

**MANUFACTURING CULTURE:  
THE SOVIET STATE AND THE MAYAKOVSKY LEGEND  
1930-1993**

**by**

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**A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
Graduate Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures  
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**Dissertation Abstract**  
**Manufacturing Culture: The Soviet State**  
**and the Mayakovsky Legend, 1930-1993**  
**PhD 2000**  
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The present dissertation presents a study of the official Soviet image of the Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893-1930) as an expression of Soviet cultural policy. It seeks to contribute to a re-appraisal of the poet's historical legacy behind the distortions of official culture by chronologically tracing the posthumous genesis, evolution and manipulation of the Mayakovsky legend. It also seeks to disprove the arguments advanced in some scholarship that Mayakovsky's canonization as official poet by the Stalin regime was predestined, and that the politically engaged Russian avant-garde in general provided the pre-suppositions of Socialist Realism.

The dissertation begins by exploring aspects of the poet's own work and image of the self within the literary and political context of his own lifetime. The introduction outlines the poet's activity from 1917 to 1927, and the first chapter examines the last years of his life, which coincide with the onset of the Stalin era, in 1928-1930. These first two sections serve to propose an interpretation of the poet in contradistinction to the official legend, to which the large part of the dissertation is devoted.

Chapter Two examines the immediate response to Mayakovsky's suicide, primarily by the regime but with consideration of unofficial sources. Chapter Three analyzes the reasons both for the initial ambivalence of the Soviet regime of the early thirties towards Mayakovsky's legacy, and for his abrupt canonization in 1935. Subsequent chapters trace the evolution and manipulation of the Mayakovsky legend according to the specific needs of

cultural policy under Stalin, Khrushchev and Brezhnev respectively, and examine a number of significant attempts to challenge the official interpretation of Mayakovsky. The last chapter is devoted to the controversy surrounding Mayakovsky which emerged during the era of perestroika and glasnost. Finally, an Epilogue briefly considers the post-Soviet additude to Mayakovsky, particularly in light of the response to the centenary of his birth in 1993.

## Note on Transliterations

Transliterations from Russian titles of literary works and periodicals follow the Library of Congress system, as do citations of Russian verse and text. Proper names, however, depart from this. Proper surnames and forenames are rendered without the soft sign, for example "Koltsov" rather than "Kol'tsov" and "Tatiana" rather than "Tat'iana," unless they appear in the titles of works (as in the poem *Vladimir Il'ich Lenin*). The masculine ending of proper surnames is rendered as "-sky" rather than "-skii" throughout, unless it appears in the title of works, in which case it is rendered as "-skii" (as in the volume of articles *Vladimir Maiakovskii, 1930-1940*). There are additional exceptions in proper names with established renderings, such as "Yevtushenko" and "Yakovleva" instead of "Evtushenko" and "Iakovleva," and "Roman Jakobson" rather than "Iakobson."

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## **Introduction: Mythmaking and Mayakovsky**

During the lifetime of great revolutionaries, the oppressing classes have visited relentless persecution on them and received their teaching with the most savage hostility, the most furious hatred, the most ruthless campaign of lies and slanders. After their death, attempts are made to turn them into harmless icons, canonise them, and surround their *names* with a certain halo... while at the same time emasculating and vulgarising the *real essence* of their revolutionary theories and blunting their revolutionary edge.

-V.I. Lenin, *State and Revolution*

There's a monument due me by rank already.  
I'd blow the damn thing up with dynamite.  
So strongly I hate every kind of dead thing!  
So much I adore every kind of life!

-V.V. Mayakovsky, 1924 ("lubileinoe")

In a 1994 issue of the *Times Literary Supplement*, Viktor Erofeyev begins an article on the poet who was canonized by Stalin in 1935 as "the best, most talented poet of our Soviet epoch" with an unambiguous historical verdict: "Vladimir Mayakovsky is now perhaps the deadliest Russian poet of the twentieth century."<sup>1</sup> In his 1956 essay "Liudi i polozhenia" Boris Pasternak was the first Soviet writer to refer to the forced introduction of the Mayakovsky legend after 1935, "like potatoes under Catherine the Great", as the poet's "second death". Today it is undeniable that Mayakovsky has suffered a third death along with the collapse of the regime for which his legend served a purpose. Once again, his third death is one in which Mayakovsky himself had no hand.

The cult and mythology built around Mayakovsky after his suicide in 1930 emerged from the Stalin regime's need for a cultural icon with roots in the revolutionary period, one which could be used as a model for the subjugation of writers and artists to the direct service of the state. For this very reason, however, it was always fraught with tensions and contradictions. Mayakovsky and the image he consciously sought to create for himself were firmly rooted in

the avant-garde experience of the twenties, whereas Stalinist culture was built on the ashes of that experience. Resurrecting Mayakovsky in the image of Socialist Realism required fundamental distortions to re-invent his poetic project and biography to correspond to the needs of a new Soviet patriotism, expressed in literary terms in the doctrines of Socialist Realism.

The Mayakovsky legend that was crafted for the purposes of Soviet cultural and political policy after 1935 had much in common with the Stalinized cult of Lenin. After the rise of Stalin, both Mayakovsky and Lenin became important to the Soviet regime not primarily as intellectual models, but as state symbols or icons: they provided a legitimacy deriving from a formal link with the past to a largely new state apparatus created in the period of "Cultural Revolution" and political realignment of 1928 to 1931, and consolidated during the centralization and purges of the thirties. In caricatured form, they became a feature not merely of intellectual life but of ordinary life and popular culture. A 1998 feature in *Time* magazine on "Leaders and Revolutionaries" of the twentieth century quotes the dissident poet Joseph Brodsky on the popular symbolism of the Lenin cult after Stalin, when the image of Lenin was no longer identified with the utopianism of early Soviet culture but with its opposite: "Joseph Brodsky...began to hate Lenin at about the time he was in the first grade, 'not so much because of his political philosophy or practice...but because of the omnipresent images which plagued almost every textbook, every class wall, postage stamps, money, and what not, depicting the man at various ages and stages of his life...coming to ignore those pictures was my first lesson in switching off, my first attempt at estrangement.'"<sup>2</sup> Iurii Karabchievsky, author of one of the first major attempts at estrangement from the official Mayakovsky legend by a Soviet author, echoes this attitude to the disparity between the historical figures and the cult surrounding them: "We didn't study

Mayakovsky's verses in the spirit of Mayakovsky ['ne po-Maiakovskomu']. We studied them according to the kindergarten teacher, the gradeschool teacher, the pioneer camp leader. We studied them according to an actor or radio announcer's voice, the headline of a newspaper article, the slogan placard on the shop-floor of our factory and the poster in the passport department of the police station."<sup>3</sup> Although forced study of the writings of both Mayakovsky and Lenin was a feature of the cult-building, it was highly selective and carefully interpreted. The legends were based on "surrounding their *names* with a certain halo" and making of those names and images a daily encounter in Soviet life.

The official Mayakovsky legend evolved according to the changing needs of the Soviet state from the thirties onwards, and at times it felt the impact of challenges to the regime. But instead of a renewed interest in the Mayakovsky behind the official mythology, the demise of the Soviet Union has for the most part consigned both to the dustbin of history. The present work will attempt to contribute to the process of "estrangement" from Mayakovsky's official legend not by "ignoring" its manifestations, as Brodsky said of the Lenin cult, but by explaining them: by chronologically tracing the genesis and evolution of the Mayakovsky legend as Soviet state mythology. In a chapter on "the connection between Mayakovsky's 'spectacular biography' and his deaths - figurative and nonfigurative" in *Death in Quotation Marks: Cultural Myths of the Modern Poet*, Svetlana Boym points to the fact that the official image of Mayakovsky has long exerted a powerful influence even over those who do not themselves attempt to uphold it.

...each Soviet or Soviet émigré writer who discusses Mayakovsky's death and resurrection today responds to the Soviet myth of Mayakovsky incarnated in the official poet's monument. The critics in the West tend to ignore the official Soviet hero in the bronze jacket, or simply do not pay it tribute. And yet unknowingly many of them are victims of the monument.<sup>4</sup>

As a result, attempts intended to disentangle the poet from the official legend have sometimes led to almost equally one-sided interpretations of the poet. In Western criticism, the dominant tendency has been to focus on Mayakovsky's exclusively "lyrical" aspect. Many have sought to place him in the framework of literary tradition, most often that of Romanticism. In a 1986 article entitled "The Myth of the Revolutionary Poet: Majakovskij in Three Modern Plays," Halina Stephan begins a discussion of the revival of Mayakovsky's romantic persona in late-1970s Germany with a brief discussion of the conflict between Mayakovsky's efforts to "codify his own image" and almost all other interpretations, which in general "oscillate between the classical and the romantic scheme with contemporary critics experiencing some difficulty in classifying him within one or the other current of literary tradition."<sup>5</sup>

The interpretation of Mayakovsky as a reincarnation of the Romantic literary persona reflects one attempt to free him from official Soviet interpretation. It was most importantly the attribution to Mayakovsky of what Pasternak in *A Safe Conduct* - published in the year of the poet's death - called the notion of "biography as spectacle", or the view of life as the life of a poet, that led Pasternak and many critics before and since to place Mayakovsky in the Romantic framework. Even earlier, in an article written in 1921 entitled "Literature and Biography", the Formalist critic Boris Tomashevsky wrote: "Futurism took the romantic orientation toward autobiography to its ultimate conclusions. The author really became the hero of his works. We need only mention here the construction of Majakovskij's books: they are an open diary in which intimate feelings are recorded...What the literary historian really needs is the biographical legend created by the author himself. Only such a legend is literary fact."<sup>6</sup>

Although the notion of “biography as spectacle” continued to be a feature of early European modernist poetry, most notably of French Symbolism, modernist art and literature were characterized by both continuity and rupture with the artistic orientations of the past. The fact that Mayakovsky’s poetry is self-referential allows it to convey the predicament of being caught between two different images of the revolutionary poet: the established “lyric hero” of romanticism, and the poet’s modern role, which was still in the process of being developed during his lifetime. Mayakovsky made very conscious attempts to lay down a design for this role, but, as Stephan emphasizes, his “self-codified image, which combined utilitarianism with a commitment to formal experimentation, largely failed to enter into Majakovskij’s persona as it existed in general cultural consciousness.” Instead, in the late thirties, his image became associated with “state classicism.”<sup>7</sup> The elements of Romanticism that were present in Mayakovsky’s self-created legend did play a role in his initial canonization, as the notion of “revolutionary romanticism” was important in the early formulation of Socialist Realism in the thirties, before it regressed completely to “state classicism.”

One of the most recent works to focus directly on the official Mayakovsky image in the Stalin era is a dissertation published in Berlin in 1992 under the title *V.V.Majakovskij und seine Rezeption in der Sowjetunion 1930-1954*, by Birgit Menzel. Menzel counterposes her approach to the tendency of Western criticism to concentrate on Mayakovsky’s early Futurist years and to ignore the poet’s political evolution. But Menzel’s study of Mayakovsky’s canonization suggests a contradictory but nevertheless essential continuity between aspects of the left avant-garde and Socialist Realism, as opposed to the characterization of the avant-garde as mere victims of Stalinist repression, which she regards to be a defining feature of Western scholarship.

Mayakovsky has in fact often been accused in Western criticism of sowing the seeds of his own demise because he "stepped on the throat of his own song" by refashioning himself as a political poet. He has always been at the centre of a debate on the position of the entire Russian political avant-garde, or "left" artists and writers, as either victims or perpetrators of the crimes of the Stalin era. Similar accusations have long been commonplace in Russian émigré criticism, for example that of Khodasevich and Bunin. In Bunin's *Memoirs* (*Vospominaniia*, Paris, 1950) Mayakovsky's extremism is said to have influenced future cadres of "Dzerzhinsky's," referring to the head of the Cheka/GPU, or secret police in the twenties. But Birgit Menzel's work on Mayakovsky was written during a more recent re-emergence of the school of thought which suggests that the Soviet left avant-garde provided the presuppositions of Socialist Realism and Stalinism more generally, and must be held jointly accountable for the artistic repression that followed Mayakovsky's death.

The debate on the political avant-garde's relationship to Soviet power received a new impetus in West Germany of the late eighties - before the fall of the Berlin Wall - due to three developments. The first was the beginning of a backlash against the resurgence of interest in Soviet "left" art which had emerged in the West in the late sixties and early seventies, particularly in West Germany, due to the growth of the European leftist student movement. The second was the piecemeal attempt by the Soviet state in the seventies to reclaim elements of the avant-garde for itself in response to Western interest in those traditions, which by the eighties contributed to a perceived link with Socialist Realism. The third development which encouraged a re-evaluation of the Soviet avant-garde in some Western scholarship of the late eighties was the explosion of literary disputes within the Soviet Union itself as a result of the

cultural climate produced by glasnost - in which a controversy over the relationship of the avant-garde and of Mayakovsky in particular to Stalinism occupied a central place.

Menzel herself, in a short article on the Soviet Mayakovsky controversy published in 1989, also outlined the debate that had begun in the late eighties in West Germany in respect to the Russian avant-garde.<sup>8</sup> She stated that the prevailing view of the Soviet avant-garde in West Germany in 1989 remained one of admiration for its creative departure from cultural norms. This was the case not merely in leftist circles, although the virtually "unanimous appreciation" of the avant-garde in West Germany originated when "many left intellectuals at the end of the 1960s...often understood [Russian avant-garde aesthetics] as direct models for political-ideological change in their own country." Correspondingly, Menzel stated that Mayakovsky in 1989 was still commonly regarded "as an artistic anarchist, as an explosive, many-sided talent and a young rebel..."<sup>9</sup> Halina Stephan dealt with this phenomenon of the late sixties and seventies in greater detail.<sup>10</sup> Stephan pointed to the fact that a reevaluation of the German leftist aesthetics of Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin led to an interest in the early Soviet influence on these critics and writers, and that this revival of interest in the practical significance of the Soviet avant-garde for both contemporary German radical cultural theory and political struggle should be credited to the New Left and those influenced by it, particularly the collective associated with the journal *Asthetik und Kommunikation*, published in Frankfurt.<sup>11</sup> In an article on the interest in Mayakovsky's poetic persona and biography in contemporary German drama, Stephan stated that the reshaping of Mayakovsky's image according to a Western contemporization of left avant-garde traditions in the

sixties and seventies had some success in reconnecting Mayakovsky with the avant-garde experience of the twenties.<sup>12</sup>

In response to the new popularity of early Soviet culture in the West, there were limited Soviet attempts in the seventies to “rehabilitate” individual figures of the avant-garde, primarily visual artists. The purpose was to invent a greater continuity in Soviet culture extending back to 1917, and the official Soviet account of Mayakovsky’s artistic evolution was used to justify a link between aspects of the Soviet avant-garde and Socialist Realism on which other artists could now also be modelled. But this limited “rehabilitation” of avant-garde art took place for the benefit of the West. As art historian Vassily Rakitin describes it:

Naturally this recognition of the avant-garde was given out in limited doses. But in exhibitions and books oriented towards Western viewers and readers, more and more often it is precisely the avant-garde that appears as the true Soviet art. It is remarkable, for instance, that a one-person show of Malevich could travel to Düsseldorf in 1980 or that paintings by Kandinsky from Soviet museums were shown in Paris at the Pompidou Centre and in Italy. But there was a significant propagandistic element in these shows. They created the illusion of wide recognition of this art in the Soviet Union at a time when similar exhibitions were not being organised there, and books publicizing these artists were not being published.<sup>13</sup>

To some extent the Soviet presentation of modernist painters through the prism of narrow agitation and the functionalism of the decorative arts produced fodder for new accusations that the rationalism of the modernist aesthetic paved the way for Stalinism. This was particularly the case in the Russian emigration, largely predisposed against the left avant-garde, in journals such as *Kontinent*, and in the work of individual émigré art historians and of some Soviet specialists who published abroad.<sup>14</sup> But partly through émigré criticism, this view had an impact on German cultural theory at a time when some German critics and scholars were beginning to react against the lingering influence of

the re-discovery of Soviet avant-gardism, after the retreat of the student movement and the New Left. The art historian Boris Groys, who emigrated to West Germany in 1981, exemplified the renewed rejection of modernism as a precursor to Socialist Realism. In 1987 he engaged in a debate in the pages of the Frankfurt newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, in which he disputed Frank Schirrmacher's depiction of the avant-garde as expressive of "human potential" and as the "mortal enemy of tyranny."<sup>15</sup> In 1987, for a catalogue of the exhibition "'The Ax has blossomed...' European Conflicts of the Thirties in Memory of the Early Avant-garde" in Düsseldorf, 1987, he wrote an article titled "Totalitarian Art of the Thirties: Anti-avantgardist in Form and Avantgardist in Content."<sup>16</sup> Then in his controversial book *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin* (Munich, 1988), Groys argued that Stalinist culture of the thirties was the actual realization of avant-garde utopianism, particularly of its conception of "life-building" through art.<sup>17</sup>

By the late eighties Groys also provided a link with the contemporary controversy in the Soviet Union, which saw a general rejection of the left avant-garde for its alleged complicity with Stalinism. But for Menzel, Groys had his usefulness above all in the Western reception of the avant-garde, as an antidote to its idealization: "In problematizing the inner coherence of the avant-garde and Socialist Realism, Groys also polemicizes against the all-too undisturbed association with the art of the twenties and thirties which is recently to be observed [in West Germany]."<sup>18</sup> Menzel appears to have been reacting no longer primarily to the New Left interpretation of the avant-garde, but to what she regarded as "aesthetically motivated" attempts to "rehabilitate" the "monumental order" of the thirties.<sup>19</sup> Menzel stated that Groys makes the parallels between avant-gardism and Stalinist culture clear in "the utilitarian relationship to the cultural heritage, the cult of the collective, the common deep-

rootedness in myth and the correspondingly demonic world-view" by which the division of the world into old and new was supposedly later mirrored in the opposition between Trotsky and Stalin. Consequently, Menzel "would like to agree with Groys's thesis on the joint responsibility of the left avant-garde for the culture of the Stalin era," but admits that the example of Mayakovsky "indicates that a mono-causal connection between the epochs - as Groys implies it - is out of the question." But she does not reject Groys entirely, stating that his theses must be "relativized" to account for the contradictions of history, and that the avant-garde had both an emancipatory and authoritarian potential.<sup>20</sup>

Although Menzel's works of 1989 and 1992 provided an invaluable source of information and a point of reference for the present dissertation, her approach is based on significantly different premises. Menzel's use of the word "reception" to explain Mayakovsky's place in Stalinist culture does in fact suggest an essential continuity between the Mayakovsky of the twenties and the manner in which he was accepted posthumously as a state symbol, even though Menzel, following the reception theorist Hannelore Link, defines "Rezeption" as reproductive reception with the active intent to produce passive reception, designated by the term "Wirkung," or "effect."<sup>21</sup> Her fundamental conclusion on Mayakovsky's canonization is that it was inevitable:

...in terms of literary history Mayakovsky's canonization cannot simply be evaluated as an accident or as a lack of alternatives... Mayakovsky was consistent with Socialist Realism throughout, as a poetic type and with the conception of his political lyric, and due to various qualities [he] was predestined for the role of representative of the Soviet lyric: one need think only about the high political usefulness of his lyric as a means for the direct education of the masses, about his understanding of the lyric as a craft and a trade and thus as a part of the production process, about his view of language as an instrument and means of transport for clear, unequivocal and streamlined information... and about his demand that the poet be a loyal employee and servant of the communist state.<sup>22</sup>

The preceding implies a hereditary link between the social transformations inspired immediately after 1917 and the political culture of Stalinism. In contrast, the present dissertation is informed by an analysis of the fundamental break with revolutionary political culture with the rise of Stalin. The qualities described above were in fact shaped in a particular manner in Mayakovsky in response to the circumstances of the twenties. Correspondingly, the present work is based on a critique not of the reception but of the manufacturing of the Mayakovsky legend by the Soviet state after his death, not primarily as a "representative of the Soviet lyric" but as a state icon. It will attempt to demonstrate that Stalinist culture was successful in appropriating some concepts of left avant-garde movements in grossly distorted forms and for fundamentally divergent purposes; it is for this reason that the Mayakovsky legend has served to bolster the claim of much pro-Soviet and anti-Soviet scholarship alike that Socialist Realism was prefigured in Mayakovsky's work, or that his canonization was "predestined." The present dissertation will attempt to use the study of the formation and manipulation of the Mayakovsky legend to make a case for the lack of continuity, "mono-causal" or otherwise, between the historical experience of the Russian avant-garde of the twenties and the dominant cultural premises of the Soviet Union in the Stalin era and beyond. It deals with a longer time period than Menzel's dissertation, which covers the period 1930-54, although Menzel includes a brief appendix on the post-Stalin period up to perestroika at the end of her dissertation, and as mentioned above she has also published a separate article on the Mayakovsky controversy of the late eighties. Both are discussed at appropriate points below.

The present work begins by examining the legend Mayakovsky created for himself, before an official monument was erected in his name. The purpose of the introductory chapter below is to summarize some early Soviet notions of

cultural transformation and the manner in which they found expression in Mayakovsky's persona during his lifetime, and to outline some of the changes in the Soviet political climate and in cultural policy which framed Mayakovsky's attempts to recreate himself as a political poet. Most of the period outlined below, spanning the decade between 1917 and 1927 in three sub-sections, has already received a great deal of attention elsewhere.<sup>23</sup> It will be left to Chapter One to discuss in more detail the impact of what many historians regard to be the beginning of the Stalin period, the introduction of the Five-Year Plan in 1928, on Mayakovsky's "self-codified image" in the final years of his life.

### **1917-1921: Utopia, New Myths, and "Mayakomorphism"**

The period of Revolution and Civil War produced a high level of utopian speculation in most aspects of intellectual life, particularly when War Communism was introduced in the summer of 1918. At this time rapid changes in economic and political structures, coupled with political unrest in Europe, appeared to resolve the contradiction between ambitions for a direct transition to a higher society and the backwardness of Russian cultural conditions: "...it was precisely in the atmosphere engendered by battle, heroism, martyrdom...that ideas, plans, fantasies, and utopias arose...it was the deep radicalism of the economic revolution, unprecedented in human history, that seemed to fling open the portals to unending possibilities for drastic change."<sup>24</sup>

It is undeniable that the Russian artistic and literary avant-garde did not owe its existence to the October revolution, and that even the Proletarian Culture movement had its origins in both the European socialist movement before the war and in the Russian atheist "Godbuilding" movement that emerged after the 1905 Revolution. However, the particular social climate of the first years after 1917 gave unprecedented impetus to the concept of cultural

innovation as a form of political action which could contribute to social change in and of itself. In these early years this concept was far removed from reducing art to formulaic propaganda. As a general phenomenon it represented an impetus to extend revolutionary change *beyond* the realm of the economic and political to various notions of "cultural" or "spiritual" revolution.

In his study of Mayakovsky's life and work in this period, Bengt Jangfeldt stresses the poet's repeated call in his verse for a "revolution of the spirit", the so-called "third revolution" advocated not only by the Futurists but by many who were concerned with broader questions of cultural transformation. For the Futurists at this time it was best described as "aesthetic revolutionism": "the Revolution as a political and economical emancipation as such, although it is of course touched upon, is never stressed in these first years. The Futurists were concerned with their task: revolutionizing the arts."<sup>25</sup> The spiritual emancipation that the "new art" would be instrumental in bringing about was regarded as the "missing piece" without which political change would be unsuccessful.

The attempt to link artistic experiment with the creation of "new myths" in everyday life that could counter and replace the 'byt', or daily grind, of the past, was not unique to the Futurists. Attempts at mythicizing the revolution in order to give emotional expression to new social realities became commonplace. During the Civil War an interest emerged in creating new public and private rituals to replace those associated with religion, such as "red weddings" and "Octoberings" for new-born babies, and this was officially supported by the Party by 1923.<sup>26</sup> However Mayakovsky shared an impatience for cultural transformation that went beyond this kind of social experiment with the early advocates of a new "proletarian culture".

Originally the ideas of the Proletkult organization, as founded by the self-identified "non-party Communist" Bogdanov in 1917, reflected an impatience for

change that went beyond the material. In 1917 Bogdanov published the second part of his *Tectology*, about a science which would "provide a harmonious unity between the spiritual culture and the physical experience of the 'working collective,'" and "his concept of God-building through tectology was designed - like Sorel's concurrent call for a new heroic myth - to kindle enthusiasm and assure the revolutionary movement of success not only in gaining power but also in transforming society."<sup>27</sup> Lunacharsky, the state director of education and the arts throughout the twenties as Commissar of Enlightenment, who supported the Futurists in the first years, was himself influenced by the spiritual notions of cultural change expressed in the many-faceted "Godbuilding" movement, which was linked to the idealism of early Proletkult.<sup>28</sup>

Zenovia Sochor, a sympathizer of Proletkult writing in the late 1980s, distinguishes sharply between utopian notions of "cultural revolution" held by some who were active in literature and the arts in the first years after 1917 and Stalin's "revolution from above" in 1928. She emphasizes that Proletkult "specifically devoted itself to the aesthetic moments of social life; neither its activities nor its espoused attitudes were instrumental to industrialization."<sup>29</sup> However Sochor also distinguishes between Proletkult's utopianism and Lenin's emphasis on the immediate tasks of cultural "democratization": literacy, basic skills, general education and the assimilation of the culture of the past. Proletkult was based on elite pretensions at being a laboratory for the apex of human culture but also a tool for enabling mass participation in the creation of this culture. This resulted in a tension within the organization: "Despite repeated declarations that the prime objective of Proletkult was 'revolutionary-creative' work, it seems that many local Proletkults interpreted this objective to mean education or agitation and propaganda. This interpretation was perhaps inevitable given the conditions of the civil war and the pressing educational

needs."<sup>30</sup> But Proletkult's essential stumbling block was that it was founded on an artificially predetermined notion of what "proletarian culture" was to be. This emerged from the contradictory, and non-Marxist, concept of creating an entirely new culture based on an international class within the borders of a single nation.

However, the call for a "third revolution" by both Proletkult and the Futurists between 1917 and 1921 did not inevitably lead to the inseparability of literature and politics or the literary repression of the Stalin era. The "cultural revolution" which did occur in these early years - the extensive government literacy campaign that created a new and unexposed reading public - made it possible for Soviet writers to conceive of literature as another aspect of society that could be freed from convention organically. Although this was greatly exaggerated in respect to actual conditions, it was qualitatively different from the Stalin regime's promotion of writers as "engineers of the human soul."

Mayakovsky's attempt to marry the "rhythms" of revolution with the lyrical voice of the poet must in part be understood in terms of the particularities of the Russian audience in the first years after 1917. Literacy and a new mass interest in cultural activities of various kinds produced a belief in the possibility of establishing a new and direct relationship between artistic and social innovation, according to which "writing for the masses" might lead to the enrichment of poetic language instead of its impoverishment. Some evidence of early audience reception is provided by written questionnaires distributed by Vsevolod Meyerhold during the run of his 1921 production of Mayakovsky's play *Mystery-Bouffe*, which showed that nearly seventy percent of those spectators questioned liked the play. When the total was broken down into class groupings, it was found that the percentage was the same amongst workers and peasants. At the very least, these questionnaires indicate that "Mayakovsky and

Meyerhold's work was not, as some critics objected, beyond the comprehension of the 'new' audience.<sup>31</sup> This potential fed the avant-garde's enthusiasm for revolutionizing poetic language and form as a means to transform consciousness. As John Berger argues, the belief in the creative power of a language which they supposed, rightly or wrongly, had now been fully "liberated" from convention - not merely by artists but on a mass scale - was a defining feature of Mayakovsky's agitational work in this period.

When he worked inventing slogans for the government's propaganda agency, ROSTA, when he toured the Soviet Union giving unprecedented public poetry readings to large audiences of workers, he believed that by way of his words he would actually introduce new turns of phrase, and thus new concepts, into the workers' language. These public readings...were probably among the few occasions when life really appeared to confirm the justice of his own self-appointed role. His words were understood by his audiences. Perhaps the underlying sense sometimes escaped them, but there in the context of his reading and their listening this did not seem to matter as it seemed to matter in the interminable arguments he was forced to have with editors and literary officials: there the audience, or a large part of it, seemed to sense that his originality belonged to the originality of the Revolution itself.<sup>32</sup>

The unique climate of these years is also what fuelled early Proletkult: "Proletkult leaders continued to exhort local units not to remain 'at the propaganda level'; rather, it was vital for the proletariat to engage in 'self-activity,' to try to 'work out in life' the elements of proletarian culture."<sup>33</sup> Attempts to bridge the gap between cultural potential and what was materially possible during the Civil War led either to local Proletkults taking a more pragmatic approach in practice or to grandiose claims of purity within the isolated confines of their studios. As this disparity widened during the NEP years, both pragmatism and isolated utopianism led to a gradually narrower view of the relationship between art and politics. But this only came fully to bear in Soviet society when the Party's political orientation changed in the late twenties. In the

first years after 1917 the cultural policy of the Bolsheviks was in fact to counter arguments that implied a "command" view of culture:

Lunacharsky, with Lenin's backing, strove to defend against Mayakovsky and other iconoclasts the classics of Russian literature, and of art in general. The paradoxical spectacle was seen of a state cultural department defending freedom of creation against attacks from certain 'Left' artists and writers...whereas [Lunacharsky's] detractors considered themselves 'called on to defend Party discipline in the field of poetic creativity', he considered that one of his own functions, on the basis of the office which he held, was 'the defence of the rights of free culture against 'Red sycophancy'.<sup>34</sup>

It is undeniable that the polemics against "all culture of the past" and demands for greater "political" intervention in artistic production by both Proletkult and left avant-garde artists were often narrow and self-righteous. But they were products of a particular context, one that produced iconoclastic impulses of various kinds which were not manufactured or orchestrated for the short term, calculated purpose of motivating economic productivity. The way in which ideas associated with "proletarian culture" were made use of by Stalin will be discussed in the next chapter. In these early years attempts to supersede existing levels of workers' consciousness and economic development and to smooth over the contradictions of the period, whether by Proletkult or by the Futurists, amounted to little more than unrealizable rhetoric.

The Futurists' attempt to bridge the gap between social potential and social reality in the first years after the revolution involved adapting the modernist perspective of formal innovation to the creation of a new collective consciousness. Mayakovsky and the Futurists set themselves the difficult task of trying to adapt an artistic approach which had emerged to express social fragmentation and lack of ideological coherence in bourgeois culture to a worked-out vision of a new society. In doing so, they were influenced by the legacy of revolutionary "Godbuilding" and its project of creating "new myths" to replace those which seemed to be on their way to obsolescence. The extreme

conclusion of the search for a surrogate spirituality was found in groups founded by Proletkult poets: "Cosmos" in Petersburg and "Kuznitsa" ("The Smithy") in Moscow. The result was a new myth of "universal" or "cosmic" revolution, described by Leon Trotsky as "flat romanticism" which "contains the suggestion of very nearly deserting the complex and difficult problems of art on earth so as to escape into the intersteller spheres."<sup>35</sup> Although Mayakovsky was not immune to this, the elements of "cosmism" in his early work had different presuppositions. Halina Stephan stresses the importance of mythmaking for the post-1917 Futurists and Mayakovsky, but distinguishes theirs from that of Proletkult:

...the view of poetry as craft did not prevent the neo-Futurists from using the old myths to create a new mythology of revolution and industrialization. Yet if Mayakovsky in his Soviet poetry sought to express the Soviet ethos in mythological terms, myth for him was the function of a certain poetic imagination, a coefficient of a certain literary form. Unlike in the treatment of myths by the Proletkult poets, in the neo-Futurist poetry myths became means of creating the Soviet consciousness rather than expressions of it.<sup>36</sup>

In his famous essay "On a Generation that Squandered its Poets," Roman Jakobson identifies the "creation" of consciousness through myth as the essential continuity in Mayakovsky's life-work from his first to his last lines: "A single clear purpose directs the system of symbols. 'We shall thunder out a new myth upon the world.'"<sup>37</sup> The updated folk epic *150,000,000* (1919-1920), in which the hero is able to stride the Atlantic ocean and "smash the old world wildly," and the battles and journeys of the updated medieval morality play *Mystery-Bouffe* (1918, second version 1920-1), in which the proletariat literally storms the heavens before finding a "new Paradise" and immortal happiness on earth, depict humanity's ability to bring cosmic forces "down to earth". But for Mayakovsky the cosmos does not displace traditional spiritual imagery, rather it alters it. In general, "space tended to replace for twentieth-century Russia the

symbol of the sea with all its symbolic overtones of purification, deliverance from the ordinary, and annihilation of self. The Russian Prometheans spoke no more of an ark of faith or a ship at sea, but of a new craft that would take them into outer space."<sup>38</sup> In *Mystery-Bouffe* the ark of faith in which the proletariat sails on the flood of Revolution is one which can fly into Heaven and descend into Hell, and by implication reach other worlds:

Is that the sky or a piece of bright-coloured cloth?/ If this is the work of our own hands,/ what door will not open before us?/ We are the architects of earths,/ the decorators of planets,/ we're miracle-makers,/ we'll tie rays of light into the bundles of brooms,/ to sweep the clouds from the sky with electricity./ We'll make the rivers of many worlds splash honey,/ we'll pave the streets on this earth with stars.

In the second version of *Mystery Bouffe*, this passage precedes the choral singing of a "psalm to the future," the Internationale, by the "sun-worshippers in the temple" ("solntsepoklonniki u mira v khrame") - the temple of the revolutionary theatre, in which the audience is called on to mount the stage and sing with the performers. For Mayakovsky developing a mythology of revolution was the logical extension of the Futurist campaign against 'byt,' or the daily grind of ordinary, philistine life, and for the poeticization of life on earth. In "The 'New Myth' of Revolution - A Study of Mayakovsky's Early Poetry", Jurij Striedter attempted to demonstrate that the explicit call for a "new myth" in the poem *150,000,000* holds the key to revealing Mayakovsky's search, particularly in these early years, for a collective "mother tongue" to give expression to the as yet non-existent "new language" of the revolutionary process.<sup>39</sup> Striedter pointed to the way in which mythmaking betrays an underlying harmony beneath the apparent conflict between Mayakovsky's lyric and political polarities.

...while the argument goes on as to whether this conflict is to be viewed as negative or positive, and what effect it had on the personal fate of Mayakovsky,

there remains the vital question how such a very "egocentric" and "purely lyrical" poet could have become the most convincing creator of a poetic "new myth" of revolution. Perhaps this was not *in spite* of his "lyricism," or *in spite* of the passionate and painful entanglement of the poetic "I" and the revolution, but directly *because* of them. For despite the inevitably subjective fictitiousness of poetic utterances, it was only these factors that made it possible for a "new myth" to be constituted and expressed in this medium. In this respect, his poetic revolution myth is not only eminently "lyrical," but also eminently "modern."<sup>40</sup>

Among modern poets, Mayakovsky stands out not merely as a creator of his own myth but as a personification of it. In a description which has met with the approval of Roman Jakobson and many Western specialists, and of Mayakovsky himself, Trotsky argued in 1923 in *Literature and Revolution* that Mayakovsky was faced with a dilemma in leaving the "individualist orbit" with which he was familiar to consciously recreate himself as the poet of an actual revolution, and in the absence of the opportunity to do so organically he resorted either to stereotype or to "Mayakomorphism", Trotsky's term for the poet's projection of his own image onto an objectified "proletariat" or an abstract notion of revolutionary culture:

Mayakovsky is closer to the dynamic quality of the Revolution and to its stern courage than to the mass character of its heroism, deeds and experiences. Just as the ancient Greek was an anthropomorphist and naively thought of the forces of nature as resembling himself, so our poet is a Mayako-morphist and fills the squares, the streets and fields of the Revolution with his own personality...When he wants to elevate man, he makes him be Mayakovsky.<sup>41</sup>

Victor Erlich expresses a prevailing view in Western criticism that Mayakovsky's "negative romanticism...was most apparent in the poem intended as an epic of mass heroism, *Hundred Fifty Million*," and that his initial renunciation of authorship of this work as a feature of the poem itself "resulted in another act of self-dramatization".<sup>42</sup> But it is also linked to the need to somehow reconcile the individual voice with the authority required for myth. The very appeal to the more collective artistic forms of the "bylina", or folk-epic, and the

mystery play was an attempt to adapt the more direct social function of pre-capitalist art to what Billington referred to as "a new organic society in which all participated in the common ritual the aim of which was not entertainment but redemption."<sup>43</sup> Mayakovsky's anti-realism is rooted in the theatricalist approaches of the Soviet avant-garde, which sought to bridge the distance between performer and spectator not through mimetic devices but by exaggerating the "spectacular" in both art and life. The "audience" is made complicit in the illusion, and the poetic transformation of language and imagery becomes fundamentally an act of exchange. This act of exchange is extended to the transformation of the life-experience of the artist himself, as opposed to the traditional Romantic antagonism between "the poet and the crowd" ("poet i tolpa"). Although this antagonism may still play out in Mayakovsky's battle with ever-present "byt," the opposition is more all-encompassing and therefore more flexible: Roman Jakobson described it as "I" versus "not-I." Proletkult and the Futurists generally shared a populism combined with elitism, but for Mayakovsky the "new art" had always been ultimately inseparable from the modern role of the "new poet". The conceit that "150,000,000 are speaking through my lips" is combined with "Mayakomorphism": the poet's image is stamped on *Mystery-Bouffe*, as The Man of the Future, played by Mayakovsky himself on stage, and on 150,000,000 in the partly heroic, partly comic figure of "Ivan", the larger-than-life worker-warrior or "bogatyr". But by placing his stamp on the "crowd" Mayakovsky seeks to include it in the life of the "I." His biography as "spectacle" is one in which the audience is simultaneously regarded as a potential threat which brings the poets' efforts into relief, and as a life-force that sustains him, which he invites to climb onstage with him.

In *Literature and Revolution*, Trotsky admits that "Mayakomorphism" amounts to more than conventional romantic self-dramatization: "True, extremes

meet. The universalisation of one's ego breaks down, to some extent, the limits of one's individuality, and brings one nearer to the collectivity - from the reverse end. But this is true only to a certain degree." Writing about Mayakovsky in 1922-1923, Trotsky was more generally concerned with the dangers in the new literature lacking a "sense of measure" than with the danger of a narrowed-down utilitarianism, which had yet to make itself fully felt on the Soviet literary scene. From a later historical vantage point, after Mayakovsky's suicide, Trotsky wrote that in the end Mayakovsky's attempt at developing a new role for the modern poet must be appreciated in the context of a very complicated period in cultural history:

Mayakovsky was not only the 'singer', but also the victim, of the epoch of transformation, which while creating elements of the new culture with unparalleled force, still did so much more slowly and contradictorily than necessary for the harmonious development of an individual poet or a generation of poets devoted to the revolution.<sup>44</sup>

### **1922-1925: From the New Myth of revolution to the new "byt" of the NEP**

The same conditions which gave rise to a utopian belief in the possibility of creating a new "mass" culture overnight through either a "spiritual" or a "cultural" revolution also gave rise to impatience at the difficulties in achieving change in practice. Trotsky took great pains in *Literature and Revolution* to address this important controversy, emphasizing the specific "laws" by which artistic culture operates. He emphasized the critical difference between giving expression to struggle through new forms and the organic development of new cultural wholes: "In a revolutionary break in the life of society, there is no simultaneousness and no symmetry of processes either in the ideology of society, or in its economic structure. The ideological premises which are needed for the revolution are formed before the revolution, and the most

important ideological deductions from the revolution appear only much later."<sup>45</sup> More than any other single writer of his generation, Mayakovsky expressed the contradiction between the expectations of 1917 and the cultural lag which followed, and his self-created image was itself an attempt to bridge the gap between what Roman Jakobson called "the unparalleled anguish of the present generation" and the future.

Social upheavals inevitably produce cultural unevenness, but the contrast produced between the emergency measures of War Communism and the scale of economic devastation resulted in an even greater disparity between expectations and reality. The very pace of change that made it possible for some to take economic and political transformation for granted was itself deceptive. Formal nationalization of the economy masked the inadequacy of state and trade union structures to run it, and the barter of goods and equality of bread rations necessitated by economic collapse created the illusion - but not the substance - of egalitarian direct distribution and the disappearance of money. The new relationship between poet and audience began to be eroded almost as quickly as it developed by the fragmentation of the urban population. By the end of the Civil War the urban proletariat was reduced to 43% of its numbers in 1917 due to war casualties, the dislocation of industry, starvation and the need to forage in the countryside for survival. The Futurists' earlier notions of aesthetic or spiritual revolution no longer appeared to fit the real circumstances of Soviet life.

In 1922, with the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP) and half a year before the first publication of the LEF journal, the Futurists modified their program in a new statement of objectives which Mayakovsky himself is supposed to have written. The statement appeared under the title "Maiakovskii o futurizme" in the infamous 1958 publication "Novoe o Maiakovskom," which

also printed the scandal-provoking correspondence with Lili Brik and controversial details about Mayakovsky's conflicts with Lenin. The 1922 statement, allegedly addressed to Trotsky, affirms "verbal art" as a craft as opposed to an aesthetic stylization, with the "ability to solve any assignment verbally," but marries the utilitarian function to intensive formal and linguistic innovation. Between 1923 and 1925, Lef further developed the concept of "social commission" ("sotsial'nyi zakaz") to theorize the avant-garde's political commitment, but this concept expressed not tendentiousness but rather the ability to respond to perceived social needs and "to solve any assignment" by means of new forms. Some literary and cultural historians contend that Mayakovsky's influences, especially "the subtle ideas [Osip Brik] worked out as theoretician of the Left Front of Art", not only had "little or nothing to do with Marxist literary criticism", but that "their purpose was simply to rationalize the selling of poetic talent to the state."<sup>46</sup> Others such as Halina Stephan and Richard Stites regard the Futurists' shift in emphasis to be motivated by an essential continuation of earlier responses to changes in the Russian audience:

This determination to find a utilitarian justification for Futurist poetry came in part as a result of the democratization of Russian life after the revolution. The Revolution undermined the traditional middle-class belief in the relevance of art and drastically changed the makeup of what Mayakovsky called the "producers" (*proizvoditeli*) and the "consumers" (*potrebiteeli*) of poetry.<sup>47</sup>

While it is undeniable that there was a degree of pragmatism in the Futurists' efforts to justify their access to print during the NEP, the formation of the organization Left Front of Art (Lef) with the launch of its first journal *LEF* in 1923 is better understood as an attempt to rationalize the continued centrality of radical experimentation to revolutionary art than as naked careerism. For Mayakovsky, formal poetic innovation remained an organic aspect of the concept of "social commission" throughout his involvement with Lef. For

example, at the beginning of 1925, the last year of Lef's first journal, Mayakovsky publicly debated Lunacharsky on the relationship between form and content, arguing against the latter's assertion that the writer must simply pay attention to content and the literary manner will follow on its own, and affirming that the purpose of Lef was the struggle for new means of expression: "Lef is not merely a little group, the Lef movement is a constant tendency, a constant struggle of forms..."<sup>48</sup> Stephan points to the international dimension of the direction taken by Lef, indicating that Soviet pressures for political relevance were not the only factors involved:

Mayakovsky's transformation of Futurism into poetry of "social commission" followed the general path of the new international wave of constructivist art, which introduced utilitarianism, or rather functionality, as an esthetic category. The new art centered esthetic value not on the inner experience of the artist but on the perfection of artistic technique, which was demonstrated in the solution to a given problem. Such art required that the form neither dominate nor complement the message, but become an intrinsic, inseparable part of that message.<sup>49</sup>

At the same time, however, the social circumstances of the NEP gradually meant that the utopianism which had characterized earlier notions of both "proletarian" and "revolutionary" culture took the form of greater and greater defensiveness, opening the door to the argument that any art which did not appear to directly serve the revolution did not contribute to cultural innovation. The concessions openly made to the market and social inequality under the NEP had an impact on all those who saw themselves as engaged in a battle against bourgeois culture, and the aftermath saw not only Futurists but also advocates of "proletarian" literature realign themselves. The literary grouping "October" (also known by its publication *Na postu* as the "On Guardists"), which was identified with the "proletarian line" in literature until 1926, was formed in 1922 on quite a different basis from that of Proletkult. Its founding manifesto stresses its chief aim to be "the strengthening of the

Communist line in proletarian literature.<sup>50</sup> This distinguished it both from Kuznitsa, which was concerned to a greater extent with raising the quality of "proletarian" literary production, and from early Proletkult, which was concerned with principles of popular education, and which had been militantly independent of state and Party organs. October focussed explicitly on the need for the mass organization of "ideological" struggle in literature:

All of these ringing declarations - party control, class struggle, ideological orthodoxy - were anathema to Bogdanov [i.e. early Proletkult] but became identified with the left wing in culture. This change in direction... partly reflected a desire to stake out a revolutionary position within the more moderate NEP period...<sup>51</sup>

What produced this shift was the need for "proletarian" writers to reaffirm their existence while at the same time actually adapting to the sharp turn away from the utopian cultural rhetoric of War Communism. What underlay the emphasis on "the Communist line" was actually a shift to more day-to-day and parochial concerns than those encompassed in the utopian goals of Proletkult or the "cosmism" and lyricism of The Smithy. But those who did not join the split that created October and maintained an orientation on independent creativity and revolutionary "cosmism" were also affected by the introduction of the NEP. Rather than wrapping themselves in "proletarian organization" like October or the compromise mantle of "left art" like the Futurists, the Smithy poets either succumbed to pessimism or became sectarian and defensive in their attempt to "stake out a revolutionary position":

Members of Smithy... considered the NEP a "betrayal of communism" and disassociated themselves from the party. For them, utopia was reduced to a cult, clandestine and fanatical at the same time. A "communist counterculture," thwarted, hateful, and militant, juxtaposed itself to "bourgeois culture" and all fellow travelers.<sup>52</sup>

Mayakovsky's impatience with the persistence of the culture of the past led not only to artifical attempts to graft political slogans onto his verse and onto his persona, but also to recurrent pessimism. When the NEP was introduced this pessimism expressed itself in a turn to campaign-style satire and to a focus on the lack of heroism in everyday life which overlapped completely with the period of Lef. The majority of Mayakovsky's satirical poems from 1922-1928 did not target literary "fellow-travelers" in particular but philistines and hypocrites with Soviet or proletarian pretensions who profaned the revolution and prospered during the NEP. This trend was foreshadowed by the often-quoted 1921 poem "O driani" ("About Trash"), in which a portrait of Marx comes to life and rails at a domestic scene of Soviet "meshchanstvo", or middle-brow complacency, epitomized by a chirping canary and other private fetishes, which threaten Communism itself. The "liberation from fetishisms", or from distorted notions of reality, had been an important element of proletarian culture as endorsed by Bogdanov. In the contradictory period of the NEP, when formal appearances and social reality grew further and further apart, the concept took on new significance.

Mayakovsky's opposition to the Lenin cult in 1924 provides the best single example of his struggle against "byt" during the NEP, as it also gives an indication of the disparity between the official resurrection of Mayakovsky after 1935 and the poet's own attitude to cult-building. As Nina Tumarkin emphasizes, Mayakovsky did not object to the public celebration of Lenin, but to the cult which "as he saw it, was sullying and destroying Lenin's immortal spirit..."<sup>53</sup> An anti-monumentalization theme runs through Mayakovsky's work in the months following Lenin's death: from the article written as a lead editorial for LEF No. 3 (spring, 1924), "Don't Traffic in Lenin!" ("Ne torquite Leninyem"), which railed both against the cheapest commemorative kitsch - such as Lenin

cigarette wrappers - and against the "bronzing" of Lenin as a monument; to the long 1924 poema *Vladimir Il'ich Lenin*, where he writes of "rituals, mausoleums and processions" drowning Lenin out; to his jubilee poem for Pushkin, in which he literally pulls Pushkin down from his pedestal on Tverskoi Boulevard to speak with him: "I love you, the living man, not the mummy." Although Mayakovsky was not alone in criticizing aspects of the Lenin cult, "Don't Traffic in Lenin!" was removed from issue No. 3 of the LEF journal.<sup>54</sup>

Mayakovsky tries to bring his own myth of Lenin to life by contrasting it with the eulogies of the time, just as in his earlier poetry he systematically counterposed the literary monuments of the past - represented by lifeless volumes of "Collected Works" in 150,000,000 - to the "real life" of his verse. The result, however, is mixed. Voronsky described it like this: "Mayakovsky's Lenin is a figure of stone, frozen into an emblem. He doesn't walk, he marches; he doesn't act, he performs."<sup>55</sup> Brown argues that Voronsky accurately conveyed the spirit of *Vladimir Il'ich Lenin* even though he "missed the poetic point" - the fact that Mayakovsky's Lenin is intended as myth. The irony is that it is less dynamic and vivid than the more self-consciously mythical figure of the proletariat in 150,000,000. The Lenin poem did not come easily to Mayakovsky, and in fact met with a very hesitant reception at the time: after a reading of the poema at the "Dom pechati" in Moscow on October 18, 1924, Mayakovsky responded to an attack from the audience that he had written "a political textbook in verse" ("politgramota v stikhakh"): "...while writing, I was all the time concerned about not falling into simple didacticism. Poetry is poetry. I wrote this poema while remaining a poet. It was very difficult, comrades..."<sup>56</sup> The fact that Mayakovsky did not escape a more prosaic monumentalism in his Lenin myth indicates the difficulties involved in trying to create "new myths" of the revolution during the NEP years, and illustrates the poet's struggle with the tension

between heroism and fetishism, revolutionary myth and religion, legend and cult.

The original cult of Lenin in the twenties was generally linked to the revolutionary "Godbuilding" impulses that continued to take various forms during the NEP, based on a belief that "many people needed a unified set of rituals and symbols to bind their feelings to the goals of the regime."<sup>57</sup> Svetlana Boym points out the distinction between the notions of 'byt', or everyday routine and stagnation, and 'bytie', or spiritual being, and refers to the attempt by Sergei Tretiakov, propagandist of LEF, to "redefine the dynamism of bytie, turning it from a spiritual into a revolutionary force," and to "oppose revolutionary bytie to materialistic byt, the realm of the petit-bourgeois kitschy objects...which do not simply compose a private world but also profane the Revolution."<sup>58</sup> This describes very well Mayakovsky's interpretation of Lenin's "immortal spirit", a version of his "new myth" of revolution, as opposed to attempts to vulgarize it.

The fact that there was relatively little public protest against the veneration of Lenin's corpse speaks fundamentally to the degeneration of Party culture at this time. However, it also indicates that the 1924 campaign was "a rally to tap the genuine popular sentiments of anxiety and sorrow unleashed by Lenin's death."<sup>59</sup> The use of Lenin's image as part of a revival of revolutionary sentiment at this time, either by Mayakovsky or even by promoters of the basest aspects of the cult in the twenties, cannot be seen as equivalent to the cult of Stalin, which was not based on pre-existing popular sentiment but on historical invention, and which inspired subservience rather than self-identification. The 1924 Lenin campaign was the product of a qualitatively different historical context from that of the thirties and beyond, which in addition to the Stalin cult produced the official Mayakovsky legend and a new cult of Lenin after Stalin's

disgrace in 1956 (see Chapter 5 of present work). The post-1956 cult of Lenin, which inspired the hatred of Brodsky in the first grade and which ironically made use of Mayakovsky's verse and slogans about Lenin more than that of any other poet, "bore such a different tone from the early cult that a propagandist from the twenties would doubtless have found greater similarities between the later Lenin cult and the cult of Stalin than between the two Lenin cults."<sup>60</sup>

Although utopianism and the mythicization of reality are also based on distortion, it was the transformation of "new myths" into "fetishes" that Mayakovsky identified as a principal danger in the twenties. His turn to the campaign against Soviet 'byt' in more journalistic verse in the first years of the NEP did not represent a complete retreat from the "new myth" of revolution. It stemmed from a utopian impulse which Richard Stites identifies as a general phenomenon that remained a part of the cultural scene during these years:

When the optimism generated by the Revolution and by the Red victory in the Civil War was shattered by the failure of War Communism and by the turn to a mixture of Old and New Economies in the 1920s, the utopian mechanism did not perish. It was refueled by the powerful belief that if the larger scheme of a new world had to be abandoned for the time being, then there was all the more reason for communists to begin laying its foundations in a culture and mode of life that would prefigure the new order, and by fashioning new people who would be fit to live under such an order. This was the social circumstance and the psychological mechanism that explain why, after the collapse of War Communism, an even intenser culture of utopian behaviour, experiment and dreaming flourished in the midst of petty capitalists, bourgeois restaurants, and philistine values - the despised world of the N.E.P.<sup>61</sup>

Roman Jakobson echoed this interpretation of the "victory of agit-prop" in Mayakovsky's verse from the early twenties onwards as a "realignment of forces" rather than a "retreat":

...in connection with its social setting, the journalistic verse of Majakovskij represented a shift from an unrestrained frontal attack in the direction of an exhausting trench warfare. *Byt*, with its swarm of heartbreaking trivia, is still with him...You cannot resist the pressure of such rubbish by grandiloquent pronouncements "in general and in toto," or by theses on communism, or by pure poetic devices. "Now you have to see the enemy and take aim at him." You

have to smash the "swarm of trivia" offered by *byt* "in a small way" and not grieve that the battle has been reduced to many minor engagements. The invention of strategies for describing "trifles that may also prove a sure step into the future" - this is how Majakovskij understood the immediate task of the poet."<sup>62</sup>

### **1925-1927: "The Stabilization of *Byt*" and the degeneration of language**

In the early twenties debates within the Bolshevik Party over how to transform culture had been open and heated. Bukharin believed in the possibility of creating an art and literature superior to bourgeois culture immediately and welcomed a "proletarian" novel or theatrical production as "a first swallow."<sup>63</sup> Lenin denounced the concept that a new culture could be simply "clutched out of thin air" or could be "an invention of those who call themselves experts in proletarian culture."<sup>64</sup> Trotsky regarded the ideas of Proletkult to be not only utopian in the given circumstances but based on the false premise of identifying a truly democratic culture with one particular nation or class, rather than on internationalism and the elimination of class societies.<sup>65</sup> But these early disputes were based on differences as to exactly how to aid the development of a new mass culture, not on the need for party control of artistic matters. As late as July of 1925 a Central Committee resolution reaffirmed that "the Party should declare itself in favor of the free competition of various groups" and that "it is inadmissible to legalize by a decree the monopoly of the literary printing business by any one group or literary organization."<sup>66</sup> However, the resolution also acknowledged the "historical right" of the proletariat to "hegemony" in literature. By this time the question had become highly contentious and connected with larger factional struggles within the Party.

When the notion of systematic party intervention in literature began to take hold in the late 1920s, it was linked to a fundamental shift in the party's

political orientation away from a commitment to world revolution and towards nationalism. In December of 1925 the doctrine of "socialism in one country" was officially proclaimed and early in 1926 the Party renounced its neutrality in matters of art and literature, reversing its stance of July, 1925. A number of historians, notably E.H. Carr, point to the undeniable connection between these two developments.<sup>67</sup> Although it was not until the introduction of the Five-year Plan that the Party used the proletarian artistic associations to go on the offensive, in 1926 the leadership of the All-Russian Proletarian Writers' Association (VAPP) passed from those associated with "October," who had allied themselves with Zinoviev's opposition movement, to the anti-oppositionist Averbakh.

Support for Proletkult during the Civil War by Bolsheviks like Bukharin took on a different significance in this context. While resisting VAPP's argument for party control of literature in 1925, Bukharin at the same time attacked Trotsky in *Krasnaia nov'* for denying the possibility of proceeding to "the accumulation of proletarian culture" in Russia immediately without waiting for world revolution.<sup>68</sup> In other words, despite resistance to using methods of coercion, Bukharin's argument became that Russia in fact must begin building proletarian culture "in one country," and although he would later reverse his stance at the First Congress of the Writers' Union in 1934, after breaking with the Stalin faction, his argument was adopted by the Central Committee by 1928. The main difference in the argument in favour of building "proletarian culture" in 1925-6 as opposed to 1928 was that it could be a gradual and "organic" process. Nevertheless there was a continuity in the case for a "national" proletarian culture and the later case for state direction of literature. Already the very words "proletarian culture" began to change their significance and gradually became identified with Russian pride and national destiny, like the word "Soviet" itself:

Words began to hide as much as they signified. They became double-faced: one face referring to theory, the other to practice. For example the word *Soviet* became a designation of citizenship and a source of patriotic pride: only in theory did it still refer to a particular form of proletarian democracy.<sup>69</sup>

The disparity between formal appearance and reality during War Communism had been based on the material circumstances imposed by Civil War and economic collapse; with the NEP the revolutionary language which poets and revolutionary leaders alike had used to bridge this gap became twisted beyond recognition and actually served to widen it. Some cultural historians, such as Katerina Clark, see a turning point in the process of political and linguistic degeneration, or at least in the artistic reaction to it, taking place from 1926 onwards. She argues that the first half of the decade had been characterized by a culture in which "the materiality of the word was downplayed in favor of such values as music (or the sound qualities of language), theatricality, spectacle, and monumentalism" - in other words, poetic language that was associated with larger-than-life imagery, direct emotional response, and myth. This was replaced by a general concern for authenticity in language that took many forms, which Clark subsumes under the quest for a new "resurrection of the word," using the Formalist Victor Shklovsky's term from a pamphlet published in 1914 in a different way:

...at this later time, those who privileged the spoken language wanted to "make the stone stony" once again, but they believed they were doing so more literally than the Formalists. In this sense, their project can be seen as analogous to the new wave found in Germany from around 1925 which called for *Neue Sachlichkeit*, for basing art more in the actuality of the world, to give it, as *Sachlichkeit* is generally translated, "objectivity."<sup>70</sup>

Clark argues that this shift bore no necessary connection to the specific conditions of Soviet Russia, but it seems clear that there is a specific connection with the devaluation of language. The materiality of the word could be

downplayed in the years before revolutionary language became double-speak; by the mid- to late twenties words could no longer be treated as raw material out of which to create new myths. Their communicative relationship to a shared reality could no longer be taken for granted and had to be restored. James H. Billington also emphasizes "music as the dominant art form in an age of passionate liberation and liberated passion" during the early twenties, and musicality as the defining feature of all the arts during those years, but that this "music" was transformed into a parody of "prescribed ritual, communal chants" by Stalin.<sup>71</sup> In this context, the "resurrection of the word" can be understood as a reaction not only against bureaucratic double-talk but also against lyricism of all kinds - any literature which could be conventionalized, fetishized or divorced from concreteness and therefore from communication.

...were one to seek to define this new trend, the use or nonuse of substandard language - street talk - would not be its most crucial feature. Street language in the romanticized conception of writers and librettists is essentially a trope for the forces that conspire to challenge and undermine "music." The issue is whether the materiality of the word will be given its due, or whether conventionalized, but now hackneyed and allegedly "petty bourgeois" (*meshchanskiye*), systems for achieving "beauty," such as the standard literary language, the principles of harmony, and overriding, music-like constructions, will prevail and thus keep back the "great breakthrough" to a new culture.<sup>72</sup>

During the last year of the journal *LEF*, in 1925, its theoreticians began to develop the idea of "Literature of Fact", which placed emphasis on objective fact over the inevitable distortion involved in any subjective purpose, whether it be lyrical distortion and the creation of artistic wholes - including "new myths" - or ideological distortion and tendentiousness in literature. The clearest beginning of the new orientation came with Tretiakov's travel notes from his trip to Peking, published in the last number of *LEF* in 1925. They bore the subtitle "travel film" ("putfil'ma"), reflecting the concrete visual quality of the prose and its relationship to a shared material reality "caught on film," so that Tretyakov could

"operate with an illusion of a collective point of view."<sup>73</sup> The Lef group, while seeking to redefine the social usefulness of artistic literature, and therefore justify its existence alongside VAPP, also sought to reaffirm the writer's commitment to the "materiality of the word". This concept found greater practical expression in the relaunch of the group's journal as *Novy LEF* in 1927-28, which also included works that continued to focus on issues of form. The linking of literature to factual reporting was clearly to some extent a reaction against a growing demand for the "interpretation" of reality and the increasing disjunction between language and the facts of Soviet life. Although in practice Mayakovsky and the Lef alliance did not confine their work to documentative literature, the theory of the "bare fact" was a specific expression of the emphasis on the genuinely utilitarian function of art, one that was not fully abandoned in theory until Lef and the rest of the avant-garde were subjected to the pressures of Stalin's "cultural revolution" in 1928.

The collapse of the journal *LEF* in 1925 by no means saw Mayakovsky abandon the fundamental link between utilitarianism and formal innovation. On the contrary, in public appearances and debates in 1926-27, he still publicly defended the importance of poetic experimentation and innovative formal technique both to the adequate expression of new political and social themes, and to the development of a new perception of the world. For example, at a debate in March of 1927, in response to an article by Polonsky printed in *Izvestiia* the month before titled "Remarks of a Journalist: Lef or Bluff?", Mayakovsky declared that "...for the transmission of all the grandiose content given to us by the revolution, the formal revolutionizing of literature is necessary." He also defended the Formalist school repeatedly for its technical value in uncovering the laws and processes of language and poetics, which are not independent of social processes but also not mechanically determined by

them, explaining that "within chemistry there exist particular chemical combinations. It is possible to speak of chemistry by means of the periodic table of elements."<sup>74</sup>

Also after the collapse of LEF and before Lef theory shifted more or less completely to "literature of fact" in *Novy LEF*, with a corresponding focus on prose rather than poetry, Mayakovsky made his last theoretical statement clearly influenced by Futurist aesthetics. His 1926 essay, "How Are Verses Made?" ("Kak delat' stikhi?") emphasizes that in addition to the notion of poetry as production and the broad principle of "social commission," "novelty, novelty of material and of device, is obligatory for each poetic work." Moreover, his conception of the "productive attitude to art" was inseparably linked to an argument for professionalism, as opposed to the abstract literary populism of early Proletkult and the lowering of technical standards, as well as to traditional notions of artistic inspiration: "The work of the poet must be conducted on a daily basis for the perfection of the craft and for the accumulation of poetic stock." He declared that "one must take to the pen only when there is no other method of speaking, except in verse"; in other words, the use of poetry must be restricted to topics that allow the poetic form to be a functional part of the meaning of the poem. As opposed to the subjugation of art to propaganda, poetic propaganda is raised to the level of art, and must be judged first and foremost for its technical success. In this essay Mayakovsky describes his attitude to subject matter as the initial impulse for the generation of poetic form, which in turn determines the expression of content: "...rhythm is the basis of every poetic work, moving through it with a drone. Gradually from this drone you start to squeeze out individual words." He demonstrates this process in the composition of his 1926 poem "To Sergei Esenin," in which the poem first takes

shape in his mind as pure rhythm and meter, then gradually the words materialize through the repetition of the rhythm.<sup>75</sup>

It is undeniable that some of Mayakovsky's own attempts at emphasizing utility over lyricism in his life's work were useful in fabricating an image of the poet suitable to Socialist Realism. However, the concept of "utilitarianism" itself is too often referred to out of context in order to ascribe a false continuity between the Russian avant-garde the cultural policy of the Stalin era. The notion of "art as production" shared by Lef and constructivist art more generally throughout most of the NEP years was not yet an expression of the demands of state economic planning. Rather it expressed an attempt to collaborate with the shifts and changes in the social life of the majority of the Soviet urban population, reaching its extreme conclusions in Tatlin's design of maximum-heat, minimum-fuel stoves and collapsible furniture and utensils. Constructivist and utilitarian aesthetics of design and functionality continued to play a role in Soviet cultural innovation until the early thirties. The superficial resemblance between the utilitarianism of the "left" avant-garde and Soviet literary dictates from the late twenties onwards was a contentious issue from the beginning of the Stalin era. As Mayakovsky himself put it in 1930: "An interesting subject, how the social command differs from the command actually given."<sup>76</sup>

By 1927, Mayakovsky was already answering his own earlier call in the 1925 poem "Homeward!" ("Domoil!") for "the understanding of poetry to top the pre-war norm". The answer came in his 1927 poem "The Stabilization of Byt": "In the matter of ideas, everyday life and culture, things are below the pre-war norm!"<sup>77</sup> By 1927, the Party had already become a transformed entity, hostile to the Old Bolshevik cadre. But for Mayakovsky the question was as yet unresolved as to what was the driving force behind "meshchanstvo" in late NEP culture - the old intelligentsia and the cultural forms of the past, the NEP men

and commercialization, or the new state bureaucracy which would soon begin the "great breakthrough", bringing language to a parody of "concreteness" and eventually to the most conventionalized of literary systems. From the First Five-Year Plan in 1928 to the collapse of the Soviet Union and its aftermath in the early nineties, the evolution first of Mayakovsky's self-image, then of his posthumous legend, acted as a barometer of developments in Soviet politics and cultural policy. This barometer measured the transformation of revolutionary ideals and language in the Soviet Union: their degeneration in the late twenties, their complete disintegration in the early thirties, and finally their symbolic manipulation in a new form throughout the rest of the Soviet period.

## **Chapter 1: 1928-1930: Mayakovsky and Stalin's "Cultural Revolution"**

The distance between the "new myth" of revolution and what was to come found early expression in the play *The Bedbug*, Mayakovsky's satirical speculation about the future written in 1928-29 and staged in 1929. At the beginning of the second-last scene Prisypkin, the "bourgeoisified proletarian" of the NEP years who was accidentally frozen alive and then resurrected in the "Communist future" of 1979, receives a reply to his off-stage request for books "for the soul" about "roses and dreams" ("rozy i griozy"): "Only textbooks on horticulture say anything about roses. And dreams are mentioned only in medical books..." (Scene VIII) This is a direct reference to Mayakovsky's own verses from the poem *150,000,000* (1919-20) and its "new myth" of a poeticized world:

We will smash the old world wildly/  
We will thunder a new myth over the world  
[...] Roses and dreams debased by poets will unfold in the new world./  
All for the delight of our eyes, the eyes of big children!/  
We will invent new roses  
-/ roses of capitals with petals of squares.

Prisypkin has asked after the old "roses and dreams": cliched, sentimental, "debased" poetry which is confined to books and "plucks at the heartstrings", and which no longer exists in the world of the future. But no "new roses" have unfolded in the streets of the new society either: poetry has not found its rightful place in everyday life but has been displaced altogether, and attempts to poeticize and mythicize the revolutionary experience have not merely been corrupted but abandoned. Words themselves have lost both their "debased" and their utopian meanings and are left only with the literal. Katerina

Clark begins her discussion of the rise of "straight talk" in the culture of the mid-to late-twenties with a comment on linguistic change that describes Prisypkin's dilemma:

In an article of 1928 Polivanov claimed that "the language of the Pioneer-Komsomol generation of today is quite different from that of the prerevolutionary intellectual or the average Russian of 1913." He contended, moreover, that the differences amount to not merely two dialects but two separate languages as that word is defined by linguists, that is, "in terms of mutual incomprehensibility." He went on to invoke a common trope of utopian writing in claiming that if someone had gone to sleep in 1913 and woken up in 1928, he or she would not be able to understand what was being said.<sup>1</sup>

For the early Futurists, the poetic word had been "neither a vehicle of rational thought nor a glimpse of the 'other world'...[nor] a reminiscence of mankind's mythical youth, but, on the contrary, a 'creator of myths.'"<sup>2</sup> For Mayakovsky, the theory about the linguistic genesis of myths took the form of the potential of the poetic word to revolutionize consciousness. For words to appear to lose that power was disarming. Although Mayakovsky's satirical verse about philistinism and everyday life between 1922 and 1928 and the theoretical turn to the "Literature of Fact" by the Lefists had already indicated a response to the conventionalization of utopian visions and the corruption of "new myths", some of Mayakovsky's last works, particularly in theatre, take this response to a new level. The "straight talk" of *The Bedbug*'s future society is not depicted as an appealing alternative to the hollow tendentiousness and kitsch of NEP culture. In fact, now it is the narrow, "literal" meaning of words - their very materiality - which appears to hide more than it signifies.

The dominant Soviet view has claimed *The Bedbug* to be primarily a satire of the NEP, but it is also a disenchanted realization of earlier cosmic visions of the future society, such as the "earthly Paradise" of *Mystery Bouffe* where "pineapples will grow six times a year/from the root of the common dill", now transformed into one in which artificial trees bear plates of fruit. "Roses and

dreams" are quite literally reduced to "bare facts." But as Roman Jakobson points out, Mayakovsky's use of parody in his symbolic system "does not mean that the beliefs of yesterday are necessarily held up to scorn."<sup>3</sup> The target of satire in *The Bedbug* is not necessarily the imagined "new roses" themselves but the inadequacy of late-twenties Soviet society - and of the poet himself - to make them unfold. As the present work attempts to chart the manufacturing of the Mayakovsky legend after his death, it requires a working interpretation of the last years of his life and work - so often cited as the basis for the official posthumous image of the poet - as a reference point and basis for comparison. The purpose of this chapter is to outline some of the driving issues in Mayakovsky's attempt to renegotiate his own image and re-situate his life's work in the context of the Soviet state's first concerted steps towards Stalinist culture.

The present chapter will consider a few examples of the popular response to Mayakovsky in the last years of his life, but primarily it is concerned with an overview of the poet's own self-defined image. It will not attempt to catalogue the bibliography of literary criticism of the late twenties touching on Mayakovsky; neither will it present a systematic, complete or balanced picture of post-1930 interpretations of the Mayakovsky of the late twenties. Criticism and scholarship concerning Mayakovsky's life and work will be referred to selectively in order to suggest an interpretation which situates Mayakovsky in a particular understanding of the historical context of these years.

### **Cultural Revolution**

In the 1970s a "revisionist" movement developed in American Sovietology which, as one of its foremost representatives, Sheila Fitzpatrick, puts it: "was associated both with repudiation of Cold War scholarship...and with

a challenge from social historians to the dominance of political scientists..."<sup>4</sup> These scholars <sup>5</sup> emphasized a fundamental cultural shift in Soviet society which accompanied the introduction of the Five-Year Plan in 1928, and as Richard Stites points out in his 1989 *Revolutionary Dreams*, there was a flourishing of interest in the lost cultural experiments of the pre-Stalin era as a result. Scholarship which has stressed the impact of the first five-year plan on Soviet cultural policy has played a role in allowing the utopianism of political poets like Mayakovsky to be understood as a phenomenon distinct from what in 1928 was referred to as a "Cultural Revolution," a term adopted by a number of Western historians to indicate a qualitative shift away from the cultural inheritance of Bolshevism. It therefore also distinguishes Mayakovsky's legacy from the later historical phenomenon of Socialist Realism. If Socialist Realism itself was not predestined in the political context of the twenties, then Mayakovsky's loyalty to the early Soviet state, along with that of other representatives of the "left" avant-garde, cannot be regarded as a position which predestined him for the role of socialist-realist icon. The corresponding political interpretation of Stalinism, often referred to in these relatively recent Western cultural histories of the Soviet twenties and thirties as a "revolution from above," is not identical to the analysis of Stalinism as a Soviet "Thermidor" advanced by Leon Trotsky in his 1937 *The Revolution Betrayed*. But to varying degrees for different authors, it involves the premise that "Stalinism must be recognized as an historically distinct and specific phenomenon which did not flow directly from Leninism."<sup>6</sup>

Although literature in the period of the first five-year plan received detailed study in 1953 by Edward Brown in *The Proletarian Episode in Russian Literature*, that work tends to draw more of a direct link between early utopian notions of "proletarian culture" and the proletarian artistic associations that were

used by the Party for calculated political purposes in the late twenties and early thirties: "Thus we see that RAPP [known as VAPP until 1928]...traced its lineage ultimately to the Smithy, and was the final flowering of a proletarian literary movement which had begun in the early days of the revolution."<sup>7</sup> Brown does argue that the coordinated offensive on the avant-garde which began in this period and the campaign for a literary "five-year plan" was orchestrated by the Party and that RAPP was used as a necessary instrument for its purposes, but he does not emphasize the critical distinction in context between the earlier debates on proletarian culture and the Party's purposes after the NEP.

The years 1928 to 1931 in fact marked a qualitative change in the Party's attitude to artistic freedom rather than a resolution of debates on culture from the early twenties. By the end of 1929, Stalin had proclaimed a "Great Breakthrough" (*bol'shoi perelom*) that would bring an absolute break between "the old and the new." The transformed myth of collectivism manufactured after 1928 in the name of proletarian culture set the trajectory for a whole new era of mythmaking, even though the specific forms it took underwent drastic changes in the course of the thirties. Robert C. Williams identifies the replacement of one myth of collectivism by a fundamentally different one at this time as the key to what was to be a protracted process of cultural change.

The cultural revolution of 1928-1932 marked the end of the collectivist myth of a proletarian culture and the beginning of the individual authority of the cult of the personality. With the celebration of Stalin's fiftieth birthday in 1929 began a celebration of his heroic individuality as worthy successor to Lenin, coupled with a collectivist drive to build socialism and rid Soviet Russia of the legacy of bourgeois culture entirely. But the new collectivism was no longer an autonomous myth designed for a single social class, but the basis of a new culture based on national traditions, party controls, and an ideology of socialist realism that rewarded some individuals in the name of the collective for their energy and achievement, rather than their sacrifice.<sup>8</sup>

One of the most critical social changes of this time was the introduction of one-man management in the workplace in 1928-29. Until that time the "zavkom," or factory trade union committee continued to play a role in management along with the Party cells and technical managers. After a year of preparation, the Party Central Committee resolved in 1929 that the workers' committees "may not intervene directly in the running of the plant or endeavour in any way to replace plant administration; they shall by all means help to secure one-man management..."<sup>9</sup> The Soviet state was driven by the priority of building a strong national economy at the expense of general living standards, and yet the abrupt shift in 1928 to what Sheila Fitzpatrick calls "class war on the cultural front" was an attempt to justify the Party's power struggle by appealing to Civil War visions of a struggle for "proletarian culture." The utopianism of the early twenties was distorted in order to "create an atmosphere of crisis and to justify the regime's demands for sacrifice and extraordinary efforts in the cause of industrialization."<sup>10</sup> The impact on culture and art must be distinguished from earlier notions of "cultural revolution" of either Lenin or early Proletkult. Zenovia Sochor, a scholar of Bogdanov and Proletkult, puts the case clearly:

To be sure, to call the class war on the cultural front a "cultural revolution," in either Lenin's or Bogdanov's understanding of the term, was a misnomer and an aberration...Certainly [Stalin's "cultural revolution"] borrowed some of the ideas derived from Proletkult; it was, however, a specific policy pursued for a specific period of time, rather than a commitment to an underlying cultural policy...Ultimately, it served to realign ideological premises with political needs and to establish the party as arbiter of ideological orthodoxy and definer of utopia. Moreover, it was no accident that Stalin's cultural revolution coincided with the First Five Year Plan; the revolution was part of a general mobilization of society, a class war on all fronts, under party guidance and bureaucratic control. Thus, although the cultural revolution denoted literacy and skills to Lenin and socialist self-change to Bogdanov, it was translated to mean "mobilization campaign" by Stalin.<sup>11</sup>

The term "cultural revolution" was first used by Pravda in 1927 "in its Leninist sense to describe the nonmilitant development of mass education that

industrialization would require."<sup>12</sup> The emphasis changed abruptly once the industrialization drive had actually begun to one of "class war". Its first major public expression was the Shakhty trial of May and June 1928, in which a large group of mining engineers and technicians were charged with conspiracy and sabotage, opening up a campaign against bourgeois specialists as scapegoats for economic failures and shortages. The political usefulness of specialist-baiting went hand-in-hand with the needs of the Stalinist faction of the Party to go on an offensive against wealthy peasants and Nepmen in order to centralize agriculture and industry for the purposes of the First Plan, and this was linked with a political campaign to discredit the pro-NEP opposition to Stalin's faction within the party.

Fitzpatrick also argues that "the substance behind the rhetoric of class war was large-scale upward mobility of industrial workers and working-class party members into higher education and administrative and managerial jobs. Cultural Revolution was the vehicle for training the future Communist elite and creating the new Soviet intelligentsia."<sup>13</sup> Although the social mobility of this time was significant for a minority of the population, the vast majority experienced a rapid decline in its material conditions at the same time. In other words, it was the opposite of a theory put forward to hasten the creation of a new and truly democratic mass culture, whether by Proletkult or the early Bolsheviks.

The Cultural Revolution was facilitated by the "proletarian" offensive in the artistic sphere, directed at "Formalism" and compromise with fellow-travellers; in fact it was the Commissariat of Enlightenment which was portrayed in the press as the archetypal "bureaucratic" commissariat, guilty of "right deviation." It was extensively purged and Lunacharsky forced to resign from its leadership in 1929. The central point to draw from the impact of the Cultural Revolution on literature and art, however, is that underlying all the rhetoric

against "bourgeois culture" was not principle but short-term political brokering. Fitzpatrick cites the unconfirmed but plausible story that in 1928 Stalin first approached Lunacharsky with an offer of support for the latter's moderate approach to artistic questions in exchange for his denunciation of the pro-NEP opposition. She surmises that by turning to the "proletarian" alternative instead, "Stalin accepted a predefined opposition platform and support when he moved against his colleagues in the leadership in 1928, just as a hypothetical challenger to Stalin in (say) 1934 would have had to do."<sup>14</sup>

In the summer of 1928 the Central Committee held a conference on questions of agitation, propaganda, and cultural work which provided the basis for the famous resolution on literary policy of December, 1928. This resolution was not merely a guide to literary organizations but a directive to publishing houses themselves on the selection of works, authors, and the assignment of literary tasks. As Edward Brown stated, "without specifically mentioning the tolerant policy of 1925, it departs from that policy decisively and finally."<sup>15</sup> The most significant feature of this departure is not that of literary theory but that of Party control of literature and the beginning of centralized literary command - a very different reality from the various notions of social command that writers in the twenties had tried to serve out of conscience rather than coercion.

Although the Central Committee did not clearly name RAPP as its representative, it depended on it and the other proletarian associations in the arts to begin the process of cultural centralization. RAPP was by this time far enough removed from the original roots of Proletkult to be used as an arm of the state. Nevertheless it was also highly contradictory, since its theoretical and literary-practical orientation had been developed in 1926. It was influenced by the general trend toward "the resurrection of the word" and the new objectivity which had arisen at that time in opposition to pure tendentiousness in literature.

The RAPP slogans of "immediate impressions", "for the living man in literature" and especially "the tearing off of masks" - which bore such strong resemblance to the thinking of their opponents Voronsky and the Pereval group, who shared Trotsky's approach to literary questions - meant that like Mayakovsky even they sometimes exceeded the limits of "self-criticism" as defined by its usefulness to the Party at this time. Their emphasis on journalistic writing and uninvented, "topical subjects", meant that, like Lef's "Literature of Fact," the proletarian platform in literature did not always serve to "interpret" reality ideologically. The proletarian associations were products of a time in which the Party was not yet fully in control of the impulses it had encouraged, some of which connected with a genuine sentiment of discontent in society as a whole.

The late NEP period was a time of growing social tensions due to rising unemployment alongside the growth of the "NEP bourgeoisie", and to a minority, the abrupt change in policy seemed to mark a return to "socialist principles." As a result, although the Cultural Revolution was initiated and orchestrated from above, the period was also characterized by a genuine militancy from below:

...when the first five-year plan began, a mood spread among the party rank-and-file that the revolution from above portended imminent equality. This was observed first-hand by the American journalist William Chamberlin 1929-30. The liquidation of private enterprise in those two years seemed a forecast of renewed War Communism and egalitarian distribution. Civil War veterans saw the next step as leveling of living standards, and some communist officials in the village tried to promote the rural communes as the main instrument of collectivized agriculture.<sup>16</sup>

It is this "mobilization from below" which explains why Mayakovsky and other left avant-gardists sang the praises of many policies of the time, including the collectivization of the peasantry. Mayakovsky's 1929 poem "Harvest March" ("Urozhainyi marsh"), which leaves a terrible blemish on his name, must be understood in light of this context: "We are preparing to wipe out the pest [or

"economic saboteur" - "vreditel"] completely./ We will sweep the Kulak class, the weed and locust, from the fields."<sup>17</sup> Without the benefit of historical hindsight, the notion of collectivization was still widely equated with egalitarian distribution. It was not yet evident, especially to those far removed from the countryside, that the kolkhoz was not to be modelled on the economically progressive rural communes of the twenties but involved the violent dispersal of peasants of low economic means.

The mobilization from below peaked in 1930, then began to be reversed when the regime began to fear the extent of the enthusiasm it had generated. But for a short while, along with the rhetoric of class war, "various Utopian visions of instant change in different areas of social life (culture, law, and urban planning, for example) were promoted; common to all was a voluntarism summed up by the slogan 'There is no fortress which Bolsheviks cannot storm.'"<sup>18</sup> Both the plan itself and the rhetoric of "cultural revolution" initially had the effect of stimulating hopes for the "great breakthrough" to a post-bourgeois culture, whether in hopes for a final victory of social levelling or in avant-garde hopes for an offensive against aesthetic and moral philistinism.

Mayakovsky epitomized both the convergence and the incompatibility between the avant-garde and the Cultural Revolution. Despite the criticism that was mounting against him on the part of RAPP, to many he was a symbol of the renewed atmosphere of iconoclasm, especially for the Komsomol, with which he worked closely in these years. The Komsomol itself played an important and contradictory role in the period, particularly in regulating a youth movement directed against "bureaucratic" authority and privilege. But the regime used rhetoric directed against established authority to mobilize the Komsomol in large numbers for particular purposes: to wage an ideological campaign in the cities and to drive the peasantry onto collective farms. It was in fact for

*Komsomol'skaia Pravda* that Mayakovsky wrote "Harvest March," as a propaganda piece for the Komsomol's harvest campaign. Still, although it was becoming more and more directly subordinated to the party, as late as June, 1929 the Komsomol explicitly advocated the levelling of wages.

Perhaps the best single example of the intersection between aesthetic and social "militancy from below", and an example of the significant role Mayakovsky played in this for the Komsomol, is the campaign "Down with Domestic Trash," waged by the Komsomol's newspaper and documented by Svetlana Boym.<sup>19</sup> In response to Mayakovsky's poems of the mid to late twenties against bourgeois coziness, especially those that focussed on the symbolism of household fetishes and domestic bliss, *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* launched a campaign in 1928-1929 "to implement in real life Mayakovsky's poetic battle with the daily grind." The campaign was led by left art theorists close to the Constructivists who initially saw a new lease on life in the Cultural Revolution, and its slogans both tried to recreate the language of the Civil War and the notion of "aesthetic revolutionism" in everyday life. But they also bore a resemblance to the new slogans of crisis and reprisal: "Clean your room! Summon bric-a-brac to a public trial!" *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* published letters of confession on the destruction of fetishes such as the porcelain figurines of Mayakovsky's poem "Idyll" (1928), linking them to "meshchanstvo," or "bourgeois culture" in the sense of middle class values. But at this time the ideal of revolutionary taste envisioned in their place was still closer to the avant-garde simplicity and practicality of the Constructivists than to the strange combination of solemn monumentalism and sentimental kitsch that was to become Socialist Realism: "the new beauty was expressed in Mayakovsky's catchphrase: 'Elegance is 100 percent utility, comfort of clothes, and spaciousness of dwellings'." Even the State Academy of the Arts planned to

organize an exhibit of petty-bourgeois art in 1929. Although this may have been in a spirit of denunciation in keeping with the times, the exhibit did not target the avant-garde but rather borrowed some of its slogans of the twenties against kitsch and about the connection between aesthetics and social existence in order to attack "degenerate everyday life."<sup>20</sup>

Soviet political culture up until 1929 had not been defined by short-term propaganda, but rather was characterized by the notion of "enlightenment", or the concerted attempt to mould consciousness.<sup>21</sup> For those who saw an illusory opportunity to speed up those efforts in 1928-29, questions of morality, everyday conduct and private behaviour were of greater concern in practice than simply singing the praises of the five-year plan. Mayakovsky's poems on quitting smoking, about being cultured, about pettiness and bureaucracy in this period, like the work of some left artists and rank-and-file Komsomol activists, both narrowed the scope of earlier concepts of "enlightenment" but also made some attempt to maintain a connection to it. It was not long before this emphasis was clearly excluded from what was necessary to extend the Plan to the cultural front.

The debate on proletarian morality was abandoned around 1930. Some Communists called it "utopian" to lay the foundations of morality so early. The five-year plan left no time or energy for the exploration of the nuances of everyday conduct. Party leaders began to sneer at the whole enterprise. Kaganovich told Komsomols that it was silly to spend so much time arguing over whether or not communists should smoke. By that time, the Komsomol, the major body exploring these issues, had considerably narrowed its earlier broad vision of a humane society and brought it into line with the party to which it was now almost wholly subordinated.<sup>22</sup>

The last two years of Mayakovsky's life reflect in extreme form the dilemma that faced all of the revolutionary avant-garde in circumstances which simultaneously stimulated utopian thinking and began an assault on it. Katerina Clark points out that the effects of this dilemma continued into the thirties,

producing "conflicting gestures" by the avant-garde, both "heroic, propagandistic ritual and... 'carnival,' modes most see as antithetical."<sup>23</sup> In Mayakovsky's case, this took the form of a heroic mode at times celebratory and at times tragic and critical, as well as the unheroic mode of the grotesque, particularly in the "carnival"-like satire of the plays *The Bedbug* and *The Bathhouse*. The Cultural Revolution itself was a time of transition for the Party; it was not yet Stalinist culture, but, as Robert C. Williams described it, "a mix of collectivist utopia and heroic authoritarianism."<sup>24</sup> Clark in fact identifies a common root to both heroism and carnival:

Essentially, both modes represent an attempt at getting out of ordinary time via a romanticized version of the other (the proletarian). Thus we find the two extremes of the iconoclasm/icon-creation spectrum, or to put it in terms of Mayakovsky's play, both "mystery" and "bouffe."<sup>25</sup>

Not only did these "conflicting gestures" characterize Mayakovsky's work and literary-polemical stances at the end of his life, they also became a defining feature of his own self-created legend. Mayakovsky had always tried to motivate his life poetically by both working through his private dilemmas in the public arena and expressing social upheavals in personal, intimate terms, but in this period his self-documentation becomes markedly more explicit. The major literary works from 1928 to 1930, as well as the poet's public appearances and especially the 1930 exhibit of his life's work, represent an attempt at self-affirmation in relation to new circumstances which are out of his control. His self-image is most often projected against the hostile or potentially hostile judgements of a future world. The result is a view of the self which is alternately heroic and grotesque. Sometimes it takes the form of self-defense, at others he subjects himself to a characteristically extreme form of fashionable "self-criticism." In either case, however, Mayakovsky displays a new urgency in his desire to exert control over his own immortality. This was much more than a

private dilemma: the question of an audience that was already in the process of rapid transformation in the late twenties had immediate implications for a poet who saw poetry as a form of social exchange.

### The Theatre Audience

Mayakovsky's turn to theatre in this period was a key aspect of his attempt to reestablish a more direct connection with his audience in order to defend his own interpretation and justification of his life's work. The reworking of his persona took the form of both "mystery" and "bouffe," beginning with a character that embodies both simultaneously. Just as the society of the future in *The Bedbug* is depicted as the myth of "roses and dreams" turned on its head, its hero Prisypkin, the bourgeoisified proletarian, is a deformed version of the romanticized proletarian of 150,000,000 ; but what is actually being parodied is the poet himself and his "Mayakomorphism". The projection of the self onto the "hero" is now made both explicit and self-mocking: instead of "raising" man to the level and form of Mayakovsky in order to elevate him, the poet lowers his own persona to the level of Prisypkin.

Mayakovsky was centrally involved in the staging of *The Bedbug* at its February, 1929 premiere and took great pains to ensure that the actor who played the role of Prisypkin would adopt his mannerisms and voice. As Roman Jakobson points out <sup>26</sup> there are many intertextual references to Mayakovsky's earlier poetry in this play, particularly to *About That* (1923) in which the poet admonishes himself: "Have you greased your way into that caste of theirs? Will you kiss? Feed yourself? Grow fat?" In that same work, however, Mayakovsky also pleads for his immortality with the "Future Workshop of Human Resurrection" of the "thirtieth century": "I have not lived out my earthly span/ on earth/ I have not finished loving/ resurrect me - / I want to live out my life! / I'll do

anything you want for nothing...Do you have zoos?/ Let me be a keeper."<sup>27</sup> In *The Bedbug* it is the Institute of Human Resurrection that allows Prisypkin to live out his earthly span in the future, but as a zoo exhibit, not a keeper. However, in the last scene of the play Mayakovsky's persona is split in two: he is both the caged exhibit of primitive life, and the zoo Director of the future who, like the author of the play itself, has "untangled the meaning" of the "strange events" Prisypkin has been responsible for and "turned a baleful phenomenon into a gay and instructive entertainment" ("preprovozhdenie vremeni") by "capturing" the insect-man within himself and putting him on display in a theatre-zoo.

Mayakovsky's own biographical legend in these years alternates between "the two extremes of the iconoclasm/icon-creation spectrum": he identifies as both the scourge of "byt" and its unfortunate embodiment in Prisypkin. This particular doubling of Mayakovsky's persona is not new: as Roman Jakobson points out, Mayakovsky was always tormented by the lack of complete correspondence between his creative ego and his actually existing self.

This terrible "double" of the poet is his conventional and common-place "self," the purchaser and owner whom Xlebnikov once contrasted with the inventor and discoverer. That self has an emotional attachment to a securely selfish and stable life, to "my little place, and a household that's *mine*, with my little picture on the wall."<sup>28</sup>

Nevertheless, *The Bedbug* is also the most spelled-out example of Mayakovsky's ambiguity about both aspects of his biography and their common divergence from his "new myth" of revolution. The first four scenes target Prisypkin in the spirit of Mayakovsky's NEP satire directed at hypocrites who used the rhetoric of Communism to justify pursuing a self-serving, comfortable middle class life-style and social status. Soviet critics before 1990 claimed that

Prisypkin's projection into the world of the future merely serves to show his degenerate nature in greater relief. In fact, rather than re-inforcing Prisypkin's flaws, the rational society casts them in a better light. In a world where the only artistic expression and entertainment consists of mass choreographed dancing, the only purpose of which is to serve as "a joyous rehearsal of a new system for field work on the farms," the chorus line that appears out of nowhere once Prisypkin has spread his contagion to the inhabitants of the new society takes on an ambiguous significance. It may not be the vision of "making a musical scale of the rainbow" from 150,000,000, but the chorus line and Prisypkin's own cliched love songs heighten the emotional sterility of the "new world." Prisypkin stands in relief as a tragic hero, despite the fact that he expresses the earlier cosmic ideal of revolution in comically impoverished terms.

Prisypkin conjures up the poet's evolution from the tragic, alienated hero of his pre-revolutionary work to the triumphant and celebratory "man from the future" of the Civil War years, finally to a tragicomic "man from the past" - Polivanov's "pre-revolutionary intellectual" who went to sleep and woke up to "mutual incomprehensibility" in the society of 1928. The satire is aimed at the vulgarization and fetishization of the revolution, including what Mayakovsky sees as his own frailties, his lack of measure, his irrational, destructive passions and self-indulgent complacency which make him and many of his contemporaries unworthy of any kind of utopia. But it is also a polemic between this exaggerated debasement and an exaggerated realization of the narrowed-down, utilitarian, dehumanized vision of "socialist" values that he, like the proletarian artistic organizations, the Komsomol and so many others adopted over the course of the twenties. The poet is judging himself, but not by mocking his earlier idealism, which is only made conspicuous by its absence in the play:

the absence of "roses and dreams," or of a vision which does not counterpose "heroic, propagandistic ritual" to lyricism, or even to "carnival."

Just as "mystery" and "bouffe" were not in conflict with each other in Mayakovsky's earlier myth of revolution, his biographical legend was able to unify both ends of the spectrum as well. In *The Bedbug*, however, they are not merely in conflict but have split into two completely separate personas. Once Prisypkin appears in the future society, it becomes apparent that it too represents a side of Mayakovsky: a side which has come to narrow the concerns of socialism down to the everyday questions of smoking, drinking, spitting, cursing and hygiene. The concept of "moral" purification is burlesqued by the artificial, antisceptic, hospital-like environment of the future society and the squeamishness of its inhabitants. Mayakovsky's own obsession with hygiene went so far as to recommend the elimination of hand-shaking in a "rational" society, and in *The Bedbug* the future inhabitants' first reaction to Prisypkin makes a comic reference to this: "Doctors: 'What was that he was doing with our hands? Grabbing and shaking them, shaking and grabbing...' Professor: 'It's an unhygienic custom they had in ancient times.'" The author even includes an ironic reference to the aesthetics of domestic trash in the frustration caused to Prisypkin by the futuristic glass walls on which "you can't pin up a picture of your best girl."

The sets for the first part of the play were designed by a team of newspaper cartoonists and the costumes and props were bought over-the-counter to demonstrate the tackiness of NEP culture. A sharp contrast was established between the heaped piles of trifles onstage and the streamlined set of the future world, emphasizing the contrast between the colourful characterization in the first part of the play and the sterility of characterization in the second part, even before Prisypkin's resurrection causes the two worlds to

collide. The set design for the future world in the 1929 production was done by the Constructivist Rodchenko, but, like the over-the-top "moral purification" of the dramatic text, it was a grotesque exaggeration of the simplicity advocated by the "Down with Domestic Trash" campaign. The set was so lifelessly sanitary that, as the critic Edward Braun put it, "the spectator was hard put to decide where the parody really stopped."<sup>29</sup>

Mayakovsky is polemicizing with himself, between the object of "self-criticism" - the side that is Prisypkin, and the aspect represented by the "materiality of the word," with which he has come to defend himself by the late twenties. By the end of the play these two sides have changed places: Prisypkin is reaching out to the real theatre audience in self-defense, and the zookeeper, who identifies Prisypkin as a subhuman "Philistinius vulgaris" in a denunciatory speech and then calls on the band to play a march to drown out his plea for help, does not leave a heroic impression either. The audience is left with the final judgement as to whether or not he belongs in a cage as a subhuman specimen, or whether the new society has distorted the ideals of the revolution even more than he has debased them. Because Prisypkin invites the audience to join him in his cage, it is implied that they too must pass judgement on themselves. But the question the audience is ultimately left with is whether or not the Mayakovsky of the revolutionary era has a place in the era of the five-year plan.

Whereas *The Bedbug*, like Prisypkin himself, had one foot in the NEP era and one in the era to come, *The Bathhouse* was entirely a product of the climate of "Cultural Revolution". The target is no longer merely narrow literalism and the disappearance of poetry, but the use of words which carried a charged meaning from the past that no longer had the same basis in reality, such as the word "socialism" itself. These words are now deliberately used for opportunistic

purposes by the caricatured bureaucrat Pobedonosikov, for whom "Socialism is a matter of bookkeeping." In *The Bathhouse* words are not merely depoeticized but two-faced and deceptive, deliberately used to embellish reality. Mayakovsky lays this bare in the "play within the play" sequence in Act 3, when the main action of the play is entirely suspended and the "real" Pobedonosikov, who is placed in a fictional onstage audience, complains about the play's assault on men of his character. In response, the "Director" of the play produces a parody of agitprop as an alternative:

All available female personnel - out on stage! You, there, you're Miss Liberty - you seem to have the right attitude for it. And you're Miss Equality, because it's all the same to me whoever plays the part. And you're Miss Fraternity, because brotherly feelings are about all you'll ever arouse in anybody...Stir up the imaginary masses with an imaginary call to action! Infect them! Infect them all with your enthusiasm!

The crude play on words is a very openly cynical commentary on a "mobilization campaign" which produced feverish rhetoric, but an often comically twisted use of revolutionary language, and which set definite limits on how far the "imaginary call to action" could go. The hypocrisy that Mayakovsky was aware of in the officially-sanctioned "public self-criticism" of the cultural revolution is also summed up by Pobedonosikov: "All [the play] needs is a character symbolizing self-criticism - that's very timely right now. Just put a little desk in one corner, and let him write articles while you go on with your own business." (*The Bathhouse*, Act 3) The agitprop interlude is also a wordless pantomime, and its ability to distort meaning is preferred by Pobedonosikov to the satirical words of the main action of the play. It is made clear that what the "real" Pobedonosikov finds objectionable is not unrealistic characterization itself but rather the purpose for which it has been used: he attacks the main action of the play as "unnatural", "not life-like," yet in the same breath exhorts the director to "tone it down, poeticize it, soften the contours." Lyricism is now

associated solely with deception: "Instead of arousing me, you should create pleasant sights and sounds for my eyes and ears...You must go back to the classics!" In many respects, *The Bathhouse* once again raises the importance of the "resurrection of the word" as a counter to empty lyricism.

In *The Bathhouse* the world of the future, represented by the "phosphorescent woman" who brings its message into the present of the play, is not presented in the same dubious light as the future world of *The Bedbug*. Nevertheless, the "woman from the future" and her de-poeticized language stands in stark contrast to the "Man from the Future" of *Mystery-Bouffe*, the Christ figure walking on water originally played by Mayakovsky on stage. That representative of the future spoke in biblical language and an elevated tone reminiscent of Old Church Slavonic, describing mystical images of Paradise. He was a man without nation or class, whose spirit seemed to enter the Unclean themselves, while the "phosphorescent woman" is a business-like delegate with credentials. It is significant that Mayakovsky no longer casts himself as the representative of the future, which has now become something outside both present reality and the life of the "I." As Boym notes, "The reification of revolutionary ideals and the bureaucratization of revolutionary discourse take center stage, even for revolutionary poets."<sup>30</sup>

Both *The Bedbug* and *The Bathhouse* also represent a turn towards a different kind of tendentiousness, that of "tendencies brought to life." Instead of counterposing the theory of the "bare fact" to agit-prop, Mayakovsky's aim was to resurrect the interactive, spectacular spirit of early Soviet revolutionary theatre. Theatre had been the consummate art form of the revolutionary years in general because of the element of mass participation, and in *Mystery-Bouffe*, performed in 1918 and 1921, the presence of a sympathetic audience was a part of the dramatic event, allowing Mayakovsky to proclaim with authority at the

end of the second version of that early play that "today, these are only stage-prop doors, but tomorrow, reality will replace this theatrical trash." The overt use of theatricalist devices to lay bare the dramatic illusion had always been a key aspect of Mayakovsky's attempt to subvert the traditional relationship between poet and reader, or performance and spectator, and in his last years it became central in his attempt to reestablish a more direct connection with his audience, on which his image of the self and his new role for the poet depended.

*The Bedbug* and *The Bathhouse* harkened back to the circus-like aesthetic of *Mystery-Bouffe* or even of 150,000,000 in their characterization: "As in the 1921 production of *Mystery-Bouffe*, the "clean" in *The Bathhouse* are portrayed as caricatured grotesques, the "unclean" as robot-like komsomols in blue overalls whose vigorous and rhythmic movements recall constructivist stagings..."<sup>31</sup> Theatre as "spectacle" encourages the audience to see the play as an event dependent on the interaction between performer and spectator, rather than as passive eavesdropping on a "slice of life" presented before them; the intent is to make the "audience" an integral aspect of the performance, unhindered by the fourth wall of naturalist theatre. As Mayakovsky himself wrote in November, 1929 in the journal *Ogonek*, in a note titled "What is 'The Bathhouse'? Who does it wash?", due to the agitational purposes of the play he did not use the "so-called 'living people'" of RAPP's literary theory, but instead "tendencies brought to life." In other words, he chose the theatre of masks as a better depiction of reality than RAPP's "tearing off of masks:"

The theatre has forgotten that it is a spectacle. We don't know how to use this spectacle for our agitation. An attempt to return to the theatre its spectacular nature ["zrelishchnost'"], an attempt to turn the stage into a tribune - this is the essence of my theatrical work.<sup>32</sup>

During the Cultural Revolution Mayakovsky was no longer able to invite his entire audience to physically join him onstage at the end of his plays to sing

*The Internationale*, as he did in *Mystery-Bouffe*; although in the last scene of *The Bedbug* he makes an an ironic attempt to do so by appealing to the audience to climb into his onstage cage with him. Instead, in both *The Bedbug* and *The Bathhouse*, Mayakovsky is attempting to set up a contrast between his actual audience and a hostile onstage surrogate audience. When the author literally tries to make contact with his actual theatre audience through the medium of Prisypkin in *The Bedbug*, it is the onstage "audience" of the future and the zoo director who break this intimate contact and restore the theatrical distance with the strains of a march. In *The Bathhouse* Mayakovsky places onstage those who should be least likely to join him, the "vydvizhentsy" who are the very targets of his satire, and they spell out what distinguishes them from the audience Mayakovsky is reaching out to: "Why are you turning us into characters - into actors? We want to be inactive - what do you call 'em - spectators." The play depends on an active complicity between author and audience, and Mayakovsky does not leave this to spontaneous initiative but works very hard to manufacture it. This is spelled out at the very end when the real-life spectators of *The Bathhouse* are directly addressed by Pobedonosikov: "She, and you, and the author - all of you! What have you been trying to say here? That people like me aren't of any use to communism?" The audience is in effect invited "onstage" to share the credit with the author. This no doubt heightened the irony of its failure to inspire even a conventionally favourable response in the 1930 runs.

The agitational banners that were hung in the theatre for the production of *The Bathhouse*, which proclaimed the policies of the theatrical left and ridiculed bureaucrats and censors, were like the play itself intended as much to renew the connection with Mayakovsky's audience as to denounce his enemies. As Rudnitsky wrote: "The thundering slogans were reminiscent of the

terminology and emotion of the forever departed days of the Theatrical October."<sup>33</sup>

### The "Workers' Auditorium"

Before *The Bathhouse* even got to the stage (it was premiered in Leningrad in January, 1930, and at the Meyerhold theatre in Moscow in March), Mayakovsky made a particular effort to reach out to a wider audience by means of readings from the play over the radio and at various public appearances, especially at "Workers' Clubs," in the autumn of 1929. Although readings and public discussions had always been an important aspect of Mayakovsky's work, they now took on a new significance. *The Bathhouse* had not yet met with the vicious criticism that it would soon face on the stage, but already Mayakovsky was worried about how it would be received.

One such public appearance, at the club "Proletarii" on December 4, 1929, serves as an example of the contradictory climate of the times. It was organized by the journal *Daesh'* and included a reading by Mayakovsky of a passage from *The Bathhouse* followed by a "discussion" - in reality more like a series of speeches. The speech by a komsomolka by the name of Kol'tsova is quite revealing. She was in fact the head of the "Mayakovsky brigade," a youth group formed for the study and propagandizing of Mayakovsky's work. She stated that like the majority of participants at the event she works in a factory and came to see how Mayakovsky would be received in a workers' auditorium, especially as Mayakovsky himself emphasized that the event was intended not merely as a reading but as a consultation. She then proceeded to point out that Mayakovsky is the only playwright who has started to read his plays publicly before they are produced in the theatre, whereas critics who write theatre reviews will never approach workers and solicit their opinions. She went on to

defend the reality of what Mayakovsky had depicted in the play, but made clear that it was evidently not Soviet society as a whole which was failing but a few bad apples that workers must get rid of: "Now, comrades, often many 'vydvizhentsy' have taken the right course, but have been badly received in government institutions. But sometimes, on the other hand, a 'vydvizhenets' becomes a bureaucrat without noticing it, he is turned into a bureaucrat against his own will. Such works as *The Bathhouse* teach us to reveal these bureaucrats and to understand them. This bureaucrat is one of our workers, but we don't know him anymore..." She distinguished this type of bureaucrat, which she strangely enough equated with the wholly unsympathetic portrayal of Pobedonosikov, from the kind of "saboteurs" ("vrediteli") who were exposed by the shakhty trial: "Mayakovsky does not give us a political saboteur...only the most ordinary bureaucrat, our brother communist...who at times does not consider it necessary to speak to his fellow workers differently than he did before he was promoted..."<sup>34</sup> In other words, the problem of "bureaucratism" is reduced to a question of bad behaviour.

At the end of this reading, a resolution was taken to officially endorse the play: "We, workers gathered in the "Proletarii" club ... consider such readings very useful and necessary... in addition to this evening we want to see Mayakovsky's 'Bathhouse' onstage in the Meyerhold theatre, we consider it a necessary play which powerfully exposes 'bureaucratism...' "<sup>35</sup> Afterwards the participants filled out questionnaires asking what they liked and didn't like about the play, what its message was, and what was unclear in it. The answers were generally favourable about the portrayal of bureaucrats, with more comments to the effect that Mayakovsky didn't go far enough in exposing them - rather than being guilty of exaggeration as the leaders of RAPP were soon to claim. But there seems to have been little appreciation for the play's fundamentally

satirical purpose: most felt that Mayakovsky should use more worker-characters and demonstrate what exactly to do about "bureaucratism," since most people are already well aware that bureaucracy exists.<sup>36</sup>

Despite its choreographed nature, the above example presents a stark contrast to other, increasingly hostile public receptions of Mayakovsky in 1929-1930. His last public appearance, a recital for students at the Plekhanov auditorium, on April 9, 1930, five days before his death, was disrupted several times by hecklers accusing Mayakovsky of indecency and unintelligibility, including clearly pre-planned attacks from the floor. This event was recorded first-hand by V.I. Slavinsky, and was published in *Literaturnaia gazeta* shortly after the poet's suicide, on April 28, 1930, but despite the extensive post-1935 publication of accounts of Mayakovsky's public appearances in non-periodical form, the record of this unpleasant one was only reprinted at the end of the Thaw in 1963.<sup>37</sup> The event is not even mentioned in the book on Mayakovsky's public appearances written by his organizer P.I. Lavut and published in 1959 (*Mayakovskii edet po Soiuzu*). Mayakovsky's last appearance is remarkable for the "conflicting gestures" he exhibited before a single audience, alternately denouncing them and trying to win them over. After reciting his semi-abstract 1913 poem "But Could You?" ("A vy mogli by?") Mayakovsky stated: "Any proletarian ought to understand that poem. If he doesn't he's simply illiterate. You should study. I really want you to understand my things." Although Mayakovsky's appearances involved controversy and debate throughout the twenties, there is a qualitative shift in his reception discernible after the introduction of the five-year plan and the Party's turn towards the proletarian artistic associations in mid- to late 1928. In March of that same year, Lavut records the ardent response of an audience in a provincial town that waited for hours to hear him speak when his train was delayed.<sup>38</sup>

Critical to understanding the change in Mayakovsky's audience during the Cultural Revolution is that it is not merely explained by a shift in attitude but by a demographic shift in the "workers' auditorium." On the one hand, the composition of the urban population was profoundly altered over the course of the NEP by the influx of new arrivals from the countryside, many of which had deeper roots in the peasantry than in the industrial working class, and most of which had had little direct experience of revolutionary change. On the other hand, the class stratification of Soviet society was increasing rapidly; many post-secondary students in the late twenties and early thirties, like the ones who made up the audience in the Plekhanov auditorium at Mayakovsky's last reading, would have been part of the privileged minority of the population that was benefitting from "upward mobility" through the crash program in higher and technical education initiated by Stalin and Viacheslav Molotov. These "vydvizhentsy," or new promotees, came to perceive themselves as beneficiaries of the shift away from social experimentation and egalitarianism and towards an acceptance of personal incentive and privilege, the very "profanation" of revolutionary values which Mayakovsky was condemning.<sup>39</sup>

As Vera Dunham states in her work on the fiction of the Stalin period, those who benefitted from upward mobility at this time and came to form a new Soviet middle class by the forties, were more inspired by Stalin's view of industrialization and the personal opportunities it afforded them than by the ideas underlying proletarian culture or even socialism.<sup>40</sup> It is true that what Vera Dunham calls the triumph of "middle class values" in the Stalin period had yet to be consolidated during Mayakovsky's lifetime. Nevertheless, a profound change in both social outlook and taste could be measurably felt in the audience of his last years. It prefigures what Dunham sums up as the virtue of "kul'turnost'," or "being cultured": an even narrower conception of reducing

culture to questions of proper public conduct than that of "proletarian morality." The achievement of a conventionally acceptable level of social development for the sake of propriety, with its artistic component restricted to a superficial familiarity with the "classics," came to eclipse the concepts of "prosveshchenie" ("enlightenment") and "kul'tura" ("culture" in the sense of a genuine appreciation of artistic activity).<sup>41</sup> Great irony lies in the fact that the path towards "kul'turnost'" initially began taking shape in the name of "proletarian culture."

### **The Audience of the Future**

Mayakovsky's most explicit attempt at self-defense before the eyes of the changing audience of the late twenties, and before an unknown audience of the future, was the exhibit *Twenty Years of Work*, which he organized weeks before his suicide. In an 1986 article on the Mayakovsky legend in modern German drama, Halina Stephan stresses the significance of the fact that Mayakovsky himself took "the unprecedented step in Russian literature of codifying his own image" in this exhibit and entrusted this "self-codified image" to the care of the State Museum of Literature. The exhibit is an indication of Mayakovsky's perceived need to vindicate himself in the context of contemporary debates. But, as Stephan argues, it is also key to understanding the essence of the image Mayakovsky was consciously trying to project for himself in the late twenties and the legacy he desired to leave behind:

Undoubtedly, the exhibit organized at the time of the cultural revolution had a polemical dimension; nevertheless, it represented Majakovskij's freely formed self-definition. This identity, largely derived from Majakovskij's association with the avant-garde group Lef, cast the poet as a well-integrated functionary of the new state, working in the artistic realm, where he cultivated a modern consciousness and a receptivity to the new art among the Soviet audience.<sup>42</sup>

This image underwent changes of emphasis at different times due to the pressures of political developments, and it may or may not reflect what

Mayakovsky successfully achieved in his work as a whole. Nevertheless, the 1930 exhibit depicted a new role for the socialist poet which bears only the most superficial resemblance to that ascribed to Mayakovsky after 1935. Stephan also published an article in 1979 entitled "The Rediscovery of the Left Front of the Arts in the 1960s and the 1970s" in which she argued that the efforts of New Left cultural theory in the West, particularly in West Germany, to apply the experience of Lef and Mayakovsky to the contemporary world, appealed precisely to the image Mayakovsky himself attempted to leave behind for posterity in the careful documentation of the *Twenty Years of Work* exhibit, as a model for the interaction of the activist writer with his audience.<sup>43</sup>

Through the exhibit, Mayakovsky attempted to synthesize a number of aspects of his persona perceived by the proletarian camp to be contradictory and to show the essential consistency of his project from pre-revolutionary times to the late twenties. On the one hand it presented the utilitarian image that had been shaped in response to the conditions of the NEP, in concert with the work of Lef and the Constructivists, and on the other it represented a continuity with "Mayakomorphism" and the notion of an author who is at once everywhere and nowhere, at once the voice of the 150,000,000 and one of its ranks, a product of forces larger than himself and their highest expression. As Svetlana Boym describes the self-image of the exhibit: "...again he wished to author his own antiauthorial image, to impersonate the new myth and even document it photographically, in the best of modern traditions... [the] persona of the literary 'latrine cleaner and water carrier' or 'Soviet factory producing happiness' was largely derived from Mayakovsky's association with the organization Lef, which saw itself both as a child of Futurism and its killer."<sup>44</sup>

Nevertheless, *Twenty Years of Work* cannot simply be understood as an expression of Mayakovsky's "freely formed self-definition." The very motivation

for its staging was profoundly polemical: that it was presented not twenty but eighteen years from the actual start of his literary career in 1912 speaks to the fact it was not intended simply to mark an anniversary but as an act of self-defense. Moreover, the exhibit was conceived as a very different act of self-defense from that of his theatre work, one that optimistically projected what his role in Soviet society could be were he allowed to play it. Ironically, the most important aspect of the exhibit's polemical purpose was to present an image of a well-integrated poet who does not define himself as a critic of the state or the audience he wishes to serve, and who has no need to defend himself against them, while at the same time the very concept of the exhibit spoke volumes about the poet's need to prove his credentials. It was intended as testimony to the fact that Mayakovsky was a contributor and creator and was therefore not sniping from the sidelines but had earned the right to criticize in some of his works. Mayakovsky hinted at his own intent to use the exhibit to reconcile the conflicting impulses of iconoclasm and celebration, in a speech at a jubilee evening held at the Komsomol Building in Moscow (Dom komsomola) on March 25, 1930:

Why did I put [my exhibit] together? I put it together because, owing to my belligerent character, I have had every kind of accusation flung at me. I have been pronounced guilty of so many sins, some of which I admit to and some of which I do not, that even if just one slander more were flung at me I would want to run away somewhere for two years just to stop hearing this abuse. But of course the next day I cheer up, throw off this pessimistic mood and, rolling up my sleeves, prepare for battle having established my right to exist as a writer of the Revolution and for the Revolution, and not as someone who is alienated from it. The point of this exhibition is to show that the writer-revolutionary is not alienated like someone whose verses are written down and then left on a shelf to gather dust - the writer-revolutionary participates in everyday, ordinary life and in the construction of Socialism.<sup>45</sup>

These words were quoted by Lunacharsky just after Mayakovsky's death in the 1930 obituary "Zhizn i smert': O Maiakovskom." They were cited to

chastise RAPP for its excessive severity with the poet, but also to reduce the problem to one of Mayakovsky's "thin skin" and the need to be "tender and caring towards our artists." Significantly, however, Mayakovsky's speech on his exhibit to the audience at the Komsomol Building was not printed in its entirety until 1936, in the journal *Literaturnaia ucheba* (No.4). This was well after the dissolution of RAPP, after Mayakovsky's canonization, and most importantly, during the campaign against "Formalism" and the beginning of the purges, which also saw Averbakh and other former RAPPists declared enemies of the people (see Chapter 4 of the present work). Mayakovsky's attempt at self-explanation to what he regarded as a sympathetic audience later became ammunition for the regime's demonization of most of the literary groups and critics of the twenties, although his embattled position in 1930 was in fact inseparable from state literary policy of the Cultural Revolution.

Mayakovsky's *Twenty Years of Work* was in fact part of the avant-garde's pattern of "conflicting gestures" in the years of Cultural Revolution: it was designed in December of 1929 and January of 1930, at the same time that Mayakovsky was working on both *The Bathhouse* and on the unfinished, accusatory poem *At The Top of My Voice*. The extent to which the exhibit was intended as a harmonious model to be held up against the deficiencies of reality can be measured by contrasting it with the latter work, which Mayakovsky himself chose to read at the opening of his exhibit.

Although *At The Top of My Voice* was originally intended as an introduction to a work in praise of the Five-Year Plan, it was also Mayakovsky's last major literary attempt to defend the significance of his life's work. The poem fluctuates between martyr-like resignation and indignant defiance before the judgements of a future audience. However, after having reprimanded the obtuse academics of the future who will study him like a dead thing and

inevitably distort his work, he attempts to speak as "one of the living" to those who might recognize the value of what he has left behind. He bequeaths his "twenty years" of verse not to the Soviet people of the present but to the "planet's proletarian" of the future; he wants his verse to be a living legacy, but doubts whether it should in fact outlive his audience of earlier revolutionary years or whether it should "die, like those who died nameless in battle." What is at stake is no longer simply the "materiality" of the word but its ability to struggle with present reality like a living thing rather than becoming a dead literary convention, a fate which could befall even "agitprop" and revolutionary verse.

The provocatively vulgar language of *At The Top of My Voice* does harken back to the Futurist use of antipoetic language as "épatage" before 1917, which was itself an earlier version of the "resurrection of the word" in the face of conventionalized lyricism. It was in fact the intentional use of vulgar language in *At the Top of My Voice* that produced the most hostile reaction from the students in the Plekhanov auditorium at Mayakovsky's last recital in April 1930, some of whom passed notes to the stage objecting to the use of indecent words in poetry. That real audience's horror almost seems to reenact the squeamishness of the citizens of the future in *The Bedbug*, who must be protected from Prisypkin's foul mouth by filters that drown out the obscenities.

As in Mayakovsky's pre-revolutionary verse, his language in *At the Top of My Voice* reflects the need to insist that the reality behind words such as "tuberculosis," "prostitute" and "syphilis," and the imperfections they imply, has not yet passed in the present of 1930. Now, however, it bears a new significance: the resurrection of these words would mean the resurrection of the poet himself in the world of the future. Mayakovsky implies that he was first drawn to these coarse words because he was drawn to the city squares where they really existed, and he calls on the people of the bright communist future

who will one day truly live without such words to check them in a dictionary and remember that it required a poet to "lick clean the consumptive spittle with the rough tongue ["iazyk", i.e. both "tongue" and "language"] of a poster." He wants to resurrect these particular words for the same reason he wants to be resurrected himself in the "thirtieth century" in the poem *About That*. He wants the role he played in helping to cleanse the world through a battle with the ugly reality of everyday life and through the transformation of language to remain a living part of the future. But he does not even consider that he might be identified in the future with his cosmic vision of "roses and dreams". Once again he states it has become clear that in his lifetime "roses" can only be identified with a debased lyric poetry that has no connection with the harshness of reality: "It would hardly be an honor/ should roses like these/ get my graven image set up/ on squares where consumption coughs out its lungs/ where whores with hooligans and syphilis walk." Instead, *At the Top of My Voice* is a recognition that his legacy will not in fact be the work of a "creator of new myths" in a world where "new roses" with "petals of squares" unfold in the streets, but the dirty work of a "latrine cleaner" whose role it has been to struggle with the debris of the past. Once again, Mayakovsky is anticipating his own incomprehensibility to a future world which will speak a language foreign to his.

### **From RAPP to the Bullet**

The final issue in Mayakovsky's re-negotiation of his relationship with his audience in these years is that of his organizational alliances. Here again, it is a story of "conflicting gestures." In July of 1928 he resigned from the editorship of *Novy LEF*, and in September of the same year in a speech entitled "To the Left of Left!" he declared publicly that such marginal literary groupings had outlived their usefulness and that the times required mass literary organizations that

lead agitational work.<sup>46</sup> This was even before the formal party resolution in December of 1928 which stressed the agitational purpose of literature and initiated the reign of the proletarian artistic organizations.

Yet before joining RAPP Mayakovsky briefly attempted once more to regroup with many of the Lefists by changing one letter in the acronym to form "Ref" (the "Revolutionary Front of Art"). The defensive significance of this new organization was summed up in two public speeches in 1929. In May Mayakovsky wrote an explanatory note to Glavlit for a speech entitled "The Old and the New," in which he aimed to describe the development of contemporary poetry "away from Lef, that is, away from formal innovation towards 'Ref'...that is, towards the conscious directive for the revolutionary proletarian role of production art."<sup>47</sup> An explanatory note written for Glavlit in September 1929 for a lecture originally entitled "What is to be Done?" to be read at the event "REF is launched" ("Otkryvaetsia REF") on October 8, announced that the fundamental reason for the founding of Ref was the "struggle with apoliticalness and a conscious reliance on the directive of art as agitprop for the building of socialism" and a change in Lef's program to the "denial of the bare fact and the demand in art of tendentiousness and [political] orientation."<sup>48</sup>

In reality, Ref represented a compromise at the level of theory, stated explicitly as "the denial of the bare fact", but one which might allow Mayakovsky to maintain in practice a commitment to formal innovation and an avant-garde version of utilitarianism that was not tolerated by RAPP. Secondly, Ref counterposed tendentiousness that was voluntary to that which was enforced. Nevertheless, Mayakovsky's final entry into RAPP in early February of 1930,<sup>49</sup> at a time when the association was still the Party's undisputed instrument in the literary field, cannot be construed to represent a seamless continuity between his allegiance to the Soviet state of the twenties and his resurrection as a state

symbol five years later. Without a clear analysis of the fact that the Cultural Revolution and Five-Year Plan were the beginning of a fundamental break with early Soviet social and cultural policy - an extremely difficult conclusion to reach at such an early stage - there was little alternative for a poet in 1930 whose life's work had been shaped by his commitment to a post-bourgeois culture. The renewed utopianism, both social and artistic, that was stirred up by the "Cultural Revolution" was not only tolerated but exploited by the state at the beginning of the first Five-Year Plan, and it is possible to understand how this could have had for Mayakovsky a mitigating effect on the assault on modernism with which it co-existed for a brief time.

The harassment, censure and attempts at marginalization which Mayakovsky faced from critics and other writers during the "proletarian episode" was as important in shaping Mayakovsky's self-created legend as the changes in the "workers' auditorium." Stenographic records of public speeches given by Mayakovsky in 1928-1929 testify to his conflicting impulses both to establish "solidarity" between RAPP and Lef/Ref and to defend the independent record of the "Lefists" as "builders" of proletarian literature since 1917.<sup>50</sup> RAPP's implicit elevation by the Party made it difficult for Mayakovsky to dismiss the dogmatism of the "proletarian" literary camp as he had in the past, and made it necessary for him to argue for the "proletarian" credentials of the Lef grouping, but defensiveness alternated with self-assertion. The attacks he continued to face from the RAPP leadership in the few months he was a member of that organization, for both the "right deviation" of his avant-gardism and the "left deviation" of his "excessive" criticism of bureaucracy in *The Bathhouse*, not only forced concessions from him but also played a role in shaping the belligerence of his late persona.

The final contribution to the Mayakovsky legend in which the poet himself had a hand is the often-quoted suicide note, "To All of You." Most commentators on the note itself consider its most significant feature to be the "conflicting gestures" it contains in so few words. Sergei Eisenstein, in his personal diary, went so far as to doubt its authenticity, claiming that it was not in keeping with a suicide note by someone so concerned about what people thought of him, due to its flippant tone, trivial details, and the "chastushka" or light-hearted folk style of the well-known "love boat" lyric: "the love boat has crashed against byt" ("liubovnaia lodka razbilas' o byt"). But in fact it is the very juxtaposition of the note's poetic and antipoetic elements, its combination of "mystery" and "bouffe," which are in keeping with Mayakovsky, particularly in these late years.

In an almost schizoid fashion Mayakovsky displays in a short message to his contemporaries the entire repertoire of his cultural personae...What strikes us at first glance is the note's heterogeneity, a clash of different discourses. It contains high poetic diction, contemporary Soviet speech, colloquialisms, and some expressions which seem to come from popular urban romances and sentimental melodramas, linking death with kitsch. Such is for instance the much quoted sentence "Ljubovnaja lodka razbilas' o byt" ("Love boat has crashed against the daily grind"), which does not allow us to distinguish between pathos and irony.<sup>51</sup>

The note epitomizes the late-twenties avant-garde distaste for exaggerated pathos and heroic monumentalism, and what Katerina Clark refers to as the "paradoxical attempt at monumentalizing the trivial" which characterized these years.<sup>52</sup> But although the practical trivialities of life gain significance by their inclusion in a suicide note, they can of course also be read as an attempt at "trivializing the monumental" and the act of suicide itself, which is intended to be seen as a matter-of-fact, anti-poetic event that simply "couldn't be helped" and which isn't recommended to others - an attempt to codify the poet's final act as one which was not intended to fuel a new legend about him. The phrase "the love boat has crashed against byt" is also one final sally at

poetic language, one that is, as usual, both tragic and self-mocking. It is something Prisypkin would say. Like the "roses and dreams" of 150,000,000, it is a distorted echo of greater days, of the "boat" that began as a "steamship of modernity" in the 1912 Futurist Manifesto *A Slap in the Face of Public Taste*, which became a Soviet ark steering the course in the flood of revolution in *Mystery-Bouffe*, then a person-boat with barnacles clinging to its sides during the NEP - "I am cleaning myself under Lenin, in order to sail further into the Revolution" - in *Vladimir Ilich Lenin* in 1924. Finally, it becomes the "love boat," which according to Victor Shklovsky "is a double image: it is an ironic sentimental cliche, but it is also [Mayakovsky's] own office on Lyubyansky Street [the room in which he shot himself], which he really referred to as his 'boat.'"<sup>53</sup> For Marina Tsvetaeva it comes from an incomprehensible language, spoken by a tragicomic "man from the past" despite his claim to being at home on the Soviet "steamship of modernity": "That love boat, comrade, what language does it come from?" ("Lodka-to tvoja, tovarishch, iz kakogo slovarja?")<sup>54</sup>

## Chapter 2: 1930-1931: Literary Suicide as "Political Fact"

The year 1930 marked the peak of Stalin's "Cultural Revolution" before its short-term policies of anti-bureaucratic rhetoric and the attack on "bourgeois culture" began to be reversed. These were replaced by a number of socially-stabilizing policies, some of which had long-term implications and others which were essentially reactive, particularly those intended to cancel out the "proletarian" line in the artistic sphere. But for many commentators, Mayakovsky's suicide became and remained a graphic symbol for the definitive end of an era of cultural experimentation and the beginning of the process that erased its traces in Soviet society. James Billington put it most succinctly: "The destruction of a living Russian culture was made complete in 1930 with the suicide of Maiakovsky, the formal abolition of all private printing, and Stalin's sweeping demand at the Sixteenth Party Congress that the first five-year plan be expanded into a massive 'socialist offensive along the entire front.'"<sup>1</sup>

The story of the contradictory relationship between the Mayakovsky legend and the Soviet state begins with the immediate impact of the poet's suicide on brewing literary and political conflicts in 1930-1931. The fact of Mayakovsky's suicide was not the least of the contradictions to be dealt with in determining his place in the developing Soviet literary canon. Roman Jakobson in 1930 was the first to assert that his suicide could be understood as "literary fact" like Esenin's death before, because it was "fixed in the word" - not only in his suicide note but as a motif in the body of his poetry.<sup>2</sup> Immediately after the fact of Mayakovsky's death and for the rest of the Soviet period, his suicide also became "literary fact" of a different kind: it became "fixed in the word" of political commentary and subject to both official manipulation and "unofficial"

speculation.

Throughout much of the Soviet period, literary suicides have played a significant role as both official political symbols and popular historical benchmarks, above and beyond the nature of suicide as either a literary motif or the real-life act of individual human beings - from Esenin in 1925 to Fadeev after the 1956 Stalin revelations. In the case of Esenin, much official discussion and ink was devoted to the term "eseninshchina" ("eseninism") as a "political fact" of the late twenties, particularly by Mayakovsky himself, who constantly emphasized that the focus of his disapproval was not Esenin the man and poet but the phenomenon of "eseninism." His aim was to deconstruct and demythologize Esenin's literary persona.<sup>3</sup> The term "eseninism" came to signify, on the one hand, the phenomenon of depression, drunkenness and sexual debauchery among youth in general, and on the other, a political question of literary significance: the weakness that led to the domination of the personal and private over the political and public, to self-destructive individualism and suicide, especially in poets. In 1934 Max Eastman, an American correspondent of Leon Trotsky, wrote a condemnation of Soviet cultural policy titled *Artists in Uniform: A Study of Literature and Bureaucratism*, in which he examines the political discourse surrounding the suicide of poets. On "Eseninism" he states:

The word is firmly fixed in the new Soviet language. In the *Literary Encyclopedia*, a considerable space is devoted to its meaning, and here the suicide of poets plays the major role... "Yesseninism expressed itself still more sharply in the suicides which removed several poets from our literature." And lest the reader should attribute a political, or perhaps even a "proletarian" cause to this unusual epidemic, it quickly adds: "The majority of them were of peasant origin, were not engaged in any social work, and found in the poems of Yessenin support and justification for the development of individualistic experiences within themselves."<sup>4</sup>

Eastman then contrasts this portrayal of the "epidemic" as a particular kind of "political fact" with the two other most well-known literary suicides of the

time, that of the poet Kuznetsov, of wholly proletarian origin and a member of the Komsomol, and that of Mayakovsky, whom he describes as "of the Bolshevik intelligentsia." On Kuznetsov he quotes Voronsky on the non-literary nature of the poet's suicide: "We could not tell from his verses that the poet was living through an inner crisis. Only after his death did it become known that he had one or two poems reflecting the mood which brought him to the noose."<sup>5</sup> On Mayakovsky Eastman states: "Maiakovsky's suicide is in one way more symbolic than Kuznetsov's of the state of arts and letters under Stalin. For Maiakovsky was not only engaged in "social work" under the direction of the party, but also in a very lusty shouting that such work is what it means to be a poet."<sup>6</sup>

Although Eastman did not use the term "political fact" for the suicide, he hints at such a concept. Lazar Fleishman identified the other aspect of Mayakovsky's death as "literary fact," its literary impact beyond Mayakovsky: not only was his death "fixed in the word" of his own literary work but in that of countless other writers and poets from 1930 to the present.<sup>7</sup> Just as the word "eseninism" was "firmly fixed in the new Soviet language" of literary politics, Mayakovsky's suicide became a part of Stalinist political culture due to its social impact and significance, beyond the real-life facts of the poet's own suicide motives, political or otherwise. The official interpretation of Mayakovsky's suicide was not as "fixed" as the words of his poetry but became a reflection of political fact in the changing attitudes towards it. "Unofficial" or counter-interpretations at various stages of Soviet history also bore the mark of political context. The phenomenon represented by Mayakovsky's suicide was and is much more complex and flexible than "eseninism."

The present chapter will consider in some detail the immediate responses to Mayakovsky's suicide, which only represent a small part of its

evolution as "political fact." Although the historical moment of the suicide in 1930 is clearly significant in hindsight, it was not possible at the time for the new regime either to renounce Mayakovsky completely or to place him on the pedestal of national poet. Rather, what followed was a period of uncertainty as Stalinist culture emerged piecemeal out of the ruins of the culture of the twenties. The various reactions to the act of suicide itself and its impact on immediate assessments of Mayakovsky's life reflect the ideological contradictions that characterized the first years of the Stalin era. It will not be attempted here to provide a definitive explanation of Mayakovsky's actual suicide motives, but to outline the way in which his suicide began to shape various "Mayakovsky legends" of the early thirties, how this was reflective of the political or literary-political interests of the parties involved, and to question the degree to which immediate reactions to the suicide shaped the poet's later canonization.

### The Party: "Our" Mayakovsky Lives

The first official reports of Mayakovsky's death are ideologically clear but vague in detail: the bulletin from ROSTA dated April 14, 1930 and published in *Pravda* the next day carefully states that "the suicide was caused by reasons of a purely personal order, having nothing in general to do with the public and literary activity of the poet, the suicide was preceded by an illness from which the poet still had not completely recovered."<sup>8</sup> Articles in the same issue of *Pravda* and in a special issue of *Literaturnaia gazeta* also emphasized the need to remember and celebrate Mayakovsky as a genuine proletarian poet, who in life never displayed the weaknesses of the intelligentsia.

The dramatic popular response to Mayakovsky's death, including the response of low-level Party activists, illustrates the regime's need to respond

carefully. Mayakovsky's funeral procession and burial in Moscow on April 17, 1930 was the largest demonstration of public mourning since the funeral of Lenin himself: over a hundred thousand people took part, without encouragement from the State. Birgit Menzel states that the funeral "gave an impressive indication of the tremor caused by Mayakovsky's suicide in the populace."<sup>9</sup> The regime at first underestimated what the reaction would be and organizers of memorial events were caught off-guard on several occasions. Although the Party took charge of the burial, striking a committee under the leadership of Gosizdat director Khalatov that included both the Lefist Aseev and the RAPP leaders Libedinsky, Sutyrin, and Selivanovsky, top-level officials did not attend the Moscow funeral. The day before, on April 16, the Writers' Federation had completely underestimated the turnout at the public memorial service in Leningrad, and chose a hall that was too small for the ten thousand people who gathered spontaneously in front of the Dom Pechati. The crowd responded by storming the building and tearing the doors from their hinges.

The near-riot which occurred at the memorial in Leningrad was reported in an article in *Literaturnaia gazeta* of April 21, "Leningrad speaks of Mayakovskiy" ("Leningrad govorit o Maiakovskom"). But a letter to the Lefist Sergei Tretiakov from an undetermined acquaintance, dated April 17, 1930, provides a very vivid eye-witness account of the event.<sup>10</sup> The letter recounts that although the police were called in to control the crowds, and speeches were made from a balcony to those who couldn't enter the hall, scuffles soon broke out with police on horseback, and cries of "Remove the police! Down with the police!" were heard. The writer Lavrenev finally told those on the street: "we didn't realize that Vladimir Vladimirovich was so popular among the masses and didn't expect crowds of thousands... we are trying to correct our mistake - in the next few days we will organize an evening in memory of V.V. Mayakovskiy in

one of the largest halls of our city...allow me to remind you that the deceased whose memory you have come to honour was an orderly person. In the name of that person I ask you to disperse in an orderly fashion...the public in the hall will also disperse now." The crowd, however, became indignant and "choice words rained down on Lavrenev and the Writers' Federation." The lights were put out in the hall and the windows covered, but rays of light could be seen, and some shouted "they lie like writers! What are we, children? To be lied to? Give us Lavrenev!" This continued all day.

Whether or not this example indicates Mayakovsky's popularity as a poet, it certainly gives an indication of the shock effect and social impact of his suicide. There is evidence that it was precisely the act of suicide which actually increased Mayakovsky's popularity at this time: "There were also numerous letters from [newspaper] readers which affirmed that their previously uncomprehending and negative attitude towards the attention and admiration for Mayakovsky had been changed by the event."<sup>11</sup> The State Mayakovsky Museum in Moscow contains an album of newspaper and journal clippings of official statements on the suicide prepared by an unknown individual, which in itself presents an interesting recreation of the information and attitudes to Mayakovsky's death that the average Soviet citizen had at his or her disposal at the time.<sup>12</sup> The collection of these articles in a single volume presents the official statements in a slightly new light, emphasizing the major themes and imagery of Mayakovsky's death as generated by the regime at this sensitive time. The quotations in the following survey of the regimes's response are taken from this album of articles, which were published in various Soviet periodicals in 1930.

An article on the funereal commemorations titled "The Final Journey" cites Lunacharsky's assertion that Mayakovsky's death can only be explained

by "purely personal motives," as the poet himself wrote in his suicide letter, and Lunacharsky's warning that "some would like to treat Mayakovsky's suicide as his defeat - the defeat of the public figure and revolutionary. It is too bad that Mayakovsky cannot object to this himself..."<sup>13</sup> Instead it was necessary to object on his behalf, since those who interpreted the suicide in political terms, whether in order to defend Mayakovsky as a political suicide, or to gloat over the defeat of his revolutionary convictions, obviously cast a spurious light on the regime. In an article by the title "Life and Death: On Mayakovsky," Lunacharsky carries on in this vein: "Of course, enemies will hiss that death came to Mayakovsky precisely in his public life. We know what they will say on this account and what they are already saying...After your gunshot they don't want even to believe that you only just rang out to them 'At the Top of Your Voice."<sup>14</sup> Although by this time Lunacharsky was already becoming a marginalized figure, having been dismissed from his leadership post in the Commissariat of Enlightenment in 1929, his defense of Mayakovsky was significant given that he had already long abandoned his initial sympathies for the Leftists and had engaged in bitter public disputes with Mayakovsky over his "Formalism" in the late twenties. His rapid turnaround was representative of many others at the time.

The Party's response to Mayakovsky's death did not of course go so far as to excuse the act of suicide even when it insisted that his moment of weakness, as questionable as it was, must not be allowed to tarnish his entire life's work. In fact, many of the essentially positive obituaries include clear expressions of protest at his "senseless" death: at his funeral Felix Kon, speaking for the Commissariat of Enlightenment, stated that "We will learn to struggle like he did, but not to die like he did."<sup>15</sup> In an article titled "Liquidation of the Breach," David Zaslavsky uses the suicide as an example of the need for constant vigilance in the war on personal weakness and old attitudes, in the

language of the day: "...with his death he has deepened and sharpened the very problems of the struggle that he satirically placed in his poems and dramas. For Mayakovsky's personal failure that old damnable *byt* is answerable. Proletarian literature must... tear off all the masks with which the old *byt* shields itself."<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, in the immediate aftermath of Mayakovsky's death, the Party press did not portray it as an example of bohemian degeneracy comparable to Esenin's suicide.

On the other hand, a number of commentators in the Party press attempted to resolve the contradiction between the need to defend Mayakovsky and the need to avoid condoning his suicide by laying claim to the "real" Mayakovsky who had been "murdered" by an alter ego. They insisted on the inconsistency of the poet's public life and private death to the point of describing it in terms of a conflict between two separate entities. Roman Jakobson cites the example of the editor of the mass periodical *Ogonek*, M. Koltsov, who had not been a great supporter of Mayakovsky until after the poet's death: "Majakovskij himself was wholly absorbed in the business affairs of various literary groups and in political matters. Someone else fired that shot, some outsider who happened to be in control of a revolutionary poet's mind and will."<sup>17</sup> In the article "Liquidation of the Breach" Zaslavsky claims that Mayakovsky's untransformed personal life "killed Mayakovsky the man, but did not tear a single despairing note from the poet Mayakovsky, did not de-magnetize a single one of his last lines."<sup>18</sup> Lunacharsky too, in the article "Life and Death" plainly states that "since Mayakovsky was not conquered in the line of public life, it was only Mayakovsky as a private individual who died."<sup>19</sup>

In this there is an echo of Mayakovsky's own words and those of many others following Lenin's death: only "Ilych" or "Ulyanov", the man, has died; "Lenin," the legend, lives.<sup>20</sup> One of the concrete steps taken by the Party in

laying claim to the Mayakovsky "legend" was to have his brain studied by the State Institute for Brain Research, just as Lenin's was seven years earlier. Mayakovsky's brain was found to be heavier than average, a fact which fitted with his own larger-than-life poetic persona as well as the notion of a larger-than-life public figure, undiminished in death. At the same time, however, the facts about Mayakovsky's brain were published along with the Institute's account of personal details about Mayakovsky the "individual," including personal character traits and habits, in an article in *Literaturnaia gazeta* a week after his death.<sup>21</sup>

For Zaslavsky, Mayakovsky's persona was a battleground: not only for his own conflicting impulses but already for warring factions that wanted to claim his mantle for themselves. He states that at the time of the poet's death, Moscow was filled with chuckling Prisypkins and Pobedonosikovs, who under different circumstances might themselves climb onto the funeral tribune "in order to honour their own man in Mayakovsky." Zaslavsky emphasizes that the memorial speeches of Lunacharsky, Gosizdat director Khalatov and Felix Kon did not constitute a justification or embellishment of Mayakovsky's death but a warning and a call to arms: "...in every speech was the unshakable thought: he is one of our own. The old *byt* was able to kill him, but it could not steal him from us."<sup>22</sup> Lunacharsky describes the relationship between man and legend in similar terms: "The misfortune is that the private Mayakovsky was able to kill along with himself the songs as yet unsung by the public Mayakovsky. However it is impossible to kill the public Mayakovsky, in so far as he is already embodied in his songs...Above all we will not allow the fall of Mayakovsky the individual to be used in order to cast a shadow over the great public Mayakovsky and over the cause he served."<sup>23</sup> Some recent commentators, like Svetlana Boym below, see the early emergence of the official monument to

Mayakovsky in this immediate response to his death, which describes not only the act of suicide but the very hand that pulled the trigger as something already separate and distinct from the poet's public figure.

The Soviet revolutionary poet has become immortal; he is community property, property of the socialist state. He cannot be accidentally murdered by the weak and impressionable individual Vladimir Mayakovsky. In the duel between the official Vladimir Mayakovsky and his flickering double, the first always wins. The poet is no longer in control of the dynamic and playful process of self-creation; some of his masks are already "patented" by the literary establishment with all rights reserved.<sup>24</sup>

But although the poet was certainly no longer in control of his legend, the regime was not yet fully in control of it either. The year 1930 was a turning point for tolerating elements of the political avant-garde who supported the voluntaristic aspects of the Cultural Revolution. Mayakovsky had distanced himself from avant-garde organization but not from its traditions; he remained in conflict with the RAPP leadership to the end of his life, and yet shared the few vestiges of cultural iconoclasm in RAPP which were to become a thorn in the regime's side by 1932. Was he to be associated with "right deviation" or "left deviation," or both? In fact, it seems clear that in 1930 the motivating factor in the regime's attitude to Mayakovsky was the shock effect of his suicide. The new establishment was far more concerned with diffusing this and steering the reaction in a safe direction, than with maintaining consistency with the "proletarian line." As Lunacharsky implies in the citation above, the "public Mayakovsky" could not be easily separated from the "cause" that the regime was still paying lip-service to, and it could not allow a "shadow" to be cast over one without darkening the other in some measure at this stage. Thus, whereas just before the end of his life Mayakovsky was defined in the Soviet encyclopedia as "a fellow traveller of the revolution" to whom "the world view of

the proletariat is alien,"<sup>25</sup> two years later he was described as "the most important poet of the proletarian revolution."<sup>26</sup>

Although it is possible that there was some immediate concern for "patenting" Mayakovsky's image beyond playing down the potential impact of his suicide, the practicality of doing so was still in doubt. There were clear signs of state suspicion of the poet during the last year of his life: he was denied a visa for travel to Paris in the autumn of 1929, and already in July of that year the mass periodical *Ogonek* had refused to publish his "Verses about the Soviet Passport." Semion Chertok, who conducted research in Moscow in 1957 for an article on the suicide, claims that this poem was "a form of preparation" for the poet's trip to Paris, and that *Ogonek* didn't print it because its editor Koltsov "knew very well the behind-the-scenes side of literature and sought to please not Mayakovsky but the OGPU." In January of 1930, *Ogonek* also did not include Mayakovsky's *V.I. Lenin* in a list of the 16 most important works dedicated to Lenin, which according to Chertok shows "how well-informed Koltsov was about the true attitude of the authorities to Mayakovsky." Immediately after the suicide, however, *Ogonek* rushed to publish *Verses about the Soviet Passport*, even though it had already been published elsewhere.<sup>27</sup>

The most obvious indication of the state's growing suspicions at the end of Mayakovsky's life is the fact that a leading GPU agent, Iakov Agranov, was assigned to observe him in 1929 by working his way into the poet's literary circle. Whether his first connection was with the Briks or with Mayakovsky himself is a point of controversy: Bengt Jangfeldt, in his commentary to the correspondence between Mayakovsky and Lili Briks, maintains the claim made by the Briks themselves that it was Mayakovsky who brought Agranov into their shared home, that Mayakovsky came to know Agranov through Valerii Mikhailovich Gorozhanin, another GPU agent whom he had met in 1926 in the

Crimea.<sup>28</sup> Those sources hostile towards the Briks claim it was through them, due to their own service with the secret police in the early twenties, that Agranov gained access to Mayakovsky.<sup>29</sup> The Soviet commentator most hostile to the Briks, Andrei Koloskov, argued that Agranov was the engineer of a conspiracy to murder Mayakovsky.<sup>30</sup> V.V. Katanian (son of V.A. Katanian, Mayakovsky specialist, former colleague of the poet and last husband of Lili Brik) maintains that in any case, Agranov was on good terms with both Mayakovsky and the Briks.<sup>31</sup> The poet's relations with Gorozhanin, with whom he wrote the film scenario *Inzhener d'Arxi (Bor'ba za neft')* in 1927, and to whom he dedicated the 1927 poem "Dzerzhinsky's Soldiers," written for the tenth anniversary of the Cheka-GPU, testify to Mayakovsky's lack of suspicion of the intentions of the GPU agents in his acquaintance.

In a New York publication of 1951, R. Ivanov-Razumnik implicated Agranov in the disappearance from the suicide scene of a letter other than the suicide note written by Mayakovsky just before his death: "Before he shot himself, [Mayakovsky] wrote a long letter and someone's address on the envelope; his relations did not manage to see to whom [it was addressed] in their despair and in the commotion. It was seen by Agranov, the then all-powerful assistant of Yagoda, specially appointed to 'literary issues', who had appeared immediately at the scene - and the letter disappeared into his pocket, which means into the archive of the GPU."<sup>32</sup> Chertok also points to the mysterious disappearance from Mayakovsky's archive of letters to him from Tatiana Yakovleva, the Russian émigré with whom the poet had fallen in love in Paris, and to the disappearance of film footage taken of "all the events of the days of mourning" by a film crew which arrived immediately at the scene of the suicide.<sup>33</sup> It also seems possible, though it remains unconfirmed, that the GPU confiscated the manuscripts of an unfinished poem titled *Bad! (Plokhoi!)*, the

poet's own response to *Good!*, his poem celebrating the tenth anniversary of the revolution. Mayakovsky himself mentions that he was in the process of writing *Bad!* in his 1928 update of the autobiography *I Myself*, while after his death Soviet sources claimed that it was never written. Rumours circulated not long after Mayakovsky's death that the drafts of this poem were taken during a search of the suicide scene.<sup>34</sup> Rumours also began circulating about the missing letter, assumed by many to contain a second and more revealing explanation of the suicide that was deliberately suppressed.

After the most immediate shock of the suicide had passed, an edict from the Commissariat of Enlightenment appeared in *Izvestia* on July 27, 1930 which partly refused Mayakovsky's last wishes in his suicide note. His last female companion, Veronika Polonskaia, was refused the state income granted to the other members of Mayakovsky's "family" - Lili Brik, his mother and two sisters.<sup>35</sup> In her memoirs, written in 1938, Polonskaia stated that she was forced to renounce any connection with the poet's name.<sup>36</sup> Polonskaia did not attend Mayakovsky's funeral; she claimed that Lili Brik discouraged her from doing so.<sup>37</sup> Much more significantly, in June of 1930, Mayakovsky's works were removed from all children's and youth libraries throughout the Soviet Union because they were deemed "unsuitable." This was done by an explicit Party directive made public in *Literaturnaia gazeta* on July 10, 1930. Menzel states that this directive testifies to the fact that Mayakovsky was once again "interpreted as an 'enfant terrible,' as a corruptor of morals without pedagogical value."<sup>38</sup> The Party's ambivalence about Mayakovsky was a reflection of broader changes that began to develop in 1930: despite continued reliance on the "proletarian line," the Party was already beginning to require a revamped version of traditional culture and a new "court" art to glorify the Soviet state, soon to be expressed in the 1931 slogan "The Great Literature of Bolshevism."

## RAPP: "Whose Mayakovsky?"

In 1930, the difficulty in presenting a consistent official response to Mayakovsky's suicide was complicated by the latent rift developing between RAPP and the Party. Although the extent of this rift only became systematically exposed in 1931,<sup>39</sup> the conflict between the Party and the RAPP leadership over how to respond to Mayakovsky's suicide can be considered the first major incident to betray the underlying differences.

The RAPP leadership set out its public position on Mayakovsky's death in the short article "From the Secretariat of RAPP," published in *Izvestia* on April 16 1930 and later that year as a foreword to RAPP's polemical book *Pamiati Maiakovskogo*. It admits that Mayakovsky did have huge significance for the history of revolutionary poetry and the proletarian struggle, and emphasizes his leadership in challenging bourgeois values and liberating poetry from aestheticism. It acknowledges that Mayakovsky was an ally of the revolution from its first days and that "his whole poetic path led him closer and closer to the revolution," and declares that had he remained alive there is no doubt that we would have developed a "dialectical materialist method" and completed making the world-view of the proletariat his own. It does not neglect to mention that RAPP accepted him into its ranks "as one of the artists closest to the proletariat." Nearly half of the article is made up of such "praise," with the caveat that Mayakovsky had much to learn from proletarian literature. But the main argument is that Mayakovsky's death has shown all artists once again how complicated the struggle with the old world and its individualism is, and that sympathy for Mayakovsky must not cloud the issue:

In his suicide letter Mayakovsky asks the members of RAPP to not think him a coward. But Bolsheviks cannot but think his behaviour cowardly no matter how painful the personal sufferings that served as its cause. Did not Mayakovsky

write in his wonderful poem dedicated to the death of Esenin, that "in this life dying is not difficult - to build life is much harder"?<sup>40</sup>

It is striking that there was so little attempt made between the Party and RAPP at a common public position on such an important development as Mayakovsky's suicide. Lunacharsky's obituary even assigns unambiguous blame to RAPP for the "single difficult 'hitch' in Mayakovsky's public life", the fact that he felt driven to prove that he was not a renegade - even though Lunacharsky is careful not to hold this up as the "reason" for the poet's suicide: "Those who scolded him from the right (the aesthetes he despised) and from the left (the pedants of our camp, of which we have quite a few), thought: 'this won't affect him.'...The lesson for us is that we must be kind and caring towards our artists...Our proletarian camp is harsh in general. But towards our singers it should be tender."<sup>41</sup> A special single-issue newspaper titled "Vladimir Mayakovsky," published in April, 1930 in Leningrad, which was the centre of avant-garde opposition to RAPP from the late twenties until well into the thirties, contained several articles offensive to the association. Although it was not a Party publication, the fact it was published at all is significant: one article by B. Solovev asserted that "In RAPP Mayakovsky, being already a proletarian poet when proletarian poetry was suffering a difficult crisis...was nearly the only one who gave needed and correct works to his time."<sup>42</sup>

The RAPP leadership responded to what they judged to be the Party's "soft line" on Mayakovsky in a letter of complaint addressed directly to Stalin dated April 26, 1930.<sup>43</sup> The letter was signed by Averbakh, Ermilov, Kirshon, Libedinsky, Selivanovsky, Sutyrin, and Fadeev. They argued that glossing over the significance of the suicide was not only inconsistent in itself but gave tacit encouragement to "a series of unhealthy phenomena among Soviet writers and sections of youth" and worsened the condition of writers already disoriented

and confused by the need to "re-arm" themselves in the period of reconstruction: "in some writers' circles the attitude was already widespread...that Mayakovsky was persecuted by the epoch, like Blok and Esenin." They claimed that the false evaluations of Mayakovsky as an ideal proletarian writer and the false explanations given for his suicide - "an absurd incident," "an accident," "a serious illness" (including "narrow-minded/pharisaic gossip about syphilis") - did not in fact spare his reputation or diffuse political conjecture, but rather handed over the initiative of explaining his suicide to class enemies:

Thus came about the pharisaic rumours that "the Communists have hidden" Mayakovsky's real ("second") letter, that the poet had become disillusioned with everything, that he was "stifled by the Soviet authorities, which do not tolerate gifted people." Among the youth an attitude has appeared that can be formulated in this way: if Mayakovsky, the example of a proletarian revolutionary, "intimately linked with the masses of the working class," has shot himself, then how can we average people go on living?

The letter emphasizes that RAPP's intention was to "mobilize the healthiest attitudes among writers" by explaining Mayakovsky's death in terms of "the underestimated powers of his anarchistic-individualistic past, which still clung to the poet." It directly protests the lack of Party support for RAPP's line, particularly the refusal of *Pravda* and *Literaturnaia gazeta* to publish the RAPP leadership's official response to the suicide. Even more to the point, it accuses a series of "comrades" of using Mayakovsky's suicide to renew their attack against the RAPP leadership by denouncing RAPP's articles on the suicide as "slander." Finally, the letter requests Stalin's intervention: "We consider necessary the involvement of the Central Committee in the activity of those communists who not only do not correct their mistaken line in connection with the suicide of Mayakovsky, but attempt to take it further." Although Stalin did not

respond publicly, the RAPP leadership was allowed to publish its argument in *Pravda* on May 19.<sup>44</sup>

The essence of RAPP's alarm stemmed not from the comments of "moderates" like Lunacharsky but from the fact that RAPP itself was deeply divided over Mayakovskv after his death, and several members of RAPP had in fact formed a "united front" with Lefists in their response to Mayakovskv's death in the Party press. The dissent over Mayakovskv was a reflection of the heightened tension between the "proletarian line" and elements of the political avant-garde, whose hopes for its place in the Cultural Revolution had not yet been crushed. It was directly connected with an important change which had taken place within RAPP just before Mayakovskv's death: on April 2, 1930, the *Literary Centre of Constructivists* disbanded and its members collectively swamped RAPP, where they gave themselves the new name of "Brigada M-1." Many within this minority saw an opportunity in Mayakovskv's death to secure a place for the avant-garde in the proletarian camp. In fact, Mayakovskv's legacy was a bone of contention between RAPP and the Party in large part because it was the catalyst for a factional struggle within RAPP itself.

Some of these Constructivists, along with other oppositionists within RAPP, affiliated themselves with the collective obituary published by the Lefists Aseev, Tretiakov, Rodchenko and Kirsanov in the April 15 edition of *Pravda* (No. 104) entitled "To a Friend's Memory" ("Pamiati druga"), which followed the Party's emphasis on the private nature of the suicide. They then collaborated with the Lefists in the April 17 special edition of *Literaturnaia gazeta* dedicated to Mayakovskv, in which M. Gelfand, a member of RAPP and one of the co-signatories of the *Pravda* obituary, wrote the following in shocking contradiction to RAPP's negative assessment of Mayakovskv's "anarcho-individualistic past": "The problem of 'acceptance' of the revolution never presented itself to him...he

was never outside the revolution...from the furious rebellion of the epoch of the "yellow blouse" [pre-1917] to the unforgettable and genuinely proletarian pathos of his last lines..."<sup>45</sup> B. Olkhovii, also a signatory of the Lef obituary, was singled out in the RAPP leadership's letter to Stalin for refusing to publish their statement on the suicide in the special issue of *Literaturnaia gazeta*, "despite the fact that the editor of 'Litgazeta' comrade Olkhovii, being a member of RAPP, had a directive from the secretary of the fraction to print it as an official document..."<sup>46</sup> and he was actually expelled from RAPP. In June of 1930 Molotov gave an official platform to the RAPP leadership's complaints about the Mayakovsky dispute, entrusting RAPP with an article in *Pravda* to settle accounts with all other positions, but it did not intervene as requested by RAPP, remaining largely neutral as the debate raged over the next year.

Not all of the Constructivists within RAPP allied themselves with Mayakovsky's legacy to advance their literary goals.<sup>47</sup> But the general unreliability of RAPP's membership, particularly with the sudden influx of writers influenced by avant-garde traditions, meant that the RAPP secretariat had to take a much harder line on Mayakovsky than was necessary for the Party press in 1930, in order to maintain its hegemony over the association. There were pressures from outside as well, as the state began to look back to traditional culture for Soviet models. Although RAPP's official line from 1930 onwards supported the creation of a "new Lev Tolstoy" and a return to the classics, it faced a difficult situation when factions within its ranks continued to fight for some kind of "postbourgeois" culture, if not necessarily a modernist one.

The controversy came to a head in August of 1930 when the small, avant-garde-oriented minority that had existed within RAPP split from it and reconstituted itself within the short-lived but independent LITFRONT, a "united front" of disparate elements, from Constructivists to renegade Komsomol poets

to the old VAPP/On Guard leadership which had been deposed in 1926, all united in their opposition to the leadership of RAPP. Brown emphasizes the group's focus on literary "shock work," vulgar publicism and "revolutionary romanticism," and asserts that "the LITFRONT campaign represented an attempted resurgence of the old On Guard leadership."<sup>48</sup> But this is probably largely gleaned from the RAPP leadership's own writings, which focus their wrath on the old VAPP opposition of the twenties and its cynical use of Mayakovsky's death against the current leadership, largely avoiding the question of the Constructivists, referring to them in passing as "new RAPPists."<sup>49</sup> Menzel emphasizes that LITFRONT also represented "the last organized attempt to link the conventional proletarian aesthetic with the innovative poetics of the avant-garde."<sup>50</sup> The link was obviously in shared opposition to the "living man" slogan and psychological realism, to which Mayakovsky's "theatre of masks" had also been so strongly opposed. The avant-garde connection is also evidenced by the fact that the experimental theatrical organization and arch-rival of RAPP, TRAM, with its belief that the consciousness of the audience played an active and in fact crucial role in theatrical production, was able to bring LITFRONT into its ranks shortly after its formation.<sup>51</sup>

LITFRONT made the first real attempt at promoting Mayakovsky as the leading poet of the Soviet canon after his death, partly by "patenting" him as a political symbol but also by claiming his artistic methods as a model. In an article in *Molodaia gvardia* in August, the expelled RAPP member Ol'khovii, who became a founder of LITFRONT, published an article on Mayakovsky titled "A Poet of Social Orientation,"<sup>52</sup> in which he embellishes the poet's agitational image while defending his innovative poetics. LITFRONT in fact worked very closely with a number of Mayakovsky's former LEF colleagues in efforts to establish museums, travelling exhibits, performances, recital competitions, and

publications. Just as RAPP had feared, those who did not "correct their mistaken line" on the poet's suicide did indeed "attempt to take it further": even in death Mayakovsky's influence was overwhelming to RAPP's organizational discipline.

Averbakh states in the afterword to the brochure *Pamiati Maiakovskogo* that it was intended not only as a response to the suicide but as a polemical document against the opponents of the RAPP leadership, and that "it is characteristic that this bloc is linked namely by its relationship to Mayakovsky."<sup>53</sup> RAPP's polemic with Mayakovsky's supporters climaxed in an article by the RAPP leader A. Selivanovsky in *Literaturnaia gazeta* on April 11, 1932, titled "Whose Mayakovsky?" ("Chei Maiakovskii?") in which he states that "the canonization of a part of Mayakovsky's poetry constitutes the obliteration of his poetry as a whole." Although this appears to be a sound warning against LITFRONT's idealization of the agitational Mayakovsky and the denial of contradictions in his work as a whole, it must be read in conjunction with *Pamiati Maiakovskogo*. There it is stated clearly that RAPP aims to expose the "nihilism" in the poet's earlier work and states that "to canonize Mayakovsky's method means to not understand the direction of the development of proletarian literature," and that the oppositionists "have tried to canonize in Mayakovsky that which he himself wished to transform in himself by entering RAPP."<sup>54</sup>

RAPP's hard line on Mayakovsky cannot solely be explained by its factionalism, however. The majority of its leadership were still too consistent at this time in their opposition to the "varnishing of reality" to be concerned either about diplomacy during the shockwave following the suicide or to participate in remaking Mayakovsky's image. Right up until the time of RAPP's dissolution its leadership maintained the call to expose contradictions wherever they lay, and the slogan "for the living man," which cautioned against canonization, did not

allow for improvements on existing reality - including in the public image of Mayakovsky.

### **"Unofficial" interpreters of Mayakovsky's suicide**

From 1930 to the present, Mayakovsky's death has remained one of the most controversial aspects of the poet's legend, even among those who sought to come to his defense against the versions of either the Party press or RAPP, or of both. Among these there were three major "camps": those who saw in him an incarnation of the Russian romantic poet-martyr; those associated with the political avant-garde who saw in his death a crisis of legitimacy for their project; and those who viewed Mayakovsky's suicide as symptomatic of the political degeneration of the Soviet state.

The first interpretation regarded his suicide not merely as prophetic of the death of an entire epoch, but even in some way predestined and mythical - most importantly Boris Pasternak in his autobiographical work *A Safe Conduct*, in 1931, and Roman Jakobson in the essay "On a Generation that Squandered its Poets" in 1930. Both saw Mayakovsky's life and death as more closely linked to an ahistorical poetic destiny than reducible to either personal or political motives. For Pasternak, it was both the notion of "biography as spectacle" and the Romantic quality of Mayakovsky's suicide that lay behind the view of Mayakovsky as a reincarnation of the Romantic archetype of the poet as prophet, saviour and ultimately martyr.

...in the poet who lays himself down as the measure of life, and pays for this with his life, the Romantic conception of life is irresistibly vivid and irrefutable in its symbols. In this sense something permanent was incarnate in the life of Mayakovsky and also in the fate of Esenin, a fate that defies all epithets, self-destructively begging to become a tale [skazka] and receding into it.<sup>55</sup>

In this view, the myth incarnate in the poetic persona inevitably killed the living man because there was no distinction between the two: "in contrast to the playing out of roles, he played - with his life." For Jakobson, "the brand of martyrdom is burned into him," and "the act was long in preparation" in the motif of suicide that recurs throughout his poetic biography.<sup>56</sup> Although it is clearly the poet's doomed struggle with *byt* that lies behind his martyrdom, for Jakobson this is hardly a modern dilemma. He emphasizes that "Majakovskij himself compared his duel with *byt* to the fatal duels of Pushkin and Lermontov."<sup>57</sup>

Jakobson and Pasternak were surely motivated by the desire to dissociate Mayakovsky's legacy from contemporary distortions - even though these had not yet officially crystallized. Because the poet's suicide immediately produced the beginnings of political reinvention of his image, it is to be expected that it would also produce the first concerted attempts at "dehistoricizing" Mayakovsky's death, and by extension his life, in reaction to the "patenting" of the poet by the state. Because both consider Mayakovsky first and foremost as a poetic innovator, both provide important insights into his aesthetics and poetic development. But, as Svetlana Boym comments, in doing so they found it necessary themselves to reinvent Mayakovsky and his suicide in an image that was not entirely his own either.

Jakobson's Mayakovsky reenacts the eternal return of the Russian genius, the poet-saviour. The critic styles his own, the only "true" and "real," Mayakovsky according to the archetypal tragic mask designed by the Romantics. This heroic rendering covers up many unromantic contemporary details, allowing Jakobson to ignore the concrete circumstances of Soviet history in the late 1920's and early 1930's - the beginning of the ideological persecutions of intellectuals, constant attacks on LEF and the other avant-garde groups, and the malicious critique of fellow Formalists and friends from the OPOJaZ. On the one hand, Jakobson seems to have had very little regard for the historical specificity and the peculiar modernity of the poet's suicide. On the other, this in itself can be seen as a reaction against the official politicization of all the discourses in the Soviet context, be they on literature, life or an author's death.<sup>58</sup>

Jakobson does acknowledge the significance of the "law of large numbers" in the circumstances surrounding Mayakovsky's death : "It is very strange that on this occasion such terms as "accidental," "personal," and so forth are used precisely by those who have always preached a strict social determinism. But how can one speak of a private episode when the law of large numbers is at work, in view of the fact that in a few years' time the whole bloom of Russian poetry has been swept away?"<sup>59</sup> Nevertheless, the very attempt to link Mayakovsky's death with factors not merely beyond the personal but based on a predetermined impasse embodied in the fates of Romantic poets and forecast in Mayakovsky's pre-revolutionary poetry, inescapably reproduces the wrong from which Jakobson aims to rescue the poet: "suddenly [his] songs are no longer part of the dynamic of history, but have been transformed into historico-literary facts."<sup>60</sup>

The Party's lead in "privatizing" Mayakovsky's death was followed by most of his former colleagues in articles printed in the Party press. For most of the political avant-garde, Mayakovsky's voluntary death presented a crisis of legitimacy and increased the pressure on its surviving advocates to prove themselves. But the flurry of discussion immediately after the suicide also provided them with the opportunity to campaign for artistic freedoms. As Birgit Menzel points out, this explains why many recent quarrels were quickly forgotten, including the fact that after Mayakovsky's entry into RAPP just before his death almost all of his colleagues had turned away from him, some even calling him a traitor.<sup>61</sup> Despite some differences between various avant-garde writers and critics in their means of reconciliation with Mayakovsky, what united them in rallying around the poet was their opposition to RAPP's claim that the poet's death served as an example of how difficult it is for writers from the ranks

of the revolutionary intelligentsia to transform their methods of work and “merge with the proletariat.”

In its letter to Stalin, the RAPP leadership singled out as a negative example in the special edition of *Literaturnaia gazeta* dedicated to Mayakovsky an article by the Lefists Neznamov and Katanian which bore the headline: “This is exactly what a proletarian poet is” (“*Eto i est’ proletarskii poet.*”) This article, which is also included in the margins of an obituary essay by the French Surrealist poet Andre Breton (discussed below), aims to defend the link between the avant-garde and “proletarian” poetry in Mayakovsky and by extension in the work of others: “He was a *revolutionary poet*, not because he wrote about the Revolution, but because he wrote *for* the Revolution. He became a proletarian poet, not because he took the proletariat as a *theme*, but because he made the proletariat’s goal his own.” Neznamov and Katanian emphasize that he was able to do this precisely because of his artistic methods of work, because he “understood that the problem of the masses is at present not only the problem of the workers’ auditorium, but also a literary problem, not only the problem of the task to be carried out, but also a problem of form.”<sup>62</sup>

Osip Brik, Mayakovsky’s closest theoretical collaborator, took a similar approach to that of LITFRONT in defending Mayakovsky’s poetic legacy, and by extension his own. In 1930 he wrote his first in a series of articles intended to reformulate Mayakovsky’s image to suit the political demands of the times while still defending his poetic innovations. “A Poet of the Proletarian Revolution”<sup>63</sup> was written two months after Mayakovsky’s suicide and makes a point of defending his pre-revolutionary poetry as a revolt against bourgeois society, a theme that required a new poetic form. Like LITFRONT, Brik’s attempt to defend the happy marriage between the avant-garde and proletarian literature in Mayakovsky was narrower than that of Neznamov and Katanian, who at this

time asserted the possibility of writing for the Revolution in a broad sense. Brik emphasized the publicistic themes in Mayakovsky's poetry in another article written in 1930, "A short biography and the public-literary path."<sup>64</sup> By 1931, Brik began to "correct" his own previous statements that the Revolution had become the theme of Mayakovsky's poetry when earlier themes such as alienated love had become naturally exhausted as an expression of his rebellious impulse, and emphasized instead that the Revolution had always been the cause of Mayakovsky's whole life.<sup>65</sup>

Brik is vague in identifying the real reasons for Mayakovsky's suicide but very concrete in dismissing what he identifies as mistaken rumours, even those which in 1930 might have been useful in providing a relatively safe explanation for the poet's weakness: "[Mayakovsky's] secret [throat] ailment, failure in love and other nonsense." Instead he offers a more pragmatic explanation: "Mayakovsky very ill-advisedly and extravagantly dissipated his physical and spiritual powers. He overrated them and exhausted himself. He did not come to grips with a petty personal problem. He overrated himself."<sup>66</sup> A year later, Brik restated the explanation of physical and mental exhaustion for Mayakovsky's suicide, but emphasized that this cause was neither "serious" nor inevitable, but accidental: it was "a tragic accident, a result of great overstrain, which produced a nervous disorder."<sup>67</sup>

Some of Mayakovsky's former colleagues interpreted his death as "accidental" in a slightly different sense from both Brik and the Party press: not as a "private" accident, due to personal weakness, but as a public one. Aleksei Kruchenykh ends his 1932 collection of essays titled *Our Arrival: From the History of Russian Futurism*, with an essay on "The End of Mayakovsky," which he concludes with the assertion that "...everyone who knew the poet personally took his end as a chance happening, like 'an industrial accident.'"<sup>68</sup> This is a

reference to Viktor Shklovsky, who did “know the poet personally” and titled his own 1930 article on Mayakovsky’s death “An Accident at Work”<sup>69</sup>, although the expression first came from the pen of a female textile worker in a letter to Tretiakov about the suicide. The notion of “an accident at work,” while it rules out inevitability and martyrdom, does not imply complete randomness but rather a given set of material circumstances, as well as a public setting for both cause and effect: the poet’s performances. Kruchenykh places utmost importance on the poet’s voice as “the best indicator of his poetic health” and uses its deterioration as a metaphor for his inability to communicate with his audience:

Anyone who heard Mayakovsky in the performances of his last years, would probably have noticed the way he used his most powerful notes right from the very first words of his lecture or reading. After a quarter of an hour, he would usually start to get hoarse, and the evening would carry on with his voice already strained...It was a physical strain, an extravagant powerful impetus, quickly dissipating his energy. But towards the end, his strength ran out, and Mayakovsky would break off. This is not just a picture of the poet’s last performances: it is the story of his life.<sup>70</sup>

Kruchenykh did not consider the demise of lyricism in Mayakovsky’s work to be at fault, however; it was not the use of “coarse, heavy words” by the poet as both early Futurist and Lefist but the “higher tinkling notes...that tended to go into falsetto, or a yelp; it was through them that the element of whimpering lyricism, depression and self-doubt used to break through.” Kruchenykh sees the final blow to the poet in the weakening of his voice, in both the figurative and the very physical sense: influenza, pneumonia, and the fear of having to stop speaking in public. Ultimately, however, Kruchenykh is convinced that “the strength of this straining plunderer of energy was still considerable” at the time of his death, and does not support interpretations that imply “the ‘fateful inevitability’ of the tragic end of Mayakovsky the man.”<sup>71</sup> By placing his essay on Mayakovsky at the end of *Our Arrival*, however, Kruchenykh identifies the poet’s death with the exhaustion of the Futurist project.

The Lefist and Mayakovsky disciple Semion Kirsanov picked up on the industrial theme for the suicide in his poem "Five-Year Plan,"<sup>72</sup> in which Mayakovsky appears in the form of a Five-Year Plan factory, in response to Mayakovsky's own 1925 poem "Homeward!" in which he depicts himself as a "Soviet factory, producing happiness" and calls for poetic norms to be included in Stalin's reports on the Five Year Plan. His death is described as merely a brief interruption in the production process, followed by the whistle of the Turkestan-Siberian railroad and the call to leave grief behind and return to work. The literary response to Mayakovsky's death, particularly in the poetry of his former colleagues and supporters of LITFRONT at this time, cannot simply be described as "literary fact," since it arose not out of a relationship between texts or even out of a direct poetic relationship with Mayakovsky's act, but out of the politically-charged atmosphere surrounding it. Nikolai Aseev, however, who did go on to play a role in promoting Mayakovsky's canonization, wrote a poem immediately after his death titled "Final Conversation," which is more concerned with expressing personal grief than with salvaging the poet's image.<sup>73</sup>

In opposition to the various interpretations of the suicide as "accidental", the writer Nikolai Nikitin wrote an article on the suicide interrogatively titled "A mistake?" ("Oshibka?") Nikitin was associated with the Serapion Brotherhood, "fellow travellers" who stood for literature independant of propaganda and utilitarianism. In contrast to the political avant-garde, Nikitin not only puts into question the "irrationality" of suicide but defends Mayakovsky's death as political protest. His article was printed in "Vladimir Mayakovsky," the anti-proletarian special single-issue Leningrad newspaper mentioned above, and is mentioned with horror in the RAPP leadership's letter to Stalin. Nikitin did not regard Mayakovsky's act as inevitable, yet expressed understanding and

sympathy for it: "They say it is a mistake. Who knows? I think: he was not a machine, not an aggregate of movements, fuel, combustion."<sup>74</sup>

One more significant camp existed among the sympathetic "unofficial" interpretations of Mayakovsky's suicide: one based on a political analysis of Stalinist culture as a reflection of the bureaucratic degeneration of the Party and Soviet state, initiated by Leon Trotsky. Trotsky's short obituary for Mayakovsky, originally published in *Bulletin of the Opposition*, number 11, in May 1930, states that "Mayakovsky was not and could not become a direct progenitor of 'proletarian literature' for the same reason that it is impossible to build socialism in one country."<sup>75</sup> In explaining Mayakovsky's death, Trotsky argues in support of a fundamental continuity between the poet's public and private lives:

"The ship was smashed up on everyday life," says Mayakovsky in his presuicide poems about his intimate personal life. This means that "public and literary activity" ceased to carry him high enough over the shoals of everyday life [byt] - not enough to save him from unendurable personal shocks.<sup>76</sup>

As in *Literature and Revolution*, Trotsky does not see the need to idealize Mayakovsky as a revolutionary in order to defend him as a poet: "It is not true that Mayakovsky was first of all a revolutionary and after that a poet, although he sincerely wished it were so...he did not come to [the revolution] during his years of inner formation, in his youth."<sup>77</sup> Nevertheless, Trotsky regarded Mayakovsky to be entirely genuine in his political intentions: "The poet rightfully speaks of himself as 'one who is not for hire.' " He describes Mayakovsky's decision to enter RAPP as the first act of violence he committed against himself. Despite genuine motives and an instinctive reaction to the degeneration of Soviet culture, Mayakovsky was defeated by the logic of the situation: "ready to serve the 'epoch' in the dirty work of everyday life, Mayakovsky could not help being repelled by the pseudorevolutionary officialdom, even though he was not able

to understand it theoretically and therefore could not find the way to overcome it."<sup>78</sup>

Not being able to understand the degeneration of revolutionary culture meant that Mayakovsky's rebellion against it was directionless and ultimately turned in on himself. But for Trotsky, the broad significance of Mayakovsky's death was not primarily in the poet's own failures either to challenge more consistently the official Soviet ideology or to break more fully with the values of the old world, but in that his suicide was yet another indictment of the Stalin regime's political and cultural bankruptcy.

When the poet liquidated his accounts with the contradictions of "everyday life," [byt] both private and public, sending his "ship" to the bottom, the representatives of bureaucratic literature, those who are for hire, declared it was "inconceivable, incomprehensible," showing not only that the great poet Mayakovsky remained "incomprehensible" for them, but also the contradictions of the epoch "inconceivable."<sup>79</sup>

The French Surrealist André Breton, who would become one of Trotsky's sympathizers by the mid-thirties, wrote a polemical article in Mayakovsky's defense soon after his death. It was published in Paris in 1930 under the Russian title "Liubovnaia lodka razbilas' o byt" (although it was written in French), as the central article in the first issue of the literary journal *Le Surréalisme au service de la Révolution* (previously *La révolution surréaliste*). Svetlana Boym begins her discussion of the French Surrealists' image of Mayakovsky in *Death in Quotation Marks* by emphasizing the deep impact of his death beyond the borders of the Soviet Union:

European avant-garde artists and writers regarded Mayakovsky as an exemplary, almost mythical figure, a modern poet who seemed happily to reconcile the important epithets "revolutionary" and "avant-garde," a poet who managed to live out the Surrealist dream of "practicing poetry" in the service of a victorious Bolshevik revolution. The voluntary death in 1930 of the exemplary revolutionary poet...challenged the Mayakovsky myth in the West...<sup>80</sup>

Breton's article comes to Mayakovsky's defense as both poet and revolutionary, but it shares some leanings towards symbolic "dehistoricization" with Jakobson and Pasternak in its account of his death. For Breton, however, the universal reenactment of the poet's downfall is not the Romantic struggle with *byt* but the contradiction in the life of the poet between the responsibilities of a revolutionary and the legitimate but fateful desires of an individual man. It begins by imputing blame for the poet's suicide to Tatiana Yakovleva, a "drama" of unrequited love for a "counter-revolutionary woman" from which even socialism could not spare him: "It has not yet been proved ...that a man who has arrived socially at the highest degree of conscience (a revolutionary) is a man who is the best protected against the danger of a woman's glance..." He even cites Engels on this subject: "Sexual love, especially, has developed in the course of the last eight centuries and has conquered a position which has made it, in the course of this period, the basis of all poetry."<sup>81</sup> Although he acknowledges that the poetic problem has been expanded since Engels' time, poets, even when they are revolutionaries as well, are more subject than others to the illusion that the loss of the individual loved one depopulates the world.

Nonetheless, Breton reproduces the essential thrust of Trotsky's argument against the artificial separation of public and private life. But he takes issue with Trotsky's insistence that Mayakovsky came to the revolution as a bohemian rebel and never merged with it completely, even though for Trotsky this did not discredit Mayakovsky as a poet or let the regime off the hook for his demise. Breton's concern was that such emphasis "risks blinding well-intentioned people for whom Mayakovsky, because of certain responsibilities he took on, did not have the right to end his life."<sup>82</sup> Breton's attitude to the act of suicide itself is distinct not only from the notion of inevitability and that of "accident," but also from Trotsky's understanding of it as an act of

powerlessness in the face of insurmountable obstacles. Breton sees it as an act of free will: "Are we in the world, yes or no, that is to say were we put here by those who more or less agreed to put us here or to not put us here and... can we not judge for ourselves whether to stay here or to get out?" Moreover, he states that "Courage is not...to continue living or to die: it is simply to envisage with cold blood the respective violence of the two contradictory currents which result."<sup>83</sup>

Breton of course challenges the pronouncements of the mainstream press in France, which "has attempted to exploit Mayakovsky's suicide at our expense, and in general at the expense of all those who, with Mayakovsky, proclaim the absolute inanity of literature with proletarian pretensions." Such attacks in *Le Soir* and *Monde* claimed that the "purely individualist inspiration that brought Marinetti to the glorification of the war and fascism" also "brought Mayakovsky to the glorification of the proletarian revolution." But Breton equally denounces the French Communist Party press, *L'Humanité*, "the only place, in France, where Mayakovsky could have expected to be defended when necessary," for mimicking the attacks on Mayakovsky's "individualism." *L'Humanité* claimed that Mayakovsky's voluntary death unmasked him as a bourgeois, and that his works do not celebrate "that vigour, robust with effort, overflowing with power and gaiety, full of revolutionary élan and irresistible in its final triumph, characteristic of the working class..."<sup>84</sup> Breton, however, sees no need to insist on Mayakovsky's credentials as a "proletarian" poet in order to defend him as a revolutionary. In response, he ends his article with a pledge to defend what he considers to be Mayakovsky's legacy: creative freedom and the independence of the poet even in the service of a revolution.

In the camp of those who defend the possibility of being a revolutionary poet without fitting into the mould dictated by the Soviet regime also falls Max

Eastman, who, although an admirer of Trotsky, was in his own words "undeluded by the philosophy of dialectic materialism." He included a chapter called "Maiakovsky's Suicide" in his 1934 *Artists in Uniform: A Study of Literature and Bureaucratism*, a work which was written "in no utopian mood of general protest against human imperfection, but with the circumspect belief that in other countries the economic system can be revolutionized without these extreme sacrifices of what is good and of great hope in human civilization."<sup>85</sup> Eastman considers the "phase of natural growth, of free spontaneous experiment" in Soviet politics and culture to have ended definitively with Lenin's death in 1924, at which point writers were subject to unprecedented pressures, and the resulting betrayals of their own literary voice were not always conscious ones.<sup>86</sup> He describes Mayakovsky's final surrender to RAPP as much less voluntary and much more contradictory than Prisypkin's surrender to the zoo-keeper's cage in *The Bedbug*:

I see him gradually driven in, storming and yapping and growling, jumping first this way and then that, crawling rearward, twitching, getting his belly lower and lower to the earth, and finally making a great sudden roaring leap of it and arriving, big and ferocious as ever - so it seemed - in the cage and harness that the dupes of practicality and party hacks were holding ready for him.<sup>87</sup>

Eastman, who was in the Soviet Union just after Mayakovsky's suicide, does not consider it necessary to understand the immediate motives for the poet's fatal decision in order to understand the nature of the historical situation which in Trotsky's words "ceased to carry him high enough over the shoals of everyday life." Although he does view what he considers to be Mayakovsky's uncritical commitment to the "social command" as partly at fault, Eastman views Mayakovsky's destruction as an expression of history. As Jakobson points out, "Majakovskij himself compared his duel with *byt* to the fatal duels of Pushkin and Lermontov."<sup>88</sup> But rather than dehistoricizing and mythicizing poetic

martyrdom, as Jakobson does, Eastman historicizes the struggle of Romantic poets with *byt* and politicizes their legendary deaths in order to link their fates with that of Mayakovsky:

...the similar deaths of these two great poets, [Esenin and Mayakovsky] whatever the immediate causes, will stand in history as a symbol of the devastation wrought in their decade by the twin monsters, Marxian bigotry and Stalinist bureaucracy, as surely as the similar deaths of Pushkin and Lermontov have stood symbolic of the foul breath of tzarism and its tool of orthodox religion in their time.<sup>89</sup>

Like Jakobson and Trotsky, Eastman emphasizes the revealing nature of the political mythmaking that sought to save face for the regime in the immediate aftermath of the poet's suicide: "Nothing could better prove the significance of this act [the suicide] than the obscene haste with which the politicians, so briefly triumphant, rushed in with a denial that it had any significance." Writing from the vantage point of 1934, however, Eastman also notes a shift that took place in the political interpretation of the suicide by 1932:

Two years later, in a memorial article in the *Literary Gazette*, the truth begins to peep through: "The death of Maiakovsky showed how great was still his inner contradiction, how strong in him were still the petty bourgeois individualistic forces which he had wished to strangle by attacking the throat of his own song." Is it not truly wonderful how those words *petty bourgeois* explain everything, and make everything fair and neat and comfortable and nicely all right - everything but the poor dead proletarian poet Kuznetsov! He can not be explained at all.<sup>90</sup>

### **Beyond the obituaries**

A subtle shift did take place in the Soviet state's attitude to Mayakovsky after its initial attempts to reclaim his legacy for itself immediately after his death. A more mistrustful attitude towards Mayakovsky's suicide and his value to Soviet culture resulted in the poet's brief drift into official neglect by 1931. Despite superficial similarities between efforts at "patenting" Mayakovsky's image in the Party press in 1930 and the official image of the poet after 1935,

the degree of continuity between the two should not be overestimated. The continuity exists in the “politicization” of Mayakovsky, but this is a similarity of form, not in the content of the poet’s political image.

Birgit Menzel argues that representatives of LITFRONT, such as Bezymensky, along with some of Mayakovsky’s colleagues, especially Osip Brik and Nikolai Aseev, “supplied...the arguments for his later canonization and incorporation in the socialist realist canon.”<sup>91</sup> This is a feature of the broader argument in West Germany in the late eighties in favour of an inner coherence and continuity between the political avant-garde and Stalinist culture in general. It is of course undeniable that LITFRONT and former Lefists in 1930-31 promoted a hagiographic image of Mayakovsky as a ready-made political revolutionary from the beginning of his career, and that their defense of Mayakovsky was premised on the complete denial of any political meaning in his suicide. Nevertheless, they did not attempt to disassociate Mayakovsky from the LEF grouping as Osip Brik himself would later be forced to do to make the poet’s image palatable in the mid-thirties. Brik, Aseev, and some former LITFRONT supporters later did play a role in Mayakovsky’s canonization, but this was after LITFRONT, and any hope of incorporating avant-garde aesthetics in Soviet culture of the thirties, had been decisively eliminated.

The saint-like “politicization” of Mayakovsky the public figure in 1930 was the immediate corollary of the “privatization” of his death. Although it can be argued that the reaction to the suicide which was required by the Party due to circumstance later provided a precedent for Mayakovsky’s canonization, this could not take place in conditions in which Mayakovsky’s image could also still provide a model for LITFRONT. Although the RAPP leadership technically won its battle against Mayakovsky’s supporters within the “proletarian” camp at a national convention in 1931 in Leningrad, where LITFRONT and TRAM were

based, once RAPP had served its purpose in crushing opposition in its own ranks, it was liquidated for fundamentally the same reasons. Ironically, some of RAPP's arguments against Mayakovsky after his suicide were taken up in the Party press just at the time of RAPP's dissolution. This "showed how great was still the inner contradiction," not principally in Mayakovsky, but in emergent Stalinism.

### Chapter 3: 1931-1935: The Years of Transition

In 1932, the Soviet regime adopted cultural policies that in outward form briefly resembled those of the NEP years, but which in fact served the greater statification of culture. A number of historians, beginning with the sociologist Nicholas Sergeyevich Timasheff, have long identified the year 1934 as a turning point in the process of the stabilization of Stalinism, referring to it as the "Great Retreat" from collectivist policies in both politics and culture.<sup>1</sup> Although it was only in the mid-thirties that this process took systematic shape, its roots lie in the preceding years. The year 1931 began a shift away from the rhetoric of "proletarian culture" and towards some of the ideological pre-suppositions of high Stalinism. But this brief transitional period contained elements of both the preceding era and the one to come, and some of its ambiguities continued well into 1935.

As Clark and Stites describe it, a central tension in Soviet culture of the late twenties, the tension between monumentalism and iconoclasm, was resolved by censoring out potentially iconoclastic tendencies throughout the course of the thirties in stages.<sup>2</sup> As a result of the episodic nature of these developments, the early thirties saw many contradictions in the details and impact of cultural policy, above all in terms of what models the state could look to. Mayakovsky's place in Soviet literature was perhaps the most ambiguous of all at this time.

Mayakovsky the monument only fully replaced Mayakovsky the iconoclast at the same time that this same tension was being more firmly resolved in the arts in general by the 1936 anti-Formalist campaign directed against the remnants of the avant-garde. The turning-point began, however,

when the First Congress of the Soviet Writers' Union in August of 1934 officially set the criteria for Socialist Realism, but left a vacancy in the category of poetic models. The logic of cultural change, framed by the Stalinist regime's quest for its own "new myths," created the pedestal on which Mayakovsky's likeness was later placed. But the uncertainty in the realm of poetry continued for yet another year after the Writers' Congress, leaving Mayakovsky's name, legend and works in a state of official limbo. The reasons for Mayakovsky's canonization will be dealt with in the last section of this chapter, once the reasons for his initial rejection as leading Soviet poet have been explored.

### **Mayakovsky and the retreat from "the proletarian line"**

The first stage in censoring out iconoclastic tendencies was the systematic elimination of the class-war rhetoric unleashed in both politics and culture in 1928, and more open efforts to bring the social and cultural fabric of society into alignment with the Stalin regime's crystallizing economic priorities. As the First Five-Year Plan drew to a close in 1931, the voluntaristic rhetoric of Cultural Revolution was becoming a hindrance to entrenching explicit discipline in both industry and intellectual activity. The Party began to come into open conflict with RAPP as the most critical need for a "mobilization campaign" around the economy had passed.

The first marker of the need to stabilize the general flux was Stalin's infamous 1931 denunciation of egalitarianism - or "uravnivovka" (the "leveling" of wages) - as "un-Marxist" and discouraging of incentive. Stalin's speech legitimized wage differentials which had already been growing since the mid-twenties, and which widened drastically during the five-year plan along with differentials of privilege and power. Nevertheless, the ideological justification of this reality in 1931 marked the beginning of a process which continued through

the Stalin era to a more open embrace of the values of acquisitiveness and privilege after the Second World War. The attack on leveling was accompanied by an abrupt rehabilitation of bourgeois specialists and the technical intelligentsia as allies in industrialization, and the distinction between "bourgeois intelligentsia" and "Red specialists" was dropped in favour of a new classless category of "Soviet intelligentsia."<sup>3</sup> By 1932, academic criteria were already reestablished in university admissions in place of class origin.

These changes were reflected in a major shift to monumental conceptions of art and culture, including a move away from the common workers and their labour as the main subject for artistic production, from the cult of the "little man" to the "big" or "great" man in literature, and from the minor literary genres to "The Great [bol'shaya] Literature of Bolshevism," which appeared as a new slogan in 1931. Part of the old cultural intelligentsia and most of the major pre-revolutionary cultural institutions began to enjoy the special favour of the Party, even though they were subject to censorship and party administration. These were institutions which Mayakovsky had consistently denounced throughout his life: the Bolshoi Theatre, its opera and ballet companies, and the Moscow Arts Theatre.<sup>4</sup> Toward the end of the "proletarian episode" the cult of "Great Men" emerged concurrently in Soviet historiography as part of the retreat from anti-authoritarian rhetoric.

At the root of the retreat from the proletarian line in culture was not only a greater hierarchization in Soviet society but also the new identification of "Bolshevism" with nation-building and patriotism. In his article "The Nationalization of Early Soviet Culture" Robert C. Williams identifies in the early thirties "a shift from a view of culture as the product of particular social classes derived from historical experience to a view of culture as the active transformer of society by heroic individual action, rather than belief in collective myth."<sup>5</sup> On

the "stepping stone" of Cultural Revolution, the transitional ideal had been "neither the collective proletariat nor the individual, but the hero of labor, the New Soviet Man, a new type of individual whose achievements fulfilled both self-interest and social need."<sup>6</sup> The shift away from the collective and toward the heroic really took hold in 1931, when RAPP itself, despite its increasing conflicts with the Party, called on writers to depict heroes of labour in their novels. A December, 1931 issue of *On Literary Guard* reprints a speech given at RAPP's September plenum on the depiction of heroes in which RAPP itself begins to question its preference for everyday problems over larger questions of ideology.<sup>7</sup>

The official dissolution of the proletarian associations in April, 1932 sent a clear message about the change in the cultural climate. An article entitled "Against the Distortion of the Leninist Teaching on the Cultural Revolution" by Iudin, the Party's main literary spokesman, published in *Pravda* on the very day RAPP was dissolved, made it clear that Averbakh's principal crime lay in denying the socialist nature of Soviet culture by maintaining that it is proletarian and not yet socialist. As it was now asserted that Socialism had been achieved, the criterion for judging intellectual achievement of any kind could no longer be that of class but became implicitly that of nation: "proletarian" culture was gradually abandoned for the potentially class-neutral concept of "Soviet" or "Socialist" culture.

A large part of what needed to be counteracted in the retreat from the "proletarian line" was the focus on agitational writing, be it that of RAPP, the Constructivists or Lefists. The regime's initial doubts about Mayakovsky, made explicit in the removal of his works from children's libraries in 1930, actually grew between 1931 and 1935 into a quiet but general retreat from attempts to salvage the "public" Mayakovsky. There was very little significant Mayakovsky

criticism undertaken in the early thirties other than that written by his friends or former colleagues. Opponents of the proletarian line largely shied away from Mayakovsky at this time, and publication of his works, especially separate editions, was noticeably held back right up until 1935.

Although Mayakovsky's own works were not subject to outright censorship, there was a dramatic turn-around in their publication as soon as the aftershock of his suicide began to fade. Aside from the 10-volume edition of Mayakovsky's works which had already been initiated during his lifetime, in 1928, and which continued to appear in a slow and dragged-out fashion until 1933, with the last two volumes appearing more than a year apart - and all in editions of only 3,000 - only three other volumes appeared between 1930 and 1933. In contrast, eleven volumes of his work had appeared in 1930 alone. Moreover, the new publications between 1930 and 1933 were printed in small editions of 5,200 and sold at a very expensive price.<sup>8</sup> The Briks, Katanian and some of Mayakovsky's other former colleagues had to engage in a battle to have cheap mass editions published. The small inexpensive volume published by Gosizdat in a edition of 100,000 contained an enormous number of typographical errors, and yet Gosizdat protested any attempts at cheap publications "on the side."<sup>9</sup> The plays *The Bedbug* and *The Bathhouse*, which were to remain a controversial sticking point in the official Mayakovsky legend, were avoided from the beginning: they were only published once in this period, and that was during Mayakovsky's "honeymoon" year of 1930.<sup>10</sup>

A few individual works did appear as separate editions, but only two in significant print runs, and for very specific reasons. *At the Top of My Voice* appeared in 15,000 copies over two editions, but these were in 1930 and 1931, during the aftershock of the suicide: it was the poet's final work, and given the emphasis placed on it in official commentary about his death it was no doubt

seen as a work that could serve as a denial of political conjecture about his suicide motives. On the other hand, three of the five fragments begun as a continuation or "second introduction" to the work, titled "Unfinished" ("Neokonchennoe") appeared for the first time only in 1934, in *Al'manakh s Maiakovskim*, a collection of essays published by the Briks. Before the establishment of Mayakovsky's state persona, the tragic tone of defeat in these fragments implicitly contradicted the official explanation of his suicide. Later, ironically, the fragments would be studied as curiosities. They were published in the 1936 edition of Mayakovsky's *Collected Works*, under the joint editorship of Lili Brik.

The poem *V. I. Lenin* appeared in largest numbers: it was printed three times in 1934-35 with a total print run of 70,000 copies. At this time there were still relatively few large poetic works of quality devoted to Lenin, and Mayakovsky's had the advantage of being one of the few such works written shortly after Lenin's death, during the period of widespread mourning. Despite its polemic against fetishization this work was more in keeping with the "heroization" of Soviet literature than almost any of Mayakovsky's other works, no matter how political their content. In fact, it may also have been a more desirable homage to Lenin than more conventional ones, given the fact that the Lenin cult was taking second place to the emerging cult of Stalin by 1934. Paradoxically, in 1931 and again in 1934, Mayakovsky's former colleagues were able to publish a long quote from the article "Don't Traffic in Lenin!" which had originally been removed from *LEF* No.3, in a cheap version of his *Collected Works*.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, *V.I. Lenin* along with Mayakovsky's other major work dedicated to a poeticized history of Bolshevism, the 1927 *Good!*, which was not even published as a separate edition, were both removed from a school textbook on contemporary Soviet literature by order of the Commissariat of

Enlightenment, as noted in Lili Brik's letter to Stalin of November, 1935, discussed below. This was in keeping with the judgement that Mayakovsky was without pedagogical value, even in his most political works. Moreover, the deletion from school textbooks occurred in 1935: the trend to neglect or openly disfavour Mayakovsky in state publication policy continued right up to the time it was abruptly reversed by the poet's canonization.

After 1930 the efforts of Mayakovsky's former colleagues and friends were required to push for almost all of the new publications by and about Mayakovsky that did appear. In addition to Brik, many others such as Nikolai Aseev, Viktor Shklovsky, Piotr Neznamov, Semion Kirsanov, Lili Brik and Vasili Katanian either wrote numerous critical and biographical articles or applied themselves to editing his work. Katanian, who dedicated himself to chronicling Mayakovsky's life and work almost immediately after his death, experienced great difficulty in publishing in the early thirties as a result.<sup>12</sup> In 1974, he wrote an article on the history of the publication of Mayakovsky's works that wasn't published until the late eighties, posthumously, by his son. In it he testifies not merely to the neglect of the poet but to the open attempts to frustrate the efforts of his friends and former colleagues even when they were prepared to take on all the work of preparing publications themselves.<sup>13</sup> Only one pre-revolutionary poem appeared as a separate edition with a significant print run: *Vladimir Mayakovsky, A Tragedy*, in 1932 in 6,500 copies, and it was published by Mayakovsky's Lef colleague Aseev. The Brikes were able to publish the collection of essays *Almanakh s Mayakovskim* in 1934, and to negotiate for a new edition of Mayakovsky's *Complete Works*, edited by Lili Brik, the first volume of which also appeared in 1934. This last project, however, came to a standstill after the sixth volume.

It was in this context that Osip Brik began efforts to rewrite the Mayakovsky legend in a series of articles. Brik's 1931 article "Poet V.V. Maiakovskii" mentioned in the previous chapter, which identifies Mayakovsky's suicide as a "tragic accident," shows a marked increase in the narrowly political defense of Mayakovsky's legacy compared with any of Brik's previous writings on the poet, although Brik did not entirely neglect the importance of Mayakovsky's poetic innovations. Significantly, however, Brik's approach to the "politicization" of Mayakovsky in 1931 still bore the mark of the cultural policy of the "proletarian" period: Brik still emphasized Mayakovsky's focus on publicistic themes, contemporary topical events, everyday problems and agit-prop as opposed to the more idealized ideological concerns that began to be demanded in literature that year, even before the proletarian line was officially changed in 1932. Although Brik was convinced that downplaying Mayakovsky as a lyric poet and overemphasizing his political legacy was necessary to make him acceptable at this time, the publication of his lyric poetry, including personal dedications and autobiographical references, at least within volumes if not in separate editions, was not actually prevented in the early thirties. It was still not enough at this time for Brik merely to emphasize the political aspects of Mayakovsky's legacy at the expense of his lyricism in order to push him to the forefront of Soviet poetry, since Mayakovsky's usefulness to the newly developing political criteria was not yet established.

In response to the general stonewalling of Mayakovsky in publishing, Brik's articles on the poet after 1932 take on the character of what Vahaan Barooshian called an "intensive campaign": "[Brik's articles] begin to proliferate and extend to the remotest regions of the Soviet Union. It is difficult to determine how many articles Brik wrote during the 1930s, particularly in local newspapers beyond Moscow and Leningrad..."<sup>14</sup> The campaign was aimed in part at

pushing for Mayakovsky's immediate recognition, not only in publishing but by the artistic circles of the time. In 1933, Brik wrote that Mayakovsky was "alien to our theatres, directors and artists. No theatre, except that of Meyerhold has attempted, with several minor exceptions, to produce his plays 'The Bedbug' and 'The Bathhouse.' Hardly any of our artists read his poetry."<sup>15</sup> But Brik also recognized the need to revamp Mayakovsky's political image in order to alter this trend in the context of changing literary politics.

In 1932, Osip Brik criticized Gosizdat for refusing to publish Mayakovsky's revolutionary jubilee poem *Good!* (1927) in a separate edition, singling it out as a demonstration of Mayakovsky's commitment to Bolshevism.<sup>16</sup> This must not have been simply out of concern for the individual work itself, but also as a means to promote Mayakovsky as a political poet. Although *Good!* is less concerned with empirical fact than with creating a larger-than-life mythology of revolution, Mayakovsky's brand of mythmaking remained suspect. In Brown's words, "just as he does in the poem *V.I. Lenin*, Mayakovsky [in *Good!*] uses his poetic talent to create a contemporary myth of bolshevism,"<sup>17</sup> but one that was no longer "contemporary" by this time. It was still too much associated with a belief in collective myth to be touted as a model during the transition towards the cult of "Great Men."

In April of 1934 Brik published an article specifically to promote *V.I. Lenin*<sup>18</sup> as he had for *Good!* His change in strategy is significant: he now more explicitly sought to promote a specific image of Mayakovsky by means of this poem, by depicting Mayakovsky's deep emotional connection with Lenin, and recounting how Mayakovsky never forgave himself for the fact that he never managed a personal encounter with the living Lenin. He also made explicit use of the poem to counter the widespread emphasis on Mayakovsky's "individualism" and the "limited nature of his personal 'I': "in all of world

literature can hardly be found lines that have expressed with equal power and conviction the transformation of individual feeling into collective feeling, and that great happiness that a person experiences having become conscious of that transformation." He wrote of how Mayakovsky struggled with and suffered from the individualism in his nature, but that "it is not surprising that for that very reason he was able to feel, understand and express in a poetic image that which many were thinking and feeling with confusion the night of January 23-24 of 1924," the night of Lenin's death.<sup>19</sup> On the issue of the lack of "realism" in the portrayal of Lenin, Brik comments: "It would be strange to demand of Mayakovsky an exhausting biography and portrait of Lenin. This theme is too grandiose for even a very great writer to be able to undertake in the first days after the death of Lenin."<sup>20</sup> The article goes on to follow Mayakovsky's return to the theme of "Lenin" in verse after this major work. Whether or not this article, written at the time *V.I. Lenin* began to appear in three large editions, had a direct impact on Gosizdat, it is a significant attempt to make a case for Mayakovsky as a poet intimately connected with events from which the younger generation of poets, though better schooled in the demands of the times, were inevitably separated. This had both potential advantages and disadvantages for the new canon.

Critics in the Party press did make attempts in the early thirties to distance Mayakovsky from their criticisms of the left avant-garde, but Mayakovsky's colleagues, as they persistently campaigned for him, made this difficult. Although the state later appropriated elements of their posthumous image of Mayakovsky, at this time their efforts ironically played a role in holding back his recognition. The publication of *Al'manakh s Maiakovskim* met with much adverse criticism which centred not around the legacy of Mayakovsky himself but accusations that it represented an attempt at resurrecting the Lef

grouping: it was accused of "lefovshchina" ("Lefism") and "gruppirovshchina" ("small groupism"). An article published at the beginning of 1935 referred to it as a "funeral feast for Lef" ("pominki po Lef'e").<sup>21</sup> These accusations were inflamed by Osip Brik's open defense of "creative associations" against the amalgamation of all writers and groups into the new Union of Soviet Writers.

The formation of the Organization Committee of the Writers' Union in 1932 allowed the Party to appear to support moderation and tolerance in the process of actually centralizing the levers of cultural command. It was in fact accompanied by an emphasis on material "incentive" for literary "specialists": its principle concerns were initially linked with improving the material position and social status of its members. By 1934, during the lead-up to the First Congress of the new Writers' Union that August, the question of literary organization became central not only to state cultural policy but also to the uncertainty surrounding Mayakovsky, and Brik had to deal with the historical significance of Lef and Mayakovsky's relationship to it.

In May of 1934, shortly before the Writers' Congress, Brik engaged in a polemic with Fadeev over the latter's rapid conversion from the leadership of RAPP to supporter of the new Union. Brik's article, which appeared in *Literaturnyi kritik*, was titled "On the Use of Creative Associations."<sup>22</sup> He quoted Fadeev's claim that each literary group of the past, be it RAPP or LEF, represented not merely creative differences but was "a literary expression of diverse social strata" and that these groups were liquidated by the Party because they had "lost their historical content."<sup>23</sup> The implication is that their reason for existence was obsolete now that social differences had been eradicated and the class war on the cultural front, as on other fronts, had been won. Brik pointed out the contradiction in this position, since Fadeev also claimed that the class struggle had not ended; Fadeev at this time, unlike more

hardline opponents of "proletarian culture" such as Iudin, tried to find a happy marriage between the shift from the "proletarian" line to "Socialist" culture and the continued importance of "class struggle" to Soviet ideology.<sup>24</sup> This was indeed a central contradiction in the ideological premises of Socialist Realism, especially at this early stage. Brik argued that Soviet literature had not reached the end of debate and controversy, firstly because no writers had yet "liquidated all the prejudices of anti-proletarian ideology," and secondly because not every literary disagreement or creative problem constituted a social contradiction.<sup>25</sup> The first reason is interesting because it contains an implicit defense against the attacks on Mayakovsky's failure to purge his "petty-bourgeois" or individualist tendencies: "These habits and mistakes are not the same in all [writers], but they exist for all, and no one can escape this internal struggle and work on oneself." In fact, for Brik this was one of the principle reasons for Lef's existence: "In this struggle with the past, in this work on oneself...is the sense of genuinely creative literary associations...the attempts to found such creative associations were expressed in the organization of literary groups such as LEF, the Constructivists, 'Kuznitsa' [The Smithy] and others."<sup>26</sup> He argued that these groups fell apart not because the very idea of "creative associations" of any kind had outlived itself, but because the particular bases on which these groups were formed in the twenties lost their relevance and demanded a new regrouping. The function of "creative associations" could therefore still be to stimulate "an organically developing creative community among writers," and Brik argued that such associations should continue to exist under the supervision of the Writers' Union. In the edition of *Literaturnyi kritik* which followed the one containing Brik's article on the subject, E. Usievich responded by condemning *Al'manakh s Maiakovskim* as an attempt by the "Lefists" to revive themselves.<sup>27</sup>

The period 1932-34 included some reactive developments which gave the appearance of state support for literary diversity, such as the favourable discussion of fellow travellers and some avant-garde writers, at least the more "apolitical" ones such as Babel, Ehrenburg, and Khlebnikov in the pages of *Literaturnaia gazeta*. Although the more avowedly "left" avant-garde writers did not fare so well, some of Mayakovsky's defenders could be more daring than Brik in their defense of the poet's avant-garde heritage. V. Pertsov, who would later write the most respected Soviet biography of Mayakovsky along largely official lines, in 1933 defended the techniques of hyperbolic exaggeration, the grotesque and the "distortion of familiarities" ("defamiliarization," or *ostranenie*), as used by left artists like Mayakovsky, Kirsanov and Georg Grosz, as legitimate methods of realism.<sup>28</sup> This sparked a debate over subjectivity and realism; Fadeev responded by counterposing the "petty-bourgeois" line in the arts, which for him at this time included not only Pil'niak, Lef and Meyerhold but also Eisenstein and Mayakovsky, to the "proletarian-democratic" line, with which Socialist Realism was officially claimed to be linked by "heritage," represented by *Pravda*, Gorky, and Demian Bedny.<sup>29</sup> Shortly after the Party's dissolution of the proletarian associations in 1932, Fadeev could still praise RAPP's struggle against all tendencies associated with the pre-Plan era: not only against "Voronskyism/Trotskyism" and "rightists" in the Party, but also against proletkultism and the "left opposition" within RAPP's own ranks. In other words, those who raised an agitational image of Mayakovsky as a banner, such as Brigade M-1 and others who left to form LITFRONT, Mayakovsky's supporters among the RAPP youth and the Komsomol, his former colleagues or even Mayakovsky himself, did not benefit in the short term from the retreat from the notion of "proletarian culture." And yet, "the formula of 'socialist realism' which the union [of Soviet Writers] adopted [in 1932] was not originally conceived as a

party line, any more than the union was conceived as an instrument of total party control over literature...their disciplinary uses came later with the mounting political tension of 1935-1936."<sup>30</sup>

It was precisely this uncertainty about the new criteria for literature that allowed for relative tolerance of literary diversity at this time, rather than a genuine "thaw" in cultural policy. As Katerina Clark argues, "It was almost as if the fact that there was no new cultural model meant that it was not clear which trends might threaten its purity...By contrast, the two adjacent periods which were dominated by coherent cultural models (1928-31, and 1936-37) saw massive 'witchhunts' of writers."<sup>31</sup> The "liberalization" which did occur bore the mark of being motivated by short-term ends in its exaggerated, polemical bias against proletarian writers, for the purpose of counteracting the influence of the proletarian line. And the retreat from the proletarian line and the logic of the slogan "Great Literature of Bolshevism" demanded a return to a standard inventory of models and a search for new individual literary icons: Gorky had been established since 1931 as the figurehead in Soviet prose.

But the uncertainty in cultural politics did not allow for a definitive attitude towards such a stridently political yet contradictory poet as Mayakovsky. Although the period 1931-34 produced relatively unrestricted conditions for debate about his death and the relevance of his work to the conditions of the thirties compared with later years, the shift in official attitudes towards his legacy took an almost inverted course to that experienced by some of the avant-garde. The "witchhunt" to which he was subjected in the last years of his life was briefly eclipsed by the praise heaped on him during the aftershock of his death - at the height of "proletarian" attacks on fellow travellers - which in turn gave way to neglect just as greater tolerance for fellow travellers emerged. Because it was not yet clear which trends might threaten the "purity" of the new cultural model,

more openly political poets were for a time almost more suspect than apolitical fellow travellers, although Mayakovsky was never as disfavoured as patently non-Soviet poets like Akhmatova or Mandelshtam.

Although the cultural shift of the early thirties is what made it ultimately possible to "resurrect" Mayakovsky as a Socialist Realist poet by laying the ground for a further step away from the legacy of the twenties, the immediate impact of the abrupt retreat from central elements of the proletarian line put his usefulness into serious question. The lingering influence of the avant-garde's conception of agitational as opposed to ideological literature, and the need to extend a hand of reconciliation to the old cultural intelligentsia, meant that it was safer to reserve official judgement on such a controversial figure as Mayakovsky for the moment.

### **The Writers' Union and the Mayakovsky debate**

The year 1934 marked another step towards the replacement of the cultural remnants of the twenties by a new worked-out vision. The institutionalization of Socialist Realism as a formal doctrine, the consolidation of the Writers' Union against lingering support for diverse literary associations, and the call for the "heroization" of Soviet literature from Andrei Zhdanov, Central Committee secretary and Stalin's political representative at the Writers' Congress in August of that year, were all part of the "monumentalization" of Soviet culture. Even before the Writers' Congress, Glavlit had obtained power of censorship over all literature, plays, films, ballets, broadcasts, and even circus acts produced in the USSR by February 1934. The year 1934 also saw the introduction of the term "meritorious artist," the restoration of academic degrees, and the creation of the order of Hero of the Soviet Union.<sup>32</sup> There was also a shift in the most important aspect of state symbolism: the erosion of the Lenin

cult and the emergence of the cult of Stalin. In 1934 the Stalin prize replaced the Order of Lenin, and although Lenin's image could not be dispensed with entirely, it was relegated largely to museums while the Stalin cult held centre stage in popular culture.<sup>33</sup>

Some artists of the period, such as the architect Mikhail Barshch, later identified the primary cause of the 1934 "turn-around" as the "cult of personality."<sup>34</sup> But the progression towards more and more centralized literary control was not simply the result of arbitrary or gratuitous megalomania. It was a reflection of the very real need to express the state's developing economic and political orientation in a new mythology, to clothe itself in images of victories, achievements and unchallenged authority, and to sever its connection with competing collectivist myths of Bolshevism while denying any real rupture with the legacy of 1917. The "cult of personality" was an inescapable function of this; as the editorial of the important journal *Literaturnyi kritik* proclaimed in June of 1934, before the first Writers' Congress even opened, "We will found the image of the hero of our epoch: the first all-Russian congress of Soviet writers...will open a new page in Soviet Socialist literature."<sup>35</sup>

Despite the signs that pointed to the statification of culture, the understanding of 1934 and of the Writers' Congress in particular as a turning point came largely in hindsight. At the time, because of hopes raised by greater tolerance for literary diversity between 1932 and 1934, the Congress was welcomed by many writers and artists as a sign of official relaxation in the realm of literature. Stephen Cohen argues that a major reason for this was the appearance of Bukharin as one of the three official speakers, because he was known as a long-standing opponent of party dictates in literature and had become known in the early thirties as a defender of disfavoured writers such as Mandelshtam and Ehrenburg: "his presence on the rostrum seemed to confirm

expectations of a reconciliation between the regime and the cultural intelligentsia.<sup>36</sup> Bukharin's speech called for "diverse unity" under the banner of Socialist Realism, which for him could not come about through orders issued by the state.

But the other reason for the historical significance of Bukharin's address to the Writers' Congress is that it initiated the last genuine public debate about Mayakovsky in an official forum until the late eighties. The balance of Bukharin's evaluation of Mayakovsky is full of admiration for his novelty and suitability to the times in which he wrote: "...his whole ebullient, choppy, short-worded system of rhythms, bold and self-assured...was really an apt reflection of the rhythm of the street and the square, of the headstrong dynamics of the revolutionary semi-chaos, within whose womb was gradually maturing the chiselled, organized force of the new-born society."<sup>37</sup> Bukharin acknowledged that Mayakovsky "lived on" in almost every young poet, and that his poetic methods had become a permanent part of Soviet literature. But given that the thrust of Bukharin's speech was to argue that Soviet art must reflect the diversity of life, his evaluation of Mayakovsky was aimed against the elevation of agitational poetry as a timeless model.

Our poetry is sometimes elementary - and this happens all too often in the case of people whose ideas are closest to ours...we often accept a rhymed slogan as poetry. You may mention Mayakovsky. But time has set its stamp on him too: because life has grown infinitely more complex, and we have to keep moving forward...It is time to put a stop once and for all to Bohemianism and the squabbles of literary cliques.

Bukharin's attempt to counter the narrower conception of Socialist Realism with which he was competing meant that he had to counter the narrowly agitational image of Mayakovsky promoted by the political avant-garde. Some of his criticisms echo those of Trotsky in *Literature and Revolution*, who was able to praise Mayakovsky as a voice of his times while deplored the

tendency to artificially “tack on” political slogans to poetry. But whereas Trotsky in 1923 could praise Demian Bedny as a more organic example of a political poet, by 1934 Bukharin evidently saw his own role as one of countering the shift towards mandatory tendentiousness of all stripes. He considered Bedny’s work to be in danger of becoming out-of-date as well, despite the poet’s attempts to renew his subject matter. Although the “rhymed slogan” was in fact already giving way to the call for a “Great Literature of Bolshevism,” Bukharin argued that the era demanded “synthetic poetry-making, of monumental poetic works.” But by this he meant a more organic, complex, well-rounded literature, not the type of “monumental” canon that was to be established. The example he emphasized was Pasternak, despite his remoteness from current affairs, arguing that Pasternak’s originality was a strength when it allowed him to avoid rhymed prose, but also a weakness when it allowed him to stray into egocentricity. Although Bukharin’s speech was understood at the time and subsequently as an argument for the canonization of Pasternak, he was in fact defending the role of apolitical and lyric poets in Soviet literary development more generally. The debate at the Congress had implications that went beyond the evaluation of individual poets and writers, and Bukharin was supporting a “liberal” platform in literature which corresponded with his stance on other matters of Party policy, at a time when a “moderate” faction of the Politburo led by Kirov was attempting to win over the Stalin faction to a more conciliatory position.<sup>38</sup>

In fact, it was not the question of Mayakovsky’s status among the “Soviet classics” that was of concern to Bukharin. His praise for Mayakovsky’s historic contribution to Soviet poetry was less inhibited than that of many others at this time, but his concern was the question of Mayakovsky’s influence on contemporary poets, now that the “chiselled, organized force of the new-born

society" had reached a higher level of maturity. But again, it was not the influence of Mayakovsky's poetic innovations that posed the problem, but the reduction of his method to "rhymed slogans" by Komsomol poets such as Alexander Bezymensky, whom Mayakovsky himself had never ranked very highly. Bezymensky was an important figure to comment on in respect to Mayakovsky's posthumous influence, because he had been a leading representative of LITFRONT. Bukharin's critique of what had become of Mayakovsky's influence in the early thirties is clearest in his comments on Aseev, whom he calls "the most orthodox 'Mayakovskyite'." The implication is that the emphasis of the political avant-garde on "actuality" was not inherently problematic, but that it should be based on the changing demands of the era, not on the slavish reworking of old formulas.

... [Aseev's] unquestionable talent is cramped by his theoretical outlook. He does not see that the "agitational piece" of Mayakovsky can no longer satisfy, that it has become too elementary, that what is required now is more diversity, more generalization, that the need is arising for monumental poetic painting, that all the sources of lyric verse have been opened and that the very conception of "actuality" is becoming a different one.

Unfortunately, however, Bukharin's bold evaluation of Soviet poetry was also cramped by his own "theoretical outlook." Bukharin's comments on Aseev and Mayakovsky, in the context of the thrust of his speech, appear to support the accusations levelled at the Soviet political avant-garde for their complicity in entrenching literary utilitarianism in Soviet literature. His vision of a "monumental poetic painting" is marked by the enormous illusions held by Bukharin and others in the temporary liberalization that characterized not only cultural questions but also aspects of economic policy and state repression.<sup>39</sup> For this reason Bukharin makes a neat distinction between "agitational" and "monumental" poetry without any concrete analysis of the way in which the avant-garde's conception of "utilitarianism" in the twenties was being distorted,

or the manner in which a call for a monumental literature and an end to "literary cliques" could be used to silence iconoclasm, both in terms of formal innovation and social critique.

Aseev also presented a short evaluation of Mayakovsky at the Writers' Congress, which emphasized the latter's importance in founding a historically new poetic type: a type which represented a break with all traditional images of the poet and which was made possible by means of the Revolution.<sup>40</sup> Once again the approach of Mayakovsky's former Lef colleagues was to link his legacy inseparably with both the Revolution with a version of the left avant-garde's conception of the poet's role. Although this had by now indeed already suffered from further reduction to the level of agitation in the narrow sense, it did maintain a tenuous link with a broader notion of social transformation through formal innovation, which had been signified by Mayakovsky's own notion of "the file of language." At the Congress Mayakovsky's former colleagues were again accused of attempting to resurrect "small groupism" with the publication *Al'manakh s Maiakovskim*, by the former *October* poet and organizer, Aleksandr Alekseevich Zharov.<sup>41</sup> Although Aseev's interpretation of Mayakovsky and the "new poetic type" was worthy of criticism, it was not at this time identical with the platform Bukharin was striving to oppose.

Another example at the Congress of the rejection of Mayakovsky's methods as outdated came in the discussion on drama. The keynote address on this subject was given by V.Ia. Kirpotin, who attacked in passing the "rationalistic, abstract form" which "repeats today the creative practice (historically justified in its day) of Mayakovsky in the drama and Meyerhold in the theatre," and which represents "a mortal danger both for dramaturgy and for theatre." Instead, Kirpotin counterposed the precepts of Stanislavsky's theatre, which he cited at great length.<sup>42</sup>

That Bukharin was able to spark a debate about agitational poetry and Mayakovsky, despite the fact that he had been demoted from full to candidate membership on the Central Committee earlier that same year, is an indication of the unresolved battle with moderates in the Politburo.<sup>43</sup> But it is also indicative of the lack of poetic models, as opposed to prose writers, of which the advocates of Socialist Realism could make ready use. By 1937, with Bukharin in jail and Mayakovsky declared head of the Soviet poetic pantheon, *Pravda* singled out Bukharin's speech to the Writers' Congress as an attempt to "disorient and demoralize non-party writers."<sup>44</sup> In 1990, Vadim Kovsky, in an article addressing the controversy on Mayakovsky of the late eighties, wrote: "For a long time we imagined Bukharin's speech - precisely in connection with the theme of Mayakovsky - to be almost the trick of a class enemy, although Bukharin called Mayakovsky a 'Soviet classic,' who 'lives in almost every young poet'... while Gorky in his concluding address poured oil on the fire, accusing Bukharin for the fact that in discussing Mayakovsky he 'did not mention the harmful - in my opinion - hyperbolism, characteristic of this extremely influential poet.'"<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, the speeches of the other two featured speakers at the Writers' Congress, Gorky and Zhdanov, went on to become official sources of the doctrine of Socialist Realism.

The last official word on Mayakovsky at the Writers' Congress was made clear by the Central Committee's delegate, the head of its Cultural Section, Aleksei Stetsky: "I also don't know of any decisions of the Party and government about the canonization of Mayakovsky. Mayakovsky is a powerful poet, a poet of the revolution, but we have made no decision to emulate all our Soviet poetry according to Mayakovsky alone."<sup>46</sup> That Stetsky felt the need to make such a direct statement of denial speaks to the intensity the controversy about Mayakovsky took on at the Congress; at the end of the Congress Stetsky in fact

had to pursue the question with the Politburo for clarification.<sup>47</sup> Clearly, the debate on Mayakovsky at the 1934 Congress only partly reflected what was truly at stake in the future direction of Soviet literature.

### **After the Writers' Congress: Mayakovsky and the Avant-garde**

Even after the Writers' Congress took a decisive step in constructing a "pedestal" for the new monuments of model Soviet literature, another year elapsed before Mayakovsky was placed on it. In fact, as Lili Brik's now infamous letter of complaint to Stalin of November 24, 1935 testifies, it was not merely a question of Mayakovsky's rejection as official poet but his continued neglect in publishing and scholarship and the outright sabotage of efforts by his friends to promote his memory: the year 1935 showed signs not of simple neglect but open disfavour, such as the removal of Mayakovsky's works from a textbook in that very year.<sup>48</sup> Clearly, the official attitude to Mayakovsky was not slowly evolving in tandem with a progressive reworking of his image even after the Writers' Congress, but was heading in a different direction.

At the same time, other poetic contenders were also being eliminated. Some support had existed for Pasternak as leading Soviet poet - and not only on the part of Bukharin - after the dissolution of RAPP until the Writers' Congress.<sup>49</sup> The ultimate significance of this support is debatable, given the dominant direction of artistic policy despite the influence of cultural moderates in 1934. But it is clear that support for Pasternak faded quickly as the "Soviet spring" began to cool after the assassination of Kirov in December of 1934, which many including Bukharin believed to have been carried out in order to disrupt the liberal reforms.<sup>50</sup> Other contenders of stature were few. Demian Bedny had already been sharply criticized by Stalin himself in a letter dated December 12, 1930, for his "slander of our people, discrediting of the USSR" in

the poem "Slezai s pechki."<sup>51</sup> By 1936 Bedny was decisively ostracized for writing *Bogatyri*, a satirical comedy that made light of Russian history at a time of renewed patriotic fervour: unlike Mayakovsky, Bedny's more controversial satire was not safely in the past. The romantic poet Bagritsky, although he wrote politically-committed epics in the early thirties and remained popular, and was also safely dead by 1934, had been organizationally associated both with Voronsky's non-tendentious Pereval group and with the Constructivists and was aesthetically difficult to classify due to his predominant lyricism. Other living poets who were more slavishly propagandistic were possible contenders, particularly Bezymensky; but he was very clearly Mayakovsky's disciple, and more importantly, he was too much a doctrinaire product of the "proletarian" era for the requirements of Socialist Realism.<sup>52</sup>

Birgit Menzel argues that despite the doubtful tendencies between 1930 and 1935 which delayed Mayakovsky's canonization, the year 1935 was not a fundamental break in the poet's reception-history. Menzel states it was always less a question of "whether" than "how" Mayakovsky's influence would be felt, since the "vacuum" in poetry demanded a leader to match the role of Gorky in prose.<sup>53</sup> But the argument that the logic of literary hierarchization predetermined Mayakovsky's usefulness to the state is easier made in hindsight.

There were significant factors which had made Gorky an easy choice to serve as a symbolic institution in prose compared with the more controversial realm of poetry. Firstly, it was easier to set the criteria for Socialist Realism in prose and in fact Gorky represented a literary tradition that fitted with the need for a standardized literary language. Gorky had always been hostile to modernism while remaining associated with the non-Communist cultural intelligentsia: he provided both the legitimacy of his association with Lenin and a connection with a prerevolutionary heritage distinct from that of the avant-

garde, a hybrid that the Stalin regime was anxious to achieve in culture and ideology generally. Also, Gorky returned permanently from abroad in the propitious year of 1931, just in time to step into the vacuum with minimal associations with the cultural and political turmoil of the late twenties. Finally, at the time of the Congress Gorky was seriously ill and did not pose the threat of long outliving his usefulness. Igor Golomstock argues that it was evidently for this last reason that "Stalin decided to make him into something like an incarnation of himself in the area of literature."<sup>54</sup> In her definitive study of Socialist Realist prose, Clark notes that even with the existence of a living figurehead in the person of Gorky, the pedestal he occupied played as much of a role as the living man in setting the terms for literature: "It is difficult to ascertain what policies can be ascribed to the historical figure Gorky as opposed to the institution of "Gorky" as head of Soviet literature, although there seems to have been considerable overlap in the first few years."<sup>55</sup>

In the case of Mayakovsky, it would seem that any such overlap could have been easily limited to the needs of state cultural policy, with the historical figure safely in the grave. But there was far less correspondence between the historical figure Mayakovsky and the norms which had fallen into place. It might be argued rather simplistically that if Mayakovsky did not exist, the state would have had to invent him, and in fact his canonization did require the reinvention of his image. But if this was inevitable, even if it was not predestined in Mayakovsky himself, why did it not take place earlier? The problem of Mayakovsky's suicide was undoubtedly one factor, but there were two more important reasons. One was the state's need for models that reflected stability rather than constant struggle. This changed towards the end of 1935; why this happened will be discussed below. The other reason was Mayakovsky's link with the legacy of the avant-garde, which was kept alive by his former

colleagues. A persistent argument remains today in favour of a heritary link between the avant-garde's concept of utilitarianism and and Stalin's 1932 formula for the "engineer of human souls." The logical extension of this is the argument that Mayakovsky's canonization exists in direct lineage with his own self-created legend, or at least with the image created by his former colleagues. But the contradictions involved in piecing together the ragged quilt of Socialist Realism from the remnants of previous eras explains both why Mayakovsky's canonization could not take place earlier, and why it eventually did.

Boris Groys, as discussed in the introduction to the present work, argued in the late eighties that left avant-garde visual artists supplied Stalinism with its approach to culture through their equation of art and life. He posited that for them the masses were merely passive material to be manipulated and remodelled into an image of the "new man," and that writers who put forward the theories of "literature as fact," "the social commission," and "art as production" were responsible for the ultimate reduction of literature to the form of propaganda institutionalized as Socialist Realism.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, Aleksandar Flaker, in an article on the "Presuppositions of Socialist Realism" made the assumption that the statification of culture is an inevitable consequence of utilitarianism:

...the etatisation of the arts was preceded as well by a semantics which, at the time of the dehierarchising pathos of the avant-garde, reduced the former "creator to the level of a shoemaker, a joiner, a tailor," but the very reduction of the arts into connection with (industrial) production implied the equalisation of the artist with the "engineer," and so in about 1923 the concept of the "artist-engineer" appeared in Tarabukin, and in Mayakovsky even earlier, in connection with the comprehension of "the formal work of the artist as only engineering, needed for the sake of shaping our whole practical life."<sup>57</sup>

In fact, Zhdanov's entire speech to the 1934 Writers' Congress, in which he made repeated reference to the writer as "an engineer of human souls," reads today like a cynical parody of the avant-garde conception of the artist as

engineer. Once again, as in the “proletarian episode,” the manufacturers of a new state-sanctioned culture invoked the terminology and the outward form of some artistic concepts of the twenties in order to turn content on its head. For the Constructivists, the concept of the artist as engineer had meant the involvement of the artist in the production of new scientific knowledge or technological construction - in other words, the artistic creation of a blueprint, not merely its execution as dictated by the state. The blueprint itself had been intended for new functional forms of art to suit the needs new Soviet people should acquire, not a blueprint for human souls themselves. Whereas the Constructivists had aimed to contribute to the development of new Soviet people not merely by propaganda but by their own contributions to productivity, now engineering was reduced to the sole meaning of political manipulation. In *Marx's Lost Aesthetic*, Margaret Rose points to the central contradiction in this process: “Attacks on the avant-garde Constructivists and productivists coincided with the appropriation of their roles as both avant-garde artists and engineers by the ideologues of Socialist Realism.”<sup>58</sup>

One of the most difficult problems of Socialist Realism in relation to Mayakovsky was the question of language. It was in the move to conventionalize the literary language that the concept of “utilitarian” literature departed completely from that of the left avant-garde. In his speech to the Congress Zhdanov had stated: “To be engineers of human souls means to fight actively for the culture of language, for quality of production.”<sup>59</sup> But what was meant by “cultured language” for Gorky and Zhdanov actually substituted form in place of utility rather than unifying them. Like Soviet architecture of the thirties, literature began to make a virtue of monumental ornament, as opposed to clean lines, the articulation of materials, and the “resurrection of the word.”

The new language policy for literature seems comparable to the one advocated in the mid-1920s by such Constructivists as Arvatov, who also used the metaphor of the "engineer," and by Trotsky, who recommended "cultured speech" too. There was a significant difference, however. Trotsky's and Arvatov's agendas for language reform had as their master norms utility, science, and technology - making language dignified and efficient, and eliminating rhetorizing flourishes and other such "redundancies." Gorky's emphasis was on avoiding the prosaic; his model was the language of epic, rhetorized language.<sup>60</sup>

Language reform had been led by Gorky from the early thirties and took shape hand-in-hand with the doctrine of Socialist Realism, and in the debates this sparked between 1932 and 1934, which greatly intensified in the months leading up to the August Writers' Congress, Mayakovsky's former Left colleagues had for the most part defended his linguistic innovations. But while the years 1931 to 1935 allowed for the last open debates about Mayakovsky's legacy, they also saw greater restrictions placed on the publication of studies of his formal and linguistic innovations than in later years. Barooshian argues that the study *Mayakovsky's Poetic Workshop*, written by the Futurist Vladimir Trenin with the help of Osip Brik, which was published in 1937, probably could not have been published before Stalin's pronouncement on Mayakovsky.<sup>61</sup> Ironically, there was more latitude for such studies once Mayakovsky's new status was established and the left avant-garde had suffered a decisive defeat. Debates over the literary language continued after the Writers' Congress, and the question of language continued to be too sensitive to smooth over in the official attitude to Mayakovsky throughout most of 1935.<sup>62</sup>

Osip Brik, along with other representatives of the left avant-garde, continued to see the promotion of Mayakovsky in some connection with the legitimization of aspects of their project, when in fact the state's acceptance of Mayakovsky depended precisely on breaking his ties with that project. Yet after the Writers' Congress, eight months elapsed before Osip Brik resumed his

campaign of articles on Mayakovsky's relevance to the period. In April of 1935 Brik published an article which asserted that Mayakovsky's work "How Are Verses Made?" must be viewed as "an indispensable guide for any beginning poet. Hardly anywhere in world literature will one find a document which bares the mechanics of writing poetry with such clarity and concreteness."<sup>63</sup> But at this time Brik also changed tack completely on the question of autonomous creative alliances: after the hegemonic Soviet Writers' Union was firmly established it became necessary for Brik to make pointed efforts at distancing both Mayakovsky and himself from the "mistake" of remaining outside mass literary work in the twenties. In his 1935 "A Book Which Must Be Written," Brik writes that Lef's "understanding of the tactics of the class struggle was not deep enough, and therefore Lef was often misguided and hence unable completely to subject its narrow literary interests to the great tasks of the revolutionary struggle. Mayakovsky and his immediate colleagues quickly grasped their mistake and Lef was dissolved."<sup>64</sup> It is ironic that the dissociation of Mayakovsky from Lef, which became such a central and distorting feature of the poet's official legend after 1935, was first elaborated by Brik. Nevertheless, it is significant that before the First Writers' Congress Brik's rewriting of the Mayakovsky legend, like that of LITFRONT in 1930-31, did not in the first instance include such a distortion of the poet's literary alliances: each development in the statification of literature imposed further demands on the depiction of Mayakovsky as a poet whose legacy had not "outlived itself."

It is certainly true that the political avant-garde's conception of utilitarianism was narrowed in the course of the twenties, as has already been discussed, and that it continued to adapt itself to the constraining conditions of the thirties. This was reflected in the posthumous image of Mayakovsky developed by Osip Brik and others. It is also true that the state eventually

appropriated elements of this posthumous image in the propagation of its own image of Mayakovsky. But the extent of the distortion in the Stalinist version of Mayakovsky went well beyond Brik's efforts. And although the Brikes and other Lefists are credited, or blamed, for Stalin's decision on Mayakovsky, it is in fact explained by broader circumstances.

### **Mayakovsky and Stakhanov**

Boris Groys clearly links the alleged realization of avant-garde "utopia" by Stalinism directly with the canonization of Mayakovsky: "Amid conditions of intensifying centralisation, the programme of 'building Socialism in one country' and the 'growing enthusiasm of the masses,' Mayakovsky was proclaimed the greatest poet of the age and the Leninist slogan 'it is necessary to dream' was quoted with increasing frequency in the press. In these new circumstances Socialist Realism put into effect practically all the fundamental watchwords of the avant-garde."<sup>65</sup> But it was not Mayakovsky's part-whimsical, part satiric watchwords of the twenties, his "roses and dreams," that were put into effect, any more than his poetics. The necessity of dreaming took on a significance in the late 1930s that was distinct not only from the utopianism of the twenties but also from the transitional years before 1935, and from the post-War Stalin period.

In the late thirties Stalinist culture had to combine the values expressive of a rational and harmonious society with those of extraordinary events and dynamism, due to the need to motivate the extraordinarily rapid transformation of a relatively backward economy into an industrial force on the world stage. In April of 1935 Osip Brik had raised the key question in the state's attitude to Mayakovsky: "Have all the remnants of capitalism and philistinism been eradicated from our conscience? Has all that Mayakovsky struggled against

been removed from Soviet reality? Of course not."<sup>66</sup> Clearly, the answer that had been promoted by the advocates of Socialist Realism since the retreat from the proletarian line was an implicit "yes": although there were still enemies of Soviet progress for literature to contend with, the need for large-scale struggle for cultural hegemony and in particular the question of "philistinism" had been officially removed from Soviet reality. The need for an "epic, rhetorized" literary language and a stable, classical monumentality in Soviet culture ran counter to selecting Mayakovsky as a representative. But in conflict with the need for stability was the fact that the regime had not yet completed its factional struggles or ensured the dynamism of the economy. By the late thirties it needed to renew the language of struggle to complete what the first "Cultural Revolution" had left unfinished.

The year 1935 saw the beginnings of Party purges and the introduction of new, "extraordinary" institutions in Soviet political culture. Zhdanov's call for "heroization" was carried out not merely in literature but in society at large, and one of its most important new expressions was Stakhanovism. As Clark argues, "it was not until the Stakhanovite movement was launched in late 1935 that a coherent cultural model crystallized which was completely antithetical to that of 1928-31."<sup>67</sup> The "new myth" of Stakhanovism was based not on the revolutionary spirit of the masses but on the individual miner Andrei Stakhanov who allegedly topped the coal norm of the five-year plan by 1,400 percent without help from a team - in fact, despite the conservatism of his co-workers. Now the struggle against elements of Soviet society that "lagged behind" was to be waged by supermen, following the example of an individual hero.

The most characteristic epithet used for the Stakhanovite was *bogatyr'*, which places him in the tradition of fantastic Russian epic heroes who perform superhuman feats...The secret of his success lay in his daring to discount established empirical norms and "scientifically" determined limits of

technology...Thus the Stakhanovite stood as an emblem not only in daring and achievement, but in epistemology as well.<sup>68</sup>

The ability to discount empirical norms was key, because it made Stakhanov a hero who could see present "reality" in its future potential "revolutionary development," a cornerstone of Socialist Realism. For all the talk of the Soviet "new man" in literature and society generally before this, it was Stakhanovism that became its Stalinist embodiment. It was not the living, historic figure of Stakhanov and the true facts of his achievement that were important, other than the claim that these were feats accomplished by an individual hero rather than by nameless "little men." It was the legend, the institution of Stakhanovism that was central, and how it was interpreted: "It was considered that only the five-year plans, based on the one true ideology, could endow Soviet man with the strength for such achievements."<sup>69</sup>

Stakhanovism was originally conceived in order to promote competition for material reward, to motivate productivity and justify the introduction of piecework, and to fragment and discipline the industrial workforce. But by the time the first Stakhanovite meeting was held in November 1935, the "movement" took on an added feature: it was also used by Stalin to launch a new attack on industrial managers and engineers who were suspected of intentionally keeping production norms low to show high figures of fulfillment. According to Stalin in November 1935: "...[the Stakhanovites] are free from the conservatism and inertia of some engineers, technicians, and industrialists."<sup>70</sup> The struggle with stagnation became the order of the day.

On the heels of the launching of Stakhanovism, in December of 1935, Stalin's decision that "Mayakovsky is the best and most talented poet of our soviet epoch!" appeared as a headline in *Literaturnaia gazeta* and *Pravda*. The much-quoted wording of Stalin's declaration echoed the wording of Lili Brik's

letter of appeal, but although the letter was undoubtedly the immediate catalyst for Stalin's decision to canonize Mayakovsky, there was no inevitability that it would have had the effect it did under different circumstances. Osip Brik had long been openly campaigning along similar lines to no avail, and even the letter itself may never have reached Stalin's personal attention if it had not been delivered to Kremlin military security by Lili's current husband, General Primakov, Deputy Commander of the Military District of Leningrad.

The response to Stalin's declaration was not uniformly enthusiastic. V. A. Katanian testifies to the hesitant reaction it produced in the offices of *Pravda*, on the part of A. Mekhlis, chief editor, and I. Lezhneva, head of the art department.

Mekhlis... did not evince any particular enthusiasm and asked Lili Iurevna's permission to make a copy of the resolution, but he did it inaccurately (or, maybe, he decided to slightly edit the text?) On the literary page of *Pravda*, dedicated to Mayakovsky, which appeared a few days later (December 5), two sentences from that resolution, which soon gained worldwide fame, were printed with a mistake. Instead of "the best and most talented" ["luchshim, talantliveishim"] - "the best and talented" ["luchshim, talantlivym"] ... It had to be corrected later, in a lead article of *Pravda* on December 17, 1935.<sup>71</sup>

This reaction undoubtedly stemmed from understandable disbelief, as much as from any personal disapproval, but probably mostly from bureaucratic displeasure at such a drastic change and lack of measure and its potential implications for the publishing establishment. Katanian suggests that those "who were distancing themselves from Mayakovsky or were simply indifferent could be threatened with complications and unpleasantness by this unexpected turn-around."<sup>72</sup>

What made the letter decisive was that it arrived at a propitious time. Whereas the proletarian episode had called for "shock-workers" (udarniki) in both industry and literature, the present period called for literary Stakhanovites. It required not only the fictional "positive hero" of Socialist Realist literature, but writers who could themselves be cast as "positive heroes": the individual

embodiments of a new, monumentalized national myth, at a time when the regime was not yet completely stabilized. The state needed a strong current of "revolutionary romanticism" in its imagery.

Mayakovsky's larger-than-life persona, the impatience with "byt" and the notion of the poet as a "Soviet factory, producing happiness", was adaptable to this context. His ability to express "myth" in representational yet extraordinary images could be made to fit with the spirit of the late thirties, even if it did not entirely correspond. As Gorky put it: "Romanticism...lies at the foundation of myth and is extremely useful in that it encourages the awakening of a revolutionary attitude towards reality..."<sup>73</sup> The canonization of Mayakovsky also provided a useful ideological attack from the rear on "Formalism." The wave of purges that began in 1935 led to the arrests and the impending arrests of the avant-garde writers and former Lefists Nikolai Punin, Boris Kushner, Boris Malkin, Nikolai Chuzhak, and Sergei Tretyakov, and this foreshadowed the well-orchestrated "Anti-Formalist Campaign" which was to come the following year, and which will be discussed in the following chapter. The letter which appealed directly to Stalin for recognition of Mayakovsky's value to the state, signed by Lili Brik alone but most likely the work of Osip as well, was probably an attempt by the Briks to avoid the same fate.<sup>74</sup> It promoted their indispensability to Mayakovsky's legacy as much as it promoted Mayakovsky himself. But instead there proved no better weapon to use against the avant-garde than one of their own, reinvented as a literary Stakhanov who had supposedly performed his superhuman feats spontaneously and independently, without any help from his co-workers - in fact, despite them.

But Mayakovsky was adaptable only because this early phase of Socialist Realism required "heroization" to be equated with a dynamic struggle against stagnation and empirical norms, with self-sacrifice and the overcoming

of difficulties and obstacles. It is quite unlikely that Mayakovsky would have been adopted as national poet at a later, more stable stage of Soviet history. The new Stalinist state needed to disguise itself in revolutionary garb during its first stage of development, although it was in the process of resuscitating conservative traditions. So despite the surprise, and probably the reluctance of many in the Soviet establishment, on December 17, 1935, days after Mayakovsky's name had been languishing, *Triumfal'naia ploshchad'* ("Triumph Square") was renamed Mayakovsky Square. The second well-known sentence from Stalin's resolution, "indifference to his memory or his works is a crime," became an indelible part of Mayakovsky's official monument, but one of its first uses came against those who were not indifferent to the memory of the living Mayakovsky.

## Chapter 4: 1936-1953: Mayakovsky and Stalin

Throughout the remainder of the Stalin period, the Mayakovsky legend helped provide a veneer of legitimacy and continuity to the Soviet state through various periods of chaos and upheaval. The purging of most of the Party's membership dating from the twenties, followed by war, reconstruction and the consolidation of a new state apparatus made it all the more important to extol superficial links with the revolutionary past, and to preserve the impression that the period which formed the Soviet state was not completely dominated by literary "mistakes" and "enemies of the people." Socialist Realism needed its own historical genealogy.

The present chapter will examine Mayakovsky's various but interconnected functions during the poet's history as a state icon under Stalin. Although this chapter covers a much larger time-span than previous ones, and the official image of poet does undergo some evolution in the course of it, it represents an essentially consistent process of consolidating that image. Stalin's death in 1953 did not bring a fundamental break to the relationship between the Mayakovsky legend and the state any more than it altered the fundamental character of the state itself, but it did bring changes to Mayakovsky's image which reflected the limited reforms of the Khrushchev era.

The point of reference for the official image of Mayakovsky was not the fusion of the cult of the individual with the cult of the collective, which had characterized the poet's own "Mayakomorphism." Clark's description of the genealogy invented for the Socialist Realist novel is true of Mayakovsky as well: "Once the tradition of the Socialist Realist novel was "created" in the thirties, then...it could be "perceived" in the official precursors because the tradition was

these works. Yet, after Socialist Realism was "created," these exemplars became other than they had been when they were written. *Mother* of 1906 is not *Mother* of 1936; *Chapaev* of 1923 is not *Chapaev* of 1933.<sup>1</sup> This invented history continued to be developed in its details throughout the Stalin period. A 1950 dissertation abstract titled "The Struggle for Socialist Realism in the Poetry of the Reconstruction Period (Mayakovsky and D. Bedny, and their role in the development of Soviet poetry of the first half of the twenties)," expressed the view of this genealogy in a more advanced stage of its interpretation:

Precisely in this period [the early twenties] socialist realism is mastered simultaneously by a series of the best Soviet writers, [and] becomes the leading method of Soviet literature. In the heroic images of *Chapaev* [and] *The Iron Flood*, literature was uncovering the deepest of links with the Party and the people. The peak of its accomplishments is, indisputably, the creation of the image of the genius of the revolution - V.I. Lenin, Mayakovsky's poem, which even now remains one of the best artistic monuments to the leader.<sup>2</sup>

Because the "edited version" of Mayakovsky took shape from 1936, it emerged out of a period which still combined a call for "revolutionary romanticism" with a revived classicism. In his analysis of the art and culture of different totalitarian states, Golomstock makes an important distinction between this early stage of Socialist Realism and the more stable part of the Stalin period after the Second World War.

.... Mature totalitarianism inherited this concept from the earlier stage of its development, but was no means satisfied with it. The language of romanticism demanded fantasy, brilliance, exaggeration, lofty aspirations and dynamic forms; [once] the future had moved so close to the present, had in fact become its tomorrow, all this came to be seen as a distortion of living truth and even as a dangerous flight from reality occasioned by dissatisfaction with life itself.<sup>3</sup>

The more stable regime that emerged out of World War II inherited Mayakovsky as a state symbol which fit with an earlier stage of its development. But it was required to accommodate the Mayakovsky legend as it did Socialist Realism, quietly dropping the language of romanticism. The "dissatisfaction with

life itself" that was personified in Mayakovsky's own legend, and which in distorted form served an ideological purpose in the battle against stagnation and "subversion" in the late thirties, posed strange contradictions in subsequent periods. But the regime was required to balance the values of vigilance and contentment in its symbolism and literature, and the extent of Mayakovsky's entrenchment in the new Soviet canon at its formative stage in the mid-thirties made him inseparable from the Soviet regime's image of itself. Not only Mayakovsky's individual works, but the poet's persona was qualitatively transformed from all previous versions after 1935.

### **The Anti-Formalist Campaign and the Purges**

A last round of "Cultural Revolution" took shape in 1936-37 with the sweeping purges of the Party, military and artistic and intellectual community, and the Moscow show trials. In the mid-eighties historical research began to encourage the interpretation of the purges as a social process rather than the product of Stalin's individual despotism: in his *Origins of the Great Purges*, J. Arch Getty stresses the conflicts between different factions within the bureaucracy, and demonstrates that the party rank-and-file were cynically encouraged to criticize the regional secretaries, who constantly ignored the Central Committee's injunctions.<sup>4</sup> Like the intended strategy of Stakhanovism in appealing to a "spontaneous," "popular" revolt against uncooperative managers, the Terror involved mass mobilization around anti-bureaucratic slogans merely in order to settle disputes within the ruling elite. Some of the voluntarism and anti-authoritarian "left" rhetoric of 1928 was briefly revived, but this time on a terrain that was firmly under the control of the Stalin faction.

Two months after Stalin's declaration on Mayakovsky, a campaign was launched against what was left of the artistic avant-garde, using the

appropriated term of "Formalism" as a codeword for diverse kinds of modernist innovation, in a manner similar to the designation "degenerate art" ("entartete Kunst") used by the Nazi regime. The 1936 campaign against the artistic legacy of the twenties was linked to the final assault on the political generation of 1917 in the purges of 1937. The campaign was launched by targeting Mayakovsky's close theatrical collaborator Vsevolod Meyerhold and the composer Shostakovich, who had written program music for Meyerhold's 1929 production of Mayakovsky's *The Bedbug*. In fact, the more specific term "Meyerholditis" ("meierkhol'dovshchina") was used as a synonym for "Formalism." It was used to describe a production of Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District* in an unsigned *Pravda* editorial of January 28, 1936. The article, "A Mess [sumbur] instead of Music," stated that: "Leftist deformity [urodstvo] in opera springs from the same source as leftist grotesquerie in painting, poetry, pedagogy, and science....[which] leads to alienation from genuine art, from genuine science, from genuine literature."<sup>5</sup>

This article was a statement of policy: meetings were immediately held in all fields to criticize "Formalism," and within months all "left" art was removed from the halls of the Tretyakov Gallery and the Russian Museum and put into the reserves.<sup>6</sup> In March of 1936 Meyerhold was forced to give a speech that became known as "Meyerhold against Meyerholdism," but he included words of praise for Shostakovich, and for this he was met with applause.<sup>7</sup> Later that month in Moscow, he came under greater pressure to recant and join the attack on Shostakovich, but reportedly he repeated the same speech, although the press did not cover his defiance.<sup>8</sup>

In the second week of February, the Writers' Union held a plenary session dedicated to poetry in Minsk, which constituted the first significant event to reinforce Mayakovsky's new official status. In fact, the plenum had originally

been scheduled to take place in December of 1935, and as Lazar Fleishman suggests, it was most likely postponed precisely because of the change in context resulting from Stalin's resolution on Mayakovsky.<sup>9</sup> As at the first Writers' Union Congress, the discussion on poetry at the Minsk plenary centred on the antithesis between Mayakovsky and Pasternak, but now in light of an officially established verdict. A keynote speech by Aleksei Surkov addressed the recent canonization as well as the anti-formalist campaign, and also indirectly attacked Pasternak and the literary platform represented by Bukharin.<sup>10</sup> This did not go far enough for some of the "Komsomol" poets, particularly Bezymensky and Dzhek Altauzen, who had also been a member of Pereval, but who now gave a speech published as "In Favour of Mayakovsky!"<sup>11</sup> Altauzen interpreted Stalin's declaration on Mayakovsky both as a clear judgement against Pasternak and as directly connected with the substance of the campaign against formalism:

...these words [of Stalin] oblige us in the eyes of the whole country, at this plenum, to clarify why Mayakovsky has become the best poet, how he has earned such a high evaluation by our leader...There is an urgent necessity in this, as people have already appeared who are trying to interpret the wonderful words of comrade Stalin in their own interests...those who recognized Mayakovsky and loved him only when he expressed the dark, confused consciousness of a lonely, de-classeed person of the pre-October epoch...those literary gourmands, who to this day continue to be moved by the organic consistency and ideological fortitude of the great poet Boris Pasternak, who, with courage deserving of better use, continues to let Soviet air enter his locked-up, idealistic little world only through a crack in the window. It is these people for whom the Mayakovsky of *A Cloud in Trousers* is dearer than the Mayakovsky of *Good!*, for whom the Mayakovsky of the period of "the yellow blouse," banging his fists on tables, is dearer than Mayakovsky the creator...Such people...hide behind the glorification of Mayakovsky, they disguise themselves, but they must be exposed!<sup>12</sup>

In the literary world in general, there was at the time a clear impression of a direct connection between the anti-formalist campaign and Mayakovsky's canonization. Ilya Ehrenburg later implied that the clarification of exactly what version of Mayakovsky was to be canonized did in fact develop partly in

response to false expectations of a cultural relaxation raised in some circles by Stalin's abrupt reversal of policy, suggesting that Altauzen's concerns had some grounds at the time. Immediately after the 1935 declaration,

...everyone started talking right away about the meaning of innovation, about new forms, about a break with conservatism. Two months later I read... "A Mess instead of Music" [...] The critics demanded "simplicity and an orientation to the people [narodnost']." Mayakovsky, of course, continued to be praised, but now already in a different way - "simply and for the people." In one of his early futurist works Mayakovsky asked the barber: "Would you be so kind as to trim my ears?" He, of course, didn't know that they would be able to trim more than his ears..."<sup>13</sup>

But although the campaign against formalism helped shape the official Mayakovsky legend, it did not take place only for that purpose. Mayakovsky's new status was useful to a campaign which would have occurred with or without it. As it happened, the two went hand-in-hand to complete the process of attacking the legacy of the avant-garde while appropriating those elements that were useful, namely "utilitarianism" and voluntarism. Mayakovsky could now be used as a favourable example to explain the assault on those who had not made his supposedly successful transition away from "leftist deformity." In Chertok's words, "A dead lion was not dangerous. They used him [Mayakovsky] to beat on the heads of the living - friends and like-minded people."<sup>14</sup>

That Meyerhold was specifically singled out as the personification of "Formalism" two short months after Mayakovsky's canonization is significant for several reasons. Meyerhold was a living reminder of the utopian origins of "left" art, and his "de-canonicalization" as the preeminent figure of the Soviet theatre was as important as the new image of Mayakovsky in distinguishing the official literary-artistic doctrine from the legacy of the avant-garde. Stanislavsky and the tradition of the Moscow Art Theatre, so publicly derided by Mayakovsky right up until the end of his life, was in the process of being reestablished as a model for Socialist Realism in the theatre, and the repertoire had already regressed

exclusively to the classics of the nineteenth-century Russian stage. But although Meyerhold would have been targeted regardless of his direct link with Mayakovsky, his denunciation was also important to the Mayakovsky legend itself. In January of 1936, before the appearance of the *Pravda* editorial, Meyerhold had announced his intention to revive Mayakovsky's play *The Bedbug* - which had not been republished since 1930, let alone staged - in his own theatre.<sup>15</sup> This never took place: according to Chertok, Meyerhold was told that the phenomena the play was directed against were no longer in existence, even though Meyerhold tried to respond to the new demands by planning an "optimistic, inspiring, life-affirming" production, under the title *A Fabulous Comedy (Feericheskaiia komediia)* and "even suggested putting the number-one miner Stakhanov on the stage."<sup>16</sup> Meyerhold's theatre was "liquidated" by an edict of January, 1938 and he was finally arrested in June, 1939 after a speech to theatre directors calling for the loosening of controls over repertoire and productions; among other things he was charged with his stagings of *The Bedbug* and *The Bathhouse*. Neither play was revived until after Stalin's death.

From 1936 to 1938, the impact on culture both in the arts and in society at large was to combine an atmosphere of impatience and unceasing combat with the state's need to erect a facade of confident, harmonious progress and optimism during this uncertain time. Expressions of revolutionary upheaval and disharmony were only useful within the carefully-defined limits of the purges, and the rhetoric of the anti-Formalist campaign was based on this limitation. This was reflected in the continued resurrection of the literary classics, the revival of popular and folk literature and music, which had begun in 1935, and the heroization of the Russian national heritage and history.<sup>17</sup> It was in 1937 that Demian Bedny's opera *Epic Heroes* was banned from the stage because he had satirized St. Vladimir's tenth-century conversion of Kievan Rus to

Christianity. Not only is it ironic that such an event of history should be considered sacred in a supposedly socialist and atheist state, it also stands in stark contrast to the easy combination of the heroic and the satirical in the twenties, as exemplified in Mayakovsky's *Mystery-Bouffe*, which was not only staged but in fact performed for Comintern delegates in 1921. But a driving force of Socialist Realism, and of the campaign against modernism, was from the beginning the promotion of Soviet nationalism. One example of the explicitness of the connection is V. Kemenov's article "On Pseudo-nationalness in Art," which denied any link between the avant-garde and "national" art.<sup>18</sup>

The Moscow trials were the springboard for the propagation of the Stalin cult in its most extreme forms: in August 1936, just days after the 'Trial of the Sixteen', a song appeared in *Pravda* celebrating Stalin as the one who "brought man to birth, who fructified the earth, restored the centuries and made bloom the spring,"<sup>19</sup> and in 1937 cities and towns named after Stalin mushroomed. Also in 1937, the classical, academic legend of Pushkin was celebrated on an unprecedented scale by the Stalinist regime. The one-hundredth anniversary of Pushkin's death was marked throughout the Soviet Union in ritualized fashion, not only in the entirety of the press but in obligatory readings and events throughout the nation's institutions. Pushkin was canonized anew: the fourth Plenum of the Writers' Union leadership in February of 1937 was dedicated to the Pushkin centenary, and there it was made clear that he was to be used as a universal measure for contemporary Soviet poets.<sup>20</sup> As such he was celebrated as both a great national figure of Russia and a humanist hero of Socialism. Pushkin suffered a fate in many ways parallel to that of Mayakovsky himself, demonstrating the power of Socialist Realism to remake diverse cultural figures in its own image. Clark describes Pushkin's transformation at this time in political terms:

Pushkin was the name of the Russian intelligentsia, but in the late 1930s he also became the name of Russian cultural hegemony and imperialism...It was an edited version of Pushkin that was advanced when the state proclaimed him "ours" [in "Slava russkogo naroda," editorial, *Pravda*, February 10, 1937, p.1] - Pushkin the bard of Lenten rule and a Neoclassical tradition, not the Pushkin noted by others as an irreverent, irrepressible, and even bawdy poet.<sup>21</sup>

Just as a campaign against the avant-garde could now incorporate the promotion of Mayakovsky, the return of a form of "Cultural Revolution" could now involve a final damning verdict on RAPP and on the notion of "proletarian culture" in the Soviet Union. Averbakh and some of his RAPP colleagues were charged with "Trotskyism" just after the Moscow trials in 1937, allowing the Party to distinguish itself completely from the "errors" of the proletarian era by ascribing them to organized oppositionism. The RAPP leadership absorbed all the blame for past contradictions in Party policy, and this had an impact on Mayakovsky's official legend: without implicating itself, the Party could blame RAPP for Mayakovsky's less-than-favourable status at the end of his life and even in the early thirties, as will be seen below.

### **The Mayakovsky legend of the late thirties**

Because the anti-formalist campaign was related both to the creation of an atmosphere of "revolutionary" crisis and to the "great retreat" from revolutionary values to more stable, traditional and conservative ones, Mayakovsky's official image combined both. His struggle with "byt" remained an important part of his legend, since an additional target of the anti-formalist campaign was over-indulgence in "Naturalism" as opposed to "revolutionary romanticism" in literature, an accusation directed at writers such as Pil'niak. The opening address at the start of three weeks of meetings on the anti-formalist campaign in Moscow on March 10, given by Vladimir Stavsky, was in fact titled

"On Formalism and Naturalism in Literature."<sup>22</sup> In a 1936 article titled "A People's Poet," Osip Brik was even able to stress the political necessity of Mayakovsky's fight against "byt" in the sense of the dangers of bureaucracy and petty-philistinism.<sup>23</sup> Also in 1936 Osip Brik inverted Mayakovsky's expression of self-doubt in *At the Top of My Voice* to read as advice to other poets about the need for self-sacrifice: "...if it is necessary at times to overcome in oneself personal, highly individualistic impulses, then one must do this with complete Bolshevik vigor, 'by standing on the throat of one's own song'."<sup>24</sup> At the same time, a constructive image of Mayakovsky as a "builder" and "creator" was stressed over his image as an irreverent critic "banging his fists," as was demanded by Altauzen at the Minsk plenary in the speech cited above. The aspects of "builder" and "bogatyr" (epic warrior) were also two sides to the Stakhanov legend, which had to combine the values of impatience and discipline. Part of the Stakhanovite value system was that if one worked too fast, it would lead to mistakes: it was not only the breaking of established norms that was important, but also the quality of the product.<sup>25</sup> In the arts, quality was now being defined by the classics of Russian national culture, not the "steamship of modernity."

The 1936 introduction to an abridged edition of Mayakovsky's *Collected Works* provides an example of the first, hurriedly-produced efforts at explaining Mayakovsky's relationship to the avant-garde immediately after his canonization.<sup>26</sup> The four-volume collection was produced for mass circulation in 1936, while Mayakovsky's full *Collected Works*, begun in 1934 through the efforts of the Brikes but stalled until after Stalin's declaration, was in the process of being completed. The 1936 introductory article is particularly interesting because it was written by I.K. Luppoli, then director-in-chief of the State Literary Publishing House, or Goslitizdat, who was arrested the following year. It makes

more of an attempt to explain what are identified as inconsistencies in Mayakovsky than later introductions and articles of a similar type, in which the tendency became simply to gloss over these problems or to elevate Mayakovsky above them.

The 1936 introduction began with a reference to Mayakovsky's own statement that acceptance of the revolution was never in question for him, a statement widely referred to in the aftermath of his suicide, and in almost every general or biographical article about him from 1936 onwards. But Luppolt also referred to the pre-1917 Mayakovsky as a "petty bourgeois rebel," and pointed out that his early work must be understood in its proper material context. However, Mayakovsky's path was not an ordinary or typical one in its details, but "the big path of a big man," and he made, as an exceptional individual, a transition that most in his position did not. Still, he must serve as an "example for representatives of the environment that gave rise to him and surrounded him, and yes, for many of his literary colleagues..."

But this did not prevent Mayakovsky from making mistakes, and in the spirit of "self-criticism" they were openly acknowledged by Luppolt. The poet's early, pre-revolutionary attraction to "destructive principles" and "the explosion of old poetic forms" which led to "Futurist experimentation," "poetic trickery" and "word creation" was explained by an historical context in which he had not yet found the appropriate content for his rebellious impulses, and therefore could only direct them at poetic form. This was linked with the argument that before 1917 Mayakovsky did not yet know what he stood for, only what he stood against, which was fundamentally explained by Luppolt in terms of the poet's lack of allies. It was said to be reflected both in the content of his early poetry - in the motifs of loneliness and personal uselessness (*nenuzhnost'*) and his identification with outcasts, social pariahs and "lumpen" elements of society -

and in his “confused abstract form.” Later in the Stalin period, as the Mayakovsky legend became more hostile to inconsistencies, the tendency was not to be more critical of Mayakovsky’s “mistakes” but in fact to minimize them or ascribe them to others in favour of a hagiographic account of Mayakovsky’s “fully-formed” development. But it was emphasized even at this early stage that Mayakovsky himself did not exaggerate the value of his pre-1917 experimentation with form, which he saw as a “secondary function” of his poetry, designed merely to “épater le bourgeois.” This is an indication of the importance later placed on demonstrating Mayakovsky’s essential consistency. Luppol stated that as a great individual Mayakovsky was able, at least partially, to rise above the alleged limitations of his artistic environment even before the revolution, and this served to explain what prevented him from ever straying to such “Formalist” extremes as his contemporaries.

However, according to Luppol, “the idling of formal innovation led Mayakovsky to wrong conclusion such as... ‘content is inconsequential,’ ‘the word is an end in itself,’ ‘the idea does not give birth to the word, but the word to the idea,’ ‘art is the free game of cognitive abilities,’ etc.” These were the most extreme conclusions of Russian formalism, now resurrected by the police of culture to be used against all modernist art. But the revolution “subordinated form to itself, forced it to work on itself, and form merged with content into one.” Luppol did not hesitate to admit that some of Mayakovsky’s work continued to be marked by the “old Futurist devices” even as late as 1920, in the poem *150,000,000*, but after this Mayakovsky began to write “without transsense [zaum] and verbal idiosyncrasies, without superfluous and unjustified word-creation, simply, accessibly, for the people [prosto, dostupno, narodno].”

Significantly, however, Luppol did acknowledge Mayakovsky’s rejection of rhythm and meter based on music for those based on “conversation” to be a

reflection of Mayakovsky's assertion of reason and intellect over Symbolist intuition. His changes to meter were cast in an historic light in this introduction, as "a revolution in Russian poetic form which can only be compared with the revolution at the time of transition from syllabic meter to syllabo-tonic meter." But the struggle against Symbolist form was ascribed to Mayakovsky alone, and the praise for his speech-like rhythm did not extend to the later "resurrection of the word" in Lef's "literature of fact," which was also directed against musicality and lyricism. On the question of the Lef grouping and journals Luppol stated: "The demands for the destruction of great art [and] the propagation of factography, which meant the general liquidation of literature as an art, were important moments in the theoretical tenets of Lef, but, as is well known, having understood these mistakes, Mayakovsky himself disbanded Lef and - most importantly - he broke through these tenets in practice with the strength of his talent in the period of work in Lef." Mayakovsky's particular poetic innovations could now be held up as examples against "Formalism."

Luppol's introduction also commented on the problem of Mayakovsky's internationalism, which was a contradiction to the patriotic image required in the official poet of "Socialism in one country." Later this contradiction was largely glossed over or ignored, or recast in the light of Soviet imperialism. Here Luppol attempted to provide an explanation for this particular deviation by ascribing it to the pre-revolutionary Mayakovsky, who was guilty of "abstract humanism." The future he celebrated was the "future of all of humanity, all peoples," and was therefore "abstractly international...Such social - we would say, utopian-socialist - tendencies interweave and compete in the early Mayakovsky with cosmic tendencies..." But his poetry politicized, and consequently moved from the cosmic and abstract sphere to the "earthly" and concrete - and presumably national - sphere.

Luppolt emphasized that although Mayakovsky began not as a "creator" (*sozidatel'*) but as a "destroyer" (*razrushitel'*), "he became Mayakovsky precisely in [his] revolutionary day-to-day poetic work," in other words, as a patient builder rather than as an impatient rebel. A link was made between this judgement and the evaluation of Mayakovsky's relationship to Pushkin and the classics. In his early, impatient days, he made misleading statements against classical literature which were later clarified: "these statements of Mayakovsky the rebel and destroyer of poetic and artistic canons in general must not be taken to judge such an important question," but rather the "systematic series" of statements he made on this theme after the revolution. It is not the crusader against stagnation and empirical norms who comes across as the "real" Mayakovsky in Luppolt's overview of his career; although certainly Luppolt's primary purpose was to distinguish the post-revolutionary Mayakovsky from the pre-revolutionary poet, who was a "rebel" (*buntar'*) but not a "fighter" (*borets*). Mayakovsky the poet-fighter and Mayakovsky the poet-builder remained competing aspects of the legend from this time until the end of the Soviet period.

Although the introduction is signed by Luppolt alone, this abridged edition of Mayakovsky's works, published in 1936, was the product of joint editorship with Lili Brik. Both Osip and Lili Brik were notable exceptions to the purging of Mayakovsky's past during the Stalin period, both literally and figuratively, although their status was often tenuous. In his suicide letter Mayakovsky had entrusted his unpublished works and archival material to the Briks, not the State Literary Museum, to which he had left his "Twenty Years of Work" exhibit. The Briks were at first useful due to their possession of Mayakovsky's papers and their necessary help in editing and preparing his works for publication. They formed part of an editorial collective that was briefly recognized, at least

informally, as responsible for the completion of the second edition of Mayakovsky's *Collected Works*, which they themselves had begun in 1934. The collective was made up almost exclusively of Mayakovsky's former friends and colleagues: Vladimir Trenin, Nikolai Khardzhiev, L. Poliak, N. Reformatskaia, A. Fevralsky, Viktor Duvakin, Vasili Katanian, and Ivan Bespalov from Goslitizdat. The work proceeded under the general editorship of Lili Brik until a purge of the military led to the arrest of Lili's then husband, General Primakov, in the summer of 1936, and she was dismissed from the editing of the *Collected Works*. In 1937 Bespalov was also arrested, as was Luppol, and the political direction of Goslitizdat changed dramatically: the new director, S.A. Lozovsky, who was not a literary man but a hard-line bureaucrat, caused the publication of Mayakovsky's *Collected Works* to be blocked yet again, despite Mayakovsky's new status.<sup>27</sup> Although Mayakovsky's canonization may not have been seriously threatened by these events, they show how problematic his connections continued to be.

Finally, Mayakovsky's heritage was officially taken out of the hands of his former colleagues. By a decree of the Soviet of Peoples' Commissars on Mayakovsky's literary heritage issued October 3, 1938 , a new "Mayakovsky editorial commission" was appointed which did not include the Briks or any of the other former editors. Under the influence of Fadeev, two former RAPP activists, Viktor Pertsov and Mikhail Serebriansky, were chosen, as well as Mayakovsky's sister Liudmila Vladimirovna Maiakovskaia, who would eventually dedicate herself to vilifying the Briks. Nikolai Aseev was also chosen as a more trustworthy colleague of Mayakovsky's than the Briks and their circle, since he was associated primarily with the poet's later years, and had already begun publishing excerpts of his biographical poem *Mayakovsky Begins* (*Maiakovskii nachinaetsia*) to critical acclaim.<sup>28</sup>

The reasons for this editorial change were made clear in articles that began appearing in 1938, such as A. Volkov's "Mayakovskiy and Futurism" in *Molodaia gvardia*: "All the weak sides of [Mayakovskiy's] work of the pre-revolutionary period - and there were more than a few - are somehow or other linked with Futurism, [and] find their sources in the Futurist creative platform..."<sup>29</sup> In 1939, a review of the first Full *Collected Works* (1934-38) gave specific examples of the problematic "Futurist-Lefist" commentary inserted by the old editors.<sup>30</sup> A survey of the history of Mayakovskiy literature published in 1955 highlighted what came to be considered the most offensive features of the first Full *Collected Works*: "Trenin and Khardzhiev in their commentaries attempted to establish the false notion that Burliuk directed Mayakovskiy's poetic work and played a decisive role in the formation of his aesthetic outlook," and "in the introductory article by N. Plisko [vol.1] the pre-revolutionary Mayakovskiy is called 'a petty-bourgeois rebel,' the sharp distinction between Mayakovskiy and the Futurists is not drawn."<sup>31</sup> Particularly "mistaken" was O. Brik's article in volume 12, "Mayakovskiy and the literary movement, 1917-1930," which did not "uncover the true character of Mayakovskiy's struggle for front-line ideological Soviet poetry." The larger amount of commentary to the pre-revolutionary period than to the Soviet years is also deplored.<sup>32</sup>

But the new editors were in fact charged with issuing the second edition of Mayakovskiy's works which had already been completed by the previous editors; the edition was ready for printing when the new editors were appointed, as they admit without explanation in an editorial note to the first volume, published in 1939.<sup>33</sup> According to Katanian, all they had to do was to read the completed final corrections for each volume, or not even read them but simply authorize them for printing.<sup>34</sup> In the delay between the completion of the second *Complete Works* and their authorization for publication, the only significant

change was the appointment of the new editors and the printing of their names in the first volume. The point of the decree of October, 1938 was obviously to prevent Mayakovsky's colleagues from taking credit for their own work, and therefore from establishing their place in Mayakovsky's legacy. The only exception is Khardzhiev, who alone is given credit for the actual editing and commentary, under the general editorship of the new commission. Some commentary on poetic form written by Lili Brik and Katanian was retained, but it was never reprinted in future editions.<sup>35</sup>

The denunciation of "meyerholditis" played a role in allowing the official Mayakovsky legend to proceed unencumbered by the reality of the poet's past, as the founders of official Mayakovsky scholarship began to deal in detail with those aspects of the poet's life and work that required explanation and "reinterpretation." It is true that the late thirties allowed for a few publications by some of Mayakovsky's former circle on the formal aspects of his poetry, such as Vladimir Trenin's *Mayakovsky's Poetic Workshop* (*V masterskoi Maiakovskogo*), published in 1937, and a number of articles by Osip Brik, but this did not emanate from the vast majority of criticism which began to give shape to the official legend in these years. Such formal studies of Mayakovsky the poet were possible largely because Mayakovsky the monument was still under construction. The massive volume of "scholarship," which became known as "Maiakovedenie," had not yet begun in earnest, and not all questions regarding Mayakovsky's biography and poetics could be immediately resolved.

For the duration of the Stalin period, the names of Lili and Osip Brik did remain peripherally linked with Mayakovsky's biography. After Primakov was shot in 1937, Lili Brik was the only general's wife to escape arrest. Forty years later an article by Roy Medvedev stated: "...from the list of literary figures, prepared for the object of arrest, Stalin crossed out L. Brik. 'We will not touch the

wife of Mayakovsky,' he told Yezhov."<sup>36</sup> It is claimed by sources hostile to the Briks, both within Russia and in the emigration, that the Briks' survival of the purges was due to their close connection to the highest levels of the secret police, more specifically to the alleged fact that Lili acted as an informant throughout the thirties.<sup>37</sup> Lili Brik's request of the early thirties for the establishment of a Mayakovsky library, which she had stressed in the list of slights to Mayakovsky's legacy in her letter of 1935, was not only fulfilled, but a Library-Museum dedicated to Mayakovsky was established in the very house he had shared with the Briks from 1926 to 1930, on Gendrikov Pereulok. It remained at this site for more than thirty years, until it was closed down in favour of a new museum at the site of Mayakovsky's work room, when the state deemed it necessary to conduct a "campaign" directed specifically at the Briks. (see Chapter 6)

But in the same twist of political fate that was elevating Mayakovsky at the greater and greater expense of his colleagues, the State Mayakovsky Library-Museum, along with the State Literary Museum, became the organizational base for the new "Mayakovsky editorial commission," which was charged with all further collection of Mayakovsky's archival materials, and with the preparation of an "academic" edition of the *Collected Works*. In accordance with the 1938 decree which appointed the new commission, in August of 1939 the Commissariat of Enlightenment established the position of secretary of the commission as part of the permanent staff of the Library-Museum. The director of the State Literary Museum was charged with securing the acquisition of the literary materials recommended by the new editors, marking a final stage in the official acquisition of Mayakovsky as state property.<sup>38</sup>

### The Suicide Ten Years On

In 1940, the tenth anniversary of Mayakovsky's death provided an opportunity to inundate the press with further clarification of the poet's official image. The pages of *Literaturnaia gazeta* were filled with commemorative articles for days following the April 14 anniversary, including a long article by Fadeev, erstwhile opponent of the sympathetic commentary on Mayakovsky's death in the Party press ten years earlier.<sup>39</sup> There were numerous separate publications on the poet in this year, including the collection of articles *V.V. Maiakovskii 1930-1940* and memoirs such as Sergei Spassky's *Mayakovsky and His Companions* about Khlebnikov, Burliuk, and the early Futurist circle (although the Briks are barely mentioned).<sup>40</sup> In general, the argument for the essential consistency of Mayakovsky's politics and poetics was taken further than in 1936, but 1940 still showed less interest in outright distortion of his Futurist history than the post-war period would. Halina Stephan notes: "Around 1940 a brief "thaw" made the Lef group mentionable, but this temporary acceptance did not change the apologetic attitude with which Mayakovsky's participation in the movement was treated."<sup>41</sup>

The fact that it was precisely the anniversary of Mayakovsky's suicide that was being marked did not prevent the commemorative articles from omitting all mention that his death was self-inflicted, let alone attempting to explain his motives. Although the 1938 entry on Mayakovsky in the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* did note his death was self-inflicted, it made clear that Mayakovsky's canonical status now meant that all talk of personal motives must be dropped, ascribing it to "a depressive emotional state."<sup>42</sup> *Pravda*'s commemoration of April 14, 1940 opened with the simple statement: "Ten years ago - April 14, 1930 - the heart of the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky stopped beating."<sup>43</sup>

The April 14 edition of *Pravda* provides the most striking illustration of Mayakovsky's status as not merely a laudable literary figure, but as a state icon. The front- page lead article is dedicated to him, placing the anniversary of his death on a par with the news of the nation. This unsigned article, which declares that there was now no corner of the Soviet land that did not know Mayakovsky, regardless of language, sits side by side with an article on how widely read were the works of Lenin throughout the republics of the Soviet Union, sixteen years after that figure's death. Mayakovsky's status is now not only attributed to Stalin's wisdom, but to the Soviet people, who themselves "rank [him] on a par with the roots of native literature...repeating his name with gratitude and love: 'Our poet! Our Mayakovsky!' " His "immortality," his love for his native land and the "heroism" of his verse are the dominant themes, and ironically the poem *Good!* is now singled out as an example.<sup>44</sup> This is followed by pages of articles by commentators from non-Russian republics. It is also followed by the Supreme Soviet's edict of the preceding day which renamed Bagdadi, Mayakovsky's Georgian village and district of birth, as the village and district of "Mayakovsky."<sup>45</sup>

*Pravda* also included an article by the actor M. Shtraukh, who played the roles of Prisypkin and Pobedonosikov in Mayakovsky's plays *The Bedbug* and *The Bathhouse*. Meyerhold is of course not mentioned at all, and the roles are enigmatically referred to as "unusual in their devices." But the most interesting comment concerns the "delay" in Mayakovsky's canonization: "After Mayakovsky's death it was difficult to find right away the needed and truthful words to define his actual role and meaning in art. And now, when ten years have gone by since the day of his death, the poet stands before us in all his increasing greatness."<sup>46</sup> There are articles by the new Mayakovsky editors Aseev and Pertsov, but not by the Briks. The Briks are not a target of attack, but

the only oblique reference to them occurs in relation to the only mention of Mayakovsky's suicide in this edition of *Pravda*, in a poem titled "Gendrikov Pereulok" by the poet Margarita Aliger. Although the names of those who lived on this street with Mayakovsky are not explicitly mentioned, the house and street are turned into metaphors for the unhappiness of Mayakovsky's last days. This unhappiness is attributed in the poem to his need for "faithful and stubborn" love and friendship, which reached heights in him that went unequalled by his chosen friends and loved ones. The poet sadly wishes that Mayakovsky had instead "made closer friends with nature" and instead "loved the trees, little brooks and rivers."<sup>47</sup>

This treatment of the suicide seems to be taken directly from Aseev's long poem *Mayakovsky Begins*, which was first published in its entirety in 1940 after appearing in excerpt form, and for which Aseev was awarded the Stalin prize in that year. It too states that no woman lived up to the strength of Mayakovsky's love. Aseev helped to make "literary fact" out of the undercurrent of blame directed at the women in Mayakovsky's life, especially Lili Brik.

But that one,/ to whom he dedicated everything,/an avalanche of verse and passion,/his laughter and anger,/pride and ardour,- /she loved him/only by half./She still saw in him/an awkward youth/in a rhymed shell:/she loved strongly,/but not to the end,/not to the final/ point."<sup>48</sup>

This is only one example of the role played by Aseev in distancing Mayakovsky from the Biks at this time. He also wrote out Osip's role completely in *Mayakovsky Begins*: Lili Brik claimed in a 1941 article that a conversation described in the poem actually took place between Mayakovsky and Osip Brik, and not Aseev.<sup>49</sup> Also in 1940, Aseev published a film scenario for a documentary on Mayakovsky which erased the Biks entirely from his pre-revolutionary circle of friends.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, in *Mayakovsky Begins* he does

describe the history of Russian Futurism and devotes separate chapters to Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh. This was possible due to the brief "thaw" of 1940.

Aseev does hint at a suicide motive in addition to that of romantic love in *Mayakovsky Begins*, one which goes beyond the official treatment of his death: "Now is not the time to judge,/who is right:/his living steps have passed;/but more than anything/he darkened,/having become jealous/of the attention/of his motherland."<sup>51</sup> This is followed by the lines which Mayakovsky himself removed from the poem *Homeward!* (1925), reportedly on the advice of Osip Brik: "I want/to be understood by my country,/but if I am not understood,-/then,/I will pass to the side/of my native country/like the slanted rain/passes." In fact, this entire section of Aseev's poem, dedicated to the end of Mayakovsky's life, is titled "Slanted Rain." This is significant because later Soviet commentary on the poem *Homeward!* emphasizes that Mayakovsky himself removed these lines: a 1978 edition points out that it was the product of "an extraordinarily tense literary struggle and of circumstances in the personal biography of the poet's last years," and that "such moods were not the organic essence of the poet's sensibility of the world."<sup>52</sup> At the same time, Aseev's inclusion of these lines does not stray far from safe targets of blame: it follows a detailed exposé of the "gangster Averbakh" and his crimes against Mayakovsky.<sup>53</sup>

*Mayakovsky Begins* remained a part of the Mayakovsky legend well beyond the Stalin period. Aseev's original title in 1936, "The Appearance and Downfall of Mayakovsky" ("Poiavlenie i gibel' Maiakovskogo"), reflects an early focus on the tragedy of Mayakovsky's death as the key theme of the work.<sup>54</sup> Both the title and the order of the poem's sections were changed by 1940, but the poem still describes Mayakovsky's death as a new beginning, despite the slow progress of his fame at first. The line "the end signifies the beginning" is immediately followed by the last major section of the poem, titled "Mayakovsky

Square," which is dedicated to Mayakovsky's survival as a living monument.<sup>55</sup> By the time another ten years had gone by, the fact of Mayakovsky's suicide would be even more hidden under the enormity of his monument than in 1940.

### **The Great Patriotic War: "the pen as bayonet"**

During the Second World War, the first Soviet war to be fought for the "fatherland" rather than for a workers' republic, state propaganda saw a strange mixture of openly traditional appeals to the notion of "eternal" Mother Russia, and more temporal figures, such as Lenin and Mayakovsky.

Like everyone else, Lenin was pressed into service. The January 21, 1944, issue of *Pravda* carried a slogan proclaiming that Lenin's spirit was inspiring the war effort. In the Red army, said the lead editorial, Lenin's spirit lives on. Lenin is the brilliant "son of the Russian people." This original epithet was consonant with the general tenor of wartime propaganda that was fiercely patriotic, stirring up sentiments of Russian chauvinism (as opposed to loyalty to the Soviet government or working class or Communist Party).<sup>56</sup>

Mayakovsky, too, was pressed into service. Already, the decenary commemoration of his death had signalled his importance to military propaganda: the April 14, 1940 edition of *Pravda* featured an article by A. Anufriev, Deputy Political Instructor (i.e. for the Soviet armed forces: "zam. politruka") of the "N" unit of the Kalininsky military district: "I love Mayakovsky because he is our Red Army artist of the word, by birth, because his poetic word was, is, and will be in the arsenal of the Red Army."<sup>57</sup> One of Mayakovsky's roles during World War II was similar to work he had done in his lifetime, producing slogans and lyrics for propaganda posters for the Windows of ROSTA, the Russian Telegraph Agency, especially during the Civil War. The Windows of the Telegraph Agency, now called TASS, again employed artists, poets and writers in the struggle against the German army. But Mayakovsky was now subject instead of creator, and the "Windows" themselves had changed

dramatically. The dynamism, satire and imagination of ROSTA were gone, not only in the simple, static images that replaced the caricatures and innovative graphic design of the twenties, but in the text and its relationship to the images. "The arsenal of the Red Army" did not draw as much on Mayakovsky's Civil War work as on his more easily adapted later period. There were a number of poems to draw on due to Mayakovsky's response to the war scare that had been provoked in 1927 by the Stalin faction in the Politburo and to the arousal of popular fears of foreign encirclement and the threat of a renewed military intervention throughout the late twenties. Some posters turned lines of poetry into simple slogans or captions while others used longer excerpts. A poster dated December 1, 1941, depicts a soldier in military dress of the forties pointing to tanks in the background; Mayakovsky's lines from the 1927 poem "Call to Arms" ("Prizyv") are put in his mouth: "Our syllables, bridges and roads,/ treasuring their own, related by blood,/ stand on guard, strict and sleepless,/guarding your republic yourselves!" ("Nashi i sklady, i mosty, i dorogi,/sobstvennym, krovnym, svoim dorozha,/ vstan'te v karaul bessonnyi i strogii,/ sami svoei respubliki storozha.") TASS Window number 1000 bears the title "Our thousandth strike," and the line from Mayakovsky's 1925 poem "Homeward!" ("Domoil!") that was to remain a widely-used slogan, not only for posters but in publications about Mayakovsky: "I want the pen to be equal to the bayonet." On the poster it is printed with an image of bayonets, a pen and a pencil pointed at a demonic caricature of Hitler. But it is also matched with a reply in verse by V. Lebedev-Kumach: "I am proud that the pen has been equated with the bayonet,/ and in battle amongst other weapons/ the heated bolshevik word/ helps to strike the enemy!/ Mayakovskyl! Embodying your dream,/ poet and artist stand on guard./ And the enemy is unceasingly and fearsomely routed/ by verse and prose, drawings and the bright poster!" ("Ya

gorzhus', chto pero preravniali k shtyku,/ i v boiu sred' oruzh'ia drugogo/  
 pomogaet udar nanosit' po vragu/ bol'shevistskoe zharkoe slovo!/ Maiakovskii!  
 Tvoiu voploschchaia mechtu,/ i poet, i khudozhnik stoit na postu./ I vraga  
 neustanno i grozno gromiat/ stikh i proza, risunok i iarkii plakat!") It was during  
 the war that the popular Mayakovsky legend became widely identified first and  
 foremost with particular slogans rather than with poetry, although readings of  
 his poetry were broadcast over the radio during the war, usually at the time of  
 his birthday in July.

Throughout the war, Stalin's rule combined not only traditional and Soviet patriotism, but also new permissiveness with old punitive measures, and this resulted in a change in propaganda. Vera Dunham summarizes: "Ideology and its correct exercise could neither manufacture tanks nor line an officer's battle jacket with fur. Some aspects of the ideological superstructure were downplayed...This is one way of explaining why controls over writers in the first phase of the war relaxed at the same time that workers were being shot for turning out faulty screws."<sup>58</sup> Timasheff states that the press placed greatest emphasis on the importance of classical literary figures to army morale: "At the front, in the course of the war, men listened to songs with words by Lermontov and Fet, discuss Turgenev and Leo Tolstoy, read Chekhov, Gorki, Balzac, and Hugo."<sup>59</sup> However, whether or not Mayakovsky was as popular as these writers or other forms of entertainment, he was promoted as a popular hero in the political organizations of the military and in military newspapers.

The State Mayakovsky Museum in Moscow devotes a section of its exhibit to Mayakovsky and the war, including typical material from military publications. For example, *Krasnoarmeets* of July 20, 1943 devoted a page to the fiftieth anniversary of Mayakovsky's birth, and highlighted the excerpt made most famous by the war years: "When before you stands a fascist/Do not find

yourself disarmed/in every corner of the earth/ Be ready the worker's slogan:/ Converse with fascists in the language of fire,/ with words of bullets,/ with the wit [or sharpness] of bayonets!" ("Kogda pered tobou vstanet fashist/ Obezoruzhennym ne okazhis' ty/ Vo vsekh ugolkakh zemnogo shara/ Rabochii lozung bud' gotov/ Razgovarivai s fashistami iazykom pozharov/ slovami pul',/ ostrotoi shtykov!") The letters page of one edition of the paper *Metkii Artillerist* was devoted to Mayakovsky. It contained a letter from a "Hero of the Soviet Union," sergeant A. Levchenko: "The great patriot of our homeland, Vladimir Mayakovsky, hated fascism with all the strength of his soul... Mayakovsky was a genuine Russian in the best manifestations of his spiritual qualities." It also contains a letter by a person responsible for military agitation: "In my work as an agitator I often use artistic literature. In my field bag lies a small book titled *Invincible Weapon* (*Nepobedimoe oruzhie*). It is Mayakovsky's defense poetry. Here are poems about the Red Army, folk-style "jingles" ["chastushki"] about the Civil War, about vigilance, poems about Soviet patriotism. When I lead discussions on the patriotism of the Soviet people, I introduce the wonderful lines of the poet: "I am with those who have come to build vengeance as well./ In sheer fever gripped/ I glorify the country which is,/ But three times over that which will be." ("Ya s temi, kto vyshel stroit' i mest./ V sploshnoi likhoradke buden/ Otechestvo slavliu, kotoroe est'/ No trizhdy - kotoroe budet.") There is a letter from a sergeant who found the notebook of a friend after his death, which was full of quotes from Russian writers but mostly from Mayakovsky: "We, the contemporaries of the poet, see how in war-time Soviet writers and poets, the inheritors of the best of his tradition, help us to crush the enemy..." The official claim that Mayakovsky's spirit, like Lenin's, was inspiring the war effort, was made in the spirit of war-time populism and the "spontaneous" sentiment of the "little man" for his country. One of the most widely publicized events surrounding

the Mayakovsky legend was the campaign organized by Vladimir Iakhontov, an actor and reciter of Mayakovsky and other poets who raised funds himself to build a tank called "Vladimir Mayakovsky" in 1944.<sup>60</sup>

The promotion of Mayakovsky as a "war hero" seems to have had some impact on rank-and-file soldiers, although it is difficult to judge how genuine this was. A number of soldiers wrote letters to the Library-Museum requesting copies of Mayakovsky's works and explaining the poet's importance to them, and the Museum retained these letters in the archives. Many were unsolicited, but they appear to be more the product of loneliness at the front and a desire for correspondence than passion for Mayakovsky. However, they provide an indication of the particular image of Mayakovsky that became an official part of the cult of World War II. One young signalman, who wrote repeatedly to both the museum and to Lili Brik, as much to talk about himself and the front as about literature, stated: "Now I understand what a big influence [Mayakovsky] had on my own mastering of many rules of morality and everyday life...honesty, the rejection of wasting youth on "romances," the rejection of drunkenness..."<sup>61</sup> In a subsequent letter he mentions that he saw a film about Iakhontov and the Mayakovsky tank: "I couldn't help writing him a letter. I don't know his address, so I ask you to send it to me."<sup>62</sup> Another young soldier, Grigorii Serkh, wrote a series of letters to the museum from 1943 to 1945, although he cannot be considered typical as he eventually became a party organizer. He writes of presentations he made for Komsomol activists of his division about "Mayakovsky on Youth" and for his own subunit, where "Our old-timers were interested in the reasons for his death and why he wrote so strangely, and his relationship to Pushkin and Esenin..."<sup>63</sup>

However, most of the letters from the front contained in the Mayakovsky Museum archives were in fact solicited for a project the museum began around

the beginning of 1944: a collection of materials on the significance of Mayakovsky's work among soldiers. One divisional Komsomol organizer wrote in response: "The fiery poetry of the great Mayakovsky, which I often read to [young soldiers] in the dugouts, calls up new energy and passion for struggle in them..."<sup>64</sup> Another respondent sent three photographs of a submarine called "Komsomolets" built "on the initiative of Mayakovsky," in other words based on his 1930 poem "Underwater Komsomolets" ("Podvodnyi komsomolets").<sup>65</sup> There is a letter sent to the editor of *Komsomolskaya Pravda* by a lieutenant who wanted his own poem on Mayakovsky published: "I direct to you for use the poem 'On the portrait of V.V. Mayakovsky, desecrated by a fascist swine'...I carefully got up,/ I see betampled/ by German cobblers/ your face,/ Volodya."<sup>66</sup> The State Mayakovsky Museum archive also contains books that were owned by Soviet soldiers at the front and recovered or donated to the museum. There are copies of the first and second volumes of the 1936 abridged *Collected Works* edited by Lili Brik and Luppol; a pocket copy of *Vladimir Illich Lenin* with the inscription: "I carried this little book through the whole war"; a copy of the complete, 1940 edition of Aseev's *Mayakovsky Begins*; even a copy of Mayakovsky's *Selected Works* with bullet holes in it.<sup>67</sup>

### **The post-war shift in values**

The post-war Stalin period saw two simultaneous and seemingly contradictory developments in culture: a shift towards values and imagery that expressed stability and another campaign for ideological "purity" and against "formalism" in the arts. In fact, these two developments were complementary: the regime was attempting in the late forties to negotiate between two parallel value systems, since the ideological remnants of the revolution could not be openly rejected while an "embourgeoisement" of Soviet society was being subtly

embraced. The campaign for purity was expressed in policies of repression which became known as the "zhdanovshchina," or "Zhdanovism," while a shift away from the language of discontent and self-sacrifice identified with the upheaval of the thirties also took place. Although these two processes developed simultaneously and were interconnected, they will be considered separately here in order to trace the impact of particular themes on Mayakovsky's official image. Some chronological overlap will result.

In her influential book *In Stalin's Time: Middleclass Values in Soviet Fiction*, Vera Dunham notes that post-war Stalinist culture grew out of the need to avert potential social conflict, due to popular expectations of democratization and "the spread of antiauthoritarian attitudes" that emerged out of the populist promises made by the state during the war.<sup>68</sup> In addition to reviving its coercive powers through the policies of the "zhdanovshchina," the Soviet state also responded by promoting new socially-acceptable values, which were in turn celebrated in Soviet literature. Dunham subsumed these values under the terms "kulturnost", a combination of "proper" behaviour and socially-motivated cultural and artistic knowledge, and "meshchantsvo," or status-conscious consumerism and the pursuit of private, domestic happiness. These values in fact had their roots in the thirties, in the formation of a new state apparatus with personnel shaped entirely by the Stalin period and entrenched by the Terror: "The First Five-Year Plan *vydvizhentsy* are, in fact, the 'Brezhnev generation' - the core of the sub-Politburo elite in the forties under Stalin, and of the top political leadership of the fifties and sixties."<sup>69</sup> The purges had eliminated all the different factions of the twenties, and the vacuum was filled by a generation that was uninhibited not only by the revolutionary past but by contradictions in Soviet political ideology in general. Dunham writes about the impact made on Soviet culture by this generation, which she calls the new "middle class." But

this impact was due to the fact that the development of this class "was paralleled by the transformation of the Soviet political regime from a revolutionary bolshevik force into an essentially conservative establishment."<sup>70</sup>

And yet, even once this transformation had emerged from the war in a definitively stabilized form, there was no new literary canon established, and Mayakovsky was not demoted as national poet. This is explained by the fact that the shift in values was not an issue of public disclosure or ideological polemic. The continuity of legends from that of Lenin to Mayakovsky reflects the contradictory relationship of the post-war regime to the population: "Throughout those years... the regime paid lip service to other themes and values. Because of the potency of its centralized, unitary, public mythology, the ruling group itself acted out this ambiguity."<sup>71</sup> Distorted remnants of the old language of bolshevism could not be explicitly abandoned as they were still identified with the legitimacy of Soviet political power, even though "canonized bolshevik tenets abhor everything to do with the middle class."<sup>72</sup>

The official Mayakovsky legend embodied values of ascetism and self-sacrifice which had their basis in the poet's own image, though in an entirely distorted form, summarized by Osip Brik in 1936: "...if it is necessary at times to overcome in oneself personal, highly individualistic impulses, then one must do this with complete Bolshevik vigor, 'by standing on the throat of one's own song'."<sup>73</sup> This interpretation of Mayakovsky had been in keeping with the spirit of the purges. But Chertok identifies the beginning of an attempt to combine the values of vigilance and contentment in Mayakovsky towards the end of the purges in 1938, as illustrated by the first edition of the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*: "In 1938, when revolutionary slogans were discarded, but their rudiments still remained, when proletarian phraseology gave way to 'great power' phraseology, Mayakovsky was declared 'the most important Soviet poet

of the epoch of the Great October Socialist Revolution,' who on the one hand 'never tired of summons to revolutionary vigilance,' but, on the other, sang 'the proud patriotism of the Soviet man."<sup>74</sup> This explains why Mayakovsky, whose image was not substantially altered by the war, was adaptable to new circumstances afterwards.

But in the post-war period, certain "personal, highly individualistic impulses," were themselves suddenly deemed beneficial to the public good: "A model citizen was saddled with the moral and political obligation to be happy as a person, in his private life as well as in his job...No hero could now claim leadership if he denied private needs...Too much selflessness was as discreditable as excess of pride."<sup>75</sup> And yet, self-sacrifice continued to be intrinsic to the Mayakovsky legend, as did emphasizing the public over the private in his poetry. A 1949 Goslitizdat publication on Mayakovsky by N. Maslin, made up of articles published in 1947-48, cited Mayakovsky's 1927 poem "Answer to 'A Dream'" ("Otvet na 'Mechtu'") on the issue of personal happiness: "The question of personal happiness is not simple./When thugs crawl around the republic,/personal happiness is the growth/of our republic's wealth and power." ("Vopros o lichnom schast'e ne prost./ Kogda na respubliku lezut gromily,/ lichnoe schast'e - eto rost/ respubliki nashei bogatstva i sily.") Maslin commented: "The continuity of the poet with his people and country, the organic unity of the personal and the public, finds bright and full expression in Mayakovsky's lyric."<sup>76</sup> One would have to add an inversion of Mayakovsky's line to bring it up to date in the late forties: "The growth of personal wealth and power is also the happiness of our republic." But Mayakovsky served as a guardian of values that still required lip service, and also as a model for the supposed seamless continuity and "organic unity" of conflicting values in Soviet ideology. Maslin identified Mayakovsky's tradition and its influence on the

present day to be in "revealing the link between society and a person's 'private', 'intimate' affairs, in the understanding that these 'personal' qualities are public in essence and in them is expressed the fullness and unity of thought and feeling of the new man."<sup>77</sup> At a time when the sanctification of personal striving for material gain was being translated as a socially beneficial value, Mayakovsky was interpreted as upholding the values of "collectivity" while posing no threat to the idea that public interests are also private ones - as long as they are linked with the progress of the nation. The notion of "collectivity" was now inseparable from the wealth and power of the state.

Dunham writes that the difficulties in the shift from the public to the private are most clearly seen in the ambivalence toward the war hero: "With his populist leanings and lyrical meditations, he took too much to lament and hand wringing...Doleful self-searching disqualified him for postwar onward-and-upward marching...The regime's ambivalence toward the mythological legacy of the twenties and thirties, complicated by distrust of the returning soldier, did not make it easy, either, to work out clear directives for functional official post-war heroism."<sup>78</sup> But because Mayakovsky's popular image as a "war hero" during World War II had not at all been based on lyrical lament, it was used as a model of post-war heroism. Whereas elements of Mayakovsky's lyricism had been celebrated before the war and would be again after Stalin's death - principally in order to disguise the Futuristic traces of anti-lyricism and anti-aestheticism in his work - his lyricism is decisively downplayed in the late forties. In the book by Maslin mentioned above, even the chapter supposedly devoted to Mayakovsky's lyric focuses on his epic verse alone. Another of Maslin's chapters defined Mayakovsky as "Singer and Defender of the Socialist Fatherland" and made clear that he was to be defined first and foremost by patriotism. Maslin emphasized Mayakovsky's military verse and his celebration

of Soviet achievements in his travel poems, but also pointed to his value not merely as a poet but as an icon of the Soviet state: "We value the fiery patriot in Mayakovsky not only for his verses, in which the idea of patriotism is expressed in direct, immediate form. All the work of the great poet, everything created by Mayakovsky for the people, for the country, is patriotic in its very essence."<sup>79</sup>

Mayakovsky's image was used as a counter to war-weariness and dissatisfaction. In 1946, the same year that the Red Army was renamed the "Soviet Army," a line from the 1929 poem "Soviet Passport," which Mayakovsky wrote before the nationalization and Russification of Soviet culture had begun in earnest, appeared on a TASS poster with a drawing of a man proudly holding up a passport: "Read it - envy me - I am a citizen of the Soviet Union!" But Mayakovsky was also used as a balance against the potential excesses of comfort. According to Maslin, Soviet poetry had been ready for the war due in part to Mayakovsky: "Soviet poets in the pre-war epoch expressed well one of the wonderful qualities of our people - Bolshevik vigilance."<sup>80</sup> Propaganda posters of the Cold War made wide use of Mayakovsky's warning to "Be vigilant!" One from 1953 shows an image of a man who looks vaguely like Mayakovsky but in modern military dress, reading a contemporary newspaper with the headline "Spies and murderers are unmasked," matched with Mayakovsky's lines: "Do not console yourself, comrade, with peaceful days./ Reject good-naturedness as defective./ Comrades, remember: among us/ the class enemy is operating." ("Ne tesh'sia,/ tovarishch, mirnymi dniami./ Sdavai dobrodushie v brak./ Tovarishchi, pomnite: mezhdju nami/ oruduet klassovoi vrag.") While post-war culture made a shift towards the model of optimism moderated by contentment, Mayakovsky fulfilled the function of maintaining the backgrounded values of "vigour" and "vigilance" for use when required.

### The "zhdanovshchina"

Most importantly, the Mayakovsky of the post-war period maintained the "old language" in the face of an alleged resurgence of tendencies "alien" to Soviet literature. This was also the purpose of the "zhdanovshchina," whose repressions served as a counterbalance to a retreat from some of the slogans of the past. The immediate purpose for a campaign of literary repression was to put a definitive end to the artistic liberalization of the war years, a little over a year after the war's end. In August of 1946, the Central Committee passed a resolution against the literary journals *Zvezda* and *Leningrad*, which had printed a satirical children's story by Zoshchenko deemed "anti-Soviet," and the "apolitical," "decadent" poetry of Akhmatova. *Leningrad* was closed down and *Zvezda* severely censured.<sup>81</sup> Subsequently, the General Secretary of the Writers' Union, Tikhonov, was removed and replaced by Fadeev, and both Akhmatova and Zoshchenko were expelled from the Writers' Union. This was followed by a full-blown campaign of public meetings in all the arts and hundreds of articles which made clear that the August resolution was in fact a statement of general policy. Andrei Zhdanov, now secretary responsible for ideology, was the public face of the campaign for ideological purity in literature.

Months after the August, 1946 Central Committee decree was published, a special collection of articles was brought out which devoted particular attention to Mayakovsky.<sup>82</sup> As was stated in a Soviet historical survey of the study of Mayakovsky, published as part of a collection of materials for post-secondary students after Stalin's death, this was "not accidental":

Criticism used Mayakovsky's work, permeated with the spirit of "partiness," in the struggle with the manifestations of aestheticism and formalism in Soviet poetry...His work was brought forward as a model of service to the Soviet people and an example of the struggle against apolitical and unideological tendencies.<sup>83</sup>

The “zhdanovshchina” intensified in 1948, the year of Zhdanov’s death, although its effects continued until the death of Stalin. At a composers’ meeting in January of that year, Zhdanov attacked Prokofiev and Shostakovich once again for writing inaccessible music corrupted by formalism, and accused leading musicologists of overestimating Western influences in the development of Soviet music.<sup>84</sup> In February another Central Committee resolution revived the rhetoric of 1936 by denouncing yet another opera, V. Muradeli’s *Great Friendship*, for its deviation from “popular art.”<sup>85</sup> Zhdanov emphasized the continuity between 1936 and 1948, quoting extensively from the *Pravda* editorial on *Lady Macbeth* in his comments on the faults of Muradeli’s opera: “What was then condemned is still alive.”<sup>86</sup> But by 1948 the “zhdanovshchina” also clearly became the disciplining of the arts for allegedly excessive Western influence, and was used to bolster Cold War Soviet nationalism, which included the intensification of anti-Semitism. The attack on “Formalism” as “non-national” in 1936 was now more explicitly fought as a battle against what were identified as “cosmopolitan” tendencies in the arts.

A number of publications on Mayakovsky came out in these years specifically to complement the “zhdanovshchina,” and Maslin led the way. His short, 166-page treatise on Mayakovsky published in 1949 was obviously intended as a political “primer” to update the poet’s state image, although most of its chapters had been published separately as polemical anti-formalist articles before this.<sup>87</sup> Maslin held Mayakovsky up as a model against the most “extreme example” of bourgeois influences, Boris Pasternak: “The propagation of a bourgeois-individualist understanding of art, the theory of ‘pure art,’ which points to the links of B. Pasternak’s poetry with decadence, is the logical completion of Pasternak’s artistic route, which in its very essence is counterposed to the route of Mayakovsky.”<sup>88</sup> Maslin took great pains to insist

that "to speak of Mayakovsky's influence on Soviet poetry does not mean to speak of the imitation of his outward devices," which are products of a particular social context.<sup>89</sup> He cited N.K. Krupskaia's 1931 memoirs on Lenin's negative reaction to a reading of Mayakovsky's 1918 poem "Our March," as an illustration of the poet's "formalist" errors. And yet, in Mayakovsky's poetry in general, "the new content is the defining feature."<sup>90</sup>

An ongoing controversy over Lenin's attitude to Mayakovsky had begun in 1931 between the Old Bolshevik Bonch-Bruevich, whose own memoirs on Lenin were in agreement with Krupskaia's account of Lenin's aversion to Mayakovsky, and Aseev, who sought to reconstruct a good relationship between Mayakovsky and Lenin.<sup>91</sup> Lenin's criticism of Mayakovsky had been brought up again by V. Meilakh in 1940,<sup>92</sup> and would be raised again during the Thaw in the controversial 1958 *New Material on Mayakovsky* (see Chapter 5). But Maslin's reference to Lenin and Mayakovsky was significant for another reason: the Lenin legend was widely used in the literary repressions of the late forties. This began with Zhdanov's 1946 speech on the journals *Leningrad* and *Zvezda* a week after the Central Committee resolution, in which he declared Lenin's "Party Organization and Party Literature" to be a canonical text of Socialist Realism. The claim was that Lenin himself had argued that no literature must be apolitical but must express party loyalty ("partiinost'"), although Lenin had written this short article in reference to debates among Party activists in 1905 about Party newspapers and political publications. It merely made an analogy with the illusion of complete "freedom" in artistic literature, and was not directed at prose writers and poets.<sup>93</sup>

During the "zhdanovshchina," the Briks remained one of the most inconvenient reminders of Mayakovsky's link with modernist and Western cultural traditions, as well as a contradiction to the thinly veiled anti-Semitism in

Soviet policy at the time. Osip Briks had remained a legitimate, if marginal, part of Mayakovsky's biography until his death in 1945, despite the fact that he never entirely repudiated "left" art and criticism and therefore lost his preeminent position as Mayakovsky's promoter. Even Briks's 1945 obituary, which was published by TASS and whose signatories included Fadeev, had given him credit for establishing Mayakovsky as a poet before the revolution through his publication of the poem "A Cloud in Trousers." The obituary concluded: "[Briks's] name is inseparably linked with the name of the great Mayakovsky and will firmly go down in the history of Soviet literature."<sup>94</sup> However, when this obituary was submitted to *Literaturnaia gazeta* the editor, D. Polikarpov, refused to publish it.<sup>95</sup> Subsequently the Briks were placed under more and more open suspicion, although they were not yet as vilified as they would be in the late sixties. It began to be implied in studies on Mayakovsky in the late forties that the poet might have avoided the inconsistencies in his own career if he had understood the corrupting influence of the Briks and their "formalist" circle.<sup>96</sup>

In 1949 the twelfth and final volume of the second edition of Mayakovsky's *Collected Works* appeared, under the auspices of the editorial commission which replaced the Briks and their colleagues in 1938. This last volume was edited by A. Koloskov, on the recommendation of Mayakovsky's sister, L.V. Maiakovskaya. In the sixties both were to go on the offensive against the role of the Briks in Mayakovsky's life and work (see Chapter 6). But V.A. Katanian recounts that they launched a first attack on Mayakovsky's biographical history in 1949: the twelfth volume was largely dedicated to Mayakovsky's autobiography "I Myself," and Koloskov made some significant changes.<sup>97</sup> For example, Mayakovsky's own statement on his acceptance of the revolution originally read in full: "To accept or not to accept? Such a question did not exist for me (or for the other Moscow Futurists)." Not only does

Mayakovsky imply that the Futurists made the same transition he did, and were never hostile to the revolution, but that he himself came to the revolution as a Futurist and still counted himself in their number after October, 1917. The statement was already being widely paraphrased without mention of the Futurists, but Koloskov actually had them officially struck from the passage.<sup>98</sup>

By 1949, the goal of Mayakovsky scholarship was evolving well beyond efforts to distance him from the avant-garde into the project of re-working his legend for more systematic use as a tool in the rewriting of literary history as a whole. For example, a 1950 Moscow dissertation abstract titled "The Struggle for Socialist Realism in the Poetry of the Reconstruction Period" depicted the struggle between "Formalism" and Socialist Realism as the basis of the entire history of Soviet literature.

The aesthetic of Soviet writers, the content and form of their works, took shape in the struggle with reactionary movements in literature. The question of the formation and development of the method of socialist realism is a central question of the history and theory of Soviet literature. This question has been worked out extremely weakly by Soviet literary scholars. Up to this time we do not have at our disposal works that shed light on the process of the struggle of Soviet writers for socialist realism at the various stages of the development of our state...The task of the present dissertation is to show how in the conflicts with such hostile influences the process of artistic mastery of the experience of the revolutionary proletariat took place in the concrete example of the work of the best poets of this period - that of Mayakovsky and D. Bedny...<sup>99</sup>

But the "old language" of Socialist Realism and ideological "purity" defended by the "zhdanovshchina" evolved in tone itself. Official Soviet culture had to express stability above all else. Maslin's book affirmed that Mayakovsky's poetry "serves the communist education [or "upbringing"/"cultivation" - "vospitanie"] of the masses even now, in the epoch of gradual transition from socialism to communism."<sup>100</sup> This "transition" was a claim of the post-war years; although communism was supposed to arrive with the "withering away of the state," this was silently dropped from the definition

and it came to be equated with the stabilization of the economy and the "final" elimination of struggle in Soviet society. Despite similarities drawn by Zhdanov between 1936 and 1948, the cultural campaigns of the late forties and early fifties were not aimed even in part at excesses of "Naturalism" or "byt." Consequently, the struggle with "byt" was down-played in Mayakovsky as well: "vigilance" was not the same as dissatisfaction with life.

The triumphant emergence of the Soviet Union from the Second World War meant that the language of struggle and "revolutionary romanticism," which had been a factor in Mayakovsky's canonization, was inadequate to express the new spirit of confident, stable economic growth. By the late forties it was dropped from the vocabulary of Socialist Realism in favour of the "art of living truth," since "the new order was being constructed not by a revolutionary surge of the masses, not even by their daily work, but by the iron will and wisdom of the leaders."<sup>101</sup> In the new post-war hero, "simplicity and extraordinariness were to blend," and although it was still "necessary to dream," "dreaming was not to go wild. It was to be directed to one main channel: good things."<sup>102</sup> The 1950 Moscow dissertation abstract on Mayakovsky and Socialist Realism mentioned above emphasized the shift away from "romanticism" in Soviet literature of the twenties after the Civil War: "Advanced literature...inherited from the literature of the Civil War its political sharpness and its principles of social characterization of the hero and... went incomparably farther, having abandoned the method of abstract schematization, the romantic, one-sided depiction of the character of the hero of the revolution (*Mystery-Bouffe*; 150,000,000; *The Fall of Dair* [by Bedny]), having mastered the method of [the hero's] concrete-historical realistic depiction."<sup>103</sup> Precisely because the goal of this dissertation was to transport the origins of Socialist Realism into the twenties, it also sought to reflect the

emphasis on "realism" over "romanticism" in the doctrine's definition by the late forties, and to establish Mayakovsky's place within this invented genealogy.

Cultural policy required not only the rejection of "revolutionary romanticism" but the corresponding assertion of a neo-classical tradition in Soviet literature and the language itself: "Mature totalitarianism demanded sobriety of language, static forms and monumentality... it had regressed to the imperial spirit of Russian classicism."<sup>104</sup> Maslin's last chapter, titled "Mayakovsky and Our Present Day," identified his legacy as important to the ongoing development of the new personality, and by implication as a model for "sober" post-war heroism: "From this comes the consciousness of historical succession in Soviet poets, the continuers of the great heroic and patriotic traditions of Russian literature, the heirs of the noble image of the lyrical hero, founded by the front line of classical poetry from Pushkin to Mayakovsky."<sup>105</sup> In 1949, even the so-called "formalist" Kirsanov made the following statement on Mayakovsky's status in this evolution: "Mayakovsky's verse is now destined to become a new classical form... Mayakovsky's verse is Pushkin's verse today!"<sup>106</sup>

In 1950, after Zhdanov's death, Stalin took the campaign against "Formalism" to the level of language theory in *Marxism and Questions of Linguistics*, published in *Pravda* on June 20 and then as a separate brochure.<sup>107</sup> As opposed to the linguist Polivanov, who in 1928 had written about the significant developments in the Russian language over a single generation, Stalin now declared that "the contemporary Russian language differs little in its structure from that of Pushkin." Further to this, he questioned: "Why is it necessary that after each revolution the existing structure of language, its grammatical order and basic vocabulary, should be destroyed and replaced by new ones?... What use to the revolution is such upheaval in language?"<sup>108</sup>

Due to war-time liberalization, it had been possible a few years earlier for Russian linguists such as Grigorii Vinokur to publish innovative studies on the history of the Russian language and linguistic analyses of literature, such as his 1943 *Mayakovskv As An Innovator of Language* (*Maiakovskii - novator iazyka*). But the study of Mayakovskv as an innovator of poetic language in any sense was anathema to the use of the Mayakovskv legend as a bulwark against "Formalism," and as a symbol of state classicism, which required "sobriety of language." This was especially true after Stalin's decrees on linguistics, and Vinokur's work on Mayakovskv was only republished in Munich in 1967.<sup>109</sup>

In the early fifties, it was immediately clear that Stalin's linguistic theses meant Soviet culture was to include a "new myth" of the classical Russian language and its value to national identity. This went beyond even Zhdanov's notion of "cultured language," and Stalin's pronouncements occasioned a series of publications newly interpreting Mayakovskv in their light. A 1950/51 school textbook by L.Timofeev incorporated the new interpretation of Mayakovskv's language as moderate, conventional and evolutionary, and placed Mayakovskv's verse in the syllabo-tonic tradition of the classics.<sup>110</sup> It must be remembered that in 1936 Luppol had still been able to publish the statement in Mayakovskv's abridged *Collected Works* that his meter was "a revolution in Russian poetic form which can only be compared with the revolution at the time of transition from syllabic meter to syllabo-tonic meter."<sup>111</sup>

If the language had not changed since Pushkin, and Mayakovskv's value as a national poet was in the preservation of the classical tradition while simply adding Soviet content, there could no longer even be any talk of a distinct "Mayakovskv school," since this would attribute broader innovations to his legacy. As recently as 1949, the critic S. Tregub had been able to publish a book by the very title *The Mayakovskv School* (*Shkola Maiakovskogo*); by

1951, after the appearance of Stalin's linguistic theses, a conference of the Writers' Union rejected any claims to the existence of a particular "Mayakovsky school," even one which might include established poets like Aseev. This was maintained by a Writers' Union conference on Mayakovsky literature in January, 1953.<sup>112</sup> The significance of this new stage of the early fifties in the classical image of Mayakovsky is also indicated by V. Shcherbina's 1951 article in *Pravda* titled "For a Truthful Interpretation of Mayakovsky's Work." Shcherbina attacked recently acceptable sources on Mayakovsky, notably the commentary to the second *Complete Works* (1939-1949) for its "striving to find the poetic beginning of Mayakovsky's innovation in Futurism, to isolate the poet from the national traditions of classical Russian poetry."<sup>113</sup>

The "zhdanovshchina" had a direct impact on what was emphasized in the Mayakovsky legend between 1946 and 1953, and it corresponded completely with the poet's use as a model of post-war heroism and a guardian of "Soviet" values in their more stable incarnations. According to Maslin, Mayakovsky, like Pushkin, was not outdated because his verses "sound as if new at each new stage of the development of our society," and these words provide an unintentional and ironic comment on the transformation of these two poets into state legends. Almost as if describing the manufacturing of these legends under Stalin, Maslin quoted Belinsky's comments on Pushkin, as a poet who "belongs to eternally living and moving phenomena, which don't stop at the point when death finds them, but continue to develop in the consciousness of society. Each epoch pronounces its judgement upon them."<sup>114</sup> Unfortunately, the judgement of the Stalin epoch was pronounced by those who controlled the production of ideology, and Mayakovsky was adapted to the static forms of Soviet state classicism.

## Chapter 5: 1953-1965: Mayakovsky and the Thaw

The Thaw, or limited de-Stalinization that followed Stalin's death in 1953 and Khrushchev's 1956 secret speech guaranteed that the *vydvizhentsy* would not fall to a new instalment of the Terror but would remain the stable core of the new ruling class until the Gorbachev era. Because the Thaw represented a conflict within the ruling elite, which attempted to limit itself to the changes necessary to secure its own stability, this period in no way represented a return to the political circumstances of the pre-Stalin Soviet era. Moreover, it did not even put into question the fundamentals of Stalinist ideology.

The Mayakovsky legend was of value as a state icon under Khrushchev for old reasons as well as new ones. Mayakovsky was useful as a figure opposed to the "cult of personality" and the "varnishing of reality," a symbol of the continuity of "Leninist" principles in Soviet literature. This was apparent in the revival of Mayakovsky's satirical plays after Stalin's death, and it became all the more central after the Party acknowledged some of Stalin's crimes in 1956. But official deference to Mayakovsky's name, as to Lenin's, remained less a tribute to his actual words than to the state he symbolized, and in particular to its doctrine of Socialist Realism and the continued struggle against "formalist" tendencies in the arts. The Mayakovsky legend also reflected the contradictions of the Thaw, that is, the need to loosen ideological control and even to generate a certain amount of enthusiasm for this on the one hand, and on the other, the risk that this would open a "Pandora's box" of more significant challenges to the regime. In the broader sense this resulted in Khrushchev's very inconsistent liberalization policies. In terms of Mayakovsky, the establishment showed an

exaggerated fear that the inconsistencies still inherent in the image of the poet inherited from the Stalin era might unravel in this unstable context, as the present chapter will attempt to demonstrate.

From the vantage point of the early eighties, Semion Chertok, who played a role in bringing to light new material on Mayakovsky during the Thaw, wrote that Mayakovsky's suicide saved him not only from the purges and repression but also from capitulation, and "for this reason the genuine Mayakovsky was foreign not only to Stalinist but also to post-Stalinist Communist Russia."<sup>1</sup> The fact that Mayakovsky did not go on to write paens to Stalinism like so many of his contemporaries meant that his name retained a partial connection to something sincere that preceded it: "The generation of the sixties expressed its recovery of vision and contempt for the regime with Mayakovsky's name and words. For this reason it called itself later 'the generation of the Mayakovsky monument.'"<sup>2</sup> This was directly in reference to the monument in Mayakovsky Square which became a gathering place for the youth opposition in the early sixties, but it also had a broader significance for a younger generation which rediscovered elements of Mayakovsky's iconoclasm.

It is true, as Menzel argues in an appendix to her work on Mayakovsky's reception in the Stalin era, that this did not represent a fundamental break in the poet's image on the scale of that which took place in the late eighties.<sup>3</sup> Rather than trying to pull the Mayakovsky monument off its pedestal, and to tear its pedestal of socialist realism down with it, during the Thaw there were limited attempts to re-appropriate the legend, either by Mayakovsky's former colleagues and contemporaries, or by a new youth opposition, some of whom became dissidents, and some recognized poets. This should neither be underestimated as a new development nor overestimated as a complete re-discovery of the uncanonized Mayakovsky. It should also be clear what

circumstances gave rise to the changes: although there were significant areas of relaxation in the poet's official legend after Stalin's death, some of which inspired or at least permitted an interest in elements of Mayakovsky's iconoclasm, challenges to the official image developed as a result of the broader social context of "de-Stalinization." In turn, these challenges were themselves limited by the boundaries to change under Khrushchev.

This chapter will follow a scheme which is chronological over-all, but which in the second half deals separately with two simultaneous developments after 1956 that were distinct but connected: the publication of new materials on Mayakovsky by his contemporaries and the regime's reaction to this, and the development of the youth opposition.

### **Stalin's Death**

Between 1953 and 1955 "Mayakovedenie," or the official interpretive and biographical literature on the poet, essentially maintained the image of the poet inherited from the Stalin era, but expanded the problems that were dealt with, many of which had either been ignored or had raised some controversy. The limited changes were framed in terms of a rejection of previous attempts to "improve" the image of the early Mayakovsky, and "gloss over" his contradictions. This trend was announced even before Stalin's death, at the beginning of 1953, and reached its clearest statement in *Pravda* on March 2, the very day Stalin was said to have had a stroke, in an editorial titled "For a Marxist interpretation of the work of V. Mayakovsky." It stated that "despite the appearance of individual useful works, it must be recognized that as a whole the study of Mayakovsky's legacy is taking place unsatisfactorily."<sup>4</sup> The editorial argued against vulgarization and over-simplification in the study of Mayakovsky, and against researchers who "attempt to varnish reality, to silence or avoid the

complexity of the poet's development."<sup>5</sup> It criticized the positions of a number of critics, among them A. Koloskov, whose 1950 *Life of Mayakovsky* was denounced by critics at the time of its publication as well, who never received scholarly recognition in the Soviet Union, and who had taken the "varnishing of reality" to an extreme ridiculous even by the standards of Stalinist criticism. *Pravda* stated that the study of Mayakovsky was "a matter of genuine state significance, it does not permit lack of principles, crudeness, carelessness."<sup>6</sup> The other extreme position the article was responding to was the image of Mayakovsky as a purely Russian classic, a "modern Pushkin." Mayakovsky's place in the genealogy of Russian classical literature was not negated, but the legend now had to be more contemporary, and international in scope.

A dissertation abstract from Khar'kov in 1954 provides an indication of the immediate impact of the *Pravda* editorial, which was in fact cited to justify the student's choice of topic, "Soviet Reality in the Lyric of V.V. Mayakovsky, 1925-1930." The abstract stressed Mayakovsky's significance for all revolutionary writers, concluding that "the principle of the union of vanguard political thought and poetry now is being realized by all Soviet poets... all Soviet poets are following the path set by Mayakovsky, realizing the principle about which he himself wrote: '...more poets, good and diverse.' "<sup>7</sup> This last phrase was quoted more widely in 1953-56 than "I want the pen to be equal to the bayonet." This was in significant contrast to the denial of the existence of a "Mayakovsky school" by the Writers' Union before Stalin's death, when his pronouncements on language had sent literary criticism to extremes. In July of 1953, the sixtieth anniversary of Mayakovsky's birth was widely marked in the press, and the emphasis was decisively on Mayakovsky's influence on contemporary poets in the Soviet Union and around the world. *Literaturnaia gazeta* gave special

attention to the celebration of the poet's birthday in China, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Roumania, North Korea, France, and other countries.<sup>8</sup>

Slightly more room opened up at this time for detailed studies on some of Mayakovsky's particular artistic methods, such as Zinovii Papernyi's *On Mayakovsky's Craftsmanship*, published in 1953, which focussed on his imagery, poetic language, rhythm and rhyme. Papernyi followed the directive not to "gloss over" the complications of Mayakovsky's "difficult and victorious" poetic development, and yet came to the conclusion that "in all its complexity it had an internal purpose." This was not the same argument made by Roman Jakobson and others for an internal continuity in the entirety of Mayakovsky's poetic system, but an attempt to continue to read a Socialist Realist teleology into it while claiming to deal with its "complexity." For Papernyi, "in his language and in his craft the poet is the pupil of the people," and it is the abstract concept of "the people" which is the real "language creator."<sup>9</sup> But in a limited way Papernyi's approach also indicated a direction that would be taken by some writers in counterposing "narodnost'" to "partiinost'," rather than linking them, after 1956.

Beyond a doubt, the most significant change in the official Mayakovsky legend in 1953-1956, which also had an impact on its appeal as a symbol of dissent, was the popular revival of *The Bathhouse* and *The Bedbug* for the first time in a quarter-century. Up until Stalin's death the plays were mentioned only in specialised research works, *The Bedbug* was only rarely allowed to be staged by amateur troops in the provinces, and *The Bathhouse* not at all.<sup>10</sup> In 1950, party critics like E. Usievich could state openly that Mayakovsky's theatre had not retained any vital significance for later times.<sup>11</sup> Valentin Pluchek, director of the Moscow Theatre of Satire, where the plays were revived, noted that Mayakovsky's dramatic works were for a long time "the only argument

against [him] and were considered proof that his art was far removed from the demands of the people." One of the main reasons given, aside from the "dated" content of the late plays, was their supposedly archaic form: "...that his images were schematic and more suitable for poster art, and that there were no real living human beings in his plays...that the methods of the contemporary theatre, the laws of socialist realism and the principles of the Stanislavsky school could not accommodate Mayakovsky's dramas and were inapplicable to them."<sup>12</sup>

Within months of Stalin's death, *The Bathhouse*, the more anathematised of the two plays, was performed over the radio in a production by R. Simonov with Igor Ilyinsky in the lead; it was staged in Pskov, and finally in December of 1953 at the Moscow Theatre of Satire, where *The Bedbug* was also revived in 1955. However, this was not initiated by the Committee on Arts Affairs, which since 1936 had total administrative control over the theatre, or by the Ministry of Culture, which assimilated the Committee in 1953. It was not obvious what the reception would be, particularly in 1953. Valentin Pluchek wrote a few years later:

We were well aware that we were risking a flop: this would mean burying Mayakovsky as playwright for many long years to come... The Pskov Drama Theatre "risked" performing [*The Bathhouse*], and although rumours about the show were encouraging, this did not mean that the problem had been solved... After the premiere of *The Bathhouse*, the whole situation changed... When, encouraged by [its] success, we began working on *The Bedbug*, weary voices were again heard saying that [it] wouldn't be any use as theatre...<sup>13</sup>

The fact that these productions took place at all was an early indication of the usefulness of adapting the official Mayakovsky legend to the process of de-Stalinization. However, the directors took precautions to restrict and clearly delineate the targets of satire, as official approval still depended on a limited focus on individual representatives of bureaucratism and corruption. Chertok states: "Seats were sold out until the sensation passed: the productions were

timid and smoothed over, not without imaginative staging, but without contemporary, or as Mayakovsky said, 'up-to-the-minute,' content."<sup>14</sup> In the *Bathhouse*, Pobedonosikov was recast as a low-level assistant rather than an official, thus eliminating the play's central intent in counterposing sincerity at the lowest levels of society with corruption at its highest levels. The directors entirely renounced the third act with its "play within a play" which both mocks abstract tendentiousness and brings Pobedonosikov to life as a member of the audience who entirely lives up to his dramatic portrayal. The directors explained that the phenomena the third act was directed against were now non-existent.<sup>15</sup> In the 1955 production of *The Bedbug* it was of course the struggle with "petty-bourgeois ideology" in Prisypkin that was stressed, not the failings of the world of the future. For example, Pluchek stated that "the middle-class longing for peace and quiet has not faded in contrast to the Soviet man's natural state of passionate struggle for the new in life," and that the play "has not lost its point as 'anti-vodka' propaganda."<sup>16</sup> But even Prisypkin's character was toned down in the 1955 production, as indicated by a review written that year: "He isn't dangerous, he isn't even disgusting, he's only comic. This is not *The Bedbug*, this is a little insect farce. [Eto ne 'Klop,' eto 'kloplia.'][<sup>17</sup>] An instructional aid published by the Ministry of Education for high school teachers in 1955 placed special emphasis on the value of *The Bedbug* and *The Bathhouse* as timely and relevant in their ideology and satirical methods, but interpreted them in light of the struggle against "cosmopolitanism" and "servility before everything foreign."<sup>18</sup> It also emphasized that the proletarian Prisypkin "fell under the influence of the 'poet' Oleg Baian, who Mayakovsky characterizes in one of his articles as a 'bowing and scraping person with natural talent of the former home-owning class.'"<sup>19</sup> The unfavourable critical reception of the plays in Mayakovsky's lifetime was blamed on the "anti-patriotic" critics of RAPP: "The

plays...developed the glorious traditions of Gogol and Saltykov-Shchedrin... and aroused the animosity of the hidden enemies of Soviet rule."<sup>20</sup>

But despite the distortions in staging and criticism, Mayakovsky's plays had a significant influence on the new cultural developments of the Thaw in a number of ways. It was on the stage, the most bureaucratically administered area of culture at the time, that the first challenges to Stalinism appeared, giving Mayakovsky's satire on the corruption of revolutionary values more contemporary forms. Leonid Zorin's play *Guests* of 1954 depicted the villain not as an isolated "bad apple" but as a typical bureaucrat, and was attacked by the preeminent opponent of *The Bathhouse* in Mayakovsky's day, V. Ermilov: "This arrant, frank bureaucrat feels quite at home in Soviet life... Of course, this portrayal contradicts the truth of life."<sup>21</sup> Criticism limited to the secret police took a more officially acceptable form in Alexander Korneichuk's *Wings*, staged in 1954-55. But the revival of Mayakovsky's theatre at this time was not only a part of the turn to social criticism, it had an influence on theatrical tradition. A number of productions re-introduced more modern methods of staging in 1955. There was a new production of *Hamlet* by Okhlopkov, who had been a disciple of Meyerhold and now revived some of his techniques. The director Nikolai Akimov, who had also attempted a new staging of *Hamlet* in the early thirties and had been accused of "Formalism" for his departure from classical staging, also helped to renew the theatre in the fifties. The resurrection of Mayakovsky's theatre introduced a new generation to an aspect long-removed from his legend:

Renewed exposure to the blunt, direct speech of Mayakovsky... provided Russians with a model for simpler forms of discourse. At the same time, the fresh look at the long-prohibited staging of Meyerhold reminded a new generation of the expressive possibilities of non-realistic stagings. The rather sterile and pompous schematization of the Stanislavsky method that had become the accepted way of projecting socialist realism on the stage now had a challenger. Insofar as the public was given a chance to choose, it elected to see

new productions with a decisiveness clearly embarrassing to vested interests within the Party.<sup>22</sup>

Immediately following Stalin's death in March of 1953, there were indications that the Mayakovsky legend would be appealed to by some in the literary establishment as a bridge between the status quo and liberalization. This would take a much more subversive and openly political form after 1956; but in this first stage it was not political dissidents who appealed to Mayakovsky but writers who sought legitimacy for limited reforms in literary policy. The poet Olga Berggolts was the first to publish an article raising the need for limited change, titled "Conversation About Lyric Poetry" ("Razgovor o lirike") in *Literaturnaia gazeta* of April 16, 1953. She cited Mayakovsky as an example in her appeal for Soviet poetry to be allowed to express subjective individuality, including moods which did not fit the optimistic mould. She claimed that the poet's lyrical "I" becomes the individuality of his readers as well, and quoted Belinsky's defense of the subjective nature of Lermontov's poetry as an aspect of the verse which did not diminish its wider social significance.

The Second All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers in December of 1954 abounded in references to Mayakovsky that were used to highlight the inadequacies of contemporary literature. On the one hand, the Central Committee welcome to the delegates included the statement: "Continuing the best traditions of Russian and world classical literature, Soviet writers are creatively developing the method of Socialist Realism, the founder of which was the great proletarian writer Maksim Gorky, [and] are following the traditions of Vladimir Mayakovsky."<sup>23</sup> But on the other, some of the less official speeches made reference to the hypocrisy of this claim. Ehrenburg, author of *The Thaw*, the novel which provided this period with its metaphorical designation, told the delegates to "remember the creative path of Mayakovsky and his condemnation

by many of those who later praised him."<sup>24</sup> He went on to use Mayakovsky as an example of the inconsistencies of literary policy:

We can only laugh bitterly when we imagine what would have happened to Mayakovsky at the beginning of his career if in 1954 he had brought his first poems to Vorovskii Street [to the Writers'Union]. (Laughter, applause.) Of course now Mayakovsky is recalled when any opportunity is presented. He is recalled even when an objectionable author must be condemned. The admonitions of judges who do not have the moral authority to do this, the subjective evaluations to which journal editors and publishers listen closely, are frequently presented with references to the tradition of Mayakovsky. This is painful to hear for Mayakovsky's contemporaries and friends, who have not forgotten how difficult his creative development was.<sup>25</sup>

Chertok states that the stenogram of Ehrenburg's speech is exact in all but one detail: "when participants in the congress imagined Mayakovsky the Futurist in the government building of the Writers' Union, it was not [merely] laughter that resounded but a deafening roar of laughter: they all understood that he would have been thrown out and denounced to the militia and KGB."<sup>26</sup> Some delegates deplored that even works by Mayakovsky deemed ideologically suspect were to that day not being republished. The writer A. Iashin lamented that Soviet lyricism was restricted to themes such as "the eternal faithfulness of one's own spouse," and asked "who among us...has not experienced oppressive ill will in relation to our lyric poetry which to some extent does not correspond to the established optimistic scheme? ... Is it not a fact that even Mayakovsky's stunningly powerful tragic verses and poems about unrequited love are still deleted from anthologies [...] A peculiar lyrical bureaucratism has been instilled. (Applause.)"<sup>27</sup> It was not until April of 1956 that Mayakovsky's "Letter to Tatiana Yakovleva," a 1928 poem about a difficult love affair unpublished during his lifetime, and omitted from his posthumous *Collected Works*, was published for the first time in the journal *Novy Mir*.<sup>28</sup> Veniamin Kaverin spoke at length about Mayakovsky in his speech, recalling

him in 1919, and stating that Soviet writers should see in him not only a Soviet patriot, but also a poet who took his art seriously and went to great lengths to give his works the most perfected artistic form, unlike the majority of contemporary Soviet literature.<sup>29</sup>

But there were clear indications even before 1956 that the "revival" of certain aspects of Mayakovsky would not lead to a general relaxation, and that in fact stricter control would be imposed to define the limits on new considerations of his legacy. The "formalist" deviations in the commentary to Mayakovsky's second *Collected Works* of 1939-49 continued to be extensively criticized, and that publication was replaced by a new *Complete Works* in thirteen volumes between 1955-1961. Responsibility for their publication was transferred from the Mayakovsky Library-Museum to the Gorky Institute of World Literature in 1955. Even Katanian, who by this time had gained official approval for his detailed chronicle of the poet's life and work (*V. Maiakovskii: literaturnaya khronika*) nevertheless recounted: "I was not invited to take part in this work, or to be more accurate, I was not permitted to."<sup>30</sup>

In the post-Stalin period Mayakovsky remained an institutionalized subject of study. The 1955 instructional aid for high school teachers mentioned above was published by the Ministry of Education in an edition of 70,000. It was written by V.I. Kozlovsky and divided the study of the poet into the pre-revolutionary period, the Soviet period before *Vladimir Il'ich Lenin*, when he was said to be in the process of mastering the Socialist Realist method, and the mature period of 1924-1930. During the fifties, the study of Mayakovsky in high schools was based on the Lenin poem, *Good!* (1927) and to a lesser extent *At the Top of My Voice* (1930). Children in elementary school were required to memorize "Verses about the Soviet Passport." Although other agitational poems were used, the Mayakovsky legend was defined by those works which had

become part of the Soviet canon of "Socialist Realist" masterpieces. But the introduction to Kozlovsky's instructional aid warned against the trend of the last years of the Stalin period to simply deny the contradictions in Mayakovsky, rather than providing "explanations" for them:

...the creative path of the poet does not represent a countinuous, triumphal procession or a smooth, uniform ascent, as some researchers have attempted to depict. In his explorations the poet sometimes strayed from the correct path... To paint over the contradictions and conflicts in the work of Mayakovsky, to smooth over the difficulties of his artistic growth, means to abandon the method of Soviet literary scholarship [literaturovedeniia].<sup>31</sup>

However, the attempt to resurrect "self-criticism" on Mayakovsky's behalf at this time was very limited compared with the late thirties. Although Kozlovskii stated that Mayakovsky was "diverted" by Futurism's brand of anti-authoritarianism, this was due to the fact that the "theoretically inexperienced young poet" was "worked over" or indoctrinated by people like David Burliuk.<sup>32</sup> Mayakovsky was now more clearly seen as the victim of conscious manipulation, not the product of his own social circumstances; it was not the general limitations of his political and intellectual environment that he had to overcome but the interference of individuals. He could now by no means be referred to as having ever been a "petty bourgeois rebel," as could still be stated by K. Luppol in 1936, or even in 1939 by N. Plisko in the introductory article to the first volume of the second *Complete Works*. Thus the task of Mayakovsky study in the fifties and sixties became to place more emphasis on villifying his former colleagues and friends: "Having pounced on him, the 'theorists' from LEF...the journal *New Lef*...and finally from REF, tried in every way to instill in Mayakovsky the need to be guided by various confused 'theories' ('the art of production,' 'social command,' 'literature of fact,' etc.)."<sup>33</sup>

Kozlovsky's chapter on "tradition and innovation" in Mayakovsky devoted much attention to his work for the ROSTA Windows as an example of the

merging of "classical" and "folk" traditions, in which "folk proverbs, sayings, 'chastushki' [rhymed jingles] songs, fairy-tale motifs, refrains, and similes firmly enter the laboratory of his agitational poetry... he uses more than once the genre of the fable, following the best classical images."<sup>34</sup> Pages were dedicated to Mayakovsky's understanding in his mature years of the importance of Pushkin, but his contemporaneity was also emphasized. A. Tvardovsky, M. Isakovsky, A. Surkov, N. Aseev, K. Simonov, N. Tikhonov, and V. Lugovskoi were listed as poets who continued some of the principles unique to Mayakovsky, as well as an endless number of "revolutionary" poets around the world, such as Louis Aragon of France and Alekis Parnis of Greece, not to mention poets in the other Soviet republics, Eastern Europe and China, who were said to be directly influenced by him.

Also in 1955, the Ministry of Education printed 25,000 copies of a collection of materials on Mayakovsky intended for university students in the faculties of literature and philology, as well as for literature teachers and for "self-education." It was compiled by E. I. Naumov, and was followed by a new edition of 14,000 copies in 1963. This volume was designed not as a resource but as an ideological guide. In an extensive list of suggested topics for research, each provided with a bibliography of sources, it included the following:

Mayakovsky's underground revolutionary activity; Mayakovsky in the struggle with bourgeois decadent poetry; the theme of building socialism in Mayakovsky's work; the idea of Soviet patriotism in Mayakovsky's work; the unmasking of bourgeois Europe and America; Mayakovsky the playwright (*The Bedbug* and *The Bathhouse*); Mayakovsky in the struggle against religion; Mayakovsky and Soviet youth; Mayakovsky's verses for children; principles of socialist realism in Mayakovsky; Mayakovsky in the struggle for purity and richness in language of Soviet poetry; the meaning of Mayakovsky's poetry during World War II; Mayakovsky's legacy and Soviet poetry; the world significance of Mayakovsky's poetry.<sup>35</sup>

The intention of Naumov's volume was not merely to direct the study of the poet's own works but, more importantly, to guide the student through the immense volume of "Mayakovedenie" which had accumulated, and this provides an insight into the perspective on Mayakovskv "scholarship" after Stalin's death. On Grigorii Vinokur's 1943 *Mayakovskv: An Innovator of Language*, Naumov admitted that some systematic examples of Mayakovskv's neologisms might be useful, but the focus of the author's attention on this one aspect "impoverishes research in the extreme" and falls into "formalist errors."<sup>36</sup> Naumov gave a largely favourable assessment of Katanian's *V. Mayakovskv: A Literary Chronicle*, which first appeared in 1945 and in a more complete edition in 1948, but stated that criticism of the time was right to point out the inadequacy of Katanian's "scholarly objectivity" which created the impression that Mayakovskv was not distinguishable from the Futurists.<sup>37</sup> Naumov praised Papernyi's 1953 publication on the poet's craftsmanship, which "does not hide the young poet's delusion in over-valuing the Formalist experiments of Khlebnikov." But he also praised Papernyi's subtle treatment of Mayakovskv's use of neologisms, as innovations and yet based on the norms of the language, and stated that "this is all the more important, as in the past untrue points of view were expressed more than once on this question."<sup>38</sup> Entirely favourable was Naumov's assessment of the work of Viktor Pertsov, who had been associated with the journals *LEF* and *Novy LEF*. The first volume of Pertsov's three-volume monograph, *Mayakovskv: Life and Work*, was published in 1954, covering the poet's pre-revolutionary period: "Pertsov correctly views the primary source of Mayakovskv's formation not in Futurism but in the poet's revolutionary activity." But Naumov saw the value of Pertsov's work equally in its criticism of the failings in Mayakovskv's early poetry, especially *Oblako v shtanakh*, which distinguished it from "the efforts of some critics to varnish over Mayakovskv's

early work."<sup>39</sup> Again, the refusal to "gloss over" contradictions in Mayakovsky was a code for a harsher critique of his avant-garde roots: efforts to "improve" Mayakovsky "cannot bring anything but harm, since in essence, they distort the image of the great poet."<sup>40</sup> Most guilty of this crime, for Naumov, was A. Koloskov, in his attempt to paint the entirety of Mayakovsky's career in communist colours, and hence to find a political justification for his association with Futurism. Koloskov's 1950 *Life of Mayakovsky* provided Naumov with an outstanding example for students of how going too far in "improving" Mayakovsky only serves to justify Futurism: "Instead of correctly understanding Mayakovsky's contradictory aesthetic position of those years, A. Koloskov attempts to depict Mayakovsky's participation in the Futurist movement as a continuation of his underground Bolshevik activity!"<sup>41</sup>

The concern in scholarship at this time, while it was not to paint all of Mayakovsky's pre-revolutionary work in Socialist Realist colours, became to flesh-out more convincingly and concretely his line of development in that direction. The rewriting of his death also continued. In 1954, the second edition of the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* was published, and now, not only was the suicide no longer explained by "purely personal" motives, but in fact by the hounding of Mayakovsky by "enemies of the people": "[this] persecution of the poet and the complex circumstances of his personal life led him to suicide."<sup>42</sup> In 1955 a commission for the investigation of Mayakovsky's suicide was appointed on the orders of the Central Committee,<sup>43</sup> but publicly it was still anathema to discuss the suicide motives. The anniversary of his death was still solemnly commemorated, but with no mention of suicide, and the extent to which this was still a subject of worry to the state will be seen below, in the section on the *Literary Heritage* scandal.

## Lenin's Resurrection

Nina Tumarkin documents that about thirteen months before Khrushchev delivered his so-called "secret speech" to the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU, he began preparing the ground for a renewed cult of Lenin, "designed not on the black-rimmed model of the twenties but on the showy and sentimental cult of Stalin": on January 11, 1955, Khrushchev signed a published resolution moving the annual commemoration of Lenin from his death day to his birthday.<sup>44</sup> The regime still needed a formal connection with the history of the revolution for its own legitimacy, but now for a new immediate purpose. Since the whole purpose of the Thaw was social stabilization, the state could only disassociate itself from Stalin by reassociating itself with the pre-Stalin years, now by rediscovering Lenin's own misgivings about Stalin's leadership. Lenin was safer than ever to use as a public anchor for official ideology because the Lenin of the twenties had been buried for so long, along with the substance of the revolutionary era.

To expose the crimes of Stalin's rule to a roomful of people who had, by and large, been accomplices in those crimes, and who for two decades had perfected the art of ignoring the unmentionable, it was necessary for Khrushchev to construct his argument with the utmost care and to arm himself with the strongest possible weapon. Khrushchev brandished his chosen weapon before describing Stalin's reprehensible behaviour. That weapon was Lenin, the only existing (after a fashion) being with sufficient power to topple the man of steel.<sup>45</sup>

The Mayakovsky legend also survived Stalin as a weapon against him, and took on new momentum once again, as it had after Stalin's physical death in 1953. The fact that Mayakovsky had become associated with Stalin's 1935 declaration was not an insurmountable barrier, since the Mayakovsky legend no longer depended on the poet's posthumous "discovery." Mayakovsky could be used as a minor part of the arsenal against the mistakes of an era in which he had not been a living participant. Mayakovsky's image not only maintained a

connection to the culture of revolutionary times but also to some of the same virtues of "Leninism" that were needed to "topple the man of steel." Lenin's personal opposition not only to Stalin's abusive behaviour but to the cult of personality in general was a key aspect of Khrushchev's "secret speech," and Mayakovsky's opposition to fetishism and hero-worship, as well as the criticism of "bureaucratism" within limits, could be well adapted to the needs of the time. Khrushchev's statement that "our nation gave birth to many flatterers and specialists in false optimism and deceit"<sup>46</sup> could be illustrated by any number of Mayakovsky's verses after 1921 and by his late plays. In 1957, the Moscow Theatre of Satire was awarded first prize by the adjudicators of the All-Union Festival of Drama Theatres for its work on Mayakovsky's plays. By the beginning of the 1958/59 season, *The Bathhouse* had been performed over two hundred times in the Theatre of Satire, *The Bedbug* was being prepared for its five-hundredth performance, and even *Mystery-Bouffe* was being staged and toured around the Soviet Union and Poland.

As Khrushchev also noted in the "secret speech," "in many films and in many literary works the figure of Lenin was incorrectly presented and inadmissibly depreciated."<sup>47</sup> Mayakovsky as the author of *Vladimir Il'ich Lenin* was part of the immediate remedy, and he became a part of the standardized promotion of the new Lenin cult. Many of its slogans derived from *Vladimir Il'ich Lenin*: "Lenin even now is more alive than all the living," "Lenin lived, Lenin lives, Lenin will live!" and "Lenin is With Us," the title of a short poem of 1927 ("Lenin s nami!"). Of course, the "traffic" in Lenin was taken to heights of fetishization and kitsch that even Mayakovsky did not anticipate: "By and large [Lenin] came to figure either as a titanic statue, grand and imposing, or as a kindly, approachable figure in soft focus. With increasing frequency he was

pictured - in paintings and posters, on lacquer boxes and bric-a-brac - smiling at fluttering birds or giggling children."<sup>48</sup>

A reinvigorated "cult" of Mayakovsky himself found expression under Khrushchev, and mirrored some of the Lenin imagery. In 1958, the famous "titanic statue" of the poet in Mayakovsky square was unveiled with great fanfare. At the same time a "kindly, approachable" side was introduced. The 1930 edict on the inappropriateness of Mayakovsky's poetry for children had already been reversed in practice under Stalin, but there had continued to be disagreements on exactly how to present the poet's image properly in standard textbooks. For example, in 1947 E. Naumov and A. Dement'ev had objected to the use in schools of Mayakovsky's own self-image as a "latrine cleaner and water-carrier of the revolution" from *At the Top of My Voice*.<sup>49</sup> In 1960 a book of articles about Mayakovsky was published specifically for children in an edition of 50,000 copies, bearing the significant title *Our Mayakovsky*. It properly interpreted the work of a revamped "Uncle Volodia," and emphasized his value to Soviet "kul'turnost": "there isn't an educated person in the world who has not read or heard at least one work of the great poet of our Soviet nation."<sup>50</sup> In April of 1956, the previously unpublished lyric love poem "Letter to Tatiana Yakovleva" was published in *Novy Mir*. Although the poem was to appear in volume 9 of the new *Complete Works* begun in 1955, it was published separately to introduce it immediately to the wider reading public, along with commentary by N. Reformatskaia, an administrator of the Mayakovsky Museum, who gave the following justification for the poet's lyricism: "Just as 'Letter to Comrade Kostrov...' [another love poem written during the same trip to Paris] this second 'Letter' about 'the nature of love,' which reveals in the poet's personal conflict the feelings of a Soviet, a citizen, and a patriot, is one of the best examples of Mayakovsky's lyric, in which each personal theme reveals

itself as a theme of social significance and each social theme as a personal one."<sup>51</sup>

Mayakovsky continued to be featured on TASS posters after Stalin's death, but there was slightly less emphasis on heroics and vigilance and more on optimistic scenes from every-day life, in "soft focus." Although the following examples are mostly from the post-Stalin period before 1956, after the secret speech even greater use was made of optimistic Mayakovsky imagery. A poster designed for May Day, 1953, less than two months after Stalin's death, reflects the need to instill calm in the population during this confusing time. It depicts a peaceful mother and child with a crowd of red banners celebrating the May Day holiday, with Mayakovsky's lines: "Eternally shine/ over our republic,/ labour,/ peace,/ May." ("Vechno siiai nad respublikoi nashei,/ Trud, mir, mai.") Many of the popular propaganda images of this time particularly stressed Mayakovsky's connection with youth. One pictures a smiling Komsomol girl and boy, and in the background a crowd with red banners and construction in progress, presumably building Mayakovsky's "City-Orchard," the poem cited on the poster: "I know the city will exist/ I know the orchard will bloom,/ When there are such people/ In the country of Soviets." ("Ya znaiu - gorod budet./ Ya znaiu - sadu tsvest',/ Kogda takie liudi/ V strane v sovetskoi est'!") Another poster from 1955 celebrates the cult of fitness: "There is no more splendid clothing in the world,/ than the bronze of muscles and the freshness of skin," ("Net na svete prekrasnei odezhi,/ chem bronza muskulov i svezhest' kozhi") with a picture of tanned, muscular youths in trunks climbing out of a pool, holding a volleyball and looking proudly into the distance. His jingles on public health written for the publishing house "Questions of Work" and the State Medical Publishers in 1928-9 were used in this time, for example: "Fruits and vegetables, before they're eaten/ Must be washed in hot water!" ("Frukty i ovoshchi pered edoi/

Moite goriachei vodoi!") His various reminders to "be vigilant" and not to forget about rooting out enemies also continued to appear periodically.<sup>52</sup> Thus, despite a few minor changes in imagery, the popular image of Mayakovsky projected by the state remained as standardized and regulated as in the Stalin era.

An important development after 1956 was the need to write Stalin out of the historical account of Socialist Realism by placing even greater emphasis on its development in the pre-Stalin era. One of the first articles to defend the method of socialist realism by arguing that it was produced by objective conditions before it was named by Stalin, was co-authored by Moscow University professor A. Metchenko, who wrote prolifically on Mayakovsky in these years and into the eighties. The article admitted that "the cult of personality had a most unfavorable effect on the handling and working out of so important a question as that of the method of socialist realism," but that the method itself developed from Lenin's view on "partiinost'" and from the "creative searching" of Gorky, Mayakovsky and others.<sup>53</sup> This became the official means of salvaging socialist realism after Stalin's disgrace, and Mayakovsky was central to it. The continuity and change on this subject were indicated by a 1956 dissertation abstract titled "The Problem of the Positive Hero in the Work of V.V. Mayakovsky, 1917-1923," which sought to show the germination of the "positive hero" in Mayakovsky before it reached its maturity in "such masterpieces of socialist realist poetry as the poems *V.I. Lenin, Good!, At the Top of My Voice*."<sup>54</sup> As during the Stalin era, Soviet literary characterization was exclusively defined by the dychotomy of "positive" and "negative" figures, and this continued to be a method particularly attributed to Mayakovsky. This 1956 dissertation provided a slightly more sophisticated analysis than the 1950 abstract discussed at several points in the previous chapter (Pomerantseva,

"Bor'ba za sotsialisticheskii realizm..."), and it did not pose the problem of Mayakovsky's development in terms of "romanticism" and "realism." However, it came to essentially the same conclusions.

...hyperbole in Mayakovsky leads to the creation of diverse effects (heroic or satiric) depending on which image it is adjusted to (positive or negative)... In this way, the abstraction of some of Mayakovsky's works in the period of the Civil War is linked not with the poet's strivings to depart from the reflection of concrete -historical events (as was the case for the Proletkultists and 'Kuznetsa' [The Smithy]), not with isolation from life, but with the fact that methods of characterization ["tipizatsiia"] and the fleshing-out of living phenomena were not always directed in Mayakovsky at the realization of those tasks which he placed before himself, that is, [his abstraction is linked] with the well-known lagging of form behind content.<sup>55</sup>

It is significant that in 1956 Andrei Sinyavsky, under the pseudonym Abram Tertz, sent his infamous essay *On Socialist Realism* abroad for publication. In it he stated: "Mayakovsky was too much of a revolutionary to become a traditionalist. To this day he is accepted politically rather than poetically. For all the paens written to his glory, his rhythms, images, and language seem overbold to most of our poets."<sup>56</sup> Sinyavsky did depict Mayakovsky as an innovator of "socialist realism," but of a qualitatively different breed, one who carried out its demands "more radically and more consistently," which allowed him to "embody them in deathless images."<sup>57</sup> Yet in his essay as a whole, Sinyavsky challenged the notion that the official Soviet doctrine was essentially "realist" or "socialist." In 1958, he sent out an additional page which defined Mayakovsky as "the most socialist realist of all," but also placed him in the more definable category of "fantastic realism," in fact a tendency in the late nineteenth century that served to inspire modernism. Mayakovsky was the only Soviet writer to appear in this category, which included Hoffmann, Dostoevsky, Goya, and Chagall, who Sinyavsky hoped would "teach us how to be truthful with the aid of the absurd and the fantastic," in order to create "a

phantasmagoric art, with hypotheses instead of a Purpose, an art in which the grotesque will replace realistic descriptions of ordinary life"; in other words, for Sinyavsky aspects of the uncanonized Mayakovskv could be a guide to a departure from Socialist Realism.<sup>58</sup> Sinyavsky also made a comment on Mayakovskv's attitude to Lenin, which has less significance for the original Lenin cult than it does as a reaction to the canonized *V.I. Lenin* and its use in the new Stalinized cult of Lenin at this time: "Mayakovskv...could not permit himself to laugh at Lenin, whom he praised to the skies, any more than Derzhavin would laugh at his Empress."<sup>59</sup> Sinyavsky's work was published in France in 1959; in the Soviet Union the argument to uphold socialist realism as part of the "Leninist line" and to continue to use Mayakovskv as its representative was not more widely refuted at this time, due in part to the fact that the political climate began rapidly to cool in late 1956 in response to the Hungarian uprising of that autumn. In 1957, A. Metchenko again defended Mayakovskv as a canonical socialist realist poet, this time directly attacking the effects of the Thaw on the study of his work in an article titled "Against Subjective Fabrications about Mayakovskv's Work."<sup>60</sup>

### **The Literary Heritage Scandal**

What continued to take place after 1956 in "Mayakovedenie" was largely the same process of bringing the details of Mayakovskv's biography in line with established criticism, while maintaining the rhetoric against "varnishing reality" and the illusion of a greater commitment to historical fact. This met with an important challenge in 1958, when Lili Brik published 150 letters and telegrams addressed to her from Mayakovskv in volume 65 of the series *Literaturnoe nasledstvo*, or "Literary Heritage." The volume was titled *New Material on Mayakovskv*, and was entirely dedicated to new essays and

previously unpublished material on Mayakovsky, including numerous stenograms of the heated literary debates in which he took part in his late years, when he often publicly defended his commitment to formal innovation. In addition to Lili's letters, some of the material was controversial in its own right, for example, Naumov's article on "Mayakovsky and Lenin," which asserted Lenin's disapproval of Mayakovsky, in particular his opposition to the 1921 publication of 150,000,000 in 5,000 copies.<sup>61</sup>

But it was the publication of Mayakovsky's private correspondence, along with numerous informal "family" photographs of Mayakovsky with the Briks and with a number of Futurists and Formalists, which posed the most unexpected challenge to the official Mayakovsky legend. These could not be as easily dismissed as memoirs, which could always be accused of subjectivity and opportunism. Bengt Jangfeldt, who published the entirety of the surviving correspondence between Mayakovsky and Lili Brik separately in Stockholm in 1982 (and in English translation in 1986), remarked that the letters which did appear in 1958 "revealed the poet's psychological make-up in a light that was not in accordance with the narrowly ideological interpretation of his poetry." But as Jangfeldt also notes, the letters posed even broader problems for the poet's official biographical legend, as they reasserted the prominent role of the Briks in Mayakovsky's life, both in personal terms and artistically: "...it was essential, if the reading of Mayakovsky's work as realist and non-Futurist was to prevail, to deny his links with the literary milieu of the 1910's and 1920's." In addition, "the fact that Mayakovsky and the Briks lived together smacks of 'moral adventurism,' and is a dubious model for those to whom the biography of the poet of the revolution should be an example."<sup>62</sup> It was still, after all, the poet's image as an exemplary citizen that was most central to the official legend, even more than his actual creative work, as a tribute to Party loyalty and to the nation.

The editorial staff of *Literaturnoe nasledstvo* stated in the introduction to their volume that "Mayakovsky the lyric poet, the man of great feeling, is unfolded in these letters from a new standpoint. Moreover the letters contain a great deal of information and factual data indispensable to Mayakovsky's researchers."<sup>63</sup> This was a bold claim, since researchers had dispensed with such information quite decisively up to this time. In his 1997 memoirs, V.V. Katanian, son of V.A. Katanian, cites letters written to him personally by Lili Brik in 1955 in which she tells of her discussions with Ilia Zilbershtein, chief editor of *New Material on Mayakovsky*. Zilbershtein was trying very hard to convince her in that year to give the letters to *Literaturnoe nasledstvo*, but she wrote of her great reluctance to do so. Finally they came to an agreement, and she handed over some of the letters and a few of her reminiscences, but wrote "I will be happy if they don't print them."<sup>64</sup> Chertok recounts a private conversation he had with Lili in 1957 while gathering material for the same volume, in which she reportedly said: "The Soviet authorities want to see Mayakovsky as he appears in Kibalnikov's sculpture on Mayakovsky Square...Castrated!"<sup>65</sup>

It is the scandal provoked by the appearance of the volume *New Material on Mayakovsky* which is of significance for the official Mayakovsky legend at this time, and for the way in which it reflected the contradictions of the Thaw. Khrushchev's leadership had been highly unstable since the end of 1956, due to a political crisis in Poland and the Hungarian revolution of that year. As Donald Treadgold notes, Khrushchev was blamed in the secret councils of the Kremlin for the way he had managed "de-Stalinization," and in a closed meeting of Party leaders, writers and artists in May 1957, "he used the accents of 'thunder and lightning,' as he said later, and is believed to have threatened that if Soviet writers should follow the path of the Hungarian writers, 'my hand will not tremble.'"<sup>66</sup> At the end of that year, Khrushchev published an article

explicitly holding Soviet and Eastern European writers and artists responsible for the political challenges to Soviet authority.<sup>67</sup> The post-Hungary freeze in cultural policy was not followed by a thaw until after 1959. *New Material on Mayakovsky* appeared not only in this politically-charged atmosphere but also in the same year that another, much greater storm in the literary world took place: the 1958 campaign against Pasternak, who was expelled from the Writers' Union after being awarded the Nobel Prize for literature for *Doctor Zhivago*. Lili's letters would no doubt have produced a scandal even at the most auspicious moment of the Thaw, but these factors contributed to the virulence of the official reaction.

In a sense, the reaction to the researchers' efforts began even before the volume was published. In 1957 Chertok obtained the short memoirs of Veronika Polonskaia, written in 1938 and never published, about her affair with Mayakovsky and about his death, at which she was present. Chertok solicited these memoirs for an article on the circumstances of Mayakovsky's suicide, specifically for *New Material on Mayakovsky*. But Polonskaia's memoirs were considered too controversial even for that volume; Chertok could only publish them in 1983, after he emigrated to the U.S., and they were first published in the Soviet Union only in 1987.<sup>68</sup> Also in 1957, when Chertok and the journalist M. Z. Dolinsky attempted to get access to the materials from the state investigation conducted immediately after the suicide, they were told by every office they contacted that no such materials were held there. They later found out that after their letters requesting access had been received, these materials had actually been transferred from the archives into the private safe of the Central Committee secretary responsible for ideology, Suslov.<sup>69</sup>

As it was, publication of *New Material on Mayakovsky* was only possible in the wake of the 1956 de-Stalinization campaign, and in fact many Soviet

scholars gave the volume positive reviews when it first appeared, thanks to the change in climate and the discourse against “varnishing reality.” And yet, the same context provoked a swift reaction from the state. The Central Committee of the Party passed a special resolution against volume 65 of *Literaturnoe nasledstvo* and on the individual actions of its editor, Zilbershtein. The resolution was dated March 31, 1959, and was published in 1961.<sup>70</sup> That the Central Committee itself intervened in this matter directly for a second time testifies to the importance of Mayakovsky as state icon, and to the nervousness his biographical history still inspired.

In 1959, two days after the anniversary of Mayakovsky’s death, an anonymous article was published in *Literaturnaia gazeta* titled “Against the Distortion of Historical Truth.” It objected to the vulgarization of the poet’s image in the volume, stating that the publication of the letters catered to those who “crave a glimpse of a prominent person in slippers and robe, or else in a negligee, so as to reduce that person to their own level.” In reference to those scholars involved in the publication, as well as those who gave it positive reviews, the article stated: “The self-contained, blind enthusiasm for archival ‘first discovery’ compels other scholars to forget at times also the zeal of Mayakovsky’s poetry, and the decisive factor in the creative evolution of the poet - his inexorable aspiration to serve the revolution and the proletariat.” The article also attacked Dinershtein’s article on Mayakovsky’s political activities as akin to “the fabrications of foreign revisionists” for depicting him in conflict with aspects of “Soviet reality.”<sup>71</sup> The volume was obviously seen as detrimental not only to Mayakovsky’s official image but by extension to Soviet literary criticism as a whole. *New Material on Mayakovsky* had been intended as a two-volume publication, to appear as volumes 65 and 66 of *Literaturnoe nasledstvo*. Following the scandal, the second volume, also dedicated to new materials,

was refused for publication. A sixty-sixth volume of the series never appeared; without any explanation to readers, volume 65 was simply followed by volume 67. The volume planned as number 66 was never printed as such, and the correspondence as a whole was not published in the Soviet Union until *perestroika*.

From the late fifties into the sixties, two camps became polarized on the question of Mayakovsky's biography. On the one side was Lili Brik, and her sister Elsa Triolet, then living in Paris, who supported Lili's account of Mayakovsky's alliances and personal life; on the other was Mayakovsky's sister, Liudmila Maiakovskaya, whose interpretation had the backing of the Central Committee and the party apparatus. She also helped condemn Lili Brik in the 1959 press.<sup>72</sup> This came to a climax in 1968, but an official anti-Brik campaign began to take shape in the early sixties, when following the scandal surrounding Lili's letters, the daughter of Tatiana Yakovleva came to the Soviet Union and attacked Lili's claim to being Mayakovsky's "one true love." This took on political importance as a pretext for intensifying attacks on the role of the Biks in Mayakovsky's life in general. Yet despite the condemnation of *New Material on Mayakovsky*, its publication had a lasting influence on the literary world, particularly in motivating other relatively daring publications in the sixties. The most important during the Thaw was *V. Mayakovsky in the Recollections of his Contemporaries* (*V. Maiakovskii v vospominaniakh sovremennikov*), published in 1963. It included memoirs by Lili Brik, Viktor Shklovsky and Meyerhold among many others, a number of which mentioned the importance of the Biks in Mayakovsky's life. Even Aseev, who in the thirties had distanced himself from them, now asserted that Lili had been "the principal heroine of Mayakovsky's poetry," and gave a glowing description of Osip: "when his voice resounded, everyone somehow listened to him with particular attention." It also

included photographs of Mayakovsky with his Lef colleagues, with Meyerhold at a rehearsal of *The Bathhouse*, and a cover of the LEF journal from 1923. In addition, it reprinted the record of Mayakovsky's last public appearance at the Plekhanov auditorium for the first time since 1930.<sup>73</sup> The challenge to the official image of the poet through biographical material, however partial, opened the door not only to a glimpse of the living man behind the legend, but also to new interpretations of Mayakovsky as a political poet.

### **Mayakovsky Square**

The impact of *Novoe o Maiakovskom* in 1958 and the scholarly momentum it generated as a partial challenge to the official legend in the early sixties also extended indirectly to the image of Mayakovsky adopted by a new generation of poets and student dissidents, but in a much different way. The careful orchestration of Mayakovsky's popular state image which continued to predominate could not completely iron out all the potentially subversive aspects of the Mayakovsky legend during a period of political change. In the social movements of the sixties Mayakovsky's name acquired new associations. The Mayakovsky legend played a role in the attempts of some to subvert the dominant ideology in broader ways.

The square renamed in Mayakovsky's honour by Stalin, as a first public recognition of his new canonized status, ironically became a focal point for dissent among discontented youth in the late fifties and early sixties. And even more ironically, it was at the very unveiling of Khrushchev's monument to the poet in that square - the statue erected in 1958 to reaffirm the poet's official status - that the series of events began. Vladimir Bukovsky, a Soviet dissident and eventual émigré who was an activist in an opposition movement of Moscow

students and youth at this time, told the story of Mayakovsky Square in his memoirs titled *To Build a Castle: My Life as a Dissenter*.

In the summer of 1958 a statue of Mayakovsky was unveiled. At the official opening ceremony, a number of official Soviet poets read their poems, and when the ceremony was over, volunteers from the crowd started reading theirs as well. Such an unexpected and unplanned turn of events pleased everybody, and it was agreed that the poets would meet here regularly. At first, the authorities saw no particular danger in this, and one Moscow paper even published an article about the gatherings, giving the time when they took place and inviting all poetry-lovers to come along. Young people, mainly students, assembled almost every evening to read the poems of forgotten or repressed writers, and also their own work, and sometimes there were discussions of art and literature. A kind of open-air club came into being. But the authorities could not tolerate the danger of these spontaneous performances for long, and eventually stopped the gatherings.<sup>74</sup>

An oppositionist student movement had already begun to develop immediately out of the shock of 1956, one which "could no longer express itself within the bounds of 'permitted criticism'."<sup>75</sup> The first political groups had been suppressed, so opposition had to take a cultural form. After the experiment of 1958, the gatherings at Mayakovsky's statue were revived in September of 1960, again as poetry readings but with a more openly political character. They were revived by Bukovsky and just two of his university friends, but they gathered momentum quickly and were soon taking place regularly. This cultural opposition was essential to the development of a political opposition, and it must be understood differently from the debates on Mayakovsky and on literary criticism in general that were taking place at the time among scholars and established writers, although they had a mutual impact on each other. The readings at Mayakovsky Square were the incubator not only for a new generation of poets but for a generation of dissidents as well. Vladimir Osipov, one of the organizers of the Mayakovsky Square gatherings and a later dissident, told the writer Mikhail Kheifets while they were both in the same prison camp: "it seems it is impossible to find a famous dissident from among

the young, who thundered at the end of the sixties and the first half of the seventies, who would not have appeared at that time [in the early sixties] on Mayakovskiy Square, who did not spend his youth there."<sup>76</sup> The participants in the 1960-61 readings included the "veterans" of two years before, as well as a new layer of young people; they included those interested in pure art, and those inspired by dissident politics of various stripes. For some, like Bukovsky and his colleagues, "the right of art to be independent was merely one point of opposition to the regime, and we were here precisely because art happened to be at the centre of political passions."<sup>77</sup>

The readers recited their own unpublished work and that of persecuted and repressed poets such as Pasternak, Mandel'shtam and Gumilev. In part, the symbolism of the location had to do with appropriating an official literary symbol, but it is significant that it was Mayakovskiy and not another symbol - such as Pushkin Square, also in downtown Moscow - that was chosen at this time. The Square and statue became known to some as "Mayak," meaning "lighthouse,"<sup>78</sup> and an image of Mayakovskiy as a discontented, anti-authoritarian rebel was partially revived. To some extent this was simply due to the rediscovery of the poet's iconoclasm and anger, but it was also linked with the notion of purer Soviet ideals. Those who recited Mayakovskiy chose poems which diverged from the official cult of optimism, and read them in a new light. Chertok, who was at a reading himself in the early spring of 1961, gives this description of a series of young men reading poems by Mayakovskiy, one after the other:

The subject matter of the poems was more or less identical - what was being demonstrated was not the ability to read Mayakovskiy, but a commonality of feeling, for this reason each succeeding [recital] seemed to continue the thought of the previous one. A few of the poems were contained not only in the *Collected Works* but also in school readers, however the setting in which they were recited and the mood that was invested in them gave them a special intonation - refusal, protest, demand for change. The very titles of the poems,

loudly and distinctly pronounced, sounded almost defiant: "About Trash," [...] "Bootlicker," [...] "Pompadour," "Gossip," "Bribe Taker," "Coward," "Bureaucrat Factory," "General Manual for Beginning Toadies." Through the dead letter of canonized poetry there suddenly broke through its living spirit and sense.<sup>79</sup>

The Mayakovsky Square readings indicate another side of the parallel between the official legends of Mayakovsky and Lenin during the Thaw. Not only were both useful to the state for similar reasons, but some of the appeal of Mayakovsky's opposition to the corruption of ideals was partly linked with the phenomenon of so-called "Neo-Leninism" in the youth movement of the time. This emerged out of the first responses to the secret speech and the Hungarian revolution. For example, at Moscow University in November 1956, students at a compulsory session on Marxism-Leninism challenged the lecturer about the suppression of the Hungarian revolt using quotations from Lenin, and challenged the reprisals of the Komsomol.<sup>80</sup> Mayakovsky's suitability to the regime's more limited goals of partial de-Stalinization was also in tune with the anti-authoritarianism of the youth movement at this stage, which was often expressed with reference to Lenin. Chertok attested that in this first stage of the social movement of the sixties, its "spontaneous or conscious participants demanded the restoration of 'Leninist norms'... and a return to 'revolutionary ideals.' A suitable place for the public expression of such demands seemed to them the pedestal of the Mayakovsky monument..."<sup>81</sup> From his conversations with Vladimir Osipov, the writer Mikhail Kheifets recounted: "The Mayakovsky monument in Moscow had been expected for a long time. In its own way the youth respected Mayakovsky: a 'sincerely Marxist,' 'sincerely Leninist' poet was in tune with an epoch of initial awakening of social consciousness (like Yevtushenko with his declaration of the time: 'Consider me a Communist!')."<sup>82</sup>

On April 14, 1961, the Mayakovsky Square group organized a reading specifically to commemorate the anniversary of Mayakovsky's suicide. For the

students, Mayakovsky's suicide was a primary part of his appeal as a "nonconformist" revolutionary. Their commemoration of it turned out to be the largest and most eventful gathering in the Square. It happened to coincide with a holiday to celebrate Yurii Gagarin's space flight, and the square was filled with bystanders, many of whom joined the crowd around Mayakovsky's statue out of curiosity. Eduard Kuznetsov, who later became a well-known dissident, was a regular participant in the gatherings of 1960-61, and recalled the April 14 reading in 1981: "We worked out... a slogan that was to become more or less obviously the core of our conduct on Mayakovsky Square that evening: 'To Gagarin - hurrah! To Mayakovsky - three times over!' It was precisely for this that I was seized [by secret police] [...] I was seized when in one of the circles of curious people I was speaking at length on the subject that the system is characterized not so much by cosmic successes, as by the suicide and murder of poets."<sup>83</sup> Kuznetsov was sentenced in 1962 to seven years in the labour camps for "anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda." Bukovsky recalls the near-riot which took place the evening of April 14, 1961:

The atmosphere was tense in the extreme and plainclothesmen were ready to pounce at any moment. At last, when Shchukin started reading, they let out a howl and made a dash through the crowd in the direction of the statue...A gigantic fist-fight broke out. Many people had no idea who was fighting whom and joined in just for the fun of it... The police were generally unpopular anyhow and on this occasion I feared that the crowd would overturn the police car and kick it to pieces. But somehow or other the police succeeded in bundling Shchukin and Osipov into a car and extricated it from the crowd. Shchukin got fifteen days "for reading anti-Soviet verses" and Osipov ten days "for disturbing the peace and using obscene language"...This episode alone indicates what an extraordinary time it was.<sup>84</sup>

The spirit of Mayakovsky Square was captured on film during the era itself, in *I am Twenty* (*Mne dvadtsat' let*), released in 1964. Although the film is not about the Square gatherings themselves but about the everyday, largely uneventful life of Soviet youth and this time, it shows the wider impact of the shift

in the popular image of Mayakovsky and Lenin on some who were not directly involved in opposition activites: the film's original title, "Lenin's Detachment" ("Zastava ll'icha") is significant. Release of the original version was refused and the director Marlen Khutsiev had to greatly revise and retitle it. The action of the film was set in 1961, and it focussed on how the social outlook of youth was related to older revolutionary ideals. The hero is a youth who swears by "the ideals of the revolution" but who is dissatisfied by Soviet reality. The Soviet film scholar Pisarevsky counts it among the one hundred most important films produced up to 1967, but states that its reception on the screen in 1964 was sharply polarized, enjoying great success with a small part of the auditorium.<sup>85</sup> Chertok attests: "The time of...social upheaval, the sense of the necessity for change, is conveyed by the filmmakers with the help of Mayakovsky's poetry. The episode in which the heroes of the film wander through Moscow at night and recite Mayakovsky, expressing their feelings and thoughts with his words and rhythms, may be counted among the classic scenes of world cinema."<sup>86</sup>

Among the young poets who read their own work to huge crowds in Mayakovsky Square were Yevgeny Yevtushenko and Andrei Voznesensky. In order to capture the spirit of the era, the 1980 film *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears*, set in the late fifties, features a cameo appearance by Voznesensky declaiming his 1964 poem *Antiworlds on the Square*. These poets, along with Robert Rozhdestvensky, gained renown as poets who were able to publish in the Soviet Union, but who also represented the new spirit of youthful protest and who took Mayakovsky as a model. It is certainly true that the generation of poets which emerged in the fifties had a limited store of worthwhile influences at their ready disposal: in addition to Mayakovsky, there were Blok, Esenin and Pasternak, all of whom were also acknowledged by Yevtushenko as his models.<sup>87</sup> But the limited scope alone does not explain the attraction of

Mayakovsky's persona. Again, the official Mayakovsky was a bridge with what the young poets were familiar with when they began writing, while Mayakovsky the "rebel," who combined individualism with populism and aggressiveness with vulnerability, fitted their own self-image as tribunes of the people and voices of their generation. In the appendix to her work on Mayakovsky in the Stalin period, which deals with the poet's reception after 1954, Menzel summarizes the typical traits associated with Mayakovsky that were adopted by these poets: moral-ethical maximalism, the social command, the use of biographical elements to reinforce credibility, and expressive emotionality.<sup>88</sup> To this might be added "up-to-the-minute" topicality, as opposed to purely abstract tendentiousness, and a declarative internationalism, particularly on the part of Yevtushenko, who can be considered the most representative of the phenomenon as a whole.

Yevtushenko may have lacked the complexity, depth and poetic craftsmanship of Mayakovsky; in fact he adopted some of the features of Mayakovsky's poetry as mere mannerisms, such as the "lesenka" or "ladder" method of laying out verse lines, from which he derived no semantic or syntactic effects. However, what is significant about the phenomenon of these poets is the symbolic value of Mayakovsky as an icon for those who became published authors in a time of upheaval. Like the "neo-Bolsheviks" of the student movement and Mayakovsky Square, Yevtushenko sought a "purer" variant of Soviet ideology, but in a more restrained sense than many of his contemporaries who did not achieve his fame. His *Precocious Autobiography*, for which he was censured in 1963 because he had published it in Paris without authorization, expresses this aptly, and can be summed up by his statement that "the revolution is sick but not dead." He began this book by stating that "a poet's autobiography is his poetry. Anything else can only be a footnote," consciously

echoing Mayakovsky's opening to "I Myself": "I am a poet. In this I am interesting." In fact what is most interesting about Yevtushenko is his attempt to revive the poet's civic role as something other than a lackey of the Soviet state, and although he did not stray very far from traditional Russian and Soviet notions of civic poetry, his dedication to the defense of literary freedoms and the causes of the youth opposition was genuine. He travelled relatively widely, and unlike many published poets at the time his self-definition as an "internationalist" in a political sense was part of his persona. In his famous 1961 poem against anti-Semitism, "Babii Yar," he declared: "Oh, my Russian people! I know you are/ in essence internationalist."<sup>89</sup> In his autobiography he recounted that following the attacks on *Babii Yar*, and just before he left for a trip to Cuba, he gave a reading in Mayakovsky Square which ten thousand people attended, and stated "the support of the people will always mean more to me than anything else." He also asserted: "What I wanted was that the whole world should be my home... 'Frontiers are in my way; /It's awkward /Not to know Buenos Aires/ Or New York."<sup>90</sup>

Yevtushenko's straightforward image of Mayakovsky is most directly laid out in the long poem *Bratsk Hydroelectric Station (Bratskaia GES)* of 1964, published the following year. In the introduction to the poem he asks Mayakovsky for the qualities that he wants for himself: Mayakovsky's "boulder-lumpiness," "turbulence," the "deep bass" of his voice, and of course his "grim refusal of appeasement for the scum."<sup>91</sup> In another section of this same poem, titled "Mayakovsky," Yevtushenko speculates on Mayakovsky's fate under Stalin, not unlike other intellectuals of the post-Stalin era: "...I can imagine it all - /but Mayakovsky /in '37 /I can't imagine./ What would have become of him/ if that revolver/ hadn't gone off? [...] Being dead, he has become/ 'The best/ and most talented' -/ alive/ he would have been declared an enemy of the people." Unlike

others, Yevtushenko had undying faith that Mayakovsky would not have capitulated under any circumstances: "And if that shot / hadn't rung out,/ without seeking for himself reward and fame,/ like so many,-/ he would have remained honest,/ dragging the epoch on his shoulders./ No, he wouldn't have yielded,/ wouldn't have broken,-/ he, like a spearhead/ would have led us forward." Despite the combination of anger with hope, pessimism with optimism, that characterizes some of his work, Yevtushenko's image of Mayakovsky is based on the heroic and optimistic, and avoids the ironic and nihilistic side of the poet. Unlike many others who commemorated Mayakovsky's death in the Square in the early sixties, and for whom the suicide was an important symbol which characterized the system more than "cosmic successes" and served to condemn it, Yevtushenko turns the revolver outward "for the cause of the Revolution" and echoes the words of Soviet officials in 1930: "With all his life/ Mayakovsky calls us/ to battles/ and not to suicide."<sup>92</sup>

Yevtushenko's attraction to Mayakovsky was not fundamentally different from that which explains the phenomenon of Mayakovsky Square in general, but the rejection of cynicism is a significant point of divergence. It stemmed from Yevtushenko's lack of understanding for the depth of anger that characterized much of his generation after 1956. Earlier, Yevtushenko's persona included poems like the 1955 "Fury" ("Zlost") in which he described the reproaches directed at him for being too angry, responding: "life is interesting when you're angry!"<sup>93</sup> This was reversed in later poems like "The Monologue of Beatniks" in 1961, in which Yevtushenko deplored the effect of cynicism on the younger generation: "hands have laughed as they applauded,/ and feet sniggered as they marched." He was concerned that his generation would be perceived as nihilists, warning that "they could write about us, make movies/ of this scribbled nonsense - we've allowed it...," which is possibly a reference to the film *I am*

*Twenty*, filmed in that year. Yevtushenko's verdict was that "irony, from our saviour/ you have turned into our murderer."<sup>94</sup> This attitude was clearly spelled out as early as 1959 in the poem "The Angry Young Men" ("Serditye"). Here Yevtushenko defined the twentieth century as both the "great age of the sputnik" and as an age that murders its own ideas. But in reference to the "angry young men" produced by it, he worried that "their eyes shine with contempt for the age" and for all parties and governments, for church and prophets, and asked: "Surely their youthful credo/ is not just their capacity to swear like hell?!" He clarified his own distinction between anger and what he perceived as nihilism: "If I'm moved to anger,/ it's not because I harbor/ wretched disbelief -/ but because I'm loud in my love for my country." Finally he calls for the twentieth century, first and foremost "the great age of the sputnik," to "pluck them out of their dark confusion."<sup>95</sup> For Yevtushenko after 1956, the system tended to be characterized as much by "cosmic successes" as by the suicide of poets, and it was Mayakovsky in heroic battle which spoke to the age, rather than his disillusionment and bitterness.

The phenomenon of Mayakovsky Square and the young published poets who identified with Mayakovsky must be carefully assessed. Menzel argues that when the further evolution of Yevtushenko, Voznesensky and Rozhdestvensky is considered, it becomes clear that there was no radical change in the "reception-history" of Mayakovsky, nor can it be said that Mayakovsky affected the emancipation of this generation in a positive way, either in terms of poetic innovation or politicization.<sup>96</sup> She argues that these poets found themselves at an impasse after only a few years and had to re-orient themselves, footnoting Yevtushenko's 1963 poem "The Far Cry" ("Dolgie kriki") as evidence: "My voice has thundered through the halls, like an alarm,/ squares shook to its mighty roll,/ but it is too weak to reach/ out to this hut, and wake it."<sup>97</sup> It is certainly true that

these poets came up against the limitations of the Mayakovsky legend, although they and some in the youth opposition maintained an identification with it beyond 1963. But the question here is what exactly those limitations were.

Menzel lists declarative loyalty to the regime as one of the particular aspects of Mayakovsky upon which these poets depended and which doomed them to failure; this is the key point, but it must be clarified. These poets identified with Mayakovsky in a way that incorporated both his iconoclasm and the still-dominant influence of the poet's official legend, which was modelled on loyalty to a regime utterly removed from that which shaped the living Mayakovsky. It had become linked with chauvinism and apologist rhetoric. Despite some misplaced loyalties by the Mayakovsky of the late twenties, his declarative loyalty to a state still widely identified with far-reaching social change could not simply be successfully transplanted to the infinitely more limited liberalism of a section of the new Soviet bureaucracy. The "neo-Leninists" in the youth movement found themselves in a similar predicament.

Some of Bukovsky's comments on this are useful:

Among the people circulating in Mayakovsky Square...were a lot of neo-Marxists and neo-communists of various kinds... [they] had appeared in the 1950s as a natural reaction to Stalin's tyranny: taking the classics of Marxism-Leninism as their starting point and making their appeal to them, people endeavoured to force the authorities to observe their own wonderful principles. But the authorities had long since ceased to take note of the prophets displayed on the Party facade and were guided by considerations of their own self-interest.<sup>98</sup>

Boris Kagarlitsky, who was a Soviet oppositionist in the eighties, noted that it was to be expected that versions of "neo-Bolshevism" or "neo-Leninism" would predominate in the student movement of the late fifties, and would continue to exert an influence into the sixties. He also noted that this embodied inherent limitations:

The Twentieth Congress had revealed Stalin's distortion of Lenin's line, and it was precisely Lenin's line that was counterposed to Stalinism. Lenin's ideas were well known and his writings accessible. Clearly, it was to him that the anti-Stalinist rebels turned in the first place. Paradoxically, both the rulers and the opposition were appealing to the same ideas and values...however, the neo-Bolsheviks... on the whole maintained the positions of the official ideology, although representing a "purer" variant of it.<sup>99</sup>

The same can be said of the Mayakovsky legend. Because it had become one of the "classics of Marxism-Leninism," exposing its contradictions did not automatically mean a complete break with official ideology. Mayakovsky could be associated with what was perceived as "Lenin's line" before the distortions of Stalinism, but this was still limited by the parameters of the official Stalinized version of "Leninism." Yevtushenko, Voznesensky and Rozhdestvensky gave voice to the mood of protest and often spoke out boldly against the regime, but stayed within certain limits of Soviet ideology. This linked them with the ambivalence of the Mayakovsky legend itself. They walked a thin line between dissidence and acceptability, and were alternately disciplined and tolerated. At times the regime made use of them - as it made use of Mayakovsky - in giving a public face to de-Stalinization, particularly during its last phase of 1962-64. This was possible because for these three published poets, to varying but comparable degrees, the era was still characterized by "cosmic successes" and Mayakovsky called them "to battle" for a state which "had long since ceased to take note of the prophets displayed on the Party facade."

But these poets who achieved some official acceptance were expressive of a much broader social phenomenon, which explains the fact that rulers and opposition could appeal to the same ideals and values and produce quite a different dynamic for many in Mayakovsky Square. Although the dissidents who spent their youth there also abandoned a primary identification with

Mayakovsky and certainly with Khrushchev's Lenin, the Square and the combination of anger and idealism it represented was in fact a crucial influence on an entire generation of dissenters.

By the autumn of 1961, news of the readings in Mayakovsky Square had begun to filter out to the foreign press, and an open campaign began to crush them. Names of those involved often appeared in the Soviet press, "where we were virtually called enemies of the people."<sup>100</sup> The KGB brought snowplows to the Square and circled them around the Mayakovsky statue to prevent the readings from taking place. After a final gathering on the opening day of the Twenty-second Congress of the CPSU in October of the same year, the readings were officially banned. In 1962-63, there was another overt de-Stalinization campaign, allowing the publication of a number of previously unpublizable Soviet writings, among them *V. Mayakovsky in the Recollections of His Contemporaries* mentioned above, which was partly influenced by the new vogue and demand for new materials among both scholars and university students. In 1964 there were signs that this last phase of liberalization was coming to an end while Khrushchev was still in power, particularly when the unconventional poet Joseph Brodsky was tried under the Soviet "parasitism" laws. By October Khrushchev's "resignation" had been accepted in favour of Brezhnev, although 1965 saw an economic liberalization, which gave rise to acute conflict in the regime.

In 1965 the gatherings in Mayakovsky Square were briefly revived again by a new youth group called SMOG, which stood for the Russian words "boldness, thought, image and depth," or "the youngest society of geniuses." This group expressed a trend of 1964-65 toward greater organization and coherence among literary dissidents, as compared to the more unstructured

and spontaneous readings of the early sixties. The introduction to an anthology of Samizdat literature, written in 1974, recounts:

Like their hero, Mayakovsky, the SMOGists wanted to break from conventionalism and had revolutionary impulses: "Today we have to fight against everything from the Chekists to the bourgeoisie, from ineptitude to ignorance," said one of their manifestos. The idea of forming SMOG groups apparently caught on among young rebels in many parts of the Soviet Union. While the movement was centered in Moscow and Leningrad, there were also reports in 1965 of SMOG groups that put out uncensored newsletters in the Urals, Odessa, and "southern Russia."<sup>101</sup>

On April 14, 1965, SMOGists organized what they described as a "literary-political" meeting to commemorate the anniversary of Mayakovsky's death and to use the symbolism of the occasion to make a series of demands. Among their demands were official recognition of SMOG by the Writers' Union, the right to discuss ideas freely and to set up their own press, the release of Bukovsky, who had been imprisoned in a psychiatric institution for organizing a protest of the 1965 arrest of the dissident writers Sinyavsky and Daniel, and freedom for Brodsky. About a thousand youth attended.<sup>102</sup> The SMOGists combined a primary concern for literary freedom with an interest in the native revolutionary tradition from the Decembrists to Lenin, and in other leaders who had opposed Stalin, such as Trotsky and Bukharin. In the same month, the official Soviet press was already beginning to criticize the "one-sided" treatment of historical events and personalities, and by this was meant the denigration of Stalin.<sup>103</sup>

Under the right circumstances even the very symbols of Mayakovsky's official image, like the rigid statue in the Square, could briefly become partially transformed for limited numbers of people, due to the broader social developments of this "extraordinary time." The "edited" Soviet version of Pushkin that became celebrated in the late thirties, as tenacious as it was beyond the Stalin era, also retained an ambiguity which surfaced at various

times. Its clearest parallel with the appeal of the Mayakovsky legend to those in revolt against aspects of the Soviet status quo came much later, during the 1991 putsch against Gorbachev, when both rulers and opposition again appealed to some of the same symbols. Pushkin's verse and alleged beliefs were cited in support of the putschists' call for defence of the old regime, while those who resisted the putsch also recited from Pushkin in the speeches made on a tank outside the "White House."<sup>104</sup> Mayakovsky was chosen over Pushkin at a time when the terms of reference were still defined by the language of Bolshevism, without its substance, and some dissidents and poets were framing their struggles in the discourse at hand while seeking a "purer variant." And yet, the challenge to Mayakovsky's official image did give the "generation of the Mayakovsky monument" in the sixties at least a glimpse of the living poet's genuine revolutionary impulses.

## Chapter 6: 1965-1985: Stagnation and Mayakovsky

Unfortunately, the “generation of the Mayakovsky monument” had little lasting impact on the official Mayakovsky legend. By 1965, the popularizers of Mayakovsky’s legendary biography were providing a new solution to the problem of the poet’s association with Futurism, which had continued to trouble critics in its biographical details. Earlier criticism had already made use of the statement in Mayakovsky’s autobiography that he originally wanted to create a “socialist art” before any contact with Futurism, but most studies continued to date the beginning of Mayakovsky’s poetic career from his first publications in 1912. In 1965 a popular biography by S.V. Vladimirov and D.M. Moldavsky, *Vladimir Vladimirovich Maiakovskii*, further “clarified” the issue: “It is no accident that the start of Mayakovsky’s poetic work belongs not to 1912 - the period when his poems appeared in Futurist anthologies - but to 1909, when, while in solitary confinement he created lines charged with revolutionary enthusiasm.”<sup>1</sup> Such a claim was possible because the notebook in which his genius had allegedly appeared fully-formed had been confiscated by prison authorities. Whereas before Mayakovsky’s ideological formation was linked with his underground activities as a Bolshevik, now his formation as a poet, isolated from any influences “foreign” to him, was rewritten to correspond. Since the “corrupting” influences of Futurism and Formalism came later, they could be easily shaken off by the poet - and by Soviet critics, whose claims need not be compromised by the poet’s biographical history. This biography was issued in a mass edition of 120,000 copies.

In 1966 appeared a monograph by V.A. Shoshin, which made use of Mayakovsky for national-chauvinist and anti-Semitic purposes.<sup>2</sup> Mayakovsky’s

image as a Soviet patriot rather than an internationalist was alive and well in Soviet criticism, with all the chauvinistic associations this inevitably implied to one degree or another. Moreover, the demonization of the Briks which reached its high point in the late sixties and seventies, although motivated by a variety of factors, made great use of anti-Semitism.<sup>3</sup>

An official source published more than ten years after the start of the Brezhnev era gives an indication of how few fundamental changes occurred in the poet's image in the course of this period, despite a few minor changes resulting from the Thaw which had a lasting impact. A teachers' aid for the study of Mayakovsky in high schools, published in 1976, began by quoting a Central Committee speech from the twenty-fifth Party Congress of February of that year: "Communist upbringing presupposes the constant perfecting of the system of 'people's' [popular] education." The teacher's aid then committed itself to carrying this out in the "constant perfecting" of the system of work in the study of Mayakovsky, but, as the Party Congress also stated, "without an unnecessary break or hasty decisions."<sup>4</sup> This comment was obviously directed at the Khrushchev years in a general sense, but it also summed up the attitude to Mayakovsky as an element of official ideology. Still, this teachers' aid gave more attention to the love lyric than was the case before the Thaw, including "Letter to comrade Kostrov from Paris on the Nature of Love" and even a mention of the pre-revolutionary "To Lilichka," and "Letter to Tatiana Yakovleva," published in the year of the secret speech.

Whereas Mayakovsky's official legend and its manipulation were not substantially changed by his appeal as an iconoclast and rebel to the generation of the Thaw, the attitude of non-conformist poets and dissidents to his legacy did alter during the Brezhnev era. Lenin did not survive as any kind of symbol of dissent for very long at all: by the mid sixties, as Bukovsky noted,

"the popularity of Lenin and the rest had fallen so low that this kind of criticism began to sound more like a compliment than an indictment."<sup>5</sup> The subversive appeal of Mayakovsky had slightly more staying power, although it too ran up against the limits of the poet's official state legend. The retreat of Mayakovsky as a symbol of dissent was felt after 1968, when the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia to crush the "Prague Spring" resulted in widespread and decisive disillusionment with all the lingering hopes raised by de-Stalinization.

The former oppositionist Boris Kagarlitsky writes:

On the morning of 21 August 1968 the entire ideology of Soviet liberalism collapsed in a few minutes, and all the hopes aroused by the Twentieth Congress fell to the ground. Whereas previously liberal intellectuals had comforted themselves with the thought that, on the whole, our society had a sound foundation, that it had not lost its socialist character, that - as Yevtushenko wrote in his *Autobiography* - the revolution was sick but not dead, the events of 1968 scattered those illusions. It was not a matter of "the excesses of Stalinism" but of the system itself. For many, recognition of this fact meant spiritual and ideological collapse...1968 put an end to their hopes, and along with them their ideology, in the form it then bore. It had proved helpless to withstand the tank armies of the neo-Stalinist state upholding its monopoly of "Communism." It was almost like Mayakovsky's verses: "Communism from books is easy belief./ (To serve it up in books is fashionable)/ But this - brings 'rigmarole' to life,/ and shows Communism in flesh and blood."<sup>6</sup>

The disillusionment that followed the events of 1968 was coupled with a more general cynicism which grew during the seventies as a result of the increasing gap between social reality and official slogans, and it came to affect all segments of society, certainly by the early eighties. In the Stalin and Khrushchev eras bureaucrats at all levels could have a certain sense of pride in their achievements. They might have lived in fear of Stalin and have resented Khrushchev's chopping and changing of policies, but they also saw the economy grow, and with it their individual prestige. Under Brezhnev, as the economy began to stagnate, pride gave way to cynicism, cynicism easily spilled over into flagrant corruption, but official slogans themselves grew more

pompous and falsely optimistic to compensate. The cynicism of the bureaucracy was clearly matched by mass alienation at the base of society, especially as widespread knowledge grew of the immense material privileges possessed by the nomenklatura.<sup>7</sup> On the one hand, drunkenness rose to record heights, on the other, various countercultures developed, both popular and intellectual. Economic and cultural stagnation represented only one side of the Brezhnev era: urbanization took place at an unprecedented rate, and contact with the West grew. In 1990, Kagarlitsky also cited a Soviet sociologist who argued that "the cultural level of the masses became on average somewhat higher during the 1970s than the cultural level of the ruling elite."<sup>8</sup>

Socialist Realism had begun to decline in practice in the course of the sixties although it remained official doctrine: in 1969 an article by G. Nedoshivin, somehow published in the Soviet Union itself, systematically examined the principles of Soviet aesthetics and their inapplicability to the art of the sixties.<sup>9</sup> In this work the author even attacked the very notion that "partiinost'" in artistic literature was a concept emanating from Lenin. The decline of Socialist Realism became more generalized in the seventies in literature, the visual arts and particularly in the cinema, although of course the innovative work of film-makers like Tarkovsky did not replace official culture. Writing in 1990, the scholar Mikhail Epstein described a progressive retreat from social reality in the literary aesthetics of the seventies, from the "moral phase" of the sixties to a "metaphysical phase" beginning in 1968, to "conceptualism" in the late seventies: "if it was the moralism of the 'shestidesiatniki' ('the generation of the sixties') that was vulgar for the metaphysicians - who in their turn condemned 'vulgar sociology' - then it is all kinds of mythologisms or metaphysical constructions that the conceptualists find vulgar. Language is to be pure of the sin of content..."<sup>10</sup> By the early eighties

crisis in the Soviet economy reached a peak, as did ideological and cultural alienation from official political culture and its icons. Nevertheless, the regime clung to Mayakovsky as a symbol of the civic traditions of Russian and Soviet literature, and the need to revive this in order to address the contemporary ideological crisis and lack of civic enthusiasm.

The present chapter follows a generally chronological scheme, but will stray from this in order to trace the outcome of events discussed, particularly in the section on the "Anti-Brik Campaign."

### **1966-1968: Challenges to the official Mayakovsky**

The retreat from attempts to use Mayakovsky against official culture did not take place all at once. Partial challenges to Mayakovsky's image continued for a few years after the end of the Thaw, but in much humbler ways. They did not represent new interpretations, but merely a reflection of those raised during the Khrushchev years.

In 1965, the writers Andrei Sinyavsky and Iulii Daniel had been arrested for publishing their books in the West, and Mayakovsky was featured in their self-defense at the famous trial of February, 1966. This was the first time the regime had actually tried writers specifically for what they had written, rather than using a trumped-up charge such as "parasitism" as in the case of Joseph Brodsky in 1964. The trial came at a time when there were moves to rehabilitate Stalin; the previous month *Pravda* had questioned the use of the phrase "cult of personality."<sup>11</sup> The trial was the first real indication that the new leadership would put an end to the erratic liberalism of the Khrushchev era; it was a trial not merely of Sinyavsky and Daniel but of all uncensored literature.

As noted in the previous chapter, Sinyavsky did share the attraction of many writers of the younger generation to what he regarded as the genuine

tradition of the young Mayakovsky - at least in an artistic, if not in a political, sense. But quite apart from the question of Mayakovsky's influence on the artistic work of Sinyavsky and Daniel, the fact that they made reference to the Mayakovsky legend in the trial itself is significant. It provides an example of Mayakovsky's muted but lingering importance as an inconsistency of official ideology which could on occasion be used against the regime's own arguments. This importance was linked with the continued hegemony of Socialist Realism in the Soviet literary world until the end of the sixties, when it declined rapidly, as did Mayakovsky's appeal to dissidents and unconventional writers.

In the examination of Iulii Daniel, who published under the pseudonym "Nikolai Arzhak," the prosecutor accused him of slandering the Soviet people in his novel *This is Moscow Speaking*, written in 1960-6. In the novel he satirically depicted the passive reaction of the Soviet population to a state-declared "Public Murder Day," on which all citizens have the right to kill any other citizen other than those in the police and military. In response to the charge of slander Daniel replied: "In that case Mayakovsky's *Bathhouse* and *Bedbug* would also be slander on the Soviet people. Didn't Mayakovsky slander Pierre Skripkin?" The prosecutor replied: "Let's not talk about that."<sup>12</sup> Andrei Sinyavsky also referred to Mayakovsky's plays, in his defense of language parody in *The Makepeace Experiment* (*Liubimov*): "Some of the characters use cliches... fun is being made of the speakers, not of what they say. There are many examples in literature of the use of parodied newspaper language, and there is nothing political about this device. Just think of Mayakovsky's *Bathhouse* and *Bedbug*."<sup>13</sup> For both authors, Mayakovsky was the only officially acceptable Soviet satirist to whom they could refer in their own defense. This would have been impossible, however, before the revival of his plays after Stalin's death,

which had a lasting impact on his official image. Sinyavsky again referred to Mayakovsky's theatre when interrogated about his essay of the mid-fifties *On Socialist Realism*: "I am against eclecticism, against mixing things that are incompatible. I am not against *The Cherry Orchard*; I am against an unnatural union of *The Cherry Orchard* with *Mystery-Bouffe*."<sup>14</sup> In *On Socialist Realism*, Sinyavsky had referred to Mayakovsky ironically as the "most consistent Socialist Realist," because the poet's own hyperbole shared with Socialist Realism a fundamental anti-realism, and an attempt to seek truth by means of the absurd and fantastic - in other words, by distorting the given reality and inventing one's own.

For Sinyavsky, slightly older than the "generation of Mayakovsky Square," who were shaped by the influence of the "secret speech," Mayakovsky's usefulness as the least stultifying example of the Soviet literary tradition was completely divorced from any idealization of Lenin. To his defense of the use of satirical clichés in *The Makepeace Experiment*, the judge responds: "And what about 'the little beards'? And Lenin's well-known words about a 'universal breathing space'?... What is the author making fun of here? This is not the same as in *The Bathhouse*." Sinyavsky: "I'm making fun of Lenya Tikhomirov, who talks in clichés and always thinks 'on a world scale'."<sup>15</sup> More to the point, when the prosecutor raised his comment in *On Socialist Realism*, that "Mayakovsky...could no more permit himself to make fun of Lenin, than Derzhavin could permit himself to sneer at the Empress," Sinyavsky responded: "The classicism of the twentieth century echoes the classicism of the eighteenth century...The young Mayakovsky made fun of things, but then he stopped. Mayakovsky was confronted by limits to what could be made fun of. But in the nineteenth century there were no such limits."<sup>16</sup> That this was a sticking point for the establishment is seen in the judge's admonition of Sinyavsky: "Now, you

have conducted a seminar on Soviet poetry and you probably talked about Mayakovsky and his epic poem on Lenin. You talked to the students about Lenin as seen by Mayakovsky. And then [in *The Makepeace Experiment*] you have him [Lenin] baying at the moon!"<sup>17</sup> In his final plea, Sinyavsky summed up the ambiguous status of Mayakovsky in the sixties, as an icon appealed to by both leaders and opposition: "If I write in an article about my love of Mayakovsky, then they quote at me Mayakovsky's words: 'Soviet citizens have a pride all their own,' but you, they say, sent your manuscripts abroad. But why, inconsistent and un-Marxist as I am, may I not express my admiration for Mayakovsky?"<sup>18</sup>

One of the major turning points for non-dissident literature was the Etkind affair in 1968. Efim Etkind was a professor of philology for twenty years at the Herzen Pedagogical Institute in Leningrad and a senior member of the Leningrad Writers' Union, and in his *Notes of a Non-Conspirator* he recounted in detail his conflict with the authorities in 1968.<sup>19</sup> In that year, he was unexpectedly called in to his publishers' office over an anthology of Russian verse translations he had edited. In the foreword he had dealt with the phenomenon of the forties and early fifties, when for the first time in Russian history so many prominent poets became professional translators, by stating: "Russian poets were deprived of the possibility of expressing themselves to the full in original writing and spoke to the reader in the language of Goethe, Orbeliani, Shakespeare, and Hugo." Although this would not have been a shocking observation during the period of de-Stalinization, it now led to a reprimand which included Etkind's observations on Mayakovsky. A month after Etkind was called in to his publishers, the rector of his institute accused him of distorting Mayakovsky's poetic development by writing that the dol'nik, a poetic meter with feet of two and three syllables which became established in Russia

in the early part of the century, first appeared in Russian verse through translations of the German poet Heine, and then went on to play an important role in Mayakovsky's verse reform. The rector objected: "This is a lie! Mayakovsky's poetry was born of the revolution, and not from translations of Heine!"<sup>20</sup> The Russian dol'nik was indeed first used by Zhukovsky and other Russian poets of the nineteenth century in translations of German poems; it was given its name by the Symbolist poet and prosodist Briusov, and became most associated with the name of Alexander Blok and to some extent Esenin, who popularized it, but it also made an impact on Mayakovsky's innovations in versification.<sup>21</sup> During the furor over the "errors" of his anthology, Etkind referred to Mayakovsky in his self-defense:

I wanted to explain the high level of poetic translation in our time by the fact that a series of major poets became professional translators, which was not the case in previous times... It is well known that in a certain period of our development lyricism was not very credited - I need only recall Mayakovsky's verse: "We have attacked lyricism more than once with the bayonet...", and his lines: "...I subdued myself, stepping on the throat of my own song." Mayakovsky was able to create a new poetry, in which civic passion and lyric verse were merged into one. The lines mentioned above are Mayakovsky's reflections on his own poetic past, Mayakovsky himself overcame the breach between the social and the personal in poetry, without outside help. His words "I will walk across volumes of lyrics" do not at all mean that he rejected lyricism, but that he denied "pure" lyricism, devoid of social passion, cleansed of politics. Mayakovsky could merge civic and lyric poetry... [But] it was not given to all to do so.<sup>22</sup>

The Etkind affair was primarily an indication of the general retreat from the relaxation in official literary criticism of the Khrushchev years: dozens of editors lost their jobs over it, and it was followed by a series of repressions of non-dissident critics. But the incident was also indicative of the return to greater simplification of the official Mayakovsky legend and its unapologetically "varnished" interpretation. Subsequently, after emigrating in the early 1970s, Etkind began to write about Mayakovsky's approach to form as content, and to

link this with similar considerations in other poets, from Pushkin to Tsvetaeva and Mandelshtam.<sup>23</sup>

Between 1967 and 1969, the Taganka Theatre in Moscow staged an authorized but popularly successful show based on Mayakovsky's works, titled "Listen!" after his prerevolutionary poem of the same title ("Poslushaite!"). It was devised by the actor Veniamin Smekhov, directed by Iurii Liubimov, and the cast included the popular actor and "guitar poet" Vladimir Vysotsky - the latter's significance to the culture of the Brezhnev era and to the Mayakovsky legend in the seventies is discussed below. The production used both Mayakovsky's verse and recollections about him. The role of Mayakovsky was played by five different actors, each representing a different aspect of the poet: Mayakovsky the lyricist, the satirist, the tribune, the angry Mayakovsky, and a silent Mayakovsky, whose role it was to stare profoundly at the audience without saying a word throughout the performance. It also featured children reciting the same verses over and over in a "competition": "Very many and diverse scoundrels wander throughout our land and around it," from the 1929 poem "Conversation with Lenin." One of the Mayakovsky's then came on stage reciting the same verses and stated "We of course will subdue them all, but subduing all of them is awfully hard."<sup>24</sup> Even as late as 1971 a film by E. Klimov, *Sport, Sport, Sport!* depicted youth who identified with Mayakovsky's non-conformism in the spirit of youth ten years earlier. But these echoes of the Thaw had clearly dissipated by the seventies.

### **The Anti-Brik Campaign**

In 1968, months before the Soviet invasion of Prague, the periodic state-sponsored attacks on the role of the Briks in Mayakovsky's life and work became intensified to such a point that they are now referred to as a

"campaign." This has long been acknowledged as an important milestone in the rewriting of Mayakovsky's biography, which had an impact on the popularly projected image of the poet, as well as on Mayakovsky scholarship in the Soviet Union. It had the opposite effect on Western scholarship: beginning in 1968 and continuing throughout the Brezhnev era, a series of Western publications appeared which specifically focussed on Mayakovsky's relationship with the Briks. One Russian commentator, decidedly unsympathetic to the Briks, much later referred to this Western phenomenon as a "tendentious" layer of "maiakovedenie," which it would be more accurate to call "brikovedenie."<sup>25</sup>

The campaign was sparked when in 1968 the popular magazine *Ogonek*, under the editorship of A. Sofronov, published two articles which took even greater liberties than was standard with the available biographical evidence on Mayakovsky and the Briks. The goal of the two articles was to establish Tatiana Yakovleva, rather than Lili Brik, as the love of Mayakovsky's life, and to establish Lili and Osip Brik, as well as a number of their contemporaries, as responsible for his suicide. The articles were written by the already somewhat infamous Koloskov, who had been negatively reviewed and criticized repeatedly by Mayakovsky scholars for the overly fanciful distortions in his books *The Life of Mayakovsky* (1950) and *Mayakovsky in the Struggle for Communism* (1958). Before, his embellishment of the poet's uniform political image at all stages of his career was viewed as a problematic blurring of his ideological development; now that Koloskov turned his attention to vilifying the Briks in the period of the twenties, the same unscientific methods he had always employed were taken seriously. The name of V.V. Vorontsov, a party functionary who shared Koloskov's views, was added to the first article of 1968 in order to lend authority to it. Koloskov had already associated himself closely with Mayakovsky's sister Liudmila, who was herself dedicated to discrediting Lili's

claim to the poet's legacy. Also in 1968, she and Koloskov co-edited a book of memoirs about Mayakovsky, *Mayakovsky in the Recollections of his Relatives and Friends*, which was published to counter the 1963 *Mayakovsky in the Recollections of his Contemporaries*. As the editorial note of the 1968 book emphasized, these were the memoirs of people who "shared his views" and "understood the significance of the activity of the great poet of the socialist revolution."<sup>26</sup> The intent was to establish the identity of the poet's genuine family, his mother, sisters, childhood friends from Georgia, and others unconnected with the "false" family and friends he had adopted. This was also the intent of the articles in *Ogonek*. Although the conflict over Mayakovsky's legacy dates back to the thirties, it would now take on a new importance due to the decisive intervention of the regime.

The first of these articles, titled "The Love of the Poet," was printed on the anniversary of Mayakovsky's death.<sup>27</sup> Its subject was the 1928-29 love affair between Mayakovsky and Tatiana Yakovleva, whose name up until this time had hardly appeared in print in the Soviet Union, and whose affair with the poet had never before been mentioned in the Soviet press. Mayakovsky's letters and telegrams to her had only been published abroad, by Roman Jakobson, and even the 1928 poem "Letter to Tatiana Yakovleva" was not published at all until 1956. V.V. Katanian writes: "In our country Tatiana Yakovleva was always spoken of vaguely and implausibly."<sup>28</sup> Now her name was resurrected not in order to set the biographical record straight, but as a means to distort it in a different way. Vorontsov and Koloskov attempted to use Tatiana's previously unpublished letters to her mother in Russia as new evidence to show that Tatiana and Mayakovsky were "created for each other," while Lili was merely an "infatuation" who brought him nothing but unhappiness, and that this was part of the reason for his tragic fate. The authors claimed that Tatiana's love letters to

Mayakovsky were destroyed by "some evil hand," which can only refer to Lili, who was known to be in possession of his papers after his death. Mayakovsky's affair with Veronika Polonskaia, which began before his intended return to Paris, was also dismissed as an "infatuation."

The authors stated that the failure of Mayakovsky's love for Yakovleva was due to the fact that he was denied a visa to return to Paris in October 1929, which is entirely plausible. But although Vorontsov and Koloskov did not state it directly, it is implied that the Briks had a hand in denial of the visa, because they "mysteriously" travelled to London five months afterward, and because Mayakovsky could never have been denied a visa by the regime without someone's interference. As Brown noted in 1973, "the belief is firmly held in some quarters that Brik through his connections in the GPU, maneuvered the refusal of Mayakovsky's visa, since he had reason to believe that Mayakovsky's marriage would be a distinct loss to both of the Briks... A version repeated and widely believed in the Soviet Union is that Lily, through her own connections with a GPU official, Iakov Saulovich Agranov, herself brought about the refusal of Mayakovsky's visa."<sup>29</sup> It is now well known that Mayakovsky and his circle were being watched by the secret police, and although the Briks may have played a role in accepting agents like Agranov into their circle, and may in fact have done some informing themselves, Mayakovsky himself was unsuspicious of the proximity of members of the secret police, who at the time were not yet identified with mass repressions.<sup>30</sup> It is entirely plausible that he was denied a visa due to suspicion on their part of his relationship with Yakovleva, who was considered to have White sympathies, in addition to a multitude of political and artistic grounds for suspicion of Mayakovsky's unreliability.

Chertok recounts the following private conversation with Lili Brik concerning Mayakovsky's suicide, which took place in 1957 when he was

gathering materials for *New Materials on Mayakovsky*, and which was published abroad only in 1983. Unlike her published accounts of the poet's death, this one deals with the issue of the visa, although it is paraphrased by Chertok: "In September of 1929 he was refused a foreign passport for the first time...In the administrative department of the Moscow Soviet, in charge of foreign passports, Mayakovsky was told, half in jest, half mocking, that in his latest works a Trotskyist stench was noticed. But we knew, said Brik, that the administrative department of the Moscow Soviet was only a signboard, that the decision was made by the propaganda department of the Central Committee and the OGPU."<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, in the excerpt from her memoirs written in 1956 but published in Stockholm in 1975, after the appearance of the *Ogonek* articles, Lili did not mention the visa at all, but simply downplayed Mayakovsky's reaction to the marriage of Yakovleva.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, Elsa Triolet gives a similar public account in defense of her sister Lili, in one of her two responses to the *Ogonek* articles in 1968, "N'accusez personne de ma morte," published in the pro-Communist Paris newspaper *Lettres Françaises* in July, 1968. Here she insists that Mayakovsky never applied for a visa, as Yakovleva had married someone else.<sup>33</sup> In fact, Yakovleva married after Mayakovsky informed her that he could not go to Paris. It seems clear that the *Ogonek* articles inspired defensiveness on the part of Lili and her supporters, as even the insinuation of the Biks' guilt was damning.

An interview conducted with Tatiana Yakovleva fifty years after the events in question provides some additional insight. The interview was conducted by Yakovleva's friend the Russian émigré critic G. Shmakov, who was preparing to write her biography before his untimely death, after which a recording of the interview came into V.V. Katanian's hands and appears in his book of 1997.<sup>34</sup> She states that she herself did not know at the time that her love was "not strong

enough" to leave with him, and even that she was still not sure whether she might not have gone with him after all had he come to Paris a third time as planned, in October 1929. But when she found out that he was denied a visa, she married the Viscount du Plessix in order to "untie the knot": "If I had agreed to go, [Mayakovsky] would have had to marry me, he wouldn't have had a choice. I thought, perhaps, he simply became afraid...and I had already heard about Polonskaia...I felt free. [...] I wanted to build a normal life, I wanted to have children...Francine was born nine months and two days after my marriage. Those two days saved my reputation in Paris."<sup>35</sup> But Yakovleva also made it clear that she bore no ill will towards Lili, and on two other occasions after 1968, also mentioned in V.V. Katanian's recent book, she decisively refuted the manipulative intent of the articles in *Ogonek*. Genrikh Borovik sent a typed copy of an interview he conducted with Yakovleva while in New York to Lili Brik with a dedicatory inscription to her. In it Yakovleva spoke negatively about the *Ogonek* publications in general, and clearly stated that "all this was done in order to cause harm to Lili Brik." Lili promised not to publish the interview without Borovik's permission, and it remains unpublished to this day.<sup>36</sup> Katanian also recounts an informal visit he himself paid to Yakovleva after Lili's death in 1978, with Shmakov. She again spoke with contempt about Vorontsov and Koloskov and their methods:

Those letters of mine to Penza! I never lisped like that, "Mommie dearest" ["mamulen'ka"] and such things, someone clearly re-styled them, to put it mildly... And why do some people who have never seen me before with their own eyes say that I was connected with [Mayakovsky's] tragedy? Both Kamensky and Shklovsky, who don't know me, discuss our love, and ignore Lili and Polonskaia. How vulgar it is! To whom are these fabrications necessary? Who are these boulevard journalists? This is disrespectful in relation to Mayakovsky and written with the goal of insulting Lili Brik...<sup>37</sup>

The reason for linking Yakovleva with Mayakovsky's death was clearly not to cast blame on her, but rather to idealize her importance in relation to Lili.

It is easy to become disoriented by the number of conflicting accounts about what in fact took place in the last years of Mayakovsky's life, many details of which cannot be indisputably verified. It is not necessary to refute Yakovleva's genuine, reciprocal love for Mayakovsky, and even Lili's jealousy at the time, nor that the inability to travel to Paris was a factor in the poet's depressive state of mind, although it was far from the only one. There is also a large question mark over the extent of the Briks' involvement with the secret police in the late twenties. But it is not necessary to establish every fact in order to refute the intent of the *Ogonek* articles, which was not to expose a love triangle, or the suspicions of the authorities regarding Mayakovsky, but to discredit Lili Briks's role and by extension that of the Briks' entire circle in Mayakovsky's life and work in every sense, and to further monumentalize the poet's image.

This is made even more obvious in the second article, "The Tragedy of the Poet," in which the reasons for Mayakovsky's death are addressed more directly. It was written by Koloskov alone and published in two parts on June 1 and 14, 1968.<sup>38</sup> Here Koloskov pointedly referred to Tatiana as the daughter of Russian parents and to Lili as the "dazzling tsaritsa of the Zion of the Jews," using Mayakovsky's own words but with a clearly anti-semitic meaning in this context. In addition to Mayakovsky's frustrated love, two other key reasons for the suicide are listed: the betrayal of his false friends, in particular the Briks, and his life-long persecution by counter-revolutionary critics. By this last was meant not merely Averbakh and other RAPP critics, who were already declared "enemies of the people" and previously blamed for the poet's death, but practically every critic and theoretician of the twenties who had had a critical word to say about him. Mayakovsky's death is portrayed as the most damning condemnation of the entire intellectual world of the twenties. Koloskov even claimed that Mayakovsky's contemporaries attacked *The Bathhouse* because

they recognized the prototype of the character Pobedonosikov to be Trotsky. Osip Brik was identified as the primary reason for Mayakovsky's inability to successfully unite different forces which would have helped defend the Party line in literature and art, and was therefore also implicitly blamed for the rise of RAPP. Those who Mayakovsky most trusted were seen as most directly responsible for the poet's death, and the article concluded with the implication that those people were in fact murderers: "we are still unable to name precisely who prepared the shot that led to the death of the great poet. We are confident, however, that the time will come." This follows a statement that "many important facts had to be excluded from this publication, since they concern 'living people.'" Koloskov did write a more explicit account of his "murder" theory in 1970, as the last chapter to an unpublished book, *Cherez vsiu zhizn'*, which was kept in Koloskov's personal archive. The last chapter was reworked in 1979, and circulated unofficially in the eighties under the title "I accuse" ("Ya obviniaiu"). It undoubtedly was a source for the popular spreading of rumours and conspiracy theories regarding Mayakovsky's death in the late eighties and early nineties, which were developed by other "researchers" in an even more sensationalist, "detective" style. "I accuse" was in fact published in 1991 in *Molodaia gvardiia*, a conservative journal known for its overt anti-semitism.<sup>39</sup>

Nevertheless, in 1968 insinuation was more than enough, and the time for blame came immediately. Although the Brikes were not declared "enemies of the people," the articles were followed by entirely new steps to strike them from the historical record. As V.V. Katanian writes in his 1997 memoirs: "[Lili Brik] was made into an odious person, her name began to appear in the press only with a minus sign, her work was not printed anywhere, the dedications to her in Mayakovsky's books began to be deleted, the censorship office retouched her photographs, and where the poet had stood next to her, he was left alone with a

tree."<sup>40</sup> The photograph mentioned was taken in 1918; it first appeared in its retouched form even before the appearance of the *Ogonek* articles, in a 1964 publication by L. Rakhmanova and V. Valerianov.<sup>41</sup> This is one indication that the systematic campaign against Lili had its roots in more sporadic efforts to erase her from historical documents before this, and it continued long after the sensation over the *Ogonek* articles had died down. The practice of air-brushing Lili from photographs of Mayakovsky continued into the early eighties.<sup>42</sup> Even after Lili's death in 1978, a new edition of Mayakovsky's *Complete Works* suppressed all dedications and references to her on the instructions of Suslov, Central Committee secretary of ideology. The pre-revolutionary poem "To Lilichka (In Lieu of a Letter)", was deleted altogether from the 1978 Works. The major poems about the poet's relationship with Lili, such as *The Backbone-Flute* (1915) and *About This* (1923), were included without a single mention of her in the accompanying notes. These 1978 Works were in fact produced as part of the "*Ogonek* " Library series, under a joint editorship which included Vorontsov and A. Sofronov, editor of *Ogonek* in 1968.<sup>43</sup>

In 1972 the museum on Gendrikov Lane, in the building where Mayakovsky had lived with the Briks, was closed down, ostensibly on the appeal of the poet's sister Liudmila Maiakovskaia, but with the full support of the leadership of the Writers' Union and the Central Committee. In 1974 a new museum was founded on what was then called Serov Street on Dzerzhinsky Square, formerly (and now once again) Lubiansky Passage, at that time across from the headquarters of the KGB. For Katanian the new museum was both an integral part of removing Lili's name from Mayakovsky's life and his further monumentalization: "on Dzerzhinsky Square was opened a marble museum-palace, with marble halls, marble lethargy and marble corridors along which one could reach a marble Mayakovsky. There was not a single photograph of

Lili Briks to be found."<sup>44</sup> The campaign against the Briks resulted not merely in changes to aspects of the poet's biographical history, but to a further "refining" of his official popular image as a whole.

The new museum was founded at the location where Mayakovsky had his office, or work room, but it was also ironically where he had committed suicide. By 1974 this potential association was less distasteful than that of the poet's life with the Briks, although in fact none of the displays mentioned the suicide or even that this was the place of his death. Although the *Ogonek* articles seemed to break a taboo in speaking openly about the reasons for Mayakovsky's death, in fact as soon as the articles had served their purpose, the taboo remained intact. The topic of the suicide was not broached again in such detail until glasnost, and official criticism continued to avoid even mentioning it. Even the third edition of the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* in 1974 simply stated: "The complex circumstances of the last years of his personal life and literary struggle led Mayakovsky to depression and suicide."<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, the 1968 articles constitute another chapter in the evolution of Mayakovsky's suicide as "political" fact, which continued to produce responses and speculation well after the Brezhnev era.

It is understandable that the popular publication *Ogonek*, with its circulation of over two million, would be sought after as a forum by Vorontsov and Koloskov rather than a scholarly journal. They were themselves clearly seeking to provoke some kind of campaign: this was a question of the poet's popular image as a model Soviet citizen, and the changes that followed the articles affected much more than scholarship. But *Ogonek* was a Party organ, and the central question is why these articles were not relegated to the list of officially unrecognized publications by Koloskov, or at best simply regarded as a contribution to the negative but less systematically hostile regard for the Briks

up until that time. This was not the first time there had been hints that the Briks and their colleagues were in some measure to blame for Mayakovsky's fate, but the extent of the state response suggests that the regime had a vested interest in making use of the articles at this particular time.

Menzel emphasizes the state-sanctioned policies of anti-Semitism, which had increasingly affected many Jewish artists and intellectuals since the overtly anti-Semitic nature of the trial of Joseph Brodsky in 1964.<sup>46</sup> Although this was certainly a factor in the way the campaign was carried out, as evidenced by the articles in *Ogonek*, it was not the only motive on the part of the state. The campaign was not separate from the ongoing desire to diminish or disapprove of the role of Briks, which had progressed in stages since the forties, and its intensification in 1968 could be attributed to the fact that Lili Brik had not been keeping her silence. The 1958 publication of *New Material on Mayakovsky* had left a marginalized but lasting impact on the literary world at home and abroad, and since that time Lili had also published an article in a major journal suggesting a parallel between Mayakovsky's poetry and the heroes of Dostoevsky, who was still not in the pantheon of celebrated Russian classics.<sup>47</sup> Another motive in the background may well have been the resurgence of interest in the theories of Lef outside of the Soviet Union, particularly in Eastern Europe, where it was more than likely regarded as a direct threat after the experience of the Hungarian uprising. In her 1981 book on the work of Lef, Halina Stephan notes that this occurred in Czechoslovakia and East Germany as a result of liberal efforts directed towards rediscovering pre-Socialist Realist traditions within socialist culture.<sup>48</sup> This was not unlike the Soviet attempts to find in Mayakovsky a "purer variant" of socialist culture, but it was more sophisticated and far-reaching than it could be in the heartland of Socialist Realism, where modernist traditions had been earlier and more effectively

destroyed. Stephan states that the Czech revival of interest "came as part of a conscious break with the prescriptive Soviet cultural models," and "although the primary motivation was unquestionably political, the approach was historical, because the rediscovery of Lef was the work of Czech specialists in Russian literature."<sup>49</sup> For example, in 1964 a historical reappraisal of Mayakovsky in the context of Russian and European art movements was published in Prague,<sup>50</sup> in 1965 an international conference on the avant-garde took place in Bratislava, the proceedings of which were published in 1968,<sup>51</sup> in 1967 an article titled "Osip Brik as Critic" appeared in a Czech literary journal,<sup>52</sup> and in 1968 an analysis of Lef aesthetics appeared in a volume along with the theories of RAPP and Pereval.<sup>53</sup> Although by themselves these developments may not have had a wide impact, they were motivated by a wide sentiment for reform, and in the context of the Prague Spring it must have been cause for concern to the Soviet authorities. After the Soviet invasion, "the entire Czech program of research on Soviet left art came to a halt,"<sup>54</sup> and the circumstances likely provoked a desire to stem the possibility of any such revival in the Soviet Union.

But V.V. Katanian suggests another even more immediate motive against Lili Brik on the part of the regime: he refers to Lili as a "hostage" and a "trump card" in a political game directed against the famous French Communist poet Louis Aragon, who was then married to her sister, Elsa Triolet. Aragon was chief editor of the pro-Communist newspaper *Lettres Françaises*, a member of the Central Committee of the French Communist Party, and a holder of the International Lenin Prize, and after years of loyal support for Soviet policy he began to break with it loudly and publicly in print in the late sixties. His criticism began with the trial of Sinyavsky and Daniel, but it became intolerable to Soviet authorities when he opposed the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and the crushing of the Prague Spring, and steps were taken to restrain him. Katanian

writes that Lili herself understood that she was being used against Aragon: "The offensive against Lilia Iurevna proceeded systematically, and she was skillfully placed in the centre of scandalous insinuations...Both she and Aragon understood this perfectly, but still Lilia Iurevna let him know that he should continue to conduct himself as he considered necessary... and that it was already impossible to live as they had lived before."<sup>55</sup> It seems plausible that this was a primary reason the anti-Brik campaign took the shape it did at this particular time, although it also served to provide clear political support for anti-Semitic and anti-"formalist" goals as well. The policies against the Briks and against Lili in particular continued, quietly at times and at times with renewed vengeance, until perestroika and glasnost. At that time, the exposure of the distortion of the Briks' role in Mayakovsky's life was to be a key issue in the reassessment of the poet and the debates surrounding his name.

### **Official Jubilees and Unofficial Popular Culture in the Seventies**

Two years after the articles in *Ogonek* and during the repressive and cynical aftermath of the crushing of the Prague Spring, two state icons were dragged out simultaneously to "reinvigorate" the population with political ritual. April of 1970 marked both the centennial of Lenin's birth and the fortieth anniversary of Mayakovsky's death, and although in three years' time the more celebratory occasion of Mayakovsky's eightieth birthday would be commemorated, a special commemoration for the poet was set for this year as well. The Lenin centennial, which in fact lasted the entire year, exposed the alienation of growing segments of Soviet society from the symbols of the regime. By this time, as Nina Tumarkin describes, the Lenin cult was at its weakest point to date:

The Lenin centennial had been intended to saturate political, civic, and cultural life with Lenin. But the celebration was a disaster for the credibility of Communist propaganda and political ritual. The barrage of Leniniana was so vast and unrelenting that the jubilee took on the appearance of a burlesque performance...Too many slogans and busts, too many speeches, too many articles in every periodical for months and months beforehand, and too many rhapsodic declamations to the immortal Lenin turned an event designed to evoke enthusiasm into one that provoked disdain...<sup>56</sup>

Tumarkin believes it was the excesses of the Lenin jubilee which produced disdain, but a political and cultural cynicism and a growing lack of reverence for state symbolism was already beginning to become generalized beyond dissident circles. It was characteristic of the Brezhnev era to trumpet ever more optimistically and hollowly no matter what the response, irrespective of changes in the cultural and social sophistication of the population, and this no doubt contributed to a loss of credibility. Although a genuine reverence for Lenin may well have survived in large segments of the population in the seventies, the jubilee was clearly designed "to cover over the many disappointments of present-day life in the USSR."<sup>57</sup> The excesses were due to the enormity of the disappointments, not the other way around.

Mayakovsky continued to be closely associated with the Lenin cult and was used to promote it. Brezhnev's Kremlin speech for the Lenin jubilee in 1970 ended with the familiar slogan from *V.I. Lenin*, 'Lenin lived, Lenin lives, Lenin will live!'"<sup>58</sup> All musicians were ordered to contribute to the centennial, and Mayakovsky's poem was used as the basis for a symphony-cantata called "Lenin Is With Us."<sup>59</sup> His image was intertwined with the over-saturation and "burlesque" of the jubilee, and although the film *Sport, Sport, Sport!* depicted his appeal to youth in its 1971 release, the times had changed. Ironically, Andrei Voznesensky was selected for the organizing committee that was struck for the special commemoration in that same year of the fortieth anniversary of Mayakovsky's death. A 1970 anecdote about this encapsulates Voznesensky's

own continued commitment to a more genuine, iconoclastic image of Mayakovsky, but shows what little impact 'the generation of the Mayakovsky monument' actually had on the poet's official legend. The anecdote is told by Robert A.D. Ford, a Canadian diplomat assigned to Moscow who gave a dinner for Voznesensky there in 1970. Ford recounts:

He described, a bit tongue-in-cheek, how he tried to convince the committee that they should not commemorate Mayakovsky in the traditional way. Mayakovsky had wanted not a monument but an explosion. So Andrei had proposed precisely that - an explosion. "I suggested that the army give them a rocket, just a little one," he said, "which could be set off from the Lenin Hills. The committee voted for a 'solemn evening' of speeches in the Bolshoi Theatre." Andrei laughed drily at his own joke.<sup>60</sup>

The enthusiasm for the possibility of reform during the Thaw, which had surrounded Khrushchev's revived Lenin cult and the revitalized Mayakovsky legend with an aura of anti-Stalinism, was long gone. The Lenin jubilee and the commemoration of Mayakovsky only served to highlight how little had really changed in Soviet society, and to what extent enthusiasm for either of these legends now sounded "more like a compliment than an indictment," in Bukovsky's words. The Mayakovsky phenomenon, as a legend of rebellion and as an incarnation in modern, tamer versions like Yevtushenko and Voznesensky, was replaced for the youth of the seventies by Vladimir Vysotsky, who was not a poet in the traditional sense, but an actor turned "guitar poet." Guitar poetry had become a popular form for alternative culture by the mid-sixties, and throughout the seventies it was dominated by Vysotsky, who sang songs which mocked most aspects of Soviet life, including revolutionary traditions, Soviet heroes and Russian literature, and attacked privilege, inequality and official hypocrisy. But he also sang about everyday life, about drinking and sex, in the language of the street. He was attacked in the press for disfiguring the Russian language and for singing "in the name of and on behalf

of alcoholics, soldiers in disciplinary units and criminals."<sup>61</sup> Richard Stites describes the popularity evoked not only by his work but by his persona: "The Vysotsky cult was enlivened by gossip about his life style, romances, marriage to the French actress Marina Vlady, fast cars, and drinking bouts. It was reminiscent of the celebrity legends in the last years of Tsarist Russia, and it revealed as much about Russian character as the officially invented cults of the Soviet period."<sup>62</sup>

Vysotsky actually came closer to recreating the spirit of the uncanonized Mayakovsky than Yevtushenko and the published poets of the sixties had, although he did not identify with it as overtly as they. In fact, one of his greatest successes as a stage actor was the recreation of a less monumentalized literary suicide of the twenties, Sergei Esenin. But he was also one of the five actors who played Mayakovsky in the theatrical production *Listen! (Poslushaite!)* at the Tanganka Theatre between 1967 and 1969: his was the role of the "angry Mayakovsky." Since the collapse of Mayakovsky's official state image with the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991, a few minor studies linking Mayakovsky and Vysotsky have appeared, suggesting that there is some recognition of the comparison in Russia today. A summary of papers read in Kolomna at a commemoration of Mayakovsky's centennial in 1993 included a presentation on "One Allegory in the Lyric Poetry of V.V. Mayakovsky and V.S. Vysotsky."<sup>63</sup> Also in 1993, an article titled "Vladimir Mayakovsky and Vladimir Vysotsky" was published in the literary journal *Znamia*.<sup>64</sup> This article, by Vladimir Novikov, discerns a running "dialogue" with Mayakovsky in the course of Vysotsky's career. Novikov identified three elements that Vysotsky took from Mayakovsky and from Futurism as a whole: intonational energy, or the individual "discharge" ("vydennost") of each word, which Roman Jakobson regarded as a particularity of Mayakovsky's verse; the ability to find imagery in the word itself;

and the extended comparison, or "realized" metaphor.<sup>65</sup> Novikov also cited Vysotsky's own attitude to the Mayakovsky behind the official legend in his comments on the production of *Listen!* from an unpublished volume titled *Vysotsky on the Theatre*, compiled by A. Krylov and I. Rogovoi from recordings of his public appearances:

That show, at the time we were rehearsing it, made a colossal impression on me. The teaching of Mayakovsky in our schools is very one-sided: our Mayakovsky... is always saying "look, envy me" [from the poem "Soviet Passport"] - children know only this, only this is read to them. But Mayakovsky is not only this - he was also sad and tragic... [in the show] he is portrayed entirely as a man without [protective] skin.<sup>66</sup>

But the economic, political and cultural stagnation of the Brezhnev years made it impossible to rekindle popular interest, in either official or unofficial terms, in legends that were linked with inspiring reverence for the current regime. The failure of the Lenin jubilee in 1970 was followed by the rapid decline of the Lenin cult, and not merely because as Tumarkin writes "that event seems to have made it impossible to rekindle popular interest in most Lenin cult rituals, even once a year."<sup>67</sup> In 1973, the commemoration of Mayakovsky's eightieth birthday was not widely marked in the realm of publication, other than by a new edition of his *Complete Works*, and two new books on very specific topics: reminiscences of the "Twenty Years of Work" exhibit, which included very brief remarks by Lili Brik - her only Soviet publication to follow the *Ogonek* affair; and memoirs of Mayakovsky's connections with Georgia, which was entirely in keeping with the new emphasis on his "real" friends and family.<sup>68</sup> "Solemn evenings" of official speeches were held, and one speech which was printed in *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* in July emphasized again that Mayakovsky's political formation was to be regarded as his primary influence, rather than Futurism: "it would be false to regard such a biographical beginning as an accidental

episode. The Bolshevik underground gave him a powerful political charge, which was manifest many years later."<sup>69</sup>

Over all, the 1973 jubilee was quite standard, with the exception of one incident. "Mosfilm" invited S. Iutkevich, one of the Party directors who had staged Mayakovsky's plays at the Theatre of Satire in the fifties, to make a film for television called *Mayakovsky and the Cinema* specifically for the 1973 anniversary. Iutkevich was not a radical interpreter of Mayakovsky by any standard; his productions of Mayakovsky's plays were considered somewhat timid even in 1955, and in the seventies he brought *The Bedbug* to a new level of "sanitation" on film by transporting the action of the play to the West. In 1971 he had stated: "Prisypkinism has today taken on threatening proportions above all abroad, where capitalist 'consumer society' seems to have realized Prisypkin's fondest dreams."<sup>70</sup> This film version was released in 1979, the very year to which Prisypkin is transported and which represents the world of the future in the play, under the title *Mayakovsky Laughs* (*Maiakovskii smeetsia*, 1979). But in 1973, Iutkevich's jubilee film was stopped by a denunciation from V. Makarov, the director of the new Mayakovsky museum which was to open the following year, and the Party organizer B. Dorofeev, in the name of secretary of ideology Suslov. This was the same Suslov who kept the investigation into Mayakovsky's suicide locked in his personal safe, and who in 1978 would have all mention of Lili Brik removed from the poet's *Complete Works*. In 1973 he was concerned about the use of fragments from Mayakovsky's films which not only showed Lili sitting on Mayakovsky's lap, but depicted the poet as a love-lorn artist and a "hooligan."<sup>71</sup>

The fragments concerned were from two 1918 films which Mayakovsky both wrote and appeared in: *Fettered by Film*, referred to as the creation of the private firm "Neptune," and therefore not really Mayakovsky's own, and *The*

*Lady and the Hooligan* (*Zakovannaia fil'moi*, 1918; *Baryshnia i khuligan*, 1918). Iutkevich's film could only be shown after Suslov's death in 1982, and even then not in full: *Fettered by Film*, in which Lili played the role opposite Mayakovsky, and is seen sitting on his lap, was removed. Elsewhere in Soviet criticism, these films received not entirely hostile consideration, but showing them to a wide audience was a different matter. In a short article which appeared in a Soviet volume designed for an English-speaking readership in 1976, B. Rostotsky emphasized that these films were judged very harshly by Mayakovsky in the foreword to a 1927 collection of his film scenarios, and that "not for nothing did Mayakovsky himself call them sentimental rubbish written to order," but "insofar as they showed, though only relatively, the direct influence of Mayakovsky, they countered the cherished clichés and banalities of the bourgeois middle-class cinema. Mayakovsky's participation in the making of these films was, of course, only a kind of reconnaissance and an attempt to carry the battle on to enemy territory."<sup>72</sup> And yet, in this article not a word was mentioned about Lili Brik's participation in *Fettered by Film*, although the film was praised for its originality.

V.V. Katanian describes very well the dilemma in the Soviet Union in 1973: "In this way, for the day of nationwide anniversary festivities for the apostle of the revolution, the political legend of the Leninist party in poetry, S. I. Iutkevich was preparing an 'anniversary' film in which Mayakovsky appeared in the role of a hooligan, and in the role of a 'pining' artist who dreams about the wonderful cinema-world 'Love-land' ['Liublandiia']. The image of the great poet, his monumentality, his passion for the business of serving the revolution, the party, the people - all this was being replaced by Mayakovsky the hooligan, by 'Love-land.'"<sup>73</sup> Instead, the 1973 jubilee was entirely characterized by one of the posters produced to commemorate it, which depicted a photograph of the

monument in Mayakovsky Square standing on a platform made from Mayakovsky's books in several different languages, with the lines: "And I, like the spring of humanity,/ born in labours and in struggle,/ sing my homeland,/ my republic!" ("I Ya, kak vesnu chelovechestva,/ rozhdennuiu v trudakh i v boiu,/ poiu moe otechestvo,/ respubliku moiu!") Judging by the popularity of Vysotsky at this time, the jubilee would have had more success with Mayakovsky in the role of "hooligan."

### **The Avant-garde as a Soviet Export**

Ironically, the incompatibility of the majority of the Soviet avant-garde with Socialist Realism, which remained a central point in official Soviet literary and artistic criticism throughout the Thaw, began to be selectively reassessed during the greater cultural repression of the seventies. At this time, Mayakovsky's artistic route was taken as a model to accomplish precisely the opposite of what his canonization had been used for in the late thirties. Then, it had been manipulated in order to distinguish Socialist Realism from the concepts which had been superficially appropriated from the historical legacy and experience of "left" art and literature. In the seventies, some Soviet avant-garde visual artists of the twenties were "rehabilitated," not so much for the Soviet public as in response to a new interest in the West. This was part of the attempt to present a "world class" face abroad as the economy stagnated and competition on the world stage grew more fierce. Artists such as Kandinsky and Malevich were modelled according to the official Mayakovsky, who served as an example of the successful transition from bohemianism to Socialist Realism. As the art historian Vassily Rakitin states: "It was necessary to co-ordinate the history of the avant-garde with the so-called mainstream line of growth, that is, with the assertion of Soviet themes and the principles of Party spirit. The artistic

route of Mayakovsky into the Soviet era interpreted superficially and romantically, was taken as a model."<sup>74</sup>

Officially, Mayakovsky's artistic route into the Soviet era remained well-established, despite the limited challenges to his image described in the previous chapter. By this time it seemed possible to "resurrect" and adapt other figures of the Soviet avant-garde in a similar way. Some of those whose paintings had been removed from the walls of the Tretiakov Gallery during the anti-Formalist campaign of 1936 were now also adopted as "pure" Soviet classics.

Of course, Malevich, Tatlin and Filonov are turned into orthodox Soviet artists with great difficulty, but in each instance - where there's a will - it is possible to find something acceptable... A paradoxical situation resulted: Kandinsky was propagandised as a painter of cups and Malevich as an illustrator of shoes. [...] What inspires the new Soviet adherents of the avant-garde? That the avant-garde was no worse than the Socialist Realist models already acknowledged as classics. That is, Tatlin is no worse than Brodsky with his numerous standardized images of Lenin.<sup>75</sup>

By 1977, John Bowlit observed: "we may assert that a dramatic aesthetic shift in the Soviet exposition and evaluation of many artists is now occurring."<sup>76</sup> But it must be remembered that this only took place after the Western rediscovery of these artists, and that the new exhibits were being shown abroad and not at all in the Soviet Union. Kandinsky's centennial was not recognised in the Soviet Union, and that of Malevich in 1978 was acknowledged but not even a small exhibition was organized.<sup>77</sup> There had been small attempts at such exhibitions during the Thaw, including a small showing in 1964 of works by Malevich's mentor Larionov and the cubist Goncharova, and in fact this exhibit had been organized by Nikolai Khardzhiev in the old Mayakovsky museum on Gendrikov Lane.<sup>78</sup> It was the last of its kind for twenty years, and certainly the new Mayakovsky museum would not entertain the idea of showing Mayakovsky's early influences in painting. In fact, when the Literary Museum

displayed a self-portrait by Mayakovsky in a Cubist style, depicting the poet in his famous yellow blouse and a top hat, at an exhibit for the poet's ninetieth anniversary in 1983, it encountered great difficulties. The Moscow Committee of the Party, which was allowing the exhibit to take place there, had the painting re-hung just below the ceiling so that it could barely be seen and had the label removed.<sup>79</sup>

And yet, the process by which these artists were now reclaimed for propagandistic purposes in relation to the West in some ways mirrored the logic used in appropriating Mayakovsky. It followed the progression in the official Mayakovsky from the "literary Stakhanov" of the late thirties to a more harmonious image:

At first, for convenience, the avant-garde was put on equal footing only with the agitational art of the revolution, after that it was equated with the concept of a genuine Soviet art. In the same way, from asserting its equality with realistic tendencies it changed into a virtual assertion of the ideological unity of artistic culture in the Soviet era. And once all was equal in the light of a general ideology, could the avant-garde and classical Socialist Realism be but two sides of one coin?<sup>80</sup>

This was a shift which could not have taken place in the thirties, when Socialist Realism had to be developed in contradistinction to the essential presuppositions of modernism. Since that time, as has been described, the tension between the need to depict an ideological unity throughout the course of Mayakovsky's career, at least in the Soviet period, and the need to portray his progressive development into a "mature" Socialist Realist poet - in order not to give too much credence to the formal elements which "lagged behind" - periodically led to controversies. Although Mayakovsky was now taken as a model for the transformation of other artists into something acceptable, there was always the danger that this could tarnish his official image when taken too far. An example is the only book published in Russia in the seventies that was

devoted to an aspect of Lef theory, A.I. Mazaev's *The Concept of "Production Art."*<sup>81</sup> This work was a Soviet response to the rediscovery of Lef in the late sixties and early seventies, not only in Czechoslovakia but in East and West Germany. It was written ostensibly to counter the glorification of the avant-garde, but a 1977 review of the book cited by Stephan gives an indication of how difficult the subject remained: the review commended work on this unexplored subject, but "at the same time admonished [the author] for failure to emphasize the fact that Mayakovsky had been only superficially touched by Lef aesthetics and should therefore be excluded from the discussion of Lef theories."<sup>82</sup> In other words, the limited shift in Soviet evaluation would not be permitted to alter established canons, and what could not be "coordinated with the mainstream line of growth" ultimately had to be treated separately. This characterized the superficial rehabilitation of modernist Russian artists in general, as Bowlt also noted in 1977: "The whole subject of the Russian avant-garde or leftist art of the period from 1910 through the twenties is still a dangerous and enigmatic one for the Soviet historian."<sup>83</sup>

Rakitin mentions another controversy that was provoked both in the Soviet press and in the Russian press abroad:

.. the direct propaganda of the avant-garde led to its rejection anew in various intellectual circles. A new logic of evaluating the avant-garde began to form on the reverse principle. The argument goes like this: they gave us much documentary material on the avant-garde and attempted to prove that it was one course among the main tasks of Soviet art... it is impossible for us not to see a reflection of Stalin's totalitarianism in classical Socialist Realism. And so does not the avant-garde, too, share in the responsibility for this ideology, since it shared the general ideological principles of Soviet art? From the uninspired, mechanical and rationalistic squares and red wedges there was a direct route to a soulless and unthinking man-screw [sic: i.e. "human cog"] whose creation Stalin and his comrades-in-arms worked on not without success.<sup>84</sup>

This reaction had a similar manifestation in some Western criticism of the eighties, particularly in Germany, as discussed in the introduction to the present

work. To recapitulate, the foreign revival of interest in the Soviet avant-garde had been strongest in Germany in the late sixties and early seventies, and had extended to an attempt by German scholars to develop a contemporary radical cultural theory based on left avant-garde theoretical precepts. Subsequently, a reaction against the avant-garde occurred in Germany when the New Left disappeared and the European student movement went into retreat in the eighties. In the Soviet Union, the view of the political avant-garde as a route to totalitarianism, which emerged on the margins in the seventies, came to have a wider impact during glasnost.' This background is essential to understanding the controversy about Mayakovsky which emerged in the Soviet Union in the mid-eighties.

But in the seventies and into the eighties, the Soviet regime continued to export the artists it denied at home, and it exported Mayakovsky along with them. A number of translations of the poet and even critical publications about him were produced in the Soviet Union for distribution abroad, such as the English-language volume *Vladimir Mayakovsky: Innovator* by Progress Publishers in 1976, cited in the present work. The Mayakovsky legend had its use as external propaganda as well as internal.

### **1980-85: A "Shortage of Civic Feeling"**

In the early eighties, the regime continued to try to rekindle popular interest in its symbols, but failed in the case of both Lenin and Mayakovsky. The decline of Socialist Realism, combined with wider alienation from state ideology and the rise of popular culture, had produced an impasse for the regime. By the time of Brezhnev's death in November, 1982:

...the state ideology had been hollowed out as large sections of the population began openly to opt for alternatives ranging from the new youth culture to traditionalist Russian nationalism, the latter tacitly encouraged by one wing of

the bureaucracy. The USSR entered during the 1980s into a profound crisis of hegemony.<sup>85</sup>

A few symbols of official political culture, notably the Lenin Mausoleum, remained central because they played a key role in obligatory social ritual. Mayakovsky's monuments did not have as much of a participatory function, other than the mandatory memorization of the "Soviet Passport" poem by school children. On the Lenin cult, Nina Tumarkin noted in 1983:

Cult museums attract few individual visitors, and bookstores cannot find buyers for Lenin's writings, phonograph records of his speeches, or busts that come in all sizes. College students proudly boast to foreigners that they make it a point to forget promptly everything they must learn about Lenin and Leninism in their required courses. The iconographic representations of Lenin, the sacred writings, the commemorative meetings, and the grand Lenin museums appear to evoke little enthusiasm in the contemporary populace.<sup>86</sup>

But the regime was still determined to anchor itself with its traditional ideology, and the establishment looked to a new revival of Mayakovsky as the solution for flagging enthusiasm. At the end of his reign, Brezhnev told the 1981 Party Congress that they should do more to "strengthen the intellectual foundations of the socialist way of life." He stated that it was all very well for writers to produce works that made people sit up and think, and it was right that they should show "civic passion" and "irreconcilability to shortcomings." But to illustrate this, he approvingly quoted Mayakovsky's call in *Homeward!* (*Domoi!*, 1925) for the State Planning Committee to "sweat in debates, setting yearly tasks for me."<sup>87</sup> Also in 1981, at the Seventh Congress of the Union of Soviet Writers, G. Markov, then first secretary of the Writers' Union, emphasized in his speech that Mayakovsky was to remain the "flagship of our literature." The stenographic record of the Congress reads: "in the discussion 'Problems of the development of Soviet poetry between the sixth and seventh congresses of the writers of the USSR,' ... the shortage of civic feeling, indifference to the events of

the life of the people, the inexpressiveness of literary form, were sharply criticized. Again and again was heard the summons to follow the traditions of V. Mayakovsky - to promote the social involvement of poetry." The Congress decreed: "...contemporary Soviet poetry is summoned to struggle more actively for the ideals and values of our society, to develop productively the militant traditions of civic-mindedness, bequeathed by Vladimir Mayakovsky, and by other distinguished poets of the Soviet epoch."<sup>88</sup>

The appeal to Mayakovsky as an antidote to these problems continued after Brezhnev's death in 1982 and up until perestroika. The year 1983 was the ninetieth anniversary of Mayakovsky's birth, and the press was filled with official statements on Mayakovsky's relevance to the present day: "Mayakovsky's poetic voice - resounding, lofty - was and has remained valuable for us. It is the voice of a new man of the new world." Also: "The great master of the Russian poetic word, Vladimir Mayakovsky, was destined to exert the deepest influence on the development of the poetic word of all people of the planet. And this influence is not being extinguished or weakened with time, but on the contrary, it is being strengthened. All the new poets of the earth are turning to the powerful revolutionary word of Mayakovsky..."<sup>89</sup> A somewhat less dogmatic tribute to the jubilee was a book written by A. Mikhailov on Mayakovsky's poetic traditions in the present: "Those who in the 1950s seized Mayakovsky's banner do not let it out of their hands in the 1980s. Today, it is possible that the peak of their popularity is behind them, but the influence of this generation of poets on the work of the young continues, the line of succession is uninterrupted. And this line runs in diverse directions, not only through Yevtushenko or Rozhdestvensky, Voznesensky or Gordeichev."<sup>90</sup>

But most important in 1983 were the statements made at the Central Committee's June Plenum. The regime again appealed to the "civic fervour" of

Mayakovsky's poetry, not merely as an issue for contemporary literature but as a solution to the "crisis of hegemony" in society as a whole: "It is important that the understanding of the true value of the historical achievements of Soviet society not be smoothed over in people's consciousness, that the proud feeling of the citizen of the new world is not eaten up, as Vladimir Mayakovsky said, by the most terrifying of amortizations - the amortization of the heart and soul. We must more actively place at the service of our educational goals the great magnetic power of communist ideals."<sup>91</sup> This pronoucement was repeatedly quoted in publications on Mayakovsky in the following two years. The Plenum also stressed the need "to propagandize creatively the Soviet way of life, the fundamental values of socialism. It is necessary to support all that is advanced in public practical work, to affirm and clearly reveal the new quality of life of the labouring masses, including collectivism and comradeship, moral health and social optimism, the certainty of each person in the coming day, the high culture of labour and consumption, behavioural conduct and everyday life."<sup>92</sup> In other words, official literature, like the excessive cult of Lenin, was to redouble its efforts in "varnishing over" the disappointments of contemporary life.

At the end of 1982 and the first months of 1983, in preparation for the ninetieth anniversary commemorations, *Literaturnaia gazeta* held a printed "debate," or "round table discussion," on "Mayakovsky and Contemporary Poetry" with the participation of poets, critics and readers. In actual fact, there very little debate at all, and certainly not on anything of substance. This even prompted a comment early on from Larisa Vasil'eva: "I don't see the reason for a debate."<sup>93</sup> The poet Egor Isaev stated that "Mayakovsky's work is not merely a school, but a Mayakovsky university, in which all poets have studied and still study," yet "we have remained a little aloof from Mayakovsky, we have spoken of him too loudly, we have not really felt him. But the Mayakovsky wave has still

not fully crested. The crest of the Mayakovsky wave is still somewhere ahead."<sup>94</sup> "Mayakovsky and The Present Day" became the running theme of these years, not merely in terms of inspiring a school of poets, "good and diverse" ("khoroshikh i raznykh"), but as a desperate insistence on the relevance of the Mayakovsky legend, and all it had come to symbolize, to the pre-perestroika period. Since 1983, when the cue was given repeatedly, publications on Mayakovsky concentrated almost uniquely on this theme: for example, a collection of essays and articles titled *Mayakovsky in the Modern World* (*Maiakovskii v sovremennom mire*) appeared in 1984, and two other such collections, both titled *Mayakovsky and the Present Day* (*Maiakovskii i sovremennost'*) but containing different articles, appeared in 1984 and 1985. The first article in the 1985 collection, by G. P. Berdnikov, made reference to the June, 1983 Plenum of the Central Committee as a guide to the importance of Mayakovsky's patriotism to the political climate of the modern world: "This world is divided. And it is marked by 'the stand-off of two polar and counterposed world views, unprecedented in the entire post-war period in its intensity and acuteness...' [June, 1983 Plenum] In these conditions the artistic legacy of the wonderful tribune of Lenin's work takes on special significance..."<sup>95</sup> This comment of course referred to the intensification of the Cold War and the nuclear arms race with the U.S. in the early eighties, and the attempt to revive Mayakovsky as a Cold War hero was a central aspect of his importance. But Berdnikov also insisted that Mayakovsky's "artistic legacy" was at this time "itself becoming an arena of the acutest struggle." He asked, "Which are here the most obsolete devices used to discredit the artistic legacy of the great poet? Above all they are the vain attempts to separate him from art, to list him according to the rank of newspaper journeymen. Unfortunately, there are people among us, including those involved in literature, who have not gone far beyond similar

critical constructions." Berdnikov also took issue with foreign writers, who "strive to present Mayakovsky only as a rebel, an innovator of form, a futurist-avantgardist from beginning to end." To this he counterposed the Mayakovsky celebrated by the 1983 jubilee, "when not only in scholarly auditoriums, but also from the stage, the television screen, on the radio, the poet's works resounded more often than usual."<sup>96</sup> The publisher's note in one of the 1984 volumes on the poet's contemporary relevance stated: "The decisions of the Communist Party on the questions of ideology oblige and teach [us] to perfect our spiritual weapon. Vladimir Mayakovsky is with us in the unceasing battle for people's hearts and minds, for world peace, for the bright future of humanity."<sup>97</sup>

Mayakovsky was supposed to be the antidote to flagging enthusiasm, but the establishment was clinging to a leaky life-boat rather than what the secretary of the Writers' Union had in 1981 called a "flagship." Even in the 1983 "debate" on "Mayakovsky and Contemporary Poetry" in the pages of *Literaturnaia gazeta*, there were a few telling "slips of the tongue": "Actually, this is not a discussion of a higher level or a greater depth than any other discussions."<sup>98</sup> This sums up the cynicism which had set in at all levels of Soviet society, even in the Writers' Union paper, and even concerning the hallowed name of Mayakovsky. But it would not be long before a debate of much greater depth erupted around the relevance of Mayakovsky to the new present of perestroika, which was to concern the ideological core of the Mayakovsky legend itself.

## Chapter 7: 1985-1991: Cracks in the Mayakovsky Legend

Although the period of perestroika under Gorbachev did not yet represent a complete ideological break with the legacy of Stalinism, the restructuring required to address the depth of the crisis in the economy made glasnost a political necessity. On the one hand it was to be the "sweetener" for the bitter pill of economic privation required by perestroika, on the other, it was necessary to combat the opponents of economic reform, who sought to defend themselves by glorifying the Stalin era. Even a relatively mild proponent of reform such as Gorbachev had to combat this opposition ideologically, and this involved giving the signal to economists, journalists and writers to criticise the Brezhnev era and those that would perpetuate it. A major editorial in *Pravda* on April 5, 1988, probably written by a member of the Politburo, made the key role of intellectuals in supporting the regime very clear:

Democratism is impossible without freedom of thought and speech, without the open, broad clash of opinions and without keeping a critical eye on our life. Our intelligentsia has done much to prepare public awareness to understand the need for profound, cardinal changes. It has itself become actively involved in the restructuring.<sup>1</sup>

Inevitably, this also gave rise to a fierce debate over the rise of Stalinism, and for a significant number of intellectuals, certainly for the literary and artistic sector, Mayakovsky became a focal point for this debate. But now the depiction of Mayakovsky as an anti-Stalinist symbol was the terrain largely of establishment critics. For those seeking to extend glasnost beyond official parameters, the dominant impulse was to pull the Mayakovsky monument off its pedestal entirely. It was certainly predictable that some controversy would surround Mayakovsky at a time when all canons were not merely permitted but encouraged to come under scrutiny. But the extent to which Mayakovsky had

become the face of state cultural policy, in fact with renewed vigour in the early eighties, meant that he became the subject of debates with much wider political implications. Although this meant a great deal of attention was devoted to him in this period, it also meant that objective assessments of the Mayakovsky behind the legend were nearly impossible. It should not be surprising that most of those who engaged in the Mayakovsky controversy, either to attack or to defend his legacy, were ultimately concerned with a larger political agenda. What was at stake in the politically-heightened atmosphere of the late eighties went far beyond questions of literary criticism. Moreover, it is difficult to separate the reassessment of the Mayakovsky legend from a wider negative reaction to the entire left avant-garde, a reaction which often betrayed an anti-modernist bias that remained ingrained in much of Soviet culture.

The controversy over Mayakovsky fell into four general camps, which were not always clearly demarcated: the majority of the intelligentsia, with varying political attitudes to reform, which gave either critical or entirely negative consideration to Mayakovsky; the conservative camp, proponents of traditional Russian nationalism, who claimed Mayakovsky as a sacred national hero; a liberal camp of reform supporters, including poets of the "Mayakovsky Square" generation, who were critical of the official Mayakovsky but defended the poet against the claims of the conservative nationalists; and establishment literary scholars who sought to shield Mayakovsky from political controversy and consider him aesthetically, or to resurrect him as an anti-Stalinist. In the course of 1989 the controversy grew even more heterogeneous, and in 1990 attempts at assessing Mayakovsky's legacy more objectively began to appear. Once again, the Mayakovsky legend acted as a reflection of changes in the Soviet state, but now as an expression of its fractiousness and the decisive breaking-down of ideological hegemony. Critical attitudes to Mayakovsky as a political

symbol also coincided with a largely negative assessment of the legacy of the literary left avant-garde in general, as will be discussed below.

The first attack on the official Mayakovsky came in a book by the poet and critic Iurii Karabchievsky, *Mayakovskiy's Resurrection* (*Voskresenie Maiakovskogo*), in which it was directly stated that Mayakovsky's name was surrounded by "a universal system of lies." This book was actually written between 1980 and 1983 in Moscow and first published in Munich in 1985. It circulated unofficially in the Soviet Union and had an indirect impact there before its first Soviet publication, which was not until 1989, in the journal *Teatr*, numbers 7-10. It was another year before it appeared in the Soviet Union in book form. The editors of *Teatr* claimed that the book became the centre of stormy debates in the Russian literary emigration in 1985, although as one of the Soviet respondents to the book wrote in 1990, it is difficult to imagine that Mayakovsky could have had many ardent fans in that milieu.<sup>2</sup> Today, Karabchievsky's book is regarded as the first major attempt to decanonize Mayakovsky, and has remained required reading for a contemporary understanding of the poet, whereas many of the articles on Mayakovsky published between 1987 and 1989, some of which are discussed below, are not considered to be of equal importance today. Nevertheless, the open debate on Mayakovsky in the Soviet Union itself began not in direct response to Karabchievsky's book, but to articles in a local Moscow newspaper for visual artists, *Moskovskii khudozhnik*, at the end of 1987. Because it is difficult to determine the extent of the influence of Karabchievsky's book in informal circulation before this, the present chapter will begin with the controversy that was launched in 1987.

Brigit Menzel included a brief discussion of the Mayakovsky controversy between 1987 and 1989 at the end of her dissertation written between 1985

and 1990, and she also devoted a separate publication largely to this in 1989, which summarized the various positions and numerous articles involved in the controversy.<sup>3</sup> Menzel also devoted a 1990 publication to the literary debates of perestroika more generally.<sup>4</sup> The present chapter will begin by summarizing the controversy between 1987 and 1989 and assessing Menzel's interpretation of it, while discussing a few publications of these years in more detail. More attention will be devoted to aspects of the controversy not discussed by Menzel, particularly Karabchievsky's book and the impact of its Soviet publication in the period 1989 to 1991, and the popularization of conspiracy theories regarding Mayakovskiy's death in those same years.

### **1987-1989: Mayakovskiy and anti-Stalinism**

The first direct attack on Mayakovskiy to be published in the Soviet Union appeared at the end of 1987, the very month in which Gorbachev began a considerable retreat from his commitment to wide-ranging reform: in that month Yeltsin was fired from the Moscow Party Committee for making a speech to the Central Committee denouncing the opponents of perestroika and calling for "glasnost without limits." Yet it was in this same period, from October 1987 onwards, that the general ferment in Russian society actually grew. Whether or not this directly sparked the Mayakovskiy debate, it produced conditions in which many intellectuals and journalists responded to the paralysis of the party leadership on the one hand and ferment in the population on the other by increasing the discussion of taboo subjects. Of course, the first attack on Mayakovskiy did not appear in a major publication but in the local Moscow artists' newspaper *Moskovskii khudozhnik*, but the debate quickly made its way into the major newspapers of the country.

In *Moskovskii khudozhnik* the sculptor V. Lempert declared that Mayakovsky had provided the cultural pretext for Stalin's crimes because of his call in the 1925 poem "Homeward!" for "the pen to be equal to the bayonet." This short poem, from which a significant number of now infamous slogans and images were taken for the popular propagation of the poet's official image, was one of the main reference points for the attack against him. The sculptor A. Grigoriev declared that what was even more frightening than the "transformation" of the pen into a bayonet was Mayakovsky's image in the same poem of a factory committee locking up his lips at the end of the work-day. Grigoriev implied that as a result many intellectuals and old Bolsheviks did have their lips sealed, and not at the end of the work-day, but forever. Lempert also cited Mayakovsky's 1929 poem "Harvest March," particularly the statement about uprooting the kulaks from the fields like weeds, which he claimed was written at a time when the suffering of the peasantry from collectivization was clear to be seen. Lempert stated that "Stalin accepted [Mayakovsky's] proposals with pleasure and began to uproot poetic dissidents along with those who had been infected by them."<sup>5</sup> Grigoriev stated the case directly by declaring that "in disputing Mayakovsky, we are disputing the direction of our art and of our history as a whole." The articles continued in the same vein in the following month and into the new year.<sup>6</sup> In this same line of attack, which portrayed Mayakovsky not merely as a supporter of cultural orthodoxy but as a direct advocate of repressive violence through the violence of his poetry, is an article which appeared later in 1988 in *Ogonek*, which was by this time a relatively liberal publication that often polemicized in favour of extending glasnost. There, Mayakovsky's comparison of poetic verses with "bombs" was equated with political brutality.<sup>7</sup> Menzel considers that these attacks generally over-stretched the case and were somewhat unqualified, as lyrical subjects are merged with

the poet himself.<sup>8</sup> This is certainly the case, and was largely inevitable since the poet's official legend made no distinction between lyrical subjects and the poet "himself," and the poet behind the legend had no genuinely independent existence in the Soviet Union. Mayakovsky's poetic imagery of violence is a common theme in the attacks of this time, and also constituted a major part of Karabchievsky's argument, as will be seen below.

One of the foremost Soviet Mayakovsky specialists, Zinovii Papernyi, who had written the introduction to the 1963 *Mayakovsky in the Reminiscences of his Contemporaries* and who evidently saw himself as an independent thinker on the poet, responded to the attacks by protesting defensively in another local Moscow publication that "Mayakovsky scholarship is hardly the most falsified branch of Soviet literary criticism."<sup>9</sup> In *Sovietskaia kultura* E. Grandova gave a short response in the form of a warning "not to confuse glasnost in the name of affirming the high ideals of our life in the process of renewal with glasnost in the name of one's own self-affirmation through the overthrowing of these ideals."<sup>10</sup> But the first major response to *Moskovskii khudozhhnik* came from Aleksei Mikhailov, at the beginning of February, 1988, now in the pages of *Literaturnaia gazeta*, which testified to the stir that had already been created. Mikhailov also accused Mayakovsky's detractors of ambition, of thirsting not for truth but for the "destruction of monuments." Mikhailov was the author of a 1983 book on Mayakovsky's relevance to the present, in the spirit of so many other publications of the early eighties, but with relatively more emphasis on Mayakovsky's poetic influence than on his propagandistic usefulness.<sup>11</sup> Two chapters of this book, on two contemporary poets inspired by Mayakovsky, were reprinted in the 1984 collection *Mayakovsky and the Present* under the title "In Rank with the Giant," ("V

sherenge velikana"), and now Mikhailov gave his response to *Moskovskii khudozhnik* the title "At the Foot of the Giant" ("U podnozh'ia velikana").

Mikhailov pointed out that the assault on Mayakovsky over the last few years began with minor attacks or passing retorts, because there was a fear of major, open declarations due to Mayakovsky's status in world literature. He acknowledged that Stalin's evaluation of the poet distorted his legacy and that schooling killed interest in his poetry and frightened adolescents, instead of starting them off with the youthful, romantic appeal of early poems like "Listen!" of 1914. But he rejected the "primitively literal" interpretation by Lempert and Grigoriev of the 1925 poem "Homeward!" in which are found Mayakovsky's call for the pen to be equated with the bayonet, and his wish to hear Stalin report to the Politburo on poetic work along with reports on iron and steel production. Mikhailov stated that the sculptors ignored the poem's metaphorical sense and distorted its poetic imagery, and that the "equating" of the pen with the bayonet was not the same as its replacement by it. Mikhailov regarded the artists' hints at Mayakovsky's direct culpability in the Terror to be transparent: "today everyone is far-sighted, but in 1925... I think there were fewer such people, so let the reader judge to what extent it is moral to accuse Mayakovsky now of 'poetic short-sightedness' that he did not predict what Stalin would be like in ten or twelve years."<sup>12</sup>

Mikhailov defended the theme of the pen and bayonet as an expression of Soviet patriotism, linked for Mayakovsky with the ideals of the revolution, but as nothing more than an image of effective art. He posited that had Mayakovsky found himself in another country, or had he been repressed for many years, the attitude towards the same imagery would be entirely different on the part of his current detractors. However, Mikhailov did not defend the poet's comparison of himself with a "factory producing happiness" or having his lips locked up by the

factory committee as successful images: "I don't like them either." But he attributed this imagery to a reflection of "Lefist delusions, attempts to liken art to production." He cited the stanza removed from "Homeward!" as an example of Mayakovsky's own doubt on the question: "I will pass to the side of my native land,/ As slanted rain passes." Mikhailov emphasized that this was removed from the poem on the advice of Osip Brik, and that although Mayakovsky himself accepted responsibility he did so according to Brik's advice; Mikhailov in fact argued that this passage was key to understanding the poem as a whole. On the sculptors' attacks based on the collectivization poem "Harvest March," he argued that as this poem was written as immediate propaganda for *Komsomolskaya Pravda* and not for posterity, "one must have an extremely deformed imagination to blame [it] for the Yezhovshchina."<sup>13</sup>

Mikhailov also referred to two other detractors of Mayakovsky. He simply dismissed Boris Likhtenfel'd, who wrote: "that which at one time looked like romantic bravado, now looks like ordinary boorishness," and that which "at one time appeared to some as unheard-of innovation now appears as imitation or fraudulent versification." More attention was accorded to P. Chusovitin, the author of a "pamphlet" titled "Allow Me to Introduce Mayakovsky," which Mikhailov considered the "crowning achievement of the debate" in its portrayal of Mayakovsky as an enemy of culture. Chusovitin's Mayakovsky was a boor who was prepared to execute Dantes and shoot Rastrelli to death; in other words, it was not exclusively or even primarily the late Mayakovsky that was under attack, but Mayakovsky the Futurist, and this was true of many opinions unleashed by the controversy over the poet. Mikhailov took issue mostly with Chusovitin's depiction of Mayakovsky as the mortal enemy of Esenin, distinguishing between their sympathetic relationship as poets and Mayakovsky's response to "eseninism" after the latter's suicide. Finally,

Mikhailov posited that the aggressive and denunciatory tone of all these attacks makes it impossible simply to dismiss them, even though "no matter what disproportion Lemport finds in the figure of Mayakovsky, no one has yet been successful in attempts to over-shadow it with someone else, and the overthrowers themselves have turned out to be completely invisible at the foot of the giant..." But Mikhailov predicted that the attacks he had dealt with were merely a test of strength, and that the real "purge" was still in preparation, awaiting the right moment.<sup>14</sup>

In March of 1988, Mikhailov again referred to the attacks on Mayakovsky in his speech at a Plenum of the Writers' Union leadership, in which he addressed the question of state prizes for literature. He argued that literary prizes should not be abolished, but that they should cease to be used for "self-promotion": "I would like to conclude with the words of Mayakovsky, who was not granted prizes and awards; on the contrary, even with the passage of almost six decades after his tragic death, now already under the flag of glasnost, he is subjected to denunciatory attacks of ignorant ambition: 'Why should we carve up poetic power,/ Let's heap up words both caressing and withering,/ And without envy or snobbery lay/ Word-bricks in the commune under construction.'"<sup>15</sup> Mikhailov cast the current controversy in the same light as the denunciations the poet faced while alive, inventing a new legend of posthumous victimization, as if Mayakovsky's name had not been awarded the highest place in Soviet poetry during those six decades. In 1988 Mikhailov also published a biography of Mayakovsky that was more historically honest, frank and rigorous than pre-perestroika biographical works; and yet he still followed a relatively standard formula, ending with the statement: "Mayakovsky is with us. And already over our heads, across the mountains of time, to new generations his voice carries: 'I will reach you in the far Communist future...'"<sup>16</sup>

On the attempts of Mikhailov, and well as those of the literary scholar G. Babaev, to remove Mayakovsky from political controversy and confine him to aesthetic consideration, Menzel states: "even [these] efforts remain one-sided like most reception in the first years of perestroika, as they did not do justice to the contradictions of his image."<sup>17</sup> In fact, the illusion of confining Mayakovsky to aesthetic consideration, without an analysis of the destruction of the revolutionary tradition which shaped him as a poet, could only end in a defense of the poet's official monument, which did not at all remove him from political controversy. The result is essentially a defense of Stalinist ideology against the extremes of the Stalin period. A slightly different effort was made by the writer Iulii Semionov, who depicted Mayakovsky not merely as a victim at the end of his life who tried to escape Stalin through suicide, but also as a "typical present-day intellectual."<sup>18</sup> Not surprisingly, the immediate reaction to attacks on Mayakovsky as a de facto Stalinist was to idealize him as consciously anti-Stalinist, or to emphasize his purely aesthetic merits as something approaching those of a "fellow traveller."

On July 22, 1988 *Pravda* published for the first time the RAPP leadership's 1930 letter of appeal to Stalin on the misplaced praise of the poet. This was not merely an informational addition to the new openness of discussion but an intervention in the debate. Again, Mayakovsky was depicted as the victim of RAPP alone and not the regime, but the *Pravda* publication of the letter also imputed to those who now attacked Mayakovsky a RAPP-like dogmatism and opportunism, just as Mikhailov ascribed the attacks to "ignorant ambition." An article later that year accused supporters of reform of taking themselves to be the successors of the avant-garde, and with making the same claims to hegemony as the LEF journal did in its time, and even equated LEF with RAPP.<sup>19</sup> This type of accusation by opponents of perestroika became

common: in March of 1988 the paper *Sovietskaia Rossiia* published a long letter entitled "I cannot waive principles," allegedly from a Leningrad chemistry lecturer, but which presented a manifesto of the opponents of reform. It stated that among the intellectuals there were all kinds of "modernistic strivings" and "pretentions to a model of some kind of left-liberal intellectual socialism."<sup>20</sup> Certainly the old accusation of "cliqueism" ("gruppirovshchina") used in the early thirties against both LEF and RAPP was resurrected both by those who opposed all reform and by those opposed to "glasnost without limits," and it is interesting that so much reference was made to the groups and polemics of the twenties in many arguments that were not about historical reassessment at all but about the different tendencies of the perestroika period. However, Menzel greatly exaggerates this phenomenon when she states that "ideological fronts from the twenties repeated themselves unawares."<sup>21</sup> Cultural and political landmarks from the twenties have been revived in various ways throughout the Soviet era to interpret contemporary developments in contexts far removed from the early period, because this has been the only legitimized historical tradition. What did reappear during perestroika was an attack on the notion of the "avant-garde" both by conservatives, as "left-liberal intellectualism," and by reformers, as linked with political conformism, echoing polemics between tendencies which had all been suppressed by Stalinism. But the historical analogy cannot be taken too far, since the debates of the twenties were not the product of reactions to canonized cultural models, but of a more direct engagement with genuine questions of aesthetics and revolution. The period of perestroika did not produce a Voronsky or a Trotsky, who could be productively critical of the left avant-garde from a sophisticated Marxist standpoint. Moreover, attitudes to the avant-garde and in fact modernism in general were coloured by decades of anti-modern Stalinist ideology, even on the part of those who attacked

Mayakovsky as an icon of Socialist Realism. What emerged was a pale reflection of the "ideological fronts" of the twenties.

The controversy intensified in 1989, along with the heightening of divisions in the regime over the future of perestroika and glasnost. In fact, the debate over Mayakovsky became even more subsumed in the larger political controversy. In January of 1989, an open letter from seven conservative writers and literary critics, notably the village writers V. Rasputin and V. Belov, was published in *Pravda*. It accused the now relatively liberal publication *Ogonek* of "an unprecedented distortion of history," "revising the social achievements of the people," and "the debasement of cultural values," as well as for its dismissal of speeches at a writers' conference in Riazan as "provincial." They deplored the general tendency to "disparage and delete multi-national Soviet artistic culture, especially Russian - classical and contemporary" and singled out "the undignified fuss about Mayakovsky, the increasing attacks on Sholokhov and on writers now thriving and recognized by the people" which "flow with the current of spitting on our spiritual values."<sup>22</sup> This conservative camp combined a defense of Mayakovsky as an institution with an opposition to aspects of Stalinism, particularly collectivization. But it was not Stalin who received most of the blame: Menzel notes that throughout perestroika this group blamed the political left of the twenties, particularly Trotsky and Bukharin, and the left avant-garde, which allegedly betrayed the high cultural and moral values of rural, patriarchal Russia with their nihilism. Others, such as Karabchievsky, rejected Mayakovsky for a similar betrayal of more traditional, "humanist" values. But this camp of "radical" nationalists represented one of the tendencies which emerged from the ideological crisis of the late Brezhnev era, the traditionalist nationalism encouraged by a wing of the bureaucracy. The compatibility of remnants of Stalinist ideology with the reemergence of a more traditionalist nationalism

became even more evident after the fall of the Soviet Union, when demonstrations parading images of both Stalin and the Tsar became commonplace for a time - although Mayakovsky did not make the same transition as a symbol of the national heritage, as will be discussed in the "Epilogue" to the present dissertation. The open letter to *Pravda* was countered by a letter signed by ten reform supporters, including "sixties generation" poets Yevtushenko, Voznesensky and Okudzhava: *Pravda* refused to print their letter in its entirety, but it was printed in *Ogonek*. The letter made no direct reference to Mayakovsky, but concluded that the self-interest of individual groups should not be allowed to hamper perestroika.<sup>24</sup>

Now that glasnost had put more into question than the Thaw, figures of the literary establishment were forced to make a case for Mayakovsky's anti-Stalinism almost as emphatically as poets like Yevtushenko had done under Khrushchev, when official criticism had treated the issue with more caution. At the beginning of 1989 G. S. Cheremin, an established critic and the author of publications on Mayakovsky dating back to the early sixties, made a long contribution to the Mayakovsky controversy in the journal *Russkaia literatura* which focussed on precisely this question, under the title "From the history of the study of Mayakovsky's work (Mayakovsky and Stalin's cult of personality)."<sup>25</sup> It is worth considering this article in some detail, as it reflects the "official" stance on Mayakovsky which was nominally maintained until the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991, although in fact attitudes to Mayakovsky became genuinely heterogeneous in the course of 1989, and the influence of old establishment critics like Cheremin was definitely on the wane. He protested the lack of recognition that Mayakovsky was more relevant than ever to the current political and cultural changes:

Since the time of Stalin's famous comment on Mayakovsky, the poet and his work in the course of many years have been depicted as flowing with the current of Stalinism. And now the supporters of Stalin's cult of personality continue to count this comment among the credits of the "leader of peoples." On the other hand, the exposures of the Stalinist cult are at times accompanied by unjust charges addressed at Mayakovsky, which attempt to link his name with the cult and its manifestations.<sup>26</sup>

To make a case against these charges, Cheremin began by outlining Mayakovsky's opposition to fetishization in *V.I. Lenin*, particularly the lines: "If he were regal ["Tsar-like"] and divine...I would throw blasphemy into the sky, / I would hurl bombs on the Kremlin: Down with [Lenin]!" It is emphasized that these lines were removed from the poem during the years of the Stalin cult: "in the period of the Stalin cult Mayakovsky's 'curses' and 'blasphemy' addressed at any absolute ruler became unacceptable and already by the middle of the thirties they disappeared from the pages of editions of the poet's works."<sup>27</sup> Cheremin insisted that the entirety of the poet's work stood in opposition to the Stalin cult, particularly in the evolution of the theme of struggle with bureaucratism. Cheremin then moved on to the two references to Stalin which appear in Mayakovsky's verse. The first was attacked by Lempert in *Moskovskii khudozhhnik*: Mayakovsky's wish to hear Stalin report to the Politburo on poetry in the 1925 poem "*Homeward!*" Cheremin argued this had nothing to do with Stalin personally, but with Mayakovsky's attempts to raise "poetic work" to the level of the most important economic questions of the Politburo. He did not mention the obvious poetic reason for choosing Stalin's name, namely the rhyme and play on words between steel ("stal") and Stalin. Along the same lines as Mikhailov, he declared Lempert's suggestion that Stalin accepted Mayakovsky's proposal to make the pen equal to the bayonet to be absurd because "the Stalin cult had not yet taken shape in 1925, and it goes without saying, there could not be at that time the mass repressions inherent to it...It

should also be taken into consideration that the metaphorical image 'pen - bayonet' is one of the variants of comparing poetry to a weapon of battle often encountered in Mayakovsky and which has long become common in political poetry the world-over." The second reference to Stalin, in *V.I. Lenin*, was explained simply by the fact that Stalin's is one of the voices heard in the poem's description of the Smolny Institute in revolutionary days, and Cheremin stressed that Trotsky's name was struck from this passage during the Stalin period (it was restored during the Thaw) in order to inflate Stalin's importance in the insurrection: "the editorial erasures in the works of the poet of the revolution came about in connection with his 'canonization' as a poet of the 'Stalin era.'"<sup>28</sup>

Cheremin critiqued the "canonization" as Stalin's attempt to link Mayakovsky's name not with the revolution but with the epoch which had just begun in 1935. Like the editors of *Pravda*, he identified the RAPP leadership's letter to Stalin and Molotov as the cause for the neglect of Mayakovsky. He argued that once Stalin and Molotov arranged for RAPP to publish its argument in *Pravda* on May 19, 1930, RAPP's evaluation of Mayakovsky's legacy became the dominant one.<sup>29</sup> On the Mayakovsky debate at the 1934 Writers' Congress, Cheremin admitted that although Bukharin was clearly mistaken in his assertion that the "stamp of time" lay on Mayakovsky, his assessment of the poet was distorted after he was "illegally repressed." Bukharin had not only been rehabilitated by this time but was in fact celebrated in the Soviet press during perestroika as a legitimizing figure for the concept of "market socialism," due to his support of the NEP. In fact, Cheremin explained Mayakovsky's canonization in terms of Stalin's power struggle in 1934-35 with possible rivals, including Bukharin: "In these conditions the propositions of Bukharin's speech at the Writers' Congress had to be interpreted by Stalin accordingly: in part, it made sense to counterpose the de facto refusal to recognize Mayakovsky as

the major contemporary poet with a diametrically opposed evaluation as the only correct one (not only 'was' [the best poet] in the past, but 'remains' in the present)."<sup>30</sup> This explanation, though simplistic, has some merit in suggesting a connection between Mayakovsky's canonization and the need to counter the "moderate" platform in the Party. But by the end of 1935, the "moderate" faction which had been represented by Bukharin and Kirov, who was in fact assassinated in 1934, no longer posed the potential threat to Stalin's control of the Party that it had in the previous year. Cheremin also claimed that at this time Stalin must have suddenly realized the letter from the RAPP leadership was "seditious," and that the need to counter RAPP's line as well as Bukharin's also explains the change in attitude to Mayakovsky. This argument is not credible at all, given that cultural policy had already retreated dramatically from the "proletarian line" while maintaining an aversion to Mayakovsky; as discussed earlier in the present dissertation, this was for reasons associated precisely with that retreat from the "proletarian" platform, not simply because RAPP's line on Mayakovsky had been allowed to linger. Finally, Cheremin argued, rightly, that a banner poet for the new "epoch of Stalin" was needed, and that Mayakovsky's death made him a safe choice, guaranteeing "against unpleasant creative surprises that might be expected from Demian [Bedny]."<sup>31</sup>

Nevertheless, the historical merit of these arguments is impossible to disentangle from their political intent in the midst of the current controversy. This was, more overtly than in the case of Mikhailov, to defend Stalinist ideology against certain crimes of Stalin himself. Cheremin did not leave this in doubt when he declared that Pasternak's statement on Mayakovsky's forced introduction "like potatoes under Catherine the Great" was completely wrong, despite Stalin's motives: "There was no reason to 'introduce' in a compulsory fashion a poet who enjoyed the widest fame and recognition not only in our

country but also abroad."<sup>32</sup> Moreover, Cheremin claimed the resolution produced fortunate results, including the "scholarly research" conducted on the poet. Cheremin acknowledged that Stalin's cult of personality had a negative influence, in the endless repetition of Stalin's resolution more in praise of its author than Mayakovsky, in the "one-sided, complimentary character" of the research, and in the separation of Mayakovsky from "the general development" of Soviet literature against the poet's own wish for more poets, "good and diverse." None of this diverged fundamentally from the official revisions to Mayakovsky criticism under Khrushchev, and not a word was mentioned about Lef. Cheremin's only mention of Futurism was to deplore that "criticism of the poet's Futurist infatuations was unfairly declared to be the intrigues of 'enemies of the people"'; in other words, he repeated the same rhetoric about the "varnishing of reality" which had served since the fifties to justify more open attacks on the influence of modernist aesthetics on Mayakovsky. The result is that Cheremin's affirmation that the living poet was transformed into a "mummy," and that perestroika had created the conditions for an "objective," "unconstrained" mastery of Mayakovsky's legacy, rings very hollow. Ultimately, his conclusion was that "no cult of personality could darken the genuine image of the poet in the consciousness of the masses."<sup>33</sup>

### Karabchievsky's Mayakovsky

The extent to which this was not the case is reflected in Karabchievsky's *Mayakovsky's Resurrection*. Although this book alone cannot testify to the attitude of the population at large, its image of the poet was to have more of an impact than that of Cheremin beyond perestroika. Writing in the early eighties, Karabchievsky began his book by stating "Today it is better not to touch Mayakovsky." As V. Kovsky stated in a 1990 response to the book, "many today

will say (and also not without grounds): 'It is better not to defend Mayakovsky - you will fall in with dogmatists and conservatives.'"<sup>34</sup> Karabchievsky also introduces his book with the affirmation that Mayakovsky "is not simply literary fact, but a part of our everyday life, of our biography, as they say."<sup>35</sup> But the official Mayakovsky was by no means Karabchievsky's only target: his thesis is equally that the uncanonized poet never reflected or expressed his age at all.

One of the enduring images of Karabchievsky's Mayakovsky is the poet's rotted teeth. This was biographical fact: it explains the poet's refusal to smile in photographs more than any desire to project a harsh self-image. But the exaggeration of ugliness was part of a reaction to the pale reflection of the Stalin years in the smug "varnish" of the Brezhnev era, described by Evgenii Sidorov during the time of perestroika as "vulgar optimism [which] covered everything with a vigorous phrase and a glistening smile."<sup>36</sup> Karabchievsky's Mayakovsky, avowedly talented, is depicted not merely as "short-sighted" or corrupted by politics as he largely was for Lemport and Grigoriev, but as the diametric opposite of the poet's idealized bronze monument: a grimacing psychological cripple, both physically and mentally deformed. Interestingly, *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* published a strange reference to Mayakovsky's teeth shortly before the journal publication of Karabchievsky's book in 1989. In an article titled "Mayakovsky Without Bronze" it was recounted that the newspaper was taken to task by the Mayakovsky Museum for citing an anecdote from the recent Soviet edition of Irina Odoevtseva's *By the Banks of the Neva* (*Na beregakh Nevy*). Odoevtseva recounted that a Moscow girl once told the poet Blok that she heard Mayakovsky recite the lines "The Commune! To some - here you go! To some - no! For some, she put out their teeth with a rifle-butt, for others - like me - she put teeth in." The *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* article then cited the following words from the book, supporting the quotation, but which had

previously been left out of the newspaper: "And he smiled with a wonderful new set of false teeth..."<sup>37</sup> The Mayakovsky Museum objected to *Komsomoł'skaja Pravda*'s use of unsubstantiated rumours and inaccuracies of all sorts about Mayakovsky in many instances, but this one provides an interesting metaphor which corresponds with Karabchievsky's attack on the "false teeth" of the official Mayakovsky.

Mayakovsky's violence of imagery and metaphor is key to Karabchievsky's toothless portrait of the poet, right from the very beginning of his career in the "monstrous" line "I love to watch children dying," from the 1913 poetic cycle "I." For Karabchievsky this stemmed not from the violence of the epoch but from the poet's individual psychology, dominated by a sadistic complex: "He had a surprising capability for hatred... The revolution was a blessing for Mayakovsky above all in the sense of health, in that it gave his hatred a direction and so saved him from eternal hysterics."<sup>38</sup> At the time of the revolution, he was the only well-known poet for whom not only theme but the very substance and manner of execution of the verse were defined by "blood and violence":

Before it had been only a knife and a knuckle duster, now it was the most diverse kinds [of weaponry], from "the fingers of the proletariat around the world's neck" to the Mauser and the machine gun...but to all others he preferred the bayonet. This word became a material expression of his relationship to the world...<sup>39</sup>

But if the revolution gave him a weapon, he gave the authorities "the gift of speech": " 'Punctuate with a bullet,' 'textbook gloss,' 'stepped on the throat,' 'about the times and about myself'... This will remain in the language whether we like it or not...Henceforth any chairman, any secretary will be able to liven up their speech with a quotation: 'As the poet said...' "<sup>40</sup> Although Karabchievsky acknowledged that Mayakovsky's verse was studied "not according to

Mayakovsky" and levelled some of his attack specifically at the institutionalization of the poet in school, pioneer camp, and on posters in the passport department of the militia, his fundamental thesis was also to deny that this distorted the original substance of the poetry itself: "we notice that never, at any age, does our attitude to these sources come into contradiction with the sense of the verses. Omission was not necessary, abruptly cutting the quotation short was not required in order to limit its content to what was of use to the camp leader or the militia."<sup>41</sup> Mayakovsky is repeatedly described as "duplicitous," "incapable of sincerity," devoid of individual personality behind his mask, a "tireless misinformer" - all epithets that describe official Soviet culture. Moreover, Karabchievsky rebuffs Mayakovsky's admission in *At the Top of My Voice* that he "stifled" himself, insisting that the only voice he had was an insincere, invented one. The horrific result was due to the fact that "in Mayakovsky, there was no Mayakovsky... emptiness, thickened to the dimensions of the soul, to the density of the personality - this is Mayakovsky."<sup>42</sup>

There is an indirect parallel to Karabchievsky's Mayakovsky in the non-canonical account of Pushkin by Tertz/Sinyavsky in *Strolls with Pushkin (Progulki s Pushkinym)*. Sinyavsky's challenge to the official Soviet image of Pushkin met with a much more negative reaction during the time of glasnost than Karabchievsky's attack on Mayakovsky: "Tertz's Pushkin book is an attack on the most exalted icon in [the Russian] tradition. The depth of its respect for Pushkin's art could not, for many readers, redeem its flouting of ingrained, traditional, sincere pieties, its shocking violation of readerly decorum. Pushkin there is presented as a vacuity, a poseur and a parasite, who produced in *Eugene Onegin* 'a novel about nothing,' and produced it 'only because he knew that it was impermissible to write in that way'."<sup>43</sup> Sinyavsky's Pushkin was an "anti-legend" to the guardian of sacred classical values. Both Sinyavsky's

Pushkin and Karabchievsky's Mayakovsky came to embody little more than the emptiness of their official legends.

But what Karabchievsky objected to as much as Mayakovsky's service to the state was his modernism. He interpreted his "active" relationship to the world - as a poet engaged not in "sniffing" roses but "inventing" them - as soulless: "All his roses are invented. He didn't understand anything in the real world, he didn't sense anything first-hand."<sup>44</sup> In fact, Karabchievsky was reflecting a hostility not only to the broader, uncanonized left avant-garde, but to modernism in general, regardless of the degree and kind of political engagement involved. Tsvetaeva, in his view, was ruined by Mayakovsky's influence: "One concurrence existed [between them] and it was decisive... the primordial contractiveness of thought and particularly the attitude to the word." He argued that her admiration for Mayakovsky and his "constructive" aesthetic changed her from a poet who in her early period expressed herself *through* the word into one who was expressed forcibly and tormentingly *by* the word, and was eventually driven to her death. This was linked with the destruction of the "laws" of harmony, perception and creativity.<sup>45</sup> Karabchievsky's thrust is even clearer in his assessment of Mayakovsky's poetic influence on Soviet poets of the post-Stalin era. First, he largely dismissed the phenomenon represented by Yevtushenko, Voznesensky and Rozhdestvensky, in whom Mayakovsky was resurrected "in the form of farce."

Each of them was a parody on some sides of his poetic identity. Rozhdestvensky [parodied] the external facts, height and voice, enlarged facial features, chopped verse lines. But in the eyes and words was fog, and in the verses, hackwork that Mayakovsky allowed himself only in extreme weakness. Voznesensky [parodied] the sound and effect, comfort and technique, and mechanical, toy happiness, and the same kind of anger. Yevtushenko - the most alive and gifted, carrying the whole weight of the self-parody, but on the other hand, everything that was human...<sup>46</sup>

But Karabchievsky did not stop with the inferiority of these "parodies" to the original. Insofar as they did inherit Mayakovsky's modernist methods and devices, these methods themselves were regarded as superficial and insincere, devoid of genuine human feeling:

...they inherited constructiveness, an attitude to the world as to a membrane, to the word as to a part of construction, to the truth of the word and the truth of fact as to something completely extraneous to poetry. They revived something of the methods: positive self-characterization, the wandering mask, didacticism... the ability to scream faithful vows of citizenship with the same final, desperate boldness...<sup>47</sup>

Karabchievsky's anti-modernist bias, which partly informed the basis of his attack on Mayakovsky, saw a particular defect in the "substitution" of form for content. This is more evident in his claim that Mayakovsky had been most directly "resurrected" in the poet Joseph Brodsky. Karabchievsky admitted that in addition to a direct opposition of world-view to that of Mayakovsky, Brodsky also maintained a "traditionally respectful attitude to the word" and an unbroken classical meter. But the parallel Karabchievsky identified was in the poets' virtuosity of technical form and emptiness of content: Mayakovsky signified the tendency, and Brodsky affirmed the result. Karabchievsky pointed out how difficult it is to remember Brodsky's verses by heart, because the internal logic of the image is almost always replaced by the external logic of syntax, and the result is said to be emotional emptiness:

Brodsky's verse, even more than Mayakovsky's, is devoid of the after-effect of image, and if in Mayakovsky this is an important but incidental result of constructiveness, in Brodsky it is a consistent principle. Brodsky's strength is constantly felt while reading, however, our reader's soul, thirsting for co-creation and catharsis, strives to remain one to one not with the dictated word but with the free word, with the image recalled by that word... We are deceived initially by the level set, which is the level of conversation - but not the level of feeling and sensation.<sup>48</sup>

When asked in a 1990 interview about Karabchievsky's link between Mayakovsky and Brodsky, Bella Akhmadulina, herself a poet of the "Mayakovsky Square" generation, replied: "I have read Karabchievsky's book...I think that even taking into account Mayakovsky's talent and his tragic fate, Mayakovsky and Brodsky strike me as being absolutely opposites, the antithesis of each other. Mayakovsky was a tragically unfulfilled man but Brodsky is tragically fulfilled. If they can be compared in any way it is only in their utter opposition to one another."<sup>49</sup> But Akhmadulina missed entirely the purpose of the comparison, which was to depict Mayakovsky as the carrier of a contagion, like his alter-ego Prisypkin. In this case it is the contagion of avant-garde poetics, with which he has infected many others in the Soviet world of the future. Karabchievsky stated this clearly at the end of his book:

The steady application of modern means of efficiency, the estrangement of skill from the soul of the artist, is taking place today in the latest Russian poetry. The living presence of Mayakovsky in [this poetry] is established not so much by his extremely difficult verse as by the active life of this new aesthetic, of which he was the transmitter [or carrier] and the message-bearer. An ironic mask instead of self-expression, grammatic complexity instead of image content, and in response, on the part of the reader, admiration of the technical virtuosity of speech instead of co-creation and catharsis... It seems that this route is an arterial one, and in the verse of better future poets - precisely better ones, maybe great ones - the striking proverbial accuracy of formula will wholly replace any profound accuracy of word and image. Let us hope that this will not be. I fear that it will.<sup>50</sup>

Karabchievsky even used the word "nositel'" to describe Mayakovsky, meaning the carrier or transmitter of a disease. Writing in the early eighties, Karabchievsky was reacting to the development of a small "neo-avant-garde" in the seventies, particularly in Moscow, as well as to the more general influence of modernist devices and theoretical outlooks as official culture began to lose its potency. As mentioned in the previous chapter, unofficial writers, artists and filmmakers followed a progressive retreat from social engagement as a reaction

to Socialist Realism, but they also were drawn to formal experimentation. It was in the 1970s that the very word "avant-garde" was first reclaimed by unofficial Moscow artists in a positive sense. Svetlana Boym even claims that a Mayakovsky monument of the seventies, a statue of the poet's oversized head built for the entrance to the new Mayakovsky museum opened on Dzerzhinsky Square in 1974, "is the last pre-glasnost monument in the city that pays its dues to the ironic avant-gardism of the Moscow architects of the 1970s, who were mostly resigned to being architects 'on paper,' rarely allowed to realize their whimsical and dreamlike projects."<sup>51</sup> In an article written in 1994, Viktor Erofeyev, no admirer of Mayakovsky in any sense, gave Karabchievsky's claim some credence in light of the rise of "conceptualism" in the entire period 1970-1990:

To a certain extent Karabchievsky was right. Russian Neo-avant-gardism of the period 1970-90 made use of certain devices of early Mayakovsky, while being totally unwilling to admit that he was even the most distant of relatives. These features were: *épatage*, mock cynicism, black humour, and an aversion to culture. Recent Moscow conceptualism is close to early Mayakovsky in its behaviour and in the stylistic features of its "happenings." The conceptualists borrowed the formal image of the poet and threw his entire inner content overboard, since they were undoubtedly more mature and refined as far as culture was concerned.<sup>52</sup>

Now that "avant-gardism" had become such a hotly contested concept in the late eighties, Russian writers and artists were even more reluctant than they had been before glasnost to acknowledge the legacy of even the uncanonized aspects of the early Mayakovsky. Similarly, many of the Soviet assessments of Mayakovsky's influence during perestroika also showed an anti-modernist strain that went well beyond a reaction to the official Mayakovsky. There was much greater interest in persecuted writers who were not part of the avant-garde, or not perceived to be so, particularly Akhmatova and Bulgakov, but also Andrei Platonov and Osip Mandelshtam. The literary scholar G. Babaev claimed

in 1988 that Voronsky's literary group Pereval, which existed between 1924 and 1932, was much closer to the present day than Mayakovsky and the Lef group in general.<sup>53</sup> Although the rediscovery of Voronsky's sophisticated and genuinely Marxist approach to literature is indisputably important, part of the appeal of Pereval during perestroika was that it was perceived as a grouping of "typical intellectuals" rather than being associated with any sort of political engagement - despite the fact that Voronsky was known to be a member of the Trotskyist opposition from 1926 to 1928.<sup>54</sup> In addition, Pereval was associated with more conventional prose rather than constructivist concepts. Menzel noted that there were a few young artists and groups in these years that were inspired by the creative potential of Mayakovsky's Futurism, and gave the examples of a 1987 painting by I.L. Lubennikov titled "Image of Love" ("Obraz liubvi"), productions of the Moscow student theatre "Teatr tret'ego napravleniia," and a Rock opera by the group "Avia."<sup>55</sup> But most of those who did look to avant-garde experimentation in the late eighties found other models from the past:

...the artists who partake in the emerging new experimental movement, which includes literary and performance groups, do not put Mayakovsky among their predecessors. This clearly distinguishes the artists of the 1980s from those of the 1960s, the poets of the "thaw generation"... Instead the artists of the late 1980s have chosen to recover poets such as Daniil Kharms of OBERIU, the avant-garde absurdist group of the 1920s and 1930s, poets who were the uncompromised martyrs of the official culture. The contemporary Leningrad poet Alexander Kushner provided evidence of this trend when he remarked during his visit to Cambridge in 1989, "Mayakovsky is not read now."<sup>56</sup>

The publication of Karabchievsky's book in 1989 and again in 1990 coincided with a fairly wide-spread rejection of what was perceived as the political avant-garde, but it expressed another contradiction within the Mayakovsky controversy. Just as Mayakovsky was defended by opposing political interests, he was also attacked by opposing artistic viewpoints, both of which had been denied by official Soviet culture. Despite the weight of his

official image, Mayakovsky again came under attack from all sides, as he had in his own lifetime, both for his conformism and non-conformism as a poet. Karabchievsky premised his attack on Mayakovsky on similar political grounds to those who rejected the poet as too "compromised" by official culture to be restored to the avant-garde tradition. But he combined this attack on the official Mayakovsky with an assault on the artistic traditions it was used to destroy, including the poetics of "*épatage*, mock cynicism, black humour" and the "ironic mask." Although a reaction to the political project of the left avant-garde should not be surprising in the Soviet context, Karabchievsky's broad stance against those seeking a modernist voice in Soviet poetry mirrored the arguments of opponents of democratic reform who during perestroika rejected modernism as the root of moral decline and the denial of traditional humanist values. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the limited attempts to officially reclaim a few Soviet avant-garde painters in the seventies led to their rejection anew by some intellectuals who were also opposed to Socialist Realism; the result was the assertion that the "reduction" of reality to geometric shapes had led directly to the Stalinist concept of the human "screw" or "cog." Karabchievsky was a product of this tendency, which ultimately ends by echoing the claim that formal abstraction is a product of moral emptiness and "decadence." The innovative Mayakovsky of the pre-revolutionary period and the twenties was a common enemy both to those who continued to defend his monumental status and to some of those who began to tear it down. Whether the intent was to defend Socialist Realism or other traditional forms of expression suppressed by it, the result could be equally conservative in substance.

### 1989-1990: Responses to Karabchievsky

One of the first responses to the publication of Karabchievsky's book in journal form in 1989 appeared in the paper *Moskovskii komsomolets* in August of that year. It was an ecstatic review, written by the poet and critic A. Aronov: "Reading Iurii Karabchievsky is a torturous happiness. Don't be afraid, my friends, a labour of love will never disappear." Aronov even asserted that Mayakovsky himself "would recognize this text to be more interesting than nearly everything written about him since his death." Unbelievably, Aronov imagined a mutually sympathetic relationship between Mayakovsky and Karabchievsky, and even more surprisingly, this was because he imagined that in Karabchievsky, Mayakovsky had found his own Pisarev, a socially-oriented critic of the 1860s who attacked Pushkin as the epitome of official culture.<sup>57</sup> Karabchievsky's book elicited a few comparisons between Mayakovsky and Pushkin, and this one is interesting in that it described a partial reversal of roles between Pisarev, who attacked Pushkin for his narrow individualism, and Karabchievsky, who attacked Mayakovsky precisely for his service to Soviet rule. Both critics, however, accused their subjects of superficial aestheticism and internal emptiness in similar terms, and Karabchievsky's Mayakovsky is as much a lackey of the status quo as Pisarev's Pushkin, in his service of the authorities rather than the revolution itself. It is doubtful that Pushkin would have welcomed Pisarev's efforts any more than Mayakovsky would have been grateful to Karabchievsky, but this comparison by Aronov arose from the new "iconoclasm" directed at official literature.

The afterword to the 1990 Soviet edition of Karabchievsky's book as a separate publication was written by Natalia Ivanova, a supporter of the heterogeneous camp of liberal reformers in the literary debates over perestroika and glasnost which included Yevtushenko.<sup>58</sup> Ivanova's short piece was titled

"Will we throw Mayakovsky from the steamship of modernity?"<sup>59</sup> She argued that the phenomenon represented by Mayakovsky's *Resurrection* struggled not so much with Mayakovsky himself as with his "monument," in the figurative sense of his official image and status, because "our time is a time of special relationships with monuments."<sup>60</sup> She mentioned the struggle for new monuments, like that of the mass organization "Memorial," dedicated to the memory of Stalin's victims, and the contemporary reaction against it, as well as the novel *Demontazh*, written by A. Zlobin about the destruction of a Stalin colossus. To this could be added the replacement of the old Mayakovsky museum in 1989, and soon, the popular dismantling of the statue of Dzerzhinsky that stood across from it in 1991.

Ivanova compared Karabchievsky's attack on the monumentalized Mayakovsky to the literary challenges made to monuments of authority in Pushkin's *Bronze Horseman* and *The Stone Guest*, in which a "little man" challenges a statue of Peter the Great as an act of self-assertion, and the character of Don Juan tries to cheat death and show his fearlessness in the face of the unchallengeable. In other words, Karabchievsky's book expressed the need to cut Mayakovsky down to size, and the question of whether he was entirely just to his subject is not considered to be the central issue. Ivanova also predicted that if Karabchievsky was attacked in turn it would not be for Mayakovsky's sake but for that of his official monument, by those who had built it and who still attempted to preserve it.<sup>61</sup> This response testifies to the ground gained by Mayakovsky's detractors by 1990, at which time even those who earlier might have attempted to defend the "real" Mayakovsky against his official image considered that any defense ran the risk of falling in with "conservatives and dogmatists." Although Ivanova disagreed with Karabchievsky's analysis on many points, particularly the comparison of Mayakovsky with Brodsky and also

with Tsvetaeva, she welcomed its publication as part of the indispensable process of removing the bronze from Mayakovsky's figure:

Karabchievsky's book produces a necessary cleansing: with its corrosive acidity it removes stereotypes in perception of Mayakovsky, liberates [this perception] from the layers of pseudo-literary criticism of many years, from the state Mayakovsky cult, established as the Best Friend of all Soviet literary scholars. It is no longer a question of the gloss - it is a question of the far-reaching falsity of the image circulated across the country.<sup>62</sup>

But what of Karabchievsky's assault on the Mayakovsky behind the monument? Ivanova agreed with Karabchievsky's unconditional statement that Mayakovsky himself served "not the Revolution, but the authorities." On the question of Karabchievsky's rejection of modernism, Ivanova acknowledged that many of his observations condemned not only Mayakovsky but Salvador Dali and Picasso, and questioned whether it was necessary to throw Futurism and avantgardism as a whole from the "steamship of modernity"; however she agreed with Karabchievsky that Mayakovsky was unable to express his time and that those writers who succeeded in doing so largely stood apart from the avant-garde.<sup>63</sup> In response to his analysis of Mayakovsky's violent imagery, she cited Pushkin's famous poem "The Prophet," in which the poet's tongue is torn out, his heart is torn from his breast and replaced with burning coal - "Stunning, magnificent poetry! But again: a surgical operation. Dismemberment of the flesh."<sup>64</sup> But she was in fact arguing that there is a danger in falsely adopting the role of prophet, and whereas Karabchievsky followed in the tradition of Pushkin's heroes, Mayakovsky followed in the tradition of the heroes of Dostoevsky, many of whom are false prophets. Ivanova's comparison of Mayakovsky not with Dostoevsky's own literary tradition but with that of his heroes was not new: Pasternak alluded to such a comparison in *Doctor Zhivago* and in his autobiographical essay "People and Situations," and Lili Brik wrote an article outlining the basis for it in 1966.<sup>65</sup> But Ivanova posited that "in this

literary context the "Mayakovskian" vocabulary of violence, exposed by Karabchievsky, finds its genealogy."<sup>66</sup>

Ivanova argued that Karabchievsky's interpretation was the only one involved in the controversy that did not merely replace one legend about Mayakovsky with another. On the one hand it demythologized (or as Ivanova put it, "delegendized") the poet's image by focussing on his poetics, as opposed to the popular, sensationalist biographical material of the time, and on the other it was also counterposed to "academicism" in favour of seeing Mayakovsky's poetry in the context of "our bitter historical experience."<sup>67</sup> Although it is understandable that Karabchievsky should be preferred to either "populism" or academicism, his version of Mayakovsky falls victim to the poet's official "monument" as much as other less literary contributions to the controversy. It too is an "anti-legend," which extends itself ahistorically to the uncanonized poet. What Ivanova referred to as Karabchievsky's attention to "poetics" are largely excerpts taken out of their artistic and historical context - nearly as much as the official slogans taken from Mayakovsky, which according to Karabchievsky did not suffer from being taken out of context to be used for contemporary political purposes. In fact, Kabachievsky fell into the same fallacy in the opposite sense. He himself admitted to the impossibility of being objective about Mayakovsky because of the poet's place in history; neither was his own interpretation of "bitter historical experience" objective. His book was published at a time when it was extremely difficult to rescue the historical and cultural legacy of the twenties from its association with the repression that followed.

Although Karabchievsky had many supporters among those who opposed the official image of Mayakovsky in 1989-90, this was also a time which saw the emergence of a few less polarized assessments of the poet. In 1989 a completely reconstructed Mayakovsky museum was reopened on

Dzerzhinsky Square, with a design inspired by Constructivism and more historically accurate displays which did not portray Mayakovsky's Futurism in a negative light, in startling contrast with the marble corridors and "marble Mayakovsky" of the museum opened there in 1974. The new museum itself depicted the dramatic contrast between its own conception and the post-1935 Mayakovsky, to which a display is devoted at the end of the exhibit. A few of those who responded to Karabchievsky reflected a similar interest in both dispensing with the poet's official image and restoring Mayakovsky to the serious, objective study of literary history. The most significant was Vadim Kovsky, who objected to Karabchievsky's militant subjectivity, but unlike critics such as Mikhailov he did not fall back on a defense of the official Mayakovsky. His article "Iurii Karabchievsky's 'Yellow Blouse'" appeared in the journal *Voprosy literatury* in March of 1990.<sup>68</sup>

Kovsky stated that he did not intend to defend Mayakovsky from Karabchievsky because the opponents' forces were still too uneven - in other words, his criticism of Karabchievsky's approach was not intended to bolster those who defended the poet's official image, which still included the majority of the literary establishment. His intent was to "defend the history of literature as a science," particularly because science, or scholarship, "is now certainly threatened by 'populist' literary criticism."<sup>69</sup> Kovsky originally began writing his article as the foreword to the 1990 Soviet publication of Karabchievsky's book, because he saw the book as necessary from a literary-historical point of view and felt a sense of pride that it was written in Russia and not abroad. Despite its flaws, its overwhelming merit was "to throw a stone at the tranquil surface of Soviet 'maiakovedeniia,'" which Kovsky agreed constituted a "universal system of lies."<sup>70</sup> In the end, Kovsky's article was published separately before the book's appearance, and Kovsky welcomed the direct polemic made possible by

the first Soviet publication of Karabchievsky in 1989 in the journal *Teatr*. However, he cited a 1989 interview with Karabchievsky in the newspaper *Moskovskie novosti* just before the journal publication, in which the critic gave a surprisingly different account of his own stance. Karabchievsky spoke of "the great poet" as a "huge phenomenon in literature and culture," and declared his essential sympathy for Mayakovsky. In this interview Karabchievsky suggested that the alternative to his book might be a different but "equally subjective" image of the poet.<sup>71</sup> In response, Kovsky suggested that the alternative should be "something completely different - spacious, deep and objective knowledge." He cited Shklovsky's words on this problem as equally relevant in 1990: "There are not yet books about Mayakovsky. Calm books, written by calm and knowledgeable people."<sup>72</sup>

Kovsky stated that Stalin's evaluation of Mayakovsky deprived the poet of his only means of protection, the direct and undistorted reception of his poetry by the reader, and cited the first part of Karabchievsky's thesis: "we studied his verses not according to Mayakovsky." Although the method of studying the Soviet classics between the thirties and the fifties may have seemed natural, "it was organizationally linked with the entire mechanism of manipulation of mass consciousness."<sup>73</sup> From the sixties to the eighties the revolt against former idols brought a change in cultural, ideological and artistic orientation that was nearly as polarized as the previous one. Unlike Ivanova, Kovsky regarded Karabchievsky's Mayakovsky as something of an "anti-legend":

I think that only the irritation of many years and the violent reaction to the state aesthetic canon could produce the disfigured portrait of Mayakovsky which gradually "accumulates" - from characteristic to characteristic - along with the extent of [the reader's] immersion in Karabchievsky's book.<sup>74</sup>

Kovsky agreed with another statement made by Karabchievsky in his interview with *Moskovskie novosti*, that contemporary complaints addressed at

Mayakovsky were actually complaints addressed at the regime. But Kovsky objected that this is far from the best method for achieving an objective verdict on any writer, or on literary history in general. He took issue with Karabchievsky's "sectarian" intolerance of the entire Russian poetic avant-garde, and maintained that Futurism "was a major artistic phenomenon of international proportions, and its aesthetic programs are being developed in one way or another in various cultural spheres to this day."<sup>75</sup> Although he may not have favoured Mayakovsky as a symbol for the revival of the avant-garde, Kovsky welcomed the beginning of its recovery, including those traditions deriving from Futurism and Lef:

Today, when despite the persecution of half a century the Russian avant-garde is returning to its native land as a national achievement, when its living traditions, forcibly driven underground, have come to the surface again - the position of Iurii Karabchievsky appears perhaps particularly conservative and unproductive.<sup>76</sup>

On the question of Mayakovsky's violent imagery, Kovsky accused Karabchievsky of deliberate "blindness" in his consideration of Mayakovsky's pre-revolutionary verse, of ignoring its humanistic richness, some of which survived long after the revolution, "resisting the naked class ideologies that 'stepped on the throat' of the poet."<sup>77</sup> Karabchievsky's declaration that an open and unpredisposed reading of Mayakovsky is impossible begs the question of the book's genre, which Ivanova described as one which avoided both populism and academicism. But Kovsky deplored the lengths to which others had gone to justify its subjectivism. He analyzed Karabchievsky's claims about Mayakovsky's verse and biography practically page by page, and what emerges is the extent to which what at first struck one as completely new in the context of the eighties, was in fact not so: "...a feeling of strange familiarity with an entire series of [the book's] key positions would not leave me..."

Karabchievsky convincingly confirms the well-known idea that the new is really the old which has been well forgotten." To prove his case, Kovsky compared passages from the book with the words of some of the foremost literary critics of the twenties: Chukovsky, Voronsky, Polonsky, and Trotsky. Kovsky objected to the presentation of these critical observations firstly as Karabchievsky's own, and secondly as "eternal truths," though they derive from varying historical circumstances.<sup>78</sup>

Finally, Kovsky explained that what motivated him to take Karabchievsky so seriously and to critique him in such detail is what stood behind his book: the serious changes in attitude to history as a whole and to literary history in part, a process both "inevitable and alarming." The re-evaluation of the past was weighted down by "ethical positions, for many decades trampled upon under the banner of class morality," which now made their first target of attack the "masters of culture" who by their moral authority appeared to have sanctified the crimes of the Stalin era. Although Kovsky considered Soviet literature to be deserving of a harsh reckoning, he included in such a list the "agonizing compromises" of Mandelshtam, Pasternak and Bulgakov with the "Stalinist theme."<sup>79</sup> Of course the analogy is not a direct one, as Mayakovsky embraced his "social commission" voluntarily, well before the consolidation of Stalinism; but Kovsky was making the point that the fate of the revolution affected Soviet literature as a whole, not merely individuals. He cited remarks by Lidia Ginzburg in the 1988 Soviet press which assessed the literary compromises of the Stalin era as a general misfortune:

**Today everyone is bewildered - how was this possible? It was possible both in terms of the force of historical conditions and the force of the general patterns of behaviour of social human beings. The most fundamental patterns include: adaptability to circumstances; the justification of necessities when faced with the impossibility of resistance [...] Where was the deception? At what boundary was its beginning to be found?... At the time it seemed that there was but one language left, in which everyone spoke...<sup>80</sup>**

Kovsky supported Karabchievsky's statement that the transformation of the latter's attitude to Mayakovsky was linked with historical change. But Kovsky considered that history can only be judged historically, whereas Karabchievsky depicted "the varied and dramatic process of artistic development of the twenties" as "a 'straight line,' deprived of all its contradictory interconnections and transitions."<sup>81</sup> Karabchievsky's book did strike a necessary blow at "maiakovedenie," or the Mayakovsky "industry," and served its purpose as "shock therapy." But Kovsky also made note of the critic's own stated "fraternization" with Vorontsov and Koloskov, who began a tradition of "Mayakovsky sensationalism" in their 1968 *Ogonek* articles which only came to fruition in the late eighties and early nineties. Of course Karabchievsky's own demonization of the Briks had nothing to do with casting Mayakovsky as a victim, but as one amongst his own. However, the new tradition of "épatage" surrounding Mayakovsky was the reason for the title of Kovsky's article, "Iurii Karabchievsky's 'Yellow Blouse'."

Clothing himself in Mayakovsky's yellow blouse, now the critic himself wants to throw its former owner from the Steamship of Modernity, using épatage, smashing, hating, and playing teacher. History, in repeating itself, acquires a farcical appearance...In the end, even if out of the "hundred volumes" of Mayakovsky's "party-loyal books" one or two reach future descendants, they will suffice for immortality, which does not require a special "resurrection" of the poet.<sup>82</sup>

A few other attempts at more objective responses to Karabchievsky's book continued to appear, for example K.G. Petrosov's 1991 "Posthumous Crucifixion of the Poet."<sup>83</sup> But the linking of Mayakovsky with the crimes of Stalinism, and in fact with what was increasingly perceived as the crimes of the entire Soviet era without distinction, did not end in 1990. One example is a letter by Vladimir Osipov, a former organizer of the Mayakovsky Square gatherings

and now in agreement with those who would blame the poet for everything that followed his death, to the journal *Moskva* at the end of 1990. Captioned "Retribution for Nihilism," Osipov's letter addressed the increasing inter-republic and national tensions within the Soviet Union:

It is not only a question of Stalin, not only of concrete executioners, be they Sverdlov, Trotsky or Kaganovich. The reason for the crisis in the national sphere is the false postulate of Marxism on the disappearance of nations. In the twenties, singers of the revolution did not spare their vocal cords in cursing the nation. The word "patriotism" was considered abusive. Mayakovsky dreamed of a future world "without Russia, without Latvia"...This groundless utopia lay at the foundation of all practical politics of the period of the "cult" and the "stagnation."<sup>84</sup>

### **Suicide, murder and conspiracy theories**

Between 1989 and 1991, the Mayakovsky controversy also became increasingly dominated by detective-style, pseudo-criminological speculation that he had been murdered. As Natalia Ivanova rightly pointed out in her 1990 afterword to Mayakovsky's *Resurrection*, there was now a trend to counter the Mayakovsky legend with "anti-legends" of a sensationalist nature: "He shot himself? - He was murdered! He hung himself? - They hung him! Five lovers? - Here's a sixth! And the first was a GPU agent! This is what stirs people up - and for some reason today in particular."<sup>85</sup> This is the same literary "populism" deplored by Kovsky. One of the major sources of the new journalistic "research" was V. Skoriatin, who in 1990 published documental material on Lili Brik's service with the Cheka-GPU.<sup>86</sup>

Although previously inaccessible archival material was one impetus for this speculation, it was also based on precedents from the past. Koloskov's unpublished essay from the seventies, "I accuse," clearly provided indirectly some of the key grounds for speculation that were elaborated in these years. The essay had been circulating unofficially throughout the eighties and was published by the conservative journal *Molodaia gvardiia* towards the end of

1991, with the editorial emphasis that this version had the stamp of approval of Mayakovsky's family.<sup>87</sup> Koloskov accused "a group of Zionists" and "enemies of socialism" among Mayakovsky's so-called "friends," above all Lili Brik and the GPU agent Agranov. He cited the testimony of the writer Anatoly Vinogradov, recounted to him by the writer K. Gorbunov, that in Vinogradov's presence Agranov gave his own revolver to Mayakovsky with the words "Let's see how brave you are, if you have enough courage to 'punctuate your end with a bullet.'" Koloskov asserted that Agranov knew Mayakovsky had his own revolver but staged this exchange in front of a witness, so that in the event that he was able to kill Mayakovsky himself with this very weapon, he could then simply claim that his jest had been taken seriously by the poet.<sup>88</sup> Koloskov stated that the superficial investigation at the scene had been under Agranov's control, and was convinced that Polonskaia had been forced to lie in her reminiscences, citing the account of a neighbour in the building on Lubiansky Passage who claimed that Polonskaia was in the room when the revolver went off.<sup>89</sup> According to Koloskov, she may have been "voluntarily or involuntarily" used in the plan of Agranov and the Briks. He recounted that the poet Igor' Kobzev had told him in 1973 that a former police officer who had been the first to appear in Mayakovsky's room when the shot was heard had gone to the Writers' Union at the end of 1972 or the beginning of 1973 to divulge "some kind of secret, linked with Mayakovsky's death" which had tormented him his entire life, but had returned in a depressed state and forbade his family to speak of the matter.<sup>90</sup> Koloskov suggested that the suicide note might be a forgery, as Liudmila Maiakovskaia told him that someone in Mayakovsky's circle was able to imitate the poet's handwriting, and also because the note was dated April 12 rather than April 14.<sup>91</sup>

The question remains why such unreliable rumours became so widespread during glasnost. In 1987, Polonskaia's memoirs, the only eyewitness account of the moments leading up to the poet's death, which testify to circumstances that could only explain a suicide, were published in *Voprosy Literatury*.<sup>92</sup> Even Karabchievsky, although he provided his own speculative reasons for the suicide, denied the murder theory: "I, of course, don't doubt for a second the capability and preparedness of our valiant organs to accomplish similar feats at all times. However, I am certain that in the given circumstances they were not involved... Above all, it was not necessary to anyone at that time. He could not bother anyone, he was sick, broken, weak and pliable."<sup>93</sup> The criminological speculation that arose after the Mayakovsky controversy had been raging for over a year in the late eighties might have served a purpose for some in defending the poet, but the widespread interest it evoked reflected the fascination for sensationalism, conspiracy theories and in particular the popularity of detective novels in popular culture of this time.<sup>94</sup> In fact, the 1990 Soviet publication of Karabchievsky's book, although it focussed on a different type of Mayakovsky "sensationalism," appeared with a description promoting as one of its attributes "the fascination of a detective novel."<sup>95</sup> And ironically, a debate about the murder theory in *Literaturnaia gazeta* on April 12, 1989 appeared on the same page as an article on the history of the detective genre in the Soviet era.<sup>96</sup>

The debate in *Literaturnaia gazeta* was sparked by the most popular of media, that of television, in a special program titled *Before and After Midnight* by television journalist Vladimir Molchanov, which aired on March 25 and 26 of 1989. It suggested the possibility of murder: two people described as leading forensic experts testified that a photograph taken immediately after Mayakovsky's death showed what could be a second bloodstain on the poet's

shirt, which could have been produced by a gunshot wound to the right temple, and that it was easy to mistake several gunshots for a single one; a neighbour attested to the fact that there was a second revolver in the room; Molchanov added that the investigation into Mayakovsky's death was still unavailable even to the Mayakovsky museum. V. Radzishevsky recounted these arguments in *Literaturnaia gazeta* on March 29, and argued that "investigative journalism" was not a substitute for serious, qualified work.<sup>97</sup> On April 12 Molchanov wrote a letter in his own defense, insisting that he was willing to be proved wrong but that Radzishevsky had not done so, as he merely relied on official sources, and the letter was printed along with a longer reply from Radzishevsky.<sup>98</sup> In his two articles, Radzishevsky argued that the judgement of the forensic experts was incomprehensible for a number of reasons. The photograph was not an original but a bad copy, and had already been published in *Sovetskaia kultura* in 1987 and even earlier abroad, and Radzishevsky surmised that the print quality of these earlier reproductions would have led the experts to believe that Mayakovsky had been killed by a streetcar. There had clearly been no wound to the right temple given the evidence: the existence of the death masks made by two sculptors, many drawings of the poet in his coffin, and the fact that Mayakovsky's brain was studied in the Brain Institute. Moreover, the photograph in question, in which Mayakovsky's eyes were closed, was taken after the arrival of a medical team and several witnesses who described his eyes as being open; the photograph could therefore not have represented evidence that was subsequently disguised. Radzishevsky argued that even if one were to develop an elaborate conspiracy theory involving many people, it made no sense to choose such a public place as a crowded communal apartment building, where entering and leaving Mayakovsky's work-room unnoticed was impossible. Radzishevsky questioned Igor Chernoutsan, who was responsible

for the official re-investigation of the suicide conducted in the mid-fifties, who attested that there was no hint at murder in its documents. Radzishevsky argued that the flaws in the original investigation, which over-simplified the suicide motives, had nothing to do with covering up a crime. In addition, if Mayakovsky had written his suicide note on April 12 then reconsidered, and was then either murdered or provoked to kill himself by someone else, Radzishevsky questioned why Mayakovsky had not destroyed the suicide note.

The extent to which rumours of Mayakovsky's murder remained widespread is indicated by the fact that even as late as the end of 1991 they prompted the State Mayakovsky Museum to commission an expert medical and criminological inquiry into the material evidence of his death kept in the museum: photographs, the shirt with traces from the gunshot, the carpet on which Mayakovsky fell, and the authenticity of the suicide note. The possibility of a forgery, suggested by Koloskov, had survived as a theory with different variants. But the results of a detailed hand-writing analysis found that the suicide note was undoubtedly written by Mayakovsky, and also included the conclusion that its irregularities "depict a diagnostic complex, testifying to the influence... at the moment of execution... of 'disconcerting' factors, among which the most probable is a psycho-physiological state linked with agitation."<sup>99</sup> Although the findings are hardly surprising, the event is indicative of a fascination with Mayakovsky's contradictory relationship with the Soviet authorities which survived into the era of perestroika, despite the fact that he was being attacked and rejected for his political conformism at this time. From the vantage point of 1994, Victor Erofeyev chose the following cynical verdict on the suicide and on the entire Soviet era:

Mayakovsky's suicide in 1930 was historically predetermined: the ground had been taken from under his feet. Having given all of himself to the Party's cause, he died when he ceased to be of any use... and with his suicide he did the Party

a great service by freeing it from the obligation to kill him itself. Stalin had his reasons for posthumously awarding Mayakovsky the title of the best, most talented poet of the Soviet epoch. He knew the value of this act of self-sacrifice.<sup>100</sup>

## Epilogue: Post-Mayakovskv?

In 1990 the critic Mikhail Epstein wrote an article influenced by the emergence of Russian postmodern theory titled "After the Future: On the New Consciousness in Literature." In it, he claimed that a general cultural shift away from intellectual polarization began to occur before the break-up of the Soviet Union, resulting in what he described as: "...the impossibility of working in an 'anti-' genre: anti-totalitarian, anti-utopian, anti-communist, anti-militarist, etc. All of these realities are so locked in history that the relationship is better expressed by 'post' than it is by 'anti'..."<sup>1</sup> Although this may reflect a widespread political and cultural cynicism which had an impact on Russia in the early nineties, it is not an accurate depiction of Russian society as a whole. However, it does describe a shift in attitude to Mayakovskv by most intellectuals, particularly after 1991, in comparison with the passionate engagement with the Mayakovskv controversy just before the fall of the Soviet Union even on the part of those who were "anti-Mayakovskv."

One of the most spectacular events of 1991 in Moscow was the pulling down of the monument to Dzerzhinsky in front of KGB headquarters and across from the Mayakovskv museum, which became a spontaneous public celebration. Tatiana Tolstaia wrote in October of that year that everyone was touched by "the pathos of iconoclasm and vandalism."<sup>2</sup> After 1991 Mayakovskv Square went back to its old name, Triumph Square, as did the Metro station located there. The statue remains untouched, unlike so many others associated with the Soviet regime. Mayakovskv's monumental place in Soviet literature had been eroded during perestroika; but now the poet is not even a significant subject of historical reassessment. Although the Mayakovskv museum was

recreated in 1989, at the time when a new interest in the poet, though mostly negative, was at its peak, it now unfortunately attracts little attention except from foreign tourists. The end of censorship of Mayakovsky the Futurist rebel and Lefist was followed by the end of heated controversy over the poet. Although the poet's monuments may not have been physically obliterated and placed in the "monument graveyard" that now lies behind the Tretiakov Gallery in Moscow - which is a monument to 1991 in itself - they have met the less dramatic but equally damning fate of indifference. What seemed like only a partial fall from grace became an attitude best described as "post-Mayakovsky."

One of the most telling indicators of official attitude to Mayakovsky is in the school system. There was no official break with Mayakovsky until after 1991, although gradually his name had been surrounded by less fanfare during perestroika. The regime had less at stake in the Mayakovsky legend than it did in Lenin, who had continued to be celebrated as a spiritual guide to perestroika. Kovsky wrote in 1990 that "school teachers, and to an even greater degree university instructors, sense keenly that the temperature is falling in the perception of Mayakovsky, that a conscious, fundamental distancing from him is taking place more and more often."<sup>3</sup> But the retreat from Mayakovsky was a quiet one, and the school system was slow to respond to changes that weren't yet clearly made official. Up until the break-up of the Soviet Union, school children continued to memorize "Soviet Passport," and even university courses which dealt with the Mayakovsky controversy took a side. A small volume of materials titled *New Material on Mayakovsky*, published by the ministry of education in 1991 but before the break-up of the Soviet Union, testifies to the fact that although the debates of the late eighties did have an impact on the university curriculum, the stance was still to defend Mayakovsky. The volume was designed for a specialized course on "Literature and the Present Day

(current problems)," and the major articles it listed from the recent controversy were those that defended the poet's official legacy: Mikhailov's reponse to Lemport, "At the Foot of the Giant," Cheremin's article in *Russkaia literatura*, and Radzishevsky's articles on the suicide. It welcomed the discussion of Mayakovsky in a new light, but in order to better appreciate his value: "The process of newly comprehending history and literature is linked not only with the filling-in of 'blank spaces,' with the publication of what was forgotten or unpublished in the country, with the repatriation of the artistic legacy of the Russian emigration, but also with a new look at Russian literature of the twentieth century, with a 'fresh' reading of what seemed to be the long- and well-known pages of the classics."<sup>4</sup>

To some extent in contrast, a 1993 paper titled "Vladimir Mayakovsky in Schools Today," delivered at a conference in Kolomna in honour of Mayakovsky's centennial, focussed on the slowness of the school system after 1991 to respond to the changes in the study of the poet: "Authors of the most diverse high school literature programs include Mayakovsky's works for study, discussion, and independent reading in middle as well as upper grades. But to do this today as before is simply not possible." At the levels of grade six and seven, the authors of this paper recommended simply using poems that would pique students' interest, such as "Kindness to Horses," "Listen!" "An Unusual Adventure," and others. They also recommended that in the introductory lesson the teacher should focus on the poet's personality in as interesting a manner as possible, using sources like *V. Mayakovsky in the Recollections of his Contemporaries*. In high school, however, the teacher must focus on "the poet and his time, the poet and the authorities, the significance of Stalin's evaluation, which defined for decades the 'textbook gloss' accompanying everything linked with Vladimir Mayakovsky's name." At the high school level special attention

must be given to the recent controversy, particularly Lempert's articles in *Moskovskii khudozhnik*, the most important passages in Karabchievsky's book, and the responses to it by Kovsky and Petrosov.<sup>5</sup>

Mayakovsky's 1993 centennial was humbly marked in Russia by the standards of previous jubilees for the poet. According to Viktor Erofeyev, "In Russia, which purely out of politeness and an unenthusiastic historical curiosity has just marked the centenary of his birth, no one needs him, neither readers nor the authorities."<sup>6</sup> There appears to have been greater interest abroad: according to the present assistant director of the Mayakovsky Museum, Muza Anatolevna Nemirovaia, the museum was requested to mount an exhibit dedicated entirely to Mayakovsky in Italy in 1993, sponsored by a private Italian firm.

There was no mention of the Mayakovsky centennial whatsoever in major Russian literary journals such as *Novy Mir*, and even *Molodaia gvardiia*, which did dedicate space in two of its 1993 issues to a detailed article making the case for the adverse role of the Briks in Mayakovsky's life, nevertheless gave top billing in its July, 1993 issue not to Mayakovsky but to the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the birth of Derzhavin. *Ogonek* gave the jubilee a brief mention in its summary pages on news items of the week, along with a mention of Yevtushenko's sixtieth birthday, which he celebrated in the same week as the Mayakovsky centennial, with jubilee evenings in Moscow and St. Petersburg.

*Ogonek*'s comments on Mayakovsky were somewhat ironic:

Mayakovsky's jubilee was marked unusually widely. The newspaper *Den'* published a huge portrait of V.V., with four lines summoning proletarians to beat the damn bourgeois, the paper *Moskovskii komsomolets* published the most detailed dossier on all of Mayakovsky's favourite women. Etcetera. *Stolitsa* is again publishing the musings of the critics Pozdniaev and Chuprinin on whether he is "our" poet or not and how to relate to him in general, and the paper "AIDS-Info" (this is already my imagination) - something about the intimate life of the poet. In short, there are idols that never grow old. No verses about the Soviet passport (by the way, they were about the foreign passport)

are in a position to cancel out the personal power and nightmarish attraction of one of the founders of twentieth-century art - of avant-garde art, nonconformist and psychadelic.<sup>7</sup>

The first public series of readings dedicated to the jubilee in Russia took place in Kolomna, not Moscow, in May of 1993. It included the paper mentioned above, on teaching Mayakovsky in the schools; a presentation by Petrosov on the poet David Samoilov, who in 1987 gave a speech in Kolomna about Mayakovsky's influence on the poets of the generation of World War II; a speech on Mayakovsky in Russian emigre criticism by V.N. Terekhina from Moscow, which included Trotsky's "The Suicide of Vladimir Mayakovsky"; a study of *The Bathhouse* by M. Bocharov from Taganrog; a comparison of Mayakovsky and Vysotsky by A.V. Kulagin from Kolomna, and a number of other topics, both traditional and new.<sup>8</sup> Examples of the few centenary book publications which appeared are: *The Name of this Theme: Love!*, a book of memoirs by women, both lovers and friends of the poet, including Polonskaia's 1938 memoirs; a new biography of the poet by Aleksei Mikhailov, *The Period of a Bullet*; and *With Mayakovsky in St. Petersburg*, a biography emphasizing the aspects of his life and work connected with that city.<sup>9</sup> The latter concluded: "Today criticizing Mayakovsky is very easy and fashionable... It is much more important to maintain distance, to not violate historicism, to attempt to reproduce that spirit of the times, that atmosphere, in which sometime, now already very long ago, Mayakovsky lived and became a poet..." But in fact, the authors of this book continued to distort this themselves, insisting on an ahistorical Russian patriotism as Mayakovsky's most enduring quality: "the most important thing that makes Mayakovsky necessary to us is the civic fervour of his poetry, his stance as a citizen-patriot, selflessly believing in his people and their initiative."<sup>10</sup>

Periodicals that did commemorate the centennial in 1993 tended to focus on the sensationalist biographical themes of late perestroika. Issue number 5 of the magazine *Dos'e*, or *Dossier*, was dedicated to Mayakovsky, with articles on his death, his loves, the gossip about a menage a trois with the Briks, the existence of a daughter by the Russian-American Elly Jones, and the poet's relationship with the Kremlin and the NKVD.<sup>11</sup> In 1992-93, V. Skoriatin published the previously unknown materials of the original 1930 investigation into Mayakovsky's suicide.<sup>12</sup> The role of the Briks continued to be a source of controversy. On the one hand, the State Literary Museum in Moscow devoted an entire hall to an exhibit called "The World of Lili Brik," which opened at the end of 1992 in honour of the centennial, under the influence of the "Avant-garde Galerie" in Berlin.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, *Molodaia gvardiia* published a two-part piece attacking the influence of the Briks on Mayakovsky's life and work, by Vladimir Diadichev, bearing Koloskov's title of 1968 in *Ogonek*: "The Tragedy of the Poet," with a subtitle in brackets: "Mayakovsky and the Briks."<sup>14</sup>

Diadichev's article was a polemic with Bengt Jangfeldt over the recent 1991 Moscow publication of his edition of the correspondence between Mayakovsky and Lili Brik, with detailed introduction and commentary.<sup>15</sup> For Diadichev, Jangfeldt's commentary was guilty of the idealizing distortions perpetrated by the majority of Western literature on Mayakovsky's relationship with the Briks, which he referred to as tendentious "brikovedenie." Diadichev followed in the dubious footsteps of Koloskov, although his arguments rely less exclusively on unfounded gossip and rumour. He dismissed the "dillentantism" of the controversy over Mayakovsky and Stalinism in the late eighties in favour of the enlargement of biographical information on the poet in the same period, notably the appearance of previously unpublished memoirs, such as those of Polonskaia, Skoriatin's publications on the Briks' connection with the secret

police and on the circumstances of Mayakovsky's death - which he believed provided "new fodder" for discussion - and the coming forward of Mayakovsky's American daughter, Patricia Thompson, in 1990.<sup>16</sup> Diadichev portrayed the idealization of the Briks as an orthodoxy which must be challenged, and feared that Jangfeldt's popularly-oriented publication, based on the "one-sided" testimony of those belonging to the "Briks' party," would become the only recognized source on this topic. In his turn, Diadichev relied almost exclusively on sources explicitly hostile to the Briks, including the 1968 volume of memoirs edited by Koloskov and Liudmila Maiakovskaia (*Maiakovskii v vospominaniakh rodnykh i druzei*), which hardly constituted new material. But he also cited recollections printed in 1990, in *Ekho Planety* No. 18, such as Natal'ia Briukhanenko's claim that when going through Mayakovsky's archive immediately after his death, Lili Brik destroyed much evidence of his relationships with other women, including his letters from Tatiana Yakovleva and a photograph of his daughter by Elly Jones.<sup>17</sup> According to Diadichev, both of the Briks cunningly hitched their wagon to Mayakovsky's star throughout his life and after his death, and he contrasted Mayakovsky's noble origins to Osip Brik's "merchant" background.<sup>18</sup> But particularly guilty was Lili, in her "false" claim to being Mayakovsky's "widow," for supposedly keeping Mayakovsky's daughter a secret, and for consistently attempting to discredit his true family, his mother and sisters, during Mayakovsky's lifetime and beyond, while they had allegedly refrained from criticizing her both before and after the poet's death.<sup>19</sup> Thus the old rivalry between Mayakovsky's two "families" was resurrected and carried on by new parties despite the fact that the original members of both camps were long dead. Obviously, for some it still represents a less personal struggle over Mayakovsky's legacy, with broader implications for his image. Although Diadichev did not go as far as Koloskov in implicating the Briks in a

conspiracy or in Mayakovsky's "murder," their opportunism and manipulation were blamed for the tragedy of his life and therefore by extension for his tragic end.

For the camp represented by Diadichev, Mayakovsky's daughter, Patricia Thompson, was a welcome, living addition to the side of Mayakovsky's blood relations as opposed to those who "falsely" laid claim to him. She had revealed herself in 1990, and visited Moscow in 1991. Diadichev cited her interviews given to a TASS correspondent: "As my mother told me, Mayakovsky was a little afraid of that woman [Lili Brik], and called her the "evil genius" of his life. He couldn't live without her, but he couldn't live with her either! He suspected that she was informing the NKVD about every step he took." The correspondent continued: "Patricia...did not know exactly what else the poet had told her mother about Brik, but at that time he was already able to sow a fear of this woman in [Elly Jones], which the entire family maintained for many years..."<sup>20</sup> Most incredibly, Diadichev stated that Patricia Thompson's existence challenged the "myth" of Mayakovsky's dislike of children,<sup>21</sup> and by implication that it also challenged the myth of his preference for the non-traditional, morally-loose and bohemian lifestyle embraced by the Briks, to which Diadichev repeatedly alluded in disgust throughout his 1993 article. V.V. Katanian cites a less incriminating account of Mayakovsky's explanation to Elly Jones of his relationship with the Briks. Patricia Thompson told Katanian that her mother was jealous of Lili Brik, and provided excerpts of her mother's recollections on tape: "And then [Mayakovsky] told me about the Briks: 'You know, they did so much in order to publish my first poem, when I was young and poor. And in the time of starvation - we all starved - she sold her pearl necklace for a sack of potatoes. Of course, I was never married to her. We were lovers, but we separated."<sup>22</sup> Katanian testifies to the fact that Thompson shared her mother's illusion that it

was the regime which prevented Mayakovsky from pursuing a happy family life with them in America, despite his admission in a letter to Lili that after visiting them for a day in Nice during his stay in Paris in 1928, he immediately became bored and left, meeting Tatiana Yakovleva that very evening back in Paris.<sup>23</sup> Katanian also testifies to Thompson's utter lack of comprehension that nothing was ever written in the Soviet Union about her parents' affair, and it seems that Thompson's relative naivete about the history of Mayakovsky's posthumous legend made her vulnerable to being used in the less intense but ongoing controversy over his alliances.

Perhaps the most interesting and artistically worthwhile publication on Mayakovsky in 1993 was a short article by Vladimir Novikov in the literary journal *Znamia* comparing the poet with Vladimir Vysotsky, mentioned in Chapter 6 of the present dissertation.<sup>24</sup> It was published to coincide with two July dates: Mayakovsky's centennial on the nineteenth, and the thirteenth anniversary of Vysotsky's death on the twenty-fifth. In introducing his article, Novikov accurately predicted that the front-line Russian press would respond to Mayakovsky's centenary in parodic style while *Pravda* and *Sovetskaia Rossiia* would pull out the old, standard quotations about "the communist far-future" and "the spring of humanity." Novikov attempted to pay a different tribute to Mayakovsky in drawing a comparison between him and the still highly-regarded Vysotsky. The most significant parallel that Novikov drew between Mayakovsky and Vysotsky is in the poetic motif of "the monument" in their work, which he suggests provides insight into the divergence of their respective fates:

We will not dig up all the historical roots...we will not retell [the sources in verse]: everyone remembers the ending of "Jubilee" [Mayakovsky's 1924 Pushkin poem], everyone also remembers Vysotsky's plot about the daring "exit" of the author-hero from the stone skin of the monument. But what suicidal doom sounds in [Mayakovsky's] wish that came from the depths: "I'd blow the damn thing up with dynamite!" After this [his] assurance of the "adoration of life" is rhetorical enough. But in Vysotsky the final, laconic: "I'm alive!" is genuinely

convincing. And, what is more, this is not because [Vysotsky] took a "different path" - a more correct one - but because that was the fate that fell to him, a life-affirming one, without ironic quotation marks.<sup>25</sup>

For Novikov, Mayakovsky was a utopian from his first lines to his last. Novikov gave short shrift to those who would blame the artistic utopianism of the Russian avant-garde for Stalin's Terror: he would like to award all new accusers of the avant-garde with a medal in the name of Trofim Lysenko - the infamous agro-biologist canonized by Stalin for his deterministic theories - since their alchemistic claims are equivalent to the transformation of rye into wheat.<sup>26</sup> Finally, Novikov suggested that the title of Mayakovsky's first major work, his 1913 theatrical piece *Vladimir Mayakovsky - A Tragedy*, could encompass the entire aggregate of his literary texts from his first poem to his suicide letter. But in this "tragedy" he included not only Mayakovsky's own work, but what might be considered its accompanying historical text, both during his lifetime and after: "Willingly or not, all who were in one way or another connected with Mayakovsky became the characters and co-authors of this tragedy: Lili Brik, Lenin, Pasternak, Karabchievsky, Vysotsky and many others."<sup>27</sup>

In the final analysis, however, the rediscovery of the Mayakovsky behind the official legend has continued throughout the nineties to be limited by the difficulties of post-Soviet Russia, and this will likely continue in the near future. Once again, attitudes to Mayakovsky continue to express contemporary historical circumstances and differing political perspectives towards them. The authors of the 1993 biography *Mayakovsky in St. Petersburg* give the following evaluation of Mayakovsky's relevance to the post-Soviet present and the material strivings of its "new Russians":

And now at the beginning of the nineties, we cannot but agree with Meyerhold, who saw in [The Bedbug] the exposure of philistinism as a social disease with deep and tenacious roots that die hard. And today audiences of V. Rozov's play *The Nest of the Wood Grouse* involuntarily recall Prisykin, who in 1929 "fought

for a mirrored armoire." And are Mayakovsky's characters not brought to mind at times by young people whose only goal is the desire to dress themselves in everything imported, or, as they would say sixty years ago, everything foreign?<sup>28</sup>

In contrast to this assertion, the widely-known phrase about "byt" from Mayakovsky's suicide letter was used for the opposite purpose - to sell foreign consumer goods. It was used in an ironic sense in a 1993 advertisement: "Your love boat will not crash against the daily grind if it is equipped with technology for everyday use made by Siene."<sup>29</sup> Although this 1993 jingle echoes the opening scene of *The Bedbug*, in which Mayakovsky pokes fun at his own commercial jingles of the NEP period, the pun on "byt" does not spoof the trivial nature of consumerism so much as it trivializes both the Mayakovsky legend itself and the deathliness of "the daily grind." It is now a modern version of "domestic trash" ("bytovaia tekhnika") that promises a more certain happiness than poetry. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Mayakovsky's phrase has lost its sense of pathos and has become an ironic reference to the fall of the official Mayakovsky legend. For Viktor Erofeyev, however, the "new philistinism" in Russia since 1991 is entirely in keeping with Mayakovsky's legacy:

Tomorrow belongs to Mayakovsky. The West has good reason for being far more tolerant towards Mayakovsky than we are. Advancing Russian capitalism, with all its delights, is already pregnant with the "rude Hun" in a new yellow shirt, who is already preparing a new poetic Slap in the Face of Public Taste.<sup>30</sup>

One does not have to agree with Erofeyev to understand what is meant by equating "advancing Russian capitalism" with a "slap in the face of public taste." Erofeyev's comments point to a step "sideways" from state control of culture and Soviet "byt" to the new commodification of culture. And yet, he also links the degradation of culture by the market with the anti-aesthetic impulses of the early avant-garde. In fact, it is not their cultural traditions that weigh heavily on present-day Russia. The hopes and illusions raised in 1989-1991 have

dissolved into a new cynicism about the promise of market democracy: the trolley overturned during the failed coup against Gorbachev, which was placed in front of the Museum of Revolution in Moscow as a new revolutionary monument, has already been removed. In conjunction with the present-day social crisis, "culture" in the traditional Russian as well as official Soviet and underground dissident sense is in a deep crisis...from the hindsight of the 1990s perestroika appears as the 'golden age' of Russian art and the glorious twilight of the Russian intelligentsia."<sup>31</sup> We can recall Mayakovsky's lines from 1927: "After battles and hungry agonies/ A solid emptiness grew in the belly./ Grease pours in the alkaline of byt/ and congeals, quietly and widely. [...] Select a genius for any suite,-/ Everything from Kazin to Briusov./ In the stores - notes for the wide masses./ Sing, workers and peasants,/ the latest romance to pluck at the heart-strings:/ 'My heart longs for the party!'"<sup>32</sup> The "latest romances" have now become Western-style pulp fiction, Hollywood films, Latin American soap operas, and commercial jingles. But this is not by any means to condemn the longing of ordinary Russians for consumer goods or the products of popular culture, much less to advocate a return to the post-twenties Soviet system. It is by way of comment on the disappointments of a mass-produced commercial culture, and on the continued disparity between official promise and everyday reality in Russia today. While Erofeyev's comments beg the question of the relevance of avant-garde aesthetics to the present, in fact it is the relevance of the social project embraced by Mayakovsky, before its distortion by Stalinism, which is still in many ways at stake.

In his 1993 article on Mayakovsky and Vysotsky, Novikov asserted that whereas Mayakovsky's centennial fell at the moment of the poet's "decanonization," the thirteenth anniversary of Vysotsky's death "would become yet another testimony to the unceasing dialogue between the poet and his

readers/listeners." Vysotsky would take on new contemporary relevance in post-Soviet Russia when, after the political news of the day, the radio would play his lyrics: "No, kids, everything's wrong! It's all wrong, kids..." ("Net, rebiata, vse ne tak! Vse ne tak, rebiata!")<sup>33</sup> Perhaps it is this kind of "slap in the face" which is most relevant today.

## Notes

### Introduction: Mythmaking and Mayakovsky

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### **Chapter 1: 1928-1930: Mayakovsky and Stalin's "Cultural Revolution"**

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40. See Vera S. Dunham, *In Stalin's Time: Middleclass Values in Soviet Fiction*, Cambridge, 1976
41. ibid, pp.22-23
42. Stephan, 1986, p.250
43. See Stephan, "The Rediscovery of the Left Front of the Arts in the 1960s and the 1970s," in *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 13, no.3, 1979, pp.322-49
44. Boym, 1991, p.145
45. "Vystuplenie v Dome komsomola Krasnoi Presni na vechere, posviashchennom dvadtsatiletiiu deiatel'nosti," March 25, 1930; first published in *Literaturnaya ucheba*, Moscow, 1936, No.4; translation in *Mayakovsky: Twenty Years of Work*, catalogue of the exhibition as reconstructed at the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, from the State Museum of Literature, Moscow, David Elliott, editor, 1982, p.85; for an official Soviet account of the exhibition, which also includes a short recollection by Lili Brik, see *Maiakovskii delaet vystavku*, Moscow, 1973
46. Mayakovsky, "Levei Lefal Razgovor-doklad," September 26, 1928; see Katanian, 1985, p.441
47. In RGALI, f.336 op.5 eg.khr.25 l.55
48. Katanian, 1985, p.468
49. Brown contends that Mayakovsky's decision was actually taken in late 1929, since the declaration of intent he read in February was dated January 3, and a number of RAPP leaders corroborate the claim; see *A Poet in the Revolution*, 1973, p.365. On Mayakovsky's falling out with Lef/Ref, see excerpt from Lili Brik's memoirs, titled "Poslednie mesiatsy" in *Vladimir Majakovskij: Memoirs and Essays*, Bengt Jangfeldt, ed., Stockholm, 1975, pp.11-24
50. See especially "Vystuplenie na vtorom plenume pravleniya RAPP," September 23, 1929, in *Literaturnoe nasledstvo* No.65, pp.87-96
51. Boym, 1991, p.150
52. Clark, 1995, p.226
53. Victor Shklovsky, *O Maiakovskom*, Moscow, 1940, p.183
54. Marina Tsvetaeva, "Maiakovskому," in *Nesobrannye proizvedeniia*, Gunter Wytrzens, ed., Munich, 1971, p.56

**Chapter 2: 1930-1931: Literary suicide as Soviet “political fact”**

1. Billington, p.522
2. Jakobson, 1930, in Cambridge, Mass., 1987, p.292
3. See not only the poem *Sergeiu Eseninu* and the description of its composition in "Kak delat' stikhi"(1926), but also *Vystuplenia na dispute "Upadochnoe nastroenie sredi molodezhi (eseninshchina)"*, February 13 and March 5, 1927, first published as a pamphlet in 1927 (in Mayakovsky's *Collected Works*, 1978, vol.11 pp. 297-304)
4. Max Eastman, *Artists in Uniform: A Study of Literature and Bureaucratism*, New York, 1934, p.60
5. ibid, p.61
6. ibid, p.63
7. Lazar Fleishman, "O gibeli Maiakovskogo kak 'literaturnom fakte.' Postskriptum k stat'e B.M. Gasparova," *Slavica Hierosolymitana*, 1979 No.4, Jerusalem, pp.126-30
8. *Pravda*, April 15, 1930, No.104
9. Menzel, 1992, p.93
10. In State Mayakovsky Museum Archive, Moscow, P - 5561
11. Menzel, 1992, p.97
12. State Mayakovsky Museum Archive, 9650 PD-6368: *Al'bom gazetnykh i zhurnal'nykh vrezok*
13. ibid, from article "Poslednii put"
14. ibid, Lunacharsky, "Zhizn' i smert': O Maiakovskom"
15. ibid, from article "Poslednii put"
16. ibid, David Zaslavsky "Likvidatsiia proryva"
17. Jakobson, 1930, in Cambridge, Mass., 1987, pp.294-5
18. Zaslavsky, "Likvidatsiia proryva"
19. Lunacharsky, "Zhizn' i smert"
20. "Short is the life of Ulyanov/ Known to its last syllable;/ But the long life of Comrade Lenin/ We must tell/ and describe once more." *Vladimir Ilych Lenin*, 1924
21. "Mozg Maiakovskogo," *Literaturnaia gazeta* , April 21, 1930
22. Zaslavsky, "Likvidatsiia proryva"
23. Lunacharsky, "Zhizn' i smert"
24. Boym, 1991, p. 152-3

25. *Malaia sovetskaiia entsiklopediia*, Tom 5, Moscow, 1930, p.341; cited in Chertok, *Posledniaia liubov' Maiakovskogo*, p.64
26. *Literaturnaia entsiklopediia*, Tom 7, Moscow, 1932 p.46; cited in Chertok, p.64
27. Semen Chertok, *Posledniaia liubov' Maiakovskogo*, Ann Arbor, 1983, p.103 (note 22)
28. See *Liubov' - eto serdtse vsegda*, Bengt Jangfeldt, ed., Moscow, 1991
29. See the memoirs of E. Lavinskaia in *Maiakovskii v vospominaniakh rodnykh i druzei*, Moscow, 1968; Vladimir Diadichev, "Tragediia poeta (Maiakovskii i Briki)," *Molodaia gvardiia*, 1993 No. 8, pp.234-5
30. Andrei Koloskov, "Ya obviniaiu," 1979, in *Molodaia gvardiia*, 1991 No.10, pp. 244-258; see last section of chapter 7 of the present dissertation
31. V.V. Katanian, *Prikosnovenie k idolam*, Moscow, 1997, p.89
32. R. Ivanov-Razumnik, *Pisatel'skie sud'by*, New York, 1951, p.20-1
33. Chertok, p.63
34. ibid
35. The text of the July, 1930 edict is also found in V. A. Katanian, "Ne tol'ko vospominaniia - k istorii izdaniia Maiakovskogo," 1974, in *Druzhba narodov*, 1989 No.3, p.222
36. There is a discrepancy between the version of Polonskaia's memoirs as published abroad by Chertok in 1983 and that published in Moscow, first in 1987 in the journal *Voprosy literatury*, and then in a collection of memoirs in 1993. Both include the passage describing Polonskaia's meeting with the bureaucrat Shibailo at the Kremlin, who suggested that instead of accepting the status of one of Mayakovsky's heirs, she might prefer a permit to go somewhere, presumably abroad. They never came to any agreement, but subsequently the mention of her name in Mayakovsky's suicide note was simply ignored. The later versions also include an account that when Polonskaia first consulted Lili Brik about the matter, Brik told her to renounce her rights out of respect for Mayakovsky's relatives, claiming that they blamed Polonskaia for Mayakovsky's death, and even admitted that representatives of the government had unofficially asked her to advise Polonskaia to do so; Chertok's version states that Brik simply told her to decide according to her own conscience. It is also claimed in the foreword to the version in *Voprosy Literatury* that Lili Brik, who had been taken into Polonskaya's confidence in the thirties, saw to it that the memoirs remained secret until 1955, soon after which they were obtained by

Chertok. Despite the anti-semitism which continued to motivate attitudes towards the Biks into the nineties, this claim is plausible. But it is certain that the state had its own reasons for denying Polonskaia's role in the last years of Mayakovsky's life; she was not even temporarily indispensable to Mayakovsky's legacy as Lili Brik was for a time, due to the latter's access to Mayakovsky's archive as stipulated in the suicide letter. Polonskaia's presence at the suicide scene made her particularly problematic, as evidenced by the fact that her memoirs were not published in the Soviet Union until the era of glasnost. See Chertok, *Posledniaia liubov' Maiakovskogo*, 1983, pp.95-6; V.V. Polonskaia, "Vospominaniia o Maiakovskom," *Voprosy literatury*, 1987 No.5, pp.144-198; V. Polonskaya, "Poslednii god," in *Imia etoi teme: Liubov'*, Moscow, 1993, pp.320-22

37. See V.V. Katanian, 1997, p.82-3

38. Menzel, 1992, p.95

39. The first official criticism of RAPP appeared in *Pravda* on April 15, 1931, almost exactly a year to the day since Mayakovsky's suicide, in an article titled "For A Leninist Literary Criticism."

40. Leonid Averbakh, *Pamiati Maiakovskogo*, Moscow, 1930, p.5

41. Lunacharsky, "Zhizn' i smert'" in State Mayakovsky Museum Archive, 9650 PD-6368: Al'bom gazetnykh i zhurnal'nykh vrezok

42. Solovev's comments cited in letter from RAPP leadership to Stalin, April 26, 1930, in State Mayakovsky Museum Archive, 11740 PD -7889

43. Copy of letter in State Mayakovsky Museum Archive, 11740 PD -7889; published in *Pravda*, July 22, 1988

44. L. Averbakh, V. Sutyrin, F. Panferov, "Pamiati Maiakovskogo," *Pravda*, May 19, 1930

45. M. Gelfand, *Literaturnaia gazeta*, April 17, 1930

46. Letter from RAPP to Stalin, p.4 of archival copy (11740 PD -7889)

47. For example, I. Selvinsky, a Constructivist and member of Brigada M-1 who had polemicized against Mayakovsky during his lifetime, wrote the manifesto "Declaration of the Rights of the Poet," a fictional polemic between Mayakovsky and the avant-garde, published in *Literaturnaia gazeta* on November 15, 1930, which criticized Mayakovsky for his excessiveness, sloganizing and megalomania. Selvinsky later renounced it, however.

48. Brown, 1953, pp.152-162 (p.152)

49. See *Pamiati Maiakovskogo*, 1930

50. Menzel, 1992, p. 99
51. Clark, 1995, p.272-3
52. B. Olkhovii, "Poet sotsial'noi napravленности," in *Molodaia gvardia*, 1930, No.8, pp.67-70
53. *Pamiati Maiakovskogo*, p.29
54. ibid, p.27, 29
55. Boris Pasternak, *Okhrannaia gramota*, in his *Vozdushnye puti: proza raznykh let*, Moscow, 1982, p.272
56. Jakobson, 1930, in Cambridge, 1987, p.290
57. ibid, p.296
58. Boym, 1991, p.155
59. Jakobson, 1930, in Cambridge, 1987, pp.295-6
60. ibid, p.300
61. Menzel, 1992, p.82
62. Neznamov and Katanian, "Eto i yest' proletarskii poet," *Literaturnaia gazeta*, April 17, 1930
63. Osip Brik, "Poet proletarskoi revolutsii," *Pioner*, 1930 No. 4, pp.15-16
64. O. Brik, "Kratkaia biographia i obshchestvenno-literaturnyi put'", *Klubnyi repertuar*, 1930 No. 5, pp. 28-31
65. O. Brik, "Poet V.V. Maiakovskii," in *Shkol'nyi Maiakovskii*, second edition, Moscow, 1931, pp. 91-102
66. O. Brik, "Poet proletarskoi revolutsii," *Pioner*, 1930 No. 4, pp.15-16
67. O. Brik, "Poet V.V. Maiakovskii"
68. Aleksei Kruchenykh, *Our Arrival*, Moscow, 1995, p.119
69. Viktor Shklovsky, in *Puti optimizma*, Moscow, 1931
70. Kruchenykh, p.114-5
71. ibid, p. 119
72. Semion Kirsanov, "Piatiletka," first published in *Novy Mir*, January 1931
73. Nikolai Aseev, "Poslednii razgovor", in *Novy Mir*, May, 1930, pp. 5-12
74. Cited in RAPP leadership's letter to Stalin, archival copy (11740 PD -7889)
75. L.N. Trotsky, "The Suicide of Vladimir Mayakovsky", in *Leon Trotsky on Literature and Art*, New York, 1970, p.178
76. ibid, p.175-6
77. ibid, p.174-5
78. ibid, p. 177
79. ibid

80. Boym, 1991, p.158
81. Andre Breton, "Liubovnaia lodka razbilas' o byt," in *Le Surrealisme au service de la Revolution*, No.1, 1930, p. 17, 20
82. ibid, p.18
83. ibid, p.18, 19
84. ibid, p.21-22
85. Eastman, p. viii
86. ibid, pp.33-34
87. ibid, p.69
88. Jakobson, 1930, in Cambridge, 1987, p.296
89. Eastman, p.74
90. ibid, p. 72-73
91. Menzel, 1992, p.110

### **Chapter 3: 1931-1935: The Years of Transition**

1. See N.S. Timasheff, *The Great Retreat: The Growth and Decline of Communism in Russia*, New York, 1946
2. Clark, 1995, p.294; Stites, 1989, p.238
3. As Billington and Fitzpatrick point out, although this actual phrase came into use later, the idea was made explicit in 1931. See *The Icon and the Axe*, note 17, p.771, and *The Cultural Front*, p.242
4. See Fitzpatrick, 1992, p.244
5. Robert C. Williams, "The Nationalization of Early Soviet Culture," in *Russian History* 9, pts. 2-3, 1982, pp.157-72 (p.158)
6. ibid, p.166
7. "Pokaz geroev - general'naia tema proletarskoi literatury (doklad na sentiabr'skom plenume RAPP)," *Na literaturnom postu*, December 1931, No. 35-36, p.59
8. Also see Menzel, 1992, p.89, 92
9. See V.A. Katanian, "Ne tol'ko vospominaniia - k istorii izdania Maiakovskogo," 1974, in *Druzhba narodov*, 1989 No.3, p. 223
10. Also see *Literaturnaia gazeta*: "Ne vypolneny dazhe minimal'nye plany," April 11, 1932, and "Dva goda so dnja smerti," April 17, 1932
11. V.A. Katanian, 1974, in *Druzhba narodov* 1989 No.3, p.223
12. See V.V. Katanian, 1997, p.29

13. V.A. Katanian's 1974 "Ne tol'ko vospominaniia - k istorii izdaniia Maiakovskogo" was first published in Paris, in *Sintaksis*, 1987 No. 19, and then in *Druzhba narodov* 1989 No.3, pp.220-27
14. Vahaan D. Barooshian, *Brik and Mayakovsky*, The Hague, 1978, p.112; also see "A bibliography of Brik's works" in Barooshian pp.149-54 and Jangfeldt, "Osip Brik, A Bibliography: Reply on Barooshian" in *Russian Literature* 1981 No. 9, pp.404-6
15. O. Brik, "Poet i teatr," *Sovetskoe iskusstvo*, April 14, 1933
16. cited in Barooshian, p.112
17. Brown, 1973, p.24
18. O. Brik, "Lenin v stikhakh Maiakovskogo," in *Literaturnyi kritik*, 1934 No.4, pp.106-116
19. ibid, p.109
20. ibid, p. 114
21. See N. Stepanov, "Zametki o stikhakh," in *Literaturnyi sovremennik*, 1935, No.1, pp.150-7
22. O. Brik, "O pol'ze tvorcheskikh ob'edinenii," *Literaturnyi kritik* , 1934 No.5, pp. 155-160
23. ibid, p.156
24. ibid
25. ibid, p.157
26. ibid
27. E. Usievich, "Sovetskaia poeziia pered novym pod'emom," in *Literaturnyi kritik*, 1934 No.6, pp.80-100
28. V. Pertsov, "O lupe vremeni i pravdivom izobrazhenii deistvitel'nosti," in *Znamia* 1933, No.3, p.185
29. A. Fadeev, "Pomen'she literaturshchiny," in *Znamia* 1933, No.5, pp.175-8; this debate is discussed in Hans Gunther, *Die Verstaatlichung der Literatur*, Stuttgart, 1984, p.70-71
30. Fitzpatrick, 1992, p. 243
31. Katerina Clark, "Utopian Anthropology as a Context for Stalinist Literature," in *Stalinism: Essays in Historical Interpretation*, Robert C. Tucker, ed., New York, 1977, p.185
32. See Stites, 1989, p.234
33. Tumarkin, p.254
34. Stites, 1989, p.238

35. In *Literaturnyi kritik*, 1934, No.6, p.2
36. Cohen, p. 356
37. The full text of Bukharin's speech and concluding remarks is found in *Pervyi vsesoiuznyi s"ezd sovetskikh pisatelei: stenograficheskii otchet*, Moscow 1934, pp. 479-503; 573-7; 671
38. See Cohen, pp. 345-6
39. See Boris Nicolaevsky, *Power and the Soviet Elite: "The Letter of an Old Bolshevik" and Other Essays*, New York, 1965 (*Letter of an Old Bolshevik: The Key to the Moscow Trials* first published in New York, 1937)
40. N. Aseev, "My sozdaem novyi tip poeta," in *Pervyi vsesoiuznyi s"ezd sovetskikh pisatelei: stenograficheskii otchet*, pp.567-9
41. A. Zharov's comments in *Pervyi s"ezd*, p.539
42. "Doklad V. I. Kirpotina o sovetskoi dramaturgii," in *Pervyi s"ezd*, p.379
43. See Cohen, p. 345-7
44. *Pravda*, May 17, 1937, p.4
45. Vadim Kovsky, "Zheltaia kofta' Iuria Karabchievskogo," in *Voprosy literatury*, 1990 No.3, pp.28-9
46. In *Pervyi s"ezd*, p.614
47. Also see Menzel, 1992, p.133
48. For discussion of the letter see V.A. Katanian, 1974, in *Druzhba narodov* 1989 No. 3 (with full text on pp.220-1)
49. See Lazar Fleishman, *Boris Pasternak v tridtsatye gody*, Jerusalem, 1984, Ch. 5 and 6
50. See Cohen, p. 364 and note 133 on p. 471
51. I.V. Stalin, *Sochineniya*, Moscow, 1951, vol.13, p.25
52. In early 1935, Bezymensky published an article attacking the producer and musical contributor of the film *The Merry Boys* for borrowing from bourgeois shows; after the case was brought to the Committee of Party Control, a letter signed by Bezymensky appeared in *Pravda* recognizing his lack of grounds. See Bezymensky's article in *Literaturnaia gazeta*, February 28, 1935 and Timasheff's discussion of the episode in *The Great Retreat*, p. 270
53. See Menzel, 1992, p.84 and 92
54. Igor Golomstock, *Totalitarian Art*, London, 1990, p. 87
55. Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, Chicago, 1981, p.33
56. See Groys, *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin*, Munich, 1988

57. Aleksandar Flaker, "Presuppositions of Socialist Realism," in *The Culture of the Stalin Period*, Hans Günther, ed., London, 1990, p.100-101
58. Margaret A. Rose, *Marx's Lost Aesthetic: Karl Marx and the Visual Arts*, Cambridge, 1984, p.150
59. "Rech' sekretaria TsK VKP(b) A.A. Zhdanova," *Pervyi s"ezd*, p. 5
60. Clark, 1995, p.286
61. Barooshian, p.121
62. For a detailed account of the 1934-35 language debate see Hans Günther, *Die Verstaatlichung der Literatur*, Stuttgart, 1984, pp.55-67
63. O. Brik, "V masterskoi V.V. Maiakovskogo," in *Smena* 1935 No.3, p.16
64. O. Brik, "Kniga, kotoruiu nado napisat'," *Khudozhestvennaya literatura* 1935 No.5, pp.1-3
65. Groys, "The Birth of Socialist Realism from the Spirit of the Russian Avant-Garde," in Günther, ed., 1990, p.134
66. O. Brik, "V.V. Maiakovskii," in *Krasnoarmeets i krasnoflotets* 1935 No.7, p.2, cited in Barooshian, p.117
67. Clark, in Tucker, 1977, p.185
68. ibid, p. 186-7
69. Golomstock, p. 213
70. V.I. Stalin, "Rech' na pervom vsesoiuznom soveshchanii stakhanovtsev," November 17, 1935, in his *Sochineniya*, Robert H. McNeal, ed., Stanford, 1967, Vol.1 (14), pp.84-5
71. V.A. Katanian, 1974, in *Druzhba narodov* 1989 No.3, p.225
72. ibid, p.224
73. Maxim Gorky, *Sovietskaia literatura*, Moscow, 1934, p.20
74. See Barooshian, p.117-18

#### **Chapter 4: 1936-1953: Mayakovsky and Stalin**

1. Clark, 1981, p.29-30
2. E. Pomerantseva, "Bor'ba za sotsialisticheskii realizm v poezii vosstanovitel'nogo perioda (Maiakovskii i D. Bednyi i ikh rol' v razvitiu sovetskoi poezii pervoi poloviny 20-kh godov)," *Avtoreferat, Institut Mirovoi Literatury imeni A.M. Gor'kogo, Akademiiia nauk SSSR*, Moscow, 1950, p.5
3. Golomstock, p.183
4. See J. Arch Getty, *Origins of the Great Purges*, Cambridge, 1985

5. "Sumbur vmosto muzyki," *Pravda*, January 28, 1936, p.3
6. V. Rakitin, "The Avant-Garde and Art of the Stalinist Era," in Gunther, 1990, p.179
7. Fitzpatrick, 1992, p.200-1; also see S.M. Khentova, *Shostakovich v Moskve*, Moscow, 1986, pp.61-3
8. Fitzpatrick, 1992, p.201; also see Iu. Elagin, *Temnyi genii (Vsevolod Meierkhol'd)*, New York, 1955, p.367
9. Fleishman, 1984, p.293
10. "O sovetskoi poezii. Doklad A. Surkova na III plenume Pravleniya SP SSSR," in *Literaturnaya gazeta*, February 16, 1936
11. "Za Maiakovskogo! Rech' tov. Altauzena," published in both *Literaturnaya gazeta*, Feb. 16, 1936 and *Oktiabr'*, 1936 No.4. p.234; excerpt cited and discussed in Fleishman, 1984, pp.305-7
12. *ibid.*
13. Ilya Ehrenburg, books 3-4, pp. 504-506
14. Chertok, p. 41
15. V.A. Katanian, 1974, in *Druzhba narodov*, 1989 No.3, p.225
16. Chertok, p.47
17. On the revival of folk culture, see Timasheff, pp.271-2, 279
18. V. Kemenov, "O psevdo-narodnosti v iskusstve," *Literaturnaya gazeta*, May 16, 1936
19. In *Pravda*, August 28, 1936
20. See Fleishman, 1984, p.394-5
21. Clark, 1995, p.289
22. Vladimir Stavsky, "O formalizme i naturalizme v literature. Vstupitel'noe slovo tov. Stavskogo na obshchchemoskovskom sobranii pisatelei," *Literaturnaya gazeta*, March 15, 1936; also see Fleishman, 1984, pp.326-335
23. O. Brik, "Narodny poet," in *Urozhainy marsh*, Moscow, 1936, p.9
24. O. Brik, "Poet sovetskoi epokhi," *Literatura v shkole* 1936 No.2, p.29
25. On Stakhanovism in literature and political culture see Michael Gelb, "Mass Politics Under Stalinism: Two Case Studies," 1989, in *Essays on Revolutionary Culture and Stalinism*, John W. Strong, ed. Slavica, 1990; and Katerina Clark, "Utopian Anthropology as a Context for Stalinist Literature" in *Stalinism: Essays in Historical Interpretation*, Robert C. Tucker, ed., New York, 1977, pp.180-98
26. *Sobranie sochinenii v chetyrekh tomakh*, Moscow, 1936; introduction by I.K. Luppol in Vol. 1, pp.5-36

27. V.A. Katanian, 1974, in *Druzhba narodov*, 1989 No.3, p.226
28. See A.M. Kriukova, "Rabota N. Aseeva nad poemoi 'Maiakovskii nachinaetsia,'" in *Literaturnoe Nasledstvo* No.93, 1983, pp.438-505
29. A. Volkov, "Maiakovskii i Futurizm" *Molodaia gvardia*, 1938, No.4 p.183
30. E. Malkina, "Polnoe sobranie sochinenii V.V. Maiakovskogo," *Literaturnyi Kritik*, 1939, No.1, pp.144-5
31. E.I. Naumov, *Seminarii po Maiakovskomu*, Leningrad, 1955, p. 36
32. ibid, p. 263
33. "Ot redaktsii," *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v dvenadtsati tomakh*, Moscow, 1939, Vol. 1, p. 5
34. V.A. Katanian, 1974, in *Druzhba narodov*, 1989 No.3, p.226
35. Katanian (ibid, p.227) gives the example of the commentary written by Lili Brik and himself for the poem "About This" in volume 6 of the second *Complete Works*, which appeared in 1940, on the surrealistic elements in the poem's narrative structure and imagery. *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v dvenadtsati tomakh*, Moscow, 1939-1949, Vol. 6, pp. 375-379 and 479-484
36. Roi Medvedev, "Stalin. Nekotorye stranitsy iz politicheskoi biografii," *XX vek* No.2, London, 1977, p.75
37. See B. A. Filippov, *Vsplyvshhee v pamiat. Rasskazy, ocherki, vospominaniia*, London, 1990; V. Skoriatin, "Posleslovie k smerti," *Zhurnalista*, 1990, No.5, pp.52-62; Vladimir Diadichev, "Tragediia poeta (Maiakovskii i Briki)," *Molodaia gvardiia* 1993 No.8, pp. 234-5. This last source, extremely hostile to the Briks, also claims that Lili's proximity to the NKVD in the thirties is in fact what secured Stalin's reaction to her letter about Mayakovsky - on this point also see Diadichev, "Proshlykh dnei osveshchaia potemki...," *Moskva*, 1991, No.4
38. Narkompros RSFSR, Order No. 135, August 27, 1939, in State Lenin Library, fond No. 369, karton No. 103, ed. khran. 51
39. *Literaturnaia gazeta*, No. 23, April 16, 1940, p.2
40. Sergei Spassky, *Maiakovskii i ego sputniki: vospominaniia*, Leningrad, 1940
41. Stephan, 1981, p.192
42. *Bol'shaia Sovetskaia Entsiklopedia*, 1938, volume 38, cited in Chertok, p.13
43. "Talantliveishii poet sovetskoi epokhi," *Pravda* , April 14, 1940
44. ibid.
45. "Ukaz Prezidiuma Verkhovnogo Soveta SSSR," ibid., p.1
46. M. Shtraukh, "On videl budushchee," ibid, p.4

47. M. Aliger, "Gendrikov Pereulok," *ibid*, p.4
48. N. Aseev, *Maiakovskii nachinaetsia*, in *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, Leningrad, 1967, p. 620-1. Because the Russian "tochka" has both the figurative meaning "point" and the literal meaning "sentence period," there is a double meaning in the last lines of this passage ["ne do kontsa, ne do poslednei tochki"]: she loved him "not entirely, not thoroughly, not down to the last detail" and "not to Mayakovsky's end, not to the final point of his suicide," because the line echoes Mayakovsky's own in *The Backbone Flute*, 1915: "wouldn't it be better to punctuate my end with a bullet" ["ne postavit' li luchshe/tochku puli v svoem kontse"]
49. L. Brik, "Iz vospominanii o stikhakh Maiakovskogo," *Znamia* 1941 No.4, p.229
50. N. Aseev, *Sploshnaia nevidal': Zaiavka na scenarii*, in *Izvestiia* No. 84, June 14, 1940; see also Menzel, pp. 162-4
51. N. Aseev, *Maiakovskii nachinaetsia*, in *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, p.622
52. *Vladimir Maiakovskii. Sobranie soчинений в двенадцати томах*, Moscow, 1978, Vol. 3, p.399
53. Aseev, *Maiakovskii nachinaetsia*, in *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, pp. 601-3
54. See A.M. Kriukova, "Rabota N. Aseeva nad poemoi 'Maiakovskii nachinaetsia,'" in *Literaturnoe Nasledstvo* No.93, 1983, p. 438-505
55. Aseev, *Maiakovskii nachinaetsia*, in *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, p. 625
56. Tumarkin, p.254
57. A. Anufriev, "Na vooryzhenii krasnoi armii," *Pravda*, April 14, 1940
58. Dunham, p.7
59. Timasheff, p.280
60. Following attempts to recruit him to inform on Pasternak, Yakhontov threw himself out of a window in the summer of 1945.
61. Letter from Vladimir Trefilov, Feb 7, 1944, in Museum archive: 12960 (a)-1 PD-6637
62. Letter dated April 3, 1945, 12960 (n) 13 PD-6649
63. Letters dated July 2, 1944, 12957(zh)-7 PD-6615, and August 20, 1944, 12957 (i)-9 PD-6617
64. Letter from K. A. Alekseevskii, November 8, 1944, 12958 (b)-2 PD-6624
65. Letter from V. Azarov, August 27, 1944, 31637 PD-8870
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67. State Mayakovsky Museum Archive TS-1045; I-1044; 13028 PD-8237 I-1050 PD-6722 I-1051 PD-6723
68. Dunham, p.13
69. Fitzpatrick, 1992, p.39
70. Dunham, p.14
71. ibid, p.15
72. ibid, p.17
73. O. Brik, "Poet sovetskoi epokhi," *Literatura v shkole*, 1936 No.2, p.29
74. Chertok, p.64; *Bol'shaia Sovetskaia Entsiklopedia*, 1938, volume 38, pp.547, 533
75. Dunham, p.18
76. "Otvet na 'Mechtu,'" 1927, discussed in N. Maslin, *Vladimir Maiakovskii*, Moscow, 1949, p.102
77. ibid, p.138
78. Dunham, p.77-78
79. Maslin, 1949, p.112
80. ibid, p.149
81. "O zhurnalakh *Zvezda* i *Leningrad*: iz postanovleniia TsVKP(b) ot 14 avgusta 1946 g.," in *Zvezda*, 1946, No. 7-8, pp.3-6
82. *Protiv bezideinosti v literature: Sbornik statei zhurnala "Zvezda"*, Leningrad, 1947
83. Naumov, *Seminarii po Maiakovskому*, Leningrad, 1955, p.51
84. *Soveshchanie deiatelei sovetskoi muzyki v TsK VKP(b): Stenogrammy rechei*, Moscow, 1948
85. "O opere Velikaia druzhba v. Muradeli," February 10, 1948, in *Sovetskaia muzyka*, 1948, No.1, pp.3-6
86. In *Sovetskaia muzyka*, 1948, no.1, pp.12-13
87. Maslin's "Poet i narod" was first published in *Protiv bezideinosti v literature: Sbornik statei zhurnala "Zvezda"*, 1947, pp.53-88, and his "Maiakovskii i nasha sovremennost" in *Oktiabr'*, 1948, No.4 pp.148-160; other examples of "zhdanovshchina" articles focussing on Mayakovsky are V. Bakinsky, "Maiakovskii v bor'be za sotsialisticheskuiu liriku" in *Zvezda*, 1947, No.4, pp.158-165; An. Tarasenkov, "Put' Maiakovskogo," in *Idei i obrazy sovetskoi literatury*, Moscow, 1949, pp. 96-152
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89. ibid, p.138

90. *ibid*, p.165
91. Bonch-Bruevich, "Vospominaniia o Lenine," and Aseev, "Ob otnosheniiakh Lenina k Maiakovskomu," *Na literaturnom postu*: No.4, 1931, pp.4-8 and No.10, 1931, pp.3-6
92. V. Meilakh "Maiakovskii i Lenin," in *V.V. Maiakovskii 1930-1940*, Moscow, 1940 pp.9-42
93. V.I. Lenin, "Partiinaia organizatsiia i partiinaia literatura," in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii V. Lenina*, fourth edition, Moscow, Vol. 10, pp.26-31
94. "Osip Maksimovich Brik," *Tassovets*, March 1, 1945
95. Barooshian, p.147 note 32
96. *ibid*, p.125
97. V.A. Katanian, 1974, in *Druzhba narodov*, 1989 No.3, p.227
98. In *Vladimir Maiakovskii. Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v dvenadtsati tomakh*, Vol. 12, Moscow, 1949, p.26
99. Pomerantseva, p.1
100. Maslin, 1949, p.3
101. Golomstock, p.194
102. Dunham, p.78
103. Pomerantseva, p.5
104. Golomstock, p.194
105. Maslin, 1949, p.156
106. S. Kirsanov, "Uchit'sia li u Maiakovskogo?" *Literaturnaia gazeta* Sept 3, 1949
107. Stalin, "Otnositel'no marksizma i iazykoznanii," *Pravda*, June 20, 1950; as brochure: "Marksizm i voprosy iazykoznanii"; reprinted in Stalin, *Sochinenia*, Stanford, 1967, Vol. 3, pp.114-48
108. *ibid* (from *Pravda*), pp.7-8
109. Grigorii Vinokur's first published article in 1916 had been a linguistic discussion of Mayakovsky's *A Cloud in Trousers*. His 1943 monograph *Maiakovskii - novator iazyka* discussed the poet's neologisms, or new word formations. In it Vinokur stated that the fact that Mayakovsky had never had indifferent readers was due not only to the content of his poetry, but equally to its language: "To some this language seemed a bold revolutionary rupture of the very foundations of Russian speech...Others took it as the deterioration and death of that cultural tradition as it was founded from the Russian language of our classical literature of the nineteenth century. But these

emotional evaluations of Mayakovsky's language have up until now not been counterposed by a sufficiently sober, more or less systematized analysis..." Vinokur argued that "the problem of Mayakovsky, in which there is so much that is critical and timely, [but] which does not coincide with the customary notions of the Russian classical language, cannot be avoided on this path..." (See G.O. Vinokur, *Maiakovskii - novator iazyka*, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, Munich, 1967, pp.3, 4) After Vinokur's death in 1947 a collection of his works was not published again in the Soviet Union until 1959, after Khrushchev's "secret speech" in condemnation of Stalin. But even in 1959, Vinokur on Mayakovsky was not redeemed in the Soviet Union: the *Selected Works on the Russian Language* (*Izbrannye raboty po russkому языку*, Moscow, 1959) did not include *Mayakovsky As An Innovator of Language* or his earlier articles on *A Cloud in Trousers* and on the work of Lef. This speaks to the lasting impact of the post-war period's identification of the Soviet state with static traditions and with the elimination of historical change, even after Stalin's death.

110. L.Timofeev, 1950/51, pp.228, 278, as described in Menzel, 1992, p.234-5
111. *Vladimir Maiakovskii. Sobranie sochinenii v chetyrekh tomakh*, volume 1, Moscow 1936; introduction by I.K. Luppol, p.25
112. Report of the conference in *Literaturnaia gazeta*, January 22, 1953; also see Menzel, 1992, pp.232-3, for her treatment of this episode
113. V. Shcherbina, "Za pravdivoe osveshchenie tvorchestva Maiakovskogo," *Pravda* March 25, 1951
114. Maslin, 1949, p.138-9

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2. ibid, p.51
3. See Menzel, 1992, pp.240-250
4. "Za marksistskoe osveshchenie tvorchestva V.V. Maiakovskogo," *Pravda*, March 2, 1953
5. ibid.
6. ibid.
7. M.Ya. Golberg, "Sovietskaia deistvitel'nost' v lirike V.V. Maiakovskogo, 1925-1930," Avtoreferat, Khar'kovskii Gosudarstvennyi Universitet imeni A.M. Gorkogo, Khar'kov, 1954, p.23

8. *Literaturnaia gazeta*, July 18, 1953
9. Zinovii Papernyi, *O masterstve Maiakovskogo*, Moscow, 1953, p.108
10. Chertok, p.47
11. E. Usievich, *Vladimir Maiakovskii*, Moscow, 1950, p. 255
12. Valentin Pluchek, "The New Drama" in *Vladimir Mayakovsky: Innovator*, an English-language Progress publication, Moscow, 1976, p.94-5
13. ibid, p.95-6
14. Chertok, p.47
15. ibid.
16. Pluchek, in *Vladimir Mayakovsky: Innovator*, p.104
17. V. Sappak and V. Shitova, "Perechityvaia 'Klopa'," *Teatr*, 1955, No.8, p.96
18. V.I. Kozlovsky, *V. Maiakovskii: Posobie dlia uchitelei*, Moscow, 1955, p.69
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20. ibid, p.162
21. V. Ermilov, cited in Walter N. Vickery, *The Cult of Optimism*, Bloomington, 1963, p.44-5
22. Billington, p.572-3
23. From report in *Pravda*, December 16, 1954
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25. ibid, p.145
26. Chertok, p.46
27. A. Iashin, *Vtoroi s"ezd soiuza sovetskikh pisatelei, stenograficheskii otchet*, p.340
28. "Neizvestnoe stikhotvorenie Maiakovskogo (k vykhodu novogo Polnogo sobraniia sochinenii poeta)," *Novy Mir*, 1956 No.4 pp.59-62
29. Veniamin Kaverin, *Vtoroi s"ezd* , p. 168-9
30. V.A. Katanian, 1974, in *Druzhba narodov*, 1989 No.3, p.227
31. V.I. Kozlovsky, *V. Maiakovskii: Posobie dlia uchitelei*, Moscow, 1955, p. 3
32. ibid, p.10
33. ibid, p.160
34. ibid, p.138
35. E. I. Naumov ,*Seminarii po Maiakovskomu*, Leningrad, 1955
36. ibid, p.49-50
37. ibid, p.50
38. ibid, p.101

39. ibid, p.60. Volume two of Pertsov's work appeared in 1956; after the third volume appeared, the work as a whole was awarded the State Prize of the USSR and became the most authoritative literary biography of Mayakovskiy in the Soviet Union until the late eighties.
40. ibid, p.59
41. ibid, p.67
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47. ibid.
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88. ibid, 255-6
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95. In Karabchievsky, Moscow, 1990, p.2
96. "Beskonechnye kilometry detektivov. Koe-chto o deval'vatsii populiarnogo zhanra," and "Kak pogib Maiakovskii?" in *Literaturnaia gazeta*, April 12, 1989, both on p.3
97. V. Radzishevsky, "Kak pogib Maiakovskii?" *Literaturnaia gazeta*, March 29, 1989
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17. ibid, pp.213-14; in contrast, Carl Proffer recounted that Lili Brik herself told him of the existence of an illegitimate daughter, showed him letters written by Elly Jones to Mayakovsky in the twenties and a drawing of her by David Burliuk in 1925, and asked Proffer to find out the present name and location of the daughter; see Carl R. Proffer, *The Widows of Russia and Other Writings*, Ann Arbor, 1987 (written in 1984), pp.85-7. V.V. Katanian also claims that Lili herself made several efforts after Mayakovsky's death to locate both Elly Jones and the daughter in the U.S., soliciting the help of Burliuk and Roman Jakobson, but to no avail; see Katanian, 1997, p.345
18. Diadichev, in No.7, pp.218-19
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24. Vladimir Novikov, "Vladimir Maiakovskii i Vladimir Vysotskii," *Znamia*, 1993 No. 7, pp.200-4
25. *ibid*, p.204
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29. "Vasha liubovnaia lodka ne razob'etsia o byt, esli na ee bortu bytovaia tekhnika Siene," in *Kommersant*, 18, 1993, cited in Boym, 1994, p.282
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