

Boris Dralyuk
Evgenii Evtushenko's
Civic-Minded Lyricism in „Babii Iar”

Throughout his long poetic career, Evgenii Evtushenko has been the focal point of controversy both at home and abroad. The nature of this controversy, however, has had far more to do with the political content of his poetry and with his behavior as a professional author and celebrity than with the quality of his poetry itself. Indeed, Evtushenko's oeuvre has primarily been the domain of Sovietologists rather than literary scholars, and his poetry viewed as a sturdy, sometime effective vehicle for rhetoric which defined but did not expand the boundaries of acceptable speech within the Soviet Union. Vera Alexandrova's review of a selection of the poet's work published in 1963 is typical of the more generous estimations he received at the very height of his fame:

From a purely literary point of view [Evtushenko's] poems do not rise above a good average level. But he is exceptionally gifted in expressing the feelings of the Soviet younger people [...] and so he became a kind of mouthpiece for the youth in the years after the war.¹

Simon Karlinsky, who judged Evtushenko's work more sternly, conceded the poet's importance while placing him in the tradition of Russian civic poetry:

Yevtushenko's main strength is in being topical. [His poems] can state the thoughts and attitudes of the younger

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¹ Vera Alexandrova, review of *Yevtushenko: Selected Poems; Posle Stalina, Nasledniki Stalina, Babii Iar i drugie*, *Slavic Review* 22, no. 4 (Dec., 1963): 780–81.

Soviet generation in ways that could not be safely printed in the Soviet Union unless dressed up as verse. There is an obvious analogy in this with the czarist Russia of the 1860s: Nekrasov's verse [...] also had ways of bringing up various "burning issues" otherwise too hot to be aired publicly.²

The dismissive tone of Karlinsky's review is characteristic of serious scholarly attitudes toward Evtushenko's work; more broadly, it seems that Karlinsky does not regard civic "verse" as poetry at all.

It is clear that Evtushenko's status as a civic tribune, a mouthpiece of the youth, discredited him as a serious poet. The gigantic crowds drawn by his readings-*cum*-concerts, which also featured his fellow poets Bella Akhmadulina and Andrei Voznesenskii as well as musical performances, served to peg Evtushenko as an all too eager-to-please popularizer in the eyes of many poets and scholars on either side of the political and cultural divide. Furthermore, Evtushenko's political stance as a moderate dissident who turned his poetic sails whichever way the ill wind of authorized expression happened to blow, has contributed to the impression that the poet was at best a hack, and at worst a lackey of the regime. As the poet and Sovietologist Robert Conquest wrote in 1973, when Evtushenko's reputation had been decisively stripped of any veneer it might have had in the previous decade: "The party's organ, *Pravda*, [...] welcomes Yevtushenko's 'fervent civic-mindedness,' — a phrase that in *Pravda*'s usage indicates, of course, complete loyalty to the *apparat*."³

Yet Evtushenko's poetry presents some intriguing features, which, to be fair cannot be isolated entirely from the realm of politics, but deserve attention in their own right. The reasons for his mass appeal lie not only in the limited catharsis the political content of his poetry offered the youth of the 1950s and '60s, but also in his technical and conceptual approach of uniting two of

² Simon Karlinsky, "Yevtushenko and The Underground Poets," *The Nation* 203, no. 17 (Nov., 1966): 549.

³ Robert Conquest, "The Politics of Poetry: The Sad Case of Yevgeny Yevtushenko," *The New York Times Magazine*, vol. 30 (Sept., 30, 1973): 16.

Russia's dominant poetic traditions, that of lyric and civic verse. This approach resulted in a kind of sensual and markedly personal poem of protest, and characterizes his most well regarded poems, such as "Babii Iar" (1961). The method is not without precedent, and was central in Maiakovskii's work, but a close reading of some of Evtushenko's verse might reveal how poets go about personalizing public issues, and whether or not the tension between the two poles in this particular case was effectively resolved.

In their critical biography of the poet, V. V. Artemov and V. P. Prishchepa reaffirm the commonly held impression that Evtushenko began his career as lyric poet, whose primary models were the balladic poems of Sergei Esenin and songs of his childhood in the decade preceding the war: "Musical harmony in many ways determined the poet's early experiments."⁴ Indeed, Evtushenko himself considers his art primarily lyrical:

And I, for instance, I become popular nationally, not as a political poet: as a poet of love, because for many, many years of Cold War after 1945, some poets even didn't use in the poetry about love [the] word "I" — they were using "we": "we love, we lo..." "If we lo... I love you as I love my country", for instance — that was typical, you know, hypocritical quotation from poetry of that time. [...] Russian poetry traditionally, since Pushkin's time, was very powerful in two fields: in the field of love poetry and the field of political, so-called "civic" poetry.⁵

But as Alexandrova pointed out in a 1962 appraisal of the poet, this lyricism stemmed not only from popular song and the

⁴ V. V. Artemov and V. P. Prishchepa, *Chelovek, kotorogo ne pobedili (Kritiko-biograficheskii ocherk zhizni i tvorchestva E. A. Evtushenko)* (Abakan: Khakass State University, 1996), 30. (My translation.)

⁵ Evgenii Evtushenko, interview from CNN's "Cold War" series, *Episode 14: Red Spring*, available from World Wide Web from The National Security Archive at George Washington University: <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/coldwar/interviews/episode-14/yevtushenko1.html>.

works of Esenin, but from what must have seemed a less likely source, Vladimir Maiakovskii:

Non-Russian readers may be puzzled by the new flare-up of enthusiasm for Mayakovsky. These readers should remember that there are two Mayakovskys, very unlike one another. One is the officially edited Mayakovsky, [...] the Soviet bard approved by Stalin; the other is the poet reflected through the prism of the minds and feelings of his Comsomol audience in the provinces. [...] What has brought [Esenin and Maiakovskii] together is the response of Soviet provincial readers. This has benefited both poets, stressing the democratic motifs in their work, and pushing further into the background the tribute they had paid to the officially required "civic spirit."⁶

Alexandrova argues that Evtushenko and his contemporaries tended to 'soften' Maiakovskii's rough, monumental image, pointing to poems such as "Mat' Maiakovskogo [Maiakovskii's Mother]" (1954), in which Evtushenko paints a poignant domestic scene of a mother for whom the "rough-headed" poet who "thundered on the stages," was "in a word, simply Volodja."⁷ Though this poem sheds light on the manner in which Evtushenko and his generation conceived of Maiakovskii the man, Alexandrova does not discuss whether and in what way Maiakovskii's verse actually influenced the work of the younger poet, other than to say that "Mayakovsky remained 'a stutterer' even in his lyrics, while Evtushenko is softer, more tender, more akin to Esenin."⁸ Alexandrova omits the fact that Maiakovskii's work is not evenly split between lyrics and poems of civic concern; it is rather the case that his civic works are themselves remarkably lyrical, never free of the presence of the Romantic poet-hero, who

⁶ Vera Alexandrova and Mirra Ginsburg, "Evgeny Evtushenko," *Russian Review* 21, no. 3 (Jul., 1962): 235–36.

⁷ Evgenii Evtushenko, *Sobranie sochinenii v trekh tomakh*, vol. 1, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy, 1952–1964* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaja literatura, 1983), 40. (My translation.)

⁸ Alexandrova and Ginsburg, 235.

loves and suffers, extols or heaps scorn upon the personae and events in his private and public lives. Is this fusion of the lyric and civic present in Evtushenko's work? And if so, is it as consistent as Maiakovskii's?

Perhaps we can arrive at an answer by taking a closer look at one of Evtushenko's better-known works, 1961's "Babii Yar."⁹ The poem begins:

No monument stands over Babii Yar.
A drop sheer as a crude gravestone.
I am afraid.
 Today I am as old in years
as all the Jewish people.

The first two lines situate the reader in the present day, at the infamous site of a massacre. The tone is decidedly austere and impersonal, and the meter (of both unrhymed lines in the original) is iambic pentameter. This portentous formal introduction smacks of the meditative and dramatic traditions of Russian verse. As Michael Wachtel explains:

Blank verse was already used by Russian poets in the eighteenth century in imitations of antiquity [...] and, beginning in the nineteenth century, in drama (following Shakespeare's example), lyric meditations, and some imitations of folklore. The term blank verse is sometimes restricted to mean only unrhymed iambic pentameter.¹⁰

This opening, therefore, carries definite echoes of the civic poetic tradition. It was Aleksandr Pushkin's (1799-1837) dramas which brought blank verse to the fore, and Evtushenko's "[...] over Babii Yar \ A drop sheer" seems almost an ominous echo of Pushkin's "On the shore of desert waves," the first line of *The*

⁹ Evtushenko, *Sobranie sochinenii*, pp. 316–18. English version is drawn from Yevgeny Yevtushenko, "Babii Yar," translated by George Reavey, in *The Collected Poems: 1952–1990*, ed. Albert C. Todd, Yevgeny Yevtushenko, and James Ragan (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1991), 102–4.

¹⁰ Michael Wachtel, *The Cambridge Introduction to Russian Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 27.

Bronze Horseman (1833), the first section of which epitomizes the civic tradition. By beginning with lines that metrically allude both to the dramatic and civic modes, Evtushenko fully inhabits his highly performative role as a Soviet declaimer of verse, theatrically posturing for his audience.

In addition to formal cues, the setting of Evtushenko's poem, saturated with historic significance, the severe, ruminative tone, and an undeniably authorial perspective, which hovers above the scene at an omniscient remove, would lead a reader to expect a diatribe on our common lot. The diatribe we are led to expect is an ode of a distinctly nineteenth-century "critical realist" civic tradition associated, perhaps not altogether fairly, with the work of Nikolai Nekrasov. Instead, the curt third line thrusts the reader directly into the existential state of the first person poet-hero. This intrusion of the lyrical I into civic discourse is characteristic of Evtushenko. It is, of course, nothing new.

The poem's *mise en page* cannot fail to bring to mind Maiakovskii's *lesenka* (step-ladder) forms, and that poet's radically egocentric poetics are certainly a direct, acknowledged antecedent for Evtushenko's voice. Maiakovskii, too, used a lyric and odic — or perhaps bardic — voice for his civic and political verse; his poem on Lenin, for instance, does not begin with Lenin himself, but with, "It's time — \ I start \ the tale about Lenin." As Wachtel writes, the Maiakovskian formal example inaugurated an odic tradition different from that of the preceding century:

While poems entitled "ode" remained infrequent in the Soviet period, there can be no doubt that the Soviet Union gave its poets numerous occasions for odic (celebratory) verse: holidays, anniversaries (particularly of the Revolution), deaths (of famous leaders), and abstract concepts (the Party, communism). In all these areas, Mayakovsky created the standard against which subsequent poets measured themselves, and Mayakovsky's *lesenka* became the preferred form of expression.¹¹

¹¹Michael Wachtel, *The Development of Russian Verse: Meter and its Meanings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 220.

I am behind bars.
 Beset on every side.
 Hounded,
 spat on,
 slandered.
 Squealing, dainty ladies in flounced Brussels lace
 stick their parasols into my face.
 I seem to be then
 a young boy in Byelostok.
 Blood runs, spilling over the floors.
 The barroom rabble-rousers
 give off a stench of vodka and onion.
 A boot kicks me aside, helpless.
 [*lit.* I, kicked by a boot, am helpless.]
 In vain I plead with these pogrom bullies.
 While they jeer and shout,
 "Beat the Yids. Save Russia!"
 some grain-marketeer beats up my mother.

We again see a proliferation of the first person singular. Evtushenko relates these historical episodes with the profound immediacy of a man accessing repressed memories under hypnosis. The action, of which there is quite a bit, is rendered with the help of imperfective verbs in the present tense: "*stick* their parasols," "[b]lood *runs*," "*give* off a stench," and "*plead* with the pogrom bullies." This is very much in keeping with Maiakovskii's energetic, muscular poetics, though, as Alexandrova suggests, it tends toward "softness," even toward the sentimental.

The next section, however, exhibits a fairly drastic shift:

O my Russian people!
 I know
 you
 are international to the core.
 But those with unclean hands
 have often made a jingle of your purest name.
 I know the goodness of my [*lit.* your] land.
 How vile these anti-Semites —
 without a qualm

they pompously called themselves
the Union of the Russian People!

Evtushenko's odic apostrophe in line 32 sets the stage for a return to the Nekrasovian rebuke the poem's dour initial couplet suggested. The section is rife with clunky rhetoric, epitomized by the word "international [*lit.* of an international nature]" in line 35, in which the poet indicts the indefinite "those with unclean hands," in giving their motherland a bad name. This historical lament, consigned to the past tense of "*have often made* a jingle of your name" and "pompously *called* themselves," is a far cry from the lively and affecting immediacy of the previous sections. This kind of halting criticism couched in praise is emblematic of what many have seen as Evtushenko's knack for political expediency. Evtushenko's tempered fervor has been derided as dishonest — a pale, or rather gaudy imitation of the genuine passion and consequent disillusionment of Maiakovskii. As Karlinsky writes:

Yevtushenko [has] the habit of interspersing his more daring efforts with more conventional or even conformist utterances on the standard themes of official Soviet poetry [...]. When Mayakovsky treated similar themes back in the 1920s, there was no doubt that they represented his actual convictions; in Yevtushenko [...], whatever [his] feelings may be, the reader gets the inevitable Soviet clichés which all Soviet writers (and especially those allowed to travel abroad) have been required to reiterate *ad nauseum* for the past thirty years.¹²

This section seems inorganically grafted into the text, and, indeed, Evtushenko often amputated it when reciting the poem publicly. He did so, for instance, in collaboration with Dmitrii Shostakovich, who set the poem to music in his *Symphony no. 13*.¹³ What follows confirms this impression:

¹²Karlinsky, p. 550.

¹³Dmitrii Shostakovich, *Symphony no. 13; for bass solo, male chorus, and orchestra, op. 113* (Willowdale, Ont.: Leeds Music, 1970) [sound recording].

I seem to be
 Anne Frank
 transparent
 as a branch in April.
 And I love.
 And have no need of phrases.
 My need
 is that we gaze into each other.
 How little we can see
 or smell!
 We are denied the leaves,
 we are denied the sky.
 Yet we can do so much —
 tenderly
 embrace each other in a darkened room.
 They're coming here?
 Be not afraid. Those are the booming
 sounds of spring:
 spring is coming here.
 Come then to me.
 Quick, give me your lips.
 Are they smashing down the door?
 No, it's the ice breaking...

Line 43 returns us to the '*I seem to be*' formula, and our structure of vignettes. Though the episode of Anne Frank replicates the immediacy of the previous sections, it differs from them as well. Whatever indications of sentimentalism had been given before are here fully realized. In fact, the episode is an entirely self-contained love lyric that takes the form of a duet. Though Anne's questions hint at some malevolent force approaching the door, the romance between the two characters takes center stage. If Ev-tushenko seeks to universalize the experience of the oppressed, he does so, characteristically, by appealing to what he must deem the most "universal" of sentiments: romantic passion and idyllic domesticity. As he himself claims, and early poems such as "Mat' Maiakovskogo" demonstrate, he is primarily a lyric poet, even when dealing with issues and persons of great civic importance. But again, the theatrical nature of the verse evidences a note of

hysteria, as does the poet's embodiment of an iconic victim in a manner which stresses her nascent sexuality. The intersection of civic themes and lyric forms here leaves the reader ill at ease. Though the poet's perspective is still evident, perhaps inadvertently — it is doubtful that Anne Frank would refer to herself in terms as sensual as “transparent \ as a branch in April” — this kind of sustained, earnest lyrical role-playing is something we are as unlikely to encounter in Maiakovskii as the dry, clichéd ode-segment that preceded it.

In the poem's concluding section, the poet-hero emerges from behind the masks of the preceding sections:

The wild grasses rustle over Babii Yar.
The trees look ominous,
 like judges.
Here all things scream silently,
 and, baring my head,
slowly I feel myself
 turning gray.
And I myself
 am one massive, soundless scream
above the thousand thousand buried here.
I am
 each old man [\] here shot dead.
I am
 every child [\] here shot dead.
Nothing in me
 shall ever forget! [*lit.* shall forget about this!]
The “Internationale,” let it
 thunder
when the last anti-Semite on earth
is buried forever.
In my blood there is no Jewish blood.
In their callous rage, all anti-Semites
must hate me now [\]
 as a Jew.
For that reason
 I am a true Russian!

In line 66's iambic pentameter (in the original), the poet is again perched on the precipice à la the Pushkinian voice at the poem's beginning. Immediately thereafter we return to the Soviet ode, where the poet-hero, however, is no longer any particular emblematic martyr, but is every slain elder and child, and declares, in a fiery, Maiakovskian way, his allegiance to the oppressed Jews. The focus is again on the here and now; the word "here" is repeated in lines 69, 77, and 79. The lyrical I is now quite clearly that of the poet-hero and prophet, who, like Moses, is "slowly [...] turning gray" in the face of eternal truth in line 72. The passage is more Maiakovskian than the earlier abashed Nekrasovian ode-segment, in that it is oriented toward the future: "shall never forget," "let it \ thunder," and "when [...] is buried forever." Also, the colloquial "about this (*pro eto*)" in line 81 has a clear antecedent in Maiakovskii's "Pro Eto: Ei i Mne [About This: To Her and to Me]" (1923), the first of his long poems written in *lesenka*.

After vacillating between discreet lyric and awkward civic passages, and at times conflating them uncomfortably, a more or less consistent voice emerges in this concluding section. Other than the novelty of the topic, however, it offers little new stylistically, relying heavily on the example of Maiakovskii, without, as Karlinsky states, much credibility. Though this voice is steadily sustained in most of Evtushenko's other famous poems of protest, particularly in the heavily laddered "The Heirs of Stalin [Nasledniki Stalina]" (1962), "Babii Iar" best demonstrates his attempt to find a lyric form of expression for civic concerns, to rise above polemics with an unjustified right margin to the realm of poetry. But the voice has deeper implications.

In discussing the similarities and differences between Maiakovskii and his poetic forebear, Walt Whitman — both in terms of their poetic output and the political contexts in which they operated — Clare Cavanaugh makes use of Shelley's notion of poets as unacknowledged legislators of the world:

Both poets were specialists in the art of self-celebration, and both constructed massive bodies in verse to house the monumental egos that are the source and subject of their

work. Both intended these bodies, moreover, to exemplify, even incorporate the politics and people of a flourishing revolutionary state. [...] Whitman may have suffered from the more or less benign neglect that unacknowledged legislators have come to expect in most of the English-speaking world. Mayakovsky's fate may be read as an object lesson in the dangers of acknowledged — or attempted — legislation in a state where Romantic self-glorification had given way to utopian visions of an encompassing collectivity achieved by resolute party leaders and not their poetic minions.¹⁴

The early 1960s were a far more hospitable political environment than the Stalinist 1930s. Indeed, for Evtushenko, the timing couldn't have been better; he had struck upon a civic-lyric formula perfectly suited for an ambivalent post-Stalinist era, arriving at "Romantic self-glorification" through "visions of an encompassing collectivity" — a distinctly political but cautiously selective (Anne Frank and Dreyfus, and not, for instance, Mandelstam) "encompassing collectivity," unlike the inchoate and ever-varying democratic multitudes contained by Whitman's poetic self.

And yet, although Evtushenko's civic-lyric quilt is clearly premeditated, and even shows its seams, there is still the sense that something eludes his control. The penetration of the lyrical I into the civic context — or rather, Evtushenko's positioning of the seemingly omniscient ("O my Russian people! \ I know \ you \ are international to the core"), all-encompassing ("I am \ each old man \ [...] I am \ every child"), all-remembering ("Nothing in me \ shall ever forget!") I as the focal point of civic discourse — strikes a somewhat hysterical note, bared and exacerbated by Evtushenko's overwrought performances. An I that encompasses so much cannot help but fragment and shift. His constant chimerical transformations — into what "seems" to be Dreyfus, what seems to be "a young boy in Byelostok," what "seems" to be Anne Frank, of whom he conceives as a budding nymphomaniac,

¹⁴ Clare Cavanagh, *Lyric Poetry and Modern Politics: Russia, Poland, and the West* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2009), 85.

etc. — end in “one massive, soundless scream.” What can that scream be other than the hysteric’s insistent question — “Who am I?” — bound up, as Jacques Lacan indicates it always is, in the question of gender.¹⁵

The poem concludes with a rather artificial answer to that provocative query. In the concluding lines of “Babii Iar,” Evtushenko’s speaker declares himself to be a “true Russian” by virtue of his ability to identify and embody the Other, by virtue of his universality. Evtushenko’s civic-lyric verse is, after all, a sweeping grab for the mantle of national poet, and this “true Russian” stance could indeed be called Pushkinian, if one accepts the image of Pushkin put forward in Dostoevskii’s 1880 speech:

In fact, European literature has had enormous numbers of artistic geniuses — Shakespeares, Cervanteses, Schillers. But point to at least one of these great geniuses who had possessed such a capacity for universal responsiveness as our Pushkin. And it is this capacity — the chief capacity of our nationality — that he shares with our people, and it is primarily this that makes him a national poet.¹⁶

It is ironic, but not entirely unexpected for a poet who so readily “cursed Stalin from the tribune” (to use Evtushenko’s own formulation from “The Heirs of Stalin”) to take on such a megalomaniacal tone; this is an occupational hazard of civic versifiers. But the heightened pitch of Evtushenko’s poem in both its lyric and civic modes suggests that a more complicated psychological mechanism is at work. The lyric segments of “Babii Iar” repeatedly mount to a kind of hysteria, and are repeatedly displaced in regimented civic rhetoric. Toward the end, when Evtushenko’s lyric voice is raised to its highest level — that of a pervasive silent scream — the speaker withdraws completely into the banal comforts of nationalism. But the hyperbolic nationalist

¹⁵ See Jacques Lacan, “The Hysteric’s Question,” in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book 3: The Psychoses, 1955–1956*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993), 161–72.

¹⁶ F. M. Dostoevskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v tridsati tomakh* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1984), 26: 145.

rhetoric he embraces is not less problematic, shifting before our eyes from vengeful bloodlust (“when the last anti-Semite on earth \ is buried forever”), to something that reads, in isolation, like a claim of racial purity (“my blood there is no Jewish blood”), to a paranoid fantasy of victimhood (“all anti-Semites must hate me now [\] as a Jew”), and ending with a declamatory “I am a true Russian!” which is deeply paradoxical, posing more questions than it answers. “Who am I?” Evtushenko’s civic position is itself — cannot help but be — as hysterical as the lyrical voice it displaces.

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