

BENGT JANGFELDT

## Majakovskij and "the two Ellies"

Vladimir Majakovskij was involved with several women during his life. Some of these relationships were serious love affairs, others shorter romances or flirtations. Only three of them were strong and long enough to bring forth poetry: the one with Lili Brik, of course, the heroine of the bulk of Majakovskij's lyric poetry; the one with Tat'jana Jakovleva, to whom he dedicated two superb love poems, and the one with Marija Denisova, one of the prototypes of Marija in "Oblako v štanach".

Even though Majakovskij's shorter romances were not transmuted into words,<sup>1</sup> there is good reason to examine somewhat more closely at least one of them; it did not generate any love poetry, but it generated something else – the poet's only offspring – and played a role in Majakovskij's life that has been seriously underestimated – for the simple reason that, until now, it has been virtually unknown.

Vladimir Majakovskij was a great traveller, and he always dreamt of visiting the United States. Finally, in May, 1925, at a time when his intimate relationship with Lili Brik had already come to an end, he embarked on a trip that would take him to Mexico and the United States and last for six months: on July 27 he crossed the American border at Laredo, and he stayed in the country until October 28. During his three month stay in the United States, he travelled to Cleveland, Detroit, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh, where he gave poetry readings, but most of the time was spent in New York City. Soon after his arrival there, he met a young woman of Russian extraction, Elly Jones, with whom he initiated a close relationship. In June, 1926, she bore the poet a daughter, whom he recognized as his.

The story of Majakovskij's American love and possible offspring has been the subject of rumours for a long time. V. Percov, for example, mentions that Majakovskij visited Camp Nitgedaiget, a Jewish summer camp not far from New York City, in the company of his "acquaintance" Elizaveta Petrovna Jones, hinting at a closer relationship between them.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Majakovskij's autobiography "Ja sam": "Я поэт. Этим и интересен. Об этом и пишу. Об остальном – только если это отстоялось словом."

<sup>2</sup> V. Percov, *Majakovskij. Žizn' i tvorčestvo*, t. III, 1925–1930, M. 1972, p. 33–4.

And Edward J. Brown talks of "rumors" about Majakovskij having been "sexually involved with a young woman in New York who eventually bore him a daughter", adding: "But perhaps both women deserve to have their privacy respected."<sup>3</sup> During my work on Majakovskij's correspondence with Lili Brik,<sup>4</sup> I found in Lili Brik's archive four letters and two Christmas cards from Elly Jones to Majakovskij, as well as two empty envelopes and some photographs depicting mother and daughter. In order to show that Majakovskij's disputed trip to Nice in March, 1929, really took place, I had to quote from one of the letters, and so the fact that Majakovskij had a daughter was for the first time made public.<sup>5</sup> However, fully endorsing Brown's position that "both women deserve to have their privacy respected", I never made any attempts at further research in order to establish their identities. Five years after the correspondence was published, Carl R. Proffer published some excerpts from letters from Elly Jones to Majakovskij (which Lili Brik had shown him), but was unable to establish her identity; he thought it "clear that the 'Jones' is a code name or pseudonym".<sup>6</sup>

In 1989 the situation changed: Patricia J. Thompson, professor of Women's Studies in New York, chose to disclose her identity as Majakovskij's daughter. Shortly afterwards, an account of Mrs. Thompson's story was published in the Soviet Union.<sup>7</sup>

Helen Patricia Jones (nicknamed Elly like her mother) was born in New York on June 15, 1926, the daughter of Vladimir Majakovskij and Elly Jones, née Elizaveta Petrovna Siebert,<sup>8</sup> born 1904 in the village of Dovlekanovo, not far from Ufa, in a family of German descent. In the beginning of the 1920's, Elizaveta Petrovna met an Englishman, George E. Jones, who was working in Russia as a representative of the ARA. They married, and left Moscow in 1923. After a short stay in England, they went on to the United States, where they settled in New York City.

<sup>3</sup> E. J. Brown, *Mayakovsky. A Poet in the Revolution*, Princeton 1973, p. 290.

<sup>4</sup> B. Jangfeldt, V. V. *Majakovskij, i L. Ju. Brik: Perepiska 1915-1930*, Stockholm 1982.

<sup>5</sup> *Loc. cit.*, p. 270.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the chapter "Lily Brik" in Proffer's book *The Widows of Russia and Other Writings*, Ann Arbor 1987, pp. 85-87. Since the excerpts from the letters were copied in great haste during a visit to Lili Brik's apartment in Moscow, the information in the article inevitably bears the mark of confusion.

<sup>7</sup> S. Babič, "Patricija Tompson - doč' Majakovskogo", *Écho planety*, 1990: 18, April-May, pp. 39-44.

<sup>8</sup> In Percov, *op. cit.*, her last name is erroneously given as Alekseeva, a mistake repeated by me (*op. cit.*).



Majakovskij defending Elly Jones. Drawing by Majakovskij. (Patricia J. Thompson's archive).

Elly Jones once "saw" Majakovskij in Russia in 1923, but it was only in New York City that they were introduced to each other.<sup>9</sup> From the end of August and throughout September, Majakovskij and David Burljuk spent several weekends in Camp Nitgedaiget in the company of Elly Jones. There exist three portraits of Elly Jones, one by Majakovskij (dated "6/IX New York") and two by David Burljuk made in Camp Nitgedaiget (one of them dated "1925 g. osen").<sup>10</sup> Two sketches by Majakovskij were also preserved by Elly Jones and are reproduced here.

<sup>9</sup> *Echo planety*, p. 40. According to Patricia J. Thompson, they met at a poetry reading. Majakovskij's first reading in New York City took place at Central Opera House on August 14.

<sup>10</sup> The first is reproduced in Percov, *op. cit.*, p. 34, the dated portrait by Burljuk in the English edition of the correspondence between Majakovskij and Lili Brik, ill. 42: *Love is the Heart of Everything: Correspondence between Vladimir Mayakovsky and Lili Brik 1915-1930*, Polygon, Edinburgh 1986; Grove Press, New York 1988; and the third (with the signature "David Burljuk 1925") in *Echo planety*, p. 39. Burljuk's dated drawing has the inscription

The first two months in the United States were a very productive period for Majakovskij: in six weeks, from August 6 to September 20, he wrote ten poems, among them "Brooklyn Bridge". Elly Jones remembers him once stating happily: "You know, when I finish, polish, write two good verses a day, I have done a good day's work, and I have completed so much in these weeks." They spent a lot of time together: "He was always working, that is, he composed his work orally. We walked a lot. He particularly liked to walk on 5th Avenue by day and Broadway by night." One morning, when Majakovskij was particularly satisfied with his work, he said to her: "What a wonderful feeling to know that there is something you can do better than anyone else in the world! Aren't you proud of me?" She answered: "I don't know whether you are the best poet in the world – there may be another, in a different language – I know that you bend the Russian language to your will like Rodin his material. But I know you are the dearest, kindest man in the world and I shall always think of you with love."<sup>11</sup>

Unfortunately, all but one of Majakovskij's letters to Elly Jones have been lost, but from her letters to him<sup>12</sup> we can establish that she immediately informed the poet that he had become a father on June 15, and also that he replied, but with some delay. On July 20, Elly Jones wrote back to him: "Так обрадовалась Вашему письму, мой друг! Почему не писали раньше. Я еще очень слаба. [...] Со мной Пат. Она не отходила от меня за все это время. Милая." In his letter, Majakovskij had obviously expressed a wish to visit New York, and she informs him that Charles Recht (the lawyer who helped Majakovskij get an American visa in 1925)<sup>13</sup> will be back in New York in August: "Уверена, что визу Вам достанем. Если окончательно решили приехать – телеграфируйте." She ends the short letter by reproaching Majakovskij for not writing: "Ждала, ждала от Вас писем – а они у Вас в ящиках? Ах, Владимир. Неужели не помните про любимую лапу. Смешной! Какнибудь бы нам обеим [sic] сходить к Freud."

"Елизавета Алексеевна. Mrs Джонс", which explains my error and possibly also Percov's (foot-note 8).

<sup>11</sup> The quotations are from Elizabeth Peters' (Elly Jones') manuscript "Mayakovsky in Manhattan" (written in the 1970's and early 1980's), excerpts from which have kindly been put at my disposal by Patricia J. Thompson.

<sup>12</sup> Fond L. Ju. Brik, CGALI. The envelopes show that Elly Jones addressed her letters to Majakovskij's working address, Lubjanskij proezd, 3, and not to the poet's sister Ol'ga, as stated in *Echo planety*, p. 40. I quote from typescripts in my possession.

<sup>13</sup> S. Kémrad, *Majakovskij v Amerike*, M. 1970, p. 264–6.

Majakovskij never returned to New York, neither in 1926, nor later (as a matter of fact, 1926 was the only year he did not leave Russia after he began travelling abroad in 1922). On December 3, 1926, Elly Jones sent him a Christmas card (received Dec. 26), but after that there is no evidence of any contact until 1928, when Majakovskij visited Paris. He arrived on October 15, and in a letter of October 20 he informed Lili Brik: "Сегодня еду на пару дней в Ниццу (навернулись знакомицы) [...]"<sup>14</sup> – the acquaintances, of course, being his daughter and her mother. Since Majakovskij was back in Paris again on October 25,<sup>15</sup> he could not possibly have spent more than two days in Nice. Some photographs of mother and daughter on the beach in Nice have been preserved.<sup>16</sup>

On October 26, upon his return to Paris, Majakovskij wrote a letter to Elly Jones:<sup>17</sup>

Две милые Элли!  
Я по Вас уже весь изсоскучился. Мечтаю  
приехать к Вам еще хотяб на неделю. Примите?  
Обласкаете?  
Ответьте пожалуйста.  
Paris 29 Rue Campagne Première Hotel Istria.  
(Боюсь только не осталось бы и это мечтанием.  
Если смогу выеду Ниццу среду четверг<sup>18</sup>)  
Я жалею что быстрота и случайность приезда не  
дала мне возможность раздуть себе щеки здоровьем.  
Как это вам бы нравилось.  
Надеюсь в Ницце выложиться и предстать Вам  
во всей улыбающейся красе.  
Напишите пожалуйста быстро-быстро.  
Целую Вам все восемь лап  
Ваш Вол

26/X 28

<sup>14</sup> V. V. Majakovskij i L. Ju. Brik: *Perepiska...*, p. 176–177.

<sup>15</sup> See Majakovskij's telegram to Lili Brik dated Paris, October 25, in V. V. Majakovskij i L. Ju. Brik: *Perepiska...*, p. 177.

<sup>16</sup> One of them is reproduced in *Love is the Heart of Everything...* (ill. 41), another in *Echo planety*, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

<sup>17</sup> Published from a photocopy of the original, kindly provided by Patricia J. Thompson. Also published in *Echo planety*, p. 44, without the Paris address.

<sup>18</sup> I.e., October 30 or 31.

Almost simultaneously, on October 27, Elly Jones sent Majakovskij a letter to Paris, of which only the envelope has been preserved. Majakovskij's letter was received on October 29, and Elly Jones answered immediately (her answer is postmarked 30.X.28 and addressed to Majakovskij, Hôtel Istria, Paris): "Письмо Ваше было получено только что, семь ч. вечера, так что завтра утром отошлю это." She writes: "Конечно, уродище, Вам будут рады! [...] Немедленно телеграфируйте о своем решении. Мы Вас встретим! [...] четыре лапы спят! Поцеловали в правую щеку за или для Володи, в левую для мамы. Потом объяснили долго, чтобы не перепутать, что именно на правой Володин поцелуй. [...] приезжайте. Мы можем ходить в гости и в более скромный номер. [...] Если не сможете приехать – знайте, что в Ницце будут две очень огорченные Элли, и пишите нам часто. Пришлите комочек снега из Москвы. Я думаю что помешалась бы от радости, если бы очутилась там. Вы мне снитесь все время! Но хорошо."

The second visit never took place, nor does Majakovskij seem to have answered the letter. Elly Jones' next letter to Majakovskij (with the first page missing), dated November 8 and postmarked 9–11–28, is a mixture of affection and reproaches: "Вы сказали: 'Мы так много могли жить еще.' Теперь говорю – 'Если все Вами сказанное здесь было из вежливости – будьте еще вежливы если это Вам не страшно трудно.' Вы себе представить не можете как я изнервничалась за эту неделю! Я не знаю о чем Вы думаете – но мне и так тяжело – я Вас *не очень* люблю, а просто люблю. Зачем мне делать еще больше. Тогда не нужно было приезжать. Я же просила Вас телеграфировать! Непонятно? Сразу двух Элли забыли? Или быть может не понравилось мое письмо? Или не интересно ехать к простуженным женщинам. Которые к тому же дают буржуазные наставления. Родной! Пожалуйста (девочка говорит *bitte, bitte, bitte*<sup>19</sup>) никогда не оставляй меня в неизвестности. Я совершенно схожу с ума! И если не хочешь мне писать скажи – это мое последнее письмо – как то не пишется. Или чтонибудь такое. Только так слушать и волноваться при каждом шаге в коридоре, при стуке в дверь – даже жутко. [...] [Девочка] все время выбегала на балкон, думала что Вы должны приехать на автомобиле. Потом я плакала и она меня очень утешала и грозила что сладкого не даст. Я старалась объяснить в чем дело, сказала 'Володя ist dumm und ungezogen', не только не приехал но и не написал. С тем что это невоспитано она очевидно согласилась – но

<sup>19</sup> Being of German descent, Elly Jones also spoke German with her daughter.

сказала решительно 'Володя ist nicht dumm – Сережа ist dumm'. Читаю Вашу книгу, чтобы не совсем забыть русский. [...] Я начала было уже не так по Вас тосковать, но вот Вы приехали и опять ужасно не хватает Вас и по России скучаю. [...] Правда, Владимир, не огорчайте Вашего girle friend [sic]! Вы же собственную печенку готовы отдать собаке<sup>20</sup> – а мы просим так немного. Ведь мы тоже звери, с ногами, с глазами! Уверяю незаурядные – только что не в клетке. И страшно нужно для нашего спокойствия чтобы мы знали что о нас думают – ну раз в месяц (пятнадцатого день рождения девочки) подумайте о нас! Напишите – а если некогда вырежьте из журнала, газеты чтонибудь свое и пришлите. Книги, обещались. [...] Берегите себя, да? Попросите 'человека, которого любите'<sup>21</sup> чтобы она запретила Вам жечь свечу с обоих концов! К чему? Не делайте это."

Oddly enough, the letter was addressed to Majakovskij's Moscow address. Had Majakovskij told Elly Jones that he was going back to Moscow? (he had planned to stay in Paris about two months,<sup>22</sup> and he returned to Russia only a month later). And why did he change his plans to make a second visit to Nice? The reason is obvious: the day Majakovskij returned from Nice, he was introduced to Tat'jana Jakovleva, with whom he fell in love immediately.<sup>23</sup> Not only did he not visit or write to Elly Jones; he did not write to or telegraph Lili Brik either until November 12, then hinting at changes in his life: "Моя жизнь какая то странная, без событий но с многочисленными подробностями это для письма не материал [...]"<sup>24</sup>

Majakovskij's next trip to France took place in the spring of 1929; he seems to have spent the last days of March in Nice, perhaps in the hope of seeing "the two Ellies". But they had gone to Milan at the end of February and returned to Nice only after Majakovskij had left. Elly Jones' next letter to Majakovskij is dated Nice, April 12, 1929, and addressed to Moscow. She informs him about her plans to leave immediately for

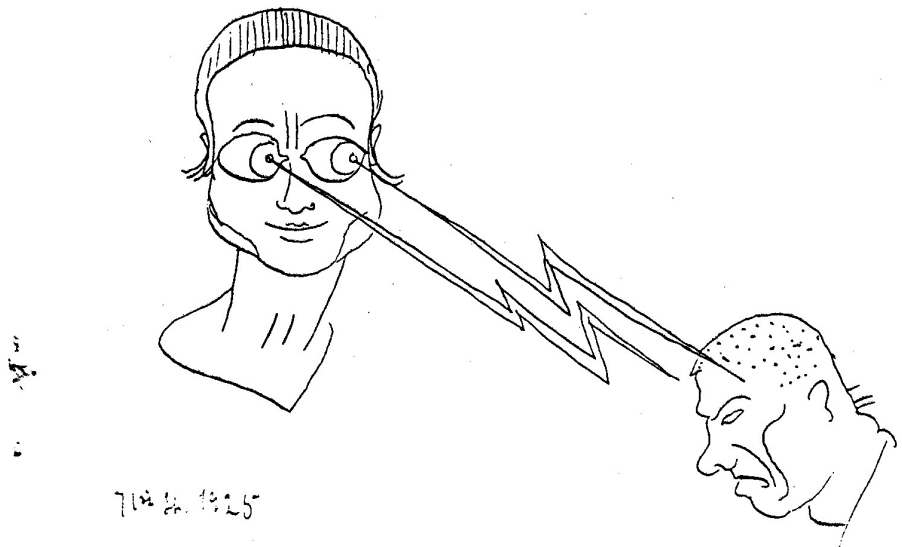
<sup>20</sup> Cf. Majakovskij's "Pro éto": "Я люблю зверье. / Увидишь собаченку – // тут у булочной одна – / сплошная плешь, – // из себя / и то готов достать печенку. // Мне не жалко, дорогая, / ешь!"

<sup>21</sup> I.e., Lili Brik.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Majakovskij's letter to Lili Brik of October 20: "Разумеется ни дня больше двух месяцев я в этих дохлах для меня местах не останусь" (*V. V. Majakovskij i L. Ju. Brik: Perepiska...*, p. 177).

<sup>23</sup> Cf. T. Jakovleva's letter to her mother, December 24, 1928: "[...] пригласили в один дом специально, чтобы познакомить. Это было 25 октября" (*V. Voroncova/A. Koloskov, "Ljubov' poëta", Ogonek, 1968: 16, p. 11).*

<sup>24</sup> *V. V. Majakovskij i L. Ju. Brik: Perepiska...*, p. 180.



Majakovskij getting inspiration from Elly Jones. Drawing by Majakovskij. (Patricia J. Thompson's archive).

London, where her "quota visa" for the United States was waiting for her and where George Jones was coming to meet her. She hopes to be in New York in a month's time ("если удастся приехать в Америку"), and asks Majakovskij to write to her at her New York address. And she adds: "А знаете, запишите этот адрес в записной книжке – под заглавием 'В случай смерти', в числе других, прошу известить и – нас [...]." Majakovskij followed her suggestion and entered the address into his note-book. (However, Elly Jones got the message about Majakovskij's death not from Moscow but from George Jones, who came home and told her: "Your friend is dead".<sup>25</sup>)

<sup>25</sup> Letter from Patricia J. Thompson to B. J., 11.4.91. The page in the note-book was torn out and preserved by Lili Brik, and I have seen it in her archive. Lili Brik did in fact make attempts to get in touch with Elly Jones: "В свое время я просила нашего посла Уманского осторожно навести о ней справки по тем адресам, которые были в Володиной записной книжке. Он ее не нашел. [...] Я сейчас просила Бурлюка, поскольку он был с ней хорошо знаком, все узнать о ней и о дочери Маяковского. Она была очень приятная женщина" (Transcript of an interview with Lili Brik, Dec. 22, 1955, quoted in *Echo planety*, p. 42).

34 *Bengt Jangfeldt*

The letter also contains some information about their daughter: "Она Вас еще не забыла, хотя я никогда о Вас не говорю. На днях мы гуляли в Милане и она вдруг говорит 'Der grosse Mann heit Володя'. Вы мне как то давно сказали что ни одна женщина не устояла Вашему charm'у. Очевидно Вы правы!"

The only further evidence of any communication between Majakovskij and Elly Jones is an empty envelope, which shows that a letter from Elly Jones was received in Moscow on October 22, 1929. Six months later, Majakovskij committed suicide. Elly Jones finished Millersville College, received an M.A. in Slavic languages from the University of Pennsylvania, and worked for the rest of her life as a teacher of Russian, French, and German. In the 1940's she divorced George Jones and married German-born Heinrich (Henry) Peters. She died in Lancaster, Pennsylvania in 1985.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Cf. the obituary in the newspaper *New Era* (March 27, 1985): "Born in Russia, Mrs. Peters came to the United States in 1923. She formerly served as a translator and guide for Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovsky during his visit to the United States. At the time of her death, she was working on a manuscript titled 'Mayakovsky in Manhattan: A Memoir'."