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*Dante and Communists of the Ninth Circle of Hell:
Malevich, Mandelstam, and Trotsky*

1. *Introduction*

While working on his last self-portrait in 1933 Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935) was caught between a rock and a hard place (fig. 1). Not only was the famous Russian avant-garde artist gravely ill, but he also was no longer allowed to practice his recognisable artistic idiom. In the spring of 1932, the Central Committee of the Communist Party decreed unified aesthetic and ideological objectives. Officially approved art was supposed to be socialist in content and realist in form, which was at odds with Malevich's inherently abstract Suprematism. Practitioners of the so-called "formalist art", namely expressionistic, abstract, and conceptual art, were running a risk of being forced out of their positions, sent to gulags, or disappearing without a trace¹. This anti-formalist attitude was not an abrupt decision on the part of the Soviet government, however. The growing discontent with avant-garde art is evidenced by the content of Malevich's note, which accompanied a parcel that he had given to a trusted friend in Berlin five years earlier. On the 30th of May 1927 Malevich wrote:

In case of my death or imprisonment, and if the owner wants to publish these manuscripts, he must thoroughly study them and may translate them into another language because I am presently under the power of revolutionary influences which could give rise to great controversies that could result in an attack on the art I represent².

This also meant that 1927 marked the year in which Malevich authored his last known theoretical musings, for upon his return to the Soviet Union

¹ P. BOOBYER, *The Stalin Era*, Routledge, London and New York 2000, pp. 187-203.

² K. MALEVICH, *Malevich Writes. A Theory of Creativity. Cubism to Suprematism*, translated and edited by P. Railing, Artists-Bookworks, Forest Row 2014, pp. 670-673.

he was no longer allowed to teach, or write.

Needless to say, this lack of hard evidence gave rise to endless speculations as to what Malevich intended to convey in his 1933 self-portrait. Was this picture simply a desperate act of a desperate painter, who still happened to have had a number of exhibitions booked abroad but was prohibited from practicing his abstract idiom and was hence coerced to return to his figurative beginnings? Or, was it Malevich's attempt not to antagonise Stalin's apparatchiks, and, by sticking to the rules of representation, prevent his own deportation or execution? Whatever the case, there has not been a satisfactory explanation of Malevich's artistic intentions behind this painting. The Russian Museum website (rusmuseumvrm.ru) states that in the picture titled *Painter*, Malevich presented himself in the typical costume of an Italian Doge, which was the name given to the leaders of the maritime republics of Venice and Genoa. Yet, this hypothesis needs to be re-examined because Malevich's costume does not resemble either of them. It is much more likely that he painted himself in imaginary garbs of a Renaissance Humanist, a *pictor doctus* in Malevich's case, who is addressing his audience. The ubiquitous black square placed next to the artist's left arm is indicative of Malevich's forays into writing: it stood for the fifth dimension of art from where Malevich looked down and examined all the creations of the world of things no longer with the brush but with the pen. The brush was disheveled and could not reach the circumvolutions of the brain. This is what spurred him to replace it with the pen, because the pen was sharper³.

2. Malevich's milieu and Italian Humanism: Mandelstam and Trotsky on Dante

Even though Malevich himself did not comment on artistic achievements of Italian Humanism, other artists, poets, and intellectuals, who belonged to the same milieu, and suffered at the hands of the same adversary, left vast written material on their own interpretation of this glorious era. The poet who seems to have particularly tickled their fancy was Dante Alighieri. Not only as the author of timeless poetry, but also as an unsuspecting founding father of the Russian avant-garde.

Dante was the final fellow-traveller of Osip Mandelstam (1891-1938), who was, in one of his last works, longing for universal hills of Dante's native Tuscany. This "Great European", as Mandelstam dubbed Dante,

³ *Ivi*, pp. 266-267.

whose *Divine Comedy* reached back to classical antiquity and forward to the modern world, accompanied Mandelstam through his exile, persecution and isolation he endured in Stalin's Russia. Mandelstam's Dante was a master of creative, comic self-deflation, and he thrived, like the Russian Futurist artists, on literary scandals that he himself had provoked. And indeed, this Dante, who Mandelstam was astonished by, was the unacknowledged father of the modern avant-garde. With his "eternal dadaism" and "childlike transience," Dante pre-empted the experiments of his Russian offspring through his flamboyant "alphabet of fluttering fabrics"⁴. Mandelstam reports to have become aware of these only after he had mastered the Italian language, pushed his speech to the front of his palate, and let the sound break out of the imprisonment of his teeth⁵.

Through Dante, Mandelstam managed to create an idiosyncratic avant-garde with a history, a "futurism with a genealogy." In Mandelstam's opinion this was only possible because Dante was "an antimodernist". The reasons supporting Dante's anti-modernism, are, however, precisely what made his Dante modern. It was his "contemporaneity" that Mandelstam claimed in his *Conversation about Dante* (1967), which proved to be "continuous, incalculable and inexhaustible"⁶.

What exactly Mandelstam meant by Dante's anti-modernism is perhaps even more pertinently, albeit less poetically, explained in Trotsky's famous speech on Class and Art, which he delivered on 9 May 1924. In his musings Leon Trotsky (1879-1940) emphasised the need for understanding "art as art". He had been provoked to explain what exactly constitutes art by a certain Raskolnikov, who, in Trotsky's opinion, overlooked in works of art exactly what made them works of art. To Trotsky's dismay Raskolnikov's firmly believed that Dante's *Divine Comedy* was valuable to his comrades only because it enabled a better understanding of the psychology of a certain class at a certain time. Trotsky was vehemently opposed to such simplistic attitudes, and warned that "to put the matter that way meant to strike out *The Divine Comedy* from the realm of art". Even though Trotsky did not entirely rule out that the time had perhaps come to reconsider Dante's place in history, he nonetheless suggested that if this was indeed so, "one must understand the essence of the questions and not shrink from the conclusions". If one said that the importance of *The Divine Comedy* lay in the fact that it provided an understanding of the state of mind of certain

⁴ C. CAVANAGH, *Osip Mandelstam and the Modernist Creation of Tradition*, Princeton University Press, Princeton (NJ) 2011, p. 226.

⁵ О. МАНДЕЛЬШТАМ, *Разговор о Данте*, Искусство, Москва 1967, p. 9.

⁶ CAVANAGH, *Osip Mandelstam and the Modernist Creation of Tradition*, cit., p. 19.

classes in a certain epoch, this ultimately meant that it was transformed into a mere historical document, for, as a work of art, *The Divine Comedy* was supposed to speak in some way to one's feelings and moods, i.e. as a work of art it was supposed to *move* the reader. In order to support, and further clarify his argument, Trotsky quoted Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Labriola, who deplored those who would simplify Marxist theory into crude economic determinism. By this method, in fact, "fools could reduce the whole of history to the level of commercial arithmetic". Finally, "a new, original interpretation of Dante's work could show us *The Divine Comedy* in the light of calculations regarding pieces of cloth which crafty Florentine merchants sold for their maximum profit"⁷.

3. *Timeless Qualities in a Class Society*

So, what exactly did distinguish *The Divine Comedy* as a work of art? Or, in Trotsky's own words, how was it possible that there was not a historical, but a directly aesthetic relationship between us and a medieval Italian book? For Trotsky, this was explained by the fact that in a class society, in spite of all its changeability, there were certain common features. This ultimately meant that works of art invented in a Medieval Italian city could affect us too. What did this require? In Trotsky's opinion just a "small thing"; that "these feelings and moods would have received such broad, intense, powerful expression as to have raised them above the limitations of the life of those days". Dante was, of course, the product of a certain social milieu, but he was a genius who "raised the experience of his epoch to a tremendous artistic height". This happened "not because Dante was a Florentine petty bourgeois of the thirteenth century", but, to a considerable extent, "in spite of that circumstance". Let us take, Trotsky suggested, "such an elementary psychological feeling as fear of death". This feeling is characteristic not only of man, but also of animals. In man "it first found simple articulate expression, and later also artistic expression". In different epochs, in different social milieus, this expression has changed, that is to say, "people have feared death in different ways, but the fear itself remained the same"⁸.

In a recent publication discussing Trotsky's views on Dante and *The*

⁷ L. TROTSKY, *Leon Trotsky on literature and art*, edited with an introduction by P.N. Siegel, Pathfinder Press, New York 1970, pp. 67-70.

⁸ *Ivi*, pp. 16, 67-69.

Divine Comedy, Stefano Jossa suggested that when talking about Dante's aesthetic power, Trotsky relied on the Romantic paradigm of the tension between individual genius and historical context, i.e. the opposition between Romanticism and Positivism. In other words, that the strength of Dante lay in his artistic power. It did not matter whether Dante was a proletarian or not, whether he was in favour of the proletarians or not. The only aspect that rendered Dante relevant to the Marxist theory of art was that his work provoked "artistic delight". In Jossa's view, this was facilitated by Trotsky's perception of Dante as a "revolutionary". This had inevitably been preceded by a process of "ideologisation" that ultimately enabled literature and politics to walk hand in hand⁹.

This might be a bit too simplistic though, because Trotsky's principal aim was by no means to "ideologise" Dante, or forge a straightforward link between Dante and Marxist theory, but rather to defend art against Marxist zealots, and explain what exactly constituted Dante's artistic power and made his writings universally relevant. In this respect Trotsky aptly demonstrated that Dante was able to reach people and move them through his ability to represent reality — to depict situations, delights, and fears that were timeless, and more particularly relatable. It is this exact aspect of Dante's poetry that was labeled as "anti-modernist" by Mandelstam, "genius" by Trotsky, and twenty years later by Erich Auerbach's in his seminal book *Mimesis*, as the astounding paradox of what is called Dante's realism¹⁰.

Dante's imitation of reality starts with the inhabitants of the three realms who lead a "changeless existence", through their passions, torments, and joys. It is further, a literary work in which all imaginable spheres of reality appear: past and present, sublime grandeur and vile vulgarity, history and legend, tragic and comic occurrences, man and nature. The *Divine Comedy* is a didactic poem of encyclopaedical dimensions in which the psychocosmological, the ethical, and the historic-political order of the universe is collectively presented. Finally, it is the story of Dante's life and salvation as a single individual, and thus a figure of the story of mankind¹¹. And indeed, it is precisely this contact with real life that was responsible for Dante's verbal forms, whose directness and rigour mesmerised Mandelstam. The extraordinary character of Dante's syntactic constructions led Mandelstam not only to identify them as "the alphabet of fluttering fabrics", but also to

⁹ S. JOSSA, *Politics vs. Literature: the Myth of Dante and Italian National Identity*, in *Dante in the Long Nineteenth Century: Nationality, Identity, and Appropriation*, ed. by A. Audeh, N. Havely, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2012, pp. 30-50, 47-48.

¹⁰ E. AUERBACH, *Mimesis*, Princeton University Press, Princeton (NJ)-Oxford 2003, p. 191.

¹¹ *Ivi*, pp. 174-202.

promote Dante into a true founding father of Russian avant-garde, which was at the time under relentless attack of the Soviet State¹².

4. *Dante and the death of avant-garde*

Much like was the case in the domain of the visual arts, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union dictated too what was hot and what was not in the realm of literature. A 1932 decree abolished all existing literary societies and absorbed all professional Soviet authors into one large Writers' Union of the USSR, or *Soyuz Pisateley Sovjetskogo Soyuz*. The union supported and enforced Party policies and was the defender and interpreter of the only writing style admitted: Socialist Realism. The union became the state's instrument of control over literature, and expulsion from it meant not only literary death, but often physical demise¹³. Mandelstam himself poignantly observed that only in Russia was poetry respected, for it got people killed.

Unlike Mandelstam, who fell victim to Stalin's purges, his *Conversations about Dante* miraculously survived. In 1937, Mandelstam handed a type-written version of the manuscript to Nikolai Ivanovich Khardzhiev¹⁴, who played a significant role in the rediscovery of Russian Modernism within the Soviet Union in the 1960s during Khrushchev and Brezhnev's era. He was in a position to do so because of his personal relationships with many of its leading figures. Apart from Mandelstam, Khardzhiev was closely associated with Daniil Kharms, and Kazimir Malevich. Thanks to his efforts *The Conversation about Dante* was published for the first time in 1967, while a considerable number of Malevich's works found its new home at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, after Khardzhiev left the Soviet Union and in 1993 emigrated to the Netherlands¹⁵.

Even though it is impossible to say whether Malevich and Mandelstam ever conversed about Dante, Italian art, or poetry, it is hardly a coincidence that Mandelstam's *Conversations with Dante* and Malevich's last self-portrait were both completed in the same year, 1933, when freedom of expression in both the visual arts and poetry was under attack of Communist Zealots.

¹² МАНДЕЛЬШТАМ, *Разговор о Данте*, cit., p. 9.

¹³ ВООВВУЕР, *The Stalin Era*, cit., pp. 187-203.

¹⁴ МАНДЕЛЬШТАМ, *Разговор о Данте*, cit., p. 71.

¹⁵ D. IOFFE, F.H. WHITE, *The Many Lives of the Russian Avant-garde: Nikolai Khardzhiev's Legacy. New Contexts*, Uitgeverij Pegasus, Amsterdam 2019, pp. 1-2.

Poetry and painting were to be governed by a series of official directives regarding details of style and content in order to ensure that each work offered a “truthful” depiction of “reality in its revolutionary development”. Art and literature ought to be “party-minded” and “typical”, i.e. avoiding unpleasant, hence “atypical,” aspects of Soviet reality, while showing the triumph of fully “positive heroes”. In this volatile and ominous political climate, it is little wonder that Mandelstam was longing for irreverent “fluttering fabrics” of Dante’s verbs, that, as Trotsky observed, could move his readers through centuries, while Malevich resorted to depicting himself as a humanistic *Pictor Doctus*, who, deprived of his pen, was still capable of tapping into the essence of his art through the power of image. Or, in, Malevich’s own words, “the struggle of the light of knowledge with the world’s gloom continues”. It is “proud, immutable and calm”, it stands “enveloped in eternity”, just like Dante’s “changeless existence”¹⁶.

¹⁶ K. MALEVICH, *Malevich Writes*, p. 430.