

MAJAKOVSKIJ AND FUTURISM: 1917–1921. By *Bengt Jangfeldt*. Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis, Stockholm Studies in Russian Literature, 5. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1976. 133 pp. + 4 pp. plates. \$12.50, paper. Distributed by Humanities Press, Atlantic Highlands, N.J.

POBEDNYI SMEKH (OPYT ZHANROVO-SRAVNITEL'NOGO ANALIZA DRAMATURGII V. V. MAIAKOVSKOGO). By *Miroslav Mikulášek*. Spisy University J. E. Purkyně v Brně, Filosofická Fakulta, 189. Brno: Universita J. E. Purkyně, Filosofická Fakulta, 1973. 279 pp. Kčs. 31.50.

Russian Futurism is still largely unexplored and/or misinterpreted. This is particularly true of the relationship between the Futurist movement as a whole and Mayakovsky, one of its chief representatives. In general, Western scholars, though conscious of the importance of this question, do not focus systematically on Futurism, are largely deprived of direct access to unpublished sources, and cannot move beyond a certain point in their discussions. As for Soviet literary historians, most would prefer to forget the problem altogether. Failing that, they emphasize the differences between Mayakovsky and other Futurists, and claim that Mayakovsky “evolved away from” Futurist theory and artistic practice.

That such treatment runs counter to the facts is well documented in Bengt Jangfeldt's brief monograph on several aspects of Futurism's—and especially Mayakovsky's—post-October development. Chapters 1–3 treat two phases of Mayakovsky's activities: the “Kafe poetov” period, lasting from the October Revolution until late spring 1918, and the “*Iskusstvo kommuny*” period, lasting from fall 1918 to October 1919. Together with Vasilii Kamenskii and David Burluk, Mayakovsky initially attempted to continue the Cubo-Futurist tradition of poetry readings designed to provoke the audience. This tactic, ill-suited to post-Revolutionary Russia, was soon abandoned. Mayakovsky began to work in the art section (IZO) of Lunacharskii's commissariat, became a major contributor to its newspapers (*Iskusstvo kommuny* and *Iskusstvo*), and led other representatives of the artistic and literary avant-garde in a struggle for a new culture. Chapter 4 explores a different problem—the relationship between the Futurists and the *Proletkul't* movement. Finally, in chapter 5, Jangfeldt describes the Futurists' attempts to gain official party backing for their movement by forming a Communist-Futurist collective, and how the failure of this venture led them to establish contact with Nikolai Chuzhak's Siberian Futurist group.

Regrettably, the volume is more a set of essays than a tightly knit, in-depth study of Futurism in the 1917–21 period. Still, Jangfeldt's fragmentation of subject matter is far outweighed by his skillful handling of the two principal motifs which run through these chapters: (1) the Futurists' struggle against both the conservative academic establishment and the ideologically strident, yet artistically helpless, *Proletkul't*, and (2) the Futurists' attempts to become the dominant element in the new state's cultural policy. Relying on press and archival materials, Jangfeldt demonstrates that the situation was complex and open to varied interpretation. To take but one example, the Futurists—especially Mayakovsky—were deliberately hyperbolic in calling for the destruction of prior culture. Yet, despite numerous accusations by their foes, the Futurists' target was not culture as such, but conservative attempts to stifle artistic innovation. On the other hand, Jangfeldt shows that there was some factual basis to the accusation that the Futurists sought to assume dictatorial authority in the sphere of culture.

The material in Jangfeldt's monograph is presented with a minimum of authorial intervention. Nevertheless, though side-stepped in the text, certain ironic and rather unpleasant realizations emerge. First, it is apparent that, despite their diametrically

opposite views on art, the Futurists and the *Proletkul'tists* addressed very similar appeals to the party: in each case, there was a call to reject other, less "worthy" artistic groupings. Second, by calling for official intervention on their behalf, the Futurists helped legitimize the principle of party interference in artistic matters (granted, this would almost certainly have come to pass on its own). Finally, the Futurists' failure to ally themselves with the party was a harbinger of the future. Despite—or perhaps precisely because of—their claims to be to culture what the Bolsheviks were to politics and economics, the party held them at arm's length, favoring, instead, almost any group of a more conservative bent, and, ultimately, choosing to repudiate the avant-garde altogether. In retrospect, these events foreshadowed Mayakovsky's eventual failure to subordinate himself successfully to the demands of Soviet *byt*.

Jangfeldt's exploration of a generally unmapped area differs greatly from Miroslav Mikulášek's study of Mayakovsky's theater. The Czech scholar regards his work as a complement to the writings in this area by Fevral'skii, Jakobson, Ripellino, and others. In this volume, Mikulášek considers the plays from a broader theoretical perspective, maps out their various generic and formal sources, and places them within the context of European literature. To this end, three separate sections, subdivided into chapters, are devoted to "Tragediia," "Misteriia-buff," and "Klop" and "Bania." An introduction and conclusion provide the framework, and lengthy summaries in Czech and English are included.

The breadth of Mikulášek's comparative discussion is certainly noteworthy, and some of it is quite interesting—for example, the parallels between Mayakovsky's plays and medieval dramas, plays from the period of the French Revolution, and German expressionist theater. Yet his technique of listing and describing at length analogies between elements of Mayakovsky's works and various works by other playwrights becomes schematized and tiresome. The flood of names, for some reason always letter-spaced, obscures the author's principal arguments, including his interesting observations on the element of the absurd in the two late comedies. As it stands, the volume is rather turgid; it would have gained enormously from rigorous pruning.

HENRYK BARAN

State University of New York at Albany

VOL'NAIA RUSSKAIA LITERATURA, 1955–1975. By *Iu. Mal'tsev*. Frankfurt/Main: Possev-Verlag, 1976. 473 pp. DM 34.50, paper.

This is a pioneering effort to sketch the history and assess the literary worth of "free Russian literature" during the period 1955–75. By "free" literature Mal'tsev means *samizdat* works which were either refused publication in the USSR or were not submitted to publishing houses because of a conviction that they could not pass the censorship.

Mal'tsev's attempt to distinguish between two "antagonistic" literatures and cultures—one "official" and the other "underground"—during the period under review lacks subtlety and occasionally lands him in difficulty. He is clearly embarrassed when he discusses important works, such as *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, which somehow found their way into print in the Soviet Union. Likewise, his assertion that contemporary official Soviet literature is nothing more than a "gray mass" reminiscent of the Zhdanov era smacks of polemical excess. Are the writings of Vasilii Shukshin, Iurii Trifonov, and Valentin Rasputin, to take just several examples, a "gray mass"? I think not. Even when making the required obeisances to the censors, such literature can be superior to much of the "free" literature circulating in *samizdat*. None of these