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This article brings together factual data and documents (articles, declarations, etc) connected with the editorial and literary-organisational work of Vladimir Mayakovsky; the documents are accompanied by brief commentaries re-establishing the actual context of the times in which they were produced.

From the outset of his writing career, and particularly since 1918, Mayakovsky's literary practice outstripped his literary-theoretical views, conflicting with them to an ever-increasing extent. As we know, this circumstance was to lead to the dissolution of *Lef* and to Mayakovsky's entry into the Association of Proletarian Writers.

It was Mayakovsky's literary work which made him the greatest figure of Soviet poetry, not his theoretical pronouncements. In fact these pronouncements can only be properly understood in the light of his creative practice; it is this which demonstrates – better than any commentary – the error of the position Mayakovsky assumed even before the Revolution, and underlines those correct, intrinsic tendencies which were to develop in the years of his post-revolutionary work.

A knowledge of the course of Mayakovsky's literary-theoretical development is nevertheless extremely important. On the one hand such knowledge contributes towards a clearer understanding of his creative work (particularly in the first years of the Revolution). On the other hand many aspects of the development of Soviet literature and the complexities and contradictions of that development are sharply reflected in the path followed by Mayakovsky.

This article represents material towards a literary biography and makes no further claims than that. The full biography will need to break down this material in the context of the main task – the analysis of Mayakovsky's literary works.

I

In mid-November 1917, the Commissar of Education, A V Lunarcharsky, appealed to the members of the Artists' Union to start working together for the creation of new forms of artistic life and cultural enlightenment.

The Artists' Union, which at that time united people from the most diverse artistic tendencies and movements, discussed the Commissar's appeal at their first meeting.

Prior to this the question had been fiercely debated in the numerous factions and groupings which made up the Union. Discussion at the meeting of the 'left bloc', constituted by the most

60 ultra-left artists, had been particularly heated.

The sharpness of the debate centred on the fact that Lunarcharsky was the representative of government authority while the 'left bloc' was categorically opposed to government intervention in artistic life and for 'the separation of art from the State'.

The 'left bloc' argued that only a 'constituent assembly' of all artists was empowered to decide questions which bore on the organisation of the nation's artistic life. Whatever the political sympathies of individual artists, art was essentially 'a-political and free'.

One member of the left bloc put forward the following uncompromising resolution:

'Commissar Lunarcharsky's appeal is vague on the question of government attitude to the autonomy of art; it forces the contemporary left movement into passive acquiescence with withered academicism and the bureaucrats of art. With this appeal to the Artists' Union, Lunarcharsky is openly undermining the beginnings of the only currently correct attempt to build our future artistic life – that propagated by the left tendencies in art – and is handing over power to the outdated and irresponsible "custodians" of art. Given this, we, the bloc of left tendencies in art, are making our own appeal to the people – through the left bloc manifesto on the tasks and attitudes bearing on the development of our future artistic life.'

The proposed resolution did not meet with a sympathetic reception. And after lengthy debate the meeting passed a brief resolution which, though more modest, was no less firm in its defence of 'constitutional rights'.

'Having listened to Comrade Lunarcharsky's appeal, the Artists' Union informs him that they have already taken measures to call a constituent assembly of all artists which will express to the people directly the organised view of the art world on the task of developing the artistic life of the nation.'

This resolution was utterly diplomatic – it avoided an outright rejection and at the same time carried the reference to a constituent assembly.

On November 17/30\* Lunarcharsky's appeal was discussed at a plenary meeting of the Artists' Union. The majority of those who spoke voiced – some aggressively, some in milder terms – a categorical protest against the 'Bolsheviks' seizure of power over art', and a call to battle for the autonomy of artistic life.

Only one of those present, Vladimir Mayakovsky, took the floor

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\* Russia changed from the Julian to the Gregorian (Western) calendar on February 14, 1918, which became February 1, new style. Brik here gives the date in old and new style.

to say that 'we must welcome the new power and open up relations with it'.

In those days Mayakovsky saw very clearly that only the power of the victorious proletariat could ensure the existence and development of a genuine art, that no sham 'constituent assemblies' could draw art out of the mire into which it had been led by the bourgeoisie.

It would be wrong, however, to conclude from this that the full complexity of the enormous tasks which confronted Soviet Power where the organisation of the nation's artistic life was concerned was understood immediately and completely by Mayakovsky.

Artists did not respond as a body to the Commissar's appeal. At the conference called by Lunarcharsky it became apparent that artists were ready to work only on condition that the organisation of the art field was independent of the Soviets of Workers, Soldiers and Peasants' Deputies. A resolution drawn up beforehand and passed by the majority of the meeting limited the form of that organisation to 'an autonomous union of all artists', while the government authorities were assigned a purely supervisory role with, of course, the responsibility of feeding that 'autonomous organisation' financially.

But individual artists did respond to the Commissar's appeal. Among them were the ultra 'left' artists, and first and foremost, Mayakovsky. Even before the Revolution, Mayakovsky had been a convinced and uncompromising enemy of capitalist society. For him therefore the question of whether or not to accept Soviet Power did not arise. He saw in that power liberation from a gross and unjust life, protest against which permeates all his pre-revolutionary work. At the same time, he saw Soviet Power as the force which could and must overthrow the power of 'old aesthetic junk'.

There was an important truth in this – the striving to free art from senile academicism, to restore it to its full-blooded, living strength. But there were many erroneous aspects to Mayakovsky's aesthetic position, the chief of which was his misunderstanding of Lenin's attitude to the cultural heritage.

However, it was not just 'left' artists who started working under the direction of the Soviets. The ranks included A Benois and Count P Zubov who saw in the Soviet government a power capable of preserving the cultural treasures and artistic monuments of the past.

The encounter with his sworn 'enemies' in the office of the revolutionary People's Commissar was totally bewildering to Mayakovsky. His ardent Futurist proposals met with a sharp rebuff from the side of the 'preservers of old junk'. And the revolutionary Commissar Lunarcharsky listened more attentively to the advice of Benois on the organisation of museums than to Mayakovsky's 'arch-revolutionary' onslaughts.

This was the start of practical solutions to the extremely complex question of the relationship between the cultural heritage and the newly-created socialist culture. In the first days of Soviet Power, the problem posed itself with all its difficulties and contradictions, and it is not surprising that Mayakovsky was unable to find the correct solution for himself at this stage.

Mayakovsky continued his Futurist battle against the aesthetic heritage produced by centuries of human history, failing to understand that that heritage was now the property of the revolutionary proletariat, regardless of who had produced it and whose needs it had fulfilled. Mayakovsky failed to see that the proletariat was not just the creator of a new form of human culture, but also the legitimate heir to all the cultural riches produced by preceding epochs.

In the fervour of his Futurism, Mayakovsky stuck completely to pre-revolutionary positions when he fought the old aesthetic traditions for the right to be a rebel-innovator. He failed to see that the October Revolution had swept away all previous positions and shifted the battle line to quite a different area.

The persistence of the Futurist mentality showed itself immediately. In March 1918 (together with D Burlyuk and V Kamen-sky) Mayakovsky brought out 'The Futurist Paper' \* in Moscow; and in its pages, the fruits of empty anarcho-syndicalism flourished vigorously alongside ardent calls for the creation of a new art.

The paper carried an 'Open letter to the workers' signed by Mayakovsky, and a 'Decree on the democratisation of the Arts' in the elaboration of which Mayakovsky had been closely involved.

These articles give some indication of the enormous distance Mayakovsky was to cover in freeing himself from the petty-bourgeois, anarchistic views of culture which initially prevented him arriving at a full understanding of the essential nature and tasks of the proletarian revolution.

But in these naive and erroneous statements of 1918, it is already possible to discern the factor which, in its continuing development, was to lead Mayakovsky away from an aestheticist 'leftism' and make him the greatest of Soviet poets. I have in mind his indefatigable hatred of capitalism, his dedication to the cause of the liberation of the proletariat, his struggle towards a full democratisation of art, towards its mergence with the revolutionary reconstruction of the life of society.

## II

The problem of organising the cultural life of the country had two aspects – on the one hand the question was to create new art works and provide for the living artist, and on the other, to

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\* For a more detailed account of this publication see the article 'IMO – Art of the Young' in this issue.

preserve artistic and historical monuments and assimilate the cultural heritage; these found their external expression in the organisation of two departments within the Commissariat of Education – the arts department and the department of museums and the protection of monuments of the past.

The head of the arts department was the painter D P Shterenberg who had returned from political emigration in 1918. Around him had gathered those leftist artists who saw in the organisation of the arts department a chance to resume the fight for new art inside the Commissariat of Education.

Militant clashes with the museums department soon broke out. Battles flared up over every conceivable issue: the allocation of exhibition halls, the purchase of art works, the composition of competition juries, and so on. A typical exchange took place between N Altman, a member of the arts department charged with the organisation of an exhibition of contemporary paintings in the Hermitage, and A Benois, the director and conservator of the Hermitage. Benois absolutely refused to open the rooms of the Hermitage to the exhibition on the pretext that he was worried about the safety of the museum's exhibits. Altman persisted, basing his claims on the authority which had been entrusted to him. In the heat of argument, Benois shouted: 'You must understand, I am responsible to history!' To which Altman calmly responded: 'Well you're alright – you're responsible to history, but I have to answer to the Narkompros'.

In autumn 1918, Mayakovsky joined the collegium of the arts department, having realised that the fight for new art could only be waged within the organisational framework of the Soviet government, not through high-sounding 'manifestos', 'decrees' and 'declarations', addressed to the people directly.

It must be borne in mind that Mayakovsky's literary practice in those years was markedly closer to the aims and tasks of the socialist revolution than were his politico-aesthetic ideas. At that time Mayakovsky was already writing his play *Mystery-Bouffe* and planning his poem *150,000,000*. But he was as yet unwilling and unable to break away from propaganda for Futurism as an artistic movement.

Mayakovsky obtained Lunarcharsky's permission to issue a small anthology of Futurism. It appeared under the title *The Unsifted Word*, in a cover designed by Mayakovsky. The cover was marked 'Imo, Fontanka 5, Flat 2'. Imo signified 'the Art of the Young' (Iskusstvo Molodykh). But of course no such publishing organisation existed. This was simply the publishing 'pseudonym' of Mayakovsky and a group of friends, like the imprint 'Asis' (Association of Socialist Art [Assotsiyatsiya Sotsialisticheskogo Iskusstva]) which figured on Mayakovsky's earlier published poems *Cloud in Trousers* and *Man*. In the same year, 1918, the first edition of *Mystery-Bouffe* appeared under the 'Imo' imprint.

- 64 Mayakovsky compiled *The Unsifted Word*; 'A revolutionary Futurist anthology' from the verse of Aseyev, D Burluk, V Kamensk Khlebnikov and his own work (*Our March, Revolution, and an extract from War and the Universe*). He also wrote an editorial foreword to the work entitled 'Everyone should read this book'. Lunarcharsky felt it necessary to send in his own short foreword to *The Unsifted Word* in which he set out the ideas which led him to agree to the publication of a Futurist anthology.

#### Foreword

*In the present difficult period writers are often deprived of an opportunity to publish their works.*

*In former times these difficulties were most often encountered by revolutionary writers; not just those who expressed revolutionary ideas in their works, but also those who strove to revolutionise form and worked against established systems.*

*The worker and peasant state has now, to an ever-increasing extent, to take on the publication of literary works by whatever means available – directly through the state publishing house, through the publishing organisations of the Soviets, or by means of subsidies (to private publishers).*

*And clearly, its accepted principle must be to give the mass reader fresh and new access to everything. It is better to make the mistake of offering the people something they cannot respond to sympathetically, either now or later, than to keep back (on the grounds that it doesn't suit certain tastes at the moment) a work that is rich in future potential.*

*For this reason the Commissariat of Education was glad to help with the publication of *The Unsifted Word*. The book is written by Futurists. Attitudes to them vary and they can be criticised on many grounds. But they are young, and youth is revolutionary. . . . No wonder then that their defiant, striking, if occasionally eccentric, art radiates the kind of power, daring and breadth we hold dear. Mayakovsky's verse rings out with many notes which no revolutionary young in body or spirit will listen to unmoved.*

*Let the worker read and judge everything – the old and the new. We will not impose anything on him; we will, however, show him everything.*

A Lunarcharsky.

This foreword is extremely characteristic of Lunarcharsky's position at that time.

A convinced partisan and propagandist of realism, Lunarcharsky followed the development of new artistic groups with the greatest attention and while allowing complete freedom to 'left' or 'right', he tried to promote all that was talented in them and capable of evolving towards a Soviet mass art.

Later, when Soviet literature had strengthened its position

while still maintaining his principle of freedom for the various artistic tendencies, Lunarcharsky expressed his opposition to the formally 'left' artists in sharper terms. Nevertheless, he always distinguished Mayakovsky's creative work from his literary-theoretical views and from the work of those writers in the 'left' groups who were substituting the so-called 'revolution in form' for revolutionary content.

### III

Having become a member of the collegium of the arts department, Mayakovsky took an active part in the work of developing the artistic life of the country. The agendas of the collegium meetings which have been preserved witness to the fact that Mayakovsky participated in discussions of the innumerable extremely complex problems that arose in the department. Artists had to be drawn into the work of the revolution, courses had to be set up at the art colleges, artists had to be materially provided for, and dozens of other such pressing questions had to be dealt with daily by the collegium. Other kinds of problems cropped up in the area of the adjacent arts – industrial art, illustrated publications, cinema, the theatre. There too Mayakovsky did not stand on the sidelines – he made suggestions and took part verbally and practically in organisational work.

For all that, Mayakovsky never for a moment lost sight of the fact that the institutional framework of artistic life had to have a real content. It was not enough to draw in artists, they had to be persuaded to work in response to the demands dictated by the interests of the socialist revolution. For Mayakovsky, those interests coincided with the aims and tasks of revolutionary-innovatory art.

As a way of propagandising that art and fighting the dominance of decaying aesthetic canons, a group of collegium members headed by Mayakovsky initiated the paper *The Art of the Commune* – the organ of the arts department of Narkompros. The first issue came out early in December 1918.

In the pages of *The Art of the Commune*, Mayakovsky published his well-known poems *Left March* and *Stunning Facts*, both pointedly revolutionary in theme; he also published a series of poems on militantly polemical themes: *Order to the Army of Art*, *We are Moving, Too Early to Rejoice*, *To the Other Side*, *Poet-Worker*, *Comradely Greetings from Mayakovsky*. In these poems Mayakovsky threw the whole weight of his poetic attack against the zealots of 'academy-junk' and against the proletkultists\* who gave way to its influence.

The aggressive tone and direction of *The Art of the Commune*, and most particularly of Mayakovsky's poems, soon sparked off a sharp conflict within Narkompros between the arts department

\* See glossary.

and the museums department. The inevitability of the conflict also stemmed from the fact that among the museum workers, old theatre workers, and so on, there were quite a number of people politically hostile to the Soviet government, for whom the preservation of the monuments of the old culture was just a convenient way of sabotaging that government's revolutionary measures. Mayakovsky hated these people and used every opportunity he had to expose them. In response they raised a hue and cry over Mayakovsky's destruction of culture, basing their attack on the 'trans-sense' extremes of which there were more than enough examples in the pronouncements of the Futurists. The situation was extremely complicated. There were exaggerations and errors on both sides which confused things even more.

Mayakovsky's poem *Too Early to Rejoice* served as a concrete occasion for conflict: in it Mayakovsky voices a call to 'gun down old trash with the canon of our throats'. To that firing squad were led such members of the 'White Guard' as Rafael, Rastrelli, Pushkin and other 'generals of the classics'.

The heads of the museums department quite rightly saw in this poem – which was published in the Narkompros paper – a dangerous appeal to violence which could easily exceed the bounds of 'the canon of our throats'.

Moreover, the whole orientation of the poem was in definite contradiction to the basic Narkompros principle on the assimilation of the artistic heritage.

The heads of the museums department expressed a vigorous protest to the People's Commissar, and Lunarcharsky was obliged to call a special meeting to settle the conflict.

With his characteristic openness and good humour Anatoly Vasil'evich Lunarcharsky at once saw that both sides were extremely overheated. He listened to the fiery speeches of the opponents, and promised to produce a clarificatory article, which was in fact published in the next issue of *The Art of the Commune* under the title 'A Spoonful of Antidote'.

With fine irony, Lunarcharsky smoothed agitated public opinion, showing that the Futurists were not the terrible people they made themselves out to be. He pointed to one of their number in particular who, despite his Futurist ardour, was a great scholar and lover of ancient Russian iconography. He moreover reminded people that 'the Futurists were the first to enlist their support for the Revolution, of all intellectuals, they were the closest and most sympathetic to it. And they have revealed their organisational abilities in many spheres of work.'

However, Lunarcharsky too found it necessary to note that he feared two traits in 'the young face of the paper' – the destructive tendency in relation to the past, and the desire to speak for authority when it spoke on behalf of a particular artistic school.

Lunarcharsky was of course right. But it was difficult for Maya-



kovsky to dampen his fighting spirit and realise fully that the tasks and aims of the cultural growth of the Soviet nation were immeasurably more important and vital than the particular questions of artistic polemics. This of course does not mean that Mayakovsky was wrong to fight for a new revolutionary art – that had to be fought for. Mayakovsky's error and the error of the whole group was the failure to understand the place of that struggle in the overall cultural struggle. They had an exaggerated view of their revolutionary role, and tended to consider their strip of the battle line the most important. Hence the loss of perspective and the crude blunders.

In the spring of 1919, Mayakovsky moved to Moscow and his links with the arts department were broken. *The Art of the Commune* went out of existence soon afterwards. The composition of the collegium changed. The group which had formed around him broke up.

#### IV

During the whole of 1919 and 1920, Mayakovsky worked tirelessly in agit and propaganda on both the external and internal fronts of the Civil War. This was that remarkable period in his literary biography when he unhesitatingly gave 'the attacking class all his resounding poet's strength', and when in his day to day revolutionary work through verse he underwent a political schooling which prepared him for the high rank of poet of the Soviet epoch. It would be no exaggeration to say that this was a turning point in Mayakovsky's development.

During these years Mayakovsky had no time for literary-artistic disputes. He occasionally engaged in public propaganda for left-revolutionary art, but this was not his main concern. Literary battles were far too minor by comparison with the great struggles of the Civil War.

Only towards the end of 1921 did Mayakovsky once again begin thinking about the possibility of giving organisational shape to the workers in left art.

In the first instance the question was one of opportunities for publishing 'our own' works – that is, the works of the members of the group.

Publishing opportunities in that period were extremely limited, Gosizdat could barely cope with the enormous tasks imposed upon it. And of course Mayakovsky would under no circumstances have published with the private publishing houses still in existence then. Their political physiognomy was repellent enough to deter him.

It would have been far preferable to find some 'honest' contractor who would for reasons of pure profit agree to print books for the Soviet market. Such a man was in fact found in Riga and Mayakovsky discussed with Lunarcharsky the possibility of implementing this kind of publishing plan. Lunarcharsky fully

68 approved the idea and suggested that Mayakovsky present him with a memorandum on the subject together with a list of proposed books.

The memorandum was presented at once. It stated that 'We are organising MAF (The Moscow – later International/Mezhdunarodnaya/ – Association of Futurists) – a publishing body for left art. The aim of this body is to publish a journal, anthologies, monographs, collected works, text books, and so on, devoted to propagandising the foundations of future communist art and presenting what has been achieved along that path.'

To the memorandum was attached a list of titles of first priority, including among others an illustrated journal of MAF art, anthologies of Mayakovsky's verse, a book on the Russian poster, Pasternak's lyrics, an anthology of the newest literature, a collection of articles on production art.

Anatoly Lunarcharsky read the memorandum and the list of proposed titles and appended his decision: 'I find the idea of such a publishing body acceptable. I request that the books be passed for import, on condition that the relevant regulations are observed'.

Of course nothing came of all this planning. The 'honest' capitalist soon realised with what and whom he was dealing and what's more, that the possibility of large profits was highly unlikely. The transaction never took place.

But the idea of creating a MAF publishing organisation was not abandoned. Mayakovsky began looking for other possibilities. He found them in the typographical department of Vkhutemas (Vsesoyznye Khudozhestvenno-tekhnicheskie Masterskie – All-Soviet Studios of Art and Design).

Mayakovsky reached an agreement with the head of the institution that books would be printed in the trainee typographical department and Mayakovsky would obtain the essential materials and means from Gosizdat as advance payments for the edition.

This plan was simpler and Mayakovsky succeeded in printing and presenting Gosizdat with several of the proposed books.

The MAF publishing organisation brought out Mayakovsky's poem *I Love*, his collection of verses entitled *Mayakovsky Mocks* and a collection of Aseyev's verse, *The Steel Nightingale*. At the same time and under the same arrangement Mayakovsky published his two-volume collected works *13 Years' Work* through Vkhutemas. The MAF printing organisation had no further developments after this.

## V

The transition from the period of war communism to the New Economic Policy produced an extremely complex economic-political situation in the country. The socialist revolution entered on a new stage of its development.

The situation on the cultural construction front, and in the literary sector in particular, also proved rather complex.

Re-awakened petty bourgeois forces, including all kinds of non-Soviet and anti-Soviet elements, took NEP as some kind of 'freedom charter' and invaded literature in an attempt to consolidate their existence under cover of 'the artistic image'.

In the spring of 1921, *Krasnaya Nov'* (*Red Virgin Soil*) – a journal devoted to literature, art and the social sciences – was launched. The object was to concentrate Soviet literary forces around the publication and to draw in those open to sovieticisation, pruning off the non-Soviet elements.

Simultaneously with the establishment of *Krasnaya Nov'*, the critical-bibliographical journal *Pechat' i Revoliutsiya* (Press and Revolution) was set up with roughly similar aims.

These two magazines played a major role in building the literary life of the nation. They succeeded in attracting and uniting around themselves a considerable number of talented writers and critics, thereby strengthening the position of Soviet literature in its struggle with its political and ideological enemies.

Nevertheless, the activities of these two magazines were not comprehensive enough to embrace all the problems which Soviet literature raised in the course of its development. In autumn 1922 a conflict began to gather to a head which was to evoke a lengthy literary dispute, organisational regrouping and bitter polemics, and which was only resolved in mid-1925 with the famous resolution of the Russian Communist Party's Central Committee 'On Party policy in the field of literature' published in *Pravda* no 147, July 1, 1925.

*Krasnaya Nov'*, in its concern to draw repentant internal and external emigrés into Soviet literature overlooked the growth of new *cadres* of Soviet literature from within the revolutionary worker and peasant youth. It paid them too little attention and failed to recognise in their first efforts the birth of a qualitatively new literature. That youth had elbowed its way onto the back seats of *Krasnaya Nov'*, worn smooth by the 'venerable figures' of literature and was now looking for its own framework; they united into the October group out of which VAPP was later to grow. On the other hand, the editorship paid too little attention to the small but active group of artist-intellectuals who did not need 'drawing in', who had long worked in the ranks of the revolutionary proletariat. At the head of that group stood Mayakovsky.

Like the October group, Mayakovsky was dissatisfied with the a-political 'literary-art' position of *Krasnaya Nov'*. They accused the editorship of giving way to the influence of those it had attracted and instead of re-aligning them, re-aligning itself in their direction.

At the end of 1922, Mayakovsky presented the agit section of the Central Committee with a request for permission to publish

70 the journal *Lef*. He attached an editorial outline of the journal which formulated the object of the publication as follows (I quote from the surviving rough draft):

*To the Agit Section of the Central Committee  
of the Russian Communist Party*

*Editorial outline of the journal Lef*

*1. Why we need to publish our own journal:*

*The extreme revolutionary movements in art do not have their own organ – since the official organs like Krasnaya Nov' for example are not exclusively concerned with art and devote little space to it.*

*2. We cannot obtain private capital for the organisation of our journal since we are ideologically a communist group.*

*3. Aims of the journal:*

- (a) The aim of the journal is to enable us to find a communist direction for all forms of art.*
- (b) To review the ideology and practice of so-called left art, rejecting its individualistic distortions and developing its valuable, communist aspects.*
- (c) To carry out vigorous agit work within production art in favour of the adoption of a communist direction and ideology.*
- (d) To bring in the most revolutionary movements in the art field and serve as an avant-garde for both Russian and world art.*
- (e) To familiarise the Russian workers' audience with the achievements of European art as represented not by its canonised and official figures, but by the young writers and artists who, while rejected by the European bourgeoisie, in themselves represent the beginnings of a new proletarian culture.*
- (f) To fight by all available means against conciliators in the art field who are substituting the old, outworn phraseology of absolute values and eternal beauties for communist ideology in the sphere of art.*
- (g) To give examples of literary and artistic works not in order to indulge aesthetic tastes, but to indicate devices for the creation of effective agit works.*
- (h) To fight against decadence, against aesthetic mysticism, self-satisfied formalism, and uncommitted naturalism, for the affirmation of a partisan realism based on the use of the technical devices of all revolutionary schools of art.*

At this time Mayakovsky had already attained the stature of a great poet and publicist, who in his work was able to combine a high level of skill with a correct political orientation. The great political esteem which Lenin accorded his poem *Re Meetings*,

printed in *Izvestiya* (March 1922) is the best proof of this.

Approval was granted for the publication of the journal *Lef* and passed to Gosizdat for implementation.

Mayakovsky now began active preparations for his work of editing the journal. First he had to develop the basic literary-political programme of the journal. He did so in three leading articles published in the first issue – ‘What is *Lef* fighting for?’, ‘Whom does *Lef* bite?’ and ‘Whom is *Lef* alerting?’\*

When you compare these three articles to earlier articles and declarations by Mayakovsky it is obvious that the political schooling he had undergone had taught him much, extended his field of vision and set many problems in their place.

However, neither Mayakovsky nor his friends on the journal were yet able to free themselves completely from the survivals of their Futurist past. In the pages of *Lef* evidence can be found of the fact that good intentions are not always realised in practice.

It ought to be noted that the journal *Lef* did not in either theory or practice represent a group firmly united in all its principle orientations. It was to a large extent a gathering of ‘freemen’ where all moved together but each spoke for himself. When someone asked Shklovsky ‘How many of you Lefists are there?’ he replied ‘We’re concrete numbers, you can’t add us up’.

Mayakovsky was of course answerable for the content of the journal, insofar as he was the responsible editor and published his work along with the rest, but it would be extremely rash to attribute to Mayakovsky everything that was said in the pages of *Lef* by all its contributors.

Mayakovsky held to the view that a journal did not need a single united platform on everything down to the most trivial details. It was important to create a place where people who were close to each other in their understanding of the tasks of literature and art could meet, argue and publish their works.

As far as this aspect of his editorial work is concerned, Mayakovsky was extremely successful. The names of writers and artists who were later to become major figures made their first appearance in the journal *Lef*. Thus the seven issues included: Mayakovsky, *About This, Jubilee, To the Workers of Kursk, Vladimir Il'ch Lenin, Part I*; Aseyev, *The Black Prince*, Vladimir Khlebnikov *Ladimir, Razin's Boat*; B Pasternak, *The Kremlin in the gale of late 1918, High Fever*; V Kamensky, *Hymn to 40-year-old youth*; I Babel, *The Red Army Stories, The Odessa Tales*; S Eisenstein, *Montage of Attractions*; Dziga Vertov, *The Kinoks*. Articles by the literary critics Y Tynyanov, V Shklovsky, V Eikhensbaum, G Vinokur, B Tomashevsky, G Polivanov, A Tseitlin. The work of the architects the Vesnin brothers, and the artists A Rodchenko, V Stepanova, and A Lavinsky.

\* See *Screen* v 12 no 4, pp 32-37 (now out of print).

But Mayakovsky did not limit himself to attracting authors to the journal. He sometimes set them particular creative tasks brought to the fore by the revolutionary reality. In 1923 he proposed that *Lef* poets write a poem on the occasion of May 1. All seven works were published in *Lef* no 2.

After Lenin's death, Mayakovsky suggested to the philologists that they take on the study of the language and style of Lenin. Six articles on the language and style of Lenin were published in no 5.

If the content of *Lef* had been limited to examples of the creative and scholarly practice of its collaborators, it could in many respects serve as a model of active editorial practice. At the same time it would not have provoked the violent opposition which *Lef* came up against from the first days of its existence. The reason for this was the articles and attacks – part-proletkult, part-Futurist, part-Formalist – which immediately hit the eye of Party literary critics.

Despite the conviction of Mayakovsky and others that 'we respect the classics', the bombardment of the 'old academy art' continued. Despite Mayakovsky's poem *Jubilee* in which he assesses Pushkin's great genius better than anyone, the Lefists took up the absurd position of people 'throwing Pushkin overboard from the steamer of modernity',\* rather than helping the broad mass of people to read and understand him. But on this question the Lefists were not concerned with the masses, they went on settling accounts with their literary opponents whom they accused of epigonism. Naturally the Party's literary activists were not long in giving the Lefists a firm rebuff on this point.

The Lefists opposed the formula 'art as cognition of life' with their own formula 'art as life-building'. Obviously there can be no cognition divorced from practical activity, and there can be no practical activity not founded on cognition.

No one would oppose *Lef's* call 'Artists, into production!' No one would dispute the significance of the artist's participation in factory production processes. But when that call was sharpened polemically for use against all those who worked in the fine arts, all those who painted easel paintings, and when the easel painting itself was declared 'a bourgeois belch', the *Lef* summons was transformed from a simple working proposition into an intellectually contrived Futurist attack.

In defending and propagandising their theoretical arguments, a section of the Lefists failed to come to terms with the tasks of building the nation's cultural life and stood in direct opposition to them. It was in this that the survival of past intellectual errors made themselves apparent.

The least mistaken in all this was Mayakovsky himself who

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\* From 'A Slap in the Face of Public Taste' (1912), Manifesto of Hylacian Poets, who included Burlyuk, Kruchenykh, Mayakovsky.

worked tirelessly during the remainder of *Lef's* existence for VTIK's\* *Izvestiya* and in a whole series of other organs of the press, never for a moment breaking off his publicist work.

Mayakovsky showed his political maturity and correct understanding of the literary situation in the agreement which was drawn up between the *Lef* group and MAPP. Mayakovsky was glad to unite his literary struggle to the efforts of young workers to find themselves a place in the literary life of the country.

The agreement between *Lef* and MAPP, published in no 4 of the journal, was totally directed against the policy of *Krasnaya Nov'*. There even existed a 'secret addendum to the agreement' not included in the published version which stated that 'the parties to the agreement are bound not to take part in the writers' workshops Krug, Union of Writers, etc or their publications, and to withdraw their members from these groups, if any such exist.'

The agreement cut the aesthetic intellectuals off from *Lef*; they saw in this union a lowering of the 'high standard' of literary artistic principles. On the other hand the agreement drew to *Lef* those who were conscientiously trying to join the socialist contingent of Soviet literary forces.

The pull to the left was extremely strong. It sometimes took such absurd and freakish forms that Mayakovsky was obliged to use the most drastic measures to drive out people who came to him with proposals that *Lef* should head some fantastic front of left art.

People used to say: 'We are the periphery and we lack a centre. You must be our centre'. Mayakovsky tried to argue that the very idea of a periphery and centre were meaningless in questions of creative work, and that *Lef* was not the headquarters of any front, but a journal which printed the works of authors who shared a common literary platform; that those who wished could send in their works to the journal and if they were found suitable, they would be printed. To no avail: people demanded an organisation with a centre, a periphery, officers, regulations, and orders.

It culminated with the most persistent group of 'organisers' calling the 'first Moscow conference of the left front of art' in January 1925. Mayakovsky willy nilly took part.

The journal *Lef* was the subject of sharp criticism at the meeting. It was pointed out that *Lef* was not the journal of the left front of art, but that of a group of writers who had seized supplies of paper and were refusing to serve the 'left front' as a whole. It was agreed that this group of writers could in no way claim to lead the whole of the 'left front', especially since their literary

\* *Vserossiiskiy (Vsesoyuzniy) Tsentral'ny Iсполnitel'niy Komitet* or All-Russian (All-Union) General Executive Committee: the central executive committee of the Congress of Soviets—All-Russian for the RSFSR, All-Union for the USSR from 1923—with a membership of 2-300 elected by the Congress of Soviets.

74 practice was directly opposed to the leading principles of the 'left front', and 'lagged behind' them. In particular, Mayakovsky's poem *About This* was assessed as a work which directly contradicted the entire orientation of the left front of art. It was essential, it was said, to create a powerful left front of art, united in all its principles, headed by people worthy to be its leaders. There was even a proposal for a takeover of the journal by a future leadership of the front, but this drastic step was not taken. It was decided to leave the journal to Mayakovsky and his group but to declare it 'a special instance' of the left front with no authoritative significance.

At the meeting Mayakovsky voiced an uncompromising protest against all 'hard line' programmes and 'rigid' organisational frameworks. He understood perfectly well the childish nature of the organisations game. He understood that that game concealed motives which had nothing to do with creative work. Mayakovsky stood firm on his understanding of *Lef* as a free association of individual artists united, not by external forms, but through collaboration in work.

The meeting made such a bad impression on Mayakovsky that he felt constrained to express this in a special announcement.

#### *Announcement*

*To the organisers of the so-called 'conference of the left front of art':*

*Having listened and given careful attention to the two tedious days of the 'conference', I am obliged to announce: I do not have, nor do I wish to have any connection with any of the resolutions or conclusions of that conference. If I could have imagined even for a moment that that clamorous conference – called under the serious slogan of 'unification' – was going to understand (in its most 'active' section) questions of organisation as the organisation of gossip, and to substitute Chuzhak's modernised version of nadsonism\* for the militant theory and practice of Lef, I would clearly not have wasted a minute at any of its meetings.*

*Vl Mayakovsky, 17/1/1925*

The conference had no practical results and the 'left front' did not therefore organise itself. The journal *Lef* soon ceased to exist. The overt reason given was the journal's financial unviability. But there were however, other deeper reasons. The journal was becoming increasingly divided internally, certain of its parts contradicted the rest more and more. Energetic and vocal, but in many ways fallacious artistic programmes, clearly exaggerated polemics on

\* The term comes from Nadson, Semyon Yakovlevich (1862-87), a minor poet and the author of sentimental verse who came to epitomise bad poetic taste.



purely artistic questions, etc thrust their way to the forefront, squeezing into the background the journal's most valuable element – the works of writers and first and foremost those of Mayakovsky. Thus an at first glance paradoxical situation arose whereby the more the mass of readers admired Mayakovsky's work, the less interest they had in the journal he edited. The final issue (no 7) came out in spring 1925 in 1,500 copies. It contained the first part of Mayakovsky's *Vladimir Il'ich Lenin*.

## VI

In the years 1924-26 during which Mayakovsky wrote the poem *Vladimir Il'ich Lenin*, a cycle of verse from abroad, the poems *Conversation with a Tax Inspector*, *To Sergei Esenin*, and *To Comrade Nette* and many others, he rose to become the greatest poet of the Soviet Union, resembling in very little the rebel-Futurist who had attempted to open conversations with the broad mass of workers through his paper. Now Mayakovsky had access to the millions-strong audience of Soviet readers. He could speak to them from the pages of every paper and journal, which rejected nothing he brought for publication.

Mayakovsky was thereby able to extend the effective scope of his work. The evenings he organised in Moscow, Leningrad and the major towns of the Soviet Union gave him an opportunity to talk to his readers face to face. Mayakovsky covered enormous distances with his literary appearances.

Given this, Mayakovsky clearly had no need of a magazine or platform of 'his own'. Every platform in the country was open to him. Nevertheless, Mayakovsky still clung to the idea of publishing a revival of *Lef*.

The reason for this was the inadequacy of the organisational framework of the literary life of the period. The overall body of writers was divided among three major unions: VAPP (All-Russian Association of Proletarian Writers), the Union of Peasant Writers, and the Union of Writers. These were mass organisations which included writers of varied tendencies, tastes and orientations. The mark which distinguished writers in these three organisations was their social origin: worker, peasant or bourgeois intellectual.

Alongside these large organisations there existed small groups which brought together writers linked by common creative principles: Kuznitsa (Blacksmithy), Pereval (Crossing), the Constructivists\* and *Lef*.

In 1926, on the initiative of VAPP, the question of the creation of a single federation of Soviet writers was raised. After discussions and negotiations a constitution for the Federation of Soviet Writers' Unions was elaborated and approved. The three

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\* This refers to the Literary Centre of Constructivists 1923-30 (Selvinsky, Zelinsky, Lugovskoy, Bagritsky, Inber).

basic organisations figured as founders of the federation. Its council consisted of representatives from the three major unions (seven members from each). The Kuznitsa, Pereval, Constructivist and *Lef* groups did not feature among the founder members. They were advised to distribute their membership among the three major unions. The list of members of the council included no one from any of these groups. Mayakovsky himself was not listed.

Naturally, Mayakovsky couldn't accept the third-ranking position he would have had in the Federation of Soviet Writers. He said with feeling: 'Abram Efros is to sit on the council representing the "bourgeoisie" and I am to be under him. It's ridiculous'.

Mayakovsky went to G M Krzhizhanovsky who was in charge of organisational matters relating to the creation of the Federation and explained the absurdity of the situation that had arisen. Krzhizhanovsky agreed with him completely and the question of the entry of the four writers' groups was reconsidered. They were offered the opportunity of entering the Federation without dissolving, and of having their own representation in the council. For *Lef*, Mayakovsky was assigned four representatives who would represent him and some ten colleagues. VAPP, to which Mayakovsky was most strongly attracted, did not see their way to bringing him into their work and drawing him in definitively; it did not occur to them to include him in their list of representatives in the council in his capacity as major poet of the revolutionary proletariat. Instead they suggested he join the non-aligned, 'non-Party' Union of Writers.

In connection with these events and as a result of them, the idea of a journal of 'one's own' – a resurgence of group isolationism – gained force and roused Mayakovsky to present an application to the publishing department of the Communist Party's Central Committee towards the end of 1926.

'I am approaching you on behalf of the workers on the left front of art with a request for your support in the publication through Gosizdat of a monthly journal to be entitled *Lef*.

'The task of the journal will be to continue the work begun by the paper *The Art of the Commune* in 1918-1919 and the journal *Lef* in 1923-24. That task is: to use art in socialist construction and at the same time to raise the level of that art as much as possible; to bring art into industrial production as an essential factor in the industrialisation of the country; to fight against hackwork and the tendency towards aestheticism, against the "restoration" of old art and other petty bourgeois tendencies. Our slogans are well known enough from our previous work and have become particularly pertinent now, in relation to the tasks currently being raised by the party and the Soviet government.

'Vladimir Mayakovsky recommends his proposal to the attention of the editor in chief.'

The department raised no obstacles to the publication of the journal and it began appearing through Gosizdat in 1927 in thin note-book form, three printed pages a month under the title '*Novy Lef* (New Lef), *journal of the left front of art*'. Mayakovsky wrote an introductory article for the first issue in which he explained the aims and tasks of *Novy Lef*.

By comparison to the declaration of the previous *Lef*, nothing new was said. It was clear that the literary battle was to continue, but it was not clear why this required the launching of a new journal. The literary battle which Mayakovsky was leading through his lectures and verses at that time had immeasurably surpassed the bounds of narrow group positions. This was no longer the group battle of former Futurists, but the battle of the entire progressive element in the literary sector. No exclusive journal was needed to wage that battle.

Of course in the pages of 'one's own' journal, all questions, and the whole polemic could be presented in a markedly sharper way than in the pages of the general press. But it was precisely this accentuation, this heightened polemical tone which represented the negative sides of the group journal. Such sharpening of issues blew up trifles, generalised particularities and confused perspectives.

During the entire course of *Novy Lef's* publication, Mayakovsky and his fellow workers were faced with the question – what should we print? And they formulated the response as follows: We shall print what cannot be printed in any other journal. But such material proved to be very scarce – almost everything could be successfully published in any of the journals of the time.

At the same time *Novy Lef's* literary propaganda was distinguished by its aggressive and challenging tone. V Polonsky, whose uncompromising stand against *Lef* was wrong on many points, expressed this feature of *Lef's* declarations in paradoxical but correct terms: 'One would not want to agree with *Lef*, even if they were right.' And in fact the entire polemics of Polonsky and others against *Lef* concentrated not on the content of the material printed, not even on particular and clearly erroneous claims, but on the arrogant, exaggerated, 'militant' tone of people who set up an entirely artificial opposition between their work and the whole of the Soviet literary world.

Much clamour was raised over *Novy Lef's* slogan – 'Closer to the fact'. *Lef* was accused of 'factography', of the indiscriminate and mechanical recording of facts, of calling for the rejection of artistic work in the name of newspaper reportage, grounds for which were found in certain statements in *Novy Lef* articles.

Of course these criticisms were exaggerated. The literary practice of such *Lef* writers as Mayakovsky, Aseyev, Kirsanov and others clearly demonstrated that *Lef* had no intention of rejecting the artistic work. The whole meaning of the slogan 'Closer to

78 the fact ' lay in its suggestion to writers that they base their work not on pure imagination, but in the main on a study of concrete reality. At the same time writers were urged not to ignore newspaper prose and journalism. It would have occurred to no one to protest against such elementary literary truths if the Lefists had not presented them in the form of a polemical attack on all literary work, and if they had been able to bring their propaganda for newspaper-journalistic work into line with the general direction of Soviet culture.

People who stood a little apart from literary polemics often didn't even understand what in fact *Lef* was being attacked for. Thus Yaroslavsky, speaking at the All-Russian congress on questions concerning the worker and peasant press movement in 1931 said:

' It needs to be said that no real work is being done here with the broad mass of worker and peasant journalists. The Party's special resolution in this regard is being poorly implemented. A massive organisation like RAPP is doing virtually nothing for the literary education of the broad mass of worker and peasant journalists. More than that – in the guise of a struggle against the survivals of leftism, the ' literature of fact ' is being discredited, and the cultivation of really genuine, good newspaper workers who could produce what is needed by the masses, is being held back. What we need at this moment is precisely the literature of fact, the clear description of the facts of socialist competition and shock work, the enthusiasm which characterises socialist construction, and the sharp class struggle taking place in one of the final stages in the building of socialism.'

As time passed it grew increasingly apparent that it was meaningless to persist in the publication of *Novy Lef*. With his characteristic strength and scope, Mayakovsky was working in all areas of cultural development, daily producing verse for *Komsomol Pravda* and dozens of central and regional papers, and fighting against philistinism, bureaucracy and decadence. He worked not as a poet from the sidelines, but as a socially committed activist, a publicist and a fighter. The polemics in *Novy Lef* and around it were an inessential and trivial matter compared with the creative tasks which Mayakovsky set himself. Not just inessential, but even to some extent damaging and lowering to his practice as a writer.

Around the middle of 1928, a conflict emerged within *Lef* between Mayakovsky's group and those colleagues who wanted to prolong the existence of the journal at any price. Mayakovsky announced his departure from *Lef* and so as not to disrupt the publication of the journal before the end of the year, he gave over the editorship, with Gosizdat's permission, to S Tret'yakov. The last five numbers of *Novy Lef* came out without the participation of Mayakovsky and those who left with him.

In October 1928, Mayakovsky organised a public appearance on the theme 'To the left of *Lef*'. In his speech he explained his motives for leaving *Novy Lef* and why generally he was suggesting the complete and final dissolution of the *Lef* group. The essence of his argument lay in the fact that all literary artistic groupings had lost their significance – that in our Soviet reality it was senseless to invent all sorts of intra-literary fronts, and that it was necessary to work together in closest collaboration with the whole of socialist construction on genuine and not imaginary fronts.

Without hauling down the positive slogans of *Lef*, Mayakovsky at the same time came out uncompromisingly against *Lef*'s groundless rejection of all supposedly outworn forms of art. 'I grant an amnesty to Rembrandt,' Mayakovsky said. 'I say that songs and poems are necessary, not just newspapers. . . . I admit all forms of art on condition that they actively work for socialist construction.'

It looked as if Mayakovsky had now permanently abandoned the thought of forming his own group. And such a thought would undoubtedly never have occurred to him again if the literary world had drawn all the right conclusions from Mayakovsky's speech. In fact things turned out otherwise. The leading group of Soviet writers, VAPP, met the dissolution of *Lef* with malicious satisfaction rather than comradely welcome. No steps were taken to bring Mayakovsky once and for all into the broad fraternal milieu, to purge him of all the survivals of sectarianism and elitism. This did not happen and Mayakovsky tried for a last time to get together a small group of colleagues, renaming *Lef* as Ref.

In October 1929 the first and only Ref (Revolutionary Front of Art) meeting took place. Mayakovsky gave a talk in which he said roughly the following:

'A year ago we dissolved *Lef*. Today we are launching Ref. What has changed in the literary situation in that year, and on what basis are the Refists now taking their stand on the literary front?

'Our past disputes with enemies and friends over which was primary – the "how" or the "what" of the art work – are now overlaid by our fundamental literary slogan – "for what" is the work being done; in other words, we are asserting the primacy of the aim over both content and form. If we take art as a weapon in the class war, then in our literary work we must above all have a clear idea of our general aim and of the vital tasks of socialist construction which confront us in their concrete reality. It is this standpoint which will determine our initial approach to every literary task today.

'We declare: only those literary means which lead to this end are correct. Orientating our programme in this way does not cancel out our former demand for new forms for a new content. And

while one edge of our weapon is directed against the defenders of "form for form's sake", and the innumerable aestheticisers and canonisers of form, the other is drawn against those who are trying to squeeze the Five Year Plan into a sonnet, and to celebrate socialist competition in the iambic pentameters of the Crimean-tableland.

'The literary situation of our day,' Mayakovsky concluded, 'confirms our constant struggle against a-politicism. It resounds throughout with an insistent demand addressed to art – to stand together with socialist construction, to take up a front line position in the class war.' (See the report in *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, October 10, 1929.)

Among Mayakovsky's papers is preserved an unfinished draft of a preface to the proposed journal *Ref*. In it Mayakovsky intended to clarify in more detail the difference between *Lef* and *Ref*.

In essence, Mayakovsky's Refist statements expressed a full awareness of the subordination of literary-artistic problems to the aims and tasks of socialist construction. Mayakovsky stated a position totally acceptable to every Soviet writer participating in the class wars of his country. The entire course of Mayakovsky's work as a writer had led towards this realisation and had transformed the rebel Futurist into the leading poet of the Soviet epoch.

Why then *Ref*? Where was the need for it? And in fact *Ref* was no longer needed by anyone – least of all Mayakovsky himself.

On December 4, 1929, *Pravda* carried an editorial article 'Towards a consolidation of the Communist forces of proletarian literature'. Provoked by a concrete issue – the sharp polemics between the leadership of RAPP and the editorship of *Press and Revolution* which had united around itself workers from IKP, the Komacademy and RANION – the article was of enormous significance on questions of principle for all genuinely revolutionary workers in Soviet literature. The article read:

'Theoretical disputes are of course inevitable, and questions of literary-political practice can and should be argued out; but polemical ardour should be tempered by a sense of proportion and group interests – in other words the narrowly conceived interests of this or that literary grouping should not be placed before the interests of the Party which imperatively demands the consolidation of Communist forces on the basis of Marxism-Leninism.'

The article ends on a call 'to unite all Communist forces and, working from and through the basic proletarian organisation (VOAPP), to close ranks and advance towards the resolution of the enormous tasks which confront the Party on the literary front'.

Mayakovsky lost no time in drawing his own conclusion. The *Ref* meeting called in mid-January 1930 passed an unequivocal resolu-

tion – ‘Not to organise any exclusively Refist groups or circles, but to seek entry into RAPP and to fight for our literary principles inside that organisation’.

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In February 1930, speaking at a MAPP conference, Mayakovsky said:

‘Do not confuse Ref with *Lef*. *Lef* was an aesthetic group which turned revolutionary literature into a self-enclosed aesthetic institution. Ref marks the transition to a Communist direction in the work of our writers – in other words, it is the route which leads to RAPP. And if I have entered RAPP it is only because the whole of my preceding work led me to this point.’

On February 6, 1930 Mayakovsky made the following statement to the MAPP conference:

‘In order to realise the slogan on the unification of all the forces of proletarian literature, I ask to be admitted into RAPP.

1. I do not have, nor have ever had, any differences with the basic literary-political line of the Party promulgated by VOAPP.

2. Methodological differences in the sphere of art can be resolved within the confines of the association with resulting benefit to the cause of proletarian literature.

I consider that every active Refist must come to this conclusion which is dictated by all our previous work.’

Mayakovsky was received into the membership of MAPP by the unanimous decision of the conference.

*Translated by Diana Matias*