



POEMS

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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 disinherited, poverty-stricken and labour-exhausted outcasts must be made to realise their moral superiority over the old bourgeois 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 "slavery 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 Bathhouse*. "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,

peechless, 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-
nified 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 *Uladimir 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 "festering Mr. Smith" to save her starving family.

Most typical of Mayakovsky's style in this cycle is the poem *Atlantic Ocean*.

I would shut America
and slightly clean it,
then I would
reopen it anew.

130'
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 Polytechnical 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 obtrusive 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—
 one common monument
 in socialism
 built in battle
 so let us share our glory,
 let's have
 to tell our story
 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 off-shoots 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 *Uladimir Ilyich Lenin*, which has just come out in a third

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.

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.

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?

YOU

You, wallowing through orgy after orgy,
owning a bathroom and warm, snug toilet!
How dare you read about awards of St. Georgi¹
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 Severyanin²!

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.

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

LILY³ DEAR! IN LIEU OF A LETTER

The room's a chapter of Kruchonikh's⁴ 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!

CLLOUDS 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 Kuznetsky⁵
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 naggie,

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!”
“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?"
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

ATLANTIC OCEAN

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 CEC⁹
not to down
their battle arms
till the end.

Now they've won
and throughout the equator—
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.

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-barreller 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 noddle.
 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,
 shares his mat with a white, Tommy ain't true,
 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 bogy 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.¹⁰
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',
focussing his fervour
on the keyhole of the said,
to wrest a divorce from Coolidge,¹¹
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.

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 ESENIN

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 chortles in my throat,
 but a lump of woe.

A sagging bone-bag
 in my vision
 you appear,
red runnels
 from your slashed-up wrist-veins¹² 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
 of such a kind
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.

Imitators jumped at it—
 Dozens hurried encore!
 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 rebotched
 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.

Your name
 is being snivelled
 into hankies.
 With your words
 maestro Sobinov¹⁶
 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. Kogan¹⁹
 should go scattering
 pell-mell,
 piercing
 all he meets
 with whisker-darts.
 Riff-raff
 hasn't scared much
 as yet.
 'There's lots to do,
 so hurry, mates,
 along.

Life must first
 be thoroughly reset,
 rebuilt—
 remade—
 and only then extolled in song.

These days—
 they are a little hard
 upon the pen.

But tell me,
 cripples,
 crippleses,
 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 hairscraps,
 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.²⁰

TO COMRADE NETTE—STEAMER
AND MAN²¹

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 Yakobson²²

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-illuminated.
 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,
 devil-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
 and go racing:
 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!

PAPER HORRORS

(*experienced by Vladimir 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.
It



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."

“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 KOSTROV²³
ON THE ESSENCE
AND MEANING OF LOVE*

Comrade Kostrov,
I know, I'm sure you won't mind—
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,
 its 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!

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 fie 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!

CLOUD IN PANTS

PROLOGUE

Your thoughts
day-dreaming in a pudgen'-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, chortling 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,
illuminating my eyebrows' arches with hellfire.

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 kisslet—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!

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-pygmyes 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 rostrums²⁵
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,
its 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.

3

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 Hutén's Cocoa!"²⁶
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,
sweatlings,
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 befitting 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,²⁸ even cruder,
sitting on the city with its huge behind.
That night—no eyes on earth could have screwed it,
blacker than Azef,²⁹ the blackest of his kind.

Cramped, 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.

4

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 Tiana³⁰
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 Eyes 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,
scowl 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 LOUE

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 Müller³¹ to give him a shake-up.
Too late!
The wrinkles crop up all about.
Love sizzles
and fizzes
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 Rion³²—
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,
shrunk to a baby's toy.
I got my geography, nightly flopping
down on the ground from a boy.
Grand issues split Ilovaisky's³⁴ 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 Dobrolyubov³⁵ (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.³⁶

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

I Call

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,
stampeded, 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,
fie-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.*

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!"

BALLAD OF READING GAOL

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

(V. Mayakovsky, *Man*)

*My ballad
and ballads
in general*

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.

*Call number
put through
the cable*

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;⁴¹
 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.

*The
telephone
runs amuck*

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
pounded
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.

The second

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 sniffing, 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 Speakers at every conference and congress,
clears interrupting unfinished gestures in mid-air,
 froze
 and, agape,
 at the most incongruous
 and ghatliest 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 bread
 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 Ehrfurt's.⁴⁴

Through the first pangs of pain,
wild and ridiculous,
a beast scrapes his way,
despite the brain's efforts.

*What
can happen
to a fellow*

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.

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 icefloe 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!!!

*The man from
seven years
back⁴⁵*

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-icefloe
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!

Green-,
Lap-,
or Love-land?

*Agony
of awakening*

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's⁴⁶ 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.

*Everyone's
parents*

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 versts⁴⁸—

mere child's play.

We'll all be there in the twinkling of an eye.

He's waiting.

We'll board a tram straightaway.”

*Travelling
with mother*

“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-sting.

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.

*Mirages on
the Presnya*

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.

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!
 Mer-ry
 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;

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.
Extraordinary My bass hushes down
events 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,
Boecklin⁵⁴
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,

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-heel!"
"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, Let life be ground
but not you 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 choked
with the daily delirium.
It ate out
my life
with domestic fumes,

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.

Strides of rhyme

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!

Leave 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.

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.

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 hussar⁶¹—
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!

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.
light up the dock Arc-lights play on the quay,
 where she's to be moored in.
And here
 immediately
weighed down my shoulders give way,
 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

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,
 grittled 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-bannered 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.

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.

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,
she'll do.

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,
starry,
sweet and warm.

Revive me,
if for nothing else,
because

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

Revive me—
never 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

VLADIMIR 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,

hurling
 blasphemy
 into the skies.

But calm
 by the coffin
 Dzerzhinsky⁶²
 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;

Snow-tears
from the flags' red eyelids
run.
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,⁶⁴
the first
steam locomotive.
Capital,
His Majesty,
uncrowned,
as yet unknown,

brickwork
mammoth
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,
just as kiddies today,
“What does Capitalism mean?”
“What’s a Gendarme, Dad?”
So here’s
capitalism
as then he was seen,
portrayed
for grandsons
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 youngster;
forged on
no worse
than we do these days;
raised revolutions
and
with gusto
joined his voice
in the *Marseillaise*.

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 hysteric:
"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

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

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
 with a willow cane
or striped
 by a seven-tail whip.
But bluer
 than a river
 ever looks through its rushes
were the bruises
 of landlord-ridden
 Russia.
Take a sidelong view
 of the woebegone land:
wherever
 you cast your eyes
mountains,
 pit-heads
 and prisons stand
propping up
 her skies.
But worse than jail,
 worse than war in the trenches
was the lot
 of those
 who slaved at her benches.
There were countries
 richer by far,
 I've heard,
more beautiful,
 more sane,
but never have I met
 in the whole wide world
a land
 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.⁷
 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,

no longer
 each
 on his own,
 but a Union
 of Fighters
 for Working Class
 Emancipation.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.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?

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

Vladimir 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
 in a Party stand—
 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,⁷⁵
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.⁷⁶
Enough!
No belief left
for twaddle and twiddle.
The Presnya⁷⁷
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:
 Hey Presto!
 Red ribbons
 blossomed
 like a virgin's cheek.
 The tsar
 from his balcony
 read the Manifesto.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.⁷⁹
 Spit in the faces
 of white dross who tell us
 about the Cheka's⁸⁰
 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.⁸¹

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 Plevna⁸³
 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
 Zimmerwald⁸⁴
 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 Hohenzollern⁸⁵ 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 Nevsky⁸⁶ 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
Dardanelsky,
née Milyukov,⁸⁷
and finally
Prince Mikhail⁸⁸
agog for coronation.
The Premier⁸⁹
wields power
with feathery splendour:

“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.

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,⁹³
 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 July⁹⁴
 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 Zinoviev⁹⁵!”
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

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 Smolny⁹⁶ throbs
 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's⁹⁷
 instructions."
 "Right!"
 —he dashed forward
 and the man's
 navy ribbons
 flashed:
 "Aurora"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,
 Guchkov⁹⁹ and Kerensky!”
But both front and rear
 surrendered without a shot
when the decrees¹⁰⁰
 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

with rivulets,
 hillocks
 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 Brest¹⁰¹:

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 hydras¹⁰²:

"Did those hydras
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.¹⁰³ Denikin gets a lickin'.
 Repair work begins on our ruined hearths.
 Then Wrangel¹⁰⁴ turns up in the wake of Denikin;
 the baron kicked out, Kolchak¹⁰⁵ 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.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

the familiar ads:

WILL BUY—

FOR SALE—

—NEP¹⁰⁷

Lenin winks:

we're in for repairs.

Get used to the yardstick—

nothing to fear.

The shore

rocks the crew,

weak with wear and tear:

“Whoah!

Where's the gale?

What's the big idea?”

Lenin

points out

a deep bay

free of rocks

with the piers

of co-operatives

looming

over it.

And smoothly

into construction's

docks

sailed

the colossal

country

of Soviets.

Lenin himself

heaves timber and iron

to patch up

the breaks and ruptures,

marks off and measures

with an all-seeing eye on

future co-ops,

shops

and management structures.

Then again

he resumes

his post

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 Bolshevnik 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,¹⁰⁸

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 Kalinin¹⁰⁹—
 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;

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,
scorched 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,
 abysmal
 four-step drop?
 That drop
 from the logic of farthing and penny,
 from ages
 of thralldom 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 Konstantinovna¹⁴⁰
 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
in the last
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-rope 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 Spasskaya¹¹¹ dance!
A minute—
 and past the last quarter
 they whisk!Stop
 at this news,
 mankind,
 and grow dumb.
Life,
 movement,
 breathing—cease.

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.
Yet 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 Muralov¹¹²:

“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 moles!
“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!

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
like banners asway
should rustle
until
the furthest 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,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,
 Professor!
I'll deal with the topic myself,
 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.¹¹⁶
Go and tell 'em,

which is which!

What's to stop
the beastly dinning?
There they'll twang
till god knows when:

Tar-ra tin-na,
tar-ra, tin-na,

*Tenn-n-n!*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
*agitprop**
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,

* *Agitprop*—body responsible for agitation and propaganda.—*Tr.*

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

NOTES

YOU!

- ¹ ...awards of *St. Georgi*—St. George's Cross—a medal awarded for military merit in pre-revolutionary Russia. p. 29
- ² *Severyanin, Igor*—Mayakovsky's contemporary, a decadent poet, leader of the poetic grouping known as egofuturists. p. 29

LILY DEAR! IN LIEU OF A LETTER

- ³ Dedicated to Lily Brik. p. 32
- ⁴ A chapter of *Kruchonikh's inferno*—allusion to *Games in Hell*, a futurist poem by A. Kruchonikh and V. Khlebnikov (1919). p. 32

KINDNESS TO HORSES

- ⁵ *Sweeping the Kuznetsky*—Kuznetsky Most—fashionable Moscow street. p. 36

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. p. 42

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. p. 44

ATLANTIC OCEAN

- ⁸ *Revkom*, military-revolutionary committee, directed the preparations for the October uprising and the uprising itself. p. 48
- ⁹ *C.E.C. (TsIK)*—Central Executive Committee—supreme organ of Soviet power before the adoption of the new Constitution in 1936. p. 49

A SKYSCRAPER DISSECTED

- ¹⁰ *Pre-October Yelets or Konotop* small provincial towns, synonymous of stagnation. p. 57
- ¹¹ *Calvin Coolidge*—President of the USA in 1923-1929. p. 58

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 Hutten'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

- 27 *General Gallifet*—sponsor of massacres concluding the existence of the Paris Commune of 1871. p. 103
- 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). p. 104
- 29 *Azef*—an agent-provocateur in the pay of the tsarist secret police. p. 104
- 30 *One poet sings sonnets to Tiana...*—allusion to I. Severyanin's poem *Tiana*. p. 107

I LOVE

- 31 *Müller*—author of popular physical exercise manual. p. 111
- 32 *Rion*—Rioni—river in Georgia which flows through the town of Kutaisi. p. 111
- 33 *Butyrki*—former Butyrskaya prison in Moscow where Mayakovsky was detained in cell No. 103 in 1909-1910 for revolutionary activity. p. 112
- 34 *Ilovaisky D. I.*—author of history-books written in a reactionary, monarchist spirit. p. 113
- 35 *Nikolai Dobrolyubov*—great revolutionary democrat, critic and writer. The name means literally "lover of good". p. 113
- 36 *Sadovaya*—one of Moscow's chief thoroughfares forming a ring round the city centre (lit., Sadovaya—Garden St.). p. 114
- 37 *Strastnaya Square*—a square in the centre of Moscow, renamed Pushkin Square (Strast—Passion). p. 115
- 38 *...precursor by Maupassant*—allusion to Maupassant's story *The Idyll*. p. 115

IT

- 39 *Lubyansky Proyezd* (drive)—now Serov Proyezd—street in Moscow where Mayakovsky lived at the time. p. 122
- 40 *Vodopyany Lane*—place where Lily Brik lived at the time. p. 122
- 41 *Myasnitskaya Street*—now Kirov Street—the route from Lubyansky Proyezd to Vodopyany Lane. p. 126
- 42 *Dantés* killed the poet Alexander Pushkin in a duel. p. 130
- 43 *UTsIK*—Russian abbreviation for Central Executive Committee. p. 130

- ⁴⁴ *Ehrfurt programme*—programme of the German Social Democratic Party adopted at a party congress in 1891. p. 130
- ⁴⁵ *The man from seven years back*—the hero of *Man*, a poem Mayakovsky wrote 7 years before *It* in 1916-1917. p. 135
- ⁴⁶ *Tverskaya*—now Gorky Street. p. 139
- ⁴⁷ *Presnya*—Moscow street where Mayakovsky's mother and sisters lived. p. 141
- ⁴⁸ ...*six hundred versts*—distance from Moscow to Leningrad. p. 142
- ⁴⁹ *domkom*—house management committee elected from the tenants of an apartment house. p. 143
- ⁵⁰ *Kudrinskaya*—a square in Moscow, now renamed Vosstaniye Square in honour of the 1905 uprising. p. 144
- ⁵¹ *Pleasant Surprise*—title of a collection of verses by A. Blok. p. 145
- ⁵² ...*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
- ⁵³ *Mystery-Bouffe*—a play by Mayakovsky. p. 148
- ⁵⁴ *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
- ⁵⁵ *Raskolnikov*—hero of Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. p. 153
- ^{56, 57, 58}, *Lyuban, Tver* (now Kalinin), *Klin*—stations on the way from Leningrad to Moscow. p. 157
- ⁵⁹ *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

- ⁶⁴ *Bromley's and Goujon's*—foreign-owned engineering works in old Russia; after the revolution they were nationalised, renamed and considerably expanded. p. 183
- ⁶⁵ *Yeliseyev*—big food-dealer with huge shops in Russia's principal cities. p. 185
- ⁶⁶ *Ivanovo-Voznesensk*—big textile centre, scene of mass strikes and revolutionary upheavals for many years. p. 186
- ⁶⁷ *Stepan Razin*—leader of a peasant uprising in the 17th century. p. 187
- ⁶⁸ The French Prime Minister Thiers and General Galliffet headed the operations against the Paris Commune of 1871. p. 196
- ⁶⁹ *Père Lachaise*—Paris cemetery where Communards were shot and buried. p. 196
- ⁷⁰ 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
- ⁷¹ Name of earliest Marxist workers' organisation in Russia, embryo of the Communist Party. p. 203
- ⁷² *Uladimirka*—highway by which political convicts were driven from Moscow to Siberia. p. 203
- ⁷³ *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
- ⁷⁴ *Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks)*—name used from 1918 to 1925. p. 205
- ⁷⁵ 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
- ⁷⁶ *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
- ⁷⁷ *Presnya*—industrial district in Moscow where the street-fighting began in 1905. p. 210

- 78 On October 17, 1905, the tsar issued a manifesto promising certain civil rights—a subterfuge aimed at allaying popular indignation. p. 211
- 79 *Admiral Dubasov*—governor-general of St. Petersburg, headed operations against the insurgent workers. p. 211
- 80 *Cheka*—Extraordinary Commission headed by Dzerzhinsky, crushed counter-revolutionary plots in the first years of Soviet power. p. 211
- 81 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. p. 211
- 82 *Georgi Plekhanov*—prominent Marxist scholar and theoretician, who in 1905 drifted to the right and broke with Lenin. p. 212
- 83 *Poltava* (Ukraine, 1709) and *Plevna* (Bulgaria, 1877)—cities near which big historic battles were won by Russian forces. p. 213
- 84 The international socialist conference held in Zimmerwald (Switzerland, 1915) took a resolute stand against the imperialist war. p. 214
- 85 *Hohenzollern*—dynastic name of German Kaiser Wilhelm II. p. 217
- 86 *Nevsy Prospekt*—central thoroughfare of Petrograd. p. 217
- 87 *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. p. 217
- 88 *Prince Mikhail*—brother of Nicholas II, made claims to the throne immediately after the tsar’s abdication. p. 217
- 89 *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. p. 217
- 90 *Boris Savinkov*—one of the leaders of the S.R. Party; after the revolution headed several counter-revolutionary plots. p. 218
- 91 *Mensheviks*—opportunist minority in the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party. The Tell-Tale Cat—folklore cat that could speak and tell stories. p. 218
- 92 *Liteiny Prospekt*—one of Petrograd’s main streets. p. 218
- 93 *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. p. 220

- ⁹⁴ 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. p. 220
- ⁹⁵ *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. p. 221
- ⁹⁶ *Smolny*—historic building accommodating the Petrograd Soviet; headquarters of the October uprising. p. 223
- ⁹⁷ *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. p. 223
- ⁹⁸ *Aurora*—famous battleship whose salvo signalled the beginning of the revolution. p. 223
- ⁹⁹ *Dukhonin and Kornilov*—white generals, *Guchkov*—Minister in the bourgeois Provisional Government; leaders of the planned coup aimed at preventing the imminent revolution. p. 226
- ¹⁰⁰ 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. p. 226
- ¹⁰¹ 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. p. 228
- ¹⁰² *...posters with hydras*—cartoons of the civil war depicted imperialism as a many-headed monster out to devour the Soviet Republic. p. 228
- ^{103, 104, 105} 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. p. 229
- ¹⁰⁶ 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. p. 229
- ¹⁰⁷ *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. p. 232

- 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