'Find me in yir sicht": A review of 'Wi the haill voice: 25 poems by Vladimir Mayakovsky translated into Scots' by Edwin Morgan

Во весь голос / At the Top of My Voice

                                        Wi the Haill Voice

Rummaging among

               these days'   Gin yir archeological scaffies

                   petrified crap,   seekin licht

exploring the twilight of our times,   on oor benichtit days

you,   come scrungein thir clairty

    possibly,   petrifacts,

          will inquire about me too   ye'll aiblins

                                             find me in yir sicht

In his continued effort to 'work devotedly for the working class reader' Mayakovsky would bend language to respond to the need for a common ground for the raising of a communal spirit. To fulfil Mayakovsky's desire that his work be truly 'everyman', a well-meaning translator could simply copy it over like for like, using a kind of trade language to mirror the wording of the original verse. They could, instead, try to find a common voice and speak with it –loudly. This would become Morgan's challenge.

This collection speaks to a certain power in Mayakovsky's work, to overcome the divide between his language and those of other worlds. In his love for the everyman, the proletariat, or the 'comrade of posterity', Mayakovsky can be seen to transcend the many complications raised by the act of translation. This power is not only made clear but tested to its outer limit by Morgan's 25 versions of Mayakovsky's poems in the Scots language.

In his introduction, Morgan iterates Mayakovsky's conviction that his work, or rather *all* works of art, will be buried in the pursuit of progress. It was Mayakovsky's wish that such works would be discovered again and excavated 'like arrow-heads and antediluvian bones'. This image runs throughout his poetry and, while making way for his belief in the necessity of progress in art, also hints at a fear of such progress. In an attempt to soothe his anxieties, Mayakovsky appeals to future generations of his artist comrades to sift through the rubble, or 'petrified crap', of a gloam-lit society to find a monument to his life and work– a plea for us to *look* and 'find me in yir sicht'.

Firstly, by phoneticising the Cyrillic titles in English, Morgan encourages the reader to put their first foot forward into the divide. As a student of Russian, he understood the challenge involved in splitting the hard shell of early 20th Century Soviet literature, and in localising something deeply distal and unfamiliar for Western readers. Morgan must also have understood that, if there was a viewfinder by which to see into the lives and souls of a generation of Russian people, it was through Mayakovksy's eyes.

In his introduction, Morgan speaks to Alexei Kruchonykh's concept of *Zaum* - the ''transrational sound-poetry'' built upon a new language, though Mayakovsky would shy away from this practice. Yet, the inventiveness of the Scots language echoes the pursuit of newness central to Mayakovsky's, and Kruchonykh's shared ambition. As such, these versions need not delve into the transrational, only succeed in marrying the playful passion of their content with the rich tone and texture of the Scots tongue.

– And they do succeed, without diluting the author's work in an attempt to copy each turn of phrase, the translation into Scots instead serves to expose the inner spirit of the poem. In Morgan's mind, 'there is in Scottish poetry [...] a vein of fantastic satire that seems to accommodate Mayakovsky more readily than anything in English Verse', and the not un-zaum-like ingenuity of Morgan's translation draws out the sweet fantasy running through the steeled futurism of Mayakovsky's poems.

Morgan states that 'Mayakovsky was not looking for new quarters for an old world. He had a new world'. This was a world written for the working-class reader, and this collection serves as a token of Mayakovsky's dedication to them. In translating Mayakovsky's works for the millions of Scots speakers, he has renewed this style of everyman futurism, in time for a 70s Scottish readership seeking a new world in the face of widespread industrial decline. Morgan's translations would even be published the same year of the state-assisted death of one of Scotland's largest shipyards, the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders.

As such, Mayakovsky's disinterest in naturalism, and his fascination with 'Urban and industrial' would surely chime with Morgan's readers, seeking lives among the ruins of old work sites, misanthropic politicians and newly-absent captains of industry. Mayakovsky's calls for revolution would echo through the Scots' calls for ownership of the North Sea oilfields, the ownership of their future in the form of home rule.

Morgan's summary that 'the glory is in the overlap, not the template' responds to Mayakovsky's fears – about the failings of language's communicative powers – and puts them to rest. These versions rise to meet Mayakovsky's boyishness and do justice to the 'grotesque and vivid fantasy' of his imagery. As per Kruchonykh's belief that 'the word is broader than its meaning', Mayakovsky's work could only be weakened by charmless attempts to replicate the literal definition of each word or turn of phrase and so overlooking the mysterious power inherent to the word. And so again, this collection speaks to certain power in Mayakovsky's work, and it is spoken in the everyman's tongue with a full voice.