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Mayakovsky on the Land

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ABSTRACT
It is surprising that Vladimir Mayakovsky, the poet whose self-proclaimed mission was to give city streets a language, turned to publicizing farming collectives. No less noteworthy is the fact that this poet of internationalism worked on the ethnocentric project of promoting Jewish agrarian communities in Crimea. This article addresses Mayakovsky's collaboration on the film *Evrei na zemle* (Jews on the Land, 1927), and his poems "Evrei (Tovarishcham iz OZETa)" (Jew [To Comrades from OZET], 1926) and "'Zhid'" ("Yid," 1928). I argue that in these works the poet reshuffles the *svoi–chuzhoi* (us-versus-them) dichotomy. Using the Moses story of exile and liberation, the poet both domesticates Jews through features of the dominant culture and marginalizes antisemites by ascribing to them the pejorative markers of the Jewish stereotype.

KEYWORDS
Vladimir Mayakovsky; Crimea; poetry; film; Jewish studies; Russian studies

It may seem unexpected that Vladimir Mayakovsky, the poet of internationalism whose self-proclaimed task was to give city streets a language, directed his talents toward the ethnocentric project of publicizing Jewish agrarian collectives in Crimea. These farms, however, were not envisioned in terms of Sergei Esenin's nostalgia for village harmony, mythologized Russianness, or a rejection of modern chaos. Instead, the settlements modeled a different vision for rural life: former shtetl dwellers would turn barren soil into abundance, reimagining themselves as new Jews who conquer nature through sweat and technology. At the same time, the Jewish flight from shtetl poverty through the desert to the land of plenty taps into the Hebrew biblical canon. Mayakovsky advances this vision in his collaboration with Victor Shklovsky on the film captions to *Evrei na zemle* (Jews on the Land, 1927), in his companion poem to the film, "Evrei (Tovarishcham iz OZETa)" (Jew [To comrades from OZET], 1926), and in his final poem on the Jewish question, "'Zhid'" ("Yid," 1928). If the first two works project the Soviet Union as a genuine home for its Jewish population, the last expresses the poet's frustration at the persistence of antisemitism. In presenting Jewish Crimea via the Moses story, the poet both integrates the ultimate Other into images of peasantry and, at the same time, excludes antisemites by means of turning against them the familiar pejorative features of the Jewish stereotype. As a consequence of this flipping of reductionist slurs, it is the perpetrator who embodies a fixed caricature while the victim blends into the majority culture, with the land of the Soviets becoming the new Promised Land.

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As various scholars have noted, Christian symbolism surged in Russian literature of the revolutionary period.[1] In his memoir *Mayakovsky and His Circle*, Shklovsky suggests that the poet uses imagery from the New Testament as the "most accessible mythology" for his audience, even if he does so in order to underscore his blasphemous pose.[2] However, the poet also draws on the Hebrew Bible in his revolutionary works, engaging Noah's Ark in *The Man* (1916–1917) and in *Mystery-Bouffe* (1918), the new tablets from "our" Mount Sinai in *Revolution* (1917), and the golden calf in *Vladimir Il'ich Lenin* (1924). In the works discussed in this study, part of Mayakovsky's target audience is Jewish, and thus the poet delves deeper into the Hebrew Bible, using the figure of Moses to challenge the Jews' marginalization in modern history and to flip the *svoi–chuzhoi* (us-versus-them) dichotomy.

Mayakovsky's trip to America initiated his engagement with Jewish issues at home.[3] While in the U.S., his poetry readings were sponsored in large part by Yiddish newspapers.[4] At one of Mayakovsky's readings, the audience broke into a spontaneous discussion of his poetry in Yiddish, to which the poet, in jest, responded loudly in Georgian.[5] The poet held a fundraiser reading for the Crimea project at an Agro-Joint event on Coney Island, joined the executive board of OZET (Society for Settling Jewish Workers on the Land) upon his return, and lent his celebrity to advertising the Jewish Crimea on the screen. Directed by Abram Room with Lily Brik's assistance, the film *Evrei na zemle* had various conflicting purposes. First, it aimed to mobilize the Jewish population inside the Soviet Union into agricultural collectives. Second, it served as a fundraiser directed at American Jewry. The third and most paradoxical motivation for the film, given its goal to disseminate the virtues of this Soviet Zion,[6] was to address the rising wave of popular antisemitism within the Soviet Union.

The Exodus story has been used traditionally by Zionists to present Palestine as the sacred destination, a return home, but it also becomes a fitting subtext for claiming thematic continuity of Jewishness within Soviet space. A report on an exploratory trip to the Soviet Jewish colonies, for instance, is titled *The New Exodus: The Story of the Historic Movement of Russian Jewry Back to The Soil*. A caption under one of the photographs in this book reads: "History repeats itself in Jewish life after nearly twenty centuries. Like the Jewish maidens of ancient Palestine, this modern Russo-Jewish maiden is tending a flock of sheep on rich, fertile pasture-land."[7] *Evrei na zemle* is one such version of the Moses story, a journey home from exile and slavery.[8] The term *zemlia* refers both to "land" (which taps into the Zionist idea of working on the land, a practice generally denied to Jews in the European diaspora) and to "earth/soil," asserting a life of rootedness.

After projecting images of poverty and lack of opportunity in the shtetl, the film arrives at its programmatic caption: "resettlement on the land is the way out of the situation." The initial appearance of the word *zemlia* stands on its own; for the initiated, it resonates with the Hebrew *haaretz*.[9] The first image of "the land" captures a bearded old man in an extreme long shot heading toward the camera, staff in hand, Moses-like. Once the man approaches the camera (Figure 1), a seven-second close-up of his feet shuffling around the ground of dusty clay (Figure 2) is intercut with the desolate landscape of rolling tumbleweed.

This setting is contrasted to earlier images of the sparkling Black Sea framed by mature trees, "the way Crimea is typically imagined," as the intertitle reads. In fact, the allocation of Crimea for Jewish agrarian settlements fed into a recurring antisemitic trope of

Figure 1. Old man approaches the camera. *Evrei na zemle*, 1927.

privilege at this time.[10] Mayakovsky himself uses Crimea as that stereotypical setting of beach, leisure, tourism, and conspicuous consumption in a movie script of the previous year, *Slon i spichka. Krymskaia kinokomediia* (The Elephant and the Match: A Crimean Cine-Comedy, 1926), describing it as "a resort comedy."[11] In *Evrei na zemle*, the screenwriters' sarcasm around this stereotype comes through their use of quotes around the intertitle "krasivye mesta" (beautiful lands),[12] followed immediately by the old man walking toward the camera through the bare field. As opposed to the crisp sharpness of the sparkling sea in the earlier frames, the image quality here communicates parched dustiness. In fact, Shklovsky recalls having to protect the film equipment from the dust blowing through the empty steppes.[13]

Figure 2. Old man's shuffling feet on the ground of dusty clay. *Evrei na zemle*, 1927.

In his companion poem to the film, "Evrei (Tovarishcham iz OZETa)" (Jew [To comrades from OZET]), Mayakovsky frames the setting in analogous terms. After addressing the myth of Jewish privilege, the speaker describes the Crimean land allocation:

Ни моря нет,

ни куста,

ни селеньица,

худшее из худших мест на Руси –

место,

куда пришли поселенцы,

палаткой взвив

паруса парусин.

Эту пустыню

в усердии рьяном

Какая жрала саранча?!

[No sea, / no bush, / not even the tiniest of settlements, / the worst of the worst places in Russia – / the place / where the settlers came, / their sails fluttering / with the sailcloth of tents in the wind. / Every kind of locust / put its mettlesome efforts to eating / this desert!][14]

Mayakovsky first read "Evrei" at the Inaugural All-Union Congress for Jewish Land Settlement in November 1926, which accompanied the screening of the film. The quick montage in the film from dust to water, as well as the same swift transition in the verses that follow the passage above, is foreshadowed by the "sails" of settlers' tents. At this point, these "sails" are intentionally misplaced in the middle of a boundless "desert," the wind playing not with the waves but with dust. The "sailcloth of tents" introduces tension between the idea of settling on the land and the fear of being swept away, metaphorically at sea and still rootless. Struggle with the elements is captured by the camera as the wind touches everything that moves: smoke from the burning fields, patches of grass, tumbleweed, men's beards and clothing, and especially the tents. Grigory Ryklin, in his piece on the screening of the film for *Izvestiia*, also noticed the "boundless, sea-like" shot of the steppe, reporting that the fluttering screen canvas itself mirrored the images projected onto it.[15]

This struggle with nature extended to the crew and inspired the film thematically. The title of Shklovsky's reminiscences on this project, "S tochki zreniia vetra" (From the Wind's Point of View), defines the wind as that "perspective" through which everything is shot. As Shklovsky writes, the wind shapes the flight of the geese while "scraps of rain and thunder" fly above the earth and "clouds run." The dry wind demolishes nearly half the harvest that year, and tumbleweed rolls past the camera too fast to get onto the screen. The settlers themselves are molded by the wind: their lips are cracked and their hair is faded. The wind blowing through "naked Crimea" frames images of Jews cultivating the land ("I v vetru, v golom Krymu – evrei-zemledel'tsy" [And amidst the wind, in naked Crimea, are the Jewish farmers]). The cinematographer Al'bert Kiun complains that, because of the dust, his camera would last no longer than five years.[16] Iakov Lur'e suggests that the wind here is a "cine-metaphor, determining the rhythm and tonality" of the film and symbolizing the beginnings of a struggle to construct the new Jew. He contrasts *Evrei na zemle* to *Iskateli schast'ia* (Seekers of Happiness), a film that presents the successful completion of that struggle in Birobidzhan.[17]

Mayakovsky's "sailcloth of tents in the wind" echoes Shklovsky's description of the frame in "S tochki zreniia vetra": "the tent is in the middle of the frame, and the wind blows straight through it."[18] The shot that corresponds to Mayakovsky's verses (Figure 3) opens up onto a tent in the middle of a vast field ("No sea, / no bush, / not even the tiniest of settlements").

Figure 3. A circular reveal onto a tent in a vast field. *Evrei na zemle*, 1927.

In Shklovsky's piece, the horizon, "completely clear and circular," mirrors the shot's circular reveal and, once again, evokes a line more typical of a seascape than a place for dwelling. Both Mayakovsky in his poem and Shklovsky in his reminiscences use nautical language to describe the landlocked terrain, pointing to a glaring absence of water's life-sustaining force. Several lines later, however, the "desert" is irrigated by "azure streams":

А нынче

течет ручьевая лазурь;

и пота рабочего

крупный град

сегодня

уже

перелился в лозу,

и сочной гроздью

повис виноград.

[And now / flows the azure of brooks; / and large hail of workers' sweat / today / already / transformed into vine, / and in juicy bunches / grapes hang.][19]

The desert is transformed into the land of the grapevine, referenced frequently in the Hebrew Bible.

After images of men tilling the earth, a polysemantic caption – "Vol provodit chertu pod staruiu zhizn'" (the bull draws the line at the old way of life) – is followed by a

shot of bulls dragging equipment that digs a line in the soil. This boundary, beyond which a new life begins, along with subsequent shots of tent-dwelling Jews, functions to reclaim both the story of Exodus, as well as the kibbutz movement, for Soviet territories.[20] The term *cherta* evokes the Pale of Settlement (*cherta osedlosti*), the newly liberated Jews' metaphorical Egypt. The "line at the old way of life," which represents the end to discriminatory prohibitions, rings with the "line/Pale" of Imperial Russia.

Scenes of well-building and water extraction from the earth, which was presented as hopelessly arid only several minutes earlier, are reminiscent of Moses extracting water from a rock.[21] We see workers digging into the hard ground, with pieces of excavated rock surrounding the pole marker (Figure 4).[22] Four minutes later, a montage of well construction culminates in a towering water wheel, filmed from below. We see the rotating buckets up close, tall grass and a field of wheat captured through the splashing water. The sequence concludes with an aqueduct carrying a sparkling stream (Figure 5).

The luscious seascape shots at the beginning – Crimea of the popular imagination – project untouched nature, while water flowing through the desert is the work of human hands. In his companion poem, "Evrei," Mayakovsky calls the work of these settlers *katorga*: hard labor that suggests exile and punishment, the exact opposite of a resort. While the tent-dwellers amidst desolate dry land are reminiscent of the Israelites wanderings in the desert, the subtext of Moses' aquatic miracles serves to contrast the "heroism" of human labor that, in Mayakovsky's "Evrei," goes into "every drop of water" (*geroistvo … vsiakaia kaplia vody*).[23] Even though in Mayakovsky's poem the "desert" transforms into "flowing brooks," it is the "sweat" of labor that turns it into grapes. Note both Moses' water-into-blood and Jesus' water-into-wine associations of divine miracles. The sweat-into-wine transformation, both of biblical proportions and solely of human potential, is emphasized by the rhyme "[pota rabochego] krupnyi grad" (large hail) / "vinograd" (grapes). Lur'e sees the film's imagery of manmade irrigation as a direct criticism of the religiosity that characterizes shtetl life: people no longer need divine intervention to make rivers flow. Similarly, Mayakovsky translates the biblical narrative into secular language.[24]

The bearded elder travels through the film as a leitmotif, first trying unsuccessfully to sell fish on a shtetl street, then standing with a group of townsfolk, purportedly discussing

Figure 4. Rocky soil surrounding a pole marker. *Evrei na zemle*, 1927.

Figure 5. Aqueduct of glistening water. *Evrei na zemle*, 1927.

their way out of this dead end, then walking toward the camera through the inhospitable-looking land allocated for his people, and finally, sitting comfortably at a table and eating. By this point, he is established as the wisdom-bearer. Aleksandr Pronin suggests that the old man assumes the role of a *raisonneur*, injecting the dramatic principle of plot development into the documentary.[25] He discusses Mayakovsky's preference for documentaries over narrative feature films, but precisely those documentaries that, in Mayakovsky's words, are "organized."[26] However, the old man serves as that organizing principle not only on the level of a *raisonneur* who represents an authorial point of view, but also as a Moses symbol. In the eating scene, the old man translates the biblical land of milk and honey (promised to Moses at the burning bush) into the proletarian land of bread and water: "What I didn't see is bread in the shtetl … . Here we will have bread because there is water … and there is land."[27] The man continues: "An ox [*vol*] does not understand a Jew and a Jew does not understand an ox. That was before. And now: the Jew understood the bull [*byk*] and the bull understood the Jew."[28] One image from the Torah is particularly appropriate in this context: "God brings them out of Egypt and is for them like the horns of the wild ox" (Numbers 23:22). The God–ox simile, the Israelites' source of strength as they leave Egypt, is realized in the film: Jews escape their shtetl predicament by conquering the animal and the natural world. In fact, in "S tochki zreniia vetra," Shklovsky comments on the bulls as the only visual point of stability amidst the wind.[29]

Leonid Katsis draws a parallel between the end of the film and the annual cycle of Torah reading. After ending with Moses' death, the new cycle of Torah goes back to Genesis and its famous "In the beginning." The appearance of the final word of the film's narrative on the screen, "The beginning" (and only several minutes later, the more expected "The End") replicates this cyclical mode of ritual reading.[30] Indeed, as the final portion of the Torah deals with Moses' farewell song, the final utterance of the film belongs to the old man. This circular structure works on the level of imagery as well: after the caption "Beginning," we see a field covered with tall wheat, an image that contrasts to the field in the beginning of the film, with its sparse, dry vegetation.

It is difficult to tease out Mayakovsky's contribution to this project.[31] In fact, the narrative arc is rather formulaic: *Evrei na zemle* meets all the major objectives established by

OZET in representing Jews in their transition from shtetl life to farming collectives. The image of the Jewish peasant becomes the standard representation of Jews. Soviet exhibits of the 1920s and 1930s on Jewish life contrast the old Jewish professions to the new ones, from artisans and petty tradesmen to modern-day farmers and factory workers.[32]

The policy of *korenizatsiia* (indigenization) of the same period, which called for preservation of ethnic cultural practices, at least on the surface, runs counter to the principles of OZET in important ways. Iangirov notes that the idea of a Jewish Crimea at the time was expressed almost entirely in Zionist formulas – healthy bodies attending to the land with sweat and labor – but, significantly, with a nod towards *korenizatsiia* in portraying these farmers through the lens of Jewish traditions.[33] Indeed, Yiddish was the language of instruction in primary and secondary schools, and even at a local agricultural technical school, until Russian became the mandatory language in 1937.[34] *Evrei na zemle* pays lip service to the principle of "indigenization" by repeatedly cutting to signs that are both in Russian and Yiddish. The school children, though, march behind a leader wearing a Soviet pioneer tie, whereas in reality, at least initially, *heders* (Jewish primary religious schools) outstripped secular education in these colonies.[35] Iangirov observes that the crew misses the opportunity to make the film ethnically colorful, that the filmmakers ultimately do not distinguish a "live 'Jew on the land'" from the multitude of generic-looking extras.[36] To my mind, this choice is deliberate and works to erase ethnic differences in representing the new Soviet Jewry, following the principles emerging from OZET. For instance, a 1928 report on an exhibition of portraits done on location in Crimean colonies specifically juxtaposes their immediacy (*estestvenny i neposredstvenny*) to Isaachar Ber Ryback's and Marc Chagall's "conventional" manner (*traditsionnaia uslovnost'*) of depicting East European Jewry.[37]

An important filmic counterpoint to representing the Jews of the Russian empire had been released two years earlier: *Evreiskoe schast'e* (Jewish Luck, 1925). Shklovsky explicitly contrasts this film's depiction of the Jewish past to the Soviet Jewish future: "The Soviet Union will gain a new autonomous region, perhaps a new republic. There is no need to mourn Menakhem-Mendel's tattered umbrella, no need to look for romanticism [*romantizm*] in the past." Shklovsky proposes to leave behind representations of Jewish "local color" – namely, those traditions and characters of the impoverished shtetl existence symbolized by the "tattered umbrella." The critic suggests that future cinematic representations of Menakhem-Mendel should be set in Soviet Russia: "We can show farming colonies […] and Menakhem-Mendel in the foreground, having rejected all 'airy' professions and settled on the land."[38] *Evreiskoe schast'e* presents a Jewish type in profession, dress, speech, and attitude. In the famous poster for the film, Solomon Mikhoels, in the role of Menachem-Mendel, wears a Chaplin-esque bowler hat and is dwarfed by his own shadow. In contrast, the men and women in the documentary *Evrei na zemle*, whether young or old, tame bulls and conquer inhospitable terrain. The Yiddish expression *yiddishe mazl* – literally, "Jewish luck" – in fact means the opposite, "bad luck." *Evrei na zemle* can be read as an answer to "Jewish luck," both to the expression and to the movie's title. *Evrei na zemle* begins with the smalltown setting of *Evreiskoe schast'e*, but continues with Jews who take ownership of their place on earth. Significantly, once Shklovsky's "settling on the land" has taken place, Jewish farmers in the film become visually indistinguishable from Russian farmers, even down to their raising pigs.[39]

Iakov Lur'e points out that the idea of internationalism – in this case, expressed in the absence of ethnic features – dominates depictions of the "new person" in general and particularly in *Evrei na zemle*.[40] The choice to shed Jewishness as a target of tsarist oppression is present in the captions to the film as well as in Mayakovsky's poems "Evrei" and "'Zhid.'" In "Evrei," the poet declares that all "People of labor / look the same"[41]:

узнай –

хоть раз из семи,

который

из этих двух –

из славян,

который из них –

семит.

[I challenge you to identify— / just once out of seven times—which one of these two Slavs / is a Semite."][42]

Sander Gilman has argued that the construction of the Jewish body as inherently different stems from antisemitism. With secularization, the normative "Christian body" becomes, as Gilman puts it, a "German" or an "English" body.[43] To extend Gilman's argument to Mayakovsky's "Evrei," the "Semite" in the above lines does not differ from the "Slavic" body. Similarly, Elena M. Katz discusses the image of the Jew as a "useful foil for designating essential Russian traits."[44] In reminiscing about the "new Jew" that Shklovsky and Room encounter in Crimea, Shklovsky recalls trying to pick out "a Jewish colonist" from among "just a colonist or just a farmer [*krest'ianin*]," and often being wrong.[45] Mayakovsky explicitly targets this antisemitic notion of difference. In the poem's land of labor, the Semites and Slavs look the same, which is depicted in the film by means of its subjects being dressed as Tolstoyan peasants. In these works, Mayakovsky complicates the dichotomy of *svoi–chuzhoi* and widens the parameters of the dominant agrarian/proletarian culture to include the Jews. This shift reverberates in Mayakovsky's poetic confrontations of Jewish stereotypes that surface with increasing frequency in the mid-1920s.

Even though the Soviet Criminal Code of 1918 made antisemitism a punishable offense, the mid-1920s experienced a drastic increase in anti-Jewish incidents. Free to leave the Pale of Settlement, Jews flooded the capital cities, particularly Moscow, which came to be known as a "Jewish city" experiencing a "Jewish invasion." In Mayakovsky's unfinished play for the Meyerhold Theater, *Komediia s ubiistvom* (Comedy with a Murder, 1926), a young woman, looking to make a wealthy match, confuses "Mossel'-prom" ("The Moscow Regional Association of Enterprises for the Production of the Agricultural Sector") for a Jewish surname.[46] The Crimean project ran the risk of further perpetuating divisions: Jews receiving coveted land as well as Western financial aid to develop it.[47] In 1926, Mikhail Kalinin, the chairman of the All-Union Central Executive Committee, observed: "There are many letters and written questions addressed to speakers at public meetings […] which refer to the Jewish question in general and to the

transfer of Jews to Crimea in particular. Some are clearly reactionary, bigoted, and antisemitic."[48]

As the Soviets sought to appeal to demographics beyond the Russian ethnic majority, the state propagated class stratification as a threat, and diversity as a solution. For instance, a Russian *kulak* in posters of the time is presented as dangerous to a Russian peasant, while a resettled Jew is portrayed as an ideal farmer.[49] The Russian term for peasant/farmer – *krest'ianin* – with the word "cross" at its root, was now expressly applied to Jews in propaganda materials for the Crimean project. Two colonies in Crimea bore the name "Evreiskii krest'ianin," which was also the title of a two-volume collection of articles released in 1925 by OZET. Note that *krest'ianin* has very specific visual associations (a linen shirt and tall boots), in contrast to the Jewish dress (either religious or secular; a jacket, a yarmulke or a black-rimmed/bowler hat). In fact, the shot of a bearded man tilling the land in *Evrei na zemle*, his plow pulled by two horses diagonally across the screen toward the camera, calls to mind Il'ia Repin's 1887 painting of Tolstoy plowing, i.e. that narrative of an outsider giving up his urban identity and choosing to work on the land (Figures 6 and 7).[50]

Figure 6. Tilling the land. *Evrei na zemle*, 1927.

Figure 7. *Pakhar'. Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoi na pashne* (Plowman. Leo Tolstoy Plowing). I.E. Repin, 1887.

The Jewish settlers on the screen now cross over into the mainstream visually as well as linguistically: they are referred to as *krest'iane* in the film's intertitles.

Mayakovsky continues this official line of rearranging the *svoi–chuzhoi* dichotomy. In "Evrei," he presents Jewishness in the images and terminology of the dominant culture. But he also extends this practice by doing the opposite, i.e. by expressly depicting non-Jewish "class enemies" through negative Jewish stereotypes. *Evrei na zemle* and Mayakovsky's two poems "Evrei" and "'Zhid'" address the faulty impression that Jews, once again, got the tastiest piece of the pie. Just as the film opens with scenes of Jewish poverty, in "Evrei" Mayakovsky stages a mental dialogue between a voice disseminating Jewish stereotypes of privilege and a voice dispelling them:

Еврей — караты,

еврей — валюта …

[…]

А тут

им

дают Крым!

А Крым известен:

не карта, а козырь;

[…]

Так врут

рабочим врагов голоса,

но ты, рабочий,

но ты —
ты должен честно взглянуть в глаза

еврейской нищеты.

[A Jew means carats, / A Jew means foreign currency … […] And here they go, / giving them Crimea! / And we all know what Crimea is: / not just any card, but a wild card; […] So lie / the enemies' voices to the workers, / but you, worker / but you — / you must look truthfully into the eyes / of Jewish poverty.][51]

The division between "us" and "them" is accentuated by way of Mayakovsky's famous *lesenka*, the pronoun *im* (them) occupying its own step in the ladder. As Michael Wachtel observes, "the seemingly visual element of *lesenka* contributes directly to the aural effect of verse."[52] The poet is inviting the reader to intone this isolated pronoun, to hear the scream of surprise at the audacity of giving *them* such territories. Several lines later "they" and "you" are once again emphatically dissociated in the *lesenka* to underscore the distance between the two pronouns, making one pause visually (and aurally) on the repeated "but you."

The impression of the recently urbanized Russian that the worker-peasant class is "native" while the NEP-men are the foreigners with their "foreign currency" is expressly reversed. The wording "Jewish poverty" contradicts the image of this purportedly "privileged" minority. Notably, Mayakovsky resolves this contradiction while, at the same time, maintaining the us-versus-them formulation. The poet counters "their" lies by ascribing the Russians' image of themselves, in which poverty gains almost holy proportions, to the ethnic Other, who, in turn, becomes no different than a poor, earth-tilling *krest'ianin*.

If one of the main properties of a stereotype is "fixity," "where the Other is fixed as unchangeable, known, and predictable,"[53] attributing new features to a social type remediates the act of stereotyping.[54] To say that Mayakovsky also reverses stereotypes in combating antisemitism would be inaccurate if we understand counter-stereotyping as outlined above. In fact, examples from advertising culture serve as points of contrast to the way Mayakovsky engages social types in society. The discussion of ethnic groups in his works remains essentializing; sketchy outlines of culturally assigned features (e.g. a bourgeois exploiter, the Russian Ivan, etc.) are the poet's shorthand. Instead of destabilizing a stereotype and hence stripping it of its meaning, Mayakovsky has the perpetrator and the victim trade places. In his denunciation of antisemitism, the poet reassigns negative "Jewish" features to the antisemite, and familiar, positive, "Russian" ones to Jews. Meanwhile, the typical ethnic clusters remain quite stable. The perpetrator of a stereotype now also becomes "fixed," defined by the stereotype he exploits. The poet's *modus operandi* here is to flip the binaries of *svoi/chuzhoi;* native/foreign; rich/poor; comrade/enemy in a way that unsettles a worker-peasant's conventional mode of experiencing the Other.

To return to "Evrei," the speaker reanalyzes the constituents of the friend–enemy worldview by breaking down a simple worker's ethnic chauvinism:

Слышатся отзвуки

стонов и рёва.

Это, «жидов"

за бунты карая,

тешилась

пуля и плеть царёва.

[…]

Как там —

война

проходила в погроме:

и немец,

и русский,

и шайки поляков.

[…]

То шел Петлюра

в батарейных громах,

то плетью свистела махновщина.

[Heard are the echoes / of moaning and weeping. / Those were the tsar's bullet and whip, / in amusement, / punishing the "yids" / for rioting. […] In the same way / the [Civil] War / was conducted through pogroms: / both a German, / and a Russian, and gangs of Poles. […] Now passed Petliura, / artillery thundering, / and now — Makhno's thugs, whips cracking.][55]

The Russian word "bunt" has the primary meaning of rioting by the masses, as in *Solianoi bunt* (1648), *Khlebnyi bunt* (1650) or, more generally, *narodnyi bunt* (national revolt). Moreover, recall that the image of the Jewish type on the screen at the time, Menakhem-Mendel, humble and submissive, excludes a posture of valiant resistance.[56] In his 1918 article "Apocalypse of Our Time," Vasily Rozanov recapitulates this servile image of a Jew: "Only out of stupidity and naïveté they [the Jews] sank to the flat bottom of the revolution, while their place is somewhere else altogether: at the feet of empires."[57] By reassigning the concept of *bunt* to the Jews, Mayakovsky includes this cultural Other in the sphere of "our" peasant-worker, anti-tsarist rebels. At the same time, "a German," "Polish gangs," Petliura, Makhno, and, most notably, "a Russian" are lumped together as the Other. The clustering of the Russian emperor, the pro-Ukrainian independence leader Symon Petliura, and the anarchist Nestor Makhno challenges national categories as a way of understanding the changing Soviet reality. Mayakovsky repeatedly confronts the popular European myth of Jewish materialistic domination over Gentile nations, a topic hotly discussed towards the end of the nineteenth century.[58] In "'Zhid,'" for instance, the speaker places the singularly privileged Solomon Rothschild alongside countless insignificant and persecuted "Solomonishki": "how many / beaten / little pauper Solomons there are" (*skol'ko / pobito / bedniakov 'Solomonishek'*).[59]

In the second half of the 1920s, the split within the Party increasingly carried ethnic undertones. Stalin was known to cast thinly veiled allusions to the Jewishness of his left-wing opposition.[60] In "'Zhid,'" the accusation that "yids" are running the country evokes this unfolding split. The year 1927 marked Leon Trotsky's expulsion. At a Politburo meeting in 1926, Trotsky brought up the issue of popularizing the left opposition as "dissatisfied Jewish intellectuals." In a note to Nikolai Bukharin, the general secretary of the Comintern Executive Committee, Trotsky claimed that one frequently hears "yids are rioting" (*zhidy buntuiut*) from the mouths of factory workers.[61] While it is speculative to trace Mayakovsky's choice of words in describing tsarist Russia in "Evrei" – "yids punished for rioting" – to Trotsky's note, it is reasonable to assume that the poet was aware of these antisemitic undertones within the Party struggle.[62] In a scene from *Evrei na zemle*, a discernible suggestion of Trotsky's photograph hangs on the wall in the background, though dwarfed by a cut-out of Lenin in the foreground. Allusions to Trotsky were risky in 1927. In a potentially sarcastic gesture in a film of the same year, *Tret'ia Meshchanskaia* (translated as *Bed and Sofa*), also written and directed by Shklovsky and Room (and, by anecdotal accounts, conceived on a train in Crimea),[63] a large poster of Stalin hangs prominently over one of the beds. It replaces Lenin, and no images of Trotsky are to be found.

The initial appearance of the slur in the body of "'Zhid,'" as Mikhail Vaiskopf notes, alludes to Rozanov's "Apocalypse of our Time."[64] Mayakovsky's lines – "Today / like a wardrobe / lies on my heart / the heavy word / 'yid'" (*Segodnia / shkafom / na serdtse lezhit / tiazholoe slovo – / 'zhid'*)[65] – reference Rozanov's section of the article titled "Nadavilo shkafom" (Crushed by a Wardrobe). There, Rozanov claims that the Jewish moans under this "wardrobe" cannot go unnoticed by any Russian who has a heart. In "'Zhid,'" Mayakovsky reformulates Rozanov's argument by replacing the Jew under the "wardrobe" with the speaker's own heart. Rozanov uses the words *evrei*, *zhid*, and *zhidok* interchangeably, taking full ownership of these ethnic slurs without the distancing quotation marks. The poet cites the likes of Rozanov when he puts quotes around the title of his poem; his speaker claims that the word "zhid" "is a password / for priests, / for nuns / from among countesses, who had not yet been crushed completely [*dlia monashek / iz nedodavlennykh grafin'*]."[66] Note that Mayakovsky's countesses-nuns (*nedodavlennykh*) replace Rozanov's Jews etymologically (*nadavilo*). In addition to Party politics, references to Rozanov recall the polarization of Russians and Jews within the intelligentsia, not only among the "knuckleheads."[67] A direct reference to Esenin in "'Zhid'" extends this polarization into Mayakovsky's profession. Esenin, whose public image is intricately connected with the heart of Russia, becomes *chuzhoi* here, ganging up on the "surnames ending in 'zon.'"[68]

Roger Chartier notes that literary texts offer a representation of the social world in which individuals "act to classify others and, by doing so, classify themselves."[69] This principle defines "'Zhid'": offensive stereotypes are constantly turned on their users. Formulations such as *nedodavlennykh grafin'* and *kommunist nedochishchennyi* ("an uncleansed / unpurged Communist") mirror the morphological structure of the popular insult "zhid nedorezannyi" (a yid who hasn't been knifed to death). While turning the formula of this remark on the bigots themselves, the poet also conflates "office" communists (*nedochishchennye*) and the aristocracy (*nedodavlennye*) on the level of word formation. The poet continues his rearrangement of the *svoi–chuzhoi* divide: "this word [*zhid*] / hissed [*shipelo*] / over the university student Raikhil' […] / when / the 'Christian' students smashed / the 'yid's' face."[70] These verses refer to violence against Jews at universities and places of work, reported regularly in *Komsomol'skaia pravda* at the time. "Hissed" (*shipelo*) applies both to the hushing consonant (*shipiashchaia*) in the word "zhid" and to the demonic undertones attributed to Jews in the form of the venomous snake/serpent in religious, folk, and everyday iconography: the Jew as trickster, an enemy that sheds skin, not easily identifiable and hard to catch, but ultimately slain by the righteous.[71] Significantly, the antisemites are the ones who "hiss" by uttering the slur "zhid" as they beat up the student, hence themselves assuming the role of the snake in this confrontation. The adjective *parshivyi* (lousy), popular in the word combination *zhid parshivyi* (a lousy yid)[72], applies in the poem to the antisemite who has to be removed from the crowd before he infects others: "We'll pull out by the collar / the lousy one" (*Vydernem / za shivorot – / odnogo, parshivogo*).[73]

In his 1919 *Sovetskaia azbuka* (Soviet Primer), in the entry for the letter A, Mayakovsky suggests that ethnic bigotry follows from European nation-building: "An antisemite is dear to the Entente. / The Entente is a gathering of rampagers" (*Antisemit Antante mil. / Antanta – sborishche gromil*).[74] Note the suggestion of the word *pogrom* in *gromila* (bullies) and the echo effect of "antisemite" in the repetition of the sound "ant." The Triple Entente "bullies," a pre-World War I alliance between Russia, France, and Britain,

represents the nation-oriented world order that, according to the poet, naturally accommodates ethnic hatred.[75] In *Sovetskaia azbuka*, the Other is made up of the kinds of nation states represented by the Triple Entente. However, by the time the poet writes "'Zhid'" almost a decade later, he rings a note of alarm that, in fact, antisemites remain in *our* villages, *our* factories, *our* Party, and among *our* cultural figures who bemoan the death of a homogeneous Russian village. As an antidote to divisive nationalism and ethnic hatred, Mayakovsky depicts the Jewish resettlement project as that place on earth which allows a new Jew to emerge on *our* Soviet soil.

In Conclusion

As posited by Yuri Lotman and Boris Uspensky, the polarized space of Russian culture tends to lack a "neutral zone."[76] All binaries, including *svoi/chuzhoi*, contain subjective judgement – e.g. *khoroshii-plokhoi* (good/bad) and *dobryi-zloi* (good/evil) – in which *chuzhoi* is unequivocally on the side of the negative. The archaic verb *chuzhati* means not merely to be suspicious and keep aloof of the unfamiliar (as in the modern Russian *chuzhdat'sia*), but more importantly, to reject it.[77] Mayakovsky, a non-Jewish Soviet poet selling the Jewish colonization project, follows the official Soviet practice of extending the language of inclusion across ethnicities.[78] Hence, the conventionally *chuzhoi* Jew is visually blended into a poor man's Russianness, the earth-toiling *krest'ianin*. At the same time, the chauvinist assumes negative Jewish stereotypes ("lousy," "unclean," demonic, treacherous, hissing and snake-like). One of the main roles of the Exodus subtext in *Evrei na zemle* and "Evrei," in which Israelites are central figures, is, in fact, to expand Mayakovsky's zone of *svoi* to include the typically marginalized modern Jew, while making the Promised Land and the lexicon of Zionism "our own" as well.

The journal of the OZET, *Tribuna*, published a curious obituary on Mayakovsky, praising the poet's efforts to summon the "Jewish poor" to productive labor. The author mentions Mayakovsky's public reading of "Evrei" at a session of OZET (the poem is reprinted below the obituary) and his work on *Evrei na Zemle*. The obituary concludes by suggesting that the Jewish community has lost one of its own: "the toiling Jews of USSR … lost … a tireless fighter for internationalism."[79] Class struggle, originally intended to erase national boundaries, resumes acutely ethnic undertones with Stalin's rise to power. In fact, if Mayakovsky had lived to see 1949, it is doubtful that he would have survived the purges of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, whose members were accused of establishing a Jewish republic in Crimea as a U.S. satellite.

Notes

1. See Clark, *Petersburg*, 3; Glaser, *Jews and Ukrainians in Russia's Literary Borderlands*, 120.
2. Shklovsky, *Mayakovsky and His Circle*, 36.
3. See Iangirov, "Marginal'nye temy v tvorcheskoi praktike Lefa."
4. For a discussion of Mayakovsky's relationship with the pro-Communist Jewish press in the U.S., see Katsis, "Vladimir Maiakovskii i russko-evreiskii N'iu-Iork."
5. Shklovskii, "O Maiakovskom," *Zhili-byli*, 401.
6. Shklovsky contrasts the proletarian ideal of the Crimean project to the bourgeois orientation of the proposed Jewish state in Palestine: "It is already apparent that Zionism and the Jewish state in Palestine will turn into nothing more than a summer resort for rich Jews" (cited in

Iangirov, "Marginal'nye temy v tvorcheskoi praktike Lefa," 231). While in direct competition with Zionism, OZET declared its neutrality toward the movement in 1925 even as the official propaganda denounced it as "bourgeois nationalist" (Polonsky, *The Jews in Poland and Russia*, 301). For an in-depth treatment of the Jewish agrarian colonies, see Dekel-Chen, *Farming the Red Land* and Kagedan, "American Jews and the Soviet Experiment."

7. Brown, *The New Exodus*, 24.
8. For an analysis of the Exodus story as an organizing subtext in *Verses about America*, a cycle that offers another Promised Land —Moscow — for a flight from bondage and a return home for Jews who left the Russian empire, see Lavine, "Vladimir Mayakovsky's Agit-Semitism," 438–444.
9. For an analysis of the film's imagery directed specifically at an audience that would recognize allusions to Zionist formulations, see Katsis, *Vladimir Maiakovskii*, 250–174.
10. State and popular attitudes diverged dramatically during this period. Policies battling antisemitism proliferated during the mid-1920s. However, as various scholars point out, it is in part this popular perception of the Jewish-friendly officialdom, with Jews themselves occupying prominent positions in the government, that propelled the narrative among the masses that "the Jews have taken over Russia." See Shternshis, *Soviet and Kosher*, 158–159. For a discussion of the popular antisemitic wave in the mid-1920s, also see Kostyrchenko, "Vsplesk antisemitizma v obshchestve," 100–111; Slezkine, *The Jewish Century*, 242–254; Levin, *The Jews in the Soviet Union Since 1917*, 166.
11. Maiakovskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* [henceforth: *PSS*], 11:647.
12. Ibid., 11:425.
13. Shklovsky, *Za 60 let: raboty o kino*, 137.
14. *PSS*, 7:246.
15. *Izvestiia*, November 17, 1926.
16. Shklovsky, "S tochki zreniia vetra," 38–46.
17. Lur'e, "Cherez Treniia Kryma k zvezdam Birobidzhana," 135.
18. Shklovsky, "S tochki zreniia vetra," 42.
19. *PSS*, 7:246.
20. David Shneer observes that Soviet photography around the Birobidzhan project used images of tents in the wilderness as well, to echo the Jews' biblical ancestors who had also re-created their identities (*Through Soviet Jewish Eyes*, 74).
21. In her 1935 travelogue through the colonies, Morrissey makes similar associations: "Fifteen thousand people where yesterday was a desert. Rich land, wanting only water. Modern machinery. Water gushes forth. I think of the Old Testament. Here is a sort of modern miracle" (*Jewish Workers and Farmers in the Crimea and Ukraine*, 59).
22. Shklovsky recalls that the steppe is made of "rock, on which a layer of earth lies like a blanket" ("S tochki zreniia vetra," 39).
23. *PPS*, 7:246.
24. Lur'e, "Cherez Treniia Kryma k zvezdam Birobidzhana," 134.
25. Pronin, *Bumazhnyi Vertov / tselluloidnyi Maiakovskii*, 23.
26. Maiakovskii, "Karaul," 23–25. Given Mayakovsky's interest in the possibilities of documentary filmmaking over feature films ("igrovoe kino"), a preference that echoes principles of factography as discussed on the pages of *Lef*, it is curious that, as Pronin remarks, out of more than ten film scripts, *Evrei na zemle* is the poet's sole involvement with a documentary (*Bumazhnyi Vertov / tselluloidnyi Maiakovskii*, 78).
27. *PSS*, 11:426.
28. Ibid.
29. Shklovsky, "S tochki zreniia vetra," 46.
30. Katsis, *Vladimir Maiakovskii*, 260.
31. Some believe that Mayakovsky's participation is limited to captions. See Katanian, *Maiakovskii*, 348. Iangirov, on the other hand, claims that the poet was the main conceptual force behind the film ("Marginal'nye temy v tvorcheskoi praktike Lefa," 230). Similarly, Pronin argues that Mayakovsky's intertitles set the main compositional and plot elements, and he

also suggests that Mayakovsky's collaboration on the film lays the groundwork for his productive period of screenwriting during 1926–1928. ("Maiakovskii v kinopublitsistike: k voprosu ob uchastii poeta v sozdanii agitkartiny 'Evrei na zemle'"). Katsis discusses the film's proximity to the poet's dramatic works and its subsequent footprint on *The Bedbug* (*Vladimir Maiakovskii*, 261–263).
32. Ivanov, "Evrei v tsarskoi Rossii i v SSSR."
33. Iangirov, "*Marginal'nye* temy v tvorcheskoi praktike Lefa," 232.
34. Dekel-Chen, *Farming the Red Land*, 157.
35. Ibid., 120.
36. Iangirov, "Marginal'nye temy v tvorcheskoi praktike Lefa," 235.
37. *Izvestiia* (26 October 1928). Shneer discusses the images of traditional shtetl Jews belonging to Roman Vishniac and other non-Soviet photographers. Inside the Soviet Union, traditional types are relegated solely to the stage, while images of "new Jews" dominate Soviet photography of the 1920s and 1930s. On film, Jews build cities from scratch, raise pigs, and tame nature (*Through Soviet Jewish Eyes*, 60–84). As Slezkine observes, many Jews who participated in the Revolution were fighting not for the right to be Jewish, but rather for freedom from Jewishness (*The Jewish Century*, 152).
38. Cited in Iangirov, "Marginal'nye temy v tvorcheskoi praktike Lefa," 231.
39. During the film's screening, the appearance of "evreiskie svin'i" ("Jewish pigs") on the screen elicits "a thunder of applause" (*Izvestiia* [17 November 1926]).
40. Lur'e, "Cherez Treniia Kryma k zvezdam Birobidzhana," 136.
41. *PSS*, 7:246.
42. Ibid., 7: 247. In Iurii Rozhkov's photomontage to "Evrei," the graphic illustration of these verses presents faces composed of two separate halves (*Fotomontazhnyi tsikl Iuriia Rozhkova*, 61.) Mikhail Karasik comments that each face in this montage is pieced together out of a Russian peasant and a Jewish settler (ibid., 83). A case for the opposite way of viewing these faces could be made: Rozhkov's visuals are rather vague as to the ethnic identities of each half, approximating Mayakovsky's impossible challenge to pick out a "Semite."
43. Gilman, *The Jew's Body*, 38.
44. Katz, *Neither with Them nor without Them*, 26.
45. Shklovsky, *Za 60 let: raboty o kino*, 137.
46. *PSS*, 11:413.
47. For a discussion of how the Crimean project contributed to popular anti-Jewish sentiments, see Shternshis, *Soviet and Kosher*, 159–160, Kostyrchenko, "Vsplesk antisemitizma v obshchestve," 99.
48. *Izvestiia* (11 July 1926).
49. See Dekel-Chen's discussion of the ways in which the Jewish resettlement project was used in the propaganda campaign against rural class enemies (*Farming the Red Land*, 105).
50. Tolstoy's influence on the kibbutz movement is worth noting here, as echoes of Tolstoy in the film may be another instance of appropriating Labor Zionist imagery on Soviet soil — a peculiar return of the master through a filter of Jewish collective farming. For a review of Tolstoy's presence from the beginning of Jewish national revival to contemporary Hebrew culture, see Rafi-Tsirkin Sadan, "Tolstoy, Zionism, and the Hebrew Culture."
51. *PSS*, 7:244.
52. Wachtel, *The Development of Russian Verse*, 208.
53. Childs and Williams, *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory*, 125.
54. Reverse stereotypes have become a common trope in popular culture. In the advertising of the 1970s in the U.S., for example, sexually assertive women began to appear as a result of the influence of feminism on popular culture. See Sivulka, *Soap, Sex, and Cigarettes*, 269–286.
55. *PSS*, 7:245.
56. See Lavine's "Vladimir Mayakovsky's Agit-Semitism" (437; 453–454) for a discussion of Chaim Nakhman Bialik's "Tale of a Pogrom" as an important subtext for "Evrei." Here, the poet contrasts Jewish resilience in the face of pogroms to Bialik's victims who are rendered mute by such inconceivable violence.

57. Rozanov, *Apokalipsis nashego vremeni*, 109. In an open letter in 1916, Mayakovsky publicly severs ties with *Strelets*, a journal that printed, alongside his poem, an antisemitic article by Rozanov. The poet accuses the journal of assuming a "posture of Blackhundredism" ("okhotno-riadskaia grimasa") for publishing Rozanov's article. *PSS*, 1:370.
58. See, for instance, Soloviev's "Evreistvo i khristianskii vopros," 31–79.
59. *PPS*, 9:120.
60. See Trotsky, "Thermidor and Anti-Semitism," 29–37.
61. Levin, *The Jews in the Soviet Union since 1917*, 238.
62. In Mayakovsky's *The Elephant and the Match*, the director of an unnamed business trust succeeds in losing weight only after a Komsomol youth chases him around town in an attempt to discuss Kamenev, Zinoviev, and Suvarin (a Trotskyist), a rising intra-party opposition of "riotous Jews" (to paraphrase Trotsky's note to Bukharin).
63. Lur'e, "Cherez Treniia Kryma k zvezdam Birobidzhana," 137.
64. Vaiskopf, *Vo ves' logos*, 32.
65. *PSS*, 9:117.
66. *PSS*, 9:117.
67. "Zhid," *PSS*, 9:121.
68. Ibid., 9:118. For a discussion of Esenin's function in "Zhid," see Lavine, "Vladimir Mayakovsky's Agit-Semitism," 456–457.
69. Chartier, *Forms and Meanings*, 47.
70. *PSS*, 9: 117.
71. In his *V plenu u "obez'ian,"* the Russian monarchist Fiodor Vinberg casts Russia as the sleeping beauty besieged by the Bolshevik "yidomasonic Serpent/Dragon" ("zhidomasonskii Zmei Gorynych").
72. As in the Russian saying, "Iz zhida parshivogo vsiu parshu ne vykolotit'" ("It is impossible to beat all the ringworm out of a lousy yid").
73. *PSS*, 9:119. A similar reversal happens in Mayakovsky's text to a 1930 poster: "Griaznye piatna, / pogromshchiki i antisemity / budut / s predpriiatii / schishcheny i smyty" (Dirty spots, / pogromists and antisemites / will be / scrubbed off and washed away from places of work). *PSS*, 10:207. Here Mayakovksy transposes the stereotype of an unclean (*nechistyi*) Jew, both in the physical and spiritual senses, onto the Judeophobes themselves. See Belova's "Evrei i nechistaia sila (Po materialam slavianskoi narodnoi kul'tury)" for a discussion of uncleanliness as a trait assigned to the Jews and, more generally, as a marker of Otherness in the Slavic world.
74. *PSS*, 2:92.
75. Mayakovsky is not alone in this view. The rise of racism and antisemitism in modern times is frequently attributed to nation-building in nineteenth-century Europe. For instance, see Macmaster, *Racism in Europe*, 20–27.
76. Lotman and Uspensky, "Rol' dual'nykh modelei v dinamike russkoi kul'tury (do kontsa XVIII veka)," 88–115.
77. Aleksandr Pen'kovskii, "O semanticheskoi kategorii 'chuzhdosti' v russkom iazyke."
78. I thank Amelia Glaser for helpful discussion of this point.
79. *Tribuna* 13 (1930): 8–9.

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