

Vladimir Vladimirovich Maiakovsky

(7 July 1893 – 14 April 1930)

Katherine Lahti
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- BOOKS: *Ia!* [lithograph of manuscript] (Moscow: Privately printed, 1913); translated by Max Hayward and George Reavey as "I," in *The Bedbug and Selected Poetry*, edited, with an introduction, by Patricia Blake (New York: Meridian, 1960), pp. 52–59—comprises "Ia!" "Neskol'ko slov o moei zhene," "Neskol'ko slov o moei mame," and "Neskol'ko slov obo mne samom";
- Vladimir Maiakovsky: Tragediia* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo 1-go zhurnala russkikh futuristov, 1914); translated by Guy Daniels as *Vladimir Mayakovsky, A Tragedy*, in *The Complete Plays of Vladimir Mayakovsky*, with an introduction by Robert Payne (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1968), pp. 19–38;
- Oblako v shtanakh: Tetraptikh* (Petrograd: Privately printed, 1915; uncensored edition, Moscow: Asis, 19?); translated by Herbert Marshall as "The Cloud in Trousers," in *Mayakovsky and His Poetry*, edited by Marshall (London: Pilot Press, 1942; enlarged edition, Bombay: Current Book House, 1955), pp. 20–43;
- Fleita-pozvonochnik* (Petrograd: Vzial, 1916); translated by Hayward and Reavey as "The Backbone Flute," in *The Bedbug and Selected Poetry*, edited by Blake (New York: Meridian, 1960), pp. 110–131;
- Prostoe kak mychanie* (Petrograd: Parus, 1916);
- Voina i mir* (Petrograd: Parus, 1917); translated as "War and the World," in *Selected Works*, 3 volumes (Moscow: Raduga, 1985–1987), II: 27–54;
- Chelovek. Veshch'* (Moscow: ASIS, 1918); translated as "Man," in *Selected Works*, 3 volumes (Moscow: Raduga, 1985–1987), II: 55–80;
- Geroi i zhertvy revoliutsii* (Petrograd: Komissariat narodnogo prosveshcheniia, 1918);
- Misteriia-buff* (Petrograd: IMO, 1918); translated by George Rapall Noyes and A. Kaun as *Mystery-Bouffé*, in *Masterpieces of the Russian Drama*, edited, with an introduction, by Noyes (New York & London: Appleton, 1933);
- Vse sochinennoe Vladimirom Maiakovskim, 1909–1919* (Petrograd: IMO, 1919);



Vladimir Vladimirovich Maiakovsky (from Roberto Messina, *Majakovskij Artista*, 1993; Thomas Cooper Library, University of South Carolina)

- Sovetskaia azbuka* (Moscow: Privately printed, 1919);
- 150,000,000* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1921);
- Rasskaz o dezertire* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1921);

- Liubliu* (Moscow: VKhUTEMAS, 1922); translated by Hayward and Reavey as "I Love," in *The Bedbug and Selected Poetry*, edited by Blake (New York: Meridian, 1960), pp. 151-171;
- Maiakovskiy izdevaetsia* (Moscow: VKhUTEMAS, 1922);
- 13 let raboty*, 2 volumes (Moscow: VKhUTEMAS, 1922, 1923);
- Dlia golosa* (Berlin: RSFSR Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1923); translated by Peter France as *For the Voice*, in volume 2 of *For the Voice* [bilingual edition], 3 volumes (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000);
- Izbranniy Maiakovskiy* (Berlin & Moscow: Nakanune, 1923);
- Lirika* (Moscow: Krug, 1923);
- Stikhi revoliutsii* (Moscow: Krasnaia nov', 1923); enlarged as *Stikhi o revoliutsii* (Moscow: Krasnaia nov', 1923);
- Maiakovskiy ulybaetsia. Maiakovskiy smeetsia. Maiakovskiy izdevaetsia* (Moscow: Krug, 1923);
- Pro eto*, with illustrations by Aleksandr Mikhailovich Rodchenko (Moscow: LEF, 1923); translated by Marshall as "About This," in *Mayakovskiy*, edited by Marshall (London: Dobson, 1965), pp. 165-215;
- Solntse* (Moscow & St. Petersburg: Krug, 1923);
- 255 stranits Maiakovskogo* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1923);
- Von samogon!* (Moscow: Krasnaia nov', 1923);
- Obriady* (Moscow: Krasnaia nov', 1923);
- Skazka o dezertire, ustroivshemsia nedurnen'ko, i o tom, kakaiia uchast' postigla ego samogo i sem'iu shkurnika* (Moscow: Krasnaia nov', 1923);
- Ni znakhar', ni bog, ni angely boga,—krest'ianstvu ne podmoga* (Moscow: Krasnaia nov', 1923);
- Veshchi etogo goda* (Berlin: Nakanune, 1923);
- Maiakovskaia galereia* (Moscow: Krasnaia nov', 1923);
- Tkachi i priakhi, pora nam perestat' verit' zagranichnym baranam*, by Maiakovskiy and Nikolai Nikolaevich Aseev (Moscow: Trest Mossukno, 1924);
- Rasskaz o Klime, kupivshem krest'ianskii zaem, i o Prove, ne podumavshem o schast'e svoem*, by Maiakovskiy and Aseev (Moscow: Finansovaia gazeta, 1924);
- Rasskaz pro to, kak uznal Faddei zakon, zashchishchaiushchii rabochikh liudei*, by Maiakovskiy, Sergei Mikhailovich Tret'iakov, and Samuil Iakovlevich Adlivankin (Moscow: Trud i kniga, 1924); translated by Babette Deutsch and Avram Yarmolinsky as "The Tale of How Parfen Learned of the Law Protecting Workingmen," in *Russian Poetry: An Anthology* (New York: International Publishers, 1927);
- O Kurske, o komsomole, o mae, o polete, o Chaplina, o Germanii, o nefli, o 5 Internatsionale i o proch.* (Moscow: Krasnaia nov', 1924);
- Rasskaz o tom, putem kakim s bedoi upravilsia Akin*, by Maiakovskiy and Aseev (Moscow: Kooperativnoe izdatel'stvo, 1924);
- Dva stikhotvoreniia* (Moscow: [VKhUTEMAS], 1924);
- Vladimir Il'ich Lenin* (Leningrad & Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1925); translated by Herbert Marshall as "Vladimir Ilyich Lenin," in *Mayakovskiy*, edited by Marshall (London: Dobson, 1965), pp. 249-330;
- Tol'ko novoe* (Leningrad & Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1925);
- Skazka o Pete, tolstom rebenke, i o Sime, kotoryi tonkii* (Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii, 1925);
- Skazka pro kuptovu natsiiu, muzhika i kooperatsiiu*, by Maiakovskiy and Aseev (Moscow: Tsentrosoiuz, 1925);
- Amerikantsam dlia pamiati* (New York: New World Press, 1925);
- Pesni krest'ianam* (Moscow: Doloi negramotnost', 1925);
- Pesni rabochim* (Moscow: Doloi negramotnost', 1925);
- Letaiushchii proletarii* (Moscow: Aviaizdatel'stvo i Avia-khim, 1925);
- Otkrytie Ameriki* (New York: New World Press, 1925);
- Parizh* (Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii, 1925);
- Solntse v gostiakh u Maiakovskogo* (New York: New World Press, 1925);
- Chto takoe khorosho i chto takoe plokho?* (Moscow: Priboi, 1925); translated by P. Breslin as *What is Good and What is Bad?* in *Mayakovskiy and His Poetry*, edited by Herbert Marshall (London: Pilot Press, 1942; revised, 1945; enlarged edition, Bombay: Current Book House, 1955);
- Guliaem* (Leningrad: Priboi, 1926);
- Pervyi pervomai*, by Maiakovskiy and Aseev (Leningrad: Priboi, 1926);
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- Razgovor s fininspektorem o poezii* ([Tiflis]: Zakkniga, 1926); translated by Marshall as "Conversation with the Inspector of Taxes," in *Mayakovskiy and his Poetry*, edited by Marshall (London: Pilot Press, 1942; enlarged edition, Bombay: Current Book House, 1955), pp. 97-105;
- Sifilis* ([Tiflis]: Zakkniga, 1926);
- Ispaniia. Okean. Gavana. Meksika. Amerika.* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1926);
- Moe otkrytie Ameriki* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1926);

Izbrannoe iz izbrannogo (Moscow: Ogonek, 1926);
My i pradedy (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1927);
Istoriia Vlasa, lentsiia i lobotriasa (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1927);
Sobranie sochinenii, 10 volumes (Moscow & Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1927–1933);
Eta knizhechka pro moria i pro maiak (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1927);
Kak delat' stikhi? (Moscow: Ogonek, 1927); translated by G. M. Hyde as *How Are Verses Made?* (London: Cape, 1970);
Khorosho! Oktiabr'skaia poema (Moscow & Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1927); translated as "Fine!" in *Selected Works*, 3 volumes (Moscow);
Chto ni stranitsa, to slon, to l'vitsa (Tiflis: Zakkniga, 1928);
Kon'-ogon' (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1928);
No. s. (Novye stikhi) (Moscow: Federatsiia, 1928);
Prochti i katai v Parizh i Kitai (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1929);
Slony v komsomole (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1929);
Klop (Moscow & Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1929); translated by Hayward and Reavey as "The Bedbug," in *The Bedbug and Selected Poetry*, edited by Blake (New York: Meridian, 1960), pp. 239–303;
Shkol'nyi Maiakovsky, with an afterword and commentary by Osip Maksimovich Brik (Moscow & Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1929);
Kem byl'? (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1929);
Tuda i obratno (Moscow: Federatsiia, 1930);
Bez doklada ne vkhodit' (Moscow & Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1930);
Bania (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1930); translated by Daniels as "The Bathhouse," in *The Complete Plays of Vladimir Mayakovsky*, with an introduction by Robert Payne (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1968);
Groznyi smekh (Moscow: Gos. izd-vo khudozh. lit-ry, 1932);
Polnoe sobranie sochinenii Maiakovskogo, 13 volumes, edited by Lilia Iur'evna Brik (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1934–1938);
Polnoe sobranie sochinenii, 13 volumes (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1955–1961).

Editions in English: *Mayakovsky and His Poetry*, translated and edited by Herbert Marshall (London: Pilot Press, 1942); enlarged edition, London: Pilot Press / New York: Transatlantic Arts, 1945; enlarged edition, Bombay: Current Book House, 1955);

The Bedbug and Selected Poetry, translated by Max Hayward and George Reavey, edited by Patricia Blake (New York: Meridian, 1960);
Mayakovsky, translated and edited by Marshall (London: Dobson / New York: Hill & Wang, 1965);
The Complete Plays of Vladimir Mayakovsky, translated by Guy Daniels (New York: Touchstone, 1968);
Selected Works, 3 volumes (Moscow: Raduga, 1985–1987);
Listen!: Early Poems, 1913–1918, translated by Maria Enzensberger (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1991);
For the Voice, 3 volumes, translated by Peter France (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000).

PLAY PRODUCTIONS: *Vladimir Maiakovsky: Tragediia*, Petersburg, Teatr Luna-Park, 2 December 1913;
Misteriia-buff, Petrograd, Teatr Muzykal'noi dramy, 7 November 1918; revised, Moscow, Teatr RSFSR I, 1 May 1921;
Klop, Moscow, Teatr Meierkhol'da, 13 February 1929;
Bania, Leningrad, Teatr narodnogo doma, 30 January 1930; Moscow, Teatr Meierkhol'da, 16 March 1930.

PRODUCED SCRIPTS: *Ne dlia deneg rodivshis'ia*, motion picture, Neptun, 1918;
Baryshnia i khuligan, motion picture, Neptun, 1918;
Zakovannaia fil'moi, motion picture, Neptun, 1918.

OTHER: "Noch" and "Utro," in *Poshchechina obshchestvennomu vkusu* (Moscow: G. L. Kuz'min, 1912);
Sadok sudei. II, with contributions by Maiakovsky, Velimir Khlebnikov, Aleksei Eliseevich Kruchenykh, Benedikt Konstantinovich Livshits, Elena Genrikhovna Guro, and others (St. Petersburg: Zhuravl', 1913);
Trebnik troikh, with contributions by Maiakovsky, Khlebnikov, and David Davidovich Burliuk (Moscow: G. L. Kuz'min & S. D. Dolinsky, 1913);
Dokhlaia luna, with contributions by Maiakovsky, Khlebnikov, Kruchenykh, and Burliuk (Moscow: Gileia, 1913);
Moloko kobylyts, with contributions by Maiakovsky, Burliuk, Khlebnikov, Kruchenykh, Livshits, Aleksandra Aleksandrovna Ekster, Igor' Severianin, and Vasilii Vasil'evich Kamensky (Moscow: Gileia, 1914);
Rykaiushchii Parnas, with contributions by Maiakovsky, Burliuk, and others (St. Petersburg: Zhuravl', 1914);

Vzial: Baraban futuristov. Dekabr' 1915, with contributions by Maiakovsky, Khlebnikov, and Boris Leonidovich Pasternak, with woodcut illustrations by Burluk (Petrograd: Z. Solinsky, 1915).

As the so-called Poet of the Revolution, Vladimir Maiakovsky embodies the misfortunes and controversies of twentieth-century Russian history. He strove to invent a voice that was truly revolutionary; his poems read as exciting displays of verbal mastery. Yet, the bourgeoisie who had been shocked by his work before 1917 were replaced after the October Revolution by Communist government functionaries of more questionable taste, causing even more problems for the poet. Maiakovsky's suicide in 1930 at the age of thirty-six made the continuing arguments against him one-sided and somewhat moot. Five years later, in 1935, Joseph Stalin made a simple pronouncement, which he scribbled in the margins of a letter: "Maiakovsky was and remains the best and most talented poet of our Soviet epoch. Neglect of his memory is criminal." For the next fifty-six years official Soviet culture submissively held Maiakovsky up as the ideal Soviet poet; but—as the Soviets did with all the writers they used to their own ends—they remade Maiakovsky in their own image.

The idea that Maiakovsky was misrepresented by official Soviet culture has generated countercurrents in scholarship about him and his work. Strongest among these conflicting views is the myth of Maiakovsky as a romantic individual. His suicide at a relatively young age, his leftist idealism, and his love life—filled with unrequited passion—easily portray him as a romantic. In fact, this image of Maiakovsky was useful to official Soviet culture: it provided the public with an attractive romantic figure who, at the same time, directed the people's aspirations toward Communism. Furthermore, attempts to salvage Maiakovsky, as a romantic or otherwise, reinforced the notion that he required rescuing precisely because of his association with Soviet Communism. Although a new image of the poet has begun to emerge, especially in scholarship published after the fall of Communism in 1991, to this day discussions about Maiakovsky still degenerate quickly to old pro- and anti-Communist positions that dominated the critical approaches to him and his work during the Cold War.

Vladimir Vladimirovich Maiakovsky was born the youngest of three children on 7 July 1893 in the western Georgian village of Bagdadi to Russian parents—Vladimir Konstantinovich Maiakovsky and Aleksandra Alekseevna Maiakovskaia (née Pavlenko). A great lover of nature, Maiakovsky's father was a forest ranger, an official of the Russian government whose work took him to the wonders of the Caucasus Moun-

tains. Young Maiakovsky would occasionally accompany him on these trips. Maiakovsky's early childhood was spent playing in and around Bagdadi, where he picked up Georgian, the only foreign language he ever mastered. In 1902, at the age of nine, he entered a classical gymnasium in Kutaisi, a town near Bagdadi, where he excelled at his studies for the next four years. This rigorous introduction to the world of literature has generally been dismissed by critics, who tend to interpret Maiakovsky as a populist illiterate. His early education at home was marked by much reading and the recitation of verses under the tutelage and constant care of three women: his mother and his two older sisters, Ol'ga and Liudmila. Liudmila in particular influenced Maiakovsky in the visual arts and would bring leftist literature into their home. In February 1906 Vladimir Konstantinovich suddenly died from an infection as the result of a paper cut, leaving the young Maiakovsky alone with his sisters and mother.

That summer the family resettled in Moscow, a move of great consequence in Maiakovsky's career. Because Vladimir Konstantinovich died before his pension had been fully vetted, the family was forced to live on only ten rubles a month. They earned extra money in various ways, renting rooms in their apartments and making folk handicraft articles to sell. Although there is evidence of Maiakovsky's interest in revolutionary activity as a schoolboy in Georgia, his leftist activity gained full force in Moscow. At the age of fourteen, after abandoning most of his studies, he passed a test to join the Russian Social Democratic Party (Bolshevik faction) and soon found himself serving on its Moscow Committee. His work included agitating among workers and arranging for the printing and distribution of leaflets. In 1908 and 1909 he was arrested three times for his party activity. The first two arrests did not involve significant time in jail. The last arrest—for supposed involvement in a successful prison break of incarcerated women revolutionaries—resulted in eleven months in prison, five of them in solitary confinement. While in prison Maiakovsky read the work of newer poets, particularly Andrei Bely (Boris Nikolaevich Bugaev), and realized that he could write as well as they did. He started composing verses seriously during his time in jail. None of that earliest work, however, remains.

Upon his release in January 1910 Maiakovsky put his party work on hold and took up the visual arts. After a year and a half of preparatory tutoring he gained admission in 1911 to the prestigious Moscow Institute of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture. In "Pamiatneishaia noch'" (A Most Memorable Night), an entry in his autobiography, *Ia sam* (I, Myself, published in *13 let raboty* [Thirteen Years of Work], 1922–1923), Maiak-

ovsky describes befriending fellow student David Davidovich Burluk, an artist eleven years his senior who had already participated in noteworthy avant-garde exhibitions, including those by the Blaue Reiter (Blue Rider) group. They became friends during an evening walk in 1911, during which they discussed the future of Russian art. At the end of "Pamiatneishaia noch" Maiakovsky writes, "David had the ire of a master who had surpassed his contemporaries. I had the pathos of a socialist who knew that destruction of the old is inevitable. Russian Futurism was born."

No Russian group at this time tried to move Russian cultural history forward as openly and explicitly as did Maiakovsky's Russian Futurists. (As Vladimir Markov shows in his *Russian Futurism: A History* [1968], there were several "Russian Futurisms" at the time.) Maiakovsky and Burluk formed this group, which included Nikolai Davidovich and Vladimir Davidovich Burluk—brothers of David—as well as the poets Velimir Khlebnikov (Viktor Vladimirovich Khlebnikov), Aleksei Eliseevich Kruchenykh, Benedikt Konstantinovich Livshits, and Vasilii Vasil'evich Kamensky. They collaborated significantly with the poet and artist Elena Genrikhovna Guro, the musician Mikhail Vasil'evich Matiushin, and the artists Kazimir Severinovich Malevich, Mikhail Fedorovich Larionov, Natalia Sergeevna Goncharova, Aleksandra Aleksandrovna Ekster, and Vladimir Evgrafovich Tatlin. In 1911 and 1912 Maiakovsky hung his artwork with these and other artists in avant-garde exhibitions, but most importantly he became a published poet, discovered by Burluk. The story, reported in *Ia sam*, goes that he recited to Burluk verses that, Maiakovsky claimed, had been written by a friend. Upon hearing them Burluk responded, "Yeah, you wrote that yourself! You're a poetic genius!" Later, Burluk introduced Maiakovsky as his friend "the famous poet, Vladimir Maiakovsky," after which he told Maiakovsky, "Now go write, or you'll make me look like a fool."

Maiakovsky published his first poems, "Noch" (Night) and "Utro" (Morning), at the end of 1912 in the Futurist almanac, *Poshchecina obshchestvennomu vkusu* (A Slap in the Face of Public Taste). This collection began with the group's best-known manifesto, bearing the same title as the almanac and signed by Burluk, Kruchenykh, Maiakovsky, and Khlebnikov. The manifesto begins with an ecstatic, forward-looking summons, "To the readers of our New First Unexpected. Only we are the face of our Time. The horn of time resounds in our verbal art." It continues with the infamous lines for which the Futurists will never be forgiven, "The past is restrictive. The Academy and Pushkin are more unintelligible than hieroglyphics. Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and so on, and so forth,

В. Маяковский

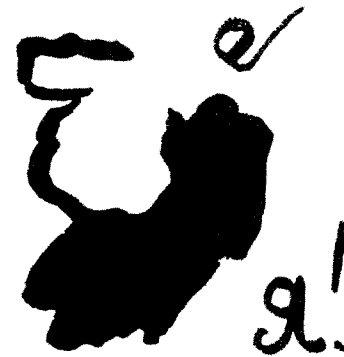


Рис. Теккрыгина и Л. Ш.

Paperback cover designed by Maiakovsky for Ia! (Me!), his 1913 poetry collection (from Roberto Messina, Majakovskij Artista, 1993; Thomas Cooper Library, University of South Carolina)

should be thrown off the deck of the Ship of Modernity." The bourgeoisie were duly shocked.

The Futurists educated the public in the ideas of their movement, mostly by giving evening lectures to which they charged admission. During 1913–1914 they put on many such evenings in Moscow and St. Petersburg, and they toured the provinces to bring their message to the broadest audience. People came to be entertained and scandalized by the Futurists' antics, which included appearing on stage with a piano hanging upside down above them or pouring tea on the audience. Yet, if one takes notice of what they were saying beyond the catcalls, one finds only a rather ordinary theory of artistic evolution. Citing Charles Darwin, they would make the point that as humanity changes over time and with humanity so, too, does art change. They used the fact of evolution to justify their new, avant-garde art and to support their claim that they were helping to move history along. Another issue that Maiakovsky and the Futurists tackled in their lectures and published essays was how to define the material features of the various arts: what is a word, what is the stuff of theater, what is film? This emphasis on the material side of art marked Futurist artistic creation and is a defining characteristic of Maiakovsky's work.

The Futurists published other almanacs, which bore spirited titles such as *Sadok sudei. II* (A Trap for

Judges. No. 2, 1913), *Trebnik troikh* (The Missal of Three, 1913), *Dokhlaiia luna* (The Croaked Moon, 1913), *Moloko kobylyts* (Mares' Milk, 1914), and *Rykaiushchii Parnas* (Roaring Parnassus, 1914). Maiakovsky's early poetry first appeared in these almanacs. In 1913 he published his first collection, *Ia!* (Me!, 1913), which encompasses four poems, "Ia!," "Neskol'ko slov o moei zhene" (A Few Words About My Wife), "Neskol'ko slov o moei mame" (A Few Words About My Mom), and "Neskol'ko slov obo mne samom" (A Few Words About Me Myself). Maiakovsky drew the cover design for *Ia!* The rest of the book was illustrated by Vasili Nikolaevich Chekrygin and Lev Fedorovich Zhegin (son of the well-known architect Fedor Shekhtel'), two of his friends from the Moscow Institute of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture. Chekrygin wrote out Maiakovsky's poems by hand, an approach that not only allowed for innovative textual presentation but also created graphic unity with the illustrations.

In the standard interpretation of Maiakovsky's early Futurist years, he is an innovator who, in accordance with the beliefs of Italian Futurism, hated the old ways and strove to embody the new technological age by siding with loud machines and other somewhat violent achievements of modern industry. The poems he published during these early years display much innovation. He combined the visual arts and poetry in new ways: he wrote about painting; he presented his poems in graphically inventive ways by splitting a line or even splitting words into syllables conveyed in consecutive lines—a technique that broke the line or word as a cubist painting might "break" its subject. Maiakovsky's early poems read like cubist canvases in that they approach an object from different points of view and juxtapose unexpected objects. Furthermore, Maiakovsky was a master at creating new words. Unlike the other Futurists who wrote in a nonsense language called *zaum'* (language beyond sense), Maiakovsky constructed neologisms from known Russian morphemes that made sense when put together. Adjectives such as *mnogolobaia* ("multi-browed"), *shoferiia* ("driver-ness"), or *bykomordaia* ("bull-snouted"), found in his early poems, definitely have meaning, although the words are strange. Equally surprising were the explosions of euphony that Maiakovsky deployed. Rhymes in his early poetry are powerful and unexpected: *serdtsa-teret'sa*; *poimat'-driaxluuu mat'*; and *boloto-kto-to*. Moreover, these poems display endless internal rhymes, alliterations, and other euphonic features that are best described as "punning." From early childhood Maiakovsky displayed a proclivity to pun. Once while watching a movie in a theater, young Maiakovsky loudly renamed one of the dancers in a motion picture; Rita Sasheto became "Sita Resheto." "Sita" and "resheto"

are two Russian words for different types of sieves. One finds this kind of intense punning in his 1913 "Iz ulitsy v ulitsu" (From Street to Street; published in *Poshchchina obshchestvennomu vkusu*), which begins "Ulitsa. Litsa u dogov godov rezche. Cherez. . ." Each word repeats the sounds of the last but in a different order. Because of this elaborate verbal technique, Maiakovsky's readers were easily lost in a sea of sound (a common complaint). The early poems also display a comfort with street language (and subjects) that shocked many readers. The verses display an urban tone—rough, blunt, and loud but different from the "tra-tra-tra" of Italian Futurists in their attempt to sound like machines.

In fact, in their first years Maiakovsky's Futurists did not know much about the Italian Futurists. His group initially called itself Gileia (after "Hylaea"), the Greek name for an area near the Black Sea, where ancient Greeks intermingled with barbarian Scythian tribes (as Herodotus describes in his *Histories*). The Burliuks' father managed Chernianka, a beautiful estate in this area, where the family hosted Maiakovsky and other Russian avant-gardists to experience the land and uncover the primitive secrets it held—sometimes literally, in archaeological excavations of Scythian ruins there. Maiakovsky's Futurists took much from their imagined Scythian ancestors, including the titles of their almanacs (such as *Moloko kobylyts*) and the forms used in their art. In reviving the art of savage and primitive cultures, their early work was actually the exact opposite of "Futurism" as the term is commonly understood. The group's Futurism thus became deeply complicated as their work strove to bring on the future by reviving the most distant past. Yet, envisioning a future Russian culture that would have commonalities with cultures of ancient, even primitive, societies was something in which many Russian art movements were engaged at the time—including the Symbolists, the supposed arch-enemies of the Futurists.

Maiakovsky himself adopted the persona of a barbarian primitive. For instance, in his openly rude poem "Nate!" (Take that! written 1913, first published in *Rykaiushchii Parnas*, 1914), he calls himself a "crude Hun." In private he was a rather polite person, but in public he dressed and acted like a brute. He wore his hair long for a while and purposely went about in unfashionable (yet good-looking) clothes—such as his famous black-and-yellow-striped blouse, which became a kind of signature for him and inspired his lyric "Kofta fata" (A Fop's Blouse, first published in *Pervyi zhurnal russkikh futuristov* [The First Russian Futurist Journal], 1914). The blouse had been sewn by his sisters, who might have been inspired by striped prison garb, folk parade costume, or even the fashion of the British

Romantics. In their public antics Maiakovskiy and the other Hylaeans painted their faces as savages were known to do (adding top hats), and instead of flowers they sported brightly painted wooden spoons, emblems of Russian folk art, on their lapels.

By far the most dominant primitive element of Maiakovskiy's early work is its oral quality. For him at this time, poetry existed as sound, not as the written word. According to legend, Maiakovskiy did not own a pencil during his first years as a poet, and in fact there are no manuscript versions of many of his early poems. Whether he used a pencil or not, Maiakovskiy intentionally wrote as if he could not write. The strong euphony of his first works renders sound dominant. The rhythm of his verses also reveals a predilection for what is oral. Maiakovskiy disregarded academic verse structure. He claimed not to know the difference between a dactyl and a trochee. While he was able to, and did, create poems that followed classical Russian verse meter, his work tended toward what is called purely tonic verse—a meter used in Russian folk poetry that allows for a varied number of unstressed syllables between each stressed one. The result is a reemphasis of stress, which nevertheless is a strong feature in Russian phonology and was a natural for Maiakovskiy, who would loudly declare his verses in his booming velvety voice—by all accounts beautiful to hear. This dominant oral element managed to fool critics of Maiakovskiy into treating him as a genuine illiterate, although memoirs of him brim with accounts of him lying in bed reading or eagerly talking about something he had recently read.

When Maiakovskiy began writing poetry, it was largely a performed genre, as it was for people of so-called primitive, oral cultures who composed lines of verse. In the texts of his poems audiences are almost always implied, if not referred to directly, and examples can be found in the pure effrontery to his listeners in "Nate!" and the lascivious appeal to the women in his audience in "Kofta fata." In the latter poem and elsewhere he adopts the role of the audience's leader in an imagined common performance. In homage to the Archaic Greek tradition Maiakovskiy depicts his verses as accompanied by intoxication, against a backdrop of flute music. In these cases he poses as a Dionysian-type poet, similar to what the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche described in advocating a revival of the Archaic Greek Dionysian spirit in his 1872 *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik* (The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music, 1872; translated as *The Birth of Tragedy*, 1909), an extremely popular work in Russia in the first decades of the twentieth century.

In 1913 the Futurists, as they were finally calling themselves, turned to theater. Using only amateur actors to give the performances an edge, the Futurists



Frontispiece for Maiakovskiy's *Fleita-pozvonochnik* (*The Backbone Flute*, 1916), a long love poem addressed to Liliia (Lily) Iur'evna Brik (from Roberto Messina, *Majakovskij Artista*, 1993; Thomas Cooper Library, University of South Carolina)

produced Maiakovskiy's *Vladimir Maiakovskiy: Tragediia* (Vladimir Maiakovskiy: A Tragedy; published in 1914) and an opera, *Pobeda nad solntsem* (Victory over the Sun), with libretto by Kruchenykh and music by Matiushin, in St. Petersburg in December 1913 on four alternate evenings. Maiakovskiy's tragedy featured innovative two-dimensional costumes and abstract backdrops by Pavel Nikolaevich Filonov and Iosif Solomonovich Shkol'nik. Malevich designed the sets and costumes for *Pobeda nad solntsem*. The performances produced a furor in the press, which by then was used to being scandalized by the Futurists. Yet, behind the befuddled newspaper reviews one can see in this tragedy and opera a Futurist attempt to complete what is called the "Nietzschean-Wagnerian project"—a popular effort in Russian culture at that time to revive something elemental and musical in the theater, as outlined in *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik* and the theoretical works of Richard Wagner.

Vladimir Maiakovsky: Tragediia was the zenith of Maiakovsky's Dionysianism. Inspired by *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik* and the theoretical works of Nietzsche's Russian followers, such as the Symbolist Viacheslav Ivanovich Ivanov, the play reconstructs two early phases of the Archaic Greek dithyramb, the primitive precursor to tragedy. In this reconstruction of the birth of tragedy Maiakovsky included several characteristics of the dithyramb: he reaffirms life through violent death; he has a poet lead the performance; and he unites all the performers, who share features of the god Dionysus—particularly the feature of dismemberment. The first act of the play is violent and takes place in the north, dominated by a fifteen-foot papier-mâché, primitive-looking dummy of a woman, suggesting a "kamennaia baba" (primitive stone woman) of the sort that the Burliuks found in their excavations at Chernianka. The second act, which takes place in Greece with Maiakovsky wearing a toga, is "boring" according to the stage directions. The poet Maiakovsky is unhappy in Greece and returns to the north at the end of the play. The play thereby takes a proprietary position: even ancient Greece is too advanced—better to live in the primitive north.

After mastering the long form in his tragedy, Maiakovsky began his next long work, *Oblako v shtanakh: Tetraptikh* (A Cloud in Trousers: A Tetraptich, 1915), in the spring of 1914 while continuing the Futurist poetry and lecture circuit. On 18 July 1914 (1 August) Russia declared its participation in World War I. In commemoration of this event Maiakovsky quickly wrote a poem, "Voina ob"iavlena" (War is Declared), which was published in *Novaia zhizn'* (New Life) in August. He wrote many other poems about the war and its horrors. During the war he also made propagandistic *lubki*—traditional, folksy equivalents of English broadsides. He and other avant-gardists wrote catchy patriotic verses for the *lubki* and illustrated them. Maiakovsky was eventually drafted in October 1915 but managed to avoid combat by serving as a draftsman for the Petrograd Automobile School.

In the spring of 1915 he began writing openly satirical, occasional verse—such as the cycle of humorous "hymns" that was published that year in Arkadii Timofeevich Averchenko's journal *Novyi Satirikon* (New Satyricon). That year he summered in the Finnish town of Kuokkala in the company of various cultural luminaries, such as Kornei Ivanovich Chukovsky, Maksim Gor'ky (Aleksii Maksimovich Peshkov), and Il'ia Efimovich Repin. In Finland he also made the acquaintance of Osip Maksimovich Brik and his wife, Liliia (Lily) Iur'evna Brik. Maiakovsky quickly began an affair with Lily Brik, who became the great love of his life. Shortly after becoming acquainted with the couple,

he read them his *Oblako v shtanakh*, and, enthralled with the long poem, the Briks took it upon themselves to publish it that fall. Generally considered one of Maiakovsky's masterpieces, *Oblako v shtanakh* is 724 lines long and bears the religious subtitle *Tetraptikh*—appropriate to a poem originally titled *Trinadtsatyi apostol* (Thirteenth Apostle) and depicting the passions of the poet. In the introduction to the uncensored 1918 edition of the poem, Maiakovsky explained the four parts of the poem as "Down with your love," "Down with your art," "Down with your society," and "Down with your religion." In the first part the poet is waiting in his room for a certain Mariia, and his anticipation mounts as he imagines love. She arrives late and expresses her simple refusal, "You know, I'm getting married." This rejection sends the poet into a literal heat; the section ends with "At least, your very last cry, groan out to the ages, that I am burning." The second part treats the passion of the poet's work. It begins, "Glorify me!," but he somewhat ungloriously describes the poetic task as "walking for a long time, getting all callused from wandering, and the stupid *vobla* of imagination quietly flops around in muck of the heart." A *vobla* is a kind of inelegant fish, and in Russian the phrase reads "vobla vobrazheniia" (*vobla* of imagination), which shows the continuing, powerful euphony of Maiakovsky's verse. In *Oblako v shtanakh* he counters the Romantic topoi of poetic creation by comparing an exalted process—the creation of poetry—to a humiliating or clumsy act, something that involves a fish flopping. In fact Maiakovsky did pace when composing his poems, and that summer in Kuokkala his friends witnessed him wandering and muttering along the seashore. In the third part of *Oblako v shtanakh* the poet summons the people to take up "a stone, a knife, or a bomb," but the section ends on a less social note with the poet calling himself the thirteenth apostle and saying "perhaps, Jesus Christ is sniffing the forget-me-nots of my soul." The fourth and last part begins with the call "Mariia! Mariia! Mariia!" Here, whether the poet is lusting after the Mariia from the date or Mary, the mother of Christ, is not clear. All the sections of the verse address closely the task of the poet and present an original, quasi-religious cosmology. Two overarching themes, which later became commonplace in Maiakovsky's verse, are the poet as martyr and the passion of unrequited love.

In the fall of 1915 Maiakovsky stayed in Petrograd to be near the Briks. His relationship with Lily deepened. According to the critic Viktor Shklovsky, she was "beautiful . . . she knew how to be sad, feminine, capricious, proud, shallow, fickle, in love, clever and any way you like." Her husband, Osip Brik, was a literary critic, active in a Formalist group, *Obshchestvo*

izucheniia poeticheskogo iazyka, or OPOIaZ, and absolutely loved Maiakovsky—who eventually moved in with them. The three became a close family that stayed together until the end of Maiakovsky's life. Lily, who cherished jewelry and fashion, convinced Maiakovsky to change his look, bathe regularly, and wear respectable clothes. In December 1915 the Briks published an almanac, *Vzial*, which included three pieces by Maiakovsky—including part of the long poem he had written that fall. *Fleita-pozvonochnik* (translated as "The Backbone Flute," 1916) is a long, passionate love lyric addressed to Lily, the first of many that Maiakovsky would write over the years combining the pain of unrequited love with the pain of being a great poet. She may or may not have returned Maiakovsky's love, but whatever affection she gave him was never enough. For Maiakovsky, love and the creation of poetry were always painful pursuits.

In 1916 Gor'ky's publishing house Parus put out Maiakovsky's second single-author collection, *Prostoe kak mychanie* (Simple as Mooing). Maiakovsky continued writing a wide variety of poems that year and read them before private and public audiences. He published several small pieces (most of them satirical) and worked on two long poems, *Voina i mir* (War and the World, 1917) and *Chelovek. Veshch'* (Man, 1918). *Voina i mir* is actually a pun. Besides meaning "world" in Russian, *mir* can also denote "peace"; thus the title recalls Leo Tolstoy's classic novel. The poem is also reminiscent of Tolstoy's novel in terms of its length and thematic expanse: it comprises 1,056 lines, gives critical treatment to the violence of war, and broadly addresses issues of world geography, history, and international politics. As in his other longer poems, Maiakovsky makes much of his tortured poetic persona and brings in religious themes. *Voina i mir* is interspersed with sung music, which is represented in print by bars of notes that return the poem to its base in sound. *Chelovek* is divided into sections titled "Nativity of Maiakovsky," "Life of Maiakovsky," "Passions of Maiakovsky," "Ascension of Maiakovsky," "Maiakovsky in Heaven," "The Return of Maiakovsky," and "Maiakovsky for the Ages." The poem lays to rest any doubts that Maiakovsky saw a Christological parallel in his suffering. He uses familiar biblical language and stories, but in *Chelovek*, as in his other poems, God is not the unimaginable entity of Russian Orthodoxy. Rather, he is quite tangible; in the poem he has three little hairs that poke out from under a ring on one of his fingers. The depiction of God in this way did not qualify as profanity for Maiakovsky, who in this poem chooses to leave heaven to return to the material world. He says, "I am for the heart, and where do the incorporeal have their hearts?"



Poster for Maiakovsky's movie *Zakovannaia fil'moi* (*Shackled by Film*, 1918), in which he and Lily Brik starred (from Roberto Messina, *Majakovskij Artista*, 1993; Thomas Cooper Library, University of South Carolina)

Maiakovsky welcomed the "bourgeois" revolution of February 1917. He spent the days of this revolution in Petrograd in a mood of great excitement, even running from one shooting battle to another, and in April 1917 he finished a long poem about this experience, which was published in Gor'ky's newspaper *Novoia zhizn'* in 1917. *Revoliutsiia: Poetokhronika* (Revolution: A Poet's Chronicle) is filled with the sounds, sights, and excitement of the event: "Everywhere flame-tongues. Soaring, then sprawling. Soaring anew, with sparks wide-brushing." That same spring he produced some radical *lubki* as well. Maiakovsky's collaboration with Gor'ky intensified, and in April he was invited to join the staff of *Novoia zhizn'*. Maiakovsky's response to Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky's palace coup in October, an event that was later called the Great October Soviet Socialist Revolution, was a combination of joy and shock. According to Vasiliu Katanian's *Maiakovsky: Literaturnaia Khronika*, Iakov Zakharovich Cherniak recalled meeting Maiakovsky while the revo-

lution was going on: "I once saw Maiakovsky frightfully agitated. It was in 1917 at the height of the October days. . . . Maiakovsky spoke almost with tears in his eyes about the great spectacle of a union of workers and peasants. He was frightfully agitated." In November, shortly after the revolution, Maiakovsky was invited to the Smol'nyi headquarters of the new government to talk about cooperation and possible ways to organize the new arts. Thus began the activity that dominated Maiakovsky's life after 1917: the attempt to define art of the new socialist age—an effort that ultimately failed.

Late in 1917 Maiakovsky returned to Moscow, where his Futurist collaborators Kamensky and Burliuk had founded the Kafe poetov (Poets' Café) in an old laundry on Nastas'insky Lane. The midnight performances attended by soldiers and other rough types were rowdy affairs. At the Kafe poetov Maiakovsky and the other Futurists played at their old game of offending the audience in a revolutionary environment—which was full of daily violence anyway. Maiakovsky's main activity during the spring of 1918 was to write the scripts for, and star in, three motion pictures, all of which were released that same year: *Ne dlia deneg rodivshisia* (Not Born for Money), *Baryshnia i khuligan* (The Young Lady and the Hooligan), and *Zakovannaia fil'moi* (Shackled by Film). In *Ne dlia deneg rodivshisia* he performs the role of a young worker, Ivan Nov, who becomes a famous poet and falls in love with a rich girl but, disappointed by people's infatuation with money, decides to return to his worker's life. *Baryshnia i khuligan* presents Maiakovsky as an illiterate roughneck who falls in love with his schoolteacher, ~~played by Lily Brik.~~ In *Zakovannaia fil'moi* he falls in love with a ballerina—played by Lily—from a movie. She steps out of the screen but soon returns to it, and the movie ends with Maiakovsky on a train to the *kinematograficheskaia strana* (land of motion pictures). In all three movies he proves himself a master of screenplay writing and a superb actor.

In March 1918 the new Futurists published the first and only issue of an arts newspaper, *Gazeta Futuristov* (Futurists' Newspaper). It featured a "Dekret No. 1 o demokratizatsii iskusstv" (Decree No. 1 on the Democratization of the Arts), a rather optimistic piece about how Communism brings art into everyone's life, both as a creator and consumer. The newspaper also featured Maiakovsky's first post-October poem "Nash marsh" (Our March), a raucous revolutionary piece that begins "Pound in the squares your stomp of mutiny!" At the same time Burliuk hung his canvases on Kuznetsky Most, a busy Moscow street. Yet, the attempts to bring art to the people by performing at a nightclub, making a few movies, and putting paintings

up in the street were on too small a scale. In June, Maiakovsky returned to Petrograd, where big political battles over the arts were being fought.

In the fall of 1918 Maiakovsky and Osip Brik went to work for the Otdel izobrazitel'nykh iskusstv pri Narodnom kommissariate prosveshcheniia (Figurative Arts Division of the People's Commissariat for Enlightenment), known as the IZO Narkompros; its two newspapers, *Iskusstvo* (Art) and *Iskusstvo Kommuny* (Art of the Commune), featured polemical articles about the future of art in the new Russia. Maiakovsky, Osip Brik, and the other members of IZO were ready to dictate culture: they had solid leftist credentials (unlike many of their enemies who had conveniently turned Communist once it became clear that the Communists were in power), and they had always defined their work as the art of the future. The members of IZO were battling with other cultural bureaucrats who did not care for avant-garde art and who regularly made the accusation "The masses don't understand you." Partially as a result, Maiakovsky had great difficulty getting his revolutionary play *Misteriia-buff* (Mystery-Bouffe, 1918) produced. The play, directed by the avant-garde director Vsevolod Emil'evich Meierkhol'd, premiered in Petrograd on November 7 for the first anniversary of the October Revolution and quickly closed. True to its title, *Misteriia-buff* is a combination mystery-play and buffoonery. In it two groups of people, the clean and the unclean, battle things out. The clean are a compendium of non-Communist rulers, including an Indian raja, a fat Frenchman, and a German officer. The unclean are members of the international proletariat who consign their enemies to hell but who themselves prefer the earthly workers' paradise to heaven.

In the fall of 1918 Maiakovsky began to take his case directly to the workers in an attempt to circumvent official enemies of avant-garde art. Accompanied by other members of IZO, he regularly read his poems before workers at factory meetings and in other less formal environments. In January 1919 members of the IZO group established "Kom fut," an organization for members of the Communist Party dedicated to the fight against the influence of the old in the art of the future—the new art. In their "Program Declaration" that came out in *Iskusstvo kommuny*, they declare, "Under the guise of immutable truths, the masses are being presented with the pseudo teachings of the gentry." Kom fut did not turn out to be a successful organization. In fact *Iskusstvo kommuny* was closed in March 1919, at which point Maiakovsky and the Briks moved to Moscow, where he and Osip Brik worked for the Moscow branch of Narkompros.

The battle lines were drawn: in May 1919 even Lenin called the avant-garde work of the "Futurists" (as

the IZO people were known) "a most ridiculous affectation." IZO was also struggling against another group, the Proletkul't, which took its members only from the ranks of the proletariat and whose work generally strove to imitate the bourgeois work that had gone on previously. In the fall of 1919 Maiakovsky left the culture wars for a while and devoted himself to designing satirical posters for ROSTA (Rossiiskoe telegrafnoe agentstvo), the Russian Telegraph Agency. The posters, made during 1919–1921, featured cartoonish paintings accompanied by short verses, in which he used forms from popular folk ditties in order to make the posters meaningful to the masses. In this art form Maiakovsky was again able to combine his poetry with his painting, and the well-known images from the ROSTA posters came to stand for him and his work as a Russian Futurist.

Working for Narkompros and ROSTA, Maiakovsky wrote relatively few short verses in the years immediately after the revolution, but he was nonetheless engaged in a diverse array of poetic projects. In 1919 he produced his *Sovetskaia azbuka* (A Soviet Alphabet), a work of hand-painted images. In the spring of 1920 he finished the long poem *150,000,000* (1921), the title of which refers to the population of the Soviet Union. *150,000,000* is meant to be understood as a collective work with no author; at the beginning of the poem Maiakovsky writes, "150,000,000 speak with my lips." In the same year, he wrote a piece, titled "Championat vseмирnoi klassovoi bor'by" (The Championship of Worldwide Class Warfare, published in 1935 in *Literaturnaia gazeta*), for the clown Vitalii Efimovich Lazarenko to perform at the circus. He also began writing for a working-class audience and produced simple pieces such as *P'eska pro popov, koi ne ponimaiut, prazdnik chto takoe* (A Little Play about Priests Who Don't Get What Kind of Holiday This Is, written 1920; first published in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, volume 2 [1956]) and the fable-like poem "Skazka o dezertire, ustroivshemsia nedurnen'ko, i o tom, kakaia uchast' postigla ego samogo i sem'iu shkurnika" (A Tale about a Deserter Who Set Himself Up Real Good and about What Kind of End the Skunk and His Family Came To), which first appeared in *Rasskaz o dezertire* (A Story about a Deserter, 1921). Written in a language they could relate to, these plays and poems were intended for workers and peasants. In the spring of 1921, after much effort, Maiakovsky premiered a second version of *Misteriia-buff*, an extremely controversial avant-garde production, again directed by Meierkhol'd.

All the while, Maiakovsky continued to give public readings of his poems as well as lectures on the future he envisioned for Russian art, poetry, and theater. He took his fight to the provinces and directly

appealed to the people of his country. Attempting to speak for the new Communist era in 1922, he published two long poems dedicated to the Fourth and Fifth Internationales. That same year, making his first long trip abroad, Maiakovsky went to Berlin and Paris, where he visited the studios of renowned artists such as Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, and Fernand Léger. In Berlin he collaborated on a collection of his poems, *Dlia Golosa* (For the Voice, 1923), with the artist El Lisitsky (Lazar' Markovich Lisitsky). Printed with an innovative tab for each poem, *Dlia Golosa* presents each verse with a startling collage of words and images in red and black, often printed in dynamic diagonal lines.

After his return from the West, Maiakovsky published a series of poems about his impressions of Berlin and Paris. In the spring of 1923 he and a group of like-minded artists and writers founded LEF, an acronym for Levyy front iskusstv (Left Front of the Arts), which began publishing, in March of that year, a journal under the same name. Their manifesto reads, "LEF shall unite a front to blow up the old, to fight for the encirclement by a new culture." In the first issue of the journal *Lef*, Maiakovsky published the long poem *Pro eto* (About This); in June 1923 it came out in book form as well, illustrated with collages by Aleksandr Mikhailovich Rodchenko. The energetic collages display cut-out photos of Lily—one could even say that the poem is about her. Yet, it is also about Maiakovsky's relation to life in general as well as about the present and future of the new regime. Relations with his lover had always been troubled, but at the time of the writing of *Pro eto* they had reached a low point: she had thrown Maiakovsky out and was refusing to see him.

Since World War I, Maiakovsky had shown himself to be adept at writing poems on demand. In the fall of 1923 he started writing advertising copy for such commercial enterprises as Mossel'prom, Gosudarstvennyi universal'nyi magazin (GUM, State Department Store), and Rezinotrest, which again gave him the opportunity to combine the visual and the verbal. Some critics assess these little slogans as Maiakovsky's best poetry, and in fact the images and ditties from the ads turned into some of his most celebrated work. Beyond his assignments in commercial advertising, much of Maiakovsky's poetic production during this time consisted of political agitational-propagandistic verses with titles such as "Krest'ianin—pomni o 17-m aprelia" (Peasant—Remember April 17th, 1923) or "Proch' ruki ot Kitaia!" (Take Your Hands off China!, 1924). Critics commonly divide Maiakovsky's poetry into his political, topical verses (written because of the so-called societal mandate) and his lyrical verses (which are often about love). Yet, the political poems show a great range: he wrote a long, high-styled paean to Lenin;

funny political satire; simple verses with illustrations (such as a poem for peasants on how to avoid cholera; children's poems with political subtexts; occasional poems for events such as the building of a canal; political poems meant to influence—not commemorate—political decisions); political pamphlets; movie scenarios; plays; and, of course, highly experimental works such as his "Championat vseмирnoi klassovoi bor'by" for performance in the circus. His love poems and even his advertisements showed political concern. *Pro eto* is as much about politics as it is about love; one advertisement for rubber galoshes shows a hammer and sickle on the tread of a galosh.

Lenin died in January 1924. Maiakovsky attended the funeral on Red Square and later that year wrote a long poem about the Communist leader. *Vladimir Il'ich Lenin* (1925) was overwhelmingly successful: phrases from it became standard in the Soviet hagiography of Lenin, and schoolchildren under Communist rule memorized and recited from it. In the mid 1920s Maiakovsky continued to travel to cities of the Soviet Union, reading his poetry as well as lecturing on the new art. His pieces were often published in the provincial press. He made quite a few trips abroad, mostly to Germany and France, and eventually traveled to the United States.

On 4 June 1924 the Soviet Pavilion opened at the Paris Exhibition. Maiakovsky, who had been involved in planning the pavilion, was present and won a silver medal for his advertisement posters exhibited there. On 22 June he set sail for Mexico and arrived in Mexico City on 9 July; the painter Diego Rivera met him at the train station. After some trouble Maiakovsky managed to get a visa to the United States and arrived in New York on 30 July. Based in New York, where he was looked after by Burliuk, who had resettled there, Maiakovsky traveled to the Midwest. As a poet from the U.S.S.R., his appearances before American leftist groups were in high demand. He wrote poems and prose pieces about his trip to Mexico and the United States—notably "Bruklinskii most" (The Brooklyn Bridge, first published in the journal *Prozhektor M.*, 1925), a hymn of praise to this achievement of modern technology and industry. In New York, Maiakovsky fell in love with a Russian émigré, Elly Jones, who later bore him a daughter, Patricia Thompson. He sailed from New York on 28 October 1925 and, after stops in Paris and Berlin, was back in Moscow on 22 November. For months after his return he was engaged in reading and publishing his works about the United States, pieces that were largely critical of American capitalism and racism but that also—as in the case of "Bruklinskii most"—praised American industrial development.

In the spring of 1926 Maiakovsky published *Sergeiu Eseninu* (To Sergei Esenin). The poet Sergei Aleksandrovich Esenin had killed himself on 28 December 1925 in the Hotel Angleterre in Leningrad. His final poem, written in his own blood, concludes, "In this life it is nothing new to die, but living of course is not new either." Maiakovsky had long disdained Esenin, the premiere "peasant writer," and *Sergeiu Eseninu* brings the dead poet to task by retorting, "In this life dying isn't tough. To make a life is quite a bit tougher." He used passages from *Sergeiu Eseninu* to illustrate points in his essay *Kak delat' stikhi?* (1927; translated as *How Are Verses Made?*, 1970). A practical guide to poetry writing, the essay aims to make the production of verse a common activity in the new socialist state. From 1926 to the end of his life Maiakovsky kept his schedule of appearances packed, and traveled to cities and towns throughout the U.S.S.R. for poetry readings and lectures about art under Communism. All the while, he continued to publish his work in the provincial press. By the late 1920s he was reading his verse on the radio, a technological advancement that enabled him to expand his audience.

In 1927 the journal *Lef* was reorganized as *Novyi Lef* (New Lef). Maiakovsky used *Novyi Lef* as a soapbox for polemics about the course that Soviet art should take as well as a place to publish his new poetry. He was fighting a battle on two fronts: he toured the U.S.S.R. to make a direct appeal to the people, and he published and spoke in Moscow and Leningrad with an aim to influence the cultural masters of the new regime, whom he called the *kul'thantsevariia* (cult-chancellery). He was immensely popular with his audiences, but his attempts to influence the course of Soviet culture met with limited success. In the second issue of his journal *Novyi Lef* in February 1927, Maiakovsky retells an unfavorable discussion of his screenplay *Kak pozhiwaete?* (How are You?, written in 1926) that was held by the management of the movie studio Sovkino. At one point an attending secretary chimed in by saying, "Stsenarii neponiaten massam" (The masses can't understand your scenario). The accusation was a familiar one. After this event Maiakovsky wrote a poem titled "Massam neponiatno" (The Masses Don't Understand), published in *No. 1*, 1928, which begins, "Between the writer and the reader stand some middlemen, and the taste of the middleman is most middling."

Even his supporter, People's Commissar of Enlightenment Anatolii Vasil'evich Lunacharsky, in an article, "O sovremennykh napravleniiakh russkoi literatury" (On Contemporary Trends in Russian Literature), that was published in the journal *Krasnaia molodezh'* (Red Youth), requested that Maiakovsky tone down his verbal virtuosity, complaining, "His purely



One of many satirical posters designed by Maiakovsky for ROSTA, the Russian Telegraph Agency, between 1919 and 1921 (from Gerald Janeczek, *The Look of Russian Literature: Avant-Garde Visual Experiments, 1900–1930, 1984; Collection of Judith E. Kalb and J. Alexander Ogden*)

formal trinkets, tricks with words and rhymes that get superimposed onto extremely important topics . . . don't do the reader any good, and are some kind of tumor." The problem was that the verbal inventiveness on display even in Maiakovsky's most topical works distracted the reader from that very topic. In 1929 he was commissioned to write a poem for the journal *Krasnoe studenchestvo* (Red Students) as part of a campaign on behalf of students who were conducting hands-on work in various sectors of industry. "Teoretiki" (Theoreticians), which came out in *Krasnoe studenchestvo* in 1929, begins by describing an intellectual who is faced with a practical problem:

"I vdrug
v mashine
polimka prostaia, —
professorskie
vz" eroshit
priadi on,
i . . .
na polomku
uchenyi
rastaiav, smotrit tak
kak baran na radio

(And suddenly
in the machine
there's an ordinary breakdown,
the professorial
locks get mussed up:
and
the scholar
while wilting,
gazes
at the breakdown
just like
a ram at a radio).

Although the simile may be ancillary to the political message that practical knowledge should supplement theory, it seems to have a lot more to do with the ram, the radio, and the idiomatic phrase "smotret', kak baran na novye vorota" (to gaze like a ram at a new gate) that it skews. The same is true of the rhymes in the passage: the rhyming pairs "polomka prostaia" and "uchenyi rastaiav," as well as "priadi on" and "radio," are surprising and lively.

There was a political need to have an easily translatable literature to spread both abroad and to non-Russian-speaking peoples of the U.S.S.R. Yet, Maiakovsky's verbal display was, and continues to be, difficult to translate. Many members of the Soviet intelligentsia, making the common mistake of equating writing with language, presumed that workers and peasants have less of an ear for verbal play—the main feature of Maiakovsky's verse. The rejection was not a matter of ideology. More than two-thirds of the lines of poetry that he wrote during 1927–1930 were in commissioned, topical works in which he professed his deep belief in Soviet Communism. Particularly noteworthy is his long poem (it comprises 3,163 lines) commemorating the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution. *Khorosho! Oktiabr'skaia poema* (It's Good!: An October Poem, 1927) was well received by members of the Soviet intelligentsia and became an anthem for the revolution.

In October 1928 Maiakovsky again went to western Europe and met Elly and their daughter in Nice. Feeling threatened by Maiakovsky's new love and their little girl, Lily arranged to have her sister, Elsa Triolet, a Paris émigré, set Maiakovsky up with a Russian beauty, Tat'iana Alekseevna Iakovleva. The plan backfired. Instead of the affair that Lily envisioned would distract the poet from his American beloved, Maiakovsky and Tat'iana quickly and deeply fell in love. Maiakovsky's relationship with Tat'iana inspired his lyrical side for one last time, resulting in two completed poems, "Pis'mo Tat'iane Iakovlevoi" (A Letter to Tat'iana Iakovleva, written 1928), which was first published in *Novyi mir* in 1956, and "Pis'mo tovarishchu Kostrovu iz Parizha o sushchnosti ljubvi" (A Letter to Comrade Kostrov from Paris on



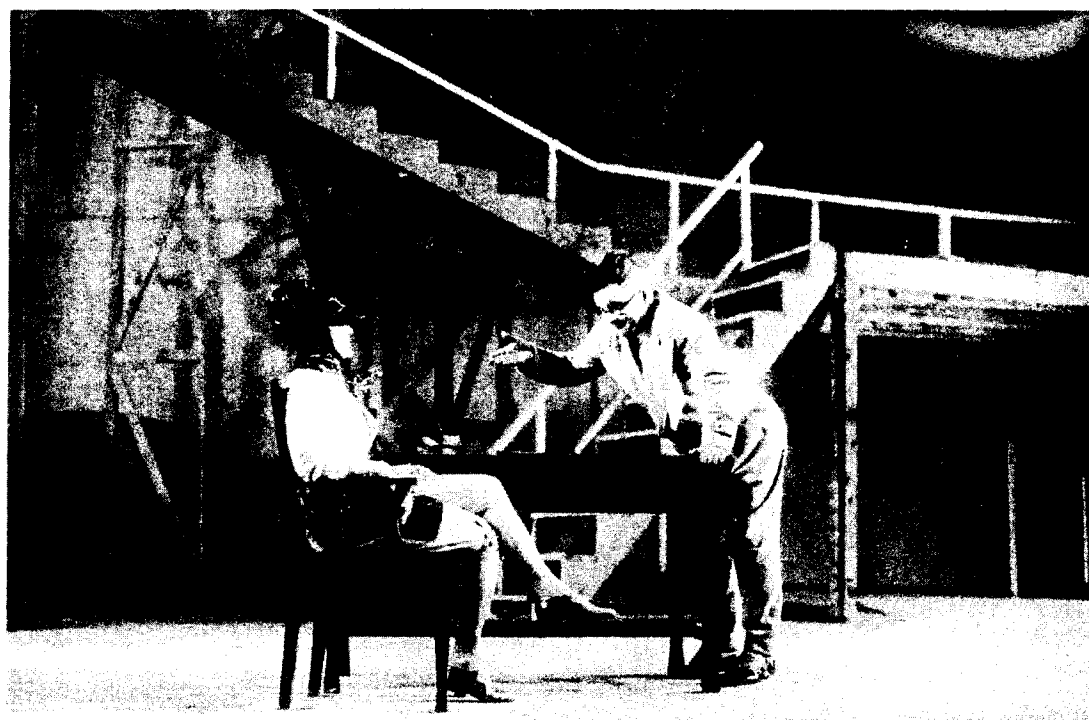
Maiakovsky (right) in 1929 with Lily Brik and her husband, Osip Maksimovich Brik (from Bengt Jangfeldt and Nils Åke Nilsson, eds., *Vladimir Majakovskij: Memoirs and Essays*, 1975; Thomas Cooper Library, University of South Carolina)

the *Essence of Love*, written 1928), first published in the journal *Molodaia gvardiia* in 1929. There are also several passionate letters and unfinished love poems to her. Maiakovsky went to Paris to be with Tat'iana again in the spring of 1929. They talked about one or the other emigrating so that they could be together, but after learning that Maiakovsky would not be able to return to Paris (at least not soon), she chose to marry the vicomte du Plessix, a French diplomat, in December 1929. When Maiakovsky found out about the marriage in early 1930, he was devastated.

In the last year of his life Maiakovsky made a major return to the theater. In February 1929 *Klop* (The Bedbug) premiered at the Teatr Meierkhol'da (Meierkhol'd Theater) in Moscow. Directed by Meierkhol'd, with sets and costumes by Rodchenko and music by Dmitrii Dmitrievich Shostakovich, the play was one of the last great productions of the Russian theatrical avant-garde. A satirical piece, *Klop* is about disingenuous enterprisers who use communism to get ahead. The antihero Prisytkin is accidentally frozen and finds himself in the future, to which he is entirely unsuited, and ends up as a curiosity at the zoo. After an unsuccessful production in Leningrad, Maiakovsky's *Bania* (The Bathhouse) had its Moscow premiere at the Meierkhol'd Theater on 16 March 1930. The production featured a constructivist set, with rows of

slogans on slats that stretched across the top of the stage. During the production the slats rotated and thus changed the slogans. The walls of the auditorium were covered with more posters displaying slogans. Maiakovsky created the slogans, which were about art and life in his imagined version of communism and his problems as an avant-gardist in the actual Communist regime. The play is about a time machine that can bring people into the future, but the Phosphorescent Woman, a personage from the future, will not allow certain unworthy bureaucrats on board. His last two plays did not meet with great popular or critical success. *Bania*, in particular, was roundly panned.

Maiakovsky's attempts to establish avant-garde art for the new Soviet Union met with utter failure in 1929 and 1930. He abandoned Lef in 1929; Ref, the group that he formed in order to replace Lef, never got off the ground. Stalin had come to power in 1928, and as a result government bureaucracies—including cultural bureaucracies—grew more strict and uniform. By 1930 Maiakovsky's former enemies in the Proletkul't had formed Rossiiskaia assotsiatsiia proletarskikh pisatelei (RAPP, or The Russian Association of Proletarian Writers), which became the writers' group most favored by the Communist Party. RAPP advocated realistic, easy-to-understand art that had been popular with the middle-brow bourgeoi-



Scene from the 1930 Meierkhol'd Theater production of Maiakovsky's play *Bania* (translated as *The Bathhouse*, 1968), with Zinaida Raikh as *Phosphorescent Woman* and Maksim Shtraukh as *Pobedonosikov* (from Konstantin Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theater 1905–1932*, translated by Roxane Permar, edited by Lesley Milne, 1988; Collection of Judith E. Kalb and J. Alexander Ogden)

sie before the revolution. The principles of RAPP were antithetical to those of Maiakovsky, however, and why he joined the organization in February 1930 remains a mystery. In that same month he opened an exhibition about his life as an artist, poet, and playwright. The show, *20 let raboty* (20 Years of Work), was his last comprehensive interpretation of his own work. It served as a guide to later critics who were curious about which approach to Maiakovsky and his work was last known to be approved by the author. Maiakovsky was disappointed by the show. It seemed to him that cultural luminaries stayed away and only students came.

On the morning of 14 April 1930 Maiakovsky was with a young actress, Veronika Vitol'dovna Polonskaia, in his apartment on Liubiansky Street in Moscow; he had known Veronika, who reminded him of Tat'iana, since 1928, when he initiated a superficial affair with her. On that morning she needed to leave for a rehearsal, but Maiakovsky, who was in a bad mood, begged her to stay. She left nonetheless, but before she was out of the building a shot rang out. Maiakovsky had killed himself with a bullet through the heart. News of the tragedy spread quickly throughout the city, and his apartment building was soon swarming with people. After Maiakovsky's body was laid to rest in a coffin the next day, it was visited by more than 150,000 people over the course of three days, from 15 to 17 April. On the last day thousands of

people filled the streets to accompany the coffin to a crematorium. His ashes are interred at the Novodevichii Monastery in Moscow.

Maiakovsky had written a suicide note two days before his death, but it is a stoic, practical message and sheds no light on his desperation. Yet, lost in love and failing as an artist, he had good reason to feel sad, and throughout his life he suffered bouts of depression. There have been attempts to prove that his death was not a suicide but, rather, a political assassination by the Communists that was made to resemble suicide. Similar claims are commonly made about the end of Esenin's life. However, to say that Maiakovsky and Esenin did not commit suicide suggests that they did not even understand what was happening to their country. Maiakovsky's last note was accompanied by some unfinished poems, one of which makes an eerie reference to Esenin's suicide, "At night the Milky Way is shining like the silver Oka"; the untitled poem was first published in 1934 in *Almanakh s Maiakovskim*. This explanation is the one that most people accept: the two poets killed themselves as a testament that horror had taken over the country.

The image of Vladimir Vladimirovich Maiakovsky with which most people are familiar was created after his death. His legacy enjoyed no great official popularity in the early 1930s—certainly not until 1935, when his former lover Lily Brik wrote a letter to Stalin pleading Maia-

kovsky's case. The leader scribbled in the margins his famous assessment of the poet's talent, and the words became an official slogan in and of themselves, as well as a starting point for Stalinist interpretations of the poet. Until her death in 1978 Lily was able to define Maiakovskiy for the Soviet Union (and anyone else interested in her version). She jealously guarded her position as the love of Maiakovskiy's life and his only muse. An advantage of her dominance was that she consistently supported the notion of Maiakovskiy as an avant-gardist. For a while the only way that the great Russian experiment with the avant-garde could be acknowledged in the U.S.S.R. was through Maiakovskiy. In the 1950s and 1960s innovators in the arts would gather at the Maiakovskiy monument in Moscow. Lily also made sure that the stories of his other great romances received little attention. Moreover, she propagated some outright lies—such as her claim that Maiakovskiy hated children. He in fact adored all children and sought their company (he was also a great aficionado of animals). For a long time Lily's version was the official story. In the 1980s an anti-Brik line took hold in Russia that insinuated anti-Semitism. The Briks were Jewish, and in their acquaintance Maiakovskiy wrote some great anti-anti-Semitic poetry. Under Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev, Maiakovskiy again came to represent freedom and possibility, but with the fall of Communism in 1991 his standing fell along with the regime. To this day interpretations of Maiakovskiy are meshed with the interpreter's understanding of Soviet Communism. This situation has begun to be changed, however, by newer critics writing in the post-Cold War era.

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Vladimir Vladimirovich Maiakovsky's papers can be found in Moscow in the State Maiakovsky Museum, the State Literary Museum, and the State Archive of Literature and Art (fonds 336 and 2650).