

## HOW ARE VERSES MADE?

### 1

I have to write on this subject.

In various literary debates, in conversations with young workers from various workshops of the word (Rapp, Tapp, Papp, etc.),<sup>1</sup> in reprisals against critics, I have often been obliged, if not to smash to pieces, at least to discredit the old poetics. Of course we didn't interfere with old poetry that was in itself quite blameless. It drew our wrath only if avid protectors of the old hid from new art behind the backsides of monuments.

Quite the reverse – removing, shaking up, and overturning monuments, we showed our readers what the Great looked like from a completely unknown, unexplored viewpoint.

Children (and young literary schools as well) are always curious to know what is inside a cardboard horse. After the work of the Formalists<sup>2</sup> the insides of cardboard horses and elephants stand revealed. If the horse is a bit spoiled because of this – so sorry! We mustn't squabble with the poetry of the past – it provides us with a textbook to study.

Our chief and enduring hatred falls on sentimental-critical Philistinism. On those who see all the greatness of the poetry of the past in the fact that they too have loved as Oniegin loved Tatyana<sup>3</sup> (elective affinities!) or in the fact that even they can understand these poets

(they studied them at school), and iammbuses caress *their* ears too. This facile Black Mass is hateful to us because it casts around difficult and important poetical work an atmosphere of sexual trembles and palpitations, in which one believes that only eternal poetry is safe from the dialectical process, and the only method of production is the inspired throwing back of the head while one waits for the heavenly soul of poetry to descend on one's bald patch in the form of a dove, a peacock or an ostrich.

It isn't difficult to unmask these gentlemen.

All you have to do is compare Tatyana's love and 'the science of which Ovid sang' with a programme of legislation about marriage, read about Pushkin's 'superior, disenchanted lorgnette' to the Donets coalminers, or run in front of the May-day processions declaiming 'My uncle showed his good intentions...'<sup>4</sup>.

After an experiment like that, I hardly think any young man, burning to give his energies to the Revolution, will feel any great urge to spend time studying ancient poetic skills.

A lot has been said and written about this. The noisy acclaim of the public halls was always on our side. But straight after the acclaim sceptical voices were raised:

'You only destroy, you create nothing!' 'The old textbooks were bad, but where are the new ones?' 'Give us the *rules* of your poetics!' 'Give us textbooks!'

To plead that the old poetics has lasted fifteen hundred years, and ours thirty, doesn't help much.

Do you want to write, and want to know how it's done? Why do they refuse to accept as poetry something that's written according to all Shengeli's rules,<sup>5</sup> with rich rhymes, iammbuses and trochees? You're right to demand of poets that they shouldn't carry with them to the grave the secrets of their skill.

I want to write about poetry not as a pedant, but as a practitioner. My article has no scholarly significance. I write about my work, which, by the light of my observations and convictions, I see as differing very little from the work of other professional poets.

Once again I want to insist that I offer no rules to make anyone a poet, by following which he can write poetry. Such rules simply don't exist. A poet is a person who creates these very rules.

For the hundredth time I offer my tired old example and analogy.

A mathematician is a man who establishes, enlarges, and develops mathematical rules, a man who introduces new concepts into mathematical knowledge. The man who first formulated the proposition that 'Two and two are four' was a great mathematician, even if he arrived at this truth by putting together two butt-ends with two more butt-ends. Everyone who came after him, even if they put together incomparably bigger things – a railway-engine with a railway-engine, for example – all these people are not mathematicians. This assertion doesn't at all belittle the work of a man who puts railway-engines together. His work, when transport is in chaos, can be a hundred times more valuable than a bare arithmetical truth. But you mustn't send a handbook on repairing railway-engines to a Mathematical Society and demand that it should rank with the geometry of Lobachevsky.<sup>6</sup> This will enrage the planning commission, puzzle the mathematicians and nonplus the Tariff Committee.

They'll tell me that I'm labouring to explain the obvious, that all this is quite clear. Nothing of the kind.

Eighty per cent of the rhymed rubbish that is printed by our publishers gets published either because the

editors have no notion of the poetry of the past, or don't know what poetry is for.

The editors know only 'I like it' or 'I don't like it', forgetting that taste, too, can and must be developed. Almost all editors complain to me that they don't know how to turn away a poetry manuscript, they don't know what to say about it.

A literate editor should have said to the poet: 'Your verses are very correct, they are composed according to the third edition of Brodovsky's handbook, or Shengeli's, or Grech's, and so on and so forth; all your rhymes are well-trying rhymes, long ago included in V. Abramov's complete dictionary of Russian rhymes.<sup>7</sup> Since at the moment I haven't got any good poems, I'll willingly take yours, paying for them, as the work of a qualified copyist, at the rate of three roubles a sheet, on condition that you provide three copies.'

The poet has no let-out. Either he stops writing, or he applies himself to poetry as to a job that needs a lot of work. In any case the poet gives up putting on airs in front of a working journalist, to whom even the latest news is worth only three roubles a paragraph. Our journalist, you see, was weaned on scandals and fires, but a poet of this type just wets his fingers and riffles through books.

In the name of raising the qualifications of poets, in the name of the future blossoming of poetry, we must expunge the idea that such facile undertakings should stand apart from other aspects of human endeavour.

I make this stipulation: establishing rules is not in itself the aim of poetry, otherwise the poet turns into a scholiast exercising his powers in formulating rules for non-existent or useless things and propositions. For example, it wouldn't be much use to make up a rule

about how to count the stars while riding a bicycle.

A proposition which demands formulation, demands *rules*, is thrust upon us by life. Methods of formulation, the aim of the rules, are defined by factors of class and the needs of our struggle.

The Revolution, for instance, has thrown up on to the streets the unpolished speech of the masses, the slang of the suburbs has flowed along the downtown boulevards; the enfeebled sub-language of the intelligentsia, with its emasculated words 'ideal', 'principles of justice', 'divine origins', 'the transcendental visage of Christ and Antichrist' – all these expressions, pronounced in little whispers in restaurants, have been trampled underfoot. There is a new linguistic element. How can one make it poetic? The old rules about 'love and dove', 'moon and June' and alexandrines are no use. How can we introduce the spoken language into poetry, and extract poetry from this spoken language?

Spit on the Revolution in the name of the iambus?

Evil we've turned, become submissive too,  
We can't escape.  
Already led on predetermined tracks  
By blackened hands.

(Z. Gippius)<sup>8</sup>

No!

It's hopeless to shove the bursting thunder of the Revolution into a four-stress amphibrach, devised for its gentle sound!

O heroes, o sailors of seas, albatrosses,  
Guests at the tables of thunderous feasts.  
O great tribe of eagles, o sailors, o sailors,  
Ruby the flames of my song made for you.

(Kirillov)<sup>9</sup>

No!

Or give full rights of citizenship straight away to the new language: a scream instead of a refrain, the rattle of a drum instead of a cradle song!

Keep step with the revolution!

(Blok)<sup>10</sup>

Deploy yourselves on the march!

(Mayakovsky)<sup>11</sup>

It's not enough to give examples of the new poetry, or rules about how a word should act on the revolutionary masses – one must ensure that these words will act in such a way as to give maximum support to one's class.

It's not enough to say that the 'tireless enemy never sleeps'. (Blok)<sup>12</sup> You must show exactly or at least suggest unmistakably to the imagination what the enemy looks like.

It's not enough to muster your forces and march. You must deploy yourself in accordance with all the rules of street fighting, securing the post office, the banks and the arsenals, in the hands of the revolutionary workers.

And so:

Eat pineapples

Guzzle grouse

Your last day draws near, bourgeois...

(Mayakovsky)<sup>13</sup>

Classical poetry would hardly have permitted verse like that. Grech in 1820 didn't know any *chastushky*,<sup>14</sup> but if he had known them he would have written about them, I'm sure, in the same scornful tone in which he talks of popular versification: 'These verses know

nothing of metrical feet or consonance.'

But the Petersburg streets fathered these lines. Critics can investigate at leisure what rules underlie them.

Neologisms are obligatory in writing poetry. The material of words and phrases that falls to the poet must be reworked. If old scraps of words present themselves in the composition of a poem, they must be used in strict proportion to the quantities of new material. Alloys<sup>XXIX</sup> of this kind are useful or not according to the quantity and quality of the new material in them.

Innovation, of course, doesn't imply the constant utterance of undreamed-of truths. The iambus, free verse, alliteration, assonance aren't invented every day. Work can be done on them, too, extending, going deeper, spreading wider in application.

'Twice two is four' – it doesn't live on its own, and it can't. You must know how to apply this truth (rules of application). You must make it memorable (more rules). You must show that it is irrefutable with a wealth of illustrative facts (example, content, theme).

From this it is clear that the depiction and representation of reality have no place in poetry on their own account. Work of that kind is necessary, but it must be evaluated as if it were the work of the secretary of a mass-meeting. It's just a matter of 'They listened, they made resolutions'. That's the tragedy of the fellow-travellers:<sup>15</sup> they heard five years ago and made their proposals a bit late – when all the rest had already implemented them.

Poetry is at its very root tendentious.

In my opinion, the line: 'I walk alone into the road'<sup>16</sup> constitutes agitation; the poet agitates for girls to walk with him. It's boring, you see, on your own! Ah, if only

there were poetry as powerful as this calling people together into co-operatives!

The old textbooks on writing poetry, of course, weren't like that. They describe only a historical and already accepted mode of writing. Actually these books shouldn't be called 'how to write'<sup>17</sup> but 'how they used to write'.

I'll be honest with you. I know nothing of iambuses or trochees, I've never differentiated between them and I never will. Not because it's hard work, but because in my work I've had no occasion to concern myself with such things. And if snatches of such metres can be found, they've been written entirely by ear, because these time-worn patterns are encountered extraordinarily frequently...like 'Down mother Volga's mighty stream'.

I've several times got down to studying this, understood the mechanics of it, and then forgotten again. Things like this, which take up ninety per cent of poetry textbooks, are about three per cent of my practical work!

In poetical work there are only a few general rules about how to begin. And these rules are a pure convention. Like in chess. The opening gambits are almost identical. But already from the next move you begin to think up a new attack. The most inspired move can't be repeated in any given situation in your next game. Only its unexpectedness defeats the opponent.

Just like the unexpected rhymes in poetry.

What basic propositions are indispensable, when one begins poetical work?

First thing. The presence of a problem in society, the solution of which is conceivable only in poetical terms. A social command. (An interesting theme for special study would be the disparity between the social command and actual commissions.)



Second thing. An exact knowledge, or rather sense, of the desires of your class (or the group you represent) on a given question, i.e. an orientation towards an objective.

Third thing. Materials. Words. Fill your storehouse constantly, fill the granaries of your skull with all kinds of words, necessary, expressive, rare, invented, renovated and manufactured.

Fourth thing. Equipment for the plant and tools for the assembly line. A pen, a pencil, a typewriter, a telephone, an outfit for your visits to the doss-house, a bicycle for your trips to the publishers, a table in good order, an umbrella for writing in the rain, a room measuring the exact number of paces you have to take when you're working, connection with a press agency to send you information on questions of concern to the provinces and so on and so forth, and even a pipe and cigarettes.

Fifth thing. Skills and techniques of handling words, extremely personal things, which come only with years of daily work: rhymes, metres, alliteration, images, lowering of style, pathos, closure, finding a title, layout, and so on and so forth.

For example: the social task may be to provide the words for a song for the Red Army men on their way to the Petersburg front. The objective is to defeat Yudenich.<sup>18</sup> The material is words from the vocabulary of soldiers. The tools of production – a pencil stub. The device – the rhymed *chastushka*.

The result:

My darling gave me a long felt cloak  
And a pair of woolly socks.  
Yudenich scurries from Petersburg  
Fast as a smoked-out fox.

The originality of the quatrain, warranting the production of this *chastushka*, lies in the rhyming of 'woolly socks' and 'smoked-out fox'. It's this novelty that makes the thing relevant, poetical, and typical.

The effect of the *chastushka* depends on the device of unexpected rhymes where there is disharmony between the first pair of lines and the second. Thus the first two lines can be called subsidiary, or auxiliary.

Even these general and basic rules of poetic practice offer greater possibilities than we now have for labelling and classifying poetic works.

Aspects of the material used, the means of production and the technical skills can simply be regarded as quantifiable on a points system.

Did society demand this? It did. Two points. An objective? Two points. Is it rhymed? Another point. Is there alliteration? Another half-point. And another point for the rhythm – since its strange movement necessitated bus journeys.

Let the critics smile, but I would rate the poetry of any Alaskan poet (other things being equal of course) higher than, let's say, the work of a poet from Yalta.

Well of course! The Alaskan must freeze, and buy a fur coat, and his ink solidifies in his fountain-pen. Whereas the Yalta poet writes against a background of palm trees, in surroundings which are nice even without poems.

Clear-sightedness about such matters is a component of a writer's qualifications.

The poetry of Demyan Bedny<sup>19</sup> presents an example of a social command for today which has been properly understood, an accurate sense of an objective – the needs of the workers and the peasants – the vocabulary of a semi-peasant environment (with a dash of moribund

poetical rhymes) and devices drawn from folklore.

The poetry of Kruchënikh:<sup>20</sup> alliteration, dissonance; its objective is to assist future poets.

Here there is no call to take up the metaphysical question of who is better, Demyan Bedny or Kruchënikh. These are poetical achievements of very different kinds, on different planes, and each of them can exist without excluding the other and without competing with the other.

As I see it, fine poetical work would be written to the social command of the Comintern,<sup>21</sup> taking for its objective the victory of the proletariat, making its points in a new vocabulary, striking and comprehensible to all, fashioned on a table that is N.O.T.<sup>22</sup> equipment, and sent to the publisher by plane. I insist, 'by plane', since the engagement of poetry with contemporary life is one of the most important factors in our production. Of course, the process of judging and evaluating poetry is considerably subtler and more complex than I have suggested.

I am deliberately exaggerating, simplifying, and distorting my ideas. I am exaggerating because I want to show more strikingly that the essence of modern literary work doesn't lie in the evaluation of this or that ready-made thing from the standpoint of literary taste, but in a correct approach to the study of the productive process itself.

Far from being unconcerned with the evaluation of accepted images or devices, this article is concerned with an attempt to uncover the very process of poetic production.

How are verses made?

Work begins long before one receives or is aware of a social command.

Preliminary work goes on incessantly.

You can produce something good to order only when you've a large stock of preliminaries behind you.

For example, at the moment (to write of what has this very minute come into my head) a fine surname, 'Mr Glyceron', is hammering away in my brain, arriving quite by chance out of some garbled conversation about glycerine.

And some fine rhymes:

In the creamy cloud tresses  
Rose a grim fortress

Go to Rome, France, or Germany,  
Find a refuge for a Bohemian.

On a snorting mare  
I'll ride to the Amur,  
The Amur  
Mourns.

Or:

Dense summer greenery...  
August's rich finery etc., etc.

There's also the metre of an American song I like a lot, which needs to be adapted and Russified:

Hard-hearted Hannah  
The vamp of Savannah  
The vamp of Savannah  
Gee-ay.

There's the tersely striking alliteration of a trivial poster glimpsed in passing, with the name 'Flora Low':

Where can I find Flora Low?  
Flora's on the lower floor.

Or, in connection with a synthetic dye factory, called Lyamina's:

Mummy mixes lovely dye  
'Cos my mummy's Lyamina.

There are themes of varying clarity and obscurity:

1. Rain in New York.
2. A prostitute on the Boulevard des Capucines in Paris. A prostitute who's considered very chic to sleep with because she's only got one leg – the other one, it seems, was cut off by a tram.
3. An old man in the lavatory of the Hessler restaurant in Berlin.
4. The great theme of the Revolution, which couldn't be done unless you'd lived through it in a village. And so on and so forth.

All these preliminaries are put together in one's head, and the most difficult ones are noted down.

The manner of their future application is all obscure to me, but I know they will be made use of.

All my time goes on these preliminaries, I spend from ten to eighteen hours each day on them, and I'm almost always muttering something or other. My concentration on them accounts for my notorious poetic absent-mindedness.

Work on them goes on with such intensity that in ninety cases out of a hundred I even know the very place where, in all that fifteen years of work, such-and-such a rhyme, alliteration or image came to me and took on its final shape.

A street.

I meet...(The tram from the Sukharev tower to the Sretenka gate, 1913)

A menacing rain narrowed the eyes,  
While I...(The Strastnoy monastery, 1912)

Stroke the shrivelled black cats (Oak tree in  
Kuntsevo, 1914)

Left

Left. (Cab on the Embankment, 1917)

D'Anthèse, son of a bitch.<sup>23</sup> (In the train near  
Mytishchi, 1924)

And so on and so forth.

This 'notebook' is one of the most important pre-conditions for the composition of the genuine article.

People usually only write about this little book after the poet's death; for years it lies gathering dust, and it's printed posthumously, long after the 'finished' works, but for the writer this book is all-in-all.

Inexperienced poets naturally lack this little book, since they lack practice and experience. Properly worked-out lines are few, and that's why their whole output is anaemic and tedious.

No beginner will, whatever his talents, write something fine straight off; on the other hand, first work is always 'fresher', since it is a vehicle for the stored-up impressions of the time that preceded it.

Only the presence of rigorously thought-out preliminary work gives me the time to finish anything, since my normal output of work in progress is eight to ten lines a day.

A poet regards every meeting, every signpost, every event in whatever circumstances simply as material to be shaped into words.

There was a time when I embarked on such work as

if fearful even to utter words and expressions that seemed to me needful for future poems – I became gloomy, dull and untalkative.

In about 1913, when I was returning from Saratov to Moscow, so as to prove my devotion to a certain female companion, I told her that I was ‘not a man, but a cloud in trousers’. When I’d said it, I immediately thought it could be used in a poem; but what if it should at once circulate in conversation and be squandered to no avail? Terribly worried, I put leading questions to the girl for half an hour, and calmed down only when I was quite sure that my words were going in one ear and out the other.

Two years later I needed ‘a cloud in trousers’ for the title of a long poem.

For two days I pondered words to describe the tenderness a lonely man feels for his only love.

How will he cherish and love her?

On the third night I went to bed with a headache, and hadn’t thought up anything. During the night the formulation came:

Your body  
I shall cherish and love  
As a soldier  
Crippled by war  
Useless  
Belonging to no one  
Cherishes his one leg.<sup>24</sup>

I leapt out of bed half-awake. By the dim light of a burnt-down match I wrote on a cigarette packet ‘his one leg’ and went to sleep. In the morning I puzzled for about two hours over that ‘his one leg’ written on my cigarette packet; I wondered how it had got there.

A rhyme that has been hooked but not yet landed can poison one's whole existence: you talk without knowing what you're saying, in a daze, you don't sleep, you can almost see that rhyme flying past your eyes.

Our present-day Shengelis have begun to handle poetical work with his contemptuous adroitness, as if it were the merest trifle. There are even fine young lads who outdo their teacher. Here, for instance, is an advert from the Kharkov *Proletarian* (No. 256):

'How do you become a writer?  
Send 50 kopecks in stamps for details. Slavyansk,  
on the Donets railway, Box number 11.'

Handy, isn't it?!

By the way, this is a product of the pre-revolutionary period. Like the supplement enclosed in the journal *Divertissement*,<sup>25</sup> a little book called *How to be a Poet in Five Easy Lessons*.

I believe that even my brief examples will put poetry where it truly belongs, among the most difficult and laborious jobs.

One's attitude to the stanza must be like the attitude to the woman in Pasternak's quatrain:

Like some provincial Shakespearian actor  
I wandered with you, repeating my part.  
From head to foot, I knew you by heart  
That day, your ways and your graces.<sup>26</sup>

In the next chapter I shall try to show how a poem grows from these preliminaries, by means of concrete reference to one of my own poems.



The most effective of my recent poems is, in my opinion, 'To Sergey Esenin'.

I didn't have to look for a paper to print it or a publisher – they circulated it in copies before publication, secretly made off with it from the printer's and published it in a provincial newspaper; my audience actually demanded to hear it read, and during the reading you could have heard a pin drop; afterwards people came up to me, wringing their paws with emotion, in the corridors they raged or eulogized, and on the day it was published the review was a mixture of curses and compliments.

How was this poem produced?

I had known Esenin for a long time – ten or twelve years.

When I first met him he was wearing his bast shoes and his peasant shirt with some sort of little crosses sewn on to it. This was in one of the best flats in Leningrad. Knowing how delighted a real peasant (as opposed to an ornamental one) is to swap his <sup>exchange</sup> outfit for a pair of boots and a jacket, I didn't quite trust Esenin. He seemed to me a bit operatic, or like a tailor's dummy. The more so since he had already written poetry which had been well received, and could certainly have found the cash for a pair of boots.

As a man who has in his time worn – and left off wearing – a yellow Futurist jacket, I made businesslike inquiries about these clothes.

'What's this, an advertising <sup>ad</sup>stunt?'

Esenin answered me in a voice like icon-lamp oil come to life.

Something like:

‘We rustic folk, we know nothing of these queer ways of yours...we have what you might call...our own...age-old, pastoral...’

His own very talented and very rustic verses were of course anathema to us Futurists.

But just the same he was a nice, amusing sort of chap.

On parting, I said casually:

‘I bet you’ll give up those bast shoes and all that coxcombry!’

Esēnin retorted with righteous warmth. Kluyev<sup>1</sup> led him aside like a mother appropriating her flighty daughter, when she’s afraid the daughter hasn’t the strength or the inclination to stand up for herself.

Another glimpse of Esenin: I met him again in the flesh after the Revolution at Gorky’s place.<sup>2</sup> At once, with the full force of my inborn tactlessness, I yelled:

‘I win the bet, Esenin, you’re wearing a jacket and a tie!’

Esenin got very angry and went to take it out on someone else.

Then I kept coming across lines of Esenin’s which I couldn’t help liking, such as:

My dear, dear ridiculous clown...etc.

The sky is a bell, its clapper the moon...etc.

Esenin cut loose from his mythical idealized village, but cut loose, of course, with some relapses, and together with

My darling mother country

I am a Bolshevik...

appeared poems extolling cows. Instead of a memorial to Marx, what he wanted was a cow memorial. Not the sort of cow that yields milk, Sosnovskoye style,<sup>3</sup> but a

cowy symbol that had locked horns with a railway-engine.

We often crossed swords with Esenin, holding him responsible for all the Imaginists who grew up in rank profusion around him.<sup>4</sup>

Then Esenin went off to America and other places and came back with a marked yearning for something new.

Unfortunately, at this period one came across him more often in police records than in poetry. He rapidly and unhesitatingly left the ranks of the healthy workers in verse (I speak of the minimal health that's required of a poet).

At this time I met Esenin on a few occasions, and the meetings were serene and without the least discord.

I watched with pleasure as Esenin evolved from Imaginism<sup>4</sup> to the V.A.P.P.<sup>5</sup> He spoke with interest of the work of others. This was one new trait in Esenin (who loved himself inordinately): he had always been rather envious of any poet who had become organically one with the Revolution and the proletariat, and who saw a great and hopeful road leading on.

This, in my opinion, is the basis of Esenin's poetic irritability and his dissatisfaction with himself, manifesting itself in his wine-drinking and his brusque and maladroit relations with those around him.

In his final days Esenin even showed some open sympathy for us, the LEF group: he would call on Aseyev,<sup>6</sup> ring me up, or sometimes just try to drop in on us.

He got a bit podgy and flabby, but remained elegant in the Esenin manner.

My last meeting with him produced on me a painful and unforgettable impression. In the cashier's office at

the State Publishing House I met a man who came rushing towards me, his face swollen, his tie crooked, and wearing a hat which kept in place quite by chance, clinging to his corn-coloured locks. From him and his two dubious (to me, at all events) companions I caught a whiff of spirits. I literally had difficulty in recognizing Esenin. It was a problem to turn aside the demand that soon followed, that I should go and drink with him, backed up by much waving of thick wads of ten-rouble notes, and all day I kept calling to mind this painful scene. In the evening, of course, I had long talks (alas, no one ever does more than talk in these situations) with colleagues, about how we must do something for Esenin. They and I cursed his 'milieu' and we went away persuading ourselves that his friends the Eseninists would look after him.

That wasn't how it turned out. Esenin's end was saddening, as such things humanly are. But it seemed all at once entirely natural and logical. I heard the news at night; my grief, however sincere, would have lessened by morning, but in the morning the newspapers carried his suicide poem:

In this life to die is nothing new  
But to live, of course, is nothing newer...

After these lines Esenin's death became a literary fact.<sup>7</sup>

It was at once clear how many insecure people these powerful lines, just these lines of *poetry*, could bring to the rope or the revolver.

And no amount of analysis in the newspapers, no amount of articles, can wipe out these lines.

One can and must combat these verses only *with* verses.

In this way society demanded that Soviet poets should write a poem about Esenin. The command was unusually important and urgent, since Esenin's lines had rapidly and inexorably begun to act. Many poets accepted the command. But what could one write? and how?

Poems appeared, articles, reminiscences, essays and even plays. In my opinion, ninety-nine per cent of everything written about Esenin is simply rubbish, or lying rubbish.

The poems by Esenin's friends are piffle. You can easily recognize them by their attitude to Esenin: they address him like one of the family, as '*Seryozha*' (which is how Bezimensky<sup>8</sup> got hold of this unsuitable word). '*Seryozha*' doesn't exist as a literary fact. There is a poet – Sergey Esenin. Please let's talk about *him*. Use of the familiar '*Seryozha*' immediately short-circuits the social command and efforts to formulate it. That word '*Seryozha*' reduces a huge and complex topic to the level of an epigram or a chanson. And all the tears of the poetic relatives of the deceased don't help in the least. Such verses can't do the job of poetry. Poetry like this only moves us to laughter or irritation.

The poems of Esenin's 'enemies', even though these men have been placated by his death, are all Pharisaical. They refuse Esenin a poetic burial simply because of the fact of his suicide.

But miserable hooliganism like this  
We never expected, even from you

(Zharov, I think)<sup>9</sup>

The poetry of these men is the poetry of a hastily implemented but poorly understood social command, and in it notions of an objective are totally unconnected

with the methods employed. The result is a low feuilleton style quite ineffectual on this tragic occasion.

A suicide torn from its complex social and psychological context, ascribed to a momentary unmotivated act of negation (how else could it appear?!) is a saddeningly false picture.

Nor is the prose about him any more use in combating the latest pernicious Eseninist poems.

It begins with Kogan<sup>10</sup> who, it seems to me, didn't learn his Marxism from Marx, but tried to derive it unaided from the dictum of Gorky's Luka<sup>11</sup> – 'fleas aren't so bad, little black hopping things' – considering this truth to be highly scientific and objective and therefore, in Esenin's absence (posthumously), writing an encomiastic article that is no use to man or beast; and it ends with the stinking little books of Kruchënikh,<sup>12</sup> who teaches Esenin the rudiments of politics as though Kruchënikh had himself spent all his life doing hard labour, struggling for freedom, and as though it had cost him a huge effort to write six(!) booklets about Esenin with a hand still raw from the jangling manacles.

So what can we write about Esenin, and how?

After considering his death from all angles, and leafing through a lot of unfamiliar material, I formulated the problem and put it to myself thus.

Objective: deliberately to neutralize the effect of Esenin's last lines, to make Esenin's death uninteresting, to replace the facile beauty of death by another beauty, since toiling mankind needs all its strength to sustain the Revolution it has begun; regardless of the obstacles on the way, and the strenuous contradictions of the New Economic Policy;<sup>13</sup> it requires us to pay tribute to life's happiness, the joy of this enormously difficult advance towards Communism.

At this moment, having the poem to hand, it's easy to formulate, but how difficult it was then to begin writing!

The work happened to coincide with my excursions to the provinces and public lectures. For about three months I came back day after day to my subject and could think of nothing sensible. All kinds of diabolical nonsense sprang to mind, little devils with blue faces and snouts like water-pipes. For three months I couldn't think of a single line. From the daily sifting of words only a few beginnings of rhymes were winnowed out, such as 'hubbub – pub', 'Kogan – rogue', 'Napostov<sup>14</sup> – more than enough'. When I was already on my way back to Moscow I realized that my difficulties and my slowness in writing were the result of too close a correspondence between my own circumstances and those I was writing about.

The same hotel rooms, the same water-pipes, the same enforced solitude.

These surroundings wound me into themselves, they wouldn't let me escape, they refused me the feelings and words I needed in order to brand and negate, they gave me no material from which I could educe sane and healthy impulses.

Whence comes what is almost a rule: to do anything poetic you positively need a change of place or of time.

Just as, for example, in painting, when you're drawing some object or other you have to stand back, at a distance equal to three times the size of the object. If you don't do that, you simply won't see the thing you're depicting.

The bigger the thing or the event, the further you have to get away from it. Feeble people mark time, and wait for whatever it is to pass by, so they can describe it,

but the strong run forward just far enough to seize the event and draw it towards them.

Any description of contemporary events by those taking part in the struggles of the day will always be incomplete, even incorrect, or at any rate one-sided.

Evidently, work of this kind is a summation, the result of two different endeavours – the records of a contemporary, and a future artist's efforts to work outwards from such descriptions.

Herein lies the tragedy of the revolutionary writer: he can give a dazzling report (Libedinsky's *The Week*<sup>15</sup> for example) and yet hopelessly falsify, by undertaking to provide this generalization without any perspective. Lacking a perspective of time and place, you must at least keep your mental distance.

And so, for instance, the respect accorded to 'poetry' at the expense of facts and accurate records has encouraged the Rabkor poets to publish a collection called *Petals*,<sup>16</sup> with lines like:

I am a proletarian big gun  
I fire and make 'em run.

There's a lesson to be learnt here: (1) Let's drop all this gibberish about unfurling the 'epic canvas' during a period of war on the barricades – your canvas will be torn to shreds on all sides. (2) The value of factual material (and this is why documentary reports from the workers' and peasants' journalists are so interesting) must be marked at a higher price – and under no circumstances at a lower one – than so-called 'poetical works'. Premature 'poeticization' only emasculates and mangles the material. All textbooks of poetry *à la* Shengeli are pernicious because they don't educe the poetry from the material, that is, they don't give us the essence of the



facts, they don't squeeze the facts to produce the essential, concentrated economical formulation, but simply impose an old form on a new fact. More often than not the form doesn't fit: either the fact gets lost altogether, like a flea in a pair of trousers – like Radimov's sucking-pigs in those Greek pentameters of his,<sup>17</sup> which would be more suitable for the *Iliad* – or the fact bulges out of its poetical clothes, and becomes ridiculous instead of sublime. That's how Kirillov's poem 'Sailors' looks, for instance, marching along in its threadbare four-stress amphibrachs, bursting at the seams.

A change of plane from that in which an action or fact is situated, a certain distance, is indispensable. This doesn't mean, of course, that the poet must sit by the sea and wait for fine weather, while time passes. He must urge time on its way. Substitute a change of place for the slow passage of time, and in the space of one day you pass over centuries in imagination.

In the case of slight or rather trivial things, you must and you can accomplish this shift in perspective artificially; and indeed this happens of its own accord.

It's a good idea to begin writing a poem about the first of May in November or December, when you feel a desperate need for May.

In order to write about the tenderness of love, take bus No. 7 from the Lubyansky Square to Nogin Square.<sup>18</sup> The appalling jolting will serve to throw into relief for you, better than anything else, the charm of a life transformed. A shake-up is essential, for the purpose of comparison.

Time is also needed to test the value of things you've already written.

All the poems I've written on urgent matters in

moments of great inspiration, which pleased me when I'd done them, seemed to me next day trivial, ill-considered, one-dimensional. Something always clamours desperately for revision.

And so, when I've finished something, I lock it up in my desk for a few days, then take it out again, and immediately see the faults that had escaped me earlier.

I'd gone over the top.

But of course this doesn't mean that you can do things only at inopportune moments. No. You must choose exactly the right moment. I just want to direct poets' attention to the fact that little agitational jingles, thought of as very easy, in fact call for the most unremitting work and the most diverse technical devices to make up for the shortage of time.

Even in preparing a quick agitational poem, you must, for instance, copy it from the manuscript in the evening, not in the morning. Just glancing through it later, you'll see a lot of things that can easily be corrected. If you copy it out in the morning, the bulk of the blunders will remain. An understanding of how to establish distance and organize time (and not iambs and trochees) should be introduced as the basic rule in any handbook for working poets that is printed.

That's why I got further with my poem about Esenin on the short journey from Lubyansky Passage to the Tea Marketing Board (I was on the way to settle my account) than on all my voyagings. Myasnitsky was a sharp and needful contrast: after the solitude of hotel rooms, Myasnitsky was packed with people; after the silence of the provinces, there was the cheerful hubbub of buses, cars and trams; and all round, as though challenging the old lamplit villages, were the offices of electro-technical firms.<sup>19</sup>

I walk along, waving my arms and mumbling almost wordlessly, now shortening my steps so as not to interrupt my mumbling, now mumbling more rapidly in time with my steps.

So the rhythm is established and takes shape — and rhythm is the basis of any poetic work, resounding through the whole thing. Gradually you ease individual words free of this dull roar.

Several words just jump away and never come back, others hold on, wriggle and squirm a dozen times over, until you can't imagine how any word will ever stay in its place (this sensation, developing with experience, is called talent). More often than not the most important word emerges first: the word that most completely conveys the meaning of the poem, or the word that underpins the rhyme. The other words come forward and take up dependent positions in relation to the most important word. When the fundamentals are already there, one has a sudden sensation that the rhythm is strained: there's some little syllable or sound missing. You begin to shape all the words anew, and the work drives you to distraction. It's like having a tooth crowned. A hundred times (or so it seems) the dentist tries a crown on the tooth, and it's the wrong size; but at last, after a hundred attempts, he presses one down, and it fits. The analogy is all the more apposite in my case, because when at last the crown fits, I (quite literally) have tears in my eyes, from pain and relief.

Where this basic dull roar of a rhythm comes from is a mystery. In my case it's all kinds of repetitions in my mind of sounds, noises, rocking motions, or in fact of any perceptible repetition which comes to me as a sound shape. The sound of the sea, endlessly repeated, can provide my rhythm, or a servant who slams the door

every morning, recurring and intertwining with itself, trailing through my consciousness; or even the rotation of the earth, which in my case, as in a shop full of visual aids, gives way to, and inextricably connects with, the whistle of a high wind.

This struggle to organize movement, to organize sounds around oneself, discovering their intrinsic nature, their peculiarities, is one of the most important constants of the work of the poet: laying in rhythmic supplies. I don't know if the rhythm exists outside me or only inside me – more probably inside. But there must be a jolt, to awaken it; in the same way as the sound of a violin, any violin, provokes a buzz in the guts of the piano, in the same way as a bridge sways to and fro and threatens to collapse under the synchronized tread of ants.

Rhythm is the fundamental force, the fundamental energy of verse. You can't explain it, you can only talk about it as you do about magnetism or electricity. Magnetism and electricity are manifestations of energy. The rhythm can be the same in a lot of poems, even in the whole oeuvre of the poet, and still not make his work monotonous, because a rhythm can be so complex, so intricately shaped, that even several long poems won't exhaust its possibilities.

A poet must develop just this feeling for rhythm in himself, and not go learning up other people's measurements: iambus, trochee or even this much-vaunted free verse: rhythm accommodating itself to some concrete situation, and of use only for that concrete situation. Like, for example, magnetic energy discharged on to a horseshoe, which will attract iron filings, but which you can't use for anything else.

I know nothing of metre. Only I'm convinced, on my

own account, that to communicate heroic or majestic sentiments, you must choose long measures with a large collection of syllables, and for cheerful sentiments, short ones. For some reason or other I have associated the former since childhood (from the age of nine) with:

As a sacrifice you fell in that fateful struggle...<sup>20</sup>

and the latter with:

Let's bid the old world farewell...<sup>21</sup>

Curious. But, word of honour, that's how it is.

I get my metre by covering this rhythmical roar with words, words suggested by the objective (all the time you ask yourself: is this the word I want? Who must I read it to? Will it be understood in the right way? and so on.) – and with words that are regulated by a highly developed sense of appropriateness, by one's abilities, and one's talent.

At first the poem to Esenin just rumbled away something like this:

Ta-ra-rá/ra rá/ra, ra ra rá/ra rá/  
ra-ra-ree/ra ra ra/ra ra/rs ra ra ra/  
ra-ra-ra/ra-ra ra ra ra ra raree  
ra-ra-ra/ra ra-ra/rara/ra/ra ra

Then the words emerge:

You went off ra ra ra ra to a world above  
It may be you flew ra ra ra ra ra.  
No loans for you, no girls and no pub.  
Ra ra ra/ra ra ra ra/sobriety.

I repeat it a dozen times, listening to the first line:

You went off ra ra ra to a world above...and so on.

What is that damned 'ra ra ra', and what can I put in its place? Perhaps I can leave it without any 'ra ra ra's.

You went off to a world above.

No! I'm reminded at once of some line or other I've heard:

The poor steed fell in the field.

What's that horse doing there! This isn't a horse, this is Esenin. For without those syllables you get some kind of operatic 'galop', and even 'ra ra ra' is much more elevated. On no account must 'ra ra ra' be expunged – the rhythm is right. I begin to try out some words.

You went off, *Seryozha*, to a world above...

You went off for ever to a world above...

You went off, Esenin, to a world above...

Which of these lines is the best?

They're all rubbish! Why?

The first line is false because of the word '*Seryozha*'. I was never that matey with Esenin, and that word is particularly intolerable now, since it brings along with it a mass of other false words, unrelated to me and to our relations: 'thou', 'sweet', 'brother' and so on.

The second line is bad because the words 'for ever' don't need to be there, they're random and put in only for the metre: not only do they not help, explaining nothing, they merely get in the way. Really, what does it mean, this 'for ever'? Did anyone ever die for a trial period? Is there such a thing as death with a return ticket?

The third line won't do because it's too heavily serious (the 'objective' is gradually hammering it into my

head that this is the failing of all three lines). Why is this seriousness inadmissible? Because it makes it possible to ascribe to me a belief in a life beyond the grave, expressed in scriptural tones – which I don't have; that's one thing, and the other is that this seriousness turns the verse into something funereal, not tendentious, and blurs my objective. That's why I introduce the words 'they say'.

'You went off, as they say, to a world above.' The line is written; 'they say', without being openly mocking, subtly undermines the pathos of the line and at the same time eliminates any possible suspicions about the author's belief in all this life-after-death nonsense. The line is written and at once becomes a *donné* which determines the whole quatrain; it must be equivocal, neither dancing at a funeral nor, on the other hand, yielding to the professional mourners. The quatrain must at once be cut in two: two elevated lines, and two conversational, drawn from everyday life, setting each other off by the contrast. So at once, in accordance with my conviction that for a more cheerful line you must cut down the number of syllables, I set to work on the end of the quatrain.

You've no loans, no girls and no pub  
ra ra rá ra ra rá ra rá sobriety.

What's to be done with these lines? How can I cut them down? 'No girls' must be cut out. Why? Because these girls are alive. To name them in this way, when the larger part of Esenin's lyrics are very tenderly devoted to them, is tactless. Therefore it's false, therefore it sounds wrong. We have left:

You've no loans, and no pub.

I try to murmur them to myself: it doesn't work. These lines are so different from my first version, that the rhythm hasn't just changed, it's broken and smashed utterly. I've cut too much out. So what must be done? There's some syllable or other missing. This line, breaking the rhythm, has become false from another standpoint: the standpoint of meaning. It doesn't contrast sufficiently, and then piles all the 'bar-room credit' on to Esenin alone, when it should apply equally to all of us.

How can I make these lines contrast more and at the same time make them more generalized?

I take the speech of the most simple folk:

Nothing under you, nor anything over you (bad  
luck to you)  
No loans now, nor pub.

In the most conversational, the most vulgar form, this would be:

We got nothing under, and nothing over.  
We got no loans now, and no pub.

The line is fixed, as regards form and sense. 'We got' contrasts that much more with the first lines, while the address in the first line, 'You went off', and in the third 'We got no', at once show that the loans and the bars are not put in to belittle Esenin's memory, but as a general phenomenon. This line has given us such an excellent run-up that we can get rid of all the syllables before 'sobriety', and this sobriety comes like the solution to a problem. And so this line wins over even Esenin's devotees, while remaining in essence almost mocking.

The quatrain is basically ready; only one line remains, not filled out by a rhyme.



You went off, they say, to a world above,  
It may be you flew ra-ra-rá-ra.  
We got no loans now, and no pub –  
Sobriety.

Perhaps it can be left unrhymed? That's impossible. Why? Because without rhyme (understanding the word in a wide sense) poetry falls to pieces.

Rhyme sends you back to the previous line, reminds you of it, and helps all the lines that compose one thought to hold together.

People usually define rhyme as corresponding sounds in the last words of two lines, when the stressed vowel is the same, and the sounds that follow it are more or less identical.

That's what everyone says, but it's nonsense just the same.

Corresponding ends of lines rhyme – that's only one of an infinite number of ways of drawing lines together, and the simplest and most crude, I may add.

You can rhyme the beginnings of lines as well:

The street –  
I meet people with time-worn dogs more rarely...  
and so on.

You can rhyme the end of one line and the beginning of the next.

A menacing rain narrowed its eyes  
While I behind the bars stare...and so on.

You can rhyme the end of the first line and the end of the second both at once with the last word of the third or the fourth line:

Though he loved a scholarly wrangle  
He  
Knew next to nothing of verse, our Shengeli.

and so on and so forth, ad infinitum.

In my poem it's imperative to find a rhyme for 'sobriety'. The first words that come into my head will be words like 'propriety', for example:

You went off, they say, to a world above,  
It may be you flew...you'd love the impropriety!  
We got no loans now, and no pub –  
Sobriety.

Can we leave this rhyme? No. Why? In the first place because this rhyme is too rich, too transparent by far. When you say 'impropriety', the rhyme 'sobriety' forces itself on you willy-nilly, and when you utter it, it doesn't surprise, it doesn't command attention. That's the fate of almost all words that are the same part of speech: if you rhyme a verb with a verb, a noun with a noun, where the roots are the same, or the inflections, etc. The word 'impropriety' is bad for another reason: it introduces an element of mockery already in the first lines, thus weakening all the later contrast. Perhaps you could make the job easier for yourself by replacing the word 'sobriety' by some other word that's easier to rhyme, or by not putting 'sobriety' at the end of the line, but filling out the line instead with a few syllables, for instance: 'sobriety, peace'?...In my opinion, you mustn't do this; I always put the most characteristic word at the end of the line and provide a rhyme for it at all costs. As a result my rhyme-schemes are almost always unusual, or at any rate not used by anyone before me, and they aren't in the rhyming dictionary.

The rhymes bind the lines together, so the material of which they're made must be stronger than the material used for the other lines.

Taking the most characteristic sound of the rhyme-word, 'briet', I repeat it to myself over and over again, attentive to all its associations: 'riot', 'iota', 'right', 'righter', 'brighter'. And a good rhyme has been found. An adjective, not a noun: and ceremonious, to boot!

But here's a problem: in the word 'sobriety' that final syllable 'ty' is clearly audible, even though it isn't as important as the 'briet'. What can we do with it? We must introduce analogous letters into the preceding line.

Therefore we must replace the words 'It may be' by 'infinity', with plenty of 'i' sounds and that 'ty'; and for the sake of euphony we change 'flew' to 'fly', the 'f...y' echoing and softening the 'i' sounds of 'infinity'.

And here is our final printed version:

You went off, as they say, to a world above.  
Infinity – you fly, and make the stars shine  
brighter...  
We got no loans now, and no pub –  
Sobriety.

Of course, I'm oversimplifying, schematizing and subjecting the work of the poet to the meddling intellect. Naturally, the process of composition is more devious, more intuitive. But just the same, the work goes on essentially according to this pattern.

The first quatrain determines all the rest of the poem. With a quatrain like this in my hands, I can already calculate how many like it I need on a given theme, and how I can distribute them to produce the best effect: the architectonics of the poem.

If the theme is big and complex, I must allocate to it

twenty or thirty bricks of this kind, quatrains, sestets, or couplets.

When I've produced almost all these bricks, I begin to size them up, putting them now in one place, now in another, attending carefully to their sounds, and trying to imagine what sort of effect they produce.

After sizing them up and thinking it over, I decide: first of all I must get my listeners interested by my ambiguity, as a consequence of which they can't tell whose side I'm on, thereby taking Esenin away from those people who are using his death to their own ends; I must praise him and vindicate him in a way his devotees never could, 'piling their dull rhymes in funereal mounds'. I must win over the sympathy of my listeners once and for all, pouncing upon all those who vulgarize Esenin's work, the more so since they vulgarize any other work they get hold of – all these Sobinovs who quickly catch the attention of their listeners with facile couplets.<sup>22</sup> Winning over the audience, seizing the right to speak about Esenin's achievements and about his circle, I unexpectedly shunt my listeners towards a conviction that Esenin's end was totally unremarkable, insignificant, and uninteresting: I have rephrased his last words, and given them a meaning opposite to the one he intended.

A scheme of this kind can be represented by a rudimentary little drawing thus:



When you've got the basic building blocks of the quatrain and you've decided on your architectural plan,

you can consider that you've done the essential creative work.

The rest consists of a relatively easy technical reworking of the poetic artefact.

You have to bring the poem to the highest pitch of expressiveness. One of the most noteworthy vehicles of this expressiveness is the image. Not that essential visionary image which rises up at the beginning of one's work as a first, dim response to the social command. No, I'm talking about the auxiliary images which help this central image to take shape. These images are one of the contemporary methods of poetry, and a movement like Imaginism, for instance, making them instead the goal, has in essence condemned itself to working on just one of poetry's technical components.

There are endless ways of fabricating images.

One of the most primitive ways of making an image is by comparison. My first things, 'A Cloud in Trousers' for example, were entirely based on similes – 'like, like and like' all the time. Isn't it just this primitive quality that makes later critics consider my 'Cloud' my 'ultimate synthesis' in poetry? In my most recent things and in my 'Esenin', of course, I've got rid of this primitivism. I've discovered only one comparison:

'Drawn-out and droning like Doronin's attempts.'<sup>23</sup>

Why like Doronin, and not like the distance to the moon, for example? In the first place, a comparison is drawn from literary life because my whole subject is literary. And in the second place, 'The Ploughman of Steel' (is that what it's called?) is longer than the journey to the moon, because that journey is unreal, and 'The Ploughman of Steel' is, alas, real; then the journey to the moon would seem shorter because of its novelty, while

Doronin's four thousand lines afflict you with the monotony of a verbal and metrical landscape you've seen sixteen thousand times before. And then of course the image must be tendentious, that is, elaborating a large subject, and you must use separate little images that you come across along the way to help in the struggle, in your literary agitation.

The most commonly accepted way of making images is by the use of metaphor, that is, by transferring attributes, which up to the present have been associated with certain things only, to other words, things, phenomena and notions.

For instance the metaphorical line:

And they bear funereal scraps of verse.

We've heard of scrap-iron, and of table-scrap. But how are we to describe those odds and ends of poetry, left over otiosely, which can't be made use of anywhere else when they've been part of other poems already? These, of course, are scrap verse, or verse-scrap<sup>bits</sup>. And in this case, the scrap is all of one kind – funereal, these are funereal verse-scrap. We can't leave the line like that, because we get 'verse-scrap', which, when you read it, sounds like 'verse-crap', and there's what the Formalists call a 'shift', which ruins the line from the point of view of the sense. That kind of carelessness is very common.

For example in a lyrical poem of Utkin's<sup>24</sup> printed not long ago in the journal *Projector* there are the lines:

He comes again no more, ah  
So the swan comes not when lakes freeze hard as  
glass.

You can distinctly hear the word 'arse'.

The first line of a poem published by Bryusov in the early days of the war, in the journal *Our Times*,<sup>25</sup> is particularly effective:

We were a regiment who learnt what pain meant.

The 'shift' is neutralised if you give a simpler, more telling order to the words –

funereal scraps of verse

One way of making an image, the one I've most often adopted recently, is by describing the most fantastic events and facts, reinforced by exaggeration.

So that Kogan scattered that way and this  
Impaling passers-by on his moustache's bayonets.

In this way Kogan becomes a collectivity, which allows him to run in all directions, his moustaches turn into bayonets, and to intensify the idea of bayonets people lie around, run through by his moustaches.

Ways of forming images vary, like all the other devices of poetry, according to how familiar or over-familiar the reader is with one form or another.

You can have imagery on the opposite principle, such that it not only doesn't enlarge the scope of what's said, by means of the imagination, but on the contrary tries to squeeze the impression made by the words into a deliberately limited framework. For example, in my old poem 'War and the Universe':

In the rotting waggon were forty men –  
And four legs.

Many of Selvinsky's<sup>26</sup> things are based on numerical images of this kind.

After that comes the work of selecting your verbal material. You have to take accurate stock of the milieu in which your poetical work is being carried on, so that no word foreign to these conditions can get in by accident.

For example, I had the line:

What things, my dear friend, you knew of.

'My dear friend' is false, firstly because it goes clean against the stern, accusatory development of the poem; secondly because we have never used this locution in our poetic circles. Thirdly, it's petty, and often employed in meaningless conversations, and used more often to suppress feelings than to show them more clearly. Fourthly, a man who is truly grief-stricken will find a much harsher word to take refuge behind. In any case, this word doesn't specify *what* the man knew of – *what* did you know of, Esenin?

What did Esenin know? That's the big question, the reason for the endless rapt attention to his lyrics; Esenin's literary progress has always to be shaped by so-called literary scandal (not something shameful, but treated with great respect, as an echo of the comparable fate of the famous Futurist performances) and these scandals were really literary landmarks, milestones, for Esenin, during his lifetime.

How inapposite it would have been while he was alive to say:

What things you could sing of to our souls.

Esenin wasn't a singer (fundamentally, of course, he was a gypsy guitar-player, but he was saved as a poet by the fact that as long as he lived, at any rate, he wasn't taken for one, and in his volumes there are dozens of



genuinely poetical innovations). Esenin didn't sing, he shouted abuse, he played the hooligan. I used *that* expression only after a lot of thought, and regardless of how much such a word may annoy the nurslings of the literary brothels, who listen to wild abuse all day, while they dream poetically of their souls inhabiting lilac, of bosoms, warbling, soft harmonies and flushed cheeks.

Without any comment at all I'll record the gradual revision of the words of one line:

1. Our days are ill-equipped for merriment.
2. Our days are ill-equipped for joy.
3. Our days are ill-equipped for happiness.
4. Our life is ill-equipped for merriment.
5. Our life is ill-equipped for joy.
6. Our life is ill-equipped for happiness.
7. For revels our planet is ill-equipped.
8. For gaiety our planet is ill-equipped.
9. Not specially well is our planet equipped for revels.
10. Not specially well is our planet equipped for merriment.
11. Our little planet for pleasures is ill-equipped.

and finally, the last, the twelfth:

12. For merriment our planet isn't well equipped.

I could deliver a whole speech for the defence, on behalf of the last of these lines, but I'll content myself for the moment with simply copying these lines from the manuscript so as to demonstrate how much work you must put in to choose a few words.

The sound quality of the thing is connected with this technical revision: the way one word combines with another. This is the 'magic of words', this is why 'perhaps everything in life is just a means to create sonorous and

melodious verses',<sup>27</sup> this musical aspect seems to many people a poetic end in itself, but again it brings us back to the level of technical work. Overdoing assonance, alliteration and so on, produces an impression of satiety after only a short time.

For example Balmont:

I, the wild wind, woefully wail,  
Whip up the waves...and so on.<sup>28</sup>

Doses of alliteration must be administered with extreme caution and as far as possible the repetitions mustn't be obvious. An example of clear alliteration in my Esenin poem is the line:

Where is it, the sounding bronze or the grey  
granite?

I have recourse to alliteration to provide a framework for, or to emphasize more strongly, words that are important to me. It's possible to have recourse to alliteration just to play with words, as a poetic pastime; old poets (old to us) used alliteration largely for its melodic effect, or verbal music, and thus often made use of a kind of sound harmony that to me is usually hateful – onomatopoeia. I've already spoken of the different kinds of alliteration in speaking about rhyme.

Of course, it's not obligatory to garnish poems with alliteration of an affected kind and turn them into unheard-of masses of rhyme. You must always remember that a policy of economy in art is the most important principle of every product of aesthetic value. For this reason, when you've done the basic work I spoke of earlier, you must suppress many passages of fine writing, and many fine fancies, to gain brilliancy in other places.

You can, for example, half rhyme lines, connecting

one word that doesn't at once catch the ear with another, to lead up to a dazzling and thunderous rhyme.

And this once again underlines the provisionality of all rules about writing verse.

The question of the tone of a poetic work is connected with matters of technique.

You mustn't design the thing to function in some airless void, or, as is often the case with poetry, in an all too airy void.

You must keep your audience constantly before your eyes, the audience at whom this poem is aimed. This is particularly important in our day, when the most significant means of communicating with the masses is the auditorium, the public platform, the voice, the spoken word.

You must adopt a tone that fits your audience – persuasive or pleading, commanding or questioning.

The larger part of my things are based on a conversational tone. But despite all my careful planning this tone isn't a fixed thing, established once for all, but a stance that I quite often change in the course of reading, according to the kind of audience I have. Thus for example the printed text speaks in rather dispassionate tones, aiming at a qualified reader:

One must tear happiness from the days to come.

Sometimes on the lecture platform I intensify this line until it's a shout.

A slogan:

tear happiness from the days to come!

So you mustn't be surprised if you come across a poem reproduced by someone in its printed form, and the disposition of the words carries a slightly different

emphasis in different versions.

When you're writing a poem that's destined for publication, you must calculate how the printed text will be received *as* a printed text. You must take the reader's reactions into account, and direct his attention by every possible means to exactly that form which you as a writer wanted to give your line of poetry. Our accepted system of punctuation, with full stops, commas, and question and exclamation marks is extremely poor and inexpressive compared with those nuances of feeling with which a complex human being can invest a poetical work.

Metre and rhythm are more significant than punctuation, and they bend punctuation to their will when it follows established patterns.

For instance, everybody reads Alexey Tolstoy's lines

Shibanov stopped talking. From his pierced leg  
Blood streamed in a red jet...<sup>29</sup>

as –

Shibanov stopped talking from his pierced leg...

And again...

Begone, rather. Ashamed I am  
To cringe before the proud Pole...<sup>30</sup>

reads like some surburban chatter

Begone, rather ashamed I am...

To read it as Pushkin intended, you must divide up the line as I divide lines:

Begone rather;  
ashamed I am...

Divided this way into two hemistichs there will be no confusion in either the sense or the rhythm. The way lines are divided is often dictated by the necessity of hammering home the rhythm unmistakably, since our condensed and economical verse-forms often oblige us to discard intervening words and syllables, and if you don't make a pause after these syllables, and often a bigger pause than between lines, the rhythm is cut off in mid-air.

That's why I write:

Infinity...

You fly

and make the stars shine brighter.

'Infinity' stands apart, a word on its own, characterizing the landscape of the heavens. 'You fly' stands apart, to avoid it sounding like an imperative ('Fly and make the stars...') and so on.

One of the crucial moments in a poem, especially when it's tendentious and declamatory, is its ending. The most effective lines of the poem usually come in this last bit. Sometimes you refashion the whole poem simply in order to justify such a rearrangement.

A paraphrase of Esenin's last lines was an obvious way of concluding the poem.

They sound like this:

Esenin's –

In this life to die is nothing new

But to live, of course, is nothing newer.

Mine –

In this life to die has never been hard.

To make new life's more difficult by far.

Throughout my work on the poem as a whole I kept these lines in mind constantly. Working on other lines, I would come back all the time to these – consciously or unconsciously.

There was no chance I'd forget what I had to do here, so I didn't write these lines down, but kept them in my head (as I formerly did with all my poems, and still do with the most hard-hitting ones).

So it isn't possible to calculate how many revisions I made but at all events there were no fewer than fifty or sixty variants of these two lines.

There are countless different technical devices you can use in fashioning words, and it's useless to talk about them, since the essence of poetic activity, as I've mentioned here more than once, lies precisely in the very ability to invent these devices, and they are what makes a writer a professional. The high priests of poetry will, I'm sure, pull long faces over this book of mine, since they love to proffer ready-made formulas for poetry. You take a certain theme, cover it in a poetic form, iambs or trochees, rhyme the ends, add a little alliteration, fill it up with images – and your poem is ready.

But in every publishing house they chuck this kind of patchwork straight into the wastepaper-basket, and it's a good thing that they do.

A man who has just got hold of a pen for the first time, and wants to write poetry after a week, won't find my book much use.

My book will be useful to a man who, despite all the obstacles, wants to be a poet; a man who, knowing that poetry is one of the most difficult things to manufacture, wants to master and to pass on some of what seem the most mysterious techniques of this productive process.

Some conclusions:

1. Poetry is a manufacture. A very difficult, very complex kind, but a manufacture.

2. Instruction in poetical work doesn't consist in the study of already fixed and delimited models of poetical works, but a study of the procedures of manufacture, a study that helps us to make new things.

3. Innovation, innovation in materials and devices, is a *sine qua non* of every poetical composition.

4. The work of the verse-maker must be carried on daily, to perfect his craft, and to lay in poetical supplies.

5. A good notebook and an understanding of how to make use of it are more important than knowing how to write faultlessly in worn-out metres.

6. Don't set in motion a huge poetry factory just to make poetic cigarette lighters. You must renounce the uneconomical production of poetical trifles. Reach for your pen only when there is no other way of saying something except verse. You must work up things you've prepared only when you feel a clear social command.

7. To understand the social command accurately, a poet must be in the middle of things and events. A knowledge of theoretical economics, a knowledge of the realities of everyday life, an immersion in the scientific study of history are for the poet, in the very fundamentals of his work, more important than scholarly textbooks by idealist professors who worship the past.

8. To fulfil the social command as well as possible you must be in the vanguard of your class, and carry on the struggle, along with your class, on all fronts. You must smash to smithereens the myth of an apolitical art. This old myth is appearing again now in a new form under cover of twaddle about 'broad epic canvases' (first epic, then objective, and in the end politically

uncommitted), or about the 'grand style' (first grand, then elevated, and in the end celestial) and so on and so forth.

9. Only by approaching art as a manufacture can you eliminate chance, arbitrariness of taste and subjectivity of values. Only by regarding it as part of the productive process can you get the different aspects of literary work in perspective: poems, and reports by workers' and peasants' journalists. Instead of mystically pondering a poetic theme you will have the power to tackle a pressing problem with accuracy, according to the poetic tariffs and standards.

10. You mustn't make the manufacturing, the so-called technical process, an end in itself. But it is this process of manufacture that makes the poetic work fit for use. It's the difference just in these methods of production that marks the difference between poets, and only a knowledge, a mastery, an accumulation of the widest possible range of varied literary devices makes a man a professional writer.

11. The everyday circumstances of poetry have as much influence on the composition of a real work of art as other factors do. The word 'Bohemian' has become a term of opprobrium describing every artistic-Philistine way of life. Unfortunately war has often been waged on the word 'Bohemian', and only on the word. But what remains actively with us is the individualist and careerist atmosphere of the old literary world, the petty interests of malevolent coteries, mutual back-scratching; and the word 'poetical' has come to mean 'lax', 'a bit drunk', 'debauched' and so on. Even the way a poet dresses and the way he talks to his wife at home has to be different, and entirely dictated by the kind of poetry he writes.

12. We, the poets of the Left Front<sup>31</sup> never claim that



we alone possess the secrets of poetical creativity. But we are the only ones who want to lay these secrets open, the only ones who don't want to surround the creative process with a catchpenny religio-artistic aura of sanctity.

My undertaking here is the feeble undertaking of just one man, making good use of the theoretical work of my friends the philologists.

These philologists must bring their work to bear on contemporary material and give their help freely to the poetry of the future.

But this is not enough.

The organs of mass education must shake the teaching of the old aesthetics to its very foundations.

# *The Farewell Poem*

## THE FAREWELL POEM (1925)

*by* **Sergey Esenin**

Goodbye, my friend, goodbye.  
Dear friend, you live in my heart.  
Although we were fated to part  
We are fated to meet by and by.

Goodbye, my friend, without handshakes, without  
murmur,  
Don't be sad, why such grief in your eye?  
In this life to die is nothing new,  
But to live, of course, is nothing newer.

*To Sergey Esenin*

## TO SERGEY ESENIN (1926)

You went off  
as they say,  
to a world above.

Infinity –  
You fly,  
and make the stars shine brighter.

We got no loans now,  
and no pub

Sobriety.  
No, Esenin,  
I  
don't want to gloat. *судя/релиш*

I see how  
you linger with your cut wrists  
And with grief  
not laughter  
sticking in my throat

See the sack  
of your own bones  
that you hoist. *left*

– Cut it out!  
Drop it!  
You gone mad or something?

Making death  
pour  
over your cheeks  
like chalk?

You of all people  
who to death  
could bring

Like no one else  
on earth  
your swaggering talk.

## СЕРГЕЮ ЕСЕНИНУ

Вы ушли,  
                  как говорится,  
  в мир иной.

Пустота...  
                  Летите,  
  в звезды врезываясь.

Ни тебе аванса,  
                                  ни пивной.

Трезвость.  
Нет, Есенин,  
                          это  
                                  не насмешка.

В горле  
                  горе комом —  
  не смешок.

Вижу —  
                          врезанной рукой помешкав,  
собственных  
                          костей  
  качаете мешок.

— Прекратите!  
                          Бросьте!  
  Вы в своем уме ли?

Дать,  
                  чтоб щеки  
  заливал  
  смертельный мел?!

Вы ж  
                  такое  
                          загибать умели,  
что другой  
                          на свете  
  не умел.

Why?

For what cause?

Bewilderment dumbs me.

The critics mutter:

– The trouble was, we find

This...

or that...

but chiefly anomy,

The result of

too much beer or wine.

In other words

if you'd swapped

Bohemia

for the working  
class

Class-conscious, you

wouldn't have come to this.

But do the workers

drink

nothing stronger than kvass?

That class, too

enjoys getting pissed.

In other words

if a Party man

had been given the <sup>task</sup> chore

Of watching

that your main stress

was on content,

You'd have written

every day

lines

by the score

Drawn-out

and ~~droning~~ <sup>buzzing</sup>

like Doronin's attempts.

But in my view

if you'd known that kind of delirium

Почему?  
Зачем?  
Недоуменье смяло.  
Критики бормочут:  
— Этому вина  
то...  
да сё...  
а главное,  
что смычки мало,  
в результате  
много пива и вина. —  
Дескать,  
заменить бы вам  
богему  
классом,  
класс влиял на вас,  
и было б не до драк.  
Ну, а класс-то  
жажду  
заливает квасом?  
Класс — он тоже  
выпить не дурак.  
Дескать,  
к вам приставить бы  
кого из напостóв —  
стали б  
содержанием  
премного одарённой.  
Вы бы  
в день  
писали  
строк по сто́,  
утомительно  
и длинно,  
как Доронин.  
А по-моему,  
осуществись  
такая бредь,



You'd have laid  
                                   hands on yourself  
   much earlier on.  
 Better die of vodka  
                                   in my opinion  
 Than of boredom!  
 They'll never tell us  
                                   the cause  
   of our loss,  
 That noose<sup>loop</sup>  
                                   there, or that penknife,  
 But if there'd been  
                                   ink  
   in the Angleterre, of course,  
 You needn't have cut  
                                   your veins  
   when you took your  
   life.  
 Your imitators were delighted:  
   encore!  
 A platoon, almost,  
                                   laid hands  
   wildly on themselves.  
 Why make  
                                   the number  
   of suicides more?  
 Better supply  
                                   ink  
   to all our hotels!  
 For ever  
                                   now  
                                   your tongue  
   's locked behind your teeth.  
 It's pedantic  
                                   and misplaced  
   riddling like this.

на себя бы  
раньше наложили руки.

Лучше уж  
от водки умереть,  
чем от скуки!  
Не откроют  
нам  
причин потери  
ни петля,  
ни ножик перочинный.  
Может,  
окажись  
чернила в «Англетере»,  
вены  
резать  
не было б причины.

Подражатели обрадовались:  
бис!

Над собою  
чуть не взвод  
расправу учинил.

Почему же  
увеличивать  
число самоубийств ?

Лучше  
увеличь  
изготовление чернил!

Навсегда  
теперь  
язык  
в зубах затворится.

Тяжело  
и неуместно  
разводить мистерии.

The people,  
     in whom our language lives and breathes,  
 Have lost in death  
     their sonorous <sup>immoral</sup>  
                     debauchee-'prentice.  
 And they bear  
     funereal scraps of verse  
 From past  
     burials,  
                     with hardly a revision.  
 Piling  
     their dull rhymes  
                     in funereal mounds: worse  
 Than useless  
     to honour  
                     the Muses' son.  
 For you  
     a monument  
                     is not cast yet.  
 Where is it,  
     the sounding bronze  
                     or the grey granite?  
 But by the railings  
     of the monument  
                     they've already set  
 Down rubbish,  
     dedications, reminiscences, all shit.  
 Your name  
     is snivelled into handkerchiefs.  
 Your words  
     are slobbered by Sobinov  
 And he winds up  
     under a droopy birch-tree –  
 'Not one word,  
     o my friend,  
                     nor si-i-igh let there be.'

У народа,  
у языкотворца,  
умер  
звонкий  
забулдыга подмастерье.  
И несут  
стихов заупокойный лом,  
с прошлых  
с похорон  
не переделавши почти.  
В холм  
тупые рифмы  
загонять колом —  
разве так  
поэта  
надо бы почтить ?  
Вам  
и памятник еще не слит, —  
где он,  
бронзы звон  
или гранита грань ? —  
а к решеткам памяти  
уже  
понанесли  
посвящений  
и воспоминаний дрянь.  
Ваше имя  
в платочки рассоплено,  
ваше слово  
слюнявит Собинов  
и выводит  
под березкой дохлой —  
«Ни слова,  
о дру-уг мой,  
ни вздо-о-о-о-ха».

Agh,  
     you'd have set about him with great glee,  
 This goddamn  
         Leonid Lohengrinsky!  
 You'd have set up  
         a thunderous row  
 'I won't permit  
         poetic burlings <sup>rolik-ovakii</sup>  
                                 from braying asses.' –  
 And you'd deafen them  
                                 tridactylously  
   whistling, now.  
 And tell them  
         they could stuff it up their arses.  
 To send packing all  
         these talentless shits,  
 Filling  
         the black sails  
                                 of their smoking-jackets,  
 So that Kogan  
         scattered,  
                                 that way and this,  
 Impaling passers-by  
         on his moustaches'  
   bayonets.  
 These shits  
         meanwhile  
                                 haven't grown any fewer.  
 It's a big job  
         just to catch them up.  
 Life  
         must be  
                                 started quite anew,  
 When you've changed it  
                                 then the singing can start up.

Эх,  
поговорить бы иначе  
с этим самым  
с Леонидом Лоэнгринычем!  
Встать бы здесь  
гремящим скандалистом:  
— Не позволю  
мямливать стих  
и мять! —  
Оглушить бы  
их  
трехпальным свистом  
в бабушку  
и в бога душу мать!  
Чтобы разнеслась  
бездарнейшая погань,  
раздувая  
темень  
пиджачных парусов,  
чтобы  
врассыпную  
разбежался Коган,  
встреченных  
увеча  
пиками усов.  
Дрянь  
пока что  
мало поредела.  
Дела много —  
только поспевать.  
Надо  
жизнь  
сначала переделать,  
переделав —  
можно воспевать.

Such an age  
                    poses problems  
  for the pen  
But show me  
                    you feeble  
  bunch of cripples  
Where some great man  
  has chosen,  
  and when,  
To follow  
                    a path of roses, not of thistles?  
Words are  
                    the commanders  
  of mankind's forces.  
March!  
                    And behind us  
  time  
  explodes like a land-mine.  
To the past  
                    we offer  
  only the streaming tresses  
Of our hair  
                    tangled  
  by the wind.  
For merriment  
  our planet  
  isn't well equipped.  
One must  
                    tear  
  happiness  
  from the days to come.  
In this life  
                    to die  
  has never been hard.  
To make new life  
  's more difficult  
  by far.

Это время —  
                    трудновато для пера,  
но скажите  
                    вы,  
                            калеки и калекши,  
где,  
            когда,  
                            какой великий выбирал  
путь,  
                    чтобы протоптанней  
  и легче?  
Слово —  
                    полководец  
  человечьей силы.  
Марш!  
            Чтоб время  
                            сзади  
  ядрами рвалось.  
К старым дням  
                            чтоб ветром  
  относило  
только  
                    путаницу волос.  
Для веселия  
                            планета наша  
  мало оборудована.  
Надо  
                    вырвать  
                            радость  
  у грядущих дней.  
В этой жизни  
                            помереть  
  не трудно.  
Сделать жизнь  
                            значительно трудней.



## THE FAREWELL POEM (1925)

*by* **Sergey Esenin**

Goodbye, my friend, goodbye.  
Dear friend, you live in my heart.  
Although we were fated to part  
We are fated to meet by and by.

Goodbye, my friend, without handshakes, without  
murmur,  
Don't be sad, why such grief in your eye?  
In this life to die is nothing new,  
But to live, of course, is nothing newer.

*To Sergey Esenin*

## NOTES

### *Notes to Introduction*

1. Boris Pasternak, *Safe Conduct*, quoted by Patricia Blake in her excellent introduction to Vladimir Mayakovsky, trans. G. Reavey and M. Hayward, *The Bedbug and Selected Poetry*, Meridan Books, 1960.

2. Russian Formalist Theory has become widely known, even fashionable, in English literary circles in the last ten years, in the wake of its rediscovery by French post-Structuralism. Several representative volumes of translated material are now available (see Select Bibliography). The Formalist position may be (crudely) summarised as a preoccupation with the intrinsic dynamics of literary texts and that which makes form perceptible as an aesthetic experience. Viktor Shklovsky's key concept of 'defamiliarisation' has become a catchword, and has often been incompetently understood as if it were more or less synonymous with surprise. In fact, like all Formalist terminology, it is founded in a hidden genre theory and a subversive 'Oedipal' theory of literary evolution, whereby the new work acquires 'perceptibility' in relation to the 'shifts' and displacements it effects in the system of codes operating in the literary culture at any given time. In verse theory, Formalism emphasises the dynamic relationship between rhythm and metre and the poetic potential of 'shifts' in syntax, grammar, and morphology. There is also a preoccupation with the semantic

potential of sonic patterning. With both verse and prose, Formalism downgrades 'message', or content, claiming that 'meaning' is generated by a play of differences (the 'split signifier' of Saussure and after). Thus literature can never simply 'represent'; and although it may play a part in *forming* an ideology, it cannot be the passive vehicle of one. The great Russian film director Sergey Eisenstein made extensive use of Formalist theory in the construction of film narratives.

3. *Mayakovsky*, trans. and ed. by Herbert Marshall, Dobson, 1965. Handsomely produced, with a good selection of graphic work and photographs, Marshall's volume is nevertheless coloured by the kind of fellow-travelling tone which has affected English readers' perception of Mayakovsky.

4. Reavey and Hayward, *op. cit.*

5. Dorian Rottenberg, trans., *Vladimir Mayakovsky: Poems*, Progress Publishers, 1972.

6. Edwin Morgan, *Wi the Haill Voice: 25 poems by Vladimir Mayakovsky translated into Scots by Edwin Morgan*, Carcanet Press, Oxford, 1972.

7. Maria Enzensberger, *Listen!*, Redstone Press, 1987.

8. cf. Byron's *Don Juan*; and Jury Tynyanov, *Rhythm as the Constructive Factor of Verse* and *The Meaning of the Word in Verse*, in Matejka and Pomorska, trans. and eds, *Readings in Russian Poetics*, Michigan Slavic Publications, 1978. Mention should also be made here of Osip Brik's distinguished contributions to metrical theory.

9. *Skaz* is a Russian word cognate with *skazka* (a folk tale) and *skazat* (to tell or say). Although the term as such may not always be invoked, the concepts which it designates pervade Formalist theories of narrative.

Boris Eikhenbaum defined its scope in two classic essays, *How Gogol's 'Overcoat' was Made* (Poetika, Petersburg, 1919) and *The 'Skaz' Illusion* (1918), and there is also Viktor Vinogradov's *Problema skaza v stilistike* (Poetika, Leningrad, 1926). In brief, *skaz* designates the problematics of the interaction of spoken and written narrative modes, hence its importance in relation to Mayakovsky's verse. In its larger dimension it becomes an aesthetic proposition about a young and unstable tradition of literary narrative (Russian) which lacked the ideological centre given by the bourgeois hegemony of Western Europe and was restlessly responsive to a wide range of different 'ways of telling'. Gogol, Leskov, and (later) Zoshchenko serve as paradigms of *skaz* for a number of reasons. For one thing, Gogol was a Ukrainian, with a rich store of folklore to draw upon, and he writes Russian with a noticeable Ukrainian 'accent'. For another (not unrelated), although he is bracketed with the founding fathers of Russian Realism, there is an evident discrepancy between his mannered 'orality' (what Shklovsky called 'the dance of the speech organs', verbal redundancy, 'sonic gesturing', and various sorts of histrionics) and much of his subject-matter, drawn from humble lives. Eikhenbaum treats the humanistic 'content' of Gogol's tale of the petty clerk as one convention of writing, and the stops and starts and splutterings of the narrator, which have an almost autonomous poetic density, as another, with which it constructs a dialogue; the story becomes a puppet play, rather like *Petrouchka*. By 'focalising' (Genette's term) the process of narration, *skaz* subverts the relationship between *énoncé*, or the matter of the telling, and *énonciation*, or the narrative process. In this way texts become 'double-voiced', and the theory of *skaz* feeds

into Bakhtin's 'polyphony', as he is the first to recognise (cf. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Discourse Typology in Prose*, in Matejka and Pomorska, op. cit.). Shklovsky's account of *Tristram Shandy* (1921) sees the novel in terms of the ways in which it is 'voiced'; his essay is quoted in *How Are Verses Made?*

10. Formalist theory of translation is disappointingly thin, but Andrey Fyodorov's essay (*Problema stikhotvornogo perevoda*, in *Poetika*, Leningrad 1927) is a notable exception, and thoroughly Formalist in the emphasis it gives to the dialogic element in the translation process.

11. Another relevant 'ism' from the art-historical cauldron of the time is Constructivism. The earliest manifestations of this 'culture of materials' in Russia were Tatlin's reliefs of 1914, using 'real space' instead of a simulated (representational) pictorial space (this begins with a fairly literal-minded use of three-dimensional forms in pictorial composition). A part of the Constructivist endeavour was the pragmatic testing and exploration of the term 'realistic' as a kind of 'illusionism'. Mayakovsky, too, liked to see words as 'raw materials', but like Rodchenko and Lissitzky, he could equally interpret 'realism' in art as a kind of use-function, or 'applied art'; or, like Tatlin in his *Monument to the Third Communist International* and his glider, the *Letatlin*, as a visionary statement of how the world might be transformed by Socialism (a concrete image of the future).

12. *Zaum* is perhaps best illustrated by examples (see n. 13), but in general the term denotes the Futurist ambition to write an 'abstract' poetry, taking the word as a musician takes a motif, or rhythm, or tonal cluster, or a painter a set of formal relations, a colour, and by means

of what Marinetti called the 'wireless imagination' set off emotional associations of particular combinations of words. This was part of the Modernist revolt against didacticism and representationalism in art.

13. O you laughniks, laugh it out!  
O you laughniks, laugh it forth!  
You who laugh it up and down, laugh along so laughily;  
Laugh it off belaunchingly!  
Laughters of the laughing laughniks, overlaugh the laughathon.  
Laughiness of the laughish laughers, counterlaugh the Laughdom's laughs!  
Laughio! Laughio!  
Dislaugh, relaugh, laughlets, laughlets,  
Laughulets, laughulets.  
O you laughniks, laugh it out!  
O you laughniks, laugh it forth!

(Markov and Sparks, trans., *Contemporary Russian Poetry*, MacGibbon and Kee, 1966)

Hlahla! Uthlofan, laughlings!  
Hlahla! Uthlofan, laughlings!  
Who lawghen with lafe, who hlachen lewchly.  
Hlahla! Ufhlofan hlouly!  
Hlahla! Hloufish lauflings lafe uf beloght lauchalorum!  
Hlahla! Loufenish lauflings lafe, hlohan utlaufly!  
Lawfen lawfen,  
Hloh, hlouh, hlou! luifekin, luifekin,  
Hlofeningum, hlofeningum.  
Hlahla! Uthlofan, lauflings!  
Hlahla! Ufhlofan, laughlings!

(Paul Schmidt, trans., *Velimir Khlebnikov, the King of Time*, Harvard University Press, 1985)

The poem (in Russian, *Zaklyatiye smekhom*), is a set of variations on the morphological possibilities of the Russian word for 'laughter'. The first of these translations is 'semantic' (or what Fyodorov calls 'comparative-projective') in orientation, and to a certain extent interprets and explains the original; the second is closer to his notion of the 'comparative-structural' process, since it sets up analogies with the verbal processes of the Russian text while refusing to 'explain' its meaning.

14. Viktor Shklovsky, *Mayakovsky and his Circle*, Pluto Press, 1974, p. 93.

15. A representative 'commercial' jingle of the same sort is (for instance):

*Vsye kuril'shchiki  
Vsegda i vezdye  
Otdayut predpochtenie  
Krasnoy zvezdye!*

with the 'moral' *Nigdye kromye kak v Mossel'promye*;  
which in English might go

Every smoker  
Near and far  
Chooses for preference  
Red Star.

– and 'Moscow Co-op's the only place you'll find them'. Mayakovsky's 'commercial' jingle characteristically blends hyperbole and local detail. It is worth pointing out that the text is only one component of a superb graphic 'construction' by Rodchenko, and that these two produced many advertisements of high artistic quality (e.g. the cover of this volume), as well as working together on more political kinds of 'agitational' projects.



These 'jingles' belong with a distinctive poetic genre known as the *Chastushka*, a kind of urban ballad (see *How Are Verses Made?*, n. 14).

16. The 'shift' (Russian *sdvig*) is central to Formalist theory, in that form becomes perceptible (aesthetically significant) when the 'series' (*ryad*) is broken, or some kind of displacement occurs. For early Formalist theory, the 'series' was a generic or formal 'given', constituted by the literary medium itself; later, the interaction of the literary 'series' with others (drawn from sociology, history of ideas, and political concepts) was a primary determinant of meaning, and what began as a purely 'intrinsic' notion (though never as self-sufficient as some would believe) became, to a considerable degree, 'extrinsic'. The 'shift' remains important, however, because it represents Formalism's refusal to allow that literature was no more than the expressive vehicle through which a given world-view was communicated, or a given 'reality' was 'represented'.

17. 'Lallans' (Lowlands) Scots is a partly synthetic, partly natural language derived from a dialect of English spoken in Scotland. For literary purposes it is very largely the creation of the Scottish poet Hugh Macdiarmid (and some others), working from the considerable resources of Jamieson's famous Dictionary. Its effectiveness in the present context has to do with its 'defamiliarising' properties, its natural predisposition to neologism, and its blend of 'folk' and 'high' expressive modes. For those with an ear for the idiom, of course, there is also a distinct political edge, perhaps deriving from Macdiarmid's Marxism-Leninism, and perhaps from the status of Scottish literature in English as culturally deviant and dissident.

18. See n. 9, above.

19. Vladimir Mayakovsky, *Prosasedavshiesya* (Vladimir Mayakovsky, *Satira*, Moscow, Khudozhestvennaya literatura, 1969 (my translation).

20. *O pokolenie, rastrativshem svoikh poetov* (1930), reprinted in Roman Jakobson and D. Svyatopolk-Mirsky, *Smert' Vladimira Mayakovskogo* (Mouton, 1975).

21. It remained for other, less convinced, chroniclers of the new collectivism to spell out the dangers of mass civilisation under Communism. One such was Evgeni Zamyatin, whose dystopian novel *We* was written in 1920 (he died in exile in France in 1937). It is a source book for Orwell's *1984*.

22. Eisenstein's mutinying sailors (*Potemkin*), Iron Guard (*Ivan the Terrible*), or Mexican peasants all share the Dionysiac characteristics of misrule and dangerous beauty. Their actual connection with any real workforce is very tenuous, yet such is the power of Eisenstein's Romantic iconography that they could almost pass themselves off as 'the real thing', that perennially reluctant bridegroom, the Proletariat.

23. The shaman is the Siberian witch-doctor, high priest of the animist cults of the Soviet Far East. This figure, one of many such 'primitivist' elements, exercised a strange fascination for the Futurist poets, who could identify with it their own cult of the animating power of the word, and their 'magical thinking' (i.e. that poetry, as pure language, could transform reality). In the Modernist period, when bourgeois morality began to yield to the pressures of historical change, and the (largely secular) art forms which had sustained it lost their hegemonic power, strange gods revived, symptomatic of an imaginative, erotic, mystical release; and with them a 'new' ritualistic art supplanting the old realism.

If the Unconscious was largely a Central-European construct, Russia had her holy fools and wild men, and a folklore rich in demonology close to the boundaries of civilised consciousness: precisely where the post-Romantic artist has taken up residence, in fact.

24. This is a stereotype of the (late) Romantic Agony, and doubtless a variant of the Oedipus Complex in its guise of castration fear. T.S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* is built upon an Oedipal scenario to the virtual exclusion of anything else.

25. cf. Boris Pasternak, *Dr Zhivago*, published (but not in Russia) in 1958. The novel opens with 'someone' being buried *zhivago* – an ambiguity suggesting 'buried alive', from the Russian word *zhivoy*, 'alive', in an archaic genitive (i.e. object) form. The narrative then takes up the theme of the resurrection of the buried poet and prophet in the Revolutionary wasteland: he stands for 'life', in the ineffable Lawrentian sense of the word.

26. Alexander Blok's great poem *The Twelve* (1918) has Christ leading a group of revolutionary soldiers.

27. The classic instance is T.S. Eliot's essay *The Metaphysical Poets* (1918), in which the mind of the poet is said to possess the power to create 'new wholes' out of a range of discrete experiences (reading Spinoza, smelling cooking, hearing the typewriter etc). Like Mayakovsky, Eliot bases his eschatology on the idea of a Fall (the moment, historically speaking, when by a 'dissociation of sensibility' the European mind fell apart into incompatible realms, and languages, of thought and feeling). Mayakovsky's equivalent 'Fall' was the sterility of bourgeois culture, or what Russian calls *byt*, the meaningless succession of everyday events. Like Eliot, Mayakovsky affirms the poet's task as that of healing the wounds of modern man's sick soul.

28. I am thinking particularly of the remarkable passage in *How Are Verses Made?* that starts 'I walk along, waving my arms and mumbling almost wordlessly, now shortening my steps so as not to interrupt my mumbling...'

29. The *credo* of Socialist Realism was formulated at the First All-Union Writers' Congress in 1934, in response to a genuine ideological problem. The Revolution had produced proletarian writing of many kinds (as the Notes to *How Are Verses Made?* clearly show), but the historical demand for a new aesthetic seemed no nearer being met, and in much post-Revolutionary experimental writing it was clearly the vigorous Russian intelligentsia, rather than the proletariat, that was calling the tune. Where the proletariat *was* actively involved (as in the Proletkult), the results were, by common consent, uninspiring. The great wave of Russian Modernism was in any case exhausting itself, to some extent by a natural process, but more as a consequence of oppression. Socialist Realism affirmed the continuing validity of realist (representational) art in the transitional period of Socialism (preceding the building of Communism); but the theory went that the *critical* orientation of bourgeois realism towards a middle-class society whose values were unacceptable should give way to an *affirmative* orientation towards the values of the revolutionary proletariat. The 'triumph' of Realism prepared the way for the elimination of the last elements of 'bohemian' nonconformism. It is beginning to look as if Mayakovsky's role in this process was not confined to literary polemics.

30. The followers of Manichaeus (3rd century) represented Satan as co-eternal with Christ, so that the

struggle between Good and Evil remained for ever unresolved. The paranoid world of Dostoevsky's novels and the increasingly opaque post-Revolutionary world of Soviet politics and literature (endlessly on guard against the class-enemy) have much in common: which is why so much of Dostoevsky's work was banned under Stalin.

### *Notes to A Cloud in Trousers*

1. Mayakovsky tells the story, true or false, of how he came upon this title, in *How Are Verses Made?* The fact is that the original title, *The Thirteenth Apostle* was banned by the censor on the grounds of blasphemy, and passages had to be cut from the text; but the poem in this, its authentic form makes extensive use of religious imagery and is conceived as a tetrptych in the form of something like the life of a Saint. The title, like the poem, combines tenderness with earthiness, even vulgarity, and perhaps contains the idea of transcending mere 'bourgeois' art (Mayakovsky himself said that the four parts were: Down with your love!; Down with your art!; Down with your social order!; Down with your religion!).

2. There are actually *two* Marias in the poem; Mayakovsky's Odessa friend remains fairly shadowy, but the Moscow Maria was a painter who committed suicide in 1919. The poet's relationships with women seem to have been difficult, limited, and strictly on his own terms, until he met Lily Brik.

3. Stolen from the Louvre in 1911. One of the many flagrantly 'contemporary' allusions in the poem.

4. The *Lusitania* was a Cunard liner sunk by a German submarine in 1915. This event contributed to

America entering the War.

5. Perhaps Mayakovsky is referring to Goethe's *Faust* as a whole, or perhaps specifically to the *Walpurgisnacht*, or spectral dance, on the Brocken. In any case, the conjunction of Romantic and mundane imagery is consistent with Mayakovsky's 'carnavalesque' poetics of blasphemy and parody.

6. An Orthodox term describing (1) St John Chrysostom (2) any eloquent preacher, and (3) by extension a gifted poet. There is much in Russian letters to remind us that the Russian literary tradition is nothing like as secular as ours.

7. As we learn again in *How Are Verses Made?*, extensive tours and public readings were Mayakovsky's stock-in-trade. His reception was often stormy in the early days, because the Futurists sought confrontation. Later on, the readings became more institutionalised, and the schedules more exhausting.

8. For many Russian writers, the Revolution was equated with the Apocalypse, which in turn reinforced the Modernist 'Sense of an Ending' in Europe as a whole. Mayakovsky compares himself to John the Baptist preparing the way for the Redeemer (and the end of Time).

9. David Burlyuk (1882-1967) was a Futurist, and a friend of Mayakovsky's who subsequently emigrated and ran a journal and a gallery in the USA. He had only one eye.

10. Yellow was the colour of the Futurists, and representative of the Dandyism cultivated by the movement.

11. An actual case is recorded of a condemned man who shouted this as he went to his death in exchange for a substantial payment to his widow.

12. Igor Severyanin (1887-1942) was a Futurist, but the 'Cubo-Futurists' (like Mayakovsky) were fairly contemptuous of the 'Ego Futurists', of whom he was one, since their 'shockingness' had little to do with either the masses or their city.

13. Bismarck's Germany (cf. the earlier reference to Krupps) was a military threat to Russia, but Germany's rapid industrialisation was also a kind of inspiration.

14. General Gallifet helped suppress the insurrection of the Paris Commune in 1871. For the French poets of the 1880s and 1890s he was synonymous with repressive authority.

15. The Khan who led the Golden Horde during the Tartar domination of Russia at the end of the 14th century. He feasted while sitting on the backs of Russian captives.

16. Evno Azef (1869-1918) was a notorious *agent provocateur* who engineered the destruction both of Imperial ministers and Revolutionaries. He was forced to flee the country in 1908.

17. Not, as we've said, the same Maria, though one might be forgiven for not registering this fact. As with T.S. Eliot all women, for Mayakovsky, seem to be one woman.

18. Mayakovsky was living in this rather run-down working-class district of Moscow at the time.

19. Another reference to Igor Severyanin.

## *Notes to How Are Verses Made?*

### CHAPTER 1

1. The most progressive writers in Russia formed, after the Revolution, associations which were known as Associations of Proletarian Writers (in Russian the

initial letters would be APP). There was, for instance, MAPP, the Moscow Association, formed in 1923; and RAPP, the Russian Association, which took over from VAPP, the All-Russian Association. Mayakovsky loved these neologisms.

2. The Formalists: two schools of literary critics active in the 1920s, one in Leningrad, the other in Moscow (see Introduction, *passim*). Mayakovsky admired their work and was a close friend of two of the most talented members of the Moscow group, Osip Brik and Viktor Shklovsky. At this time, 'Formalist' had not yet become a term of abuse, though it was already unwise to profess Formalist views.

3. The principal characters in Pushkin's novel in verse, *Evgeny Oniegin*. Alexander Sergeevich Pushkin (1799-1837) was the greatest Romantic poet of Russia, Evgeny Oniegin (finished 1830), superficially influenced by Byron, was extremely influential in 19th-century Russian literature.

4. References to specific lines in Pushkin's poem (Chapter One).

5. Georgy Arkadievich Shengeli (1894-1956), poet and literary theorist, published a short book in 1926 called *How to Write Articles, Verses and Stories*, intended primarily to help workers produce more literate wall-newspapers. Shengeli makes remarks such as: 'One single metre is usually chosen for a poem; a mixture of metres, with the first line an iambus, the second a dactyl, and so on, is inadmissible'. Mayakovsky's essay was written as a reply to this: the 'Kak pisat'...stikhi' of Shengeli's title prompted the *Kak delat' stikhi* of Mayakovsky's. Shengeli then replied with a booklet called *Mayakovsky vo ves' rost* (*Mayakovsky Full Length* – either vertically or horizontally). Mayakovsky was



unusually tall.

6. Nikolay Ivanovich Lobachevsky (1793-1856), a Russian mathematician.

7. Philologists: Nikolay Grech's textbook was published in 1820, Abramov's *Rhyming Dictionary* in 1912.

8. Mayakovsky quotes (inaccurately) from a poem of Zinaida Gippius (1869-1945) called 'One Moment', published in a collection of 1918.

9. Vladimir Timofeyevich Kirillov (1889-1943) published his poem 'To Sailors' on the first anniversary of the Revolution.

10. From the famous mystical revolutionary poem by Alexander Blok (1881-1921), 'The Twelve'.

11. From Mayakovsky's poem 'Left March' (1918).

12. Also from 'The Twelve'.

13. A street-ballad couplet that Mayakovsky composed in 1917, based on the reported shout of the sailors who stormed the Winter Palace.

14. Urban ballads or jingles of just this kind.

15. A term coined by Trotsky (*Literature and Revolution*) whose meaning was subsequently enlarged to include all those writers who were not Communists, but were to some degree sympathetic to the Soviet cause. In the 1920s it was still possible to discuss their work objectively.

16. The first line of a lyric by Michail Yurievich Lermontov (1814-1841).

17. A specific reference to Shengeli's book.

18. The White general N.N. Yudenich unsuccessfully attacked Petersburg in 1919.

19. Demyan Bedny (i.e. Demyan the Poor) was the pseudonym of the Soviet poet Efim Alexeyevich Pridvorov (1883-1945), an early Bolshevik and effective publicist.

20. Alexey Eliseyevich Kruchënikh (1886-?) was a Futurist colleague of Mayakovsky's.

21. The Communist International.

22. The *Nauchnaya Organizatsiya Truda*, or Scientific Organization of Labour, was set up in order to supply factories with information and equipment to promote their more scientific and efficient running.

23. D'Anthès (Russ.: 'Dantes') killed Pushkin in a duel. Mayakovsky calls Dantes 'sukin syn', son of a bitch: a grosser term in Russian than in English.

24. See *A Cloud in Trousers*.

25. One of many similar dilettante-literary pre-revolutionary journals. This one was a supplement to *Moskovsky listok*.

26. From Pasternak's poem 'Marburg'. Boris Pasternak (1890-1960) was associated with LEF (the Left Front in Art) and admired Mayakovsky's earlier poetry, especially 'A Cloud in Trousers'. He went to Marburg to hear the lectures of Hermann Cohen before the First World War. The poem was first published in the collection *Across Barriers* (1917). Mayakovsky (as usual) misquotes.

## CHAPTER 2

1. Nikolay Alexeyevich Kluyev (1887-1937) was a peasant poet who at first supported the Revolution in the name of the peasants. But his idealized notions of the soil were at odds with Soviet collectivisation, and after the late 1920s his poetry was not published. He died in a labour camp.

2. Maxim Gorky (1868-1936) left Russia in 1921 but, after some years in Berlin and Capri, returned (1928). He occupied a highly influential position in Soviet society and did a lot to help young writers. His

sentimental-realist novels strongly influenced many Soviet novelists and were often taken as a model of 'Socialist Realism', the official literary philosophy formulated in the 1930s.

3. Sosnovskoye is near the city of Gorky and is a major centre of milk production.

4. Imaginism was a post-Revolutionary literary movement which would count for little in the history of Russian poetry if it were not for Esenin's association with it. Taking some notions, at several removes, from the Imagist poets of Western Europe, Imaginists mainly insisted on the primary importance of the Image in poetry: for Esenin this meant the creation of sensuously beautiful pictures.

5. The All-Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (1925-28).

6. Nikolay Aseyev (1889-1963) was a Futurist poet, and the close friend and ardent disciple of Mayakovsky.

7. Esenin committed suicide on 27 December 1925 in the Hotel Angleterre in Leningrad, by cutting his wrists and then hanging himself. He left a farewell poem, written in his blood, the last lines of which gave Mayakovsky the starting point for his poem 'To Sergey Esenin'.

8. Alexander Ilich Bezimensky (1898-?), the proletarian poet, wrote a poem entitled 'Meeting with Esenin', which began 'Seryozha! My dear friend!'. Mayakovsky regards this familiar form of Esenin's name as particularly unsuitable for a poet who was not one of the Esenin circle.

9. Alexander Zharov (b. 1904) published a poem (10 January 1926) entitled 'On Esenin's Coffin', which contains these lines.

10. Pyotr Semyonovich Kogan (1872-1932), Presi-

dent of the Moscow Academy of Arts, wrote a number of laudatory articles on Esenin.

11. Luka is a saintly fool in Gorky's play *The Lower Depths*. Mayakovsky has misquoted the line.

12. Kruchënikh published several hostile pamphlets on Esenin in 1926.

13. The New Economic Policy, or NEP, was in force from 1921 to 1929. It involved a relaxing of economic rigour as some private enterprise was encouraged in an attempt to restore the country's economy to a healthy condition after the devastation of the Civil War period. Mayakovsky hated it, and where private and State enterprise were in competition, gave his support wholeheartedly to the State.

14. *Na postu (On Guard)*, hence *Napostov*, those Proletarian contributors to the journal of that title, which followed a rigid and fundamentally philistine line.

15. Yury Libedinsky (1898-1959) became famous through his novel *The Week* (1922). In it he tried to give a sense of the flux and confusion of the Civil War, but drew general conclusions which Mayakovsky thought premature.

16. *Petals* was a literary collection by the worker-correspondents (Rabkor) from the Khamovnichesky district, published in 1924. The lines cited are from a play called *Carmagnole* by Elmar Grin (1909-?).

17. Pavel Alexandrovich Radimov (1887-?) published a collection of poems in hexameters entitled *The Waggon* (1926). Mayakovsky is referring specifically to the poem entitled 'A Herd of Pigs'.

18. Lubyansky Square is now Dzerzhinsky Square.

19. Mayakovsky had a study in Lubyansky Passage (now Serov Passage). Myasnitsky is now Kirov Street.

20. A line from 'A Revolutionary Funeral March'.

21. A popular revolutionary song from the days of the Narodniki (the Russian Populists). It was written in 1875 by Peter Lavrov.

22. Leonid Vitalyevich Sobinov was a tenor with the Bolshoi Opera. Mayakovsky found his participation in a sentimental commemorative evening for Esenin at the Moscow Art Theatre, when he sang settings of some poems by Esenin, offensive, and an insult to Esenin's poetry.

23. Ivan Ivanovich Doronin (1900-?) published in 1926 a poem called not 'The Ploughman of Steel' but 'The Tractor-Ploughman'.

24. Iosif Utkin (1903-1944) published in 1926 a poem called 'The Burial Mound', from which these lines are taken.

25. Mayakovsky here misquotes from a translation by Bryusov of Verhaeren's poem 'Pestilence'. Emile Verhaeren (1855-1916) was a Belgian poet.

26. Ilya Lvovich Selvinsky (1899-1968), a Constructivist poet whose work is full of technical terminology.

27. Mayakovsky here refers to a line from a poem by Valery Yakovlevich Bryusov (1873-1924) 'To the Poet', though the notion seems to originate with Mallarmé.

28. From the poem entitled 'Sunflowers' by Konstantin Dmitrievich Balmont (1867-1942).

29. From the balled 'Vassily Shibanov' by Alexey Konstantinovich Tolstoy (1817-1875).

30. From Pushkin's verse drama *Boris Godunov*.

31. Left Front: in 1923 Mayakovsky founded and edited the journal *LEF (The Left Front in Art)*, and later *Novy LEF*, its successor. It was the journal of the Futurists, claiming for them the first place in the art of the future, committed to radical experimentation, and strongly opposed to realism. It soon ran into ideological opposition.

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