

The Artist Malevich Takes A Walk in Vitebsk

In the fall of 1919, the artist Kazimir Malevich (1878-1935), a leader of the Russian avant-garde, reluctantly left Moscow for the provincial city of Vitebsk. Malevich was part of an exodus from Russia's great cities. Two years into Bolshevik rule, the cities were emptying out as people searched for food, fuel and safety. In Moscow and St. Petersburg if there was wood, there were not enough people to chop and haul it. If there was flour for bread, there was not enough wood for the ovens to bake it. Trams and trains did not run for lack of parts to repair them. The year that Malevich so reluctantly left Moscow there were 100,000 reported cases of typhus and 72,000 reported cases of tuberculosis. Petrograd lost two-thirds of its population; Moscow, more than half. Not everyone could escape. As an artist, Malevich belonged to a group of the cultural elite who were fortunate enough to find refuge in Vitebsk, initiating what is often called Vitebsk's "cultural renaissance." Once there, Malevich joined the faculty of an art college headed by Marc Chagall, the city's most famous native son.

The usual story about Malevich in Vitebsk centers on the tension between these two artists. In this story, Chagall started it. Disgruntled at having lost students to Malevich and perhaps reluctant to admit he had left Vitebsk willingly, even eagerly, he complained to a friend that Malevich was nothing but a "dishonorable intriguer." Chagall thought that his own art, with its recognizably Jewish motifs, "was the sort of art Vitebsk and the Russian Revolution needed," while Malevich's brand of high abstraction struck some as anti-religious.

Undoubtedly, Malevich's most famous work, a square-shaped painting of a black square, resembled a crudely defaced and censored religious icon. This resemblance was enhanced by the fact that not only was "Black Square" the shape and size of a traditional religious icon, but when he first displayed the painting, Malevich hung it where religious icons usually hang in the so-called "red corner" of the exhibition hall, where the ceiling meets two walls. Soon after, this disturbing and ambiguous new icon would make its way onto the sleeves of his students (all of them Jews) as a small, square black patch, defiantly signaling their membership in UNOVIS (*Utverditeli Novovo Iskusstva*, or Champions of the New Art), the so-called Suprematist art collective that Malevich established in Vitebsk. Thus, the usual story ends.

But there's another story to tell in Vitebsk. Leaving aside the prickly questions about the *right kind of art* for a city (and for which people, at what time) hinted at by Chagall, there remains an equally, if not more, urgent matter of what to do about the wrong kind of *people* in a city, the people nobody ever needs—the outsiders. Because Chagall and his sympathizers were onto something.

There was something odd about Malevich, a Polish-Ukrainian Catholic, teaching all of those Jews when Vitebsk's other visiting cultural luminaries knew better than to mingle with the locals. True, Mikhail Mihailovich Bakhtin (1891-1975), the philosopher and literary critic, married a local, but when it came to work, he stayed within the circle of philosophers who had accompanied him to this remote outpost. Occasionally, he lectured. All of the imported actors, musicians, dancers and singers knew their place just as well: on stage. They performed. The Jews watched.

Why did Malevich disrupt this arrangement? Why did he join his students in their art collective? What was he thinking? We cannot know. Perhaps he was nothing but “a dishonorable intriguer,” an especially unscrupulous opportunist. Perhaps it was Leninism, Fordism and Marxism at their worst. But that’s still another story.

Malevich himself tells another story in five letters he wrote upon first arriving in Vitebsk. In these five letters, written between November 7 and December 28, 1919, he tells a story of an outsider. He recognizes that Vitebsk is a Jewish city and he knows he is different. He knows he cannot understand Vitebsk’s Jews, nor they him. In these letters, Malevich describes his walks in Vitebsk and the people, the Jews, who he sees on his way.

Although Malevich walked only to follow doctor’s orders, he was nonetheless following in the footsteps of *flâneurs* before him. We can compare Malevich to Monsieur G, the Parisian Charles Baudelaire describes in *The Painter of Modern Life* and the *flâneur* who defined the type. For Baudelaire, Monsieur G is the painter of a distinctly *modern* life. In his walking, Monsieur G celebrates his city and the beauty he observes in its multitudes, content to watch the crowd walk quickly by as he sorts and classifies them by their appearance. Baudelaire casts modernity as the end towards which the *flâneur* always hurries, the horizon of “the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent,” which Paris and its crowds exemplified.

Like Monsieur G before him, Malevich came to know the modern world as he walked; unlike the monsieur, Malevich walked the streets of a provincial, not Parisian, city.

Malevich also notices the differences between himself and his provincial crowd. From letter to letter, the problem of difference becomes ever graver to him. What at first can be ignored (He plans to write in his room and enjoy Vitebsk's "conveniences"), or ridiculed (The provincials sport megaphone ears!), or remedied (A language invented as it is spoken will be instantly, magically universally understood!), or transcended (He flies on a synagogue's letters "beyond the sun and this world" and then he drops his walking stick) becomes, finally and painfully, an intractable moral dilemma.

At last, in the fifth and final letter about his Vitebsk walks, Malevich writes about failing to send bread from Vitebsk to his starving friends in Moscow. In this letter he describes the Jewish refugees whose little bags of salt are inadequate to bribe their way into the safety of Vitebsk. Of all the differences in the world, the most intractable and painful one—the one most necessary to address—is that between the fortunate and the unfortunate.

The provincial *flâneur* never learned to love his city the way great city *flâneurs* loved theirs; nor did he, finally, sing hymns to the provincial life of the everyday, the boring, the clay feet, the overlooked, the discarded diary, the unwritten novel or the necessities that got in the way of life's transcendent point. At least, not exactly. Not hymns. Hallelujahs had nothing to do with it.

In this fifth letter Malevich's style turns sober, unornamented. In this letter, unlike earlier ones, nobody sports megaphones. Nobody is a cabbage. Brains are not flowerbeds. Gone are the abstractions, the flights of philosophizing that filled previous descriptions of his Vitebsk walks. This is the style of a writer who wants the facts to speak for themselves—who believes they do, or that they should. This is also a writer aware of his

shortcomings. In this letter, he writes that the sights he sees deserve someone who could “roll out at full steam a thousand-page book.” He despairs, “It’s a pity I’m not a writer.” Yet he launches into his tale of the Jewish refugees and their bags of salt, prefacing the story as if he were finally, and surprisingly, about to report on Vitebsk’s famous “cultural renaissance.”

Malevich writes: “in the fields below Smolensk, on the Orshanko-Mogilev Road,” he witnessed “the spectacle...together with opera, drama, tragedy, cabaret, ballet.” He was setting the stage of his reader’s expectations because who expects a spectacle in a provincial city, let alone in its surrounding fields? He did not. Spectacle, opera, drama, tragedy, cabaret and ballet happen in great cities, not there.

Malevich then repeats one of his initial complaints about provincial Vitebsk—it is too small. At the beginning of November, he wrote that it was “small to the point of absurdity.” Six weeks later, he came up with another adjective: trifling. Absurd means having to live and work in the same building. Trifling means having to take short walks. It is unlikely that he took 40-verst walks in Moscow as he claims (his doctor ordered daily walks, not marathons); however, he *could* have walked that far in the city (Moscow sprawls like Los Angeles compared to the San Francisco-like compactness of Petrograd). But Vitebsk’s space was too trifling, he writes, to work up a good pace. Vitebsk’s space was so trifling, Malevich complains, that a short walk brought him to its outskirts, to fields. What good is a city if it is also countryside?

A provincial city is good for repurposing, exactly because its purpose is ambiguous. Is Vitebsk city or countryside? The eyes of the beholders can make of it what

they will. Malevich saw a stage. This spot between roads and fields was neither the great city he knew nor the provincial city he did not—anything could happen there.

The artist then spins some city-like mystery. On that road, the letter continues, he beheld a “drama-tragedy-cabaret-ballet . . . in the sense of the hunt and its cunning.” What? What drama? Which ballet? What hunt and whose cunning? Who would step onto the stage he had set? On what scene would the curtain lift? On whose face would the spotlight focus? Which performer?

The answers are difficult to spot, and the letter does not name them immediately. Instead, Malevich’s description of the ditches, bushes and trees shines a spotlight, scanning the scene until finally fixing on them: the Jews outside Vitebsk. Now, the mystery thickens, and Malevich draws closer. He calls the outsiders *evrei*, the word Jews use to identify themselves, and in doing so narrows the distance—cultural, ethnic, religious, and national—between them. Sympathy intensifies. There is another group: natives. They are the people driving sledges heading into Vitebsk.

The imaginary proscenium sets the stage for a dramatic confrontation between the two groups that meet at the outskirts of Vitebsk – natives and Jews. “All the ditches, bushes and trees are filled with Jews.” The wilderness is haunted by them. Chagall also showed Jews in unlikely places, but a Jew in a ditch is not as uplifting as one on a roof. This is not a dream. These Jews are “hunters without rifles.” With a bag of salt as their only weapon, they hunt for a way into Vitebsk. Salt was precious enough – more valuable than bank notes – to tempt the sledge driver to run the risk of violating Vitebsk’s. As a sledge approaches, the Jews leap from their hiding places, each waving his own bag of salt. Sometimes the Jews find a way into the city “It’s all over, giddyup into the city and

he disappears as in the sea's abyss." The city is the abyss. One tragedy ends and another begins.

Malevich returned often enough to know that the drama could unfold differently. Sometimes no sledge appears. Other times, "an unbelievable thing happens" –only one sledge appears, forcing the Jewish hunters to compete with one another. "It is terrifying for the horse," Malevich observes. He is a good enough writer to understand the power of the unsaid.

Other times the drama has only one act: "Forward." A "jaeger" – perhaps a pun on hunter, or a reference to a member of the light infantry– rides up on his horse "all of a sudden." Those are the times when Malevich could have been mistaken for one of those people with nothing to lose, a target just like them.

The Jewish hunters returned to their ditches, trees and bushes outside of Vitebsk and Malevich returned to his home inside Vitebsk. Vitebsk remained small, painfully small, and the distances separating the safe from the suffering were small to the point of tragedy. How could the provincial flâneur sing hallelujahs to a city like that? Praise and celebration are for great city *flâneurs*, for the likes of Monsieur G, walking on his late 19th century Parisian streets. But even Baudelaire, honored as much for his poems as his essays, goes beyond praise and celebration. He curses and despairs.

"'Everyone *feels* the Devil and no one believes in him,' wrote Baudelaire in a projected preface to his collection of poems, *Les Fleurs du Mal* (I, 182-3). The eminent literary critic Jonathan Culler reminds us of Baudelaire's taunt. "Tout le monde le sent et personne n'y croit." Everyone – that's us – has *felt* the evidence of the Devil's existence

and yet not one of us will believe in him. We are like those creationists, willfully disregarding the fossil record in our determination to believe that a benevolent, divine and all-powerful hand has been (and always will be) active in our lives. Baudelaire taunts us for our perverse and stubborn preference for feeling God, not the Devil. He would have guessed that on great city streets we would want to see ballets and beauty because we want to see ourselves as performers, able to change our scripts as easily as we change clothes. Fashion is costume, isn't it? This is the modern life that Monsieur G paints, the modern life to which we creationists cling. Nowadays, to say one feels blessed is a cliché. Perhaps it is that longing to feel blessed – or at least less cursed – that keeps our attention fixed on the modern, on the great city's speed and fragmentation above all, as if the worse thing about modern life is loneliness or capitalism. *What fossil record?* Don't blame Baudelaire. Some creationists cite Darwin.

Of course, Baudelaire writes about beauty and its pleasures, noting that the *flâneur*, “marvels at the eternal beauty and the amazing harmony of life in the capital cities.” This *flâneur* does not seem to be feeling the devil: “For the perfect *flâneur*, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite.” Baudelaire expounds more on the joy of the *flâneur*, with more about dwelling in the heart of the crowd. “To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home,” is a phrase made for cross-stitch and framing. But Baudelaire turned other phrases as well. The paintings of modern life are not all chignons and crinolines. He lingers longer on Monsieur G's other subjects: war, soldiers, corpses and other decidedly devilish things.

In the eleventh of the essay's thirteen sections, Baudelaire turns to the devilishness of modern life, the "patricide and cannibalism and a thousand other abominations that shame and modesty prevent us from naming." The devil makes himself felt as much in Baudelaire's modern world as in the outskirts of Vitebsk. Unlike those naïve believers, however, Baudelaire believes in the Devil that all of them feel. He refers to this Devil as "original sin," "Nature" and even "Mother Nature," writing: "It is this infallible Mother Nature who has created patricide and cannibalism...."

Baudelaire titles this antepenultimate section of *The Painter of Modern Life*, "In Praise of Cosmetics." In the same breath – the same paragraph – that he praises cosmetics, he praises reason, religion and philosophy. Cosmetics are motive and metaphor; both our moral and physical blemishes need correction, or at least disguise. Reason, religion and philosophy powder and paint over our true, murderous natures: "Evil happens without effort, naturally, fatally; good is always the product of some art." Try cross-stitching that.

One thing is certain: Baudelaire's *flânerie*, too, has its evil side. As much as Baudelaire teaches us to savor the great city's beauty, admire the dandy, appreciate a chignon and, in general, thrill to the fast-paced, ever-shifting, ephemeral facts of modern life, he does not stop there. There is something more at stake. Loneliness and capitalism are not the worst things about modernity.

Baudelaire does not wonder why bad things happen to good people; he wonders why good people don't do anything. Suffering is not evil--our reaction to it is. The Devil laughs, says Baudelaire.

Laughter is *proof* of the devil, Baudelaire writes in a short essay titled “On the Essence of Laughter.” He first phrases his belief as a hypothetical: “If you wished to demonstrate that the comic is one of the clearest proofs of the Satanic in man...” and then continues with the story of a young woman from the provinces who is corrupted by Parisian life.

The Fall of Virginie, the young woman, is marked not by sex, as her name might suggest, but by *caricatures*. For Baudelaire, the mark of great city corruption is to laugh at caricatures: Virginie sees the humor in caricatures only after the city has seduced her into believing herself superior to the unfortunate subjects of the caricaturists’ lampoons. Baudelaire laments, “Laughter comes from the idea of one’s *own* superiority. A Satanic idea, if ever there was one!” Virginie can laugh because of her confidence that she is not only different from, but superior to those sad types. He concludes: “Laughter is satanic: it is thus profoundly human.”

Although ragged Jews, peering out of bushes and waving bags of salt, could be a caricaturist’s subjects, Malevich does not laugh. What does he do? He keeps returning to see variations on the same tragedy. He’s Darwin trying to comprehend the fossil record.

The Devil also dwells in Vitebsk. In a city small to the point of devilishness, a short walk brings the provincial *flâneur* face-to-face with the city’s suffering. It is rougher to be a provincial *flâneur* than a great city one; that is to say, in the small provincial city it is harder to walk away. In those smaller places where everyone knows each other’s business, they also know each other’s tragedies. Then what do they do?

Is that why Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin wrote about suffering the way he did? Bakhtin was Malevich's much younger neighbor. Malevich was 40; Bakhtin was 24. Malevich was expecting his third child, the first with his second wife, and Bakhtin was newly wed to a young woman from Vitebsk. While Malevich had many publications in major city journals to his name, Bakhtin had only one, a recent publication in a small city journal. Malevich would be dead in 15 years; Bakhtin had another 55 to live. As if he had observed the spectacle of Malevich's Jews, it was the young Bakhtin who would roll out those thousands of pages that Malevich swore the sight deserved.

In "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity," Bakhtin suggests, "Let us say that there is a human being before me who is suffering." He poses the problem as if it were a hypothetical one. In an essay ostensibly about literary process, Bakhtin personifies the figures of both author and hero so that he appears to be writing about two people, one closely observing the other, like the provincial *flâneur* and a person of the crowd.

Through his choice of pronouns, Bakhtin's literary criticism becomes moral philosophy: the reader becomes "I", the first-person singular, at once involved and implicated in the affairs of the other. Bakhtin's "I" acts out what ought to be done when "there is a human being before me who is suffering."

When he writes about the author and hero, "I must experience – come to see and to know – what he experiences; I must put myself in his place..." Bakhtin might have been describing Malevich watching the Jews. Like the good provincial *flâneur* he had become, Malevich drew close enough to the Jews to put himself in their place. He looked closely enough to discover their hiding places and stayed long enough to find out what happened to them. Then, he returned to watch them again. Ethically speaking, this is the

easy part—the role of mere spectator. The suffering of the Jew remains a performance, a “cabaret-ballet-tragedy.” What should Malevich do next? What should he do for the suffering human being before him?

Again, Bakhtin and Malevich think alike. The author can see the hero more completely than he can see himself; Malevich saw the entire scene from a vantage point inaccessible to the Jews. From his distance, Malevich could recognize and give name to shades of their experience that the Jew could not because, as Bakhtin suggests, the Jew “does not see the agonizing tension of his own muscles...or the expression of suffering on his own face.” Malevich, on the other hand, did. From where he stood, he could see how the Jews resembled hunters. He saw the jaeger, the terrified horse—that is, he saw the scene as a whole.

Malevich could see what Bakhtin calls the background of suffering – “the clear blue sky” – that would otherwise remain disconnected from the human suffering beneath it, and he recruits those trees, ditches and bushes to tell the story, the drama and tragedy, of the Jews. That is all Malevich can do--he can witness what the Jews experience and no more.

Only the hero can be the hero—the author can neither stand in the hero’s physical place, nor inhabit the same psychic space. If the author believes that he, in fact, feels what the hero feels, he exhibits what Bakhtin calls “the pathological phenomenon of experiencing another’s suffering as one’s own... an infection with another’s suffering, and nothing more.” While Malevich thinks it a pity he is not a writer, he does not pity himself.

Bakhtin does not want us to feel another's suffering. Rather: "My reaction...is not a cry of pain, but a word of consolation or an act of assistance." Again, Malevich and Bakhtin agree. If Malevich were crying, he would not be able to speak or act. Because he is not the Jew, because he does not bear the weight of feeling what they feel, Malevich can see, know, act and speak on the Jew's behalf. Because he stands apart from the Jew, Malevich can, in Bakhtin's words, "see the world behind his back." In a world of terrifying jaegers and not enough sledges, every self needs a watchful other. What if the *flâneur* did not simply watch the crowd, but watched over it?

Had Malevich stumbled upon a new role for the provincial *flâneur*? What if the *flâneur*'s work of surveillance and sorting did not stop at determining who belonged and who did not? What if, like Malevich, the *flâneur* recognized that the human being before him was suffering? Why should the *flâneur* behave like a jaeger?

Monsieur G, with his focus on his own passion and the delectation of superior spectacle, does not seem to spare any thought or time for the people who are not worth watching. These great city *flâneurs* do not wonder why a person would leave his or her streets for theirs, why someone would risk going where they would not be welcome. Why go where their presence makes them the target of shouts or stares or shots? When those *flâneurs* watch their crowds, they watch out for themselves.

Before he moved to Vitebsk, Bakhtin lived in nearby, smaller Nevel where he published his first essay in the one-issue journal, *Day of Art*. Manifesto-like in length and tone, "Art and Answerability" is a declaration on the relationship between art and life. The relationship between art and life is a moral one. As in *Author and Hero*, Bakhtin imagines art and life as two as people who are *answerable* to one another. Here,

“answerability” is an exact translation of the Russian *otvetstvennost*, but the Russian can also be, and previously has been, translated as “responsibility.” Together, answerability and responsibility emphasize the connection between ethics and the reciprocity of conversation.

Responsibility would not be responsibility if the risk of failure were not a terrifying possibility.

Malevich’s Jews might be shot. It is clear why this author-*flâneur* would be tempted to succumb to what Bakhtin calls “the pathological phenomenon of experiencing another’s suffering as one’s own” and nursing “an infection with another’s suffering and nothing more.” The truly answerable, responsible, responsive person might fail. The “act of assistance” might not help; the “word of consolation” might hurt. “It is not only mutual answerability that art and life must assume, but also mutual liability to blame,” Bakhtin writes. “But answerability entails guilt, or liability to blame.”

Malevich knows the meaning of answerability. Seeing the abundance in Vitebsk around him made him think of his friends in Moscow. He began the letter about the Jewish refugees with a description of buying bread for his starving friend in Moscow. He begins:

As soon as I arrived in Vitebsk and saw what breads and all kinds of other attractive good grain crowded into each shop and furthermore sausages were hanging, various meats, it was astonishing.

He does not stop at astonishment—he acts: “Right away, I bought two loaves of fresh bread and I wanted to send one to you.”

In order to send the bread, Malevich had to wait in line at the post office.

Malevich explained to his Moscow friend that the state restricted who could send bread to

whom: only union members could send bread; only family members could receive it (he and his wife agreed to pretend that their friends are family); only ten pounds could be sent; speculators were punished; and anyone's bread could be replaced by bricks.

From 5 in the morning until 4 in the afternoon, on what was nearly the darkest day of the year, Malevich had to wait without ever advancing to the head of the line. Just as he returned again and again to watch the Jewish refugees, he returned to the post office again and again to wait in line.

Waiting in line was not invented in the twentieth century, but that seems to be when it became a literary trope. Nobody waits in line in Flaubert, Balzac, Dostoevsky, or Poe and the only people who line up in Tolstoy are those in the army. Only in the last volumes of the Forsythe Saga does Galsworthy have his characters stand in a queue and, even then, they queue only twice. Anna Karenina must have waited in line at the railway station's ticket booth, but Tolstoy does not tell us about it. None of those characters who conveniently, fortuitously and accidentally meet on the train in Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* ever wait in line at a ticket booth. In nineteenth-century novels, soldiers line up and so do trains and trams. Presciently, one person in Dickens waits in a line: the homeless Oliver Twist. In Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, a novel about an ambitious girl from Wisconsin in the great city of Chicago, it is the turn of the twentieth century: young women line up at work, while men line up like street lights.

Flâneurs wander; they do not wait. Monsieur G never waits in line. The *flâneur* must move fast to catch glimpses of the ephemeral and the fugitive. The immense size of

the great city makes speed necessary. How else to traverse those 40 versts? Greater speed makes possible a greater city, and the histories of speed and the city are intertwined. Speed renders modernity ephemeral and fugitive. We no longer just walk away, we run, drive and ride away as fast as possible. Modernity hurries through the novels of Bely, Dostoevsky and Joyce; it fragments the self. Our infatuation with speed is as old as tales of magic carpets and seven league boots, but the speed of the city is new. Speed is something to boast about, to record. Speed makes history. We are human; therefore, we race.

Waiting in line stops human racing. Why does it become a trope in the twentieth century? This is the line that turns people into parts of a machine, the line of regulation and surveillance. The *flâneur* who waits in line submits himself to the modernity of surveillance, the modernity of Foucault's prisons and mental institutions. Lines discipline and punish. They take the menace out of the mob. To see a crowd outside the door is to see the risk of getting trampled—a line tames the crowd, rationalizes it. The English are justifiably proud of their willingness to queue. The line is civilized. It is just.

Waiting in line is the clay feet of the everyday. It's what clay feet do best. Waiting in line is everything the great city despises, an outpost of the provincial city in every city. Waiting in line is boredom. Unhappily for the great city, the very things that make it great, its crowds and its commerce, also make it wait in line. Waiting in line turns the urbane into provincials.

Did Malevich believe that the people who waited in line with him were his "involuntary friends"? Did he feel that waiting in line was "like coming home"? He did not say. Anna Akhmatova (1889-1966) wrote these words to describe what it felt like to

wait in line outside Leningrad's Kresty prison. Her son Lev Gumlyov was arrested and rearrested throughout the years of Stalin's terror, and after his first arrest, at the end of October 1935, Akhmatova began writing *Requium*, a poem on which she would continue work throughout his subsequent arrests and imprisonment in 1938 and 1939.

Akhmatova's poem shows how waiting in line could become an act of resistance, forging bonds between the 300-odd women waiting together, in solidarity, to learn whether their men lived or died, whether they had been sentenced—to where and for how long. These are the women Akhmatova calls "involuntary friends," one of whom says of the line, "When I come here, it's like coming home." As a microcosm of the provincial city, the line forces the women into close quarters with people vastly different from themselves; the line is the Vitebsk street where Malevich heard and saw the incomprehensible. In the line outside the Leningrad prison, different social classes coalesced.

Waiting in line, Akhmatova met women who knew nothing about her fame as a poet, or of her role at the center of Russian intellectual life. In the line, Anna Akhmatova set those aspects of her life aside to find her home and friendships among the humble, unnamed women who waited alongside her. She united with them in their shared grief and anxiety.

Malevich never said that the people waiting with him from dawn to dusk, day after day, felt like family or friends; yet he repeatedly chose waiting in line on the cold street with them over writing alone in his room.

Soon it would be his turn to go hungry. In 1921, the Trans-Volga famine devastating the whole country began to affect Vitebsk. In a letter to Lissitzky sent July 4,

1922, around the time that Malevich left Vitebsk for good, he writes, “We have had a horrible famine. I hang by a thread.” He hopes to get a package from the ARA, Herbert Hoover’s American Relief Administration, which, because of the famine, had been allowed to enter Soviet Russia at the end of the summer of 1921. Malevich now shared his crowd’s vulnerability, as well as their fate. In the same letter, he reports Khlebnikov’s death (“He died 28 June tormented by hunger”) and acknowledges that he and his arch-rival, Tatlin, face the same danger. In one of the few moments that he recognizes their shared fate, Malevich uses the metaphor of the line. “Tatlin and I,” he writes, “are next in line.”

Waiting in line is seeing eye-to-eye. The people in “Author and Hero” who look behind each other’s backs also look into each other’s eyes. Bakhtin describes a gaze between equals: “As we gaze at each other, two different worlds are reflected in the pupils of our eyes.” To see eye-to-eye, neither person can look down upon the other or walk away. The line is the problem of mass society as solved by Archimedes; his observation about the shortest distance between two points applies to people also. People get lost in crowds. The crowd is the shape that fragments—the line connects.

Flâneurs connect those around them by walking. Walking draws a line that links the people of the provincial city, even those whom nobody needs, together. Provincial city streets prove too small and too slow for one person to walk away from another. Malevich lingered there. He mingled. He felt answerable.

It is possible that walking Vitebsk’s streets gave Malevich a new vision of his Black Square and Suprematism. In January 1920, after writing about his Vitebsk walks to his Moscow friend, he wrote to a colleague in Petrograd:

Now I understand the meaning of Suprematism, now I understand its line, now I understand how we must correspond to it, now I see how wizened the old world is, and now I see the two moving "I's, I have learned to read the signs in their faces.

Malevich was in Vitebsk when he understood what lines could do. There, he saw the two I's in motion. There, he learned how to read faces. In provincial Vitebsk stumbled upon the new world to replace the old and wizened one.