

Strange Suicide of Russia's Poet-Idol



Vladimir Mayakovsky, Poet Laureate of the Soviets . . . with his sweetheart, Lily Brik . . . from a snapshot of the lovers taken in the informal attitudes of artistic Bohemia. . . . Note the spats and cane.

At the height of his fame, Mayakovsky took his own life, and 100,000 mourners marched to his funeral . . . but whether he died for love or a secret disappointment in the Bolshevik revolt remains a mystery



Theodore Dreiser . . . put vodka in the whipped cream . . . an idea which greatly impressed Mayakovsky.

"SHE was ruing me mentally and financially," he said. "I had to break away. But for a week, I went around with a revolver in my pocket; had I met her I would have shot her."

One evening he accompanied me to a moving picture theater. In the midst of the play he halted abruptly and appeared greatly agitated. A party had taken their seats behind us. Presently I felt my friend's hand on my arm: "It is she—Lilychka!" When the lights went on and we rose to depart, I faced her in the aisle. She was a woman no longer very young, of medium height and exceeding slenderness, with white skin and broad white forehead, and full lips deeply carmined. For a moment I met her large, brilliant, dark eyes which appraised me with the eager curiosity of a woman whose role in life is conquest and who is always keenly on the lookout for possible rivals—an insatiable charmer who endeavors to hold under her influence even her discarded lovers.

The second time I met her was at Mayakovsky's home. I acted as secretary and interpreter to Theodore Dreiser on his visit to Russia two years ago, and Mayakovsky had invited us to dinner. His was a shabby apartment in a very old tenement house.

At the door stood Lily Brik to greet us with grace and hospitality.

At dinner there were several kinds of gause, cheese and cold meats, wine and vodka; then roast cowrie stuffed with apples, etc. The American author had by this time been warned by the vodka into a state of more than usual geniality. When the dessert of imported prunes with whipped cream was brought, he astonished the Russians by adding vodka to his whipped cream.

"We shall call it 'Dreiser's Cream,'" declared Mayakovsky, "and remember him by it when he has gone."

He presented the American author with a volume of his poems and scribbled across the title page: "To Mister Dreiser from Comrade Mayakovsky."

ALTHOUGH he apparently tried to break away and form new ties, the poet loved Lily Brik to the end. There was Veronica Polonskaya, his latest love, whom he mentioned in his farewell letter, but Lily evidently remained not only firmly entrenched in his affections but also apparently remained more or less economically dependent upon him.

Mayakovsky earned through his writings and lectures a very large income, comparatively speaking (he was not a Party member, and hence was not restricted in his income); but he was profligate with what he earned; besides his mother, his sister and Lily—who went to Paris to replenish her wardrobe—he had a whole retinue of followers who basked in his reckless generosity. He showed a splendid scorn of money, but it may have been disillusioning to see others, especially to see the woman he loved, caring so much for it.

A great poet, dying, mentioned a beautiful woman in his farewell, and the world parroted its usual easy explanation: "He died for love of her."

But did he? Or did defeat in love merely come as a climax to spiritual defeat? No one in his own country professes to know, or is free to speak if he does know; there it, moreover, a genuine attempt made to follow his last wish—"Please do not gossip about my death," and there is no word of blame against him, only a deep sadness, an aching regret for his "foolish" act.

The Memorial published by "VAPP" carries a sad reproach: "Vladimir Mayakovsky, poet of the proletariat revolution, and master of poetic art, foolishly and unexpectedly took his own life, a life indissolubly linked with the class struggle. No justification for his act can be found, but his poetry will remain a summons to all workers in the struggle for socialism."

His comrades seem to be asking, "Volodya, why did you destroy a life which belonged to our Cause?" Why? History may one day record the answer. It is too early now for anyone to speak with any certainty.

By RUTH KENNELL

ON the desk beside the body of Vladimir Mayakovsky, who had put a bullet through his head, were two farewell notes, evidently written with cool deliberation and not in a momentary fit of passion or despair:

"To All!
Please do not blame anyone that I died, or gossip about it. The dead dislike that terribly.
Mama, sister and comrades, forgive me—this is not the right way (I don't advise others to take it), but for me there is no other way out.
Lilya, love me.
Comrade Government, these are my family—Lilya Brik, mama, sister, and Veronica Vitoldovna Polonskaya. If you will arrange a bearable life for them—thanks.
Give my unfinished poems to the Briks, they will put them in order.
As they say—
'Incident closed';
The love boat
Wrecked against life.
I have balanced my account with life
And there is no use dwelling on
Mutual sufferings,
Misfortunes
And wrongs.
Goodbye! Vladimir Mayakovsky."

There was another letter to VAPP, his literary organization:

"Comrade Members: Do not consider me a coward. Honestly—there is nothing else to do. Greetings. Tell Ermilov it is a pity he took that slogan; our argument should have been finished. In the desk I have left 2000 roubles, apply this to my debts and collect remainder in GIZ (State Publishing House).
V. M."

Why did this gifted young man, at the age of 36 and at the height of his career as the Poet of the Proletariat—as great for his times as Pushkin—take his life? The Soviet press stated that his suicide was the result of a "temporary physical weakening of the will as a result of prolonged illness." Did this cover up a more subtle, more vital reason which might reflect discredit on the Soviet society? If anyone thought so, such a theory would not have been published in the Soviet press, nor would the censor have permitted it to be cabled by foreign correspondents, or even sent by mail, if intercepted. Had there been any such reason, the poet himself would have suppressed it. Whatever his inward reactions as an artist, he died loyal to the Revolution to which he had wholeheartedly given his talents for 20 years.

WAS it wounded pride which caused him to end his life? Some point to the bitter attacks on him by his opponents and his reputed decline as the leading revolutionary poet as a possible cause. However, only a few weeks before his death, an exhibit, "Twenty Years of Mayakovsky," was held by the Federation of Soviet Writers, including the 100 published works of the poet; periodicals dating from 1913 which contained his writings; material concerning his revolutionary underground activities since 1908. At a mass meeting at the close of the exhibit, a resolution was passed calling on the Soviet People's Commissars to name Vladimir Mayakovsky "People's Poet of the Republics."

Did something happen between this apparent triumph and his tragic end which made it seem that there was "no other way out"? Or did he, in spite of the acclaim of the masses, sense that in giving his talents to make a political revolution and carry on propaganda for a socialist state he was suppressing his own inner aspirations—realizing

that it was not as an artist but as a revolutionist that he was honored?

"I have stifled the songs in my throat," he said in his last published poem.

"The death of Mayakovsky is not suicide," said one of his friends at his funeral. "Mayakovsky was killed by fragments of the old life within himself. His death is a call to finally destroy the old world."

IN the Soviet Union the poet is regarded as a servant of the proletarian dictatorship, and Mayakovsky willingly fulfilled that mission. As a consequence, more than 100,000 sincere mourners filed past his casket in the club of the Federation of Writers and looked upon his face.

There are 4000 poets registered in the writers' labor union (Federation of Writers) in Moscow, but they are far from the traditional conception of a poet as a romantic, temperamental figure weaving his dreams into verses, apart from the sordid world of reality. The Soviet government demands of its poets loyal service to the prevailing ideology and political program; they must write verses for newspapers and periodicals on the building of socialism, against bourgeois tendencies, against the rich peasant, about tractors and cream separators, the Chinese Revolution, capitalism in the United States—here are mighty themes for the poet! Their verses are subjected to the merciless fire of criticism from political leaders as well as literary critics. The Communist Party controls the printed word.

Did the egotistical genius, Mayakovsky, find living in the Soviet society, which attempts to subordinate the individual to the mass, too great a strain? But while he bitterly resented criticism, he did not appear to resent this rigid censorship. He believed that he was the true poet of the Russian Revolution.

FROM earliest youth he was a conspicuous futurist and social revolutionist. At the age of 19 he served a prison term for writing revolutionary verses. He led a group who dressed in outlandish styles, painted their faces, shaved their heads and outraged conservative intellectuals. The photograph of him as a youth reveals a neuroticism which may never have been overcome. Mayakovsky and his followers were the artistic spokesmen for the Revolution of 1917; they made their pens serve the cause unsparringly; they wrote poems on current events, penned slogans for banners and posters and addressed meetings of workers, demonstrating the basic principles of their group—Art for Use! Art to the Masses!

I remember the first time I saw Mayakovsky. It was at a "Poetry Olympiad" in Moscow one poetic spring evening. . . .



Ruth Kennell, writer of this article . . . spent six years in Russia . . . met Mayakovsky while acting as secretary to Theodore Dreiser during his trip through the Soviet.

A fair young giant, dressed in a rough tweed suit with a soft shirt and tie . . . his head shaved in the fashion of the day . . . a disdainful expression on his strong, somber face . . . That was Mayakovsky, poet of the Revolution.

—held in the First State Circus, a great amphitheater with a canvas roof. Here I had watched acrobats and animals perform, but on this night I was to see poets. The great crowd was youthful and enthusiastic. The various literary organizations entered their candidates in the lists: "VAPP," the All-Russian Association of Proletarian Writers, and "MAPP" and "VOPP," also names formed by the initials.

Leaning lazily against the wings at one side of the stage stood a fair, young giant, resembling American football heroes; he was dressed in a rough tweed suit, with soft shirt and tie, and his head was shaved after the fashion of the day. He listened with a disdainful expression on his strong, somber face. When a woman, referred to scornfully as a "has-been," recited her sentimental verses, he registered extreme nausea, pressing his hand to his head. But when it was his turn to appear, the boredom vanished; a tremendous ovation greeted him—this was Volodya Mayakovsky, idol of the Communist youth.

BUT from that time on people began to speak openly of his "decline." Was this the cause of his suicide?

Or was it, after all, as is quite generally believed, an incongruously romantic reason—the destructive influence of a woman, which he could not shake off?

"Lilya, love me," he wrote in his farewell note. Has this any deeper meaning than a tender farewell? It is said that Lily Brik had broken with Mayakovsky and had formed a new attachment, but I think she was ever following new fancies—her poet lover must have been accustomed to that.

I remember my first meeting with Lily Brik. A former ballet dancer and wife of a radical critic, her beauty, wit and charm made her the center of bohemian-artistic circles. One of my friends, an editor in the State Publishing House, and a devout Communist, had just concluded a disastrous affair with Lily Brik when I met him. Through him I first learned of the fire.



At the age of 19 . . . Mayakovsky led a group of extreme artistic revolutionists. . . . Traces of the neurotic are visible in this youthful picture of the poet.