THE REVOLUTIONARY JA:
MAYAKOVSKY AND BEZRUČ
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This paper stems from the realization that Mayakovsky’s poetry has been taken as the work of a unique voice, whose lyric ego stands as a particular personality in the history of Russian, and world, verse. Viktor Terras calls him first and foremost a “star... [who was] a legend from the outset of his career, and everything he did later enhanced his image, which was much more than life size while he was living and grew to heroic proportions after his sensational suicide”.¹ Mayakovsky’s persona set him apart from the rest of his contemporaries, perhaps more so than his skill at composing verses. He is often described as an unrefined poet, whose massive ego prevented more elegant verses, with critics often taking his persona as identical to Mayakovsky’s actual identity. Edward J. Brown, for example, states that “when his ‘lyrical I’ speaks of a razor and a throat we may be certain that the razor and the throat are his, and that if blood flows in the poem it will be real, and his own”.²

Boris Tomashevsky, on the other hand, argues that “the biography that is useful to the literary historian is not the author’s curriculum vitae or the investigator’s account of his life. What the literary historian really needs is the biographical legend created by the author himself. Only such a legend is literary fact.”³ With this quote in mind, I would like to concentrate on Mayakovsky’s own created legend, that bigger-than-life ego, not as identical to his own person, but rather as a formal method which he used to attempt broad social changes.

In my own studies of Czech literature, I found that Petr Bezruč’s poetry shares a similar stance to that of Mayakovsky, specifically in style and the use of the poetic ego in inciting social transformation. Bezruč, like Mayakovsky, used bombastic poetry centering on a lyric ego that was bigger than life, and employed a specific dialect connected to those for whom he wrote. For those who are not acquainted with Petr Bezruč, this is the pseudonym of Vladimir Vašek, a Silesian poet, who lived from 1867-1958.
He produced only three collections of poetry, *Slezske pisne* (Silesian Songs) in 1900, *Stužkonoska modrá* (The Blue Underwing) in 1930, and *Přátelům a nepřátelům* (To My Friends and Enemies) in the year he died.

I am not attempting to uncover a hidden influence of the Silesian bard on the great Russian poet, which is virtually impossible, given that Bezruč was only translated into Russian after the death of both poets, but rather, the goal of this paper will be to compare the two poets in an effort to uncover the specific formal relationship of their poetic egos to the reader. It is important to note at this juncture that the two poets did not completely share political views or even generic ones. Mayakovsky, from his youth, was associated with Socialism, even being arrested twice for sedition. Bezruč, Mayakovsky’s elder by twenty-six years, was more associated with the anarchists, specifically in their antagonism to the German, Polish and Jewish ruling class in Silesia. Far more so than Mayakovsky, Bezruč concentrated his efforts on the small, mostly mining region of his youth, from which his father had been expelled for nationalist rhetoric, but where the younger Bezruč never faced jail time (although he was investigated several times and held by the police, the government never found reason to actually imprison him). Bezruč can not be called a futurist, taking more of his influences from symbolism and the *poètes maudits*, although he did learn Russian and read the Russian greats, and, it must be admitted, Mayakovsky’s relationship to the symbolists is contradictory at best. Despite their differing politics, political situations, and generic stances, both authors provided a moral indignation towards the human suffering they saw and experienced and, through their poetry, tried to give voice to the underclasses. I believe that these differences can even be helpful in discovering the formal method at the heart of both poets. In looking at the two poems included at the end of this paper, the similarities in the poetic egos come to the fore. Both poems issue a challenge to the reader to take up the cause of the poet, despite offering different visions of the world.
The two men have a surprising similar style and content, both engaging in extreme egotism, antagonism, absurdism, and use of a specific linguistic register. Both poets became symbols of the revolutions they espoused (at least to some degree espoused), with stations, towns and even mines named after them. Bezruč received the title “national artist” in 1945, in the first group of so-named artists immediately after the Second World War, testifying to his political acceptance under Socialism, and Mayakovsky was famously declared by Stalin “the best and most talented poet of the Soviet epoch”. But what made them so successful in their fervor? What made them especially suited to being revolutionary poets? Moreover, how did such strong poetic egos strive towards an egalitarian revolution? Why did the populous accept the revolutionary strivings of such individuals, and such strong ones at that?

It is precisely the strength of the lyric ego that enhances its ability to play the role of the revolutionary. It is this strong lyric ego that I intend to define as the “revolutionary ja”. With this definition, one may ask: what is the aim of the revolutionary poet? To make a somewhat tautological claim, it is to incite revolution. Far from a trite statement, however, this shows that the revolutionary poet must precede the revolution, have a certain type of authority to describe the rationale for revolution, and point to the final goal of social upheaval, without becoming a totalitarian of this vision. In order to incite revolution, the revolutionary poet must first gain the trust of his readership, which Bezruč and Mayakovsky developed through a two-fold method: first through aggrandizing the self, and secondly through detracting from that same self. This contradictory effort works at once to establish the validity of the speaker, emphasizing his immenseness compared to the immenseness of the problems, and secondly to connect the speaker to his “merely” human readership. Once they have established this connection, they can bear witness to the injustices that need to be overcome through revolution, only after which can the poet challenge his readership to initiate revolution.

For the sake of brevity, so necessary in a conference paper, I will be concentrating on
Mayakovsky’s early poetry, specifically up to 150,000,000, and on Bezruč’s collection *Slezské písně*. Mayakovsky’s lyric ego certainly does not diminish after this period, but the revolutionary rhetoric begins to die down at this point, and the authorities -and the public for that matter -are becoming less and less welcoming to his program. Eric Naiman also points to this poem as a moment of distinct change in Mayakovsky’s work. Bezruč does continue to write, but only publishes more poetry later in his life, concentrating on more lyrical motifs.

Both Mayakovsky and Bezruč employ self-aggrandizement to increase the value of their social outrage, although each calls on a different tradition. Bezruč harkens back to the days of medieval poetry, which stands as a golden age of Czech literature. His heroes wear shields and knightly regalia, heave bucklers which stand in for the tools of coal-mining. Bezruč stands age-old, as in the poem Ostrava: “A hundred years mute I lived in the pit/a hundred years I dug the coal”\(^5\), and commands his fellow Silesians, “all you in Silesia, I speak to you all/miner and every manjack/ put on your shield and buckler of steel/call thousands to the attack”. The medieval themes are coupled with images from village and country life, transformed from an idyll into the horror of oppression, as in the line “I am dying on the German anvil / and a Pole wields the hammer”.

Mayakovsky for the most part relies on religious imagery, although he does include references to the Byliny and their Bogatyri (especially in the play *Мистерия-буфф*). His poem, *Man*, is organized around Christ’s life, with each section divided as a biography of Jesus: birth, life, passion, ascension, in heaven, return, and to the ages; and his poem “A Cloud in Trousers” was originally entitled “The Thirteenth Apostle”. Mayakovsky did not limit himself to this tradition, however, but aggrandized his stature and vocal prowess, including ascribing natural disasters to himself. Mayakovsky is Vesuvius, the cause of earthquakes, the new Zarathustra. In his poem “To his Beloved Self, the Author Dedicates these Lines”, Mayakovsky mourns, “If I were as small, as the great ocean... Oh, to be poor! like a
billionaire!... oh to be tongue-tied, like Dante or Petrarch!” Although these lines have a great deal of irony, the greatness of Mayakovsky’s ego cannot be doubted for a moment.

In contrast to these moments, Mayakovsky belittles himself through his personal failures. He details his failed loves, showing himself to be weak in such instances, with incredibly personal imagery. As in his moments of spectacular aggrandizement, his moments of failure are expressed through personal pain and biting irony. When learning that one of his loves is getting married, he writes, “All right, marry then. So what. I can take it. As you see, I’m calm!” The reader knows all too well that Mayakovsky is neither apathetic nor calm. In this poem, Mayakovsky falls from being “the most golden-mouthed, whose every word gives a new birthday to the soul” to saying “I arrive, stale, toothlessly mumbling that today I am “amazingly honest””.

Bezruč also deprecates himself by claiming that he is a bad poet, one who writes poor verses. He also emphasizes his loneliness, through his national allegiances and his occupation (that of a miner). He writes, “Sometimes I’ve made ragged rhymes, luckily very few will read them, I blow upon a half-dead flame—the gentry will not give a damn”. His appearance has been degraded through the years in the mine, where “My eyes the coal-dust has clogged and seared, the red has gone from my lips and from my eyebrows, hair and beard hang black icicle tips. Coal-bitter is the bread I bring to eat, day after day I drudge from my blood and from my sweat palaces spring by the Danube’s edge”.

Like Mayakovsky, however, these weaknesses are shown to be strengths at their core. Mayakovsky is seen as human because of his failures, but also as passionate about his life. Bezruč creates himself as a David before the Goliath of the world, although he is great enough to be a David and not merely a nameless soldier who dies before the giant. Both poets create an agonistic relationship to the world and its injustices by enlarging themselves to the same stature as their enemies, but maintain their relatability to those for whom they fight by deprecating themselves in the same breath. It is clear from the passionate failures and enormous egos of the two poets that they are
invested in the issues they write about. This passion also aids in the connection of the poets to their 
readership. In fact, the critical identification of Mayakovsky’s lyric ego with his real ego demonstrates 
his successful development of his revolutionary ja. It proves that his readership, even his critical 
readership, trusts his genuineness.

These two positions lead into the next step of the revolutionary ja: that of bearing witness. For the poet to incite revolution, he must provide examples of why said revolution is necessary. Bezruč 
represents his Silesian miners, calling himself the prophet of the Beskyd people, and mourns the “mine-
a slaves” of Tesin, whom the “Marquis Gero” has beaten and Germanicized. Mayakovsky also speaks for the downtrodden, the students, the prostitutes, and the salesmen. He cannot stand the pain of the people in the streets, who suffer while those with wealth go to “orgy after orgy”. He is horrified at the 
world, and holds himself out to be the one who speaks for all those who suffer.

The poet as prophet is not by any means new in the Russian context, from Pushkin’s Prorok 
forward. The artist already held a position of moral authority in Russia, so it is quite normal that Mayakovsky would take up that mantle. However, combining that position with an enormous ego represents a change in the Russian literary fabric. The stance of an ego is necessarily a subjective one. It is certainly this fact that raised so much concern among critics, who have asked how can Mayakovsky strive for revolution that should be based on an objective view of the world by describing it so subjectively.

The subjective view that is emphasized by the gigantic egos of these two poets serves to aid their bearing witness to the sufferings around them. By bearing witness, both poets create a “we” around their singular ego. The subjectivity undermines the hegemonic “objective” description of the world, and invited their readership to take up their own subjective stance against that hegemony. In this way, the two poets form themselves as precursors to the actual revolutions, more in line with John the Baptist than Christ.
Mayakovsky aligns himself with “thousands of street folk: students, prostitutes, salesmen”. He mourns that no one has written their story: he “spits on the fact that neither Homer nor Ovid invented characters like us pock-marked with soot”. This is part of the grand injustice that Mayakovsky sees in the world, one that must be rectified through revolution. In his 150,000,000, Mayakovsky outright states that he is one of those 150,000,000 and that “150,000,000 is the name of the creator of this poem. It’s rhythms—bullets, it’s rhymes—fires from building to building. 150,000,000 speak with my lips.” Mayakovsky as great ego is metonymic for the entire Russian working class, for whom only such a grandiose personage can speak.

Bezruč stands for his mining people, specifically those from his Silesian home. Like Mayakovsky he seeks to give them a voice, which is underlined by his use of the Silesian dialect. He protests capitalist oppression in Silesia, the Germanicization of his people, , and their general lack of national awareness. Like Mayakovsky, he stands as the metonymic voice of the whole area. In his “That Hideous Sight”, Bezruč claims the same role, that “I Petr Bezruč, Bezruč of Těšín, bard of a nation in chains”, or in “Já”, “I, I the prophet of the Beskyd people... I am the first of the Těšín people, first bard of the Beskyds to speak his word”.

This proletariat and impoverished class follow Mayakovsky in his poetry. It is his song that he wants to sing. With that, he challenges other poets to tell their story as well. Like Bezruč telling the story of his people, Mayakovsky has created his own people in Russia. Because the two poets have denigrated themselves so personally, their anger at the injustices of the world is also seen as personal. These are not abstract injustices that one could read about in textbooks and theoretical papers, but ones that exist in the world before them. This emphasizes the reader’s stake in these problems. The reader is expected to react like the poet because the issues are real.

This is further enhanced by the two poets’ use of language. Bezruč uses the Silesian dialect for his poetry, a very distinct Czech dialect that incorporates Polish, Czech, German, and its own innovations
into the language. It is so different than standard Czech, that even the first edition of the work included a lengthy glossary at the end, which has steadily grown larger in each successive edition. Mayakovsky incorporated the language of the street into his poetry, even using vulgarities that would later cause an outcry among his audiences. These specific dialects appeal to specific readerships: for Bezruč his Silesians, and for Mayakovsky his proletariat.

Once a readership has been created, the final step of the revolutionary poet can commence: he challenges his readers to revolution. This challenge is the most abstract part of the poetry thus far. As in the poems with which I began, both poets ask their readers who will stand up in their places. They do not ask people to recreate the revolutionary’s poetry, but to take up their causes and create the eventual revolution. There can be no blue print for the revolution because both poets are individuals appealing to other individuals, as subjects. If they do not, then the poetry sinks into trite didacticism and merely another form of totalitarianism. This brings us to the final problem that needs to be addressed.

What happens after the revolution? The revolutionary poets were expected to disappear after the world changed. Mayakovsky certainly worked on long after he was welcome in the proletariat ranks, before finally committing suicide. Bezruč, however, was able to live a longer life because he simply disappeared. By the time communism was established in Russia, Bezruč had already blended into the Silesian mountainside, only to occasionally reappear in the mid-fifties with a small collection of short stories and a few more poems.

The problem lies in the great egos of these two poets. If they come from a subjective stance before the revolution, how can that subjective position be incorporated into an egalitarian system that strives towards homogeneity and systemization? Neither author was able to be completely integrated into their respective systems despite their devotion to their cause. This is not a failure of the
revolutionary ego in itself, but rather representative of a failure to be able to change from the precursor of a revolution to one who exists after it.
Kdo na moje místo?

Tak málo mám krve a ještě mi teče z úst.
Až bude růst
nade mnou tráva, až budu hnít,
kdo na moje místo,
kdo zdvihne můj štít?

V dým zahalen vítkovských pecí jsem stál,
noc zřela mi z očí, plam z nozdry mi vál,
nech zářilo slunce, nech večer se šeří,
já semknutou brvou jsem vrány ty měřil:
ty bohaté židy, ty grofy ze šlachty,
já škaredý horník, jak vyskočil z šachty.
Nech diadem jednomu na skráni svítil,
každý z nich upjatý pohled můj cítil,
mou zaťatou pěst, můj vzdor,
hněv horníka z Beskyd a z hor.

Tak málo mám krve a ještě mi teče z úst.
Až bude růst
nade mnou tráva, až budu hnít,
kdo místo mne na stáž,
kdo zdvihne můj štít?

Who in my place?

I have such little blood and yet it pours
From my mouth
Until there will grow
Above me grass, until I will decay
Who in my place
Who will raise my shield?

А вы смогли бы?

Я сразу смазал карту будня,
плеснувши краску из стакана;
я показал на блюде студня
косые скулы океана.
На чешуе жестяной рыбы
прочел я зовы новых губ.
А вы
ноктюрн сыграть
могли бы
на флейте водосточных труб?

And could you?

I suddenly smeared the weekday map
splashing paint from a glass;
On a plate of aspic
I revealed
the ocean's slanted cheek.
On the scales of a tin fish
I read the summons of new lips.
And you
could you perform
a nocturne
on a drainpipe flute?
REFERENCES:


4 See Eric Naiman, *Sex in Public*, p. 67


6 Gero being the old German warrior who conquered and persecuted the Slavs in Central Europe in the 10th century.