

**BENGT JANGFELDT:****Majakovskij and the Publication of *150 000 000*  
New Materials**

1. In 1920–1921 Vladimir Majakovskij encountered great difficulties in publishing two of his major works, the long poem *150 000 000* and the second version of the play *Misterija-Buff*. This short article will present some little known materials concerning the printing of *150 000 000*. But first some of the background.

In April, 1920, Majakovskij handed over the manuscript of *150 000 000* to LITO<sup>1</sup> (Literaturnyj otdel Narkomprosa; in these years all fiction published by Gosizdat had to be recommended by LITO). LITO, in its turn, forwarded the manuscript to Gosizdat and on August 31 of the same year sent a letter to the publishing house concerning the printing of the poem. The letter stressed that *150 000 000* had an “isključitel’noe agitacionnoe značenie”, and Gosizdat was asked to publish it “v samom sročnom porjadke”.<sup>2</sup>

The poem, however, was not printed, and on October 20 Majakovskij himself sent a letter to “Kollegija Gosizdata” (with a copy to LITO) in which he complains of the bureaucratic procedures delaying the printing of his poem. The letter ended in this way:

Товарищи! Если эта книга с вашей точки зрения непонятна и ненужна, верните мне ее.

Если она нужна, искорените саботаж, иначе чем объяснить ее непечатанье, когда книжная макулатура, издаваемая спекулянтами, умудряется выходить в свет в две недели.<sup>3</sup>

But the poem was neither returned to its author, nor printed, and at the beginning of November Majakovskij again turned to “Kollegija Gosizdata” (with copies to LITO and Lunačarskij) and explained in detail how the

<sup>1</sup> V. A. Katanjan, *Majakovskij. Literaturnaja chronika*, M. 1961, p. 124.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>3</sup> Majakovskij, *Polnoe sobranie sočinenij*, M. 1955–1961, volume XIII, p. 38. Henceforth all references will be to this edition.

people of Gosizdat had tried – and succeeded – in putting off the printing of the poem. He wrote:

На писание этой книги мною потрачено полтора года. Я отказался от наживы путем продажи этой книги частному издателю, я отказался от авторства, пуская ее и без фамилии, и, получив единогласное утверждение ЛИТО, что эта книга *исключительна и агитационна*, вправе требовать от вас внимательного отношения к книге.

And he finished by once again demanding that the manuscript be returned:

Категорически требую – верните книгу. Извиняюсь за резкость тона – вынужденная.<sup>4</sup>

Eventually, on November 22, 150 000 000 was sent to printing.<sup>5</sup> But nothing happened during the whole winter, and on April 5, 1921, Majakovskij wrote a long letter of principal importance to “Komissija CK RKP(b) po delam pečati” in which he related three cases when the bureaucracy had hindered and delayed his work. The two most important cases were the delayed printing of 150 000 000 and the opposition to the printing and staging of *Misterija-Buff*. I quote in full the passage about 150 000 000:

#### Бюрократизм в чистом виде

ЛИТО приняло к печати книгу 150 000 000. ЛИТО, поставленное именно для того, чтоб разобраться в вопросах худ(ожественной) литературы, аттестовало эту книгу как *исключительно агитационную* и требовало ее издания в возможно краткий срок, в возможно большем количестве экземпляров. Агитационность была отвергнута. Книга забита была в какую-то 3 или 4 очередь, не могущую увидеть света ни в коем случае. Для чего тогда эти очереди? Началась многомесячная история с “крестиком”, крестик – это пометка, которую было необходимо получить для перевода в первую очередь (подробно эта издательская история изложена в моем докладе коллегии Наркомпроса). Крестик я получил. Валялась с крестиком. После ряда атак мне выдал т. Вейс официальную расписку в том, что книга выйдет в половине февраля, две недели тому назад я получил вторую формальную расписку с обязательством выпустить ее к 15 апреля. Если (сомневаюсь) книга выйдет, можно праздновать 10-месячный юбилей волокиты.

<sup>4</sup> Letter of November 5, 1920, *XIII*, 39. That day Majakovskij wrote two letters to “Kollegija Gosizdata”; the quotation is from the first letter.

<sup>5</sup> *XIII*, 305.

Примечание. Книга издается в 5000 экземплярах (очевидно, мне для успокоения), тогда как средний тираж любой издаваемой "агитационной" книги типа Гамсуна *Новь* или *Дрожнины песни* 25–50 000 экз., а макулатура типа – Дерябина *На заре нового мира* издается в количестве 100 000 экземпляров.<sup>6</sup>

By the end of April of the same year Gosizdat finally published *150 000 000*.<sup>7</sup>

2. Majakovskij, however, tired of the trouble he had with the printing of the poem, had already at the end of March, 1921, sent it for publication with the "Tvorčestvo"-group in Čita, the new and provisional capital of the DVR (Dal'nevostočnaja Respublika, established by the Soviet government in April, 1920, and incorporated into the RSFSR by a decree of VCIK of November 15, 1922).<sup>8</sup>

That Majakovskij chose to print the poem in Čita is not surprising. The "Tvorčestvo"-group in Čita consisted of, *inter alia*, the poets Sergej Tret'jakov, Nikolaj Aseev, David Burljuk, Petr Neznamov, and the critic Nikolaj Čužak, who were all ardent and knowledgeable propagandists of futurism and, especially, the poetry of Vladimir Majakovskij. Čužak, the theoretician of the group, was the editor of the literary and political magazine *Tvorčestvo* and the newspaper *Dal'nevostočnyj telegraf*. *Tvorčestvo* had already published six issues in Vladivostok, but the editors had been forced to move to Čita because of the Civil War, which was still raging in the Far East. The seventh and last issue of *Tvorčestvo* came out in Čita.

Majakovskij, of course, knew not only of the existence of the group, but had also known many of its members personally even before the revolution. In the first six issues his futurist colleagues had on several occasions declared that Majakovskij was the outstanding poet of the Russian revolution. The magazine, which was firmly pro-bolshevik and contained many articles on political matters, had printed not only excerpts from Majakovskij's poems *Oblako v štanach* and *Vojna i mir* but also articles dedicated to and praising the poetry and political standpoint of the poet. David Burljuk published here two interesting memoir fragments: "Vladimir Majakovskij [Poët revoljucii]" (No. 1, 1920), and "Ot laboratorii k ulice [Ėvoljucija futurizma]" (No. 2, 1920). Nikolaj Čužak wrote an article on Majakovskij's poetry, more specifically on *Oblako v štanach* ("Trinad-

<sup>6</sup> XIII, 42–43.

<sup>7</sup> Katanjan, p. 145. XIII, 305, has a more exact date: April 16.

<sup>8</sup> See Evgenij Rappoport, *Let molodych našich poroch*, Irkutsk 1974, p. 78. \* 14 novembra

end. Carr I, 367.

catyj apostol", No. 3, 1920).<sup>9</sup> In the forthcoming, seventh, issue Sergej Tret'jakov was to publish an enthusiastic and interesting review of Majakovskij's first collected works, *Vse sočinennoe Vladimirom Majakovskim*, from 1919 ("Poët na tribune [Poslednie stichi Majakovskogo]").<sup>10</sup>

But the propagandizing of Majakovskij took place not only in the columns of *Tvorčestvo* and, to a certain extent, in Čužak's newspapers. The poets of the "Tvorčestvo"-group also read lectures on Majakovskij and recited his works before workers' and party audiences.<sup>11</sup> They even staged, in December, 1921, Majakovskij's *Tragedija*, which had been staged only once before, in 1913.\* The role of Majakovskij was played by Sergej Tret'jakov.<sup>12</sup> Several discussions on futurism were also held.

It is no exaggeration to say that the Siberian group of futurists was the most important center of futurism outside Moscow in the years following the revolution.<sup>13</sup> In 1922 Aseev, Čužak, Tret'jakov, Neznamov and other members of the group went to Moscow, some of them to work with Majakovskij in Lef.

With these facts in mind, it becomes clear why Majakovskij chose to send his manuscript to the Far East for publication.

3. As *150 000 000* was published in Moscow by the end of April, 1921, there was no need for the "Tvorčestvo"-group to print it in Čita (although it was announced in *Tvorčestvo* as forthcoming). The seventh issue of *Tvorčestvo*, however, contains some illuminating and little known information about the problems involved in the publication of *150 000 000*.

It was one L. Borisov who, at the beginning of April, brought the poem to Čita. He had been a "kursant" in Moscow, where he had met Majakovskij at ROSTA. In a short report from his meeting with the poet, Borisov writes:

Из его слов было ясно, что последние произведения совершенно не печатаются: Гос. Издательство заявило, что оно печатает "более нужные произведения и вещи". О возможности печатания на Дальнем Востоке он был плохо информирован (...).<sup>14</sup>

<sup>9</sup> This article was reprinted in Čužak's *K dialektike iskusstva*, Čita 1921, pp. 64–71.

<sup>10</sup> Excerpts from this article are given in my "Notes on 'Gazeta Futuristov' and the Revolution of the Spirit", in *Vladimir Majakovskij. Memoirs and essays*, Stockholm 1975, pp. 152–165.

<sup>11</sup> *Rappoport*, p. 81 ff.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 20, 84.

<sup>13</sup> The Tiflis group 41°, with Kručenyč, Igor' Terent'ev and Il'ja Zdanevič, had more of a laboratory character and did not play the same social role as the "Tvorčestvo" poets.

<sup>14</sup> *Tvorčestvo*, No. 7, April–June 1921, p. 135.

\* Fel! ef. Трейяков: "... речитировали бесконечно, так и не поставив, трагедию 'Владимир Маяковский'." (Нвб. Леп, 1927: 8/9, стр. 70)

Borisov brought with him to the editors of *Tvorčestvo* not only the poem *150 000 000* but also letters from Majakovskij and some of his Moscow friends.<sup>15</sup> In a short article (signed “Redakcija” and written by Čužak) on the bureaucratic treatment of *150 000 000* and *Misterija-Buff*, the letters of Majakovskij’s friends are characterized as a

(...) сплошной вопль по поводу бессмысленного, недостойного пролетарского отечества, чиновного гонения на так называемый “футуризм”, – с первых же шагов революции, один из всех течений в русском искусстве, под свистопляску символистов, реалистов и др., пошедший вместе с пролетариатом и никогда ему не изменявший.

Люди с застоявшейся восприимчивостью и психологией стали между революционными массами и новым искусством и пытаются сверху, каким-то головным путем, привить этим массам свое застарелое представление о художестве, бюрократически оберегая их от нового искусства.

Čužak then continues with a sharp attack on the Moscow bureaucrats’ refusal to print Majakovskij’s works:

История с *Мистерией Буфф* Маяковского и, особенно, история с новой его поэмой... для напечатания которой, через год после нелепых проволочек то с госиздательством, то с пролеткультом, величайший из поэтов современности вынужден посылать свою рукопись в Читу, – эта история страницей позора впишется со временем в историю революционных нравов России.

Произведение в котором бьется окровавленное сердце эпохи; произведение, которое одной из самых волнующих страниц войдет в историю “словесности российской” – будет напечатано впервые в захолустной Чите! Очень большая честь для Читы! Еще больше позора для тех мешанствующих недореволюционеров в революции, которые берут на себя функции Пришибеевых!<sup>16</sup>

Majakovskij’s own letter to *Tvorčestvo* is of great interest, since it shows clearly the connection between the poet and Čužak at this time. Majakovskij’s letter – which has never been reprinted – is, unfortunately, quoted by Čužak only in parts (the dots are Čužak’s):

<sup>15</sup> In a recently published memoir fragment, Čužak writes: “(...) ja polučil ot molodych družej Brika napisannoe mnogimi iz nich (Brik, N. Al’tman, Rajt i dr.) bol’šoe pis’mo (...)”. See N. I. Chardžiev, “Zametki o Majakovskom”, in *Vladimir Majakovskij. Memoirs and essays*, Stockholm 1975, p. 94.

<sup>16</sup> *Tvorčestvo*, No. 7, 1921, p. 136.

...“Шлю... Последнее. Аракчеевы разрослись. По всему фронту перестрелка. Печатайте... Аракчеевы канителият меня год. Организуемся. Вступите через... в постоянные сношения”...<sup>17</sup>

The comparison with Arakčeev is not accidental. There are good reasons to believe that it comes from Čužak's own article in *Tvorčestvo*, “Opasnost' arakčeevščiny” (No. 5, 1920).<sup>18</sup> This hypothesis is confirmed by Čužak in the same article, where he says that the first six issues of *Tvorčestvo* had reached Moscow and been handed over, among others, to Majakovskij. And he continues:

Большой радостью было для нас узнать, что наша скромная статья в защиту “левого искусства” (“Опасность аракчеевщины”, в № 5-ом) не прошла безследно как в наших партийных кругах, так и в писательских сферах, явившись между прочим, и предметом специального публичного выступления В. В. Маяковского.<sup>19</sup>

It may, in this connection, be of interest to relate in short Čužak's extensive article, which is dedicated to “Edinomu myslitelju do dna, velikomu analitiku i intuitivistu, dejstvennomu voditelju čelovečestva – Vladimiru Leninu”.

The main attack in “Opasnost' arakčeevščiny” is directed at literary bureaucrats, at all these “Ivan Ivanyči”, who at all levels do what they can to obstruct the writers, who work and function only on directives and whose lives are but a “splošnaja mechanika”. How can such men understand the revolution “kak tvorčestvo i čudo”, when the revolution is their “služba”? Čužak also criticizes fiercely anti-futurist statements made by critics such as Friče and high party members like Zinov'ev, and at the same time hails Majakovskij as the great revolutionary poet he had always been, even before the revolution. He prophetically says that Majakovskij's name will be “tak že svjazano s épochoj, kak ne vytraviš' iz nee imja Lenina”.

“Arakčeevščina”, finally, Čužak characterizes as follows:

Недосужная недоглядка коммунистических идеологов-вождей (застарелая революционная болезнь); капральское бросание полу-вождями сверху непродуманных демагогических (“для галерки”) директив; вынужденная, в силу интеллигентского саботажа, специализация в

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>18</sup> Reprinted in *K dialektike iskusstva*, pp. 72–88.

<sup>19</sup> *Tvorčestvo*, p. 136.

делах искусства невежественных и культурно-застоявшихся людей; оставление этих людей у власти над искусством и ныне, когда вынужденность явно миновала; культивирование лишь тематически (но не изнутри) революционной поэзии и искусства при помощи наголодавшихся, на все готовых лукоморцев; изготовление дипломированных социалистических ремесленников пролет-поэзии; использование юных, неокрепнувших рабочих талантов в качестве церберов искусства и чиновников цензурного ведомства, – все это создает для молодой великой революции российской определенную опасность аракчеевщины.

(...)

Борьба с казарменной тенденцией в области познания при помощи искусства есть очередная культурная задача партии. Чиновники должны быть прогнаны от искусства!

It was, of course, not difficult for Majakovskij to agree with this description of “arakčeevščina”. He had himself, especially in the case of *150 000 000* and *Misterija-Buff*, become a victim of directives from people without knowledge of literature; he had himself always fought against those simplifiers of the poetical craft who claimed that a good form would automatically follow from a good content; and he had firmly opposed the theory that a proletarian poet just because he had the proper origin and class consciousness, also possessed unique talents for writing and judging literature.

In Nikolaj Čužak (1876–1937), an old and fervent member of the Bolshevik party, Majakovskij found an ally who not only defended and propagandized futurism but also stood for some of the ideological conviction and firmness that Majakovskij himself was in search of. The future discord between Majakovskij and Čužak (in 1923, on the policy of Lef) will not be treated here.<sup>20</sup> It is, however, noteworthy that Majakovskij in a letter to Čužak on this issue, despite their disagreement, called him an “*ispytannyj drug i tovarišč*” (Majakovskij’s italics), and “po-prežnemu” considered him his “drug i tovarišč po rabote”.<sup>21</sup> The relations between Majakovskij and Nikolaj Čužak are certainly worth further research.

<sup>20</sup> In this quarrel Čužak turned, among other things, against those in the Lef group who didn’t see the difference between “*proizvodstvo i meščanskaja lirika*”. More specifically Čužak opposed the publication of *Pro éto* and Osip Brik’s short story *Nepoputčica*. See Majakovskij *XIII*, 315–316.

<sup>21</sup> *XIII*, 61.