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Majakovskij and *Poëtičnost'*

“*Pozdnee ja uznal, čto èto poëtičnost' i ticho načal ee nenavidet'*”
“*Later I learned that this was poëtičnost' and silently started to hate it*”
(From Majakovskij's autobiographical work *Ja Sam*¹)

The aim of this article is to describe some of the literary techniques of the futurist poet Vladimir Majakovskij (1893-1930), and to explain how their meaning arises from contemporary poetic conventions, in particular the convention associated with the term *poëtičnost'*, which constituted the base of how metre and language were employed in nineteenth-century Russian poetry.

In the work of Roman Jakobson, one of the central proponents of structuralism, the concept of *literaturnost'* means “literariness”, the poetic aspect of language which cannot be reduced to a given culture or style, a phenomenon *sui generis* almost in an almost phenomenological sense. *Poëtičnost'*, on the other hand, can be defined as the poetic in one of its manifestations, defined by a given culture and wholly dependent on it, namely the nineteenth-century Russian culture, for which it was the very sign of poetry. Furthermore, *poëtičnost'* is a convention, a cultural phenomenon by definition, which regulated the use of literary techniques in such various fields as rhyme, metre, vocabulary, intonation, grammatical forms, and semantic structure.

In my opinion, it is one of the main tasks of the scientific study of literature to unite the thesis of the autonomy of the literary work with theories which can relate the work and its interpretation to general culture, and to the historically and culturally conditioned reception of the work. Autonomy of the literary work means that the works are not to be viewed as reflections of a social structure, not to be regarded as expressions of an ideology, but on the contrary, as entities which function according to aesthetic principles. One could also point to the sciences of so-

¹ Majakovskij, 1955 : 11

ciology and anthropology, with their parallel concepts and practices, to show how a cultural structure, and rules for the use of poetic language in particular, are realized in history at the level of individual taste, as a sense that some literary techniques are essentially poetic, and that others are their opposites, as anti-poetic. In particular I have in mind the theories of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, but also related theories and concepts.

A description of the poetic conventions, and of their significance to Majakovsij's poetry, must take into account the changes *poëtičnost'* was subjected to, and the subtle way it asserted itself in the form of individual taste, with all its quirks and idiosyncrasies. For an explanation of the term *poëtičnost'* one could examine its history. After the dawn of romanticism and sentimentalism, literary taste was to a lesser degree regulated by convention than it had been in the eighteenth century; taste came to be mainly a function of the individual aesthetical judgement. It was at the end of the eighteenth century that the rigid rules of classicism ceased to function as a reference point for the interpretation, practical and theoretical, of the poetic work and its various techniques.² Both the Russian literary convention and the Russian literary language, patterned on French syntax, historically an amalgam of Church-Slavonic (the liturgical language) and the vernacular East-Slavonic, were now leaving their phase of consolidation to enter a more mature level. One could make the claim that Russia now became a culturally more secure nation, when compared to its past, torn between its Slavonic and Western heritage.

Based on the above observations, I would like to put forward my hypothesis that the concept of taste, Russian *vkus*, took on a new and greater significance, when compared to its role in classicistic aesthetics. As a result of Nikolaj Karamzin's influence (a propagator of the French style, which was making itself felt in the Russian literary language), and sentimentalism (which affected aesthetic and poetic conventions), new criteria for the evaluation of works and literary techniques were developed, criteria that were culturally shared and determined. At the same time the new system made possible the deviation from the culturally determined norm, which the romantics held in such esteem in a work of lit-

² Vinokur, 1967: 8

erature. Thus the very stability of the convention was a precondition for the deviation from it.

One could point to the fact that the thematics of sentimentalism and of Aleksandr Puškin probably required a greater cultural security, a more refined sense of the poetic, and of *poëtičnost'* as poetry's representative function, as it were. But this prerequisite had ceased to exist, and the institutional preconditions of this aesthetic, the court of Catherine II and the free nobility, were no more in existence. Therefore poetry in this new literature, where genres and the hierarchy of styles had been partly discarded, needed a sense of the poetic, a taste, in order to be duly appreciated. In this way, the poetic convention asserts itself in the aesthetical judgement of the individual poet or critic. It is a structure of a cultural nature, which impresses itself upon the subject as a feeling for rhythm, words, and poetical motifs, more than it presents itself as a rationally based judgment.

During the nineteenth century, this convention was subjected to certain changes, and within the limits of its structure individual poets of talent could transgress *poëtičnost'* in its various fields: metrics, rhyme, or motifs. But by doing so, by performing their changes, they actually may have contributed to the conservation of the said convention, by bestowing on it an element of originality. Thus I consider the symbolist Andrej Belyj's opinion of rhythmic originality as sound; Belyj, as it is known, claimed that one of the prerequisites of originality is a deviation from the metrical scheme.

In the beginning of the twentieth century the convention went through considerable changes. Many of its prescriptions had ceased to be as compelling as once had been the case, and the *poëtičnost'* of several of its techniques was not so readily apparent. Above all, the metre had changed. Many of the avant-garde writers were now writing in the tonic system, based on word stress alone, as a means to group the syllables, and not in the melodic syllabo-tonic system, based on a combination of syllables and stress, which the convention prescribed. Among the first members of these groups was Majakovskij.

However, as many critics of Majakovskij have had the occasion to point out, among them his enemy Vladislav Khodasevic, Majakovskij had his precursors in both rhythm and rhyme. Several writers had in fact

written tonic verse during the nineteenth century, and, according to the formalist critic Viktor Žirmunskij, the decisive break with the syllabotonic system, its decanonisation as it were, took place when Aleksandr Blok published his *Stichi o prekrasnoj dame* (“Verses about the Beautiful Lady”) 1900-05, in which *dol’niki*, a variant of tonic verse, were employed.³

So the convention, and the *poëtičnost’* that Majakovskij’s aesthetics tried to refute, was in fact in decline. But many of its techniques would return in a later period, during the so-called socialist realism in the 1930’s. The continued prestige of the convention is also present in the affinity of the Proletkul’t writers, communists of proletarian descent, to its techniques, which at this point, and as a basis for original creation, mainly were poetic to the less cultured layers of the population, as opposed to the anti-aestheticism of an often bourgeois avant-garde.

If one compares a work of the said convention with a poem of Majakovskij, one is immediately struck by the difference between the two, a difference that concerns rhyme, metre, and vocabulary. However, to put it dialectically, where there is difference, there is also similarity. There is a basis for comparison of the works, due to the fact that Majakovskij’s aesthetics, as realized in his works in the shape of words, metrics, and grammatical forms, in a sense are an attempt to refute the convention and erase *poëtičnost’* as the criterion of *literaturnost’*. As far as *poëtičnost’* is concerned, Majakovskij’s aesthetics are never indifferent, never neutral. In his well-known study on Majakovskij as a reformer of the Russian literary language, Grigorij Vinokur referred to the futurist’s use of literary techniques as “anti-aesthetic”.⁴

How does this aesthetical program manifest itself in Majakovskij’s poetry? A case in point is his insistence on inflecting foreign nouns that according to the norms of the Russian literary language are indeclinable. This is a feature characteristic of informal speech such as *gorodskoe prostorečie*, the vulgar sociolect in Russian towns and cities.⁵ Majakovskij may well have drawn on this substandard variety in order to

³ Žirmunskij, 1967:196

⁴ Vinokur, 1967:24

⁵ Vinokur, 1967 :33

create a distance from the literary convention and its *poëtičnost*'. And, of course, Majakovskij's thematics are also affected by his struggle against conventional taste, conventional poetry:

Esli by tak poëta izmučila,
on
ljubimuju na den'gi b i slavu vymenjal
a mne
ni odin ne radosten zvon
krome zvona tvoego ljubimogo imeni.⁶

“Did you torture a poet this way
he would trade his loved one for money and fame
but for me
there is no joyful sound
apart from the sound of your dear name.”

From Mayakovskij's “Lilička! Vmesto pis'ma”

References to “poets” are an important motive in Majakovskij's poems. They are contrasted with the lyrical I, who is not, to be sure, a conventional romantic poet, but an anti-poet. In Majakovskij's poetry, this “I” represents the romantic ideals, estrangement from the world, individual rebellion, idealism, and love. The morals and aesthetics of the “poets” are both false; the two are intertwined in Majakovskij's poetry, which is in opposition to decadent aesthetics. It is the anti-aestheticism of Majakovskij that is in accordance with truth. What is *poëtičnost*? Better to play a “nocturne on water pipes”, on a “backbone flute”, than the melodic rhythms of the syllabo-tonic verse. Majakovskij's followers went for the tonic verse of Majakovskij, in which, as one listener put it, “every word appears as chiseled”.

⁶ Majakovskij, 1955: 108

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