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**Victorious laughter : an attempt at a comparative genre analysis of  
V.V. Mayakovski's dramas : summary**

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## SUMMARY

### Victorious laughter

(An attempt at a comparative genre analysis of V. V. Mayakovski's dramas)

The work of the indefatigable seeker for new artistic approaches, V. V. Mayakovski, was developed and shaped in the mould of progressive Russian and revolutionary Soviet art. Mayakovski was an innovator not only in poetry but also in the field of theatrical and dramatic arts. Each of his plays — from his youthful tragedy *Vladimir Mayakovski* (1913), full of life's absurdity, sadness but also rebellion against the old order, his *Mystery-Bouffe* (1918) celebrating the revolution in the language of biblical legends and similes, to the grotesque-fantastic and satirico-political comedies *The Bedbug* (1828) and *The Bathhouse* (1929) exposing the abuses of the new, socialist world — was an artistic event marked by boldness of ideas, formal novelty and artistic mastery. Mayakovski's drama tends to subjects of grand scale, metaphorical imagery, fantasticality, grotesqueness and sharp political satire, to a theatre conceived as an attractive spectacle combining different genres and types of spectacular art.

Mayakovski's dramatic art is born in the pre-revolutionary period. His dramatic début — the tragedy *Vladimir Mayakovski*, summarizing the ideological innovations of the poet's cycle of early verses dedicated to the theme of capitalist town, appeared in 1913. Connected with the searching of the futurists in the field of theatre, it crowned in a certain way the artistic expansions of dramatic innovators of the first decades of the 20th century — leaving aside, of course, the difference in poetical perception of life and theoretical criteria — who were opening up the path for the new conception and style of dramatic art (Blok, Bryusov, Andreyev, Meyerhold).

The creative turmoil in Russian dramatics of the beginning of the 20th century was conditioned by a whole set of complex socio-political factors and artistic endeavours of the period. The flicker of the new — the 1905 revolution — was in connection with the Stolypinian reaction superceded by a wave of terror, persecution of outstanding figures of the revolutionary movement and ideological chaos in the circles of intelligentsia.

If in consequence of difficult conditions "there arose before the bolsheviks the task of changing their tactics, retreating in calm, preserving the cadres and gathering forces for the revolutionary offensive"<sup>1</sup> it was hardly to be expected that the world of arts, which represents a sensitive seismograph of socio-political changes, moods and currents, would remain the same as on the eve or at the time of the apex of revolutionary events of 1905 or immediately thereafter. In the years of political reaction, when even the party press could for a certain time appear only illegally, it was impossible to stage dramas appealing to the public with a message of protest and *revolutionary challenge*. It is not by chance that in February 1907 the production is banned of Gorki's *The Enemies*, published before the violent reprisals in 1906. The play was found to be "сплошная проповедь против имущих классов". Similar fate also befell the play *The Last* (1908) and dramatic works of other "znanevtsy" Yushkevich, Chirikov, Andreyev<sup>2</sup> because "... the Czarist government was aware of the difference between written, published word and the word spoken on the stage, i.e. having effect on huge masses of audience". The complexity of the situation is also proved by the divergence of ideas among dramatists grouped around Gorki,<sup>4</sup> though there is no denying that their unceasing interest in social problems made their works the most progressive stream in the field of drama.

Under these historical-political circumstances, the ideological and aesthetic transformation of dramatic shape i.e. forms of artistic testimony on reality, was an objective fact. The immanence of the form was shaped by the pressure of reality.

Morphological changes of the drama in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century are connected with the searching of representatives of Russian symbolism. Thus an ideological and formal contrast to both the Chekhovian and Gorkian current came into existence. The co-operation of the drama and the theatre gave rise to a stylized expression in which the emphasis was on the moment of creative transformation of the reality depicted.

The problems of artistic stylization, rediscovered and painstakingly elaborated on Russian soil by representatives of symbolism in the field of the theory of the drama (Bryusov, Belyi, Vyach. Ivanov), found also expression in the dramatic work of a number of poets and writers (Bryusov, Blok, Andreyev, Belyi, Kuzmin, Sologub, etc.); they found support above all in the theoretical and creative efforts of theatre reformers both in the West (M. Reinhardt, G. Craig, G. Fuchs) and especially in Russia (Vs. Meyerhold in the Theatre Study [1905—1906] and afterwards in the Komissarzhevskaya Theatre in Petersburg [1906—1907]) who attempted almost simultaneously to achieve certain theatrical stylization both in scenic grasping of the performance and in acting. Theatre innovators endeavoured to overcome the naturalistic illusiveness of the "opera-glass stage" by theatricalizing consistently all parts of the scenic art. The search for new means of expression in the field

<sup>1</sup> Э. Гугушвили, А. Юфит, *Большевистская печать и театр*. Л.—М. 1961, 122.

<sup>2</sup> *Первая русская революция и театр*. Статьи и материалы. М. 1956.

<sup>3</sup> *Театральное наследие*. Сб. первый. Л. 1934, 198.

<sup>4</sup> А. Рубцов, *Из истории русской драматургии конца XIX—начала XX века*. Часть 2, Минск 1962.

of dramatic expression went hand in hand with the creative search of the dramatists; apparently it was the drama that played the inspiring role here ("Новый Театр вырастает из литературы. В ломке драматических форм всегда брала на себя инициативу литература"<sup>5</sup>). On the basis of the new dramatic technique new forms of theatre expression came into being demonstrating the dialectic conditioning and concurrence of artistic forms and genres which alone represent progress of the theatrical and dramatic art.

The efforts of the representatives of Russian symbolism were marked by a broad but often contradictory searching in the field of ideas and genre, bearing not only the seal of innovations but also stylizationism in the adaption of forms from remote theatrical epochs. In the internally differentiated river bed of the Russian symbolistic of the beginning of the 20th century there are efforts at work trying to revive medieval religiously mystical genres, i.e. the mystery with its religious ecstasy (А. Белый, *Пришедший*, 1903), the miracle play with its miracles and sudden metamorphoses of sinners (М. Кузмин, *Комедия о Евдокии из Гелиополя, или: Обращенная куртизанка*, 1907). There appear not only parodies of medieval "diableries" (А. Ремизов, *Бесовское действо*, 1906), but also reminiscences of the genre of the antique tragedy (Вяч. Иванов, *Тантал*, 1905; Ф. Сологуб, *Дар мудрых пчел*, 1908), variations on Shakespearean comedies (Л. Зиновьева-Аннибал, *Певучий осел*, 1907) and reminders of the Spanish and Italian dramas (Евг. Зноско-Боровский, *Обращенный принц*, 1910; А. Блок, *Балаганчик*, 1906; Вл. Соловьев, *Арлекин, ходатай свадеб*, 1911).

Like poetry, Russian symbolistic drama also reflected many of the ideological and formal tendencies of the neoromantic line of the West European symbolistic drama (Maeterlinck) which, inspired by the pessimistic philosophy of Schopenhauer and Hartmann, found itself in the bonds of aestheticism, transcendence, abstraction and decadence, standing for the loss of the content of life and the loss of living idea. The most progressive wing of symbolism, represented by А. Блок, did not sever off the links with life. By stressing not the transcendence but the existential-philosophical aspects, it created a specific genre modification, a variant of the European symbolistic drama.

In the Shakespearean type of objective drama, which in the course of the historical development came to be the prevailing type of drama, the kernel of the genre, irrespective of the deepening of character drawing, was to be found in the epic moment, the plot, i.e. the dynamically developing scenic event. One of the branches of the modern drama of the 20th century, springing from neoromantism, developed towards the subjective drama, accentuating states of mind and experiences of the individual.

In the cycle of his subjective "lyrical drama" representing the "purifying" stage on the poet's path towards overcoming lyrical seclusion, Блок sounded the "experiences of the solitary soul, doubts, passions, failures, falls", i.e. the lyrical stratum of the content. The replacement of the epic moment by the sphere of subjective experiences constituted an incursion

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<sup>5</sup> В с. Мейерхольд, *Статьи, Письма. Речи. Беседы*. Часть 1, М. 1968, 123.

into the dramatic structure of a specific literary layer — lyricism and brought about the poetization of the drama. This approach also entailed a new poeticalness dictated by the imaginative character of lyrical vision. Hence the chain of scenic mystifications and illogicalities (in *The Pantomime*, *The Unknown*, etc.), the intertwining of the real and the unreal plans, the process of sudden and sharp twists and contrasts of ideas, the logic of unexpected morphoses of the plot, and the transitions from the dream into the scenic reality and vice versa (that is why instead of the Jester's blood there appears "bilberry juice", etc.), which reveals the "duality" of life so typical for the symbolists.

In this structural moment was manifested certain romantic approach and conception, a romantic "dual world" encountered already in E. A. Hoffmann's fairy-tale short stories. To the poet, the earthly reality (real world) seemed illusory, unreal. He therefore creates its transformed, secondary and grotesque reflection showing its hidden true meaning. The poet's approach modelled the dramatic structure.

Blok's innovatory endeavour to change the form of traditional drama is in the history of Russian drama somewhat analogous to the work of V. Solovyev, who in his cycle of "humorous plays", especially his "humorous mystery" *The White Lily* (from the years 1878—1880) also confronts in a paradoxical reversal the plane of the pathetic, mystical, and that of the funny, grotesque. The unceasing oscillation of poetical and buffoonish motives creates a rhythm of grotesquely absurd dramatic system. Just like Jarry's extravagant experiments in France at a later point (*Ubu-Roi*, 1888), Solovyev's scenic plays are in the Russian milieu the literary-historical forerunner and antecedence of modern efforts at a theatre of absurd situations.

The poetical metaphorical imagination of A. Blok sublimed into a poetic lyrical monodrama fixing the "state of the mind". Unlike Blok, L. Andreyev, who appeared with his innovations in the same period, aims at a new form of a more broadly composed epic drama. The prosaic talent dialectically conditions the artist's epic approach. Andreyev revives the type of "theatrum mundi", the long-forgotten genre of antique theatre (cultivated again in the European drama especially after World War I by Hoffmannsthal, Čapek, etc.) in an effort to demonstrate on the stage the purpose of human existence and doings. Hence the attention paid to the fate of man and of groups of people.

As regards the form, Andreyev found his inspiration in painting where the development was oriented towards plastic grasping of the theme. (Graphic faculty was a striking feature of the writer's talent just like with O. Kokoschka, who also paved the way for the expressionistic drama by his scenic poems). The structural impulse of A. Dürer's<sup>6</sup> painting technique was reflected in the work on *Life of Man* in the organization of the subject matter of the play (sequence of scenes depicting the key phases in man's life).

In the dramatic works of L. Andreyev a new style was shaped which was

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<sup>6</sup> Аякс, у Леонида Андреева. Биржевые ведомости, № 10 225, 28/XI, 1907 (веч. вып.), 3.

in contrast to both the impressionistic Chekhovian drama and the symbolic drama. His "metaphysical tragedies" (a term coined by Lunacharski), especially *Life of Man* (1906), *Czar Hunger* (1907), *The Black Masks* (1908), reflecting the author's "cosmic pessimism", are neorealistic "dramas of ideas" where the idea appears as something given. Their dramatical poeticalness is formed by a rationalistic approach; the set of components conveying meaning (elements of reason) dominates over the set of emotional components. Andreyevian neorealistic poeticalness is remote from symbolization, intermediating "transcendence", while it applies the process of "algebraizing" the reality, i.e. "сведение конкретного к отвлеченной «сущности» (essentia), вещи к понятию"<sup>7</sup> leading to a special adaptation of the reality. Hence a certain geometrization and schematism in the construction of characters, which are given as abstract types with a number of general features and with the denotation of the species (Man, etc.).

The schematization of characters (brought about by the "algebraization" of the reality) is complemented in the Andreyevian poeticalness by the hyperbolism of forms which destroy natural proportions of the phenomenon and create strange grotesque characters in the spirit of Goya's creative manuscript (especially the cycle of Goya's allegorical etches *Caprichos* and *Disparates* betrays formal influence on the pictorial fantastico-grotesque technique of Andreyev's "metaphysical tragedies").<sup>8</sup>

The diversity of stylistic tendencies of Andreyev's work is also manifested in an inclination towards allegorical phantasmagoricallity and also towards romanticizing motives also encountered elsewhere. Thus e.g. the romantic motive of the ball "masks", one of which is to play a fatal role in the life of the hero in E. A. Poe's short story *The Mask of the Red Death*, forms one of the motives in the plot of L. Andreyev's play *The Black Masks* and points to a possible literary connection.

Rationalism and formal hyperbolism changing into a grotesque rendering of the reality form a marked stylistic feature of Andreyev's dramatic poetics which reveals symptoms of the aesthetics of the expressionistic drama as the international current in European literature.

Neither Blok nor Bryusov or Andreyev turned their backs upon spiritual currents of the time. Through the tissue of visionary dreams, complex abstractions, phantasmagorias and utopies there still came to light in their dramas the *earthly theme*, although romantically enhanced and hazily abstract. Though remaining within the bonds of abstract humanism, they knew, in spite of all the irrationality and coded symbolism of outer expression, how to appeal to human conscience and guide to thinking of the fate of mankind (V. Bryusov, *The Earth*, 1904; L. Andreyev, *Life of Man*), to the spirit of liberty and to the revaluation of Life's and Art's criteria (A. Blok, dialogue *On Love, Art and Civil Service*, 1906); they depicted the eternal struggle with reaction and the betrayal of people's interest, and at the same time they captured the progress of history, the dark symptoms of approaching social upheavals (L. Andreyev, *Czar*

<sup>7</sup> К. В. Драгин, *Экспрессионизм в России*. (Драматургия Леонида Андреева.) Вятка 1828, 20.

<sup>8</sup> Ю. Бабичева, *Леонид Андреев и Гойя*. *Československá rusistika* 2, 1969.

*Hunger*). Along with the Gorkian current, their work is in sharp opposition to decadent tendencies in the field of symbolistic drama cultivating mystico-religious (Belyi, Kuzmin, etc.) and bourgeois topics (Artsybashev, Zinoveva-Annibalova etc.).

The experiments of A. Blok as the representative of the progressive wing of symbolism, and L. Andreyev as the pioneer of the expressionistic drama find sequence, in spite of all the differences in artistic postulates, in ideological and theoretical innovations of the futurists that were shaped not only at a time of social crisis but also in a period of an upsurge of revolutionary wave. This modern conception of dramatic art came to be most pronounced in the work of V. V. Mayakovski. Like Blok, Mayakovski also stresses the subjective moment in the tragedy bearing his name; in the spirit of the romantics he uncovers "his soul"; the theme of the work was the poet's "I", his vision of the world developed in a monologue declaration. The play of course does not represent the illusive, intimate art of refined experiences or the rationalistic probe of the Andreyevian type; it is an emotionally activated artefact containing a direct poetic appeal to the conscience of man. This is to say that the heart of the ideological content of the tragedy is not the socio-political concrete but the generally human, existential philosophical problems of the mutual relations of "man and the world" and the purpose of life. In this, Mayakovski was close to German expressionists — Hasenclever, Kaiser, Werfel, etc., who were also seeking human content for their dramas in the period prior to and during the European war.

The tragical aspects of the play do not consist in the realization of the hero's undoing and the related catharsis but in the existential philosophical idea, the isolated revolt of a man with sensitive conscience, a poet suffering the torturing pain on behalf of all the outcasts, in the messianic conception of a poet sacrificing himself for mankind. This philosophical layer of ideological content brings Mayakovski's tragedy close to the romantic conception of the mission of a poet who always acts as the defender of the rights of the personality and the people, who responded to the struggle no matter where it took place, and who was always ready for personal sacrifice. Though the poet's revolt against the old world was not revolutionary in the political sense of the word, i.e. he did not call for a political action, it was revolutionary in the ethical sense of the word by its revolt and protest — though somewhat anarchistic — against the age-long subjugation of man ("в ваших душах выцелован раб"), by repudiating a world that produces human suffering. The humanistic content of the tragedy carried the colouring of revolutionary romanticism of the new epoch of "storm and defiance", it brought the poet's first work close to the Gorkian line in Russian drama of the beginning of the century.

In the play, the ideological moments of the tragedy are constantly counterposed with author's never-ceasing, almost cynical self-irony with which the poet, as it were, tried to cover the budding emotionalism. Like Blok, Mayakovski is also victim to the "old disease" of romantics — "provocative irony", which in the tragedy pervades even the neoromantic titanic revolt of the "thirteenth apostle" against god, which demonstrates the poet's repudiation of the world.

In fact, Blok's *Pantomime* was already a ruthless ironical polemic with the mystic element inside symbolism. It was, however, especially the pamphlet-dialogue *On Love, Poetry and Civil Service*, in which Blok turned decidedly to reality, that was wholly based on a satirico-ironical attitude towards political reality; with caustic irony it attacked the opportunistic ideology of "common sense" which served the enslavement of citizens, class peace, reconciliation with political situation. The ironical plane of Mayakovski's message in tragedy is an objective continuation of Blokian political pamphlet.

Irony has always been a symptom of "politically unfree state", when the artist is bound to give up his direct attacks against the ruling power and resort to a "mask", a language of suggesting and hinting. This is a situation the Russian writer found himself in during the difficult years after the defeat of the first Russian revolution. Hence the poet's shocking ironical mask of a jester in the spirit of the medieval form, which on "Fools' Day" always gave the right of expressing freely the message about events of this world.

Heine eased his irony with humour; in contrast to rather cold sarcastic Blokian irony, Mayakovski's irony was mostly grave, it sounded in the tradition of Russian literature in tragic tones. The "provocative irony" of Blok, Mayakovski or Andreyev's "red laugh" was never an expression of mere negation of life; it had its humanistic content and significance: "Не слушайте нашего смеха, слушайте ту боль, которая за ним. Не верьте никому из нас, верьте тому, что за нами" (Блок, V, 349).

Not only the motives of messianism, the revolt of the lonely rebel against the society, the revolt against god, but also the emotionally-aesthetic stylistic components ("provocative irony") of the tragedy *Vladimir Mayakovski* are a manifestation of both the functional and the formal revival of the traditions and ideo-aesthetic conceptions of romanticism, a fact of literary convergence.

Symbolists made use of the symbolistic plan as a method of stylized objectivization of the purely subjective "state of the soul". Through extroversion of the innermost, Mayakovski embraces the world. With Mayakovski the individual subjective moment in the poet's attitude to the world around, emphasizing the "free play of intellectual faculties", did not exclude objective reality from the creative process. In aesthetic opinions, Mayakovski remained under the influence of program theorems of the futurists ("... the writer only shapes a masterly vase... whether it holds wine of dishwater... it is all the same"). The contradictoriness of the starting aesthetic conception was corrected by the poet's artistic practice itself, finding support in the realization of the necessity of a social criterion and priority of life: "... Nature — this is only material the artist can handle as he pleases but, of course, under one condition: namely, he will study the character of life and pour it into moulds hitherto unknown to anybody". It is especially Mayakovski's tragedies that can testify that the poet did not attempt an "escape from the reality", on the contrary, he tried to get close to it, give a message about it, though in the form of a complex system of images.

In this sense, Mayakovski's tragedy differed from A. K r u c h o n y k h 's



"futuristic opera *Victory over the Sun* (1913). The artistic construction of this plot does not obey the laws of logic. The world is given here as a conglomerate, something like a collage, of its incidental chaotic fragments; the partial sensory loading of the verse is intentionally removed, leading not only to verbal illogicalness but also to illogicalness in the plot, a puzzle of ideas as well as subjects. The separation of the logical entirety and connections in the spirit of Marinetti's manifests ("... We have banished logic from the theatre..."<sup>9</sup>) came to be the aim and the morphological principle; this, of course, entailed the loss of communicativeness. There is no decomposition of the realness here as is the case in cubistic painting (where the outlines appear in the accumulation of geometrized forms) but a certain tendency towards objectlessness as with abstractionist artists.

The fact of formal incoherence, the breaking up of functional entirety of the artefact, the separation of the aesthetic goal from the social ones and the loss of communicativeness, all this brings Kruchonykh close to dadaism and, as a matter of fact, also surrealism, the two currents in European art towards the end of the first and beginning of the second decade of the 20th century.

Kruchonykh's work proved that the way of experiments for experiments' sake was aimless because real innovations cannot exclude the semantic side of the artefact and they appear only on the basis of such artistic vision which, along with artistic criteria, also takes into account the total sum of conditions of real life.

Orienting itself not on "illogicalness" but the *content*, Mayakovski's creative conception went beyond the limits of futuristic extravaganza and drew to a certain extent closer to creative tendencies of expressionism, displaying moments of literary convergence. As an artistic style, expressionism, which came to life at the very beginning of the 20th century and was intensively developed in the period of World War I, was not in its entirety a "formalistic" movement but one of "content", an art of active opposition having "definite and openly political goals"<sup>10</sup>. In Mayakovski's work, futurism, enriched by active social, emotional as well as ideological involvement in the fate of mankind, was rather shaped as expressionistic futurism.

While symbolists in the organization of their associative imagery issued from the emotional musical moment, where emphasis lies on half-shades, half-tones, melody and harmony, Mayakovski gets closer to expressionists and, in keeping with his creative talent, he starts — similar to Andreyev — from the principles of painting, where elementary shapes of things, rough outlines, static contour, firm axis, decomposition etc. get into the foreground. As is known, "начинался русский футуризм прежде всего как революция «живописная»".<sup>11</sup>

Already Van Gogh, who paved the way for the expressionistic art of the content ("My goal is — to learn to paint not the hand but the gesture, not a mathematically precise head but the overall expression") and adhered

<sup>9</sup> Современный Запад. Кн. первая. П. 1922, 136.

<sup>10</sup> M. de Micheli, *Umělecké avantgardy dvacátého století*. P. 1964, 72.

<sup>11</sup> Б. Л и в ш и ц, *Полугораглазый стрелец*. Л. 1933, 6.

to life, expressed the wish to learn creating "inaccuracies" just as Millet and Lhermitte did, on whom van Gogh oriented himself in his searching. He, too, wanted to "reshape and change the reality, to deviate from it and, if necessary, to paint even "non-truth" since the latter may sometimes be truer than literal truth".<sup>12</sup>

In his effort to liberate truth from the material shackles preventing its aperception, Mayakovski resorts to the process of "denudation": like expressionist painters he works with "physical deformation", with creative reduction, "distortion" of natural reality, carrying it "ad absurdum", with changing the contours of the portrait (he himself spoke about the task of "«mutilating» nature as it is reflected in different consciousness"). Hence the number of hyperbolized grotesque stylized characters in the tragedy — "Man without head", "Man with prolonged face", etc. which, using the term coined by I. Goll<sup>13</sup>, are a kind of "physiognomic exaggerations" adapting the reality. Similar to L. A n d r e y e v in his *Life of Man*, Mayakovski also went not from the real line to the transcendence but from unreality and fantasticality to the most real reality. A certain semantic symbolism (Man without head, etc.) has not an idealistic but a realistic basis, it is a realistic symbolism.

The formal reduction of reality by means of "physiognomic" as well as "subject exaggerations" (when the situation is usually turned upside down) leads to a grotesque model of reality in which all sensations, events, phenomena, etc. appear in unusual associations and relations in order to denude even more the essence and purpose of human existence, the absurdity of life.

In contemporary theoretical works, the grotesque is not only treated as partial dramaturgically-structural procedure or means of satirical depiction but as complete genre organism, a peculiar aesthetic category with tragicomical content. "Im Grotesken verbindet sich Komik und Tragik. Das Tragische wird, um mit Brecht zu sprechen, ins Komische verfremdet, das Komische aber bekommt einen galligen Beigeschmack und das Lachen bleibt dem Zuschauer im Halse stecken".<sup>14</sup> The conception of a cool grotesque with its painful grimace but, in fact, without any laugh-inspiring basis (with the exception of the author's bitterly self-ironizing aspect) brands even the internal figurative world of grotesque distortions and fantastic fancies of Mayakovski's tragedy. Its peculiar rudimentary form together with the content coordinate — existential probe of the tragic position of man in the split world of realities turned into nonsense — is close to the artistic treatment of absurd drama as we know it from the works of S u k h o v o - K o b y l i n, A. J a r r y and especially from works of dramatists of later period. The given artistic conception and stratum of the play was with Mayakovski of course hardly an expression of conscious program orientation: in absurd drama, the plays are not "the outcome . . . of the conscious pursuit of a collectively worked-out programme or theory (as the Romantic movement was, for example) but of an unpremeditated response by a num-

<sup>12</sup> В. Ван-Гог, *Письма*. М. 1966, 241, 247.

<sup>13</sup> P. P ö r t n e r, *Experimentální divadlo*. Praha 1965, 46.

<sup>14</sup> *Sinn, oder Unsinn? Das Groteske in modernen Drama*. Basilius Presse, Basel, Stuttgart 1962. Willy Jägi. Vorwort.

ber of independent authors to tendencies inherent in the general movement of thought in a period of transition . . ."<sup>15</sup>

The structural type of model drama, which came to be manifested in the modern drama at the turn of the century (Solovyev, Jarry, Blok, Andreyev, Apollinaire, etc.) meant the destruction of the architectonics of the classical dramatic form. Mayakovski also loosens the structure of the drama; in contrast to Apollinaire's "surrealistic drama" *Tirezio's Breasts* (1916) where in spite of the complexity of the plot the traditional subject structure with its intrigue basis is maintained, he suppresses the outer plot, which is more or less fragmentary, subordinates it to the logic of the poetical, metaphorical image and brings into foreground expression introducing considerable social ideas.

In thematical analogies, associative imagination and poetic treatment of artistic material (paradoxical situations, fantastic stories, artistic "peculiarization", etc.), Mayakovski's formal innovations point rather to a continuity with domestic tradition. Dramatic experiments of V. Khlebnikov represent an important filial link in the evolution from "humorous plays" by V. Solovyev through "lyrical dramas" of A. Blok to V. Mayakovski's tragedy.

Dramatic miniatures in verse by V. Khlebnikov *Чертик* (1909), *Маркиза Дээес* (1909), *Мирскóнца* (1913), *Госпожа Лéнин* (1913), *Ошибка смерти* (1914), *Снезিনি* (1915) etc. hardly represent a culmination in the dramatic system since they are dramatic sketches, torsos, where "fragmentariness" was evidently intentional, "a means of semantic shifting", a structural principle in the organization of the subject as a semantic configuration (the poet usually outlined the basic carrying moment only). This fragmentariness of shape, which in fact is also typical for Mayakovski's tragedy, carries the seal of romantic creation, which "inevitably entered upon a period of experiments, études, unfinished sketches" because it endeavoured to achieve an "absolute expression of experience not tied down by any conventions".<sup>16</sup>

Khlebnikov looked for and examined the possibilities of the dialogued form on most diverse dramatic, thematic and plot motives. As in his verses, here also comes to the foreground the "denuded structure" (I. Tyunyaanov, 561). The poet freely interweaves the planes of time and territory (in the play *Мирскóнца* the sequence of time is reversed: the life of the heroes develops not from youth to death but from death to childhood). On other occasions he creates paradoxical situations: in *Ошибка смерти* "Death" is made to drink from the "cup of death" and dies only to come to life again since it is immortal; the subject-matter of *Маркиза Дээес* (containing the motive of the "revolt of things" used later also by Mayakovski) is a fantastic event at the opening of an exhibition of paintings, where the heroes of the play are transformed into statues in stone.

The repudiation of traditional dramatic convention, cultivation of logical and plot paradoxes, reversals and leaps which turn normal logic upside-down and reverse the time sequence and course of dramatic situation, gave

<sup>15</sup> Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England, 1968, 409.

<sup>16</sup> Ю. Тынянов, *Архисты и новаторы*. Л. 1929, 181.

rise to a kind of embryonic form or first stage of antidrama, anticipating the development of one of the offshoots of European drama; in Slavonic literatures, its system was developed especially by the Polish dramatist S. I. Witkiewicz (*Kurka wodna*, 1921, etc.).

Though in Khlebnikov's efforts what dominates is the approach of a seeker of new paths of dramatic art and not the cognitive moment with regard to reality, the semantic moment, the communicativeness of images, never gets lost in them. It is true, the author did not advance into the world of deeper social ideas and associations, did not create any dadaistic nonsense such as Krutchonykh did, but he constructed a new "semantic system".

Khlebnikov's and Mayakovski's works are an expression of literary filiations inside a related artistic system.

Rather than from the Andreyevian type of epic drama, Mayakovski's tragedy starts from Blok's *Pantomime* which accentuates the subjective moment. In the tragedy, of course, the egocentricity of the core of the plot led even more to a monodramatic structure. The play is composed as a dramatic chain of the poet's vision of the world and images formed about the world which start from real experiences concretized in the flow of hyperbolized realized metaphors, loosened by association and turned into meditative monologues, which in expressive poetic images tell what was impossible to represent dramatically. The lyricalizing static quality had anyway its place in the development of drama and theatre at the beginning of the 20th century (the idea of "static theatre").

The subject-matter understood as a system of dramatic actions, or in the sense of the Aristotelian theory as the "image of man in action" or "history of the growth" of character (Gorki) was absent in the new poetic drama. Thus Mayakovski's tragedy, too, is not a classical "drama of the plot" with dynamic movement of dramatic situations. Here too, just as with Blok and Khlebnikov before, it is the lyrical principle that dominates, reflecting the stirring of the souls, minds, the state of moods, expressions, forming the internal action. It is perhaps in this union of lyric and drama, i.e. in removing the boundary between two systems, between "two genres, lyric and drama" that lies a certain "futuristic quality" of the tragedy (B. Livšic, 185). At the same time, this formal tendency was an expression of the romantic genre syncretism. Unlike classicism, which locks art in its autonomous sphere and maintains the boundaries between individual types of art, in romantic periods a syncretism of poetic genres can be observed, usually with dominant lyrical element.<sup>17</sup> Naturally, genre is not a stable, invariable formal category; it starts from embryos of some systems and becomes the rudiment of others.

The structural backbone of Mayakovski's tragedy is not the systematic colliding and intertwining of the semantic and action planes, transitions from scenic reality into unreality, dream and fantasy, so characteristic for symbolists (Maeterlinck) or for Blok's *Pantomime*. Also absent is the "passing" from the concrete to the abstract "essence", from the thing to the concept (substitution for the thing) which is typical for the expressionistic method of L. Andreyev's "metaphysical tragedies". In the

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<sup>17</sup> В. Жирмунский, *Вопросы теории литературы*. Academia, Л. 1928, 179.

tragedy there appears counterpointing, correlation of Andreyevian algebraized reality ("Man without Head"), i.e. the grotesque world of realized images with the real world represented by the poet himself. This method of construction, applied by Mayakovski in his verses and especially in the drama of the twenties, is an efficient means of the poetics of the critical view. The exposed social feeling of the author, given by his political experience of 1907—1908 and later, prevented him from sliding into empty play of symbols, concepts.

In a creative convergence with the efforts of West European expressionistic art and continuing the domestic dramatic tradition, Mayakovski models in his monodrama that peculiar poetic quality of the revolutionary-romantic, grotesque-absurd drama, involved in the civic as well as human problems. By its genre syncretism it is the forerunner of new forms in tragedy, assimilating and transforming the stimuli and innovations of the line of authors embracing Blok, Andreyev and Khlebnikov, as well as much later tendencies in the evolution of modern poetic drama.

The explorations of the innovatory, progressively oriented current in the Russian pre-revolution drama came to light on the basis of profound artistic and socio-political contradictions in the society after the defeat of the first Russian revolution. But even in this painful period of social depression and stagnation, just as in all momentous historical phases, "regress is connected with progress" (М а р к с). The atmosphere of disillusion connected with the temporary decline of the revolutionary wave was broken by new socio-political changes. In a way, even the "aesthetic revolt" of the futurists "took on itself progressive political colouring"; it was "to a certain extent" an expression of the "shifting towards left of all the democratic elements in the country by 1912".<sup>18</sup> A new political crystallization and polarization of attitudes set in, which showed the progressively minded intelligentsia turning away from the standpoints of their own class in the name of the "signum contradictionis". The cultural front was hit not only by the crisis of values, artistic as well as spiritual marasmus, decadence, but it was also marked by the activation of art, by excited searching for new artistic paths. From dialectically opposed tendencies an artefact of a new type was being born.

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The depressive mood and the tragic vision of life in Mayakovski's work gave way after 1917 to an optimistic affirmation to the revolutionary world. His *Mystery-Bouffe* — the first play of the October — was an expression of the hopes in the renaissance of the old world and the belief that the rescue does not consist in fleeing from the reality but in active participation in its transformation.

At one time, L u n a c h a r s k i said that "театру не угоняться за революцией" and that even "в эпохе французской революции тогдашний театр менее всего изображал саму революцию". Apparently this historical reality was what made Mayakovski in his *Mystery-Bouffe* turn to such forms of theatre and drama that would make it possible to depict in a brief

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<sup>18</sup> А. Метченко, *Ранний Маяковский*. Сб. ст. Владимир Маяковский. М.—Л. 1940, 18

dramatic form both the content and the meaning of the revolutionary changes, to render the epic of their events, to express the heroic pathos as well as the coarse smallness of conflicting historical forces. That is why he makes use of the allegorical form of dramatic *simile* (the revolution is compared here to the Flood washing the sinful earth and resurrecting it to new life). This enabled, above all, to render the meaning of the events, their logic, to span the great intervals of time and space and to create a particular stylized theatrical model of reality.

Though as regards aesthetic conception, *Mystery-Bouffe* is ranked with the traditions of the comic epos,<sup>19</sup> it has its typological genealogy above all in the region of dramatic forms. As to the forms Mayakovski found inspiration in the theatre of the Middle Ages. It was preserved in the famous Passion plays in Oberammergau but a deeper interest in its genres was revived only by the theory and practice of the symbolist theatre, the endeavours of which corresponded in this sense with analogical reviving tendencies of the European drama (G. Craig, Appia, Reinhardt, etc.). The founders of Russian symbolist theatre considered the revival of the forms of the theatre of the Antique, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance the starting point is searching for new ways in the theatre. This was the basis of Yevreinov's stage reconstructions of medieval mysteries, morality and miracle plays, farces, etc. in his Ancient Theatre in Petersburg in 1907—1908, which were also significant for the development of Russian drama.

The form of *Mystery-Bouffe*, i.e. a political revue with a charge of revolutionary agitation, springs from a modernized framework of the medieval mystery (a form of Western literatures having, nevertheless, a certain analogy even in the verbal traditions of Slavs) which makes it possible to combine in one form various genre strata ("heroic, epical and satirical depiction... of the epoch") as well as emotionally-aesthetic planes.

It is known that the sacral character of the first form of medieval *mystères* (as they have been called since the 14th century) was balanced by including representatives of popular classes, which introduced with them worldly realistic element, features of popular comicality, laughter, joke, wit. This was evidently due to the fact that the popular spectator wanted to see the representation of his experience of life and everyday common life, together with a natural desire for merriment, relaxation and entertainment. In this sense the given form of mysteries, which mixed — just as in real life — the serious with the comic and grotesque, was already at that time an expression of the influence of the worldly theatre born in the town square.

It is this form of medieval mystery, persecuted at one time by the Church in the form of various prohibitions etc., that Mayakovski started from in his play, while at the same time he developed and strengthened the part of the popular element, which came to be its predominant component. By not only reviving the mystery form but giving it a purely

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<sup>19</sup> К. Крејчи, *Heroikomika u Slovanu*. Praha 1964, 502.

<sup>21</sup> А. Веселовский, *Старинный театр в Европе*. М. 1870, 127.

worldly and even political content, Mayakovski in fact negated its starting point.

The poet did not want by means of the chosen system of images to reconstruct from the Bible the well-known sequence of events (the Flood, the construction of the ark, the prophet, the sermon on the mountain, the transfer of the action into the hell and paradize, the search for Ararat) but he tried to present a new artistic and ideological conception of his time, to create an artistic allegory of a revolutionary epoch. Symbolically represented painful progress of "seven pairs of outcasts" after the Flood (proletarians opening through traps, suffering and fight their way to the "promised land" — communism) reflects in the form of a mystery simile the historical experience of the Russian revolution. The very revolution thus determined the meaning, sequence and logic of the individual scenes as well as the whole scenic system of the play. The chain of biblical motives was then both ideologically and artistically modernized and politically revalued and stripped of the mythological garb in an effort at an analogy with contemporaneity. "My paradize is for everybody — but not for the poor in spirit" these are the words in which Mayakovski, in the spirit of his time, paraphrased Christ's commandment. The importance of *Mystery-Bouffe* in the history of Soviet drama and literature is given by the fact that "впервые в песнопение революционной мистерии переложила будни".

Traditional biblical imagery was in keeping with popular notions of the purpose of human existence, it made easy to understand the grandiose events of the epoch (at that time Vakhtangov also reflected on the fact that "... it is necessary to present the Bible on the stage ... to present on the stage the revolting spirit of the people"). Other writers also resorted to it in an effort to poeticize and justify the revolution (Б л о к, *Двенадцать*; Б е л ы й, *Христос воскрес*; Е с е н и н, *Июния*; but also Б е д н ы й, *Земля обетованная*; К н я з е в, *Красное евангелие*; Л у н а ч а р с к и й, *Иван в раю*, who interpreted biblical motives in parody form).

A similar modernization of medieval mysteries — parallel to Mayakovski's efforts — can also be seen in other Slavonic literatures, e.g. in Yugoslav literature (M. K r l e z h a, *Hrvatska rapsodiya*, 1918, I. K o s o r, *Rotonda*, *Chovyechanstvo*, 1925, K. M e s a r i c, *Kosmichki zhongleri*, 1926, etc.<sup>20</sup>) and Polish literature where especially E. Z e g a d l o w i c z created a type of drama for which he used the name "misterjum balladowe".

*Mystery-Bouffe* starts from the fundamental plan of the mystery but its formal components associate with other types of old theatre, suggesting thus possibilities of some artistic continuity.

The ideological, propagandistic and even didactic aim clearly penetrates the mystery subject-matter in an effort to shape the consciousness and political thinking of the proletarian spectator, to show him his historical mission, etc. Moralizing tendencies appeared in increased measure in medieval morality plays, their dramatic scope — disregarding allegorical framework — was influenced by real life which drove out scholastic notions; it used to serve as a tool of propaganda, attack and polemic in the religious as well as social struggle. These moments were also characteristic

<sup>20</sup> F. Wollman, *Dramatika slovanského jihu*. Praha 1930, 152—165.

for the grandiose revolutionary morality play *Mystery-Bouffe*, whose allegorizing novel form could not, of course, originate in vacuum.

Traditions of the old theatre affected not only the image system but also the satirical component of *Mystery-Bouffe*. The satire, directed against "the pure", is the formal element of *Mystery-Bouffe* which made the play earthbound, brought it down from the heights of elevated pathos to reality, to the fundamental conflict of the time — the fight against counter-revolution. The "buffoonish" component of medieval mysteries, which e.g. in old French "diableries" was the domain of devils and popular types (quacks, soldiers, etc.), was in Mayakovski's modern anticlerical caricaturing and polemical interpretation transformed into a political satire. But even this latter had a precedent in literary traditions of medieval drama. Very popular in the 15th and 16th centuries was the allegorizing genre of medieval West European drama, the so-called *sottie*, which was marked by mocking satirizing intention. In this peculiar variety of the farce "was formed and grew the spirit of popular opposition to all long-neglected evils of social life,<sup>21</sup> here a daring politico-satirical commentary on topical events was voiced, abuses and vices were exposed, clergy was savagely attacked in them and not infrequently the Pope himself was ridiculed and mocked (*Sottie du nouveau Monde, Des gens nouveaux, La Mere Sotte, La Sottie du Prince des Sots*). The theatre at that time came to be (especially in connection with the work of P. Gringoir) part of the political struggle, supporting the political tendencies of secular power against ecclesiastical power. And though this remarkable comico-satirical genre was soon to disappear (theatre censorship under Francis I [1515—1547] undermined its development) its fighting spirit comes to life again in the modern social and political comedy. The satirical component of *Mystery-Bouffe*, with its sharp antireligious orientation, political involvement and biting sarcasm directed against the old world, is a historical continuation to the peculiar literary tradition of medieval theatre.

Notwithstanding this objectively historical analogy of the satirical component of *Mystery-Bouffe*, the poet drew especially in the construction of characters (the process of self-denudation, the penetration to the socio-political basis of characters), in the use of language (epigrammatic, figurative expression), and in the overall spirit of democracy, on the traditions of *old Russian popular drama* which had come to light in annual popular festivities, clown performances and street performances of strolling actors and buffoons.

Modern artistic and ideological modification of the morphology of *Mystery-Bouffe* shows that the play is not a pure copy of medieval mystery but a modern variation of medieval dramatic forms. *Mystery-Bouffe* is a remarkable *hybrid genre* produced in a modern period which is marked by fluctuation of genres and which in an effort at a new expression mercilessly disrupts, mixes and distorts inherited traditions, accepted notions fixed concepts, etc.

Mayakovski's creative achievement proved that the dramatic tradition of the Middle Ages remained a true reality even in the 20th century. Modern theatre of a high standard does not give up the best works of medieval drama and tries to keep them on the stage. Whole regions of



modern drama draw on medieval drama and endeavour to be its continuation and sometimes even offshoot.

*Mystery-Bouffe* assimilated the traditions of medieval drama not only as regards the genre but also the composition. The principle of the construction of medieval mysteries, which tended to a panoramatic survey of the fate of human race, with the plot being developed on the earth, in heavens and in hell, is also the basis of *Mystery-Bouffe*. Mayakovski also tried to depict the world in its broad perspectives and relations, to create a "miniature of the world within the walls of the circus", i.e. of the type *theatrum mundi*. This type of drama was especially cultivated by the Baroque theatre, which together with the traditions of the medieval ecclesiastical theatre also inherited the traditions of secular theatre and considered the world a stage and tried to offer not only a comprehensive illusory picture of life but also perfected theatrical simile of its eternal course.

Every epoch creates its own similes when looking for answers to eternal questions as to the purpose of life, human struggle and existence on earth. Gil Vicente once tried to show on the small area of the stage a theatrical synopsis of the world, its peculiar dramatic model (*The Boats, The Play about Marketplace*) and after him Calderón in his single-act "auto sacramental" *El gran teatro del mundo* (1645) (just as long before that Dante's *Divine Comedy* tried to do the same). On the stage, which represented the "great theatre of the world", the play of human life was performed in which people — actors play before the eyes of the Master their earthly parts, their own fates. In this play, which lacked ecclesiastical scholasticism, were solved the eternal problems of good and evil, rewards for earthly doings of man. The culmination of the fundamental conflict between the beggar and the rich man — a conflict which is essentially social and not irrationally abstract, all-human — was prompted by life itself and not by ecclesiastical scholasticism: the beggar is saved while the rich man suffers eternal damnation for his lack of feeling. (In this "auto" Calderón starts — however paradoxical it may seem — from *The Judge of Zalamea*, 1640).

The conception of the "theatre of the world" also existed in literatures of earlier epochs, especially in Renaissance; from Czech literature we may quote *The Book about Lamentation* by Konáček, which has even wider literary analogies (they lead from the medieval *Song of Truth* and *Theatrum Mundi Minoris* by Nathaniel Vodňanský from Uračov, to Comenius' *Labyrinth*; it was, however, developed in later periods too, e.g. in I. Madáčh's *Tragedy of Man* (1857—1860) and L. Andreyev's *Life of Man* (1906), who developed the conception of the "great theatre of the world" in the direction of philosophical evaluation and introspection of the spiritual experience of man; it appears again in the dramatic conception and work of N. Yevreinov, who postulated the idea of "theatricalization of life" (*What is Most Important*, 1921).

*Mystery-Bouffe*, which also maintains the construction type of dramatic simile with a wide scope of action, introduced into the conception of "theatrum mundi" substantially new moments, and in doing so extended the scope of its ideas and content. The object of depiction is no longer the individual life of man in its introspective ethical, existential and fatal

dimensions (as was the case with L. Andreyev whose dramatic form, which according to Gorki combines "переосмысленную средневековую мистерию" and "ядовитую сатиру лубка" finds a sort of continuation in *Mystery-Bouffe*), but social cataclysms, and social as well as political life of large social groups on world scale.

Mayakovski's effort to present in his *Mystery-Bouffe* a drama of the history of the world corresponded with an analogical tendency of European drama which at the time of war conflagration and revolutionary upheavels reflected on the fate of mankind, but together with the conception of brothers Čapek (in the play *From the Life of Insects*, 1921, which is also conceived as a modern mystery imbued with satirical criticism — "... I judged the class which is called bourgeoisie") it differed from that part of European drama which tended to symbolico-allegorical depiction of life but ideologically started from the defence of the old world, mitigated the class differences of post-war epoch (e.g. Hofmannsthal's mystery *The Great Salzburg Theatre of the World*, 1922 — a transcription of a calderonian model weakening the social ring of the original, or E. Barlach's play *The Flood*, 1924 — which like *Mystery-Bouffe* adapts the Old Testament legend about the Flood and Noah's Ark). Hofmannsthal's transcription as well as Barlach's dramatic meditation were an expression of a certain tendency or current of religious drama, a peculiar offshoot of European drama cultivating, especially since the end of World War I, various genres of both medieval and baroque theatre — mystery plays, legends, morality plays, allegories, passion plays, miracle plays, similes, etc., which urged spectators — believers to Cristian humility, religious feeling and love of God. The revival of religious and mystic moods in a certain part of bourgeois dramatists — representatives of the so-called *Christian avant-garde* (Henri Ghéon, Max Mell, Paul Claudel, William Butler Yeats, John Masefield, Arthur Warren Hughes, Charles Williams, Ernst Barlach, Oskar Kokoschka, Jacinto Gran-Delgado, etc.) undoubtedly called forth by manifestation of dehumanization caused by war frenzy, general insecurity of human life and spiritual values, as well as by fear of revolutionary upheavels and social changes.

The ideological content of *Mystery-Bouffe* was in sharp contrast to the religious spirit of all this current. The novelty of Mayakovski's revolutionary mystery, which is without analogy not only in Russian but in all modern dramatic literature, consists in the daring creative interpretation, in the modernization and ideological revaluation of the traditional lay-out of biblical motives and legends.

*Mystery-Bouffe* is not, of course, a mere literary echo of the old theatre although it transposes its traditions in a new original form, it is in full extent an ideological and artistic expression of the tendencies of its period; it is the result of efforts of the proletarian theatre being born, to depict the historical revolutionary appearance of the proletariat, to capture in the revolutionary epos of the *mob drama* the spirit of masses that were set into historical motion. The depiction of revolutionary proletariat — in the history of drama an essentially unexplored human continent — was a complex artistic task the solution of which was often marked by setbacks.

The creation of a collective portrait, a polyphonic chorus of the nameless, roughly cast characters (including "the impure" as well as "the pure") was influenced in *Mystery-Bouffe* by the tendency of the period which refuted individualized differentiation of the revolutionary mass and programmatically emphasized the features of collectivism which, in its turn, enhanced the impression of massive uniformity and spontaneity of popular movement.

This tendency, which at one time was manifested to various degrees of artistic intensity in the practice of Soviet proletcult, in the work of representatives of German expressionistic theatre (Kaiser, Hasenclever, Toller, Sternheim, etc., who in a way continued in the traditions of the Berlin Volksbuehne of the end of 19th century) and in the Czech, so-called *drama of hosts* (A. Dvořák, *Hussites*; F. X. Šalda, *The Hosts*; Honzl's scene of hosts at the 1st spartakiade in Prague in 1921), was the continuation of former attempts at creating the drama of multitudes. In R. Rolland's revolutionary epopee *14th of July* (1901, composed in the spirit of his Theatre of the People and evoking the political events and artistic traditions of the Great French Revolution) we can also see that "individuals are lost in the ocean of people" because "if anybody wants to depict the storm, he cannot paint every single little wave but the swelling sea. A passionate truthfulness of the whole is more important than pedantic accuracy in details".

It seems, however, that in a certain respect it was above all the drama of the epoch of Great French Revolution whose formal tendencies form the *historical* starting point of early Soviet revolutionary drama that came forth with many ideo-thematic and genre analogies and parallels which reveal much about the ways and laws of the development of arts in epochs of revolutionary changes. *Mystery-Bouffe* and the satirical revolutionary political farce, a "prophétie" in one act, by Sylvian Maréchal *The Last Judgement on Kings* (1793, rendering the period after the victory of Revolution, when European nations ousted feudal monarchs and had them deported to a deserted island so that they might not harm mankind) have a number of moments in common, which is a proof of the fact that the arts, which "cannot objectively keep pace" with the revolution, prefer the way of artistic stylization, seizing the meaning and logic of historic events rather than recording them photographically.

Maréchal's *Last Judgement on Kings*, Verhearen's *Daybreak*, Rolland's *14th of July*, i.e. plays whose common feature is not only the revolting romanticizing revolutionary spirit but also the artistic style tending to great strokes of brush, monumental units and actions, all these were but intermediate steps on the way to the political drama of multitudes. At its end is *Mystery-Bouffe*, a satirical burial service for the old world and grandiose apotheosis of revolution, a true "theatre of the people" which ate "with the people from one slice, shared its worries, its hopes and its struggles".

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Although even in the twenties Mayakovski starts from the complex of traditions of both the literary and the popular theatre, the stage of creative adaptations of traditional subject-matters and motives came to its end;

the poet looks for quite new procedures that would correspond to contemporary epoch, to the level of its thinking and to the progress of modern arts.

Above all, Mayakovski's drama-work crystallizes as to the genre, it gets the shape of a *political satirical comedy* continuing in the tradition of the Russian comedy of Gogol and Sukhovo-Kobylin and keeping up the ideological and artistic progress which already marked *Мистерия-буфф*, Erdman's *Мандат* (1925), Romashov's *Воздушный пирог* (1925) as well as Bulgakov's *Багровый остров* (1928). The way of Soviet satire was not easy. Many theoreticians of the twenties and thirties (Krynetski, Blyum, Nusinov, etc., starting from illusory conceptions of a conflict-free development of socialism, actually tried to banish under various pretexts satire and laughter from socialist society (rough analogies were drawn between the destructive function of satire of past epochs and the function of satire in the epoch of socialism). Similarly, Platon used to expel satire from his ideal state when "from poetry" he admitted in it "only hymns to gods and songs of praise to good men". Many theoretical squabes had to take place before the necessity and justification of the existence of satire in the fight for socialism was accepted.

In the years of civil war, the mission of the satire consisting in self-purification from the miasm of the past, receded into background for a time ("Больше чем драматическое, белое окружение не позволило нам чистить себя чересчур рьяно. Метла сатиры, щетка юмора были отложены", Mayakovski 12, 52). Self-critical tendencies in Soviet satirical comedy come to the foreground only in the midtwenties, when the possibility opened up "серьезнее почистить советское «нутро»" (12, 30). Unlike his predecessors and contemporaries (Erdman, Faiko, Romashov), Mayakovski in this respect broadens the object plane of Soviet satirical comedy; he exposes not only outlived ideas of the old world but also the negative "new" phenomena brought forth by socialist society. If in *The Bedbug* he directed his satire downwards (exposing manifestations of bourgeois tendencies in the ranks of the working class and "ideological diversion" of those without backbone who adapted themselves to the new class), then in *The Bathhouse* his derision is directed rather upwards, in the spirit of aristophanic traditions: "Только начал комедии ставить поэт, он напал не а гражданин обычных, / А Герაკловым пламенным гневом объят принялся за могучих и сильных".<sup>22</sup> The poet ridicules the many forms and demonstrations of a new, socialist bureaucracy and its breeder — political demagogues profaning the ideas and achievements of socialism. The choice of satirical object was undoubtedly Mayakovski's innovatory step in his artistic rendering of the conflicts of socialist reality but at the same time a continuation of the traditions of demasking Russian comedy of the 19th century (Gogol, Sukhovo-Kobylin).

The ideo-aesthetic content of Mayakovski's comedies is not, of course, limited to the negative ideas, themes and characters. In *The Bathhouse*, the poet wanted to give "не только критикующую вещь, но и бодрый, восторженный отчет, как строит социализм рабочий класс" therefore his satirical comedy whips shortcomings but at the same time glorifies human

<sup>22</sup> From the Russian translation: Аристофан, *Комедии*, т. 1, М. 1954, 321.

fantasy, active creative attitude to life, i.e. it absorbs organically *heroic-pathetic* motives. Here, new possibilities opened up for the art of comedy, here lies the innovatory character of Mayakovski's satire, reminding us of Aristophanes, who in his satirical comedies was able to scenically materialize positive aspects of life (*The Peace, Plutos, Lysistrata*, etc.). The optimism of Mayakovski's comedies, born in his revolutionary conception of the world and out of his faith in the possibility of transforming life, marks a milestone even against the background of the best socio-critical comedies of the late twenties and early thirties. The development of European comedy as represented in this period by works of G. B. Shaw, C. Sternheim, C. Zuckmayer, Ödön von Horváth, G. Kaiser, Jacinto Benavente, S. J. O'Casey, etc., was marked by *deheroization* of the drama, its themes and characters, by an ironic attitude to the bourgeois world outlook and political reality, it evoked sceptical moods, disillusion, loss of faith in former ideals. At the same time, Mayakovski's plays — in the same way as those by Erdman, Romashov, Bulgakov and other comedy writers of the twenties — were in sharp contrast to the entertaining, ideologically non-involved line of European drama of that period. In the spirit of the traditions of Scribe, Labiche, etc., a number of West European dramatists cultivated the type of conversational comedy with shallow moralizing sentences, and did not even shrink from cheap light-vein comedy (Alfred Savoir, J. Deval, W. Somerset Maugham, Frederic Lonsdale, Noel Coward, Giuseppe Lanza, Curt Goetz, etc.). In contrast to this, Soviet comedy in its first stage did not sell its social conscience in exchange for entertaining superficiality.

Comparing *Mystery-Bouffe* with *The Bedbug* and *The Bathhouse*, we can see that in the latter two the poet's ideological and aesthetic conception as well as satirical metaphorical imagery become more profound, this being manifested not only in the uncommon parable and original plot structure (man — bedbug; "«Баня» — моет [просто стирает] бюрократов") but also in poetically saturated dialogues, whose variability is a modern counterpart to the molièrian dialogue, as well as in the structure tending to a specifically conceived scenic revue. It was especially with the appearance of *The Bedbug* and *The Bathhouse* that the life-giving current of the age-old popular culture of the "ridiculous" invaded Soviet drama on a larger extent than in the case of *Mystery-Bouffe*. The form of the two comedies reveals an undoubtedly genetic affinity and a resemblance with spectacular forms of the popular festive culture of the street, market-place and carnival merry-making of past epochs. The two plays offer an attractive spectacle, combining in the spirit of modern revue various kinds and elements of popular spectacular art — from buffoonery, clown show, variety show to pantomime, circus, etc.

The popular, carnival-spectacular element moulded the very type of the testimony of Mayakovski's plays about the world and their laughter. Mayakovski's laughter is an expression of the age-long popular laugh-inspiring conception of the world, which takes the world in an extremely sober and realistic way. This laughter, by means of which the common man defends himself against the pressures of the world and against the feeling of helplessness, does not know — today just as in the Middle Ages — any

humility or fear of "any power, of worldly czars, of social upper classes, of anything that humiliates or restricts him".<sup>23</sup> This laughter, which gave the right to express one's own opinion without being punished, set the poet free from "internal censorship" and fear of "authoritative prohibition" and gave him the possibility of expressing the whole, even if unpleasant, truth about his contemporaries and social discrepancies of the period. Notwithstanding all the austerity, the gravity of the revolution and disfavour of modern agelasts, Mayakovski was a son of the "laughing epoch", since the revolution needed laughter that would open up paths to the future, that would not allow to be content with the achieved, laughter that would not need the anonymity and the language of hidden political hints. The harsh and relentless frankness of Mayakovski's satire, which does not hide antipathy, is akin to the approach of Sukhovo-Kobylin and Gogol to the ailments of the world and mankind.

In his satirical work, Mayakovski just as Gogol before him, returned to aristophanic conception of the art of satiric comedy accentuating its "self-critical" moment. The conception of a "universally popular" "laughter — judge" gave laughter its true, aristophanic "purificatory" meaning.

The starting position, in which the satirist directs his sharp and relentless scalpel inside his own organism, presupposes a certain degree of love of liberty and also magnanimity on the part of the ruling force of the society which was typical for the Soviet situation in the twenties, when the importance of self-criticism was systematically emphasized. It is not without interest that the development of politically focused comic theatre in Athens is usually connected with antique conception of democracy and its fate: "Diese aristophanisch-politische Komödie zieht mit ihrem Spott immer wieder gegen die eben regierenden, von der Bevölkerung, also von den Zuschauern selbst gewählten Staatsmänner zu Felde..." (H. Kindermann).<sup>24</sup> It seems, as if after 2,000 years the history of literature repeated itself to a certain extent. Maybe the very initial stage of Soviet revolutionary satire represented that great turning of the evolutionary spiral which, on a higher level, repeated that stage when satire fights against the disorders of its own world in the name of this world itself ("Sometimes we laugh at ourselves but... on our own behalf"), helping thus in its unceasing perfection, when only true democracy can withstand the hard and sometimes even painful slashes of the satirist.

Like in *Mystery-Bouffe*, Mayakovski distorts in *The Bedbug* and in *The Bathhouse* elementary probability and creates artificial structures of subject-matter, an artificially constructed world. In this world dominates daring fantasticality (in *The Bedbug* the action is shifted fifty yers forward, into a world where "hibernated" Prisytkin is "resurrected" to new life, etc.; in *The Bathhouse* the future is brought to the present when with the aid of the "time machine" a woman-deputy from the century of communism appears), hyperbole and playful theatricality (in *The Bedbug*, people of the future, equipped with binoculars, cameras, ladders, nets, etc.,

<sup>23</sup> М. Бахтин, *Творчество Франсуа Рабле*. М. 1965, 103.

<sup>24</sup> H. Kindermann, *Meister der Komödie*. Wien—München 1952, 81.

try to catch a bedbug on the walls of a house; in the same play we meet with the jocular fairy-tale world of "мандаринящихся деревьев" etc., an analogy to socially utopian images of "the empire of prosperity" of old Attican comedy — Ferekrates, Krates, Kratin, Eupolis, Aristophanes).

Mayakovski's satirical comedies do not depict reality in the form of life itself (in the world of satire there can be no reflected image of reality), they use stylized artistic forms and thus represent a specific line in the history of Soviet drama literature.

In this artificial world the characters are no copies of real people, they represent stylized persons having — in Mayakovski's words — the character of "revived tendencies". Just as the characters in the works of Aristophanes (created by the same method revealing the socio-political basis of dramatis personae, with the stress being on the type dominant of their character), they represented certain social ideas, tendencies, "passions", etc. (Already Lessing once remarked that the general character "is rather a personified idea than characterized person".<sup>25</sup>) Hegel, it is true, was somewhat sceptical as to the given principle of construction ("characters must not be a mere personification of interests" since "such abstractions from certain passion and aims are quite ineffective"<sup>26</sup>) but its artistic realization in both Aristophanes and especially Mayakovski was more comprehensive, it led to the creation of entire, live and unrepeatable characters.

In contrast to the positive heroes of *The Bathhouse* (Chudakov, Velosipedkin, etc.) personifying in a seriously comical form positive social tendencies and qualities of people of the socialist world (inventive spirit, working enthusiasm, industriousness, etc.), its negative characters (Pobiedonosikov, Optimistienko, Ivan Ivanovich, etc.) as well as negative characters in *The Bedbug* (Bayan) are realized as a depersonalized monstrous system of phrases in which the socio-psychological automatism of their inert thinking got petrified. (This method of dramatist's satirical psychoanalysis culminates in the language stereotype of Ivan Ivanovich and the scenic sketch of the character of Momentalnikov — a system of phrases subliming into epigrammatic verbal miniature).

It is especially this path of socialist drama of a new type, opened up by Mayakovski, that a certain current of Slavonic socialist drama has recently trodden (Mróžek). The method of satirical belittling of negative features in *The Bathhouse* shows that Mayakovski here actually explored for the socialist comedy a new type, a new kind of comicalness based on manifestations and feelings of life *absurdity* produced by deformed mechanism of bureaucratized social relations, institutions, etc. The play has a number of motives, characters and scenes displaying the phenomenon of illogicalness and absurdity; it imbues the activity of the institution whose task is to "give approval" to various decisions, an institution which clearly demonstrates the degree of alienation of the bureaucratized socialist institution from the man in the street; let us further mention e.g. Optimistienko's "officialism", Pobiedonosikov's meditations and acts (the scene where he

<sup>25</sup> From the Czech translation: G. Lessing, *Hamburská dramaturgie*. Praha 1951, 230.

<sup>26</sup> From the Czech translation: G. W. Hegel, *Estetika*, sv. 2, Praha 1966, 332.

dictates the ceremonial address in honour of the introduction into service of a new, "red" tram-car, etc.). *The Bathhouse* is not based only on the concrete conflict of two camps of characters with missions of their own. The correlation of the positive and the negative principles takes on the form of confrontation of two mutually clashing logics (see the dialogues of the Phosphorescent Woman with Undertonova, Nochkin with Pobiedonosikov, etc.), two planes of life relations — the avantgarde revolutionary world of builders and the life absurdity of a world of deformed social relations personified under socialism in the figures of lifeless bureaucrats (here lies the source of that dramaticalness which Mayakovski denoted in the subtitle of the play "drama in 6 acts..." and which in spite of the comicalness of outer expression represents the serious vein of the play).

In *The Bathhouse* Mayakovski attained the type of absurd comicalness, or model of comicalness, that can be characterized as so-called *co-ordinated*, mediate absurdness. Compared to absolute, today mostly existential absurdness, it originates by "being assigned to the co-ordinate of humanized world". The type of co-ordinated absurdness is considered a relatively suitable sphere for the realization of the aesthetic category of comicalness. Another type of absurd comicalness appears in the absurd grotesque, whose dramatic construction lies in carrying phenomena and social antagonisms to utmost limits, to most impossible consequences. At one time the realization of this specific type of comicalness, which then existed only potentially, was advocated by Lunacharski, whose aesthetic conception not only did not exclude but even presupposed the flight of "unbounded fantasy" and the necessity of dramatic experiment. "Прибавим к этому, что столь же глубоко оправданными являются приемы преодоления, заканчивания, доведения до полноты того или другого типа или положения. Здесь возможно, конечно и доведение до абсурда: все это будет на благо" (Луначарский, 1, 832). Many years later, when the narrowly normative aesthetics of socialist realism had been overcome, the dramatist Mrozek followed this earlier-programmed path of absurd comedy: his work is a clear proof of the fact that uncommon, complex and experimental artistic forms are not alien to socialist drama.

Mayakovski's ideo-aesthetic conception required a specific facture, a condensation of satirical colours. Sudden combinations and contrasting applications of a whole series of comico-satirical elements, from hyperbole, fantastic exaggeration, travesty, parody, paradox to caricature and grotesque fantasticalness united in metaphorical images create both in *The Bedbug* and *The Bathhouse* a peculiar grotesco-satirical model of objective reality, whose natural proportions are shifted, condensed and extremely crystallized. One can speak here about the grotesque principle of depicting life. The artificial reality of this model peculiarly mediates the "anomalies" of the reality, no matter whether bourgeois narrow-mindedness or bureaucratism.

With Mayakovski, the grotesque deformation of phenomena in this specific satirical model of reality was not total or absolute. Though depicting reality in a grotesque key, the poet focused and presented the leading tendencies of the epoch and of the revolutionary conception of life; in this way he adjusted a certain one-sidedness of the satirical view.

Marked by a tragicomical aspect were not only satirico dramatic



grotesques by Lenz, Buechner, Wedekind, Schnitzler, etc. "Laughter through tears", full of bitterness, was to be heard also in Russian drama of the 19th century, in the work of Gogol; the gloomy, grotesquely absurd picture of the period loomed in the works of Sukhovo-Kobylin (who, by the way, has systematically been ignored by Western dramatic science<sup>27</sup>), marked with a phantasmagoric tragicomic grin.

In contemporary West European absurd theatre, which cultivates the type of "cool grotesque", the grotesquely tragic form lacking any satirico-lumorous aspect, the disarming ideo-aesthetic moments are multiplied, opening into total social resignation and acceptance of the given state of society. Hence its philosophical agnosticism, nonsensical outer expression, completing the loss of communicativeness of the work of art. The feeling of tragic isolation, frustration and helplessness with regard to the given dehumanized social order, when the moment of transforming the world becomes a mere fiction, could not and cannot, even in the future, have another solution: "Die verfremdete Welt erlaubt uns keine Orientierung, sie erscheint als absurd."<sup>28</sup>

In the Soviet grotesque satirical comedy, which was shaped in the post-revolution period in the works of Gorki (*Работяга Словококов*), Erdman (*Мандат*), Bulgakov (*Багровый остров*) and Mayakovski, consciously continuing the traditions and stylistic incentives of Gogol, Saltykov-Shchedrin and Sukhovo-Kobylin, a substantially different atmosphere prevailed. If in his *Gulliver's Travels*, Swift wanted rather to "torment than amuse the world", the Soviet grotesque comedy, which does not lose touch with the comic element, is imbued with merry *optimistic laughter*, which helps to overcome the pressure and feeling of life's absurdity, skepsis and pessimism. Its authors are aware of the shortcomings of the period — hence sometimes the bitter dramatic undertone with tragicomical aspect (apparent especially in M. Bulgakov's prosaic grotesque *Роковые яйца*, 1925); in spite of this, they do not lose in the initial stage of the revolution the conviction that the conflicts of this world can be overcome, that "evil" can be got rid of. The critical pathos born in the revolution is, of course, in contradiction with the mood of self-satisfaction, absolutization of the achieved and apologetic justification of the existing order.

In his articles on the development of Soviet dramatic art, A. V. Lunacharski mentioned as one of the fundamental artistic processes of the "proletarian style" that was being formed (along with the realistic process marked by "truthfulness of depiction of outer phenomena") the process of "stylization which embraces caricature, hyperbole, deformation". It was being shaped in the practice of avantgarde art, especially dramatic art (Meyerhold). Lunacharski emphasized the importance of such forms of satire (he wrote about "формах отрицательного реализма, которые мо-

<sup>27</sup> See, e. g., A. Nicoll, *World Drama from Aischylos to Anouilh*, London 1949; M. Dietrich, *Europäische Dramaturgie in 19. Jahrhundert*, Graz, Köln, Böhlau 1961; H. Kindermann, *Meister der Komödie*, Wien—München 1952; P. Fechter, *Das europäische Drama*. Bnd I (1956), II (1957), III (1958), Mannheim et al.

<sup>28</sup> W. Kayser, *Das Groteske. Seine Gestaltung in Malerei und Dichtung*. Hamburg, Oldenburg 1957, 199.

гут переходить в любую степень внешнего неправдоподобия при условии громадной внутренней реалистической верности" (Луначарский 1, 783).

In connection with this, Lunacharski, when looking for possibilities of enriching early Soviet comedy, drew attention to the traditions of antique theatre of Aristophanes, in whom he admired his rich inventiveness, "colossal flights of fantasy", fantastic hyperbole, grotesque sarcasm, bright and wise laughter. It was mainly these qualities that were at the bottom of Lunacharski's challenge to create "аристофановской комедии, где важен не сюжет, а отдельные блестящие плакаты, слова, пение, всевозможного рода трюки, где суть во всем том, чем театр может быть богат и чем еще может обогатиться" (Луначарский 1, 275).

Mayakovski's satirico-dramatic work developed within the river-bed of this satiric art of aristophanic style, so broadly conceived by Lunacharski, the traditions of which were revived in the works of great satirists Rabelais, Swift, Gogol, Saltykov-Shchedrin, Sukhovo-Kobylin. It was marked not only by a powerful charge of thoughts and emotions, width of ideas, militant politicalness, sharp satirical slashes that shocked many a bureaucrat of arts, but also by a tendency towards pregnant conflicts, unrestrained flights of fantasy, towards grotesquely fantastic but at the same time profoundly realistic hyperbole, towards satirical deformation of the portrayed phenomenon clarifying its internal social truth. This aristophanic branch of European satirical comedy did not have many intermediate stages in its historical development. Its spirit was preserved rather in the prosaic satire and in "that other stream of the tradition of the theatre — the anti-literary, improvised folk-theatre, which was always equally unfettered in its topical comment, equally irreverent and extravagant" (Esslin, 322), being revived in various periods in the work of Grabbe, Gogol, Sukhovo-Kobylin, Jarry, Mayakovski (who also sought inspiration in the popular theatre).

Mayakovski's comedy forms an important part in the development of modern satirical drama of the 20th century. This fact has not been appreciated sufficiently by either Soviet or Western literary and dramatic science.<sup>29</sup>

Translated by Otakar Kříž

<sup>29</sup> See, e.g., Margret Dietrich, *Das moderne Drama*. Stuttgart 1963; A. Nicoll, *World Drama from Aeschylus to Anouilh*, London 1951; Siegfried Melchinger, *Drama zwischen Shaw und Brecht*. Bremen 1959; Heinz Kindermann, *Meister der Komödie*. Wien—München 1952; Erich Franzen, *Formen des modernen Dramas*. München 1961; Paul Fechter, *Das europäische Drama*. Bnd I (1956), II (1957), III (1958) Mannheim; et. al.