WE ARE ALL FEBRUARY OF 1917

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A few weeks ago, the *Guardian* newspaper published an article by **Antonio Negri** and **Michael Hardt** entitled "Arabs are democracy's new pioneers". The authors tried to provide a frame in which to interpret the recent popular uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East. At a certain point they wrote that

> «calling these struggles "revolutions" seems to mislead commentators who assume the progression of events must obey the logic of 1789 or 1917, or some other past European rebellion against kings and czars.»

Our question while preparing this talk was: Is it possible to acknowledge a present-day uprising as a 'revolution' without being misled in such a way? And how can we narrate of a present-day revolution?

There's no doubt that the recent North-African and Middle-Eastern events, especially the Tunisian and Egyptian revolts, have resonated with us all, with our very bodies, all over Europe and the West. At a recent London demonstration, some people wore t-shirts with the slogan «WALK LIKE AN EGYPTIAN – DEMONSTRATE LIKE AN EGYPTIAN – FIGHT LIKE AN EGYPTIAN». And yet, the public discussion on this has often been sloppy and confusing, with all the narrative traps and ideological devices my comrade WM2 will list and analyze in his talk.

My take is that, while trying to avoid such traps, we should also look for "healthily schizophrenic" narratives of revolution, that is: stories conveying the multiplicity of this prolonged moment of unrest and potentially liberating us from the conditioned reflexes elicited by all kinds of unquestioned, "pathological" connections in our everyday life.

Such "healthily schizophrenic" narratives could incorporate references to both the 20th century and the European revolutionary tradition, without *any reductio ad unum* or over-simplification, in unexpected, even unsettling ways.

I think such an approach could help us bridge the gap between, on one side, those thinkers - like **Negri** and **Hardt** – who tend to over-emphasize *discontinuities* with the 20th century struggles and revolution (for example, discontinuities between today's multitudes and yesterday's proletariat, between today's Empire and yesterday's imperialism etc.) and, on the other side, thinkers like **Slavoj**

Žižek and **Alain Badiou**, who make constant references to the 20th century revolutionary sequence, but sometimes seem to choose them more for their shock value towards liberals than for their usefulness in the present struggle.
In this talk I will look for examples of "healthily schizophrenic" narratives of revolution by comparing the way the Italian working class looked at the Russian "February Revolution" of 1917, a description **Marcel Proust** makes in the 2nd volume of *In Search of Lost Time*, and a poem by **Vladimir Mayakovsky** entitled *The 150 Million*. It would have been tacky to look for examples in our own novels, wouldn't it?

We're in March of 1917. The Great War (quite obviously, nobody yet calls it the «First World War») has just entered its third year, and it is a hopeless spectacle of carnage. The core of the European continent has turned into a slaughterhouse. Gigantic battles are fought for meaningless purposes, like conquering a few dozen yards of wasteland. The Battle of the Somme, which ended two months ago, lasted about twenty weeks and caused the death of over 1 million and a half men.
Italy has entered the war in May of 1915. The front is located in North-Eastern Italy, the enemy is the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Dozens of thousands of men have already died in a series of useless, ineptly conducted battles along the Isonzo river. Daily life in the muddy trenches is miserable and desperate. Shell-shocked men cast ghostly glances upon each other.
It might be useful to remind ourselves of who is fighting against whom:
- on one side there's an alliance called the Triple Entente, that is the UK, France and the Empire of Russia, but the Entente isn't «triple» anymore because it's been joined by Italy, Greece, Romania and other countries. The US haven't yet entered the war, they'll do it in April.
- on the other side we have the so-called «Central Powers», that is, the German Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Ottoman Empire, and the Kingdom of Bulgaria.

All of a sudden, in Russia, a revolution forces the Tsar Nicholas II to abdicate in favour of a provisional government formed by liberals and socialists. In Russia, they still have the Julian calendar, which means that they are still in February. The Tsar abdicates on the 7th of March, but in Russia that day is the 22nd of February, which is why this revolution will pass to history as the «February Revolution».

When the Revolution breaks out, the news reach Rome in mid-March. In these days, the Russian socialist movement is almost completely unknown in Italy.
Not even the leaders and top intellectuals of the Italian Socialist Party know much about the

Russian revolutionaries. In the past 10 years the party's official organ, the *Avanti!* daily paper, has published some news on Russia, but they were all second-hand news, excerpts translated from the French and German socialist press. The only occasions in which delegations of Russian and Italian socialists could meet and talk were two anti-war conferences, one in Zimmerwald, Switzerland (in September 1915) and the other in Kienthal, Switzerland (in April 1916), but since then, the war has been fully raging, communications have been difficult, and Italy is experiencing war censorship. The February Revolution takes the Italian socialist movement by surprise.

If the party's leaders have only access to second-hand news, then the base of the party, that is, the Italian working class, can only rely upon third-hand or fourth-hand stuff.

Socialist proletarians remember the failed revolution of 1905, which they looked to in sympathy and solidarity, but more than ten fateful years have passed, the war has changed everything in most people's lives, the 1905 uprising belongs to a distant, pre-war set of references. And we're talking about a nation where 40% of the population is illiterate.

News of the February Revolution reach Italy through a dispatch of the Stefani news agency. The *Avanti!* publishes it on the 16th of March, and then something happens: the Italian working class, exhausted by the conflict, immediately interprets that faraway revolution as a great event that will end the war. Italian proletarians (whether at the front or at home) instantly assume that the revolutionary process will bring Russia out of the conflict, accelerating the end of the great massacre.

And yet, the Stefani dispatch explicitly states that the Russian revolutionaries «want the war to continue» and want to «eliminate all reactionary influences, which are considered conducive to peace». In fact, the first thing that socialist members of the Russian parliament do is to invite people to return to work and soldiers to the front, in order to continue the fight. And the provisional government, in an official note signed by the new foreign minister Pavel Miljukov, unambiguosly declares that Russia is still a member of the Entente and the war will go on «until the final victory». The *Avanti!* publishes these news on March 19.

In fact, the ruling classes of the Allied countries happily welcome the February Revolution, which they consider a favorable event for prosecuting the war in the best possible conditions. Now that Nicholas II has gone, the Entente is composed only of democratic countries, and the rhetoric of «the war against the despotism of the Central Powers» seems to ring truer than before. On March 16 the Italian Chamber of Deputies celebrates the abdication of the Tsar, and many MPs shout: «Long live Russia!»

On the 22nd of March, Russia's provisional government is recognized by the United States, Britain, France and Italy.

And yet, rather inexplicably, a few days after news of the revolution, the industrial workers go on strike in Turin (a bold move, given that strikes have been illegal since the beginning of the war), and they shout: "Down with the war, let's do as in Russia!"
On the 18th of March, only forty-eight hours after the news, a Milanese socialist writes a letter to a friend who is at the front, he's an infantry corporal. Here's an excerpt:

> «I do not know if you heard the echo of what is happening in Russia. I think so, anyway I must tell you that things are known only very imperfectly, because of the intentional and opportunistic lies and distortions and restrictions of the bourgeois press and the censors. What is certain today is this: the Tsar has abdicated [...] And if the purpose of revolution is to continue the war indefinitely, why has the Tsar abdicated, since his program was precisely to continue the war? [...] The truth must be very different, but the truth can not yet leak through the press.»

Both the sender and the receiver of this letter were charged with «subversive propaganda among the military» and sentenced to respectively fifteen and five years of military prison.

On March 30th, the *Avanti!* publishes a brief, second-hand summing-up of a proclamation issued by the Petrograd Soviet, the council of revolutionary workers and soldiers that's engaged in a power struggle with the Russian provisional government. The proclamation is addressed to all the proletarians in the world, whom are invited to overthrow their national autocracies and put an end to the war. At this moment, people in Italy know very little about the Petrograd Soviet and its conflict with the provisional government. This is the very first vague clue that things in Russia could go in that direction.

And yet, by now, *for more than two weeks* the Italian working class has been heralding the Russian revolution as the anti-war event *par excellence*. This will go on throughout the spring, all over Italy.
On April 15th, the Italian Army Intelligence Service reports that several letters from soldiers celebrate the Russian events, and that among soldiers it is widely believed that the revolution's purpose was [quote:] «not to overthrow a government guilty of mis-managing the war, but to prevent the continuation of the war itself.»

Soon the cry "Long live Lenin!" begins to resonate in spontaneous demonstrations. This is almost a

miracle: by all logic, in Italy Lenin should be an almost unknown figure. "Lenin", however, is a synecdoche, a good synecdoche, not a venomous one: a synecdoche where the part reveals the whole: "End the war!" is the true meaning of the slogan.
The leadership of the PSI, whose official line on the war was "neither support nor sabotage," doesn't understand why the base of the party has been giving such a fierce anti-war interpretation of events in Russia, which after all they know only through inaccurate dispatches barely filtering through war censorship, and ending up on newspaper pages devastated by the gaps left by censors. Newspapers that most people aren't able to read, by the way.

A few months later, the Bolsheviks seize power and propose, unheeded by all governments, a general armistice.
In March 1918 the Bolsheviks finally manage to bring Russia (by now a socialist republic) out of the conflict, with the separate peace of Brest-Litovsk. It is a costly peace, Russia has to renounce huge portions of its territory, including Ukraine, which are transfered to Germany and the Ottoman Empire.
Nevertheless, Russia is out of the war.

The Italian workers have been proven right. But how could they immediately comprehend what was going on, against all evidence, with no reliable information?
How did they do it? What snapped in the imagination of those members of the Italian working class? What «vision» anticipated the recognition, what gaze were they able to cast upon the Russian Event? People kept uninformed, living and toiling and dying thousands of miles away, bogged down in a trench or crushed by factory work, very little connected with each other... IWhat did the Revolution look like in their eyes?

As the Invisible Committee put it in their 2009 document entitled «Mise au point»:

> «The dissemination of a revolutionary movement is not carried by contamination. But by resonance. Something that surfaces here resounds with the shock wave emitted by something that happened over there.
> The body that resonates does it in its own way. An insurrection is not like the expansion of a plague or a forest fire - a linear process passing from one to the next, starting from an original spark. Rather, it is something that takes shape like music, whose homes, even when scattered in time and space, manage to impose the pace of their own vibration, to

> gain ever more relevance, until the moment when any return to normality can no longer be desirable or even feasible.»

Alain Badiou recently quoted a part of this remark, in an article on North African uprisings which was published on *Le Monde*.

Ok, but... How and why does an insurrection it resound? Why does it not resound with all bodies? Why were proletarians the only ones to feel the resonance of the February Revolution? What did that revolution resound with? Why was the ruling class unable to foresee what's going to happen, even if they certainly had more information than the working class?

In 1914 and 1915, the war was propagandized as nothing short of a revolution. The Governments of the larger *Entente* presented the conflict as a democratic crusade against the despotism of decadent empires, against Prussian authoritarianism, against the iron heel of the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East, and so on. The phraseology was radical and revolutionary. In fact, many radicals enlisted, thinking they would practically help in defeating the old world and build a new Europe. Several Italian radicals thought the war would realize many as yet unachieved political and social goals of Italy's *Risorgimento*. Among these people we find the cream of the crop of that era's non-Marxist left, for example the Rosselli brothers (Carlo and Nello Rosselli), who a few years later founded the anti-fascist clandestine group Giustizia e libertà.

Even more to the left, members of revolutionary syndicalism looked for a revolutionary value in the radical reset of the world that the upcoming war was likely to cause. In August 1914, the syndicalist Alceste De Ambris, who'd just returned to Italy after years of political exile in Brazil and Switzerland, wrote:

> «I believe that the wonderful event which we have the ill or good fortune to behold will have such consequences as to force all parties and all philosophies to radically revise themselves and break all mental habits no matter what principle inspired them, as the 1789 Revolution once did, and maybe to an even wider extent. This is not yet *our* revolution, but maybe it is necessary in order to get the world rid of the cumbersome remnants of the surviving Middle Ages.»

Let's not forget Benito Mussolini, who at that time was still a revolutionary socialist. In October

1914 he stated:

> «As both men and socialists, do we want to be idle spectators of this grand drama, or do we want to be, in some way, its protagonists?»

One month later, he was expelled from the Socialist Party, and that's the beginning of another story.

It didn't take long before such enthusiasm was replaced by disappointment, discouragement, fear, and horror. The war was not a revolution: it was terrible, meaningless carnage. The war had spoken the language of revolution, but had spoken it with a forked tongue. The promoters of the war had lied.

It should be noted that, unlike the radical intellectuals mentioned before, the masses, who had been contrary to joining the war in the first place, had quickly realized that the war was speaking with a forked tongue, but they couldn't have imagined the abyss of horror the intervention would topple them into.

The trauma was enormous.

The mobilized masses, tired of the war, could hardly wait for someone to *really* speak the language of revolution. A revolution that, at that point could only be antithetical to war.
Let me give you one example among thousands possible: on 20th january 1916, a military court sentenced a 25-year old soldier to four years in prison for spreading news disparaging the army. This guy had written a letter to a friend, in which he told about subversive comments uttered by army officers. He'd written:

> «Do not believe those stories on the soldiers' acts of valor, do not pay any attention to what the newspaper says, they're all lies. Soldiers do not fight with pride nor passion, they go to slaughter because they are ordered to, and because they are afraid of being executed [...]»

Then the guy reported a comment he'd heard from an officer:
«If I could lay my hands on the head of government, I would strangle him»
Finally, he concluded:

«Revolution is the only way out. We are tired and only wait for the spark.»

Certainly, nobody would have bet a single cent on backward, peasant Russia. It was the most unlikely country for a revolution. Marxists were looking to more advanced industrial countries. In fact, when the revolution broke out, Antonio Gramsci described it as «a revolution against *Das Kapital*».
However, a potential narrative of «revolution vs. the war» was in circulation, and the emotions were ready to be expressed. The war itself had contributed to arouse them. The masses were tuned and ready, and when the Event found its unlikely, surprising site, the working class immediately picked up the right narrative, against all evidence, against any "common sense" and all talk by "experts".

Nevertheless, this is just a general *precondition* of resonance. We need to know more about the *specific* ways in which the Russian Event resonated in Italy, and, more precisely, we have to understand what it resonated with.
That's why I'm starting a second line of reasoning, which is likely to be more tentative and erratic. As strange as it may seem this line of reasoning has to do with Marcel Proust.

My assumption is that those Italian workers were in an advantaged position with respect to their leaders and their journalists. While the latter were paralyzed by lack of information and suffered the frustration generated by censorship, the workers were more free to look from afar and wonder about the *outlines* of the revolutionary event, they were more free to focus on its shape, and try to grasp its significancy by means of similarities. What did it look like? What did it *feel* like?
Well, it felt like many things. The proletarians projected on it a multiplicity of images, all of which were related to their main desire, and their main desire was that the war ended, the war that had made life so monotonously terrifying, so unworth living, so depressingly lacking of variety, of multiplicity.

Far from fulfilling its radical promises, the war had established a harsh disciplinary regime, it was associated with blind obedience, despotism and inescapable death.
An event in which the masses had disobeyed, overthrown a despot and demanded a better life could not but be associated with the end of the war. A revolution could only be against the war.

Again: those proletarians asked themselves: «What does this remote event look like? What does it *feel* like?». And they answered: «It feels like what I'd like to do myself! It feels like what I've seen

attempted many times, without success!».
In mid-July of 1917, the infantrymen of the Catanzaro Brigade rebelled against their officers. It was the biggest revolt ever occurred in the Italian army during the Great War.
The incident took place in Santa Maria la Longa, in the Friuli region, where the brigade had been stationed since June 25th, for a period of rest. The news of a new deployment in the trenches of the first line triggered a protest which soon escalated into open revolt.
The army quelled the revolt by sending in a company of Carabinieri, four machine guns and two autocannon. The fight lasted all night and ended at dawn. In the following days, about 20 rebels were shot and thrown into a common grave.
That's what the revolution felt like for proletarians: it felt like a mutiny, it felt like desertion, it felt like draft-dodging, it felt like a workers' strike. Those are the things the Event resonated with: the revolution *felt* like a larger version of one of the many revolts that were erupting from the trenches in those days.

Ok, but... What in heaven has Marcel Proust to do with this?

The February Revolution is like a group of young girls walking on the seashore of Balbec, Northern France, seen by the narrator of *In search of lost time.* More precisely, in the second volume, entitled *In the shadow of young girls in flower*, which was published for the first time in 1919.

One day, while standing in front of his hotel, the narrator spots, at the far end of the esplanade, «a striking patch of colour». It's a group of five or six girls walking in his direction.
I can only provide a very dry distillate of the incredible description that follows. It lasts about twenty pages, it is full of digressions, clusters of mixed metaphors and synesthetic associations in which noses and cheeks float around without belonging to any particular face, body movements are compared to elements of musical scores (Chopin is explicitly mentioned), belonging to a social class is described as sculpture, elements in the backdrop are imagined in race competition with elements of an imaginary foreground, surrealistic machines run through the scene... First, the girls are compared to «a flock of gulls arriving from God knows where and performing with measured tread... a parade the purpose of which seems obscure to human bathers». One of them is pushing a bicycle, another one carries golf-clubs, they keep walking. The narrator describes their way of walking, but doesn't individualize any of them, he only sees a «straight nose» here, a «pair of hard, obstinate and mocking eyes» there... The pinkness of one girl's cheeks remind him of geraniums, than he reports that [quote:] «the most different aspects were juxtaposed, because all the colour

scales were combined in it, but confused as a piece of music in which I was unable to isolate and identify at the moment of their passage the successive phrases». A few lines below, he describes the group's movement as [quote:] «the continuous transmutation of a fluid, collective and mobile beauty.» Then he wonders about the girls' social class, raves about their bodies «like statues exposed to the sunlight on a Grecian shore», then the group is compared to «a luminous comet», and as the girls stop for a moment, they look like [quote:]« an agglomerate that was at once irregular in shape, compact, weird and shrill, like an assembly of birds before taking flight; then they resumed their leisurely stroll along the esplanade». Those girls couldn't care less about the other people on the esplanade, they advance like «a machine which [has] been sent going by itself», and even when the narrator individualizes the girls a little, they're still [quote:] «a whole as homogeneous in its parts as it was different from the crowd through which their procession gradually wound». Then another metaphor is introduced, now the narrator is using a telescope to observe a neighbouring planet, of which he can't say whether humans inhabit it. He says that it is the group's «fleetingness», like the fleetingness of passers-by, «persons who are not known to us», to make those young women so fascinating. Had the narrator been introduced to them in a more ordinary way, [quote:] «withdrawn from the element which gave them so many fine shades and such vagueness, these girls would have enchanted me less.»

This is a very poor account of that description, I kept my focus on the girls and left out many digressions that make these pages even more puzzlingly enchanting. This is the closing of the sequence, where the narrator says:

> "[I was convinced,] with a botanist's satisfaction, that it was not possible to find gathered together rarer specimens than these young flowers that at this moment before my eyes were breaking the line of the sea with their slender hedge, like a bower of Pennsylvania roses adorning a cliffside garden, between whose blooms is contained the whole tract of ocean crossed by some steamer, so slow in gliding along the blue, horizontal line that stretches from one stem to the next that an idle butterfly, dawdling in the cup of a flower which the ship's hull has long since passed, can wait, before flying off in time to arrive before it, until nothing but the tiniest chink of blue still separates the prow from the first petal of the flower towards which it is steering."

In one of the essays collected in his book *Politics of literature*, **Jacques Rancière** dwells upon this passage and describes it as an example of the way literature can make us experience the «haecceity» of life.

«Haecceity» is an ancient philosophical concept which Deleuze & Guattari re-formulated in *A Thousand Plateaus*. The word derives from the Latin '*haec*', which means «this»: the «this-ness» of something. «haecceity» is the configuration of the here-and-now multiplicity.

In these pages by Proust, a sense of «haecceity» is conveyed through a hank of rhetorical devices (imagine a cloud of multicolored cotton candy, where shades and nuances are produced by the intertwining of metaphors, hypotyposes, prosopopoeias, 'pathetic fallacy' etc.), an extended super-trope which Proust uses to describe the disorderly configuration the world assumes around the narrator in a singular, unrepeatable moment, without any hierarchy between large and small things, 'background' and 'foreground', human and inanimate objects, light and time etc. Haecceity is the peculiar characteristic of a moment's configuration: "We are all the five 0'clock in the evening», wrote Deleuze & Guattari, with reference to a famous poem by Federico Garcia Lorca (*Llanto por Ignacio Sánchez Mejías*). Let's savour a wee bit of their visionary prose:

> «A haecceity is the entire assemblage in its individuated aggregate... It is the wolf itself, and the horse, and the child, that cease to be subjects to become events, in assemblages that are inseparable from an hour, a season, an atmosphere, an air, a life. The street enters into composition with the horse [...] Climate, wind, season, hour are not of another nature than the things, animals, or people that populate them, follow them, sleep and awaken within them [...] That is how we need to feel. [...] We are all five o'clock in the evening, or another hour, or rather two hours simultaneously...»

What Proust describes very effectively in this passage is the assemblage of a collective being, a mobile conglomerate of sensations, objects and colors. A parade of bicycles, golf clubs, gulls, eyes, noses, statues, machines, flowers, music, comets, telescopes, planets, fleeting shadows, ships and floating butterflies!

For Rancière, this is the moment of a split, a bifurcation between two voices and two approaches.
What has been called "the transcendental ego" of Proust's work - that is the narrating I who writes about his past experiences - lingers on, hesitates, enjoys the configuration, doesn't want to tell one girl from the others, he wants to keep a distance and enjoy the effect of the whole, the impersonal (or rather, pre-personal) beauty. The description of this configuration is a real tribute to the vitality of life itself.

But the other «I», the *narrated* I - or as some critics called him, "the empirical ego", the character whom the narrator writes about - can't help but disassemble the whole. He ends up individualizing the elements of the configuration. With this initiative, he carries on the action of the novel, because that's how he'll get to know Albertine. Soon she will stand out clearly against the background, and the empirical ego will fall in love with her.

For Rancière, it is as if Proust is telling us that the right approach was that adopted by the «transcendental ego». While looking at the assemblage and enjoying his metamorphoses, the narrator has grasped something important about himself, the world, the other people, and that moment in time. Rancière goes as far as describing the object of his discovery as a «medicine».

A medicine for what?

While preparing this talk, I realized that it is Proust himself (or rather, the «transcendental ego») to give us the answer, to explain the nature of the illness, to anticipate it in a coded message at the beginning of that sequence. He explains that the character, the «empirical ego», is living one of those periods of one's youth «unprovided with any one definite love», in which one longs for impossible love, looks for Beauty (with the capital B) everywhere, and is «inclined to overrate the simplest pleasures because of the difficulties that spring up in the way of attaining them». He writes:

> «We need only to see in passing a single real feature of a woman, a glimpse of her at a distance or from behind, which can be enough for us to project Beauty on to her, and we imagine we have found it at last: the heart beats faster, we lengthen our stride and, on condition that she disappears, we may be left with the certainty of having set eyes upon it - it is only if we succeed in catching up with her that we discover our mistake.»

The «transcendental ego» calls it a mistake, we call it illness. According to Rancière, Proust's «empirical ego» suffers the same illness as Flaubert's Emma Bovary:

> «She never ceases transforming hecceities into qualities of people and things. She is thereby constantly deflecting them back into the whirlwind of personal appetites and frustrations.»

Now in my words: our illness consists precisely in mis-taking life (life in its pure multiplicity) for any one of its idealized versions, for any one of its fetishes. What we need is a cure for our compulsion to possess objects or capture subjects, a cure for our obsessive, impossible search for the Ideal Woman or any other object of enjoyment, a cure for our drive to consumerism, or our chauvinism, our cult of identity, you-name-it. A cure for the paranoia induced by the system, the state ideological apparatuses, the corporations, military propagandists etc.
The poetic medicine for this illness is life, life «returned to the pure multiple of sensation». The writer becomes a doctor, and the prerequisite for his being a doctor is his being what Rancière calls a «healthy schizophrenic»:

> «The healthy schizophrenic works hard to dissolve the pathological connections made by fictional characters between an apparition on a beach, the idea of individuality and the dream of love. He allows the moving and fluid splotch to glide freely along the sky-blue line where it turns into a flock of seagulls, a collection of Greek statues or a grove of Pennsylvania roses. Such is real life, life returned to the pure multiple of sensation.»

On the contrary, the «empirical ego» (the one who suffers the illness) individualizes and personalizes, he makes the «pathological connection»: when he stops the overview to focus on Albertine, he triggers a reaction that will eventually make him succumb to Albertine's expansion. Her name is the most mentioned throughout *In Search of Lost Time*: she is mentioned 2360 times. Three times the occurrences of Gilberte's name, almost a thousand more occurrences than Swann's.

The empirical ego's love for Albertine will cause him sorrow and pain. However, it will be a useful experience, we should never forget that the narrating I is none other than the older version of the narrated I recalling what he did in the past. In the present time, the narrator proves fully capable of describing the haecceity of life.

A curious detail: Proust's proof-reading of *In the shadow of young girls in flower* occurred in October 1917.

Italian workers were like Proust's narrator, they saw the revolution at the far end of the European esplanade, and they couldn't individualize any of its features, but they grasped the whole configuration through similarities and resonances. A multifarious parade of strikes, riots, mutinies... And they instantly sensed that such multiplicity was antithetical to the war, it was the cure for the

illness that the war had spread all over Europe. They found pure life in that moment's configuration. "We are all five o'clock in the evening", remember? Similarly, those workers were all February of 1917.

If this parallelism sounds too forced, if Marcel Proust daydreaming on a Norman seashore and the Italian working class greeting the Russian revolution seem too far away from each other, let's look for some kind of mediator between the two, as well as between the Russian revolution and the way literature can convey a sense of haecceity.

When Marcel Proust died, the Russian poet **Vladimir Mayakovsky** was in Paris, and attended the funeral (November 22, 1922).

Mayakovsky devoted many poems to the Revolutionary Event. Hundreds of them. He used poetry as social and political commentary, and many of his works were originally published as op-eds on revolutionary newspapers. He wrote millions of words on the difficult, «post-coital» task of building a socialist society, but he also frequently recalled the days of 1917. His longer, narrative poems stand out against the backdrop of his portentous output. I will quote from one of them, *The 150 Million*, which is a hymn to the revolution as a caotic, pre-personal, extra-human configuration.

Before quoting from this work, I must specify that it wasn't me to discover that Mayakovsky had a striking inclination for conveying a sense of haecceity: it was none other than **Lev Trotsky** to write this in his famous 1924 book *Literature and Revolution*. Only, Trotsky intended it as a moderately harsh criticism, while I intend it as a compliment. Here's a few passages from Trotsky's book. In Mayakovsky's poems

> «it is impossible to establish the difference between a little thing and a big. That is why Mayakovsky speaks of the most intimate thing, such as love, as if he were speaking about the migration of nations. For the same reason he cannot find different words for the Revolution. He is always shooting at the edge, and, as every artilleryman knows, such gunning gives a minimum of hits and tells most heavily on the guns.»

But no, the images of the revolution that Mayakovsky gave us are among the most durable, the most powerful, the most fascinating that we have inherited from that great event.
Here Trotsky is talking about *The 150 Million*:

> «Mayakovsky's works have no peak; they are not disciplined internally. The parts refuse to obey the whole. Each part tries to be separate. It develops its own dynamics, without considering the welfare of the whole. That is why it is without entity or dynamics. [...] The images live separately, they collide and they bounce off one another. The hostility of the images is not an outgrowth of the historic materials but is the result of an internal disharmony with the revolutionary philosophy of life. However, when not without difficulty one reads the poem to the very end, one says to oneself: a great work could have been composed out of these elements, had there been measure and self-criticism!»

No measure. Trotsky wasn't the only revolutionary leader to dislike Mayakovsky's poems for that reason: Lenin himself complained that in his verses "everything is scattered all over the place".
But it's precisely because of this, because of Mayakovsky's sense for haecceity, that his images remain so powerful to this day, and his poetic accounts are among the first things that we associate with that Revolutionary Event.

A hundred and fifty million was the number of the Russian population when Mayakovsky wrote his poem. It was published anonymously in 1919. The very first verse explains why: «150 million is the name of the creator of this poem.» The work is explicitly presented as a national allegory: the poem is revolutionary Russia itself, revolutionary Russia itself is the poem: «Its rhythm: bullets / Its rhymes: fires from building to building [...] / This edition was printed / with the rotary machine of steps / on the paper of cobblestone squares.»
What follows is a feast of digressions, clusters of metaphors, synesthetic associations and so on. Revenge, the Bayonet, the Browning Carbine and the Bomb write a leaflet together. This rhetorical device is known as «pathetic fallacy», it consists in «mis-attributing» the capability to think and have feelings to abstract concepts or inanimated things. The leaflet says:

> «Everyone!
> Everyone!
> Everyone
> Who can't take it anymore!
> Gather together
> and go!»

The leaflet is indistinctly addressed to everybody and every *thing*: street lamps and animals and trains and buildings and rivers go on strike and march together, «millions of things, disfigured, broken to pieces, devastated», no difference between large and small, it's the whole universe rising up, and there are roses, like in Proust's description of the seashore girls: «we will invent new roses / rose-shaped capitals with petals made of squares». This multitude announces the revolution, and shouts: «The world will be as we / described it / and next wednesday / and yesterday / and today / and always / and tomorrow / and the day after tomorrow / world without end!». Notice the fact that there's no hierarchy between «wednesday» and «world without end». Then the whole Russia gets anthropomorphized, Russia is now a guy called «Ivan», the champion of proletarians. He is a giant, human-shape assemblage of everybody and everything, he is composed of whole worlds, «his arm is the Neva river **/** and his heels - the Caspian steppes». Ivan heads towards the United States in order to fight against president Woodrow Wilson, who's described as the champion of capitalists. Now we're on a seashore again, it isn't Balbec, it's an American seashore, it's the West Coast, and people feel that Ivan - that is, the revolution - is coming, but they are disinformed by the radio, thus (exactly like the Italian ruling class in the days of the February Revolution) they just don't understand, the radio says that «a terrible storm [is] raging on the Pacific / the monsoons and trade winds have gone mad», then it says that in Chicago, someone fished strange fish, covered with fur, with big noses. Then the radio broadcasts a correction: The news about furry fish were wrong, but the storm is there, and «it's even worse than we thought. Causes unknown.» Finally the radio acknowledges that it isn't a storm, it's the enemy. And the enemy isn't a fleet: it's Ivan. He reaches the seashore and his arrival causes class war to break out in the US. The whole universe is described as a volcano, «the crater from which spurts the lava of the peoples.» Then the big wave caused by Ivan's arrival runs eastwards and reaches Chicago, which Mayakovsky set as Woodrow Wilson's fictional headquarters. With plenty of mixed metaphors, hypotyposes and so on, Chicago is described as a hellish place. Then Ivan himself arrives to Chicago, he and Wilson fight each other like in a Godzilla movie, and Ivan destroys Wilson.

The very last sequence of the poem is a <u>utopian moment</u> set in a distant future: we're in the Sahara, which isn't a desert anymore, and there's even a martian delegation visiting planet Earth, the old epicenter of the universal revolution. They're coming from all planets to celebrate the remote beginning of the revolution. Again, humans, animals and things are together, they sing together and remember the past exploitation, the deaths and sacrifices that were necessary in order to build the new universe.

To sum up: our bodies resonate with the multiplicity of life revealed by the Event interrupting the everyday cycle of pathological connections. Such multiplicity and resonance can be powerfully

conveyed through a seemingly disorderly description of that moment's configuration: the "super-trope", the rhetorical cloud of "haecceity", in which there seems to be no "measure" and no hierarchy between small and large things, backdrop and foreground.

This is a direction we could take, in order to avoid the usual framing traps on the path of telling about a revolution. Now WM2 will summarize what those traps are. Thank you.

March – April 2011