrified crap,
exploring the twilight of our times,
you,
possibly,
will inquire about me too.*

<...>

*Agitprop
sticks
in my teeth too,
and I'd rather
compose
romances for you-
more profit in it
and more charm.
But I
subdued
myself,
putting my heel
on the throat
of my own song.*

<...>

*Men of posterity
examine the flotsam of dictionaries:
out of Lethe
will bob up*

*the debris of such words
as 'prostitution',
'tuberculosis',
'blockade')*
[Mayakovsky, 1960].

A number of recent studies⁹ have linked depression with the perception of time, or rather its absence: the depressed do not see a future and cannot tolerate a perpetual present. Desperation is precisely the product of their inability to foresee a light in the darkness of their moments, hours, and days. The dystopian writer seems to suffer from the same syndrome.

To Mayakovsky, though, this inability is more factual and more tragic. One needs to see what his 'present' and 'future' represent and how the daily banality of Bogdanov's Red Star resembles the *окаменевшем г...* (*petrified crap*), *наших дней изучая потемки* (*the twilight of our days*), and the *романсы*¹⁰ that Mayakovsky refuses to write. Here we are evidently facing the conflict between an actual reality and a strongly desired one, between an impossibility and a desire stronger than common sense that crashes into a wall which the very same desire helped to erect.

Mayakovsky, together with his companions in LEF, wrote, *The LEF knows*. But this knowledge forced the poet to *становясь на горло собственной песне* (*put his heel on the throat of his own song*) [Маяковский, т. 10, с. 280–281]. It is easy to see the resemblance and the further correspondence between the icy greyness that replaces the enthusiasm of Bogdanov's hero for the achievements of Martian Communism and Mayakovsky's despair.

In both cases, the revolutionary intellectual's joy at the success of the revolution shatters against his inability to adapt to a society that has produced a proletarian and communist structure and superstructure. In fact, the Communism about which both Bogdanov and Mayakovsky had dreamed does not correspond to their expectations. It is motionless and entropic; it is not *тот социализм, о котором я думал, а определенный и нарочитый, как какой-нибудь остров Елены, без славы и без мечтаний* (*the socialism that I thought about, but a precise and premeditated one, like a St Helena, with no glory or dreams*) [Есенин, 1999, т. 6, с. 114–116].

But in the two writers' Communism, there is more than a hunch (Bogdanov) and an unfulfilled dream (Mayakovsky). There is prophecy and the awareness of its realisation. This connection between Bogdanov and Mayakovsky shows that *The Bedbug* has a quite different meaning from the mere pillorying of a petty bourgeois who prefers a bedbug to Communism: it is instead the confession of the failure of both a personal project and a collective one, each bound to one another in a terrible 'forever'. The theme of the Soviet system's immobility comes back, a year after *The Bedbug*, in the drama *The Bathhouse* (*Banya*, 1930).

⁹ The rich bibliography quoted in it: [Spinnato].

¹⁰ Romances.

«Баня» – драма в шести действиях с цирком и фейерверком, направленная против бюрократизма, против узости, против покоя.

<...>

«Баня» чистит и моет.

...

«Баня» защищает горизонты, изобретательство, энтузиазм.

Главная линия – борьба изобретателя т. Чудакова, придумавшего машину времени, с неким главначупсом (главным начальником по управлению согласований) т. Победоносиковым [Маяковский, т. 12, с. 202].

(The Bathhouse, a drama in six acts, with a circus and fireworks, is directed against the bureaucracy, against insularity, against stagnation.

<...>

The Bathhouse cleans and washes.

<...>

The Bathhouse defends the vastness of horizons, the spirit of initiative and enthusiasm.

<...>

Its political idea is to fight insularity, ordinary administration, bureaucracy, in favour of quick work in a Socialist perspective.)

The Bathhouse tells the story of Čudakov, who invents a time machine and tries to guide the project through a gauntlet of bureaucracy.

С моей машиной ты можешь взвихрить растянутые тягучие годы горя, втянуть голову в плечи, и над тобой, не задевая и не рая, сто раз в минуту будет проноситься снаряд солнца, приканчивая черные дни. Смотри, фейерверочные фантазии Уэльса, футуристический мозг Эйнштейна, звериные навыки спячки медведей и игогов – всё, всё спрессовано, сжато и слито в этой машине [Маяковский, т. 11, с. 280].

(With my machine, you can twirl the sticky and interminable years of pain, you can pick up your head between your shoulders, and the projectile of the Sun will pass over you without touching or hurting you a hundred times a minute, giving the coup de grace to all black days. See, the fancy pyrotechnics of Wells, Einstein's futurist brain, bears' animal hibernation, everything is fully packed, condensed, and merged into this machine.)

Pobedonosikov, the Director-General of the Office for Coordination (*his merits and seniority in the party succeeds in planning everything*), hinders him with the invincible power of bureaucracy until the bureaucrat himself decides to use the machine and go into the future. But the time machine betrays his expectations and takes only labourers and workers to the glorious future of Socialism, leaving Pobedonosikov and all others like him behind. Pobedonosikov, left behind by the time machine and by the Phosphorescent Woman of the Future who chooses who should

be sent to 2030, exclaims: *И она, и вы, и автор – что вы этим хотели сказать, – что я и вы не нужны для коммунизма?! [Маяковский, т. 11, с. 347]. (What do you mean with this – you and the author – maybe that guys like me are not necessary to Communism?)*

The picture drawn by Mayakovsky in this 'drama in six acts with a circus and fireworks' apparently opens up a hope denied in *The Bedbug*: there is a bright future for socialism, but only for proletarians. However, the subtext (among other elements, like the names of the protagonists) disproves this optimistic message: in order to achieve this bright future, a miracle is needed. So, despite the happy ending, only the bad guys win.

The enemy in *The Bedbug* is the petty bourgeoisie, while in *The Bathhouse* it is the senseless bureaucracy that imposes deadly stagnation on the socialist system. In the two plays of the last years of his life, Mayakovsky depicts two futures: a cold one 'reeking of phenol' and a different, bright one, unattainable without an impossible miracle invented by a mad scientist. The fight against bureaucracy and the immobility of a betrayed Communism is unavoidably lost.

A Short Final Digression

I said at the beginning that the Bolshevik Revolution, unlike other major European revolutions, was born with a plan in mind. But while one can plan a building or an automobile, it is difficult to design relatively banal events like a meeting between friends, the opening of a shoe store, or a wedding party (as in the case of *The Bedbug*).

These events, along with other much larger ones, belong to the category of complex adaptive systems whose components are able to respond and adapt to the conditions of a constantly changing environment. In a complex adaptive system, the micro-structures that compose the macro-structure (the complex adaptive system) implement a series (for all practical purposes unlimited) of circular feedback (feedback loops) [Holland]. These are part of the process of the system's adaptation: they ensure the system's survival whilst also making its evolution unpredictable.

All attempts made so far to find laws capable of accurately describing the chronological evolution of a complex adaptive system have been unsuccessful. Since a human society is a vastly complex adaptive system, no science has been developed even distantly resembling the Psychohistory of Isaac Asimov [Asimov].

A project, in fact, is essentially a model, a simplified picture of the chronological development of a given system. But to be validated by reality, such an image must refuse to predict the feedback loops from which emerge unexpected the new qualities, typical of complex adaptive systems, that make the whole more than the arithmetic sum of its parts. A model must be simple; but without forecasting feedback loops (which is virtually impossible), it describes an essentially 'non-adaptive', immovable system.

So, no revolutionary project makes sense if the revolution designed is not the final revolution which brings the system's evolution to an end. But, as the protagonist of Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* discovers at his own expense, a final revolution is not conceivable, as a final number is not conceivable. The 'projected' revolution must therefore renounce the 'time' of its evolution and transform the passionate early revolutionary zeal into the rigid conservatism of a society of Philistines: the Church-State, Yevgeny Zamyatin's Only State, and Mayakovsky's Communism of ten five-year plans.

The renunciation of time has yet another sinister aspect that explains the worries of the intellectual revolutionaries as they anticipated the October Revolution and then experienced its reality. The Enlightenment created the illusion that man can, with time and information, forecast his future and even determine its course. Obviously not every man, but only those who possess the necessary instruments: the intellectuals, scientists, and philosophers. The discovery or, as in the cases of Bogdanov and Mayakovsky, the intuition that complexity prevents anyone from using this faculty, both simultaneously prophetic and demiurgic, puts before them a terrible dilemma: should they plan a 'final revolution' or reconcile themselves with the course of events and their unpredictable outcomes? In the first case, adherence to the plan would result in a social system that looks like a prison; in the second, the very structure of the system would make impossible any sensible individual or collective choice.

Faced with these two alternatives, Bogdanov, Zamyatin, and Mayakovsky (and, in his own way, Andrej Platonov) each built a particular utopia of time inside a dystopia. A utopia the exact opposite of a wonderful society, terrible and cold as a morgue [Brown, p. 330], is represented in their works: it is a utopia of movement in which society, like Zamyatin's Scythian [Замятин], travels towards an unreachable last number where the unpredictability of a complex world does not matter. A complex world makes man unable to reach sensible choices because the consequences of any choice are not predictable, while a simple world (a world built according to a plan) puts everyone before choices made by others once and for all: they travel along the road of the Scythian, which has no beginning and no end.

Our future is not tied to the slow movements of blind, dumb, subterranean forces. We're taking it in hand, says Vasily Slepcev in *Salvage*, the last of Tom Stoppard's *The Coast of Utopia* trilogy about the intellectual antecedents of the Russian Revolution [Stoppard; Basile, 2009]. 'But history has no culmination! There is always as much in front as behind. There is no libretto. History knocks at a thousand gates at every moment, and the gatekeeper is chance', Alexander Herzen says to Karl Marx. The deep intuition that one can read in the works of Bogdanov, Zamyatin, and Mayakovsky does not concern so much fear or rejection of the consequences of the Communist Revolution, but rather the fact that Communism was wrong because it was a plan and that the plan itself was a 'dystopia'.

The line drawn from the three authors is only the beginning of the twentieth-century response to the Enlightenment hope that man

will come to know his future and take control of nature and his destiny. The hopes of the great late fifteenth-century humanists who believed they could reach the Platonic σοφία and the certainties that nineteenth-century technology lent to science were all in vain: in the macrocosm and in the microcosm, God plays dice.¹¹

Along the road about which Stoppard writes, where there are thousands of open gates, one can find love and hate, guilt and redemption, death and resurrection. And this is the utopia that lies behind the ghastly coldness of the different Only States, their euthanasia hospitals, their torture of dissidents, and their Room 101s for the conversion of rebels. Behind a present-past, a future can be glimpsed that promises a new *sacrum*: with every stride, the gallop of the Scythian generates new hope. As Kim Stanley Robinson writes in *The Years of Rice and Salt* [Robinson]:

For we see immediately that what we call history has at least two meanings to it: first, simply what happened in the past, which no one can know, as it disappears in time, and then second, all the stories we tell about what happened ... Besides in the memory 'which disappears over time', the Russian Revolution resides in the stories that Bogdanov (*ante litteram*), Zamyatin, and Mayakovsky tell us, in a new and wonderful utopia beyond the inevitable horrors.

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¹¹ The opposite of what Alfred Einstein wrote to Niels Bohr on 4 December 1926: “God doesn't play dice with the universe” [Born, Einstein].

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