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*FIGHTING WORDS:  
MAIAKOVSKII'S WAR WITH HIMSELF*

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

Vladimir Maiakovskii, "Civilian Shrapnel," 1914<sup>1</sup>

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

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

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1. Vladimir Maiakovskii, *Poinoe sobranie sochinenii v trindatsati tomakh* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1955-61), 1: 305. All references to Maiakovskii's work will use this edition, abbreviated as "PSS", followed by volume and page numbers.

Maiakovskii would write a poem that clearly reflected the Bolsheviks' condemnation of the war; "Answer!" ends with the lines:

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

Some of his earlier verses also paint a dismal picture of the war, such as "War is Declared" (1914), in which blood flows through the city square, and red snow falls like "juicy scraps of human flesh" (PSS 1: 64). But no matter how miserable the war might be, Maiakovskii's early war poems still display a conviction that the war has a purpose: in "Thoughts on Being Drafted," the poet approves of the power of war to transform the soldier and strengthen his resolve:

Let them  
 turn a tender man  
 into a Cossack.  
 Sent  
 to learn the new game,  
 he'll return  
 invested with new strength. (PSS I: 70)

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

Go there!  
 To the world forge,  
 to the repairs.  
 You'll come back.  
 I'll tell of a new Sparta. (PSS I: 71)

Maiakovskii spent the better part of 1914 arguing that only he and his fellow Futurists were adequately prepared to do justice to the war in verse, but by 1915 he was using that very same verse to condemn what he now felt was a senseless conflict. Using his pen to argue for peace could not have been easy for Maiakovskii – even after he turned against the war, he was no pacifist; after the revolution, he would return to exhorting his readers to show no

mercy to their enemies, the anti-Bolshevik Whites.<sup>2</sup> For a brief moment, however, Maiakovskii is forced to examine the nature and the consequence of his own military rhetoric, the very rhetoric that he had been praising only a few short months before. His response, in the long poem *War and the Universe*, is not to abandon military rhetoric; rather, with typical maximalism, he *intensifies* it in order to make an anti-war statement.

Though both fascination and horror characterize nearly all of Maiakovskii's writings on the war, one can nonetheless roughly trace the evolution of the poet's attitude. First, we see a period of unbridled enthusiasm, in which World War I is present as the embodiment of the Futurist artistic vision; here Maiakovskii engages the horrors of war only as symbols, underplaying the human experience of bloodshed and loss. Like so many of his contemporaries, Maiakovskii readily assimilated the war within an apocalyptic framework that is inherently optimistic: yes, the widespread slaughter is regrettable, but the war is precisely the final conflict that is necessary to throw the heavy ballast of history and culture "off the ship of modernity." In the second stage, Maiakovskii can no longer romanticize the war; when he turns his attention to the senseless deaths caused by an absurd international conflict, his apocalyptic framework fails him. Here war becomes a demonic parody of the apocalypse, bloodshed for its own sake; it is this horrible prospect that the poet entertains in the first sections of *War and the Universe*. Finally, he arrives at a synthesis of the two previous stages: the War is both an unconscionable human tragedy *and* the long-awaited "last battle" that paves the way for a new paradise on earth. Both Maiakovskii's initial pronouncements on the war and the end of *War and the Universe* (whose optimism after long stanzas of blood and torture is rather jarring) assume a utopian eschatology, in that they see history as a vector leading towards a state of human perfection. The difference, however, is in the author's attitude to the sacrifices incurred along the way. In *Narrative and Freedom*, Gary Saul Morson argues that eschatology and utopia are "diseases of presentness" that "typically reduce [the present] to a way station to the future": "Whether the end of history is imagined as catastrophic or perfect, the present and immediate future into which we live cease to be truly important."<sup>3</sup> But if utopia and eschatology downplay the significance of the present, the extent to which the present day is denigrated

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

3. Gary Saul Morson, *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1994), p. 198.

may vary. *War and the Universe* shows that Maiakovskii's earlier apocalypticism was superficial, and that the enthusiasm for war, inspired though it may be by a desire for fundamental change, is ethically suspect: it underestimates the human cost. Maiakovskii briefly entertains the notion that the atrocities of the war have no purpose, which would imply that the present does have some intrinsic value: if young lives are to be lost, there had better be a worthwhile reason.<sup>4</sup> If, by the end of *War and the Universe*, Maiakovskii has returned to his familiar eschatology, his outlook is far less cavalier than it once was: the poet mourns the dead who have fallen along the way. Moreover, he recognizes that, thanks to both his ideology (Bolshevik utopianism) and his rhetoric (Futurist militarism), he is complicit in the rising body count.

What a wonderful thing – war!

“Civilian Shrapnel. Poets on land mines” (1914) (PSS 1: 306)

#### Portrait of the artist as a young hawk

Maiakovskii's 1922 autobiography *I Myself* (*Я сам*) makes only a brief allusion to the poet's initial fervor about the war: “Excited about it. At first only for its decorative, noisy side.” (PSS 1: 22). But when the first battle broke out in Russia, the Maiakovskii of *I Myself* immediately recognizes the war's futility: “First battle. Face-to-face with the horror of war. The war is repulsive. The rear is even more repulsive. In order to talk about the war you have to see it. I went to sign up as a volunteer. They wouldn't let me. For lack of loyalty.” (PSS 1: 22) On October 24, Maiakovskii sends a letter to the Moscow town governor asking for a certificate of loyalty in order to be accepted in the army. But when he is drafted in the following year, Maiakovskii has a change of heart: “They shaved me. Now I don't want to go the front. I'm pretending to be a draftsman” (PSS 1: 24). By 1916, the year of the completion of *War and the Universe*, his disenchantment is complete: “I brazenly don't even show up for the war” (*На военщину нагло не показываюсь*) [PSS 1: 24].

How can one reconcile Maiakovskii's characterization of the war as “repulsive” with his as-yet unabated desire to participate in it? One might imagine a scenario à la Remarque, in which an idealistic young man volunteers for the front only to discover that war is anything but romantic, and yet Maiakovskii's contempt for the war predates his military service. As Katherine Hodgson argues in her excellent study of the Futurists at war, first-hand ex-

4. Cf. Katharine Hodgson: “If the war was not believed to be a heroic enterprise, then all that remained was violent and pointless slaughter” (Katharine Hodgson, “Myth-Making in Russian War Poetry,” in Jana Howlett and Rod Mengham, eds., *The Violent Muse: Violence and the Artistic Imagination in Europe, 1910-1939* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1994), p. 67).

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

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

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

5. Hodgson also notes that "other Futurists who saw active service at the front, such as the poet Nikolai Aseev, wrote in terms which were not significantly different from those used by non-combatant colleagues" (Hodgson, "Myth-Making," p. 69).

6. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

7. Maiakovskii's most vicious attack on the uninspired bards of war can be found in "Civilian Shrapnel: Poets on Land Mines." Here he reproduces a cliché-ridden poem, only to then reveal that the poem is actually a composite of three different works by three different authors. The style and approach to the subject matter were so similar that he was able to take one stanza from each to produce a seamless, and dull, poem. (PSS 1: 306).

assertion "I like to watch children die" which opened his poem "A Few Words about Myself" in the previous year, this sentence seems calculated to provoke the reader's outrage. But Maiakovskii's words are more than merely one in a long line of successful attempts at *épatage*. They support his campaign to portray the poet as a comrade worthy of the warrior, a professional whose "manly" resolve is no less than that of the soldier. The first installment of "Civilian Shrapnel" moves back and forth between discussions of the war and an analysis of the contemporary state of Russian letters at such a dizzying speed that Maiakovskii appears to be addressing both issues at the same time. The poet successfully wages this two-front war through a strategy of economy, applying a military lexicon to both topics: "Vandal enemies robbed the art of another people. Vandal-friends robbed Russia." (PSS 1: 303). Both the warrior and the true poet are professionals, unlike the effete literary dilettantes who use shopworn imagery to portray the war in verse: "War is a profession. It's easier for me to take aim with my trusty pen than with a trusty Howitzer" (PSS: 1: 303).<sup>8</sup> Maiakovskii further reinforces the equivalency of the two "professions" in the sentence immediately preceding his scandalous conclusion: "today I want to call for ordinary "civilian" heroism" (PSS 1: 304).<sup>9</sup>

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

Of course, everyone finds it pleasant to perfume his daughter with Balmont's powder in his little pink apartment, to memorize a couple of verses of Briusov for civil after-dinner conversation, to have a wife with penciled eyes that shine with the sadness of Akhmatova, but who needs me, awkward as a dreadnought, yelling like someone flayed by shrapnel! (PSS 1: 305)

Maiakovskii deliberately emasculates his poetic opposition, surrounding Bal'mont with feminine frippery and invoking the languor of Akhmatova;

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8. Maiakovskii himself is breathing new life into an old cliché. One Russian equivalent to the English "The pen is mightier than the sword" implies equivalency between the two "weapons," rather than superiority: "Что меч, что перо-сражаются заодно" (The sword and pen fight as one). A. M. Zhigulev, ed., *Russkie narodnye posloviцы i pogovorki* (Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii, 1965), p. 165.

9. Perhaps Maiakovskii's insistence on the equal heroism of the poet and the warrior was an attempt to escape from the ironies inherent in writing about the war rather than engaging in it; Hodgson notes that "[i]t was mostly noncombatant poets who spoke as soldiers who had found spiritual renewal on the battlefield" (Katharine Hodgson, *Written with the Bayonet: Soviet Russian Poetry of World War Two* [Liverpool: Liverpool Univ. Press, 1996], p. 20).

when set against the backdrop of such bourgeois effeminacy, Maiakovskii becomes a brawling *muzhik* who can be adequately described only by appealing to the language of the war.<sup>10</sup> Here, however, we have a presentiment of the speaker of *War and the Universe*: The Maiakovskii described here is both aggressor ("dreadnought") and victim ("flayed by shrapnel").<sup>11</sup> Yet even when the poet-warrior is portrayed as the victim of violence, Maiakovskii insists on the potent sexuality and rugged masculinity of himself and his fellow futurists, at the expense of the weak, sexless creatures that pretend to the name of poet. In "Civilian Shrapnel: Poets on Land mines," Maiakovskii writes that, before the war, old men heaped scorn on "young" poetry, but "the war took their measure, and it turned out that they were only little living corpses, tolerated only by the castrated (скопческой) psychology of the . . . philistine" (PSS 1: 307). In "We Want Meat, Too!," which begins with the poet's ironic admission that he envies soldiers who do not have to contend with the dangers of literary politics, Maiakovskii describes the terror he inspires in his enemies: "Enter Maiakovskii – And why is it that so many people fearfully hide the sexless (беспольные) children of emaciated muses?" (PSS 1: 313). Maiakovskii further emphasizes the strong sexuality of the soldier and the Futurist by allegorizing war as a beautiful woman. In the first of his "Civilian Shrapnel" articles, Maiakovskii writes: "Just as no one will marry the girl he loves to the tune of a funeral march, so no one will go to his death at war to the sounds of a Tango" (PSS 1: 303).<sup>12</sup> In "Civilian Shrapnel: To Those Who Lie with the Brush", he issues a challenge: "Now just try . . . to paint that red-mugged beauty, the war, (краснорожую красавицу войну) in a dress that is bloody-bright, like the desire to beat the Germans" (PSS 1: 309). Whether he employs the pen of the poet or the brush of the painter, Maiakovskii represents himself as one of the few who wield a weapon potent as that of the lover or warrior.

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

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

12. While the comparison between marriage and death in battle has its roots in folklore, this quote also resonates with one of the axioms included in "A Slap in the Face of Public Taste": "He who does not forget his *first* love will not recognize his last" (emphasis in the original). Vladimir Markov, ed., *Manifesty I programmy russkikh futuristov* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1967), p. 50.

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

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

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

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



Maiakovskii takes a commonplace of war (the soldier who continues the fight for his fallen comrades) and elevates wartime comradeship to a higher value than before; now, this very interchangeability of the soldier is not just a matter of expediency and patriotism, but the backbone of the world to come. The war will lead to the culmination of history not only because it will destroy the old, but because war by its very nature gives rise to just the sort of collectivist mind-set that will characterize utopian life.<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, one gets the sense that Maiakovskii is trying to convince himself as much as his readers. The very structure of most of his assertions of the war's higher purpose evokes the doubts that Maiakovskii attempts to put to rest: "war is not senseless murder, but . . ."; "The soldier is no longer meat". The inclusion of such anti-war sentiment, however negated, demonstrates that such thoughts had at least crossed the author's mind: this is a case of the return of the repressed. Moreover, an admittedly anachronistic reading of these texts in light of the later *War and the Universe* suggests that even Maiakovskii's most militarist writings of 1914 are haunted by a disgust for the very violence he is praising. Implicit in his early articles is the idea that the unrelenting violence of war could not be other than reprehensible if it were not viewed in the context of a worthwhile goal. It may look like "senseless murder" to the uninitiated, but those who share Maiakovskii's eschatological framework know the substantive difference between pointless slaughter and necessary sacrifice. Yet doubt can be difficult to suppress, since formally, slaughter and sacrifice are the same; they can be differentiated only by their meaning (or lack thereof). The war makes sense only if it is the apocalypse (in its communist, secularized model); if Maiakovskii is mistaken, then the horror is only multiplied by his initial faith in its higher purpose.

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

#### Apocalypse lost and regained

By the time he began work on *War and the Universe* in 1915, Maiakovskii's faith in the war was shaken. Edward Brown argues convincingly that it was the poet's exposure to the views of Maksim Gor'kii that played a decisive role. Gor'kii invited Maiakovskii to contribute to his new journal, *The Chronicle* (Летопись), and it was in this journal that Maiakovskii

13. The image of the regiment as one collective body would be revived again in World War II, most notably in the short stories of Andrei Platonov. See my article, "Текст как машина смерти: военные рассказы Андрея Платонова," *Вторая мировая война и литература 1941-1945* (Екатеринбург: Уральский Государственный университет, 2000).

planned to publish *War and the Universe* in 1916.<sup>14</sup> Gor'kii believed that the war was a criminal act, and that Russia and the other capitalist countries were equally to blame for its outbreak. If the cessation of hostilities led to the fall of Russia and the collapse of the regime, all the better; a new, socialist order could then be established in its place.<sup>15</sup> Even this "defeatist" position flirts with an apocalyptic understanding of the war, since, though the war may, in and of itself, lack purpose, if it leads to the overthrow of the capitalist order, the astronomical death toll will have been worthwhile. The result is a hybrid of apocalypticism and existentialism: the war is inherently senseless, but we (the communists) can create meaning for it.

In *War and the Universe*, Maiakovskii finally confronts the possibility that the war might well be thoroughly without purpose, "mere anarchy", to borrow Yeats' phrase, rather than apocalypse. Maiakovskii's internal debate about the applicability of an apocalyptic framework to World War I can best be understood with the help of Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*. Frye's theory concerns itself with two different poles of imagery, each of which is connected to the New Testament. The more positive imagery in his analysis is termed "apocalyptic": "By an apocalypse I mean primarily the imaginative conception of the whole of nature as the content of an infinite and eternal living body which, if not human, is closer to being human than to being inanimate."<sup>16</sup> Frye's apocalyptic world, "the heaven of religion, presents, in the first place, the categories of reality in the forms of human desire, as indicated by the forms they assume under the work of human civilization;"<sup>17</sup> here, "nature is now inside the mind of an infinite man who builds his cities out of the Milky Way."<sup>18</sup> Apocalypse, then, refers to a sort of anthropomorphic heaven, where all of reality is conceived in human terms. Any discussion of heaven in a Christian framework begs the question of hell, and so Frye's apocalyptic sphere has a corresponding "demonic" one, which is "the presentation of the world that desire totally rejects: the world of the nightmare and the scapegoat, of bondage and pain and confusion, the world as it is before any image of human desire, such as the city or the garden, has been solidly established."<sup>19</sup>

14. The censors would not allow the publication of *War and the Universe* in *The Chronicle* that year; the more optimistic Part V would finally be published separately in the journal in 1915. Edward J. Brown, *Mayakovsky: A Poet in the Revolution* (New York: Paragon House, 1973), p. 146.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 146-47.

16. Frye, Northrop. *The Anatomy of Criticism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press. 1973, p. 119.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 141

18. *Ibid.*, p. 119.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 147.

Frye's conception of the "apocalyptic" and "demonic" holds a number of significant ramifications for *War and the Universe*. First, Frye does not allow the horrific events described in *Revelation* to blind him to a basic truth about apocalypse: in the New Testament cosmology that is the primary course for the Western conception of apocalypse, the end of the world is an essentially positive event, in which suffering and bloodshed are the necessary precursor to the establishment of God's kingdom on earth. Hence Frye's connection between apocalypse and the city, garden, and human desire: apocalypse promises a world of order, in which even sacrifice makes sense. Second, it allows us to conceive of apocalypse's opposite, a "demonic" world in which the very symbols of order and desire are subverted: fire is not "purgatorial or cleansing," but rather simply destructive; the garden gives way to the desert; the Temple is replaced by the dungeon.<sup>20</sup> *War and the Universe* begins in a decidedly demonic key, but ends on a hopeful, apocalyptic note. Finally, Frye's apocalyptic-demonic dichotomy sheds light on the poem's pervasive Christian imagery, and particularly on the poet's identification with Christ himself. As in *The Backbone Flute* and *War and the Universe*, Maiakovskii's Christ is always crucified, always suffering; rarely is he depicted in any of his other possible roles (such as that of comforter or source of mercy). Moreover, in the apocalyptic tradition from which Maiakovskii so freely borrows, it is precisely Christ who lends meaning to the world. In Frye's terms, it is Christ's body that provides the pattern for order:

Christ *is* both the one God and the one Man, the Lamb of God, the tree of life, or vine of which we are the branches, the stone which the builders rejected, and the rebuilt temple which is identical with his risen body. The religious and poetic identifications differ in intention only, the former being existential and the latter metaphorical.<sup>21</sup>

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

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

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 141-42, italics in the original.

*Universe* begins with a prologue that introduces an element absent from his previous writings on the war: now, Maiakovskii is war's victim<sup>22</sup>:

If you want –  
I'll  
stick an ace on my forehead,  
so that the target will burn more brightly (PSS 1: 213).

The poet's identification of himself as a military target is heightened and explained in the following section, the "Dedication" to Lilia Brik. Though a dedication is a traditional introduction to a long poem, Maiakovskii exploits the ambiguity of the Russian word *посвящение* (dedication or initiation) in order to conflate the experience of the new recruit with the status of the text itself:

October 8.  
1915.  
Dates  
of time,  
looking into my rite  
of initiation into being a soldier (PSS I: 213).

The poem's dedication (to Lilia) becomes a rite of passage (into the army), a revelation of the mysteries of a new existence. Both Maiakovskii (the poem's speaker) and the reader suddenly find themselves on the threshold of something new and terrifying; Maiakovskii protests against the army's use of men as cannon fodder, but no one listens. Instead, Maiakovskii is shaved from ear to ear, and the image of the soldier as target reappears, but this time motivated by an explanatory element (the shaving):

They stuck the cross  
of the warrior  
on my head  
like a target (PSS 1: 213).

22. Though it might seem naive to identify the speaker of the poem as Maiakovskii himself, to do otherwise would be to miss the point of the poem. Here, as elsewhere, the "I" of the poem refers to himself as "Vladimir Maiakovskii"; while one can certainly argue that this is a stylized character and not the historical Maiakovskii, the insistence on having the speaker share the name of the poet is integral to the problem of personal responsibility and "war guilt" that the poem addresses (see below).

Thus before the beginning of the poem proper, we are introduced to one of its central motifs: the poet as victim. At this point, his suffering (much like his polemical writings about the war in 1914) is only hypothetical; thanks to his "initiation", the poet is preparing himself for sacrifice, but we have yet to see whether or not his death could accomplish anything.

After the Dedication, the poem is divided into five parts, each of which roughly correspond to five different stages of Maiakovskii's vision of the war. Part One presents the decadent, pre-war world, which is compared to the Biblical cities that symbolize evil (Babylon and Sodom). In Part Two, the poet arranges the adversaries like a boy with his toy soldiers, calling out the names of each of the countries that will be swept up in the conflict, and enumerating the civilized values that each one is abandoning for the sake of battle. The entire world has become a vast coliseum in Part Three, and time stops one moment before the battle begins. War is declared on paradise itself, but when the heavenly gates are breached, the Gods have already fled. In Part Four, the image of poet as martyr reaches its apotheosis when Maiakovskii himself assumes responsibility for every atrocity committed during wartime, all the while renouncing poetry as ineffectual. In the beginning of Part Five, the poet rejects the chaos he has just described, and through a sheer act of will, transforms the world into a long-awaited paradise that seems barely credible after the experience of the first four parts. Maiakovskii, like the heroes of so many utopian fictions, is challenged to convince his contemporaries of the accuracy of his vision of the world to come. In the Prologue, he had declared that "And I/am the only/ herald of the coming truths/on earth" (PSS 1: 212), and in the poem's last stanza, he desperately attempts to get the reader to recognize his prophetic vision: "Don't you see./ squinting, looking?/ Your eyes are two little slits./ Wider! Look?/My huge eyes/ are the door to the temple, open to all." (PSS 1: 242)

For the purposes of the present study, Part IV is pivotal, since it is in this part that both the themes of martyrdom and guilt, as well as the connection between war and poetry reach their culmination. Throughout the poem, Maiakovskii, who had spent the better part of 1914 arguing that his particular school of writing is best suited for times of war, calls the efficacy of poetry into doubt. In the prologue, he writes "What are/ the fringes of some verses" to those who have just come back from war. (PSS 1: 211) "You can't squeeze the cry of wrath/ into quiet little tomes of verse" (PSS 1: 215), he writes in Part II. By Part IV, his sense of the inadequacy of poetry that he rejects verse altogether:

No!  
Not in verse!  
I'd better

tie my tongue in a knot  
 than talk.  
 This  
 can't be said in verse.  
 As if the pampered tongue of the poet  
 is going to lick burning braziers! (PSS 1: 230)

These lines create a paradox that should be familiar to Maiakovskii's readers: just as the manifestos of the Futurists were written in plain speech rather than *zaum* ("trans-sense"), Maiakovskii's diatribe against poetry is written in verse. The irony is doubled when one recalls that when Maiakovskii made his grandiose claims about Futurist poetry's power to describe the war, he did so in prose rather than in verse. Though Maiakovskii is a remarkably self-conscious poet, he rarely completes the circle of self-referential writing: the subject and the commentary on it are never one seamless entity (as is the case in postmodern metafiction). Maiakovskii always needed prose as the meta-language to his poetry.

Maiakovskii's inability to describe the war is connected to his culpability as a witness. Part IV is dominated by doubts about the veracity of the world he is describing ("You think: he's lying!" [PSS 1: 228]), and by the conflation of the horrors of war he is describing with the verses he uses to describe them:

You take pain,  
 and you grow it and grow it:  
 the chest stabbed with all the lances,  
 the face twisted by all the gasses,  
 the citadel of the head raided by all the artillery –  
 this is every one of my quatrains. (PSS 1: 229)

His verse itself has become identified with weapons and destruction, and from merely embodying casualties to causing them is only a small step. A key figure in the connection between witness and war criminal is that of Vii, the monstrous, walking eye from Gogol's fantastic story of the same name:

Listen:  
 Time roars  
 out of me  
 like the blind Vii:  
 "Lift them up,  
 Lift up the  
 eyelids of ages!" (PSS 1: 230)

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

Into Christians sinking  
 their incisors,  
 lions let out a roar.  
 You think it's Nero?  
 It is I,  
 Maiakovskii  
 Vladimir,  
 who covered the circus with his drunken eye. (PSS 1: 231)

For Maiakovskii, the horror of Nero's crime is not merely that he had Christians put to death, but that he turned their execution into a public spectacle, whose audience he helped comprise. Like Vii, Nero is crucial to the ethics of the poem, for Nero, as both mass-murderer and voyeuristic spectator to his own crimes, is used to bridge the gap between two seemingly-distinct kinds of guilt: the guilt of the murderer and the guilt of the fascinated onlooker. Part Three begins with an invocation to Nero, who, as the founder of public torture, would particularly enjoy World War I. The first few verses of Part III develop the metaphor of the war as Roman gladiators, fighting for the pleasure of a bloodthirsty (but untouched) audience: "today/the entire world/ is a Coliseum" (PSS I:224). For Maiakovskii, the ethical dilemma of the war is only compounded by its representation. Considered the first modern war, World War I introduced (for Maiakovskii, at least) a conundrum familiar today to chroniclers of the bloodshed in the Balkans and Central Africa: at what point does depiction of the war degenerate into "war porn," designed not only to inform but to arouse a morbid curiosity? Here we find one of the possible sources behind Maiakovskii's impulse toward martyrdom in Part IV: in the series of 1914 essays discussed above, Maiakovskii argued that his own particular artistic approach was the most appropriate for representing the war, and if representation is itself implicated in a conflict that the poet now finds abhorrent, then Maiakovskii's own hands are far from clean.

Of course, martyrdom came naturally for Maiakovskii; especially martyrdom of the Christian sort. But Maiakovskii also had a predilection for the literalized metaphor: if Christ takes on the sins of others, then he may as well have committed them. The poet, who takes on the sins of humanity so as to free the world of the future from the burden of this guilt, seems to take perverse pleasure in cataloguing his alleged crimes. He begins with a statement of global responsibility: "I / alone am to blame / for the growing crunch of lives broken!" (PSS 1: 230-31). His assumption of guilt relieves all others of the burden:

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

Refusing to spare himself, he makes sure that the reader cannot fail to identify the "I" of the poem with Vladimir Maiakovskii himself: "It is I, / Maiakovskii, / who bore / to the foot of the idol / the beheaded infant." (PSS 1: 231) All of these examples point both to Christ-like behavior and to a demonic parody of Christ's sacrifice. The word for "infant" (*младенец*) is the same usually used for the Christ-child himself, but here the child never gets the chance to grow to adulthood and suffer for the sake of the world; rather, he is sacrificed prematurely, to a pagan idol, by the poet himself. Indeed, Maiakovskii is Christ's polar opposite, a Dostoevskian Grand Inquisitor:

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

Maiakovskii's pervasive New Testament references, if anything, make the poem less apocalyptic and more demonic, since he usually transforms Chris-



tian symbolism into a grotesque mockery of purposeful suffering.<sup>23</sup> Rather than redeeming humanity through his misery, Maiakovskii simply becomes a greater and greater sinner, himself in need of mercy: "For Christ's sake,/ for the sake of Christ, / Forgive me!" (PSS 1: 232). Maiakovskii's parodic self-torture *in imitatio Christi* reaches its height at the end of Part IV:

Rejoice!  
The only cannibal  
is executing himself!

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

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

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

23. As Lawrence Stahlberger convincingly argues, "Majakovskij's attitude toward the Christian myth was not one of simple acceptance or rejection," but was first and foremost creative: "[h]is poetry may be studied under the double aspect of his adaptation of the Christian myth and his attempt to create another." (Lawrence Leo Stahlberger, *The Symbolic System of Mayakovsky* [The Hague: Mouton, 1964], p. 13).

man attempts to surround nature and put it inside his (social) body, than the sacramental meal.<sup>24</sup>

Images of ingestion abound in *War and the Universe*, though usually not in the pure, apocalyptic form described above. Maiakovskii instead favors what Frye terms the "demonic" variant of transubstantiation: cannibalism. In the excerpt cited above, Maiakovskii brings cannibalism and transubstantiation together, providing a bridge from the demonic world of Part IV to the utopian, apocalyptic vision of Part V. Maiakovskii's body is not the body of Christ, and eating from it is not communion. Since Maiakovskii takes on the role of both victim and victimizer, it makes sense that he should choose to identify himself with a cannibal who carries out his own execution (presumably by eating himself alive). The image is a perfect symbol for the senselessness of a war that does not lead to a better future, that is, to a demonic war that is not the harbinger of post-apocalyptic utopia: the apocalyptic conception of time sees it as vector, always pointing in one direction, but Maiakovskii embodies the war within himself to show it to be nothing but "bad infinity" in which man ceaselessly consumes himself.

#### The rapture of rupture

The key to the sudden transition from pessimism to optimism at the end of Part IV lies in the fact that Maiakovskii's poetic persona is both apocalyptic and demonic at the same time, or, at the very least, alternates between the two with startling rapidity. The poet debases both his sacrifice and the idea of communion with his reference to the cannibal, and yet he also suggests that even his parodic self-sacrifice can be the foundation of future happiness: there is a man (*человек*) who will be worthy of true communion. If Christ's sacrifice worked through synecdoche (part of mankind sacrifices itself for the whole), Maiakovskii's self-scapegoating works through a total identity of the part and the whole, creating a collective Christ that resembles the poet's description of a wartime army in "We Also Want Meat!"<sup>25</sup> Maiakovskii takes

24. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 143, italics in the original.

25. Maiakovskii's insistence on total identification with all of humanity works against the typical role of the scapegoat or martyr. In *Violence and the Sacred*, René Girard defines sacrifices in terms of society's attempt "to deflect upon a relatively indifferent victim, a 'sacrificeable' victim, the violence that would otherwise be vented on its own members, the people it most desires to protect." Girard sees the "surrogate victim" as a "double" for the community: "A single victim can be substituted for all the potential victims; . . . he can be substituted, in fact, for each and every member of the community." (René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, Trans. Patrick Gregory [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1979], pp. 4, 79). Again we see the crucial role played by synecdoche: a small subset of the community represents it and bears the brunt of the violence that would otherwise threaten everyone. Maiakovskii will not let the

on humanity's evil by quite literally becoming all of sinning mankind, and his death therefore cleanses the earth of those who have offended against it.<sup>26</sup> Maiakovskii's Christ is demonic in that his sacrifice is not an act of mercy, for none of the guilty are spared; rather, Maiakovskii combines the martyrdom of Christ with the harsh judgment that led Jehovah to eradicate all mankind save Noah and his family. Maiakovskii's Christ dies not for mankind but with mankind; the result resembles a bizarre conflation of Old and New Testaments, in which God sends his only son down to earth, only to wipe him out in a flood along with the rest of humanity.

Despite this cataclysm, however, the poem manages to end on a decidedly hopeful note, an optimism made possible by rejecting all connections to the world of the past (the previous four sections). Though the shift strains credibility, it is also a quintessentially futurist move, constituting the refusal to buckle under the weight of the past. Maiakovskii's vision of a glorious future is based on an ahistorical, extra-biological inheritance: this new man has no genealogy, and seems to have no connection whatsoever with the humanity that exterminated itself in the previous section. If the nineteenth-century philosopher Nikolai Fedorov's vision is based on filial piety (all of mankind will reject reproduction in order to resurrect their dead ancestors), Maiakovskii's utopia is one where the burden of filial ties has been entirely lifted. Much has been made about the most arresting image in Part V: "Imagine - / there / under the tree / they saw / Christ / playing checkers with Cain" (PSS 1: 241). Certainly, this is a powerful image of redemption, in which the first murderer sits down for a game with the supreme martyr. But both Cain and Christ are usually located in a context combining both the family and sacrifice: Cain kills his brother after his offering to God is found wanting, while the martyr-

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synecdoche function properly, for he is unwilling to divorce the part from the whole it represents: whatever happens to one happens to the other. Therefore it is difficult to conceive of the poet's sacrifice as truly redemptive, since before the appearance of the mysterious "man" who dominates Part Five, there is no one left to be redeemed.

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

26. Cf. Roman Jakobson: "The poet himself is an expiatory offering in the name of that universal and real resurrection that is to come; that was the theme of the poem 'War and the Universe'." Roman Jakobson, "On a Generation that Squandered its Poets," in *Language in Literature*, ed. by Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1987), p. 280.

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

The optimism of Part V is explicable only if we accept the poem's logic of maximalism, voluntarism, and rupture: the world does not end, quite simply because the speaker refuses to believe that its end is possible ("No, it can't be") (PSS I: 234). The poet orders his brain to create cities, and a world of unparalleled joy and mercy is created. In a transparent nod to Fedorov's *Philosophy of the Common Cause*, the dead are physically resurrected after the earth extracts a promise from the corpses to forswear killing. Where all the nations lined up for battle in Part I, now each brings its offerings to the "man" who is to inherit the new world. Where this man comes from is not clear: does he represent all the resurrected dead, or is he unrelated to them? More than anything, he, like the rebuilt cities, seems to be a product of Maiakovskii's all-powerful imagination, the result of the poet's unwillingness to accept the world's end. Indeed, by the end of the poem, the question of the new man's existence shifts to a completely different temporal reference point: after describing the future paradise, the poet ends his poem with an appeal to the readers: "And he, / the free man, the one I'm shouting about, / – he will come, / believe me, / believe me!" (PSS 1: 242). Belief is crucial: within the poem itself, the new man arrives thanks to the poet's faith; in our world, he will arrive only thanks to ours.

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