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C. H. VAN SCHOONEVELD

Indiana University

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VAHAN D. BAROOSHIAN

BRIK AND MAYAKOVSKY

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Vahan D. Barooshian
Professor of Russian
Wells College
Aurora, New York

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Each generation brings to the contemplation of art its own categories of appreciation, makes its own demands upon art and has its own uses for art.

T. S. Eliot

PREFACE

Osip Maksimovich Brik is one of the most elusive, mysterious and legendary figures in the history of Russian literature of the twentieth century. In addition to this, a recent set of literary memoirs, which point out Brik's ties with the Soviet secret police—the Cheka—have cast him in a sinister and controversial light.[1] There is almost no biographical information about him and, characteristically, Brik never wrote about himself. He has made, however, a peculiar kind of personal history, not so much through the written word but through the spoken word, the spell of personality and the fertility of his ideas which overwhelmed many of his contemporaries, especially those who knew him well.[2] Soviet bibliographical sources have listed a bare minimum of the extraordinary range and quality of his published works.[3] Because of Brik's formalist and independent literary orientation, the efforts of certain Soviet "scholars" to banish Brik from Soviet literary history have been largely effective, despite Brik's passionate support of the Bolshevik regime after 1917.[4] In view of his diverse activities and his prominence in the literary, artistic and film debates of the 1920's and after, it is indeed a very strange irony that there has been to date no substantial study of Brik's compelling life and work. He does, however, deserve a much better fate, for he is one of the brilliant, commanding theoreticians of the Russian avant-garde of this century, whose role, influence, contribution and significance are of impressive dimensions.

The almost total lack of bibliographical documents compounds an investigation of Brik's life in particular. In effect, one might say that Brik's personal life exists largely in the minds of those who knew him, of whom today there are only a rapidly dwindling few. This study seeks to demonstrate, however, that Brik's life as a whole is basically an integral part of the history of Russian Formalism, Cubo-Futurism, the Russian artistic avant-garde, and of the life of Vladimir Mayakovsky.

This book is an attempt, therefore, primarily to portray the historical

Brik and to describe and assess his life, work, role and significance in terms of the history of those movements and against the background of revolutionary Russia, from approximately 1915 to 1930. The book also defines Brik's and his wife's relationship to Mayakovsky, with whom they lived for some fifteen years until Mayakovsky's suicide in 1930; and it explains the Briks' efforts after 1930 to find a place for Mayakovsky in the history of Soviet literature. Mayakovsky at times appears to be so much a part of the lives of the Briks that various aspects of Mayakovsky's own personal life, views and activities are necessarily treated so as to illuminate the views and the activities of the Briks. This is the substance of the first four chapters. The last chapter concerns the ironic fate of the Briks in the Soviet Union today. If this book has one principal aim, it is to discover, without polemical intent, an objective path to the historical truth about Brik. No doubt a great deal of research still remains to be done on Brik's life and work, and this factor obviously does not make the present study complete or final, but a kind of preliminary investigation.

Since this study is essentially about Brik, the bibliography contains only a list of his published works. Up to 1930, the list is, as far as can be established, complete. After 1930, the list is less than complete. A complete bibliography of Brik's works would require many months, if not years, to establish, including archival materials. Those who are interested in other aspects of this study can easily consult the sources in the notes for each chapter.

My debts to individuals and institutions for this study are many. To Professor Vladimir Markov I am indebted for continuous encouragement and advice. Professors Nina Berberova, Herman Ermolaev, and Raymond Jaffe offered me valuable criticism. I deeply appreciate the helpful assistance of Ms. Dorothy Baker and Candace VanAuken. I am very grateful to the International Research and Exchanges Board and the Soviet Ministry of Higher Education for the opportunity to do research in the Soviet Union, without which this study would not have been possible. The Russian Research Center of Harvard University allowed me to use its rich facilities, for which I am grateful. I thank President Frances 'Sissy' Farenthold of Wells College for a grant in support of this research. To many other American and Russian individuals and institutions I extend my sincere gratitude. Needless to say, I alone bear responsibility for the views expressed in this book.

A final word on the system of transliterating Russian into English, which always seems to pose complex problems and can never satisfy

everyone. I have basically used in this book the "popular" system as described in the admirable study of Edward J. Brown, *Mayakovsky: A Poet in the Revolution* (Princeton, 1973), p. vi. As Brown indicates, this system has two advantages: it provides those who know no Russian the sound equivalents of Russian in English and creates no difficulty for those who know Russian in identifying the Russian sources. If I offend anyone by using that system, I ask to be forgiven.

Notes

1. See Nadezhda Mandelstam, *Hope Against Hope* (New York, 1970), p. 172. This account is inaccurate and contradictory, for Mrs. Mandelstam says that "In Party circles he [Brik] had powerful sponsors, particularly among Chekists with artistic and literary inclinations. He maneuvered with great dexterity and at *considerable risk to himself,* but the prize was won by Averbakh, who, with his RAPP [The Russian Association of Proletarian Writers], was a latecomer in the contest" (p. 172, italics added). We shall deal with Brik's connections with the Cheka below. Mrs. Mandelstam should also know that it was Boris Malkin, a close associate of Brik, who befriended her husband in the late 1930's. It was Brik who provided Malkin with the money to give to her husband. See Nadezhda Mandelstam, *Hope Abandoned* (New York, 1974), p. 310.
2. A Soviet scholar writes of Brik: "I became acquainted with Osip Maksimovich Brik in the second half of the 1930's, when he was far from young. His completely youthful energy startled me—he was charged with ideas, like a Leyden jar with electricity." A. Dymshits, "OMB," in his *Zvenya pamyati* (Moscow, 1968), p. 370. This is one of the extremely rare "positive" accounts of Brik in the Soviet Union.
3. For example, *Sovetskoe literaturovedenie i kritika* (Moscow, 1966).
4. See A. Koloskov, Tragediya poeta, "*Ogonyok,* No. 26 (June 1968), pp. 18–19. According to A. Sheshukov, Brik "passed through the history of our literature as a failure, as an absolutely unproductive figure." *Neistovye revniteli* (Moscow, 1970), p. 41.

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CHAPTER ONE

Osip M. Brik was born in Moscow in 1888 to a prosperous middle-class Jewish family. His father was a diamond and coral merchant who travelled extensively. His mother was a well-educated member of the intelligentsia. In his youth, Brik often travelled with his father to the eastern regions of Russia, an activity which he continued throughout his life. His favorite pastimes were buying gifts for others, chess (of which he was a master), and reading of the most diverse and extensive kind. He usually read about two or three books daily. He would often go to a bookstore where he would, after reading a book there, leave with an armful of books. During his adult life, Brik maintained a "working" library of over four-thousand books.[1]

As a student in the gymnasium, Brik was simply brilliant and easily seized the attention of his classmates. His eloquence, keen and destructive wit, magnetic personality and formidable intellectual powers inspired envy, or fear and hatred, or admiration or worship.[2] No one who knew Brik ever remained, or could remain, indifferent to him. Humbug, snobbery and pretense were instinctively alien to his social character. He drew people to himself—regardless of social class or origin—by speaking to their concerns and interests.

When Brik was still at the gymnasium, he became engrossed in the political problems of the day. He read all the works of Marx, Engels and the Russian revolutionary democrats. He formed his own Marxist circle to discuss those problems. In 1905, he took part in political demonstrations against the Russian autocracy, which led to his expulsion from the gymnasium. Brik never completed the gymnasium, but desired to continue his education in law. In 1906, he passed the entrance examinations for the Law Faculty at Moscow University. Brik chose that field because it did not require him to attend lectures and classes, thus providing him more time to devote his attention to politics. In 1910, he successfully completed his studies and graduated with

a degree in law. Brik never practiced law during his life, but did apply his legal knowledge in the Cheka during the revolutionary years 1918–1921.

In 1905, Brik met Lily Yurevna Kagan, the daughter of a prominent Jewish family. She was then a thirteen-year old student at the Valitskaya gymnasium for girls, where Brik frequently gave talks on the principles of political economy. Lily's interests were mainly in painting, sculpture, dance and ballet. Their personalities apparently complemented each other. In any event, Lily's interest in Brik was essentially intellectual. Their friendship ultimately resulted in marriage in 1912. The marriage made Brik an object of envy, since he, not a particularly attractive man, had married a most charming, cultured and beautiful woman, who was eventually considered a Beatrice of her age.[3]

Three years after their marriage, the Briks made the momentous acquaintance of, and subsequently became permanently associated with, the young Futurist poet, Vladimir Mayakovsky. He was introduced to them by Lily's older sister, Elsa, whom Mayakovsky had been courting at the time. This association was of the most profound significance not only for the three of them, but also for the history of Russian literature. First, it inspired some of the most moving lyric poetry of this century, dedicated largely to Lily Brik. Second, it resulted in Brik's brilliant formalist studies of poetic sounds, rhythm and syntax, and in the formation of the Society for the Study of Poetic Language *(Opoyaz)*. Brik was, as will be seen, the principal organizer of this movement. Third, the association rescued Mayakovsky from suicide, with which he had been obsessed prior to his meeting with the Briks. The major source of Mayakovsky's despondency at the time was his feeling that his poetic talent was unrecognized and misunderstood, a feeling which he never really overcame during his lifetime; and this feeling was not without justification or objective reasons. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, this association made Mayakovsky one of "the most original Russian poets of all time . . ."[4] In other words, Mayakovsky, as we have come to know him in Russian literature, would have been largely an insignificant poet without the Briks; and it is Osip Brik who shares a measure of responsibility for shaping and directing Mayakovsky's art from 1915 to his suicide in 1930.[5]

In his autobiography, Mayakovsky noted that his meeting with the Briks in July 1915 was a "Most Joyful Date."[6] In her published memoirs, Lily Brik is much more revealing, perhaps somewhat con-

tradictory or ambivalent, in her own attitude toward Mayakovsky. Her observations perhaps penetrate the riddle of Mayakovsky's personality: his ability to repel also contained a large measure of attraction or fascination; and she was apparently defining her own attitude toward him. She observes that in her initial meeting, the crude, iconoclastic and turbulent Mayakovsky frightened her and Brik. On another meeting, she was repelled by his vaunted pride, arrogance and claims of poetic genius. Not only did Mayakovsky believe his poetry was misunderstood and unrecognized, but that it was also misread. Lily goes on to say that she did "not particularly" like his poetry. When, however, Mayakovsky read his "A Cloud in Trousers" to them, she and Brik were overwhelmed: "It was just what we had been waiting for for so long."[7] While Lily does not discuss Mayakovsky's reaction to her or hers to him, she does reveal Mayakovsky's decisive impact on Brik: "Osya took the notebook that contained the manuscript and did not relinquish it all night. He kept reading it . . . Since that day Osya fell in love with Volodya and began to waddle; he started to speak in a bass voice [like Mayakovsky's] and wrote poetry that ended thus:

> I myself will die when I feel like it,
> and in the list of voluntary victims
> I'll write my surname, name and patronymic
> and the day on which I shall die.
> I'll pay my debts to every store,
> I'll buy the last almanac
> and will await my ordered grave
> while reading A Cloud in Trousers.[8]

These poetic reflections seem to reveal Brik's thorough fascination and identification with the revolutionary and blasphemous assault of Mayakovsky's poem on society and the many-sided potential of his poetic talent. In his very first published article in 1915, entitled "Bread!," which is a brief commentary on Mayakovsky's poetry, Brik castigated the Russian Symbolist poets for their escape from reality. As Brik saw it, their poetry was merely a diet of sweets—cake, honey, ice-cream—which only caused illness for readers. At last, Brik suggested, Mayakovsky's poetry provided the daily bread of living reality and of revolutionary necessity—an occasion for joy and celebration.[9] For Brik, Mayakovsky represented the artistic avatar of his own political and social views, and perhaps even the projection of himself as a revolutionary artist. He now saw his own personal future in

Mayakovsky as a unique poet, and dedicated his whole life to his creative development as such. It is also in this sense that Brik lacked personal ambition.[10]

Since Mayakovsky was living in abject poverty and was unable to find a publisher for his rebellious poem, Brik published it at his own expense, albeit in excised form because of the censor's rejection of the blasphemous section, Part IV. As Mayakovsky noted: "*A Cloud* was feathery. The censor blew through it. Six pages of continuous dots."[15]

For Mayakovsky, the association with the Briks opened up a new world for him both culturally and intellectually and gave him purpose and a new sense of mission. He at last achieved, as a direct result of Brik's publication of his poetry, the poetic recognition which he so eagerly sought and deserved. He came to admire Brik's intellectual versatility and poise, his iron self-confidence and especially, as he remarked, Brik's "absolute taste in literature."[12] Although he and Brik shared common views on a political and artistic revolution, Mayakovsky became dependent on Brik for political and poetic guidance, direction, and discipline, particularly during the revolutionary period and after. It may very well be that Brik served as a certain "father" figure not only for Mayakovsky, whose own father had died when he was thirteen years old, but for Lily, too, whose father had died in 1915 when she was twenty-three years old. This new association had the effect of severing Mayakovsky's "poetic" relationship with David Burliuk, the founder of Russian Cubo-Futurism, who had been Mayakovsky's early mentor and major source of financial support. Their friendship, however, was never impaired.

As for Mayakovsky's relationship to Lily Brik, her enigmatic personality, intelligence, charm, beauty and imposing talents had an arresting effect on him. For her, the idea of a poet declaiming his love for her, of dedicating his poetry to her, with the attendant fame that was involved, was profoundly appealing and nourishing to her ego, even though it did not, perhaps, demand a reciprocal love. This may be why the theme of unrequited and frustrated love and the quest for the elusive and unattainable woman are so dominant in Mayakovsky's lyric poetry; and it may very well be that Lily actually played out this role in her own life, either consciously or unconsciously. But this was also perhaps merely a creative, productive poetic theme that contained the potential for manifold variations. Although Mayakovsky "searched" for love poetically, or wrote of its frustration and torment, in reality he possessed the substance of love because in 1915 he married Lily Brik, who always

lived with Brik (and Mayakovsky) until his death in 1945 despite her third marriage after Mayakovsky's suicide in 1930 and Brik's second marriage in 1928. This unusual relationship suggests that Brik was the one great love in Lily's and Mayakovsky's lives—the apex of the triangular association. As Lily described the relationship, with understandable reticence: "When I told him [Brik] that Mayakovsky and I had fallen in love, we all decided never to part. Then Mayakovsky and Brik were already close friends, men bound to each other by close ideological interests and joint literary work. Such is the way it came to be that we lived our life, both spiritually and largely in the same place, together."[13]

Nevertheless, one has little, if any, difficulty in understanding the solid, integral nature of this rather complex but "creative" triangular association which lasted for fifteen years; and it was the political and personal tensions and the heated literary controversies in the late 1920's that began gradually to erode the association, ending in Mayakovsky's suicide in 1930—a tragedy of both circumstances and character.

When he met Mayakovsky in July 1915, Brik was a volunteer, privileged officer in the Russian army and was connected with a military automobile school in St. Petersburg. In September 1915, Mayakovsky was called up for military service on the war front. Prior to this, in 1914 Mayakovsky was eager to join the Russian army, but was rejected as a political unreliable because of his prison record and his political activity as a Bolshevik propagandist in 1908. By September 1915, the bloodshed and horror of war had engendered "disgust and hatred" in him. A terrifying gloom began to grip Mayakovsky. Brik came to his rescue: he ingeniously persuaded the military authorities at the automobile school to which he himself was attached that Mayakovsky, as an accomplished artist, would be a much greater asset to the army as an automobile designer than as a soldier, who would panic at the sight of blood.[14] Mayakovsky's recollection of this episode makes Brik the central figure in his life at the time:

> Called up by the army. The front is where I don't want to go. Pretend I was a draftsman. At night I take lessons from some engineer in drawing automobiles. Publishing matters are even worse. Soldiers are forbidden to publish. Brik alone gives me joy. Buys up all my poetry at 50 kopeks a line. He published "The Backbone Flute" and "A Cloud in Trousers."[15]

Mayakovsky, however, did not remain a draftsman for very long. He soon became a billeting officer, responsible for finding rooms for soldiers who had returned from the front lines. This work afforded him greater time to devote to his poetic and political activities. He was frequently "on leave." He had his own private quarters and other privileges (food, clothing and allowances); and on January 13, 1917 he was awarded a silver medal for dedicated service.[16]

Shortly after, Brik himself was called for duty on the war front because the military authorities concluded that there were too many Jews in the automobile school and decided to send them to the front immediately, in the course of twenty-four hours.[17] Since Brik, too, was opposed to the war and was determined to remain with Mayakovsky, the new and sudden situation posed no particular challenge to Brik. On the evening that his company awaited a train to depart to the front, Brik slipped away to change into civilian clothes; then he returned and, in his usual sociable manner, bid farewell to his friends as they boarded the train. He then put on his military uniform and returned to military headquarters to explain that he had missed his company. An officer assigned Brik temporarily to a military barrack in St. Petersburg. Brik, however, soon discovered that he was a forgotten man there and felt free to resume civilian life, since he was a soldier without a company. He occasionally donned his uniform to demonstrate to others that he was still in the army and to check in and out of the military barrack, especially when he needed a chauffuered military vehicle to conduct his business, deliver gifts to his friends and bring books from the bookstores. In this way he eluded military service for two years. Shklovsky remarks that Brik "remained home for two years. Dozens of people came to see him; he published books, but no one could find him."[18]

But the elusive Brik was very much visible to some and in the center of things—deep in the world of poetry. After he, and perhaps Lily, too, recovered from the intoxication with Mayakovsky's poetry, Brik could not remain in a sea of poetry without penetrating its surface fascination, without posing the fundamental, fruitful questions: How was poetry made, organized, or better, how was it *produced?* What were its basic ingredients, the secret and mystery of its charm, its characteristic formal components? In particular, what comprised the captivating qualities of Pushkin's poetry? Why was Pushkin's poetry so unique, and why was the poetry of those who consciously tried to imitate his poetry, in both form and content, so dull, pale and undistinguished by comparison? In order to answer these questions and solve the enigma of