# THE SILVER AGE:
RUSSIAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE, 1881-1921

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FIGHTING WORDS:
MAIAKOVSKI’S WAR WITH HIMSELF

As a Russian, every attempt by a soldier to tear away a piece of enemy land is sacred to me, but as a man of art, I have to think that perhaps the entire war was thought up just so that someone could write one good poem.

Vladimir Maiakovskii, “Civilian Shrapnel,” 1914

Like nearly every line of polemical prose he wrote, Vladimir Maiakovskii’s early pronouncements on the war with Germany were nothing if not categorical. That the young Futurist would greet the outbreak of World War I with such enthusiasm should come as no surprise even to those only casually acquainted with his poetry; with the possible exception of the “conquistador” Nikolai Gumilev, Maiakovskii is easily the most bellicose writer included in this issue. Maiakovskii’s fondness for the rhetoric of war and violence is a well-known and constant feature of his work, present in the Futurist manifestos he co-authored, in his early verse, and in such post-revolutionary communist classics as his “Orders to the Armies of the Arts”. Though other Bolshevik dreamers might well have contemplated the regimentation of artists along military lines, who but Maiakovskii could have successfully transformed this sort of artistic War Communism into verse? As a poet, Maiakovskii was a general’s dream: he was in a constant state of military readiness.

Yet despite his initial enthusiasm, World War I became both an artistic and ethical challenge to Maiakovskii. The war was not simply a metaphor, no matter how much Maiakovskii insisted on treating it as such. Like many of his countrymen, he quickly grew disillusioned with the reality of war; moreover, Maiakovskii was already a revolutionary by the time the war broke out, and the Bolshevik Party denounced the war as “imperialist”. On August 9, 1917,

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1. Vladimir Maiakovskii, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v trinadtsati tomakh (Moscow: Khudozhvennaja literatura, 1955-61), I: 305. All references to Maiakovskii’s work will use this edition, abbreviated as “PSS”, followed by volume and page numbers.
...would write a poem that clearly reflected the Bolsheviks’ continuation of the war; “Answer!” ends with the lines:

When will you raise yourself to your full height,
When will you slap their face with the question:
Who are we fighting? (PSS: 1:144)

Some of his earlier verses also paint a dismal picture of the war, such as “Russia is Declared” (1914), in which blood flows through the city square, and now falls like “juicy scraps of human flesh” (PSS I: 64). But no matter how miserable the war might be, Maiakovsky’s early war poems still display the conviction that the war has a purpose: in “Thoughts on Being Drafted,” the poet approves of the power of war to transform the soldier and strengthen his resolve:

Let them
be a tender man
a Cossack.
I learn the new game,
I’ll return
vasted with new strength. (PSS I: 70)

Perhaps more important, this new man will be better able to build a new world:

I tell of a new Sparta. (PSS I: 71)

Maiakovsky spent the better part of 1914 arguing that only he and his fellow Futurists were adequately prepared to do justice to the war in verse, but by 1915 he was using that very same verse to condemn what he now felt was useless conflict. Using his pen to argue for peace could not have been for Maiakovsky – even after he turned against the war, he was no pacifist. After the revolution, he would return to exhorting his readers to show no mercy to their enemies, the anti-Bolshevik Whites. For a brief moment, however, Maiakovsky is forced to examine the nature and the consequence of his own military rhetoric, the very rhetoric that he had been praising only a few short months before. His response, in the long poem War and the Universe, is not to abandon military rhetoric; rather, with typical maximalism, he intensifies it in order to make an anti-war statement.

Though both fascination and horror characterize nearly all of Maiakovsky’s writings on the war, one can nonetheless roughly trace the evolution of the poet’s attitude. First, we see a period of unbridled enthusiasm, in which World War I is present as the embodiment of the Futurist artistic vision; here Maiakovsky engages the horrors of war only as symbols, underplaying the human experience of bloodshed and loss. Like so many of his contemporaries, Maiakovsky readily assimilated the war within an apocalyptic framework that is inherently optimistic: yes, the widespread slaughter is regrettable, but the war is precisely the final conflict that is necessary to throw the heavy ballast of history and culture off the ship of modernity. In the second stage, Maiakovsky can no longer romanticize the war; when he turns his attention to the senseless deaths caused by an absurd international conflict, his apocalyptic framework fails him. Here war becomes a demonic parody of the apocalypse, bloodshed for its own sake; it is this horrible prospect that the poet entertains in the first sections of War and the Universe. Finally, he arrives at a synthesis of the two previous stages: the War is both an unconscionable human tragedy and the long-awaited “last battle” that paves the way for a new paradise on earth. Both Maiakovsky’s initial pronouncements on the war and the end of War and the Universe (whose optimism after long stanzas of blood and torture is rather jarring) assume a utopian eschatology, in that they see history as a vector leading towards a state of human perfection. The difference, however, is in the author’s attitude to the sacrifices incurred along the way. In Narrative and Freedom, Gary Saul Morson argues that eschatology and utopia are “diseases of presentness” that “typically reduce [the present] to a way station to the future”: “Whether the end of history is imagined as catastrophic or perfect, the present and immediate future into which we live cease to be truly important”. But if utopia and eschatology downplay the significance of the present, the extent to which the present day is denigrated...

2. Indeed, to a large extent, Maiakovsky’s poetic portrayal of the revolution and civil war is a throwback to his earlier, less conflicted writings on World War I. In such poems as 150,000,000, the violence of war and revolution is abstract and aestheticized, while in his polemical writings, Maiakovsky insists that only the Futurists are capable of capturing the revolution in language.

perience had little to do with Maiakovskii’s attitude toward the conflict, despite his assertions that a true poet is obliged to witness the war for himself. 5 Maiakovskii’s initial, emotional response to Russia’s entry into the war may well have been based on national pride, but the apparently romantic view of the war found in a series of articles written by the poet in 1914 has little to do with either patriotism or politics. Instead, his support of the war is based on two ideas: Futurism and utopian escatology.

As Hodgson argues, World War I was seen by the Futurists as an enactment of the ideas they had expressed in their scandalous manifestos. 6 Russian Futurism, to a somewhat lesser extent than its Italian counterpart, made a cult of speed, machinery, and violence. To Maiakovskii, the war was futurist theory put into practice: “Isn’t this the embodiment of our ideas: it’s called ‘war’” (PSS 1: 308). For him, the war becomes a continuation of the Futurist struggle for primacy in the arts: “time has justified our five-year battle, given us the strength to look at ourselves as the legislators of life” (PSS 1: 318). Again and again Maiakovskii insists that only the Futurists are capable of depicting the reality of war. Where conventional poets simply pepper their tired verse with military vocabulary, the Futurists’ destruction of traditional rhythm and syntax is far better suited to the depiction of violence and chaos. 7 Indeed, it should come as no surprise that Maiakovskii, who in longer poems such as The Cloud in Trousers (Он мчится в навозе) treats words as though they were physical things, elides the difference between textual and real-life violence: “Every word should be made, like troops of soldiers, out of meat, healthy red meat!” (PSS 1: 314).

The conflation of words and people, so essential to his poetic technique, also provides a key to Maiakovskii’s initial response to World War I. Maiakovskii ends the first of three articles entitled “Civilian Shrapnel” (which was also the poet’s first public response to the war to be published in prose) with a statement whose apparent disregard for human life could not have been well-received by the Russian artistic establishment: “As a Russian, every attempt by a soldier to tear away a piece of enemy land is sacred to me, but as a man of art, I have to think that perhaps the entire war was thought up just so that someone could write one good poem” (PSS 1: 305). Like his scandalous

5. Hodgson also notes that “other Futurists who saw active service at the front, such as the poet Nikolai Aseev, wrote in terms which were not significantly different from those used by non-combatant colleagues” (Hodgson, “Myth-Making,” p. 69).
6. Ibid., p. 55.
7. Maiakovskii’s most vicious attack on the uninspired bards of war can be found in “Civilian Shrapnel: Poets on Land Mines.” Here he reproduces a cliche-ridden poem, only to then reveal that the poem is actually a composite of three different works by three different authors. The style and approach to the subject matter were so similar that he was able to take one stanza from each to produce a seamless, and dull, poem. (PSS 1: 306).
But Maiakovskii’s words are more than merely a long line of successful attempts at épate. They support his campaign to portray the poet as a comrade worthy of the warrior, a professional ‘manly’ resolve is no less than that of the soldier. The first installment, Civilian Shrapnel,” moves back and forth between discussions of the war analysis of the contemporary state of Russian letters at such a dizzying fast for both issues at the same time. The poet successfully wages this two-front war through a strategy of economizing a military lexicon to both topics: “Vandal enemies robbed the other people. Vandal friends robbed Russia.” (PSS 1: 303). Both the poet and the true poet are professionals, unlike the effete literary dilettante who uses shopworn imagery to portray the war in verse: “War is a profession. It’s easier for me to take aim with my trusty pen than with a trusty gun” (PSS 1: 303).

Maiakovskii further reinforces the equivalency of “professions” in the sentence immediately preceding his scandalous vision: “today I want to call for ordinary “civilian” heroism” (PSS 1: 305).

And other essays of the same year, Maiakovskii attempts to make the alliance between soldiers and the Futurists stronger by continuing to emphasize the poet himself and his tamer rivals:

Of course, everyone finds it pleasant to perfume his daughter with Balmond’s powder in his little pink apartment, to memorize a couple of verses of Burius for civil after-dinner conversation, to have a wife with penciled eyes that shine with the sadness of Akhtamova, but who needs this image, awkward as a drowned woman, yelling like someone flayed by shrapnel (PSS 1: 305).

Maiakovskii deliberately emasculates his poetic opposition, surrounding himself with feminine frippery and invoking the languor of Akhtamova;

Maiakovskii himself is breathing new life into an old cliche. One Russian equivalent to the pen is mightier than the sword; implies equivalency between the two “weaporn and pen,” more than superiority. “Это меч, что перо сражается за нее” (The sword and pen). A. M. Zhigulev, ed., Ruskie narodnye poslovicy i poverkhi (Moscow: Moskovskoe obshchestvo, 1965). p. 155.

Perhaps Maiakovskii’s insistence on the equal heroism of the poet and the warrior was an attempt to escape from the ironies inherent in writing about the war rather than engaging in it: in notes: “It was mostly noncombatant poets who spoke as soldiers who had found renewal on the battlefield” (Katherine Hodgson, Written with the Bayonet: Soviet Russia of World War Two (Liverpool: Liverpool Univ. Press, 1996), p. 20).

when set against the backdrop of such bourgeois effeminacy, Maiakovskii becomes a brawling muzhik who can be adequately described only by appealing to the language of the war. Here, however, we have a preeminent of the speaker of War and the Universe: The Maiakovskii described here is both aggressor (“dreadnought”) and victim (“flayed by shrapnel”). Yet even when the poet-warrior is portrayed as the victim of violence, Maiakovskii insists on the potent sexuality and rugged masculinity of himself and his fellow futurists, at the expense of the weak, sexless creatures that pretend to the name of poet. In “Civilian Shrapnel: Poets on Land mines,” Maiakovskii writes that, before the war, old men heaped scorn on “young” poetry, but “the war took their measure, and it turned out that they were only little living corpses, tolerated only by the acctuated (электролиз) psychology of the . . . philistine” (PSS 1: 307). In “We Want Meat, Too!” which begins with the poet’s ironic admission that he envies soldiers who do not have to contend with the dangers of literary politics, Maiakovskii describes the terror he inspires in his enemies: “Enter Maiakovskii — And why is it that so many people fearfully hide the sexless (гоцинома) children of emaciated mules?” (PSS 1: 313). Maiakovskii further emphasizes the strong sexuality of the soldier and the Futurist by allegorizing war as a beautiful woman. In the first of his “Civilian Shrapnel” articles, Maiakovskii writes: “Just as no one will marry the girl he loves to the tune of a funeral march, so no one will go to his death at war to the sounds of a Tango” (PSS 1: 303). In “Civilian Shrapnel: To Those Who Lie with the Brush”, he issues a challenge: “Now just try . . . to paint that red-napped beauty, the war, (красный покрывает красный) in a dress that is bloody-bride, like the desire to beat the Germans” (PSS 1: 309). Whether he employs the pen of the poet or the brush of the painter, Maiakovskii represents himself as one of the few who wield a weapon potent as that of the lover or warrior.

10. See also his reference to those who “dance in the short little skirt of Bal’mont” in “Not Butterfly, but Alexander the Great” (1914). PSS 1: 316.

11. Though such similes are consistent with the alternation between self-aggrandizement and self-torture found in such early works as “The Cloud in Trouser” and “The Backbone flute,” Maiakovskii’s allusion to the warrior-victim is consistent with the body of literature to emerge from World War I. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar note that “[i]t is, of course, an emblematic good soldier buried (or sometimes drowned) at the heart of many modernist texts by male as well as female survivors of the Great War.” Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, No Man’s Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century. Volume 2: Sexchanges (New Haven, CT and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1989), p. 308.

12. While the comparison between marriage and death in battle has its roots in folklore, this quote also resonates with one of the axioms included in “A Slap in the Face of Public Taste”:

He who does not forget his first love will not recognize his last” (emphasis in the original).

Maikovskii's consistently bellicose posture would pose a problem as his role evolved; however, if the poet's only source of "war guilt" were his art, War and the Universe would lack much of its power. For War and the Universe grapples with the underlying assumption that motivated much of Maikovskii's initial writings on the struggle against Russia's enemies: that war has a higher purpose. In his first "Civilian Shrapnel," Maikovskii writes, "But all violence in history is a step toward perfection, a step toward real state. Woe to him, who, after the war, will be capable of nothing but cutting human flesh" (PSS 1: 304). In "The Futurists (The Birth of Futurists)", he combines his conviction that war has a purpose with his assertion of the equivalency of art and war: "... war is not senseless war, but a poem about the liberated and exalted soul" (PSS 1: 332). In some essay, Maikovskii ridicules Leonid Andreev for placing too much stress on individual human suffering: "Andreev... saw the war as just the tragedy of one defeated man. He didn't know that each man can become a great engine of suffering through the strength of unity." (PSS 1: 332). Indeed, the entire article can be seen as an attempt to justify an individual's role in the name of the collective's higher purpose. If Maikovskii succeeds, he raises the paradoxical logic of synecdoche that operates behind collectivism: the collective is made up of superior individuals, whose superiority consists in their understanding that they are ultimately expendable. He elevates the individual to new heights:

Now everyone is the bearer of the future... The soldier is no longer a unit. The most recent military theory emphasizes the movement of enormous columns, replacing the herd-like subordination with a free initiative of billions of individuals. Each one must think that he is the last one, the one who will determine the outcome of the battle. The awareness of one's true individuality within oneself is the birthday of the new man. This is the basis for individual heroism. (PSS 1: 330)

But then he concludes that the widespread nature of such individual heroism makes it a mass phenomenon:

When the regiment launches an attack, you can't make out which voice belongs to Ivan in the general "hurrah!"; so, too, in the mass of flying death you can't make out which is mine and which is someone else's. Death spreads itself out among the whole crowd, the whole unit. After all, our common body remains, at war everyone breathes as one, and therefore there is immortality. (PSS 1: 332)

Maikovskii takes a commonplace of war (the soldier who continues the fight for his fallen comrades) and elevates wartime comradeship to a higher value than before; now, this very interchangeability of the soldier is not just a matter of expediency and patriotism, but the backbone of the world to come. The war will lead to the culmination of history not only because it will destroy the old, but because war by its very nature gives rise to just the sort of collectivist mind-set that will characterize utopian life. Nevertheless, one gets the sense that Maikovskii is trying to convince himself as much as his readers. The very structure of most of his assertions of the war's higher purpose evokes the doubts that Maikovskii attempts to put to rest: "war is not senseless murder, but..."; "The soldier is no longer a unit." The inclusion of such anti-war sentiment, however negated, demonstrates that such thoughts had at least crossed the author's mind: this is a case of the return of the repressed. Moreover, an admittedly anachronistic reading of these texts in light of the later War and the Universe suggests that even Maikovskii's most militaristic writings of 1914 are haunted by a disgust for the very violence he is praising. Implicit in his early articles is the idea that the unremitting violence of war could not be other than reprehensible if it were not viewed in the context of a worthwhile goal. It may look like "senseless murder" to the uninitiated, but those who share Maikovskii's eschatological framework know the substantive difference between pointless slaughter and necessary sacrifice. Yet doubt can be difficult to suppress, since formally, slaughter and sacrifice are the same; they can be differentiated only by their meaning (or lack thereof). The war makes sense only if it is the apocalypse (in its communist, secularized model); if Maikovskii is mistaken, then the horror is only multiplied by his initial faith in its higher purpose.

Surely some revelation is at hand
Yeats, "The Second Coming"

Apocalypse lost and regained
By the time he began work on War and the Universe in 1915, Maikovskii's faith in the war was shaken. Edward Brown argues convincingly that it was the poet's exposure to the views of Maksim Gor'kii that played a decisive role. Gor'kii invited Maikovskii to contribute to his new journal, The Chronicle (Журнал), and it was in this journal that Maikovskii...
Frye’s conception of the “apocalyptic” and “demonic” holds a number of significant ramifications for *War and the Universe*. First, Frye does not allow the horrific events described in *Revelation* to blind him to a basic truth about apocalypse: in the New Testament cosmology that is the primary course for the Western conception of apocalypse, the end of the world is an essentially positive event, in which suffering and bloodshed are the necessary precursor to the establishment of God’s kingdom on earth. Hence Frye’s connection between apocalypse and the city, garden, and human desire: apocalypse promises a world of order, in which even sacrifice makes sense. Second, it allows us to conceive of apocalypse’s opposite, a “demonic” world in which the very symbols of order and desire are subverted: fire is not “purgatorial or cleansing,” but rather simply destructive; the garden gives way to the desert; the Temple is replaced by the dungeon. *War and the Universe* begins in a decidedly demonic key, but ends on a hopeful, apocalyptic note. Finally, Frye’s apocalyptic-demonic dichotomy sheds light on the poem’s pervasive Christian imagery, and particularly on the poet’s identification with Christ himself. As in *The Backbone Flute* and *War and the Universe*, Maiakosski’s Christ is always crucified, always suffering; rarely is he depicted in any of his other possible roles (such as that of comforter or source of mercy). Moreover, in the apocalyptic tradition from which Maiakocksli so freely borrows, it is precisely Christ who lends meaning to the world. In Frye’s terms, it is Christ’s body that provides the pattern for order:

Christ is both the one God and the one Man, the Lamb of God, the tree of life, or vine of which we are the branches, the stone which the builders rejected, and the rebuilt temple which is identical with his risen body. The religious and poetic identifications differ in intention only, the former being existential and the latter metaphorical.

Equally important, the story of Christ is the story of purposeful suffering: what to the non-believer is a gruesome tale of torture and execution (Christ on the cross) is, to the believer, a tale of sacrifice and redemption. So, too, is Maiakowski’s war a problem of faith and interpretation: are the soldiers dying in vain, or will their sacrifice be justified by a new “Kingdom of Heaven”?

Though it contains typically Maiakowskian boasting (“I know/in the lava of attack/I will be the first/in heroism/in bravery”) (PSS 1: 212), *War and the

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6. Ibid., pp. 146-47.
8. Ibid., p. 141
9. Ibid., p. 141
10. Ibid., p. 142
11. Ibid., p. 150.
12. Ibid., pp. 141-42, italics in the original.
verse begins with a prologue that introduces an element absent from his previous writings on the war: now, Maiakovsky is war’s victim\(^2\).

If you want

[Ox ace on my forehead,

that the target will burn more brightly (PSS I: 213).

The poet’s identification of himself as a military target is heightened and

railed in the following section, the “Dedication” to Lilija Brik. Though a

oration is a traditional introduction to a long poem, Maiakovsky exploits

magnitude of the Russian word носить на имене (dedication or initiation) in

e to conflate the experience of the new recruit with the status of the text:

\[\text{October 8. 1915.}
\]

[dates]

looking into my rite

\[\text{initiation into being a soldier (PSS I: 213).}
\]

The poem’s dedication (to Lilija) becomes a rite of passage (into the army),

oration of the mysteries of a new existence. Both Maiakovsky (the

ner’s speaker) and the reader suddenly find themselves on the threshold of

thing new and terrifying; Maiakovsky protests against the army’s use of

as cannon fodder, but no one listens. Instead, Maiakovsky is shaved

ear to ear, and the image of the soldier as target reappears, but this time

ated by an explanatory element (the shaving):

They stuck the cross

of the warrior

in my head

ke a target (PSS I: 213).

Thus before the beginning of the poem proper, we are introduced to one of

central motifs: the poet as victim. At this point, his suffering (much like

polerme writing about the war in 1914) is only hypothetical; thanks to

“initiation”, the poet is preparing himself for sacrifice, but we have yet to

whether or not his death could accomplish anything.

After the Dedication, the poem is divided into five parts, each of which

roughly correspond to five different stages of Maiakovsky’s vision of the war.

Part One presents the decadent, pre-war world, which is compared to the

ical cities that symbolize evil (Babylon and Sodom). In Part Two, the poet

anges the adversaries like a boy with his toy soldiers, calling out the names

of each of the countries that will be swept up in the conflict, and enumerating

alized values that each one is abandoning for the sake of battle. The entire

orld has become a vast coliseum in Part Three, and time stops one

ent before the battle begins. War is declared on paradise itself, but when the

enly gates are breached, the Gods have already fled. In Part Four, the

age of poet as martyr reaches its apotheosis when Maiakovsky himself as-

mes responsibility for every atrocity committed during wartime, all the

ile renouncing poetry as ineffectual. In the beginning of Part Five, the poet

ects the chaos he has just described, and through a sheer act of will, trans-

orms the world into a long-awaited paradise that seems barely credible after

the experience of the first four parts. Maiakovsky, like the heroes of so many

opian fictions, is challenged to convince his contemporaries of the accuracy

of his vision of the world to come. In the Prologue, he had declared that “And

m I am the only/ herald of the coming truths/ on earth” (PSS I: 212), and in

the poem’s last stanza, he desperately attempts to get the reader to recognize his

ophetic vision: “Don’t you see, / squinting, looking? / Your eyes are two lit-

slits. / Wider! Look? / My huge eyes/ are the door to the temple, open to all.” (PSS I: 242)

For the purposes of the present study, Part IV is pivotal, since it is in this

part that both the themes of martyrdom and guilt, as well as the connection

between war and poetry reach their culmination. Throughout the poem, Mai-

ovsky, who had spent the better part of 1914 arguing that his particular

chool of writing is best suited for times of war, calls the efficacy of poetry

doubt. In the prologue, he writes “What are/ the fringes of some verses” to

ose who have just come back from war. (PSS I: 211) “You can’t squeeze

y of wrath/ into quiet little tombs of verse” (PSS I: 215), he writes in

II. By Part IV, his sense of the inadequacy of poetry that he rejects verse

altogether:

\[\text{No!}
\]
\[\text{Not in verse!}
\]
\[\text{I’d better}
\]

\(^2\) Though it might seem naive to identify the speaker of the poem as Maiakovsky himself,

otherwise would be to miss the point of the poem. Here, as elsewhere, the “I” of the poem

s to himself as “Vladimir Maiakovsky”; while one can certainly argue that this is a stylized

acter and not the historical Maiakovsky, the insistence on having the speaker share the

ence of the poet is integral to the problem of personal responsibility and “war guilt” that the

addresses (see below).
Gogol’s Vii, like the mythical Gorgon, destroys the object of its gaze: when Khoma Brut, the story’s hero, meets the monstrous eye of Vii, he dies instantly. The assertion that within the poet is a “Vii” struggling to get out implicates him in the horrors that he sees, suggesting that there is no way to be a dispassionate observer. At work here is an artistic version of Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle, which states that, simply by observing, the scientist has an effect on the object of his study; in the first four parts of War and the Universe, that effect, like almost everything else, is irredeemably harmful, for here, perception equals destruction. Thus when Maiakovskii begins to claim responsibility for all the atrocities ever committed, one of them is portrayed as an act of vision:

Into Christians sinking
their incisors,
lions let out a roar.
You think it’s Nero?
It is I,
Maiakovskii
Vladimir,
who covered the circus with his drunken eye. (PSS I: 231)

For Maiakovskii, the horror of Nero’s crime is not merely that he had Christians put to death, but that he turned their execution into a public spectacle, whose audience he helped comprise. Like Vii, Nero is crucial to the ethics of the poem, for Nero, as both mass-murderer and voyeuristic spectator to his own crimes, is used to bridge the gap between two seemingly-distinct kinds of guilt: the guilt of the murderer and the guilt of the fascinated onlooker. Part Three begins with an invocation to Nero, who, as the founder of public torture, would particularly enjoy World War I. The first few verses of Part III develop the metaphor of the war as Roman gladiators, fighting for the pleasure of a bloodthirsty (but untouched) audience: “today the entire world is a Coliseum” (PSS I:224). For Maiakovskii, the ethical dilemma of the war is only compounded by its representation. Considered the first modern war, World War I introduced (for Maiakovskii, at least) a conundrum familiar today to chroniclers of the bloodshed in the Balkans and Central Africa: at what point does depiction of the war degenerate into “war porn,” designed not only to inform but to arouse a morbid curiosity? Here we find one of the possible sources behind Maiakovskii’s impulse toward martyrdom in Part IV: in the series of 1914 essays discussed above, Maiakovskii argued that his own particular artistic approach was the most appropriate for representing the war, and if representation is itself implicated in a conflict that the poet now finds abhorrent, then Maiakovskii’s own hands are far from clean.
of course, martyrdom came naturally for Maiakovskii, especially martyrdom of the Christian sort. But Maiakovskii also had a predilection for the literalized metaphor: if Christ takes on the sins of others, then he may as well commit them. The poet, who takes on the sins of humanity so as to the world of the future from the burden of this guilt, seems to take perverse pleasure in cataloguing his alleged crimes. He begins with a statement of global responsibility: "I / alone am to blame / for the growing crunch of our broken!" (PSS 1: 230-31). His assumption of guilt relieves all others of burden:

Today it's not the German, not the Russian, not the Turk, -- it is I myself, who rip the skin off the living, and eat the flesh of the world. (PSS 1: 232)

Refusing to spare himself, he makes sure that the reader cannot fail to identify the "I" of the poem with Vladimir Maiakovskii himself: "It is I, / Maiakovskii, / who bore / to the foot of the idol / the beheaded infant." (PSS 31) All of these examples point both to Christ-like behavior and to a deistic parody of Christ's sacrifice. The word for "infant" (младенец) is the one usually used for the Christ-child himself, but here the child never gets chance to grow to adulthood and suffer for the sake of the world; rather, is sacrificed prematurely, to a pagan idol, by the poet himself. Indeed, Maiakovskii is Christ's polar opposite, a Dostoevskian Grand Inquisitor:

Christ has risen. Only love from your lips; in the dungeons of Seville twisted the joins of heretics on the rack. (PSS 1: 231)

Maiakovskii's pervasive New Testament references, if anything, make the poem less apocalyptic and more demonic, since he usually transforms Christian symbolism into a grotesque mockery of purposeful suffering. Rather than redeeming humanity through his misery, Maiakovskii simply becomes a greater and greater sinner, himself in need of mercy: "For Christ's sake, for the sake of Christ, / Forgive me!" (PSS 1: 232). Maiakovskii's parodic self-torture in imitatio Christi reaches its height at the end of Part IV:

Rejoice! The only cannibal is executing himself!

No, this isn't the fabricated ruse of a condemned man! So I won't gather up the torn-up pieces from the chopping-block, -- all the same shaking all of himself off, there is one who is worthy of taking the new days' communion. (PSS 1: 233)

Throughout the poem, there have been references to the ingestion of human flesh -- Maiakovskii's eating the flesh of the world, the Christians dying in the maws of lions. Moreover, the war's effect on human "meat" (meat and flesh are the same word in Russian) was a frequent concern of Maiakovskii's war-time essays: the soldier, we recall, is no longer just "meat", and those whom the war has taught only how to cut "human flesh" can expect nothing good from the post-war future. In "We Want Meat, Too!" Maiakovskii compares the living word of the futurist poet to the "healthy red meat/flesh" of the soldier. The excerpt cited above refers to a possible communion, that is, to the experience of transubstantiation. Frye describes transubstantiation as a fundamental apocalyptic motif,

... in which the essential human forms of the vegetable world, food and drink, are the body and blood of the Lamb who is also Man and God, and in whose body we exist as in a city or temple. ... It would be hard to find a simpler or more vivid image of human civilization, where

23. As Lawrence Stahlberger convincingly argues, "Maiakovskii's attitude toward the Christian myth was not one of simple acceptance or rejection," but was first and foremost creative: "[his poetry may be studied under the double aspect of his adaptation of the Christian myth and his attempt to create another." (Lawrence Leo Stahlberger, The Symbolic System of Mayakovskii [The Hague: Mouton, 1964], p. 13).
Images of ingestion abound in *War and the Universe*, though usually not pure, apocalyptic form described above. Maiakovskii instead favors at Frye terms the "demonic" variant of transubstantiation: cannibalism. An excerpt cited above, Maiakovskii brings cannibalism and transubstantiation together, providing a bridge from the demonic world of Part IV to the arian, apocalyptic vision of Part V. Maiakovskii’s body is not the body of Christ, and eating from it is not communion. Since Maiakovskii takes on the role of both victim and victimizer, it makes sense that he should choose to identify himself with a cannibal who carries out his own execution (presumably eating himself alive). The image is a perfect symbol for the senselessness of a war that does not lead to a better future, that is, to a demonic war is not the harbinger of post-apocalyptic utopia: the apocalyptic concept of time sees it as vector, always pointing in one direction, but Maiakovskii embodies the war within himself to show it to be nothing but "bad duty" in which man ceaselessly consumes himself.

Rapture of Rupture

The key to the sudden transition from pessimism to optimism at the end of IV lies in the fact that Maiakovskii’s poetic persona is both apocalyptic demonic at the same time, or, at the very least, alternates between the two startlingly rapidly. The poet debases both his sacrifice and the idea of union with his reference to the cannibal, and yet he also suggests that his apocalyptic self-sacrifice can be the foundation of future happiness: he is a man (xeose) who will be worthy of true communion. If Christ’s sacrifice worked through synecdoche (part of mankind sacrifices itself for the whole), Maiakovskii’s self-scapegoating works through a total identity of the and the whole, creating a collective Christ that resembles the poet’s depiction of a wartime army in "We Also Want Meat!" Maiakovskii takes

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25. Maiakovskii’s insistence on total identification with all of humanity works against the role of the scapegoat or martyr. In *Violence and the Sacred*, René Girard defines sacrificial terms of society’s attempt “to deflect upon a relatively indifferent victim, a ‘victim,’ the violence that would otherwise be vented on its own members, the people it desires to protect.” Girard sees the “surrogate victim” as a “double” for the community: “A victim can be substituted for all the potential victims; . . . he can be substituted, in fact, each and every member of the community.” (René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, Trans. K. Gregory [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1979], pp. 4, 79). Again we see the role played by synecdoche: a small subset of the community represents it and bears the weight of the violence that would otherwise threaten everyone. Maiakovskii will not let the synecdoche function properly, for he is unwilling to divorce the part from the whole it represents: whatever happens to one happens to the other. Therefore it is difficult to conceive of the poet’s sacrifice as truly redemptive, since before the appearance of the mysterious “man” who dominates Part Five, there is no one left to be redeemed.

26. Stahlberger, however, sees Maiakovskii’s martyrdom as based on under- rather than over-identification: “there is an apparent contradiction involved, since the scapegoat or martyr almost always represents the principle of I: that is, the ‘one’ (the individual, or self) both is and represents the ‘group’ (the collective).” But Maiakovskii is “estranged in almost all human relations. The tension between these two seemingly opposed principles, identification and alienation, gives to Maiakovskii’s poetry its peculiarly ambiguous and enigmatic quality” (Stahlberger, *The Symbolic System of Mayakovskii*, pp. 64-65). This alienation nonetheless does not prevent Maiakovskii from sharing humanity’s fate.

dom of Christ is also God's sacrifice of his only son. Just as the new man has no connection with the fratricidal crimes of the past, Christ and Cain have abandoned their standard context of sacrifice and filial obligation: they are simply two people playing a game of refreshingly low stakes, in which sacrifice can be demanded only from the checker pieces.

The optimism of Part V is explicable only if we accept the poem's logic of maximalism, voluntarism, and rupture: the world does not end, quite simply because the speaker refuses to believe that its end is possible ("No, it can't be") (PSS I: 234). The poet orders his brain to create cities, and a world of unparalleled joy and mercy is created. In a transparent nod to Fedorov's Philosophy of the Common Cause, the dead are physically resurrected after the earth extracts a promise from the corpses to forswear killing. Where all the nations lined up for battle in Part I, now each brings its offerings to the "man" who is to inherit the new world. Where this man comes from is not clear: does he represent all the resurrected dead, or is he unrelated to them? More than anything, he, like the rebuilt cities, seems to be a product of Maiakovskii's all-powerful imagination, the result of the poet's unwillingness to accept the world's end. Indeed, by the end of the poem, the question of the new man's existence shifts to a completely different temporal reference point: after describing the future paradise, the poet ends his poem with an appeal to the readers: "And he, / the free man, the one I'm shouting about, / he will come, / believe me, / believe me!" (PSS I: 242). Belief is crucial: within the poem itself, the new man arrives thanks to the poet's faith; in our world, he will arrive only thanks to ours.

In War and the Universe Maiakovskii finally comes to a limited accommodation both with World War I and with his own previous enthusiasm for it. The war now has a purpose only to the extent that the widespread upheaval can potentially free humanity from the weight of its terrible past (including the crimes of the war itself); it can, apparently, lead to a new and better world. The poet has set aside his doubts about his utopian/eschatological framework, although, typically for Maiakovskii, he appeals to the bold, declarative style of the manifesto in order to convince himself he is right: the future will come because he willed it into being with words. But if the war does lead to a positive result, however indirectly, Maiakovskii has (at least for the time being) rejected the cult of violence that initially attracted him to the conflict. Ironically, the avant-garde poet has arrived at a rather banal conclusion: though the war itself is senseless, it still has a constructive result. But it is a result that requires horrible, if necessary, sacrifices. Typically, Maiakovskii only sees the significance of these losses when he projects himself onto the victims and the perpetrators; only when the geopolitical battle is re-imagined in terms of Maiakovskii's own struggle is he able to take the time to grieve before celebrating the glory that is yet to come.

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