

# Maiakovskii and the Mobile Monument: Alternatives to Iconoclasm in Russian Culture

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But who is he  
in bronze, who is the moveless one?  
The poet laughed, It isn't me.  
It's nearly me, but I am free

—Edwin Morgan

On 28 July 1958, twenty-eight years after Vladimir Maiakovskii's suicide, on the Moscow square bearing his name, an imposing statue was unveiled to "the leading poet of our time."<sup>1</sup> In the dedicatory address, Minister of Culture Nikolai Mikhailov praised the poet as an opponent of American imperialism and a friend to the proletariat: "Maiakovskii is fighting alongside us for the victory of communism."<sup>2</sup> The poet's lover Lily Brik, however, expressed doubts about the belligerent, hyper-masculine portrayal of the poet: "If only you knew what a cry-baby he was."<sup>3</sup> As often with Maiakovskii, both in his poetry and in his posthumous reception, the image of the titanic warrior enshrined in the statue conceals a subtler character riven by conflict and paradox. Nevertheless, statues can also help us understand this more complex Maiakovskii better: the poet used the motif of the statue to articulate his attitudes toward the project of building a new culture after the revolution, often in ways that not only call into question his reputation as a nihilistic and iconoclastic proponent of destruction but also prompt a reexamination of the function of iconoclasm in Russian culture in general.

Just as Maiakovskii's poetic persona is typified by contradiction, the popular and scholarly response to Maiakovskii's statues—both poetic and physical—is marked by a lack of consensus. In reply to Brik's criticism of the statue, the poet's friend Pavel Lavut suggested that it was "better to have one like this than none at all."<sup>4</sup> Many have since disputed this claim: Edward Brown sees the statue as an ironic embodiment of the victory of Maiakovskii's "lifelong mortal enemy, *byt*."<sup>5</sup> Krystyna Pomorska agrees, arguing that "Majakovskij's attitude to monuments was one of resent-

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1. The quote is from the poet Nikolai Tikhonov in his speech at the unveiling of the Maiakovskii monument, reported in *Moskovskaia pravda*, 29 July 1958. All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

2. *Ibid.*

3. From the reminiscences of Konstantin Kedrov in *Izvestiia*, 29 July 2008.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Edward J. Brown, *Mayakovsky: A Poet in the Revolution* (Princeton, 1973), 370. *Byt*, in this context, means the stultifying force of conformity and mundanity.

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ment.”<sup>6</sup> Marina Tsvetaeva, however, might have found it a fitting tribute: “For all his dynamism, Maiakovskii is static [. . .] his staticness [*statičnost'*] comes from his statue-ness [*statuīnost'*] [. . .] he is a living monument.”<sup>7</sup> Iurii Karabchievskii expands this argument into an indictment, as part of his vitriolic debunking of Maiakovskii: “there has never been in Russian literature, nor, I think, in any other, another writer so obsessed by the idea of a monument built by human hand”; such a monument is “an undeniable, almost the chief, element of his cumulative image, his own central demand from life, the fulfilment of his life, the meaning of his existence.”<sup>8</sup>

The first scholar to draw attention to the controversial question of Maiakovskii and monuments was the poet's friend Roman Jakobson, in his seminal article on Aleksandr Pushkin's statue motif, which opens with a quotation from Maiakovskii and devotes considerable attention to him. Jakobson sought to establish that for Pushkin the statue was one of the “constant organizing, cementing elements which are the vehicle of unity in the multiplicity of the poet's works and which [. . .] introduce the totality of a poet's individual *mythology*.” It is the task of the scholar, he suggests, to “extract these invariable components or constants directly from the poetic work.”<sup>9</sup> The challenge Jakobson implicitly sets—to perform this task for Maiakovskii—has never been completed, although worthy contributions have been made to this end. This shortfall may have a methodological explanation: Jakobson's search for “unity” has been criticized for imposing illusory coherence on the complexity of a poet's worldview.<sup>10</sup> If we are willing to accept that contradictions can in fact be foundational to a poet's mythology, however, Jakobson's approach—the “internal, immanent analysis” of one motif across a body of work—can shed light on both Maiakovskii's individual mythology and its relationship to the complex of mythologies that constitute culture as a whole, even when this analysis is not exhaustive.<sup>11</sup> In particular, examining Maiakovskii's statue motif in terms of iconoclasm can help us better understand the poet's attitude to the role of the past in the construction of a new culture, his relationship to the state, and his own legacy.

Recent scholarship has sought to understand iconoclasm, not as mindless destruction, but as a sophisticated semiotic process: Richard Clay has proposed that iconoclasm can be understood as “a type of ma-

6. Krystyna Pomorska, “Majakovskij and the Myth of Immortality in the Russian Avant-Garde,” in Nils Åke Nilsson, ed., *The Slavic Literatures and Modernism: A Nobel Symposium, August 5–8, 1985* (Stockholm, 1987), 63.

7. Marina Tsvetaeva, “Epos i lirika sovremennoi Rossii,” *Sochineniia v dvukh tomakh* (Moscow, 1980), 2:417.

8. Iurii Karabchievskii, *Voskresenie Maiakovskogo* (Moscow, 1990), 142, 192.

9. Roman Jakobson, “The Statue in Puškin's Poetic Mythology,” in Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy, eds., *Language in Literature* (Cambridge, Mass., 1987), 318, 319. Emphasis in the original.

10. See David M. Bethea, *Realizing Metaphors: Alexander Pushkin and the Life of the Poet* (Madison, 1998), 96.

11. Jakobson, “Statue in Puškin,” 319.

terial sign transformation,” in which a preexisting sign is adapted, giving it new meaning.<sup>12</sup> This adaptation can entail either the alteration of the physical monument itself or the manipulation and transformation of pictorial or verbal representations. Maria Rubins has argued that the relocation of a monument into text can in itself be considered an act of iconoclasm: “While iconographic texts render the signifier, i.e., the plastic representation itself, their iconoclastic counterparts figuratively ‘shatter’ the signifier, shifting the focus from the artistic representation to the referent.”<sup>13</sup> One could add that, once liberated from the signifier, this referent can acquire new meanings constituted by its changed context. Such implicit *de facto* textual iconoclasm is, however, often accompanied by a self-conscious engagement with more explicit iconoclastic practices: for his part, Maiakovskii frequently sought to minimize the distance between his metaphorical tampering with the statue and actual physical iconoclasm. Consequently, we should locate his historically conscious use of the statue motif within the historical discourse of iconoclasm in Russia, which, thanks to the widespread perception of iconoclasm as provocatively unnatural, is characterized, much like Maiakovskii’s poetry, by extremity and contradiction. Richard Stites summarizes the situation neatly: “Iconoclasm seems so very Russian. But so does anti-iconoclasm.”<sup>14</sup>

Stites’s comment refers to the flurry of violence against property in 1917 and the preservation campaigns that it inspired. Maiakovskii’s poetic career encompassed not only this conflict but also later debates in which the question of the destruction or preservation of statues served as a case in point for arguments about the role of the past in the shaping of postrevolutionary culture. Discussions of monuments, therefore, provided an arena for the playing out of the rivalry between the avant-garde and the government over control of the cultural development of the nation.<sup>15</sup>

Monuments, of which statues can be seen as an anthropomorphic subset, provide a particularly suitable battleground for this rivalry because they exist at the intersection of aesthetics and power.<sup>16</sup> Erecting a statue or monument is both expensive and difficult and requires control over urban planning; thus this has always been the preserve of those with power, most often the state. Monuments and statues operate as “visual symbols

12. Richard Clay, “Bouchardon’s Statue of Louis XV: Iconoclasm and the Transformation of Signs,” in Stacy Boldrick and Richard Clay, eds., *Iconoclasm: Contested Objects, Contested Terms* (Aldershot, Eng., 2007), 94. For new approaches to iconoclasm, see, for example, Dario Gamboni, *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism since the French Revolution* (London, 1997).

13. Maria Rubins, *Crossroad of Arts, Crossroad of Cultures: Ecphrasis in Russian and French Poetry* (New York, 2000), 262.

14. Richard Stites, “Iconoclastic Currents in the Russian Revolution, Destroying and Preserving the Past,” in Abbott Gleason, Peter Kenez, and Richard Stites, eds., *Bolshevik Culture: Experiment and Order in the Russian Revolution* (Bloomington, 1989), 18.

15. See Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, trans. Charles Rougle (Princeton, 1992).

16. Monuments and statues operate in slightly different ways, but their functions are sufficiently similar to be considered together.

of power” that unilaterally announce the government’s control over both space and time.<sup>17</sup> They serve as markers of the omnipresence of political power in space: on the periphery, they are reminders of the powerful center; at the center, they express power’s stranglehold over the landscape. Monuments also aspire to control over time by demonstratively monopolizing the construction of historical narratives. The primary function of the monument is ostensibly to commemorate the dead (as a rule this is by design, and in the long run it is inevitable). They therefore serve as a sort of life after death and a riposte to the onward march of time: the statue’s solidity and immobility communicate a rejection of the effects of time and death. Mikhail Yampolsky has called them “islets of eternity in the movement of time.”<sup>18</sup> Their invocation of eternity is then used to establish the past and future continuity of the regime.<sup>19</sup>

This expression of the temporal continuity and geographic pervasiveness of power has made monuments important points of reference during times of political change: studies of 1917 and 1991 have demonstrated their central role in both spontaneous mass actions and revolutionary policy in Russia.<sup>20</sup> The urge to modify monuments at such moments has numerous motivations, which change over time, including the desire to use power’s own means of communication to send a message back and a sort of theatrical magical thinking in which the fate of a statue is believed to influence the state of the regime it represents.<sup>21</sup> The subsequent reconfiguration of ideological and urban landscapes in the wake of the fall of a regime is a slow and complex process: statues remain problematic because their message (both the explicit depiction of a hero of the old order and the implicit statement of continuity) is visibly at odds with the new political status quo. Consequently, they become the subject of debates about how the reshaping of the nation should proceed. The statue moves from being the center of crowd activity to being the subject of discussions in newspapers and other media.<sup>22</sup>

Their function as markers of power has also made statues prominent

17. Sergiusz Michalski, *Public Monuments: Art in Political Bondage, 1870–1997* (London, 1998), 107. See also Benjamin Forest and Juliet Johnson, “Unraveling the Threads of History: Soviet-Era Monuments and Post-Soviet National Identity in Moscow,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 92, no. 3 (September 2002): 526; Richard Clay, “Introduction: Contested Objects, Contested Terms,” in Boldrick and Clay, eds., *Iconoclasm*, 7.

18. Mikhail Yampolsky, “In the Shadow of Monuments: Notes on Iconoclasm and Time,” trans. John Kachur, in Nancy Condee, ed., *Soviet Hieroglyphics: Visual Culture in Late Twentieth-Century Russia* (Bloomington, 1995), 97.

19. See Christina Lodder, “Lenin’s Plan for Monumental Propaganda,” in Matthew Cullerne Brown and Brandon Taylor, eds., *Art of the Soviets: Painting, Sculpture and Architecture in a One-Party State* (Manchester, Eng., 1993), 16–32; Charles Merewether, “The Rise and Fall of Monuments,” *Grand Street* 68 (Spring 1999): 182–91.

20. See Orlando Figes and Boris I. Kolonitskii, *Interpreting the Russian Revolution: The Language and Symbols of 1917* (New Haven, 1999); Gamboni, *Destruction of Art*, 51–91.

21. See Figes and Kolonitskii, *Interpreting the Revolution*, 32, 54.

22. In the case of 1991, see Polly Jones, “‘Idols in Stone’ or Empty Pedestals? Debating Revolutionary Iconoclasm in the Post-Soviet Transition,” in Boldrick and Clay, eds., *Iconoclasm*, 241–59. The Narkompros paper *Iskusstvo kommuny* featured an article on pub-

in the work of poets, and particularly in the imagined dialogue between the poet and the tsar. (Although Jakobson does not mention it explicitly, emphasizing instead the erotic and the domestic, politics are central to Pushkin's myth of the statue.)<sup>23</sup> The treatment of statues in poetry differs markedly from their role in revolutionary action because the poet does not require access to the physical monument to perform acts of iconoclasm. Whereas in times of political stasis the general populace is unable to alter the statue in any permanent way, poets can enact endless transformations by relocating it in the textual space of their poetry.

Ecphrasis of this sort has more often been used as a means of articulating a relationship with other art forms and other poets than with the government.<sup>24</sup> The futurists with whom Maiakovskii began his career, however, merged poetic and political discourses in order to express their radical aesthetics. For example, the injunction of the manifesto "Poshchechina obshchestvennomu vkusu" (Slap in the Face of Public Taste, 1912)—"Throw Pushkin, Dostoevskii, Tolstoi and so on and so on from the steamship of Modernity"—has been interpreted as a reference to Vladimir's destruction of the pagan idols in Kiev before the imposition of Christianity on the population: the futurists purge literature of its pagan idols so that they can introduce their own one true faith.<sup>25</sup> Vladimir's iconoclasm remains a byword for total cultural change: in a classic article, Iurii Lotman and Boris Uspenskii described it as a "decisive milestone in the consciousness of Old Russia" and a canonical example of a form of binary thinking about culture that is typified by "a conception of the new not as a continuation, but as a total eschatological change."<sup>26</sup> Although Lotman and Uspenskii are careful to limit the historical range of their analysis to premodern Russia, the binary conception of cultural change

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lic statuary in most issues of its short existence during the winter of 1918 and spring of 1919.

23. See Jakobson, "Statue in Puškin," 322; and Roman Jakobson and Krystyna Pomorska, *Dialogues*, trans. Christian Hubert (Cambridge, Eng., 1983), 146.

24. For example, Maria Rubins has shown how Aleksandr Blok used statues to critique symbolism. Rubins, *Crossroad of Arts*, 140.

25. David Burliuk, Aleksei Kruchenykh, Velimir Khlebnikov, and Vladimir Maiakovskii, "Poshchechina obshchestvennomu vkusu," in Vladimir Markov, ed., *Manifesty i programmy russkikh futuristov* (Munich, 1967), 50. Boris Gasparov alludes to this association when he suggests that Pushkin is thrown overboard "like a pagan divinity." See Boris Gasparov, "Introduction: The 'Golden Age' and Its Role in the Cultural Mythology of Russian Modernism," in Boris Gasparov, Robert Hughes, and Irina Paperno, eds., *Cultural Mythologies of Russian Modernism: From the Golden Age to the Silver Age* (Berkeley, 1992), 8. See also Lars Kleberg, "Notes on the Poem *Vladimir Il'ich Lenin*," in Bengt Jangfeldt and Nils Åke Nilsson, *Vladimir Majakovskij: Memoirs and Essays* (Stockholm, 1975), 166–78.

26. Iurii M. Lotman and Boris A. Uspenskii, "Binary Models in the Dynamics of Russian Culture (to the End of the Eighteenth Century)," in Alexander D. Nakhimovsky and Alice Stone Nakhimovsky, eds., *The Semiotics of Russian Cultural History: Essays by Iurii M. Lotman, Lidiia Ia. Ginzburg, Boris A. Uspenskii* (Ithaca, 1985), 33. This essay has a clear influence on Gasparov's reading of "Poshchechina," in which he describes the futurist Pushkin as the standard Silver Age Pushkin, with the exception that "they simply attached a minus sign," a phrase taken from "Binary Models."

they identify is clearly one of the influences on the futurists' articulation of their avant-garde agenda.

Vladimir's destruction of the idols is an instructive example of those functions of iconoclasm that repeat themselves in conjunction with the binary discourse. The Primary Chronicle relates how Vladimir "ordered the overturning of the idols—some to be chopped up, others burned"; the statue of Perun was cast into the Dnieper, foreshadowing the writers' expulsion from the steamship. "This was done [. . .] to insult the devil that had deceived people in this image." The violence against the statues was necessary both to galvanize and mark a change in belief: "Yesterday he was still revered, but today we insult him." Furthermore, Vladimir built a church on the former site of the pagan idols, replacing the old, discredited iconography with a new system of signs.<sup>27</sup> This iconoclasm is motivated, therefore, by criticism not only of the referent of the sign—the pagan deity—but also of its function as a sign—it "deceives" people by concealing the devil. Similarly, the futurists' rejection of Pushkin implies a critique of the fetishization of Pushkin.<sup>28</sup>

The revolution changed the context of Maiakovskii's iconoclastic thinking, both because it offered "unique possibilities" for the complete remaking of culture and because it presented the futurists with rivals in this endeavor, most notably the government.<sup>29</sup> The Bolsheviks' willingness to align themselves with Vladimirian iconoclasm and, implicitly, the binary model of cultural change, is clear in Vladimir Lenin's decree of 12 April 1918, "O pamiatnikakh respubliki," the first step in his plan for monumental propaganda, which claims that the revolution has "transformed Russia": "The Soviet of People's Commissars express the wish that on 1 May the most hideous idols [*istukany*] will already have been taken down and the first models of the new monuments put up for the judgment of the masses."<sup>30</sup> The old iconography was to be replaced with a new one, which differed not only in content but also in form: the new statues were to be temporary, a choice that has been seen as a rebuke of the tsarist monuments' claim to eternity.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, this official exploitation of iconoclastic discourses also operated in tandem with the "anti-iconoclasm" identified by Stites, exemplified by the establishment of the Section for Museums and Preservation of Monuments within Narkompros.<sup>32</sup>

Maiakovskii responded both to the government's usurpation of the avant-garde's primacy in cultural affairs and its preservation agenda

27. *Povest' vremennykh let*, ed. D. S. Likhachev (St. Petersburg, 1999), 190.

28. The Primary Chronicle's narrative of Vladimir's overturning of the idol can clearly be understood within a wider context of Orthodox opprobrium for the statue, motivated by the church's interpretation of the Mosaic commandment against graven images as a prohibition against any depictions except painted icons.

29. See Bengt Jangfeldt, *Majakovskij and Futurism 1917–1921* (Stockholm, 1977), 52.

30. *Dekrety sovetskoi vlasti* (Moscow, 1959), 2:95.

31. See Lodder, "Lenin's Plan," 21.

32. See Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (Oxford, 1989), 77.

with the poem “Radovat’sia rano” (Too Early for Rejoicing) in *Iskusstvo kommuny*, an official Narkompros publication, in December 1918. He upbraids the government for the sluggishness of cultural change:

А царь Александр  
на площади Восстаний  
стоит?  
Туда динамиты!

(But Tsar Aleksandr / is standing / on Uprisings Square? / Send dynamite!)<sup>33</sup>

Maiakovskii uses the immobile statue as a symbol for the lingering presence of the old culture in general: Lenin’s plan is clearly not moving fast enough. He contrasts the statue’s solidity to the dynamism of the revolution, represented in the word *vosstaniĭ* (uprisings), which not only plays on the difference between *stoiat’* (to stand) and *vosstat’* (to revolt) but also references the recent renaming of the square from Znamenskaia Square to Square of the Uprising. Maiakovskii makes this tardiness seem all the more reprehensible by connecting the cultural struggle to the civil war; he also invokes Pushkin, perhaps as a reminder of the futurists’ long-standing role in this battle:

Выстроили пушки по опушке,  
глухи к белогвардейской ласке.  
А почему  
не атакован Пушкин?

(They have lined up cannons around the edge, / deaf to the affection of the White Guard. / But why / is Pushkin not attacked?)<sup>34</sup>

This metaphorical attack on the symbols of monarchism was perceived as an attack on Bolshevik policy: on Lenin’s instruction, the head of Narkompros, Anatolii Lunacharskii, wrote an article for the next issue of *Iskusstvo kommuny* that used architectural metaphors to criticize the paper’s “destructive tendencies.” He argued that “too often in the history of humanity we have seen how fastidious fashion has promoted something new, while striving to turn what is old into ruins as quickly as possible,” and claimed that the avant-garde was trying to usurp the power of the government.<sup>35</sup> In his rebuttal Maiakovskii disparaged the government’s credentials to manage the development of culture by mocking their literal interpretation of his imagery.<sup>36</sup>

33. Vladimir Maiakovskii, “Radovat’sia rano,” *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v trinadtsati tomakh*, ed. V. A. Katanian (Moscow, 1955–1961; hereafter PSS), 2:16.

34. Ibid.

35. A. Lunacharskii, “Lozhka protivoiadiia,” *Iskusstvo kommuny*, no. 4 (29 December 1918): 1.

36. “Ot redaktsii,” *Iskusstvo kommuny*, no. 4 (29 December 1918): 1. See Jerzy Tarsarski “Komfuty: Ideologiczne awangardy w okresie wojennego komunizmu,” *Przegląd humanistyczny* 4 (1968): 41–59, for a discussion of the possibilities of reading this poem metaphorically.

As the 1920s progressed, iconoclastic imagery became increasingly confined to the avant-garde circles that had championed a tabula rasa for culture even before the revolution; the Bolshevik authorities, by contrast, sought to make use of the culture of the past.<sup>37</sup> Maiakovskii's critique of the statue changed to reflect the new problems threatening his vision of culture: in 1918 he had ascribed one attribute of the statue—durability—to prerevolutionary culture; although this practice continued, in the 1920s he also focused on another characteristic—immobility.<sup>38</sup> The static human form seemed to symbolize the stagnation of the cultural revolution at the hands of the culturally conservative government. This imagery is evident in Maiakovskii's poetic response to Lenin's criticism of his poem *150,000,000* (1920):

Ленин  
медленно  
подымает вежища  
Разжимаются губ чугуны  
Раскатываясь пустотою города гулково  
на мрамор цоколя обрушивая вес  
загрохотали чугунобуково  
ядра выпадающих  
пудовых словес.  
Садитесь товарищ  
а где-то в уме там:  
носит чушь такую пороть его  
видят занят  
стою монументом  
за чем только смотрит эта Фотиева.

(Lenin / slowly / lifts / his huge eyelids / the iron of his lips relaxes / rolling through the emptiness of the echoing city / crashing their weight down on the marble of the socle / they start rumbling like iron / the cannonballs of dropping out / pood-heavy words. / Take a seat, comrade. / But somewhere up there in his mind: / he's talking such rubbish flog him / they can see I'm busy / I stand as a monument / watched over only by that Fotieva.)<sup>39</sup>

Lenin's hostility to Maiakovskii's modernism is embodied in his grotesque and statuesque solidity and immobility; the poet, by contrast, is likened to radiation—a modern, intangible, and mobile phenomenon:

37. See Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia* (Ithaca, 1992), 115.

38. For instances in which Maiakovskii likens the culture of the past to statuary, see Maiakovskii, *PSS*, 12:45, 81, 434–35.

39. Maiakovskii, *PSS*, 4:304. For a more detailed examination of the statue contexts of this poem, see Irina Ivaniushina, "Mednyi vsadnik' Vladimira Maiakovskogo," *Voprosy literatury*, pt. 4 (2000): 312–26. For the connection with Lenin's note, see Jakobson and Pomorska, *Dialogues*, 141. For Lenin's criticism of Maiakovskii, see E. I. Naumov, V. V. *Maiakovskii: Seminarii* (Leningrad, 1963), 210: "Are you not ashamed to vote for the publication of 5000 copies of Maiakovskii's *150,000,000*? Rubbish, stupid, arrant stupidity and prententiousness. I think that you should print only 1 in 10 of such things and not more than 1500 copies for libraries and eccentrics. And flog Lunacharskii for futurism."



Меня ль секретарша и дверь озаботит  
И сквозь грудь я пролезу.  
Радий.

(Would a secretary and a door bother me / I can crawl even through a chest. / Radium.)<sup>40</sup>

In 1924 the decision to embalm Lenin's dead body seemed to make real Maiakovskii's metaphorical petrification of Lenin. Maiakovskii saw this transformation of Lenin into a morbid ersatz monument as a symbol for the stagnation of revolutionary ideology.<sup>41</sup> In a *Lef* article refused by the censors, he urges the makers of memorabilia not to "trade in Lenin" and produces a spoof-advertisement of Lenin busts to ridicule the kitsch Leniniana that preserved his death, not his life, and that symbolized Lenin's instrumentalization and commercialization.<sup>42</sup> The language used in the article echoes his panegyric *Vladimir Il'ich Lenin* (1924), which combats the same threats: "Lenin is still our contemporary. He is among the living. We need him alive, not as a dead man. For that reason: Learn from Lenin, but don't canonize him."<sup>43</sup> This rhetoric is further evident in Maiakovskii's "Iubileinoe" (Jubilee Poem), a poem of the same year addressed to the Pushkin monument in Moscow:

Я люблю вас,  
но живого,  
а не мумию.

(I love you, but alive, and not as a mummy.)<sup>44</sup>

This line is clearly addressed to both Lenin and Pushkin, both of whom are victims of constrictive ideological readings. Maiakovskii complains, as he had in 1912, that Pushkin has been transformed into an object of cult adoration, rather than understood as a "living" person with a flexible poetic legacy. The emblem of this fetishization, and counterpart to Lenin's mummy, is the monument on Pushkin square in Moscow that was the center of the cult of Pushkin and the object of ridicule by the futurists.<sup>45</sup> Maiakovskii imagines it as a prison:

Бояться вам рожна какого?  
Что  
против—Пушкину иметь?  
Его кулак  
навек закован  
в спокойную к обиде медь!

40. Maiakovskii, *PSS*, 4:305.

41. See Maiakovskii, *PSS*, 6:252, for Maiakovskii's similar concerns about Karl Marx.

42. See Kleberg, "Notes on the Poem *Vladimir Il'ich Lenin*," 168; Nina Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives! The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997), 207.

43. Kleberg, "Notes on the Poem *Vladimir Il'ich Lenin*," 169.

44. Maiakovskii, *PSS*, 6:54. See Pomorska, "Maiakovskij and the Myth of Immortality," 63.

45. See, for instance, David Burliuk, "Plodonosiashchie," *Stikhotvoreniia*, ed. S. R. Krasitskii (St. Petersburg, 2002), 407.

(What sort of trouble are you afraid of? / What could Pushkin do against it? / His fist / is shackled forever / in bronze untroubled by insults!)<sup>46</sup>

Others viewed this immobility and durability positively: for Tsvetaeva the Pushkin monument was a “vision of inviolability and immutability.”<sup>47</sup> During the turbulent years of revolution this inviolability came to represent for some the resilience of culture in the face of barbarian assault, as is shown in this poem by Valerii Briusov from 1917:

Но неизменен, в новых бурях света,  
Его спокойный и прекрасный лик;  
На вопль детей он не дает ответа,  
Задумчив и божественно велик.

(But unchanged, in the new storms of the world, / is his calm and beautiful face; / He gives no reply to the shrieking of children, / Thoughtful and divinely great.)<sup>48</sup>

Pushkin's role as a figurehead of cultural continuity came to be endorsed by the government. In response to the alleged nihilistic anti-traditionalism of Proletkul't and the futurists, Lunacharskii promoted the necessity of continuity in Russian literature, especially in 1923's “Back to the Classics” campaign and the Pushkin Jubilee of 1924.<sup>49</sup> Lunacharskii argued that Pushkin should occupy a central place in the new culture, at the expense of the avant-garde, not only because of his work's technical virtues but also because of its “emotional and ideological content,” which was “of value to all humanity.”<sup>50</sup> He implied that Pushkin had defeated the avant-garde: “Even the most turbulent futurist figures are now bowing down before him.”<sup>51</sup> Maiakovskii is said to talk about him “with reverence”—an allusion to a speech the poet made on 26 May 1924 in which he spoke fondly of Pushkin and seemingly stated his approval of the use of the classics as the basis for the new art, proposing that “we will return hundreds of times to such works of art and study them.” Maiakovskii's surprising tenderness may be motivated by the fact that 26 May was Pushkin's birthday according to the old Julian calendar. Maiakovskii later felt compelled to distance himself from this position and so revised the printed version of this address, adding the proviso that “this is in no way similar to the slogan ‘Back to Pushkin.’ My attitude to this question is in my poem ‘Tubileinoe.’”<sup>52</sup>

46. Maiakovskii, *PSS*, 1:123.

47. Tsvetaeva, “Moi Pushkin,” *Sochineniia*, 2:332.

48. Valerii Ia. Briusov, *Sobranie sochinenii v semi tomakh*, ed. P. G. Antokol'skii, A. S. Miasnikov, S. S. Narchatovi, and N. S. Tikhonov (Moscow, 1973–1975), 3:43. For further examples of Pushkin as a beacon of cultural continuity, see Robert P. Hughes, “Pushkin in Petrograd, February 1921,” in Gasparov, Hughes, and Paperno, eds., *Cultural Mythologies*, 204–13.

49. See Halina Stephan, *“Lef” and the Left Front of the Arts* (Munich, 1981), xii.

50. See A. V. Lunacharskii, *Sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow, 1963–1967), 1:39, 38–43; Anatoly V. Lunacharsky, *On Literature and Art*, ed. A. Lebedev, trans. Y. Ganushkin (Moscow, 1965), 93–101.

51. Lunacharskii, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 1:39.

52. Maiakovskii, *PSS*, 12:265, 266.

As the title suggests, Maiakovskii purports to have written a quasi-official poem. The Pushkin he chooses to represent, however, is very different from that of the Pushkin cult or Lunacharskii's speeches: he emphasizes his unusual racial origin, his irreverence, and his quasi-futurist love of wordplay.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, rather than treat him as a teacher, Maiakovskii speaks to him as an equal, makes him his pupil, and forces him to abandon iambic meter and work in agitprop. He militates against the notion of Pushkin as a link between the culture of the past and the present: if there is any commonality between Pushkin and the present, it is because Pushkin can be made modern, not that modernity can be made Pushkinian. Maiakovskii explained his approach using monumental imagery: "My poem dedicated to Pushkin is a way of shaking up Pushkin the Academician and of constructing the sort of Pushkin that a person with a certain revolutionary enthusiasm can talk about like he was his poet. . . . We are using not a harness, but a means of steering [*povorachivaniia*] the monument in order to be able to still talk to this Pushkin."<sup>54</sup> This metaphorical "steering" is made literal in the course of the poem: as he discusses love and pillories his contemporaries, Maiakovskii leads the Pushkin statue through the Moscow night, before returning him to his pedestal at daybreak. The statue's freedom of movement symbolizes the flexible literary inheritance that Maiakovskii thinks should constitute Pushkin's contribution to culture. This self-reflexive mobilization of Pushkin is not only an emblem of the greater flexibility Maiakovskii proposes for the reception of Pushkin but an example of it, because, rather than reiterating his mythology Maiakovskii reverses the polarity of Pushkin's binary; as Jakobson observed, "the motif of the forced, imprisoning immobility of a statue, polemically opposed to Pushkin's myth of its sovereign rest, acquires particular vigor in Maiakovskii."<sup>55</sup> While Pushkin considers the mobile statue demonic, Maiakovskii sees immobility as unnatural.

The ambulant Pushkin statue can be seen as party to a broader avant-garde attitude to monuments that strove to reconcile the need to commemorate the revolution (and construct a prehistory for the revolutionary state) with a distaste for lifeless monumentalism. Movement was presented as one solution to this impasse: Nikolai Punin in *Iskusstvo kommuni* argued that monuments should be places of "the most intense movement" and nominated as an example Vladimir Tatlin's proposed monument to the Third International, which includes numerous different rotating sections

53. For the importance of Pushkin's irreverence in Russian modernism, see Greta N. Slobin, "Appropriating the Irreverent Pushkin," in Gasparov, Hughes, and Paperno, eds., *Cultural Mythologies*, 214–30. Maiakovskii's emphasis on Pushkin's irreverent qualities may well have been inspired by similar remarks in Sergei Esenin's address to the Pushkin statue, written before Maiakovskii's in 1924. See Sergei Esenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v semi tomakh*, ed. Iu. L. Prokushev (Moscow, 1995–2000), 1:203.

54. Vladimir Maiakovskii, "Vystupleniia na dispute 'Lef ili blef,'" in V. V. Vinogradov, ed., *Novoe o Maiakovskom* (Moscow, 1958), 66.

55. Jakobson, "Statue in Puškin," 364.

representing the motive force of revolution.<sup>56</sup> Tatlin is also cited by Vladimir Paperny, who sees their incorporation of movement into architecture as one of the key points of difference between the avant-garde and their Stalinist successors.<sup>57</sup> This emphasis on movement (albeit limited: Tatlin's rotating sections, like Pushkin in "Iubileinoe," always return to the same spot) predates the revolution as an avant-garde concern and has countless philosophical and artistic sources.<sup>58</sup> It is in part, however, a product of a tension inherent in modernist art: the iconoclastic artist seeks both to efface the past and to propagate his message; the latter requires the creation of a lasting work of art, which then, in turn, becomes a new past—as Paul de Man says, "he is both the historian and the agent of his own language."<sup>59</sup> This impasse has political parallels: Maiakovskii was troubled by the inevitable fact that the carnival of revolution led to a new, imprisoning status quo. He first expressed these fears in the play *Vladimir Maiakovskii: Tragediia* (1913), originally titled *Bunt veshchei* (The Revolt of Things), which draws parallels between social unrest and an ontological revolution in which inanimate objects begin to move: "i vdrug / vse veshchi / kinulis'" (and suddenly / all the objects / flew about). Katherine Lahti argues that this movement has been initiated by a giant woman, who bestrides the city: "Nad gorodom / —gde flugerov drevki— / zhenshchina / —chernye peshchery vek— / mechetsia" (Above the city / —where there are the poles of the weather vanes— / a woman / —black caves of eyelids— / is rushing).<sup>60</sup> The woman appears on stage, however, as a giant

56. Nikolai Punin, "O pamiatnikakh," *Iskusstvo kommuni*, no. 14 (9 March 1919): 3.

57. Vladimir Paperny, *Architecture in the Age of Stalin: Culture Two*, trans. John Hill and Roann Barris (Cambridge, Eng., 2002), xxiii, 13, 32. It is tempting to see the influence here of Paperny's father, Zinovii, and his reading of Maiakovskii: see Z. Papernyi "Ot Pushkina do nashikh gazetnykh dnei . . .," in A. A. Mikhailov and S. Lesnevskii, eds., *V mire Maiakovskogo: Sbornik statei* (Moscow, 1984), 80–116.

58. The Italian futurists are famous for their paeans to motion (especially relevant here is Umberto Boccioni's *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, which attempts to render movement in a sculpture); their Russian counterparts Velimir Khlebnikov and Aleksei Kruchenykh both also mention moving statues, as do non-futurists such as Aleksandr Blok and Innokentii Annenskii. See Velimir Khlebnikov, "Pamiatnik," *Velimir Khlebnikov: Sbornie sochinenii v shesti tomakh*, ed. R. Duganov (Moscow, 2000–2006), 1:216; Aleksei Kruchenykh, "Idite k chortu," in Markov, ed., *Manifesty i programmy*, 80; Adrian Wanner, "Blok's Sculptural Myth," *Slavic and East European Journal* 40, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 236–50; Alexandra Smith, *Montaging Pushkin: Pushkin and Visions of Modernity in Russian Twentieth Century Poetry* (Amsterdam, 2006), 49, 118. For other influences on the avant-garde passion for movement, see Nina Gur'ianova, "Estetika anarkhii v teorii rannego russkogo avangarda," in M. B. Meilakh and D. B. Sarab'ianov, eds., *Poezia i Zhivopis': Sbornik trudov pamiati N. I. Khardzhieva* (Moscow, 2000), 92–108.

59. Paul de Man, "Literary History and Literary Modernity," *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (London, 1983), 152.

60. Maiakovskii, *PSS*, 1:163, 157. Katherine Lahti, "On Living Statues and Pandora, *Kamennye baby* and Futurist Aesthetics: The Female Body in *Vladimir Mayakovsky: A Tragedy*," *Russian Review* 58, no. 3 (July 1999): 432–55. The gigantic woman is listed in the dramatis personae as Maiakovskii's Girlfriend. Lahti identifies her not only as a parody of the symbolist Eternal Feminine but as a response to the contemporary theatrical vogue for women to pose as statues and for statues to come alive.

*kamennaia baba*, an impassive, rough-featured stone statue. Her immobility is exacerbated by the fact that the crowds attempt to set her up as a monument to the revolution: “na chernom granite grekha i proroka / postavim pamiatnik krasomu miasu” (on the black granite of sin and vice / we will put up a monument to red meat).<sup>61</sup>

Maiakovskii implicitly criticizes the “desire to raise a monument instead of continuing the fury of the carnival whose fantasies really did turn the world upside down.”<sup>62</sup> This is typical of Maiakovskii’s scathing depictions of postrevolutionary utopias, in which the new order is usually inferior to the revolution that has created it, as in *Klop*, *Piatyi internatsional*, and *Che-lovek*. In *Tragediia* the poet himself becomes monumentalized—he wears the laurel wreath and toga of the Parnassian poet—but finds the new world “boring,” which points to Maiakovskii’s suspicions of the limitations of monumental commemoration, a theme we will explore later.<sup>63</sup>

*Tragediia*’s transformative rebellion through animation provides a blueprint for an attitude to the culture of the past that is evident in “Iubileinoe” and “Posledniaia peterburgskaia skazka” (The Last Petersburg Fairy Tale, 1916). The latter is a parody of Pushkin’s *Mednyi vsadnik* (Bronze Horseman, 1833) in which Peter, the Bronze Horseman, leaves his pedestal because he is envious of diners at the newly restored Astoria Hotel. He slinks off to join them, accompanied by the horse and the snake, which also comprise the monument, but fails to find a place in modern society and returns shamefaced.

In *Tragediia*, “Iubileinoe,” and “Posledniaia peterburgskaia skazka” Maiakovskii pursues a strategy from outside the binary iconoclastic tradition: instead of destroying the statue as an embodiment of the past he experiments with mobilizing it, letting it wander free to find a place in modern society. Thus we see the Bronze Horseman in a restaurant and Pushkin in an agitprop department.

Despite Maiakovskii’s criticisms of the official jubilee, his instrumental approach—in which Pushkin is reimagined to suit his needs—shows affinities with Pushkin’s appropriation by the Soviet state. Both poet and party hope to “steer” Pushkin in order to make him into a sort of usable past that can help them build a new culture.<sup>64</sup> What is more, they both do so by manipulating the Pushkin monument: in 1936 the inscription on the monument was changed slightly to suit the official understanding of Pushkin as a champion of freedom; in 1950 the statue was moved to the other side of the square, perhaps to erase memories of the monastery that had once stood there.<sup>65</sup> The monument continued to function as a

61. Maiakovskii, *PSS*, 1:158.

62. Robert Leach, “A Good Beginning: *Victory over the Sun* and *Vladimir Mayakovsky*, *A Tragedy Reassessed*,” *Russian Literature* 13, no. 1 (January 1983): 110.

63. Maiakovskii, *PSS*, 1:165.

64. See Stephanie Sandler, *Commemorating Pushkin: Russia’s Myth of a National Poet* (Stanford, 2004), 97, 110.

65. See M. P. Alekseev, *Pushkin i mirovaia literatura*, ed. G. P. Makagonenko and S. A. Fomichev (Leningrad, 1987), 10. The new lines were written in postrevolutionary orthography which, it could be argued, was in itself something of a symbol of the new regime.

symbol of cultural continuity but also promoted the new socialist culture. Although these interventions occurred after Maiakovskii's death, such manipulative preservation was evident in early Soviet policy: for example, Lenin ordered that the names of famous radicals be inscribed on the monument to the quatercentenary of the Romanov dynasty. As before, the obelisk symbolized historical continuity, but now it represented the continuity of socialist values.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, many statues, including that of Alexander III, were relocated to museums, an act that also constitutes a tacit transformation of the statue as sign: by reducing it to its aesthetic or historic qualities, the museum context seemingly nullifies the monument's symbolism. "Museumification" is in itself a highly symbolic act, however: the diminution of the statue to a purely aesthetic object enacts the triumph of the new ideological masters, who display these defunct monuments like the trophies of a defeated vassal-state.<sup>67</sup> Thus the statue remains a vehicle for the self-expression of state power.

Despite the fact that both the Soviet state and the poet move and alter statues to their own ends, there are essential differences between their approaches. Maiakovskii may liberate Pushkin to serve his agenda, but he also makes a wider point about the nature of cultural inheritance—our perception of the artefacts and texts of the past is necessarily conditioned by their present context. In contrast, the Soviet co-option of Pushkin sought a definitive recasting of the poet as a proto-Soviet radical and democrat as part of an attempt to limit the flexibility of culture. What is more, in order to advocate his contingent approach to the culture of the past, Maiakovskii makes his manipulation of Pushkin extremely obvious; the Soviet reimagining of Pushkin, on the other hand, is either unspoken or presented as entirely natural. Maiakovskii announces that Pushkin now works in propaganda; the government appoints him to this role in secret.

Of course, the major difference between the state and the poet is that the state is capable of actual physical relocation, while the poet can only recontextualize with words. Yet it is precisely this textual element to Maiakovskii's iconoclasm that gives it subversive power. What is more, by establishing parallels with more modern examples, by mobilizing the monument, Maiakovskii draws attention to an inherent truth about the interaction between literature and power in the landscape.

There is common ground between this reimagining of the monument in text and image and the well-established notion that "the meaning of a text, landscape, or monument is always polymorphous and dependent on multiply situated readers. The ability of the state or political elites to

66. Lodder, "Lenin's Plan," 23.

67. This "museumification" anticipates the creation of "sculpture parks" for communist statuary in the 1990s. See Fabio Rambelli and Eric Reinders, "What Does Iconoclasm Create? What Does Preservation Destroy? Reflections on Iconoclasm in East Asia," in Boldrick and Clay, eds., *Iconoclasm*, 15–35. In their typology of iconoclasm the authors define this sort of recontextualization as "negative cultural redefinition" in which "the object is preserved intact, and even highly visible, but redefined by its displacement into a new and secular context in which the agents aim to give it a clearly negative connotation" (21).

impose their intended reading on an audience is limited by the active role readers play in the creation of meaning.<sup>68</sup> Like Maiakovskii's mobilization of Pushkin, such popular reinterpretation of monuments works against the iconoclastic binary. Polly Jones has shown that in 1991 there was "a consensus against both iconoclasm *and* idolatry in the treatment of the public symbolism of the defunct Soviet state" that "concentrated upon redefinition and rereading [and] eschewed both narrowly ideological readings and neo-Bolshevik iconoclasm, proposing instead that Soviet iconography—once rendered less fearsome by physical and conceptual dislocation—would provide sites in which to rework and rewrite history and the aesthetic and social legacy of communism."<sup>69</sup> Jones's notion of "physical and conceptual dislocation" rehearses Maiakovskii's mobilization of both the statue's physical manifestation and its symbolic meaning in order to make it usable in the present.

Yet, although the urban landscape surely does function as a text that can be interpreted in various ways, this text is written and published by those in power. What is more, the multivalent monument created in reception is necessarily ephemeral: while viewers' interpretations may have some durability in urban legend and anecdote, this is too insecure a base from which to undermine official interpretations of the space of the city.<sup>70</sup> Likewise, attempts by artists to make physical alterations to statues in order to subvert official monumental narratives tend to founder because lack of control over space means that such interventions must either be very short-lived or confined to periods of political instability.<sup>71</sup>

Temporary interventions and popular interpretations can only aspire to the same permanence as the monuments they transform when they are granted longevity by attaining the status of art, typically when photographic and art historical accounts preserve the altered monument in books and galleries. In many instances this double recontextualization—the addition of new features or contexts to the monument by an artist and the new location of text or gallery—takes place without contact with the monument. In 1993 the pioneers of Sots Art, Komar and Melamid, launched Monumental Propaganda, a project in which artists were invited to enter into "a creative collaboration" with communist statues by finding ways "to leave them at their sites and transform them, through art, into history lessons."<sup>72</sup> These transformations often took creative advantage of the impossibility of their realization to design outlandish frames that could rid the monuments of their imposing aura by juxtaposing their grandiose solemnity either with the everyday realities of post-Soviet life or with a postmodernist artist's playful imaginings.

One can see clear parallels between this project and Maiakovskii's de-

68. Forest and Johnson, "Unraveling the Threads," 538.

69. Jones, "Idols in Stone," 248.

70. See Gamboni, *Destruction of Art*, 75.

71. *Ibid.*, 81.

72. Vitaly Komar and Aleksandr Melamid, "What Is to Be Done with Monumental Propaganda?" in Dore Ashton, ed., *Monumental Propaganda* (New York, 1994), 9.

ployment of Pushkin in “Iubileinoe” and Peter in “Posledniaia peterburgskaia skazka.” In both instances the statue is moved into an aesthetic space. In “Iubileinoe” and “Posledniaia peterburgskaia skazka” Maiakovskii emphasizes the fact that the animation of the statue is only temporary. Like the archetypal poet Orpheus, Maiakovskii can make objects come alive, but only in the carnivalesque space of his text.<sup>73</sup> The limitation of this movement to the poem underlines the fact that the poet’s complete control over this domain has no impact on the actual urban space, just as Komar and Melamid are unable physically to transform monuments. Nonetheless, this disadvantage is turned into a triumph because confinement to the aesthetic space ensures that the artist’s transformation of the statue becomes, in a sense, more permanent than the statue itself, because it is reproducible; it becomes a Horatian “monumentum aere perennius.”

The subversive effect of these recontextualized monuments is further evident in the way they challenge the process of museumification described above. Although the direction of the movement—from the street to the gallery—seems very similar, there is an important difference: while museumification moves the statue in order to aestheticize and neutralize it, Maiakovskii and the artists of Monumental Propaganda use the space of the gallery and the book to politicize the monument. This politicization is made possible by depicting a scenario in which aesthetic space is projected onto the statue in such a way as to draw attention, not to the statue’s aesthetic form, but to its political meaning.<sup>74</sup> In this way, the artistic recontextualization of the monument represents a truly avant-garde gesture because it breaks art out of the confines of the gallery (albeit figuratively) and uses aesthetic means to try to transform the world.

A further aspect of the transformative potential expressed by the recontextualized monument is the ostentatious demonstration of the fact that moving a sign into a new context engenders new meaning.<sup>75</sup> This concept was important in linguistic theory in early twentieth-century Russia, in the works of Aleksandr Potebnia, the formalists, and Valentin Voloshinov.<sup>76</sup> Potebnia argued that “one and the same word is understood differently by everyone; here we see the relative immobility of the image

73. This emphasis on the abilities of text vis-à-vis other art forms aligns Maiakovskii’s moving statues with a long tradition of descriptions of impossible ecphrasis in poetry in which stationary works of art are described as if moving: text can both counteract and highlight a mimetic shortcoming of figurative art—its failure to replicate movement.

74. For instance, Komar and Melamid imagine a noose around the neck of the statue of Feliks Dzerzhinskii, an aesthetic change that draws attention to the political connotations of the statue, not to its form.

75. See Iu. N. Tynianov, “O parodii,” *Poetika. Istoriia literatury. Kino* (Moscow, 1977), 294: “All methods of parodying, without exception, consist of the changing of a literary work or of a moment, which unites a range of works (an author, an almanac, a magazine) or the changing of a range of literary works (a genre)—as a *system*, in the translation of them into another system.”

76. See Renate Lachmann, *Memory and Literature: Intertextuality in Russian Modernism*, trans. Roy Sellars and Anthony Wall (Minneapolis, 1997); V. N. Voloshinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, trans. Ladislav Matejka and I. R. Titunik (Cambridge, Mass., 1986).



together with variability in content.<sup>77</sup> Maiakovskii unknowingly extends Potebnia's immobility metaphor in *Tragediia*, in which objects reject not only immobility but also the semiotic fixity of their "worn-out names": "vse veshchi / kinulis' / razdiraia golos, / skidyvat' lokhmot'ia iznoshennykh imen (all the objects / started flying about / tearing apart their voice / throwing off the rags of worn-out names). The poet draws a parallel between the liberation of immobile objects and the emancipation of the word.<sup>78</sup> In "Posledniaia peterburgskaia skazka," Peter is laughed out of the restaurant because the horse mistakes a pack of straws for straw, even though semantic confusion is more plausible here than visual. The poet critiques the hegemony of empty verbal tags by drawing attention to double meanings and highlighting the importance of context. Such linguistic games point to the importance of the *textual* existence of Maiakovskii's statues.

The analogy between words and objects is particularly close in the case of statues and quotations: just as a statue can function as a figurehead for a whole city, so a quotation has, alongside its own content, a connotative role as a representative for the text as a whole; furthermore, both quotations and statues have a tendency to hide in plain sight, being so ubiquitous that their actual meaning becomes lost. Maiakovskii treats statues and quotations as equivalent, finding new contexts for them, not to rehabilitate their lost meanings but to flaunt his own ability to fill the empty semiotic carapace of both word and monument. He opens "Posledniaia peterburgskaia skazka" with quotations from Pushkin's *Mednyi vsadnik* that acquire bathetic new meaning by transforming Pushkin's demiurge into a peckish diner: we see him first in a seemingly dramatic pose—"Stoit imperator Petr Velikii, / dummaet 'Zapiruiu na prostore ia!'" (Emperor Peter the Great stands there, / thinks "I will feast in the open space")—which recalls Pushkin's heroic Peter—"Stoial on, dum velikikh poln / [. . .] Vse flagi v gosti budut k nam, / I zapiruem na prostore!" (He stood, full of great thoughts / [. . .] All flags will come as guests to us / And we will feast in the open space!).<sup>79</sup> Now, however, his ambition amounts only to a good meal.

In "Iubileinoe" Maiakovskii misquotes a famous section of *Evgenii Onegin* (1833):

Как это  
у вас  
говаривала Ольга . . . ?  
Да не Ольга!  
из письма  
Онегина к Татьяне.

77. A. A. Potebnia, "Mysl' i iazyk," in I. V. Van'ko and A. I. Kolodnaia, eds., *Estetika i poetika* (Moscow, 1976), 176.

78. Maiakovskii, PSS, 1:163. Compare Paul A. Klanderud, "Maiakovskii's Myth of Man, Things and the City: From Poshlost' to the Promised Land," *Russian Review* 55, no. 1 (January 1996): 42: "Maiakovskii is attempting to alter radically their status as semiotic signs, to destroy their banal significations in prerevolutionary urban society."

79. Maiakovskii, PSS, 1:128; Aleksandr Pushkin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, ed. V. D. Bonch-Bruевич, Maksim Gor'kii, D. D. Blagoi et al. (Moscow, 1937), 5:135.

—Дескать,  
     муж у вас  
         дурак  
             и старый мерин,  
 я люблю вас,  
     будьте обязательно моя,  
 я сейчас же  
     утром должен быть уверен,  
 что с вами днем увижусь я.

(What was it you had Ol'ga say . . . ? / No, not Ol'ga, it's from Onegin's letter to Tat'iana. / Something like, "Your husband is a fool and an old gelding, / I love you, you must be mine / and right now I, this morning, must be certain / that I will see you in the day.")<sup>80</sup>

This misquotation exemplifies the way in which Maiakovskii promotes an image of himself as an uncultured semi-hooligan. It also hyperbolically demonstrates the idea that every instance of quotation is in itself a new communication. Just as his recontextualization of the statue anticipates the approaches of Komar and Melamid, this reinterpretation of Pushkin quotations foreshadows the way Sots Art artists exposed the vacuity of Soviet ideology by quoting slogans in their paintings.<sup>81</sup>

Despite these similarities, which suggest continuities between modernism and postmodernism, there are notable differences. Komar and Melamid openly constructed their creative engagement with monuments as a riposte to Vladimir's iconoclasm: they wrote to President Boris El'tsin with the plea, wondering, "How long will people continue worshipping or destroying things, never knowing any other alternative?"<sup>82</sup> Their adaptive preservation has been rightly understood as an act of "countermemory," which attempts to "unveil or expose the initial events of the construction of monumental history and its subsequent effects [which] involves breaking the claim of permanence by giving voice to, and somehow embodying, historical change."<sup>83</sup> While Maiakovskii also provides an alternative to the binary discourse of veneration and annihilation, his position is complicated by his desire both to maintain the avant-garde myth of the possibility of ex nihilo creation, which is incompatible with the notion that the new is merely a reworking of the old, and to promote his own privileged position in the new culture. Thus, while eschewing veneration, he maintains the right to destroy that which he believes cannot be appropriated, establishing himself as a sort of discriminating cultural gatekeeper. For example, in "Shutka pokhozhaia na pravdu" (A Joke Resembling the Truth, 1929), written in support of the campaign for the demolition of the Strastnoi monastery, he compares the monastery to its neighbor, the Pushkin monument, echoing many of the tropes of constriction detailed

80. Maiakovskii, *PSS*, 6:55.

81. See Ekaterina Iu. Andreeva, *Sots-Art: Soviet Artists of the 1970s–1980s* (East Roseville, Australia, 1995), 28, 44.

82. Komar and Melamid, "What Is to Be Done?" 11.

83. Merewether, "Rise and Fall," 189.

above: “Skushno Pushkinu. Chugunnomu roshchetsia” (Pushkin’s bored. The man of iron has got a grumble). Yet it is not being a statue that frustrates Pushkin but the fact that the monastery prevents him from walking over to join forces with the Soviet press: “Izvestiiam’ Pushkina Strastnoi zaslonoil” (Strastnoi has blocked off Pushkin from Izvestiia).<sup>84</sup> While the monastery is negatively characterized as motionless, the implication is that the statue can move: the distance between them is measured out in steps. Pushkin shows that he is capable of the mobility in the physical landscape that comes from flexibility in the ideological landscape. The allegedly alien presence of the Orthodox Church, however, is not so pliable and thus must be destroyed. The sign cannot be rewritten, so it must be erased.

Maiakovskii’s last work, the play *Moskva gorit* (Moscow Burns, 1930) points to further exceptions to the possibility for appropriation. Pushkin is again repurposed positively: a revolutionary climbs his monument and uses it as a podium for his call to arms.<sup>85</sup> Not all statues are acceptable, however. A screen shows enchained (*zakovannnye*) workers breaking free; their liberation is paralleled by the statues of the tsars and the stone Romanov eagles coming to life.<sup>86</sup> The workers shoot one of the eagles, however, and lead the herd of equestrian statues off to an unknown fate.<sup>87</sup> Although the revolution has made everything come to life, animation is not enough to guarantee a place in the new society.

*Moskva gorit* shows considerable similarities to the contemporaneous “Vo ves’ golos” (At the Top of My Voice), a poem that, in the light of Maiakovskii’s suicide soon after, has been read as a final bid to shape his legacy and articulate his relationship with Soviet power.<sup>88</sup> This coincidence of commemoration and power naturally suggests an engagement with monuments and “Vo ves’ golos” does indeed represent the culmination of Maiakovskii’s interest in his own potential monument.

Pomorska argues that Maiakovskii was obsessed with immortality, different forms of which he interrogated, and found wanting, in his poetry.<sup>89</sup> His explicit statements about the immortality offered by physical monuments are dismissive and often invoke the binary discourse of iconoclastic destruction, as in “Tubileinoe”:

84. Maiakovskii, *PSS*, 9:249.

85. *Ibid.*, 11:366.

86. The use of film here, and Maiakovskii’s well-documented passion for film in general, accord with his philosophy of mobility—the film director can, even more than the poet, imbue static images with motion. In an earlier screenplay with the significant title *Zakovannaia fil’moi* (Shackled by Film, 1918) a movie poster is made to come to life. Maiakovskii, *PSS*, 11:483–85. For an analysis of moving statues in 1920s films, see Evgenii Margolit, “Monumental Sculptures in Soviet Cinema of the 1920s,” trans. Birgit Beumers, *Kinokultura* 26 (2009), at [www.kinokultura.com/2009/26-margolit.shtml](http://www.kinokultura.com/2009/26-margolit.shtml) (last accessed 21 September 2012).

87. Maiakovskii, *PSS*, 11:371.

88. The poem, like the play, depicts the progress of the revolutionary cause from 1905 to 1930 and ends with a paean to the forthcoming Five-Year Plan. Identical rhymes and phrases also appear in both works.

89. See Pomorska, “Majakovskij and the Myth of Immortality,” 60.

Мне бы памятник  
 при жизни  
 полагается по чину.  
 Заложил бы  
 динамиту  
 - ну-ка,  
 дрызнь!

(I am due a monument during my lifetime according to rank. / I would lay dynamite—there you go, / kersplat!)<sup>90</sup>

Yet we also see evidence of the importance of mobilization as a means of commemorating without imposing stagnation: in “Tovarishchu Nette” (Comrade Nette, 1926) he proposes that in order to avoid the taint of death his monument should resemble the ship named after murdered Soviet ambassador Teodor Nette:

Мы идем  
 сквозь револьверный лай,  
 чтобы,  
 умирая,  
 воплотиться  
 в пароходы,  
 в строчки  
 и в другие долгие дела.

(We go through the barking of revolvers / in order to, when we die, be incarnated / in steamships, in verses and in other long things.)<sup>91</sup>

Just as in “Iubileinoe” Pushkin is granted new energy in the space of Maiakovskii’s poetry, here Maiakovskii hopes to be transformed into verse, which is characterized as durable, useful, and mobile. Maiakovskii alludes to the superior commemorative power of text in “Iubileinoe”:

Скоро вот  
 и я  
 умру  
 и буду нем.  
 После смерти  
 нам  
 стоять почти что рядом:  
 вы на Пе,  
 а я  
 на эМ.

90. Maiakovskii, *PSS*, 6:56.

91. Maiakovskii, *PSS*, 7:164. Pomorska, “Majakovskij and the Myth of Immortality,” 64. Pomorska has identified this poem as part of a trilogy, including “Iubileinoe” and “Sergeiu Eseninu,” in which the poet contemplates “the form of energy into which each man was transformed after the earthly form of energy was no more”; compare Mikhail Weiskopf, *Vo ves’ logos: Religiiia Maiakovskogo* (Jerusalem, 1997), 109n88: “At the same time, so it seems to me, Maiakovskii’s (baroque-futurist) enmity to monuments was by no means that irreconcilable and was corrected by the materialist mystique of the palpable-substantive commemoration of heroes.”

(So soon even I will die and will be dumb. / After death we are to stand almost next to each other: / you under Pee, and I under eM.)<sup>92</sup>

He sets up the expectation of a physical monument—the two poets will stand next to each other and Maiakovskii will be “dumb”—but they will actually be neighbors on the bookshelf.

In “Vo ves’ golos” Maiakovskii purports to address his descendants directly—there is no need for the bespectacled scholars of the future to root through the “fossilized shit” of the past.<sup>93</sup> Maiakovskii plays with the well-established trope of poetry as self-fulfilling prophecy—the poem being read both describes and guarantees the immortality of its author. Text will guarantee his ability to move into modernity: “ia shagnu cherez liricheskie tomiki / kak zhivoi / s zhivymi govoria” (I will stride through lyrical little tomes, / like the living talking to the living).<sup>94</sup> Mikhail Weiskopf has argued that Maiakovskii’s argument for the superiority of text is based on eighteenth-century discourses that contrasted the monument negatively to intangible values; this influence, modified by Maiakovskii’s flamboyant hooliganism, is clear in “Vo ves’ golos,” in which he places the collective achievement of socialism above everything:<sup>95</sup>

Мне наплевать  
на бронзы многопудье,  
мне наплевать  
на мраморную слизь.  
Сочтемся славою -  
ведь мы свои же люди, -  
пускай нам  
общим памятником будет  
построенный  
в боях  
социализм.

(I spit on the heavy weight of bronze, / I spit on the slime of marble. / Let’s settle up with glory— after all we are amongst our own here— / let our communal monument be socialism, / built in battles.)<sup>96</sup>

Weiskopf locates this gesture within the Horatian tradition but suggests that his intangible monument is heir, not to Pushkin’s famous “monument not made by human hand,” but to that of his predecessor Gavrila Derzhavin, because, unlike Pushkin, he embraces the poet’s official duties.<sup>97</sup> At the end of the poem, Maiakovskii conflates the two intangible monuments relevant to the roles of revolutionary and poet—respectively, socialism and text—by realizing the metaphor of text as monument, emphasizing the physical aspect of his literary legacy:

92. Maiakovskii, *PSS*, 6:55.

93. *Ibid.*, 10:279. Note the way in which time inevitably leads to the petrification of everything organic.

94. *Ibid.*

95. Weiskopf, *Vo ves’ logos*, 109.

96. Maiakovskii, *PSS*, 10:282.

97. Weiskopf, *Vo ves’ logos*, 162.

над бандой  
 поэтических  
 рвачей и выжиг  
 я подыму,  
 как большевистский партбилет,  
 все сто томов  
 моих  
 партийных книжек.

(Above a band of poetic graspers and rogues, / I lift, like a Bolshevik party membership document, / all hundred volumes of my party-oriented books.)<sup>98</sup>

The identification of intangible monuments and poetry in the service of an idea is strengthened by a negative connection between physical monuments and apolitical poetry. Maiakovskii argues that erotic verse would have been more profitable for him but would have endangered Russia:

Неважная честь,  
 чтоб из этаких роз  
 мои изваяния высились  
 по скверам,  
 где харкает туберкулез,  
 где б . . . с хулиганом  
 да сифилис.

(It would be a trifling honor, to have from such roses / my sculptures rise up around squares where tuberculosis hacks up, / where there is a w[hore] with a hooligan, and syphilis.)<sup>99</sup>

The poet exploits the ambiguity of the metaphors surrounding monuments and poems: his “sculptures” could represent both his poems “made of such roses” (a shorthand for love poetry) and the statues of the poet that would loom over these benighted city squares.<sup>100</sup>

Unlike his predecessors, though, Maiakovskii’s condemnation of the tangible monument coexists with praise of metaphorical solidity:

Мой стих  
 трудом  
 громаду лет прорвет  
 и явится  
 весомо,  
 грубо,  
 зримо,  
 как в наши дни  
 вошел водопровод,

98. Maiakovskii, *PSS*, 10:285.

99. *Ibid.*, 10:281.

100. Maiakovskii elsewhere describes roses as the essence of apolitical, sentimental poetry: “Poeziia—eto sidi i nad pozoi noi . . .” (Poetry is sitting and whimpering over a rose . . .). From “Piatyi internatsional,” *PSS*, 4:108. The term *sculpture* emphasizes the aesthetic rather than the political functions of plastic art.

сработанный  
еще рабами Рима.

(My verse will break through the enormity of years of hard work / and appear, heavy, rough, visible, / like a water pipe worked by the slaves of Rome entered into our days.)<sup>101</sup>

Maiakovskii's water pipe inverts specific aspects of the Pushkinian monument: its weight is aimed against Pushkin's famous "lightness"; whereas the latter is "not made by human hand," the former is handmade by Roman slaves, alluding to the Latin origin of this motif and echoing the communally constructed proletarian project of socialism.<sup>102</sup>

The transformation of Pushkin's mystical and religious monument into a functional water pipe represents a further manipulation of the monument as sign: Pushkin's monument (both as an image and as a metaphor for his poetry) is press-ganged into utilitarian service. This transformation not only symbolizes Maiakovskii's appropriation of Pushkin but also echoes the common Soviet practice of putting formerly sacred spaces to practical use: water imagery is used in this poem to describe the revolution, so the water pipe of poetry becomes an aqueduct for agitprop.<sup>103</sup>

Maiakovskii further likens his verse to soldiers and weapons, drawing parallels between his poetry and the fallen of the civil war.<sup>104</sup> On the one hand, he seems to be referencing his pugnacious revolutionary persona, equating his verse to military struggle and aligning his commemoration with that of the Red Army martyrs.<sup>105</sup> On the other, in light of his imminent death, the poem's posthumous perspective and emphasis on self-sacrifice have led critics to look beyond the bombast to see a complex meditation on Maiakovskii's relationship to Soviet power and its impact on his life and death: Svetlana Boym describes the poem as an investigation into "the tension between appropriating the revolution and being appropriated by it."<sup>106</sup> Despite the differences he has stressed between textual and physical monuments, Maiakovskii seems to imply that both literary and monumental immortality are contingent on death, as part of what Boym identifies as his myth of the self-sacrificing revolutionary poet.<sup>107</sup> Although Maiakovskii's performance of self-suppression has also

101. *Ibid.*, 10:279.

102. See, for instance, D. Merezhkovskii, *Vechnye sputniki: Pushkin* (St. Petersburg, 1906), 5.

103. Maiakovskii describes himself as revolutionary water carrier: "ia assenizator, i vodovoz, / revoliutsiei mobilizovannyi i prizvannyi" (I am a sanitizer and water carrier, mobilized and called up by the revolution). *PSS*, 10:279. Compare Roman Voitekhovich's observations that the water pipe also allows for some mobility by being a conduit for mobile water. See Roman Voitekhovich, "Monumenty 3," at [r-v.livejournal.com/237027.html](http://r-v.livejournal.com/237027.html) (last accessed 21 September 2012).

104. Maiakovskii, *PSS*, 10:282.

105. Compare Svetlana Boym, *Death in Quotation Marks: Cultural Myths of the Modern Poet* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991), 124.

106. *Ibid.*, 136.

107. *Ibid.*, 125. In the less political context of *Chelovek* (Man, 1918) Maiakovskii produces a similar vision of immortality, contingent on both martyrdom and inscription into

been interpreted as an announcement of dutiful service to a greater cause, I contend that the theatrical articulation of this myth in “Vo ves’ golos” is undergirded by a series of pointed allusions to his earlier works, and particularly to instances of the statue motif, which negatively characterize his monumentalized political persona.<sup>108</sup>

For example, the water pipe can also be seen as a reference to Maiakovskii’s prerevolutionary guise as the poet of the streets, capable of making music from street furniture, as in “A vy mogli by?” (And Could You?, 1913)—“A vy / nokturn sygrat’ / mogli by / na fleite vodostochnykh trub?” (but could you / play a nocturne, / could you, on a flute of drainpipes?)—and a stage direction in *Tragediia*—“A drainpipe begins to slowly draw out a single note.”<sup>109</sup> More compellingly, Maiakovskii also invokes “the cult of the poet that thrives on political impression.”<sup>110</sup> When ordering his warrior-poem to die—“umri, moi stikh, / umri, kak riadovoi” (die, my verse, / die like a private)—he alludes to a prototypical political martyr, André Chénier, who, in Pushkin’s poem of the same name, says just before his death: “Pogibni, golos moi” (Perish, my voice).<sup>111</sup> The kinship between Maiakovskii, Pushkin, and Chénier is also hinted at in “Iubileinoe,” in which the announcement of the poet’s imminent death—“Skoro vot i ia umru” (So soon even I will die)—recalls Pushkin’s Chénier—“Ia skoro ves’ umru” (I soon will die entirely).<sup>112</sup> Here Pushkin refers to the tradition of monument poems that posit a textual immortality for the poet, by recalling both Derzhavin’s “Ves’ ia ne umru” (I will not die entirely), which itself translates Horace’s “omnis ne moriar,” and by suggesting that Chénier will live on in his manuscripts.<sup>113</sup> Maiakovskii’s identification with Chénier, who was put to death by Robespierre, further suggests that not only will he be remembered for his writing, not for the intangible monument of socialism, but that his “martyrdom” pertains more to the tradition of state persecution of poets than to the fallen of the civil war.

Maiakovskii combines the two conflicts running through the poem—physical monuments against text, submission to the state against freedom—in the famous description of his self-disciplining turn to political verse:

Но я  
себя

---

the landscape: “—Prokhozhi! / Eto ulitsa Zhukovskogo? [. . .] ‘Ona—Maiakovskogo tysachi let: / on zdes’ zastrelilsia u dveri liubimoi’” (Passer-by! / Is this Zhukovskii street? [. . .] “It’s been Maiakovskii Street for thousands of years: / he shot himself here at his lover’s door”). *PSS*, 1:269.

108. For the dutiful service interpretation, see Z. S. Papernyi, *Poeticheskii obraz u Maiakovskogo* (Moscow, 1961), 423.

109. Maiakovskii, *PSS*, 1:40, 1:151.

110. Boym, *Death in Quotation Marks*, 120.

111. Maiakovskii, *PSS*, 10:281; Pushkin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 2:354.

112. Maiakovskii, *PSS*, 6:55; Pushkin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 2:355.

113. G. R. Derzhavin, *Sochineniia*, ed. A. S. Kushner (St. Petersburg, 2002), 224; Horace, *Opera*, ed. Otto Keller and Alfred Holder (Leipzig, 1899–1925), 1:227.



смирял,  
становясь  
на горло  
собственной песне.

(But I have been pacifying myself, standing / on the throat of my own song.)<sup>114</sup>

In Maiakovskii the image of the oppressive foot on the throat originates as a symbol for the cultural inertia inherent in statuary. For example, “Manifest letuchej federatsii futuristov” (Manifesto of the Flying Federation of Futurists, 1918) shares the dissatisfaction of “Radovat’sia rano” at the continued presence of monarchist statues: “as before, the monuments of generals and princes—the lovers of the tsars and the lovers of the tsaritsas—are still standing on the throats of the young streets with a heavy, dirty foot.”<sup>115</sup> A further variation on the image appears in a draft version for *150,000,000*: “To be a bourgeois does not mean to own capital or squander gold. It means to be the heel of a corpse on the throat of the young.”<sup>116</sup> (Here the statue is replaced by another immobile body, the corpse.) The image is first used in 1913 in “Dva Chekhova” (Two Chekhovs), an attack on moralistic attitudes to the classics. Recounting the time a member of a provincial audience described Pushkin as a “boss,” Maiakovskii emphasizes that “It is against this that the young are fighting, against this bureaucratization, against this canonization of the writer-enlighteners who with the heavy bronze of monuments are stepping on the throat of the new verbal art which is freeing itself.”<sup>117</sup> The implication that monumental commemoration indicates the transformation of the poet into a bureaucrat is repeated in “Iubileinoe”: it is Maiakovskii’s putative rank (*chin*) that entitles him to a monument. Physical monuments commemorate obedient bureaucrats and a poet having a statue indicates that he has become an obstacle to the revolutionary development of culture. Maiakovskii is pictured impeding both the poets of the future and himself.

This vision of a barren, bureaucratic Maiakovskii anticipated his eventual canonization as the patron saint of Soviet poetry, an appropriation made aptly palpable in the statue on Maiakovskii Square (just up the road, as he predicted, from Pushkin’s monument). As we have seen, however, monuments can be liberated from the straitjacket of official interpretations, not only by multifarious popular reception, but by the use of the aesthetic sphere as a space in which to make a lasting adaptation of the monument that counteracts official narratives. The power of reception

114. Maiakovskii, PSS, 10:281.

115. Vladimir Maiakovskii, Vasilii Kamenskii, and David Burliuk, “Manifest letuchej federatsii futuristov,” *Gazeta futuristov* 1 (15 March 1918). Reproduced in Bengt Jangfeldt, “Notes on ‘Manifest Letučej Federacii Futuristov’ and the Revolution of the Spirit,” in Jangfeldt and Nilsson, eds., *Vladimir Majakovskij*, 152–65.

116. Cited by Roman Jakobson, “On a Generation That Squandered Its Poets,” *Language and Literature*, 276.

117. Maiakovskii, PSS, 1:296.

was evident in the positive symbolism of Maiakovskii's statue for dissident poets (discussing the monument, Konstantin Kedrov recalls that "Maiakovskii was perceived by us as a free man who was killed"), which led to the immediate instigation of unofficial poetry readings there, which eventually blossomed into a (recently revived) tradition of treating the monument as the home of dissenting poetic culture.<sup>118</sup> The lasting force of artistic reinterpretation is evident in *Monumental Propaganda* itself: Liselot Van der Heijden's "Majakovsky Steps Down from His Pedestal to Let the People Speak" shows the poet down at the level of the streets, integrating with contemporary life; a young lady takes his position on the plinth, vividly demonstrating the possibility of democratizing the monument.<sup>119</sup> Similarly, just as Maiakovskii did with Pushkin, Scottish poet Edwin Morgan takes elements from Maiakovskii's statue mythology and adapts them to articulate his own relationship with posterity and to keep poetry mobile.<sup>120</sup> Maiakovskii's truest heir, however, is his bitterest critic, Iurii Karabchievskii, whose vitriolic debunking of the poet rehearses the futurist's own iconoclastic attitude to Pushkin: Karabchievskii brings Maiakovskii into the space of the text and thus frees him from the constrictions of cult and cliché. The cycle repeats: the afterword to the 1990 edition (significantly entitled "Shall We Throw Maiakovskii from the Steamship of Modernity?") suggests that Karabchievskii "struggles not so much with Maiakovskii . . . as with his monument."<sup>121</sup>

118. For the Kedrov quote, see *Izvestiia*, 29 July 2008.

119. For Van der Heijden's painting, see Dore Ashton, "To Degree Zero and Back," in Ashton, ed., *Monumental Propaganda*, 17.17.

120. Morgan, "A Human Head."

121. See Natal'ia Ivanova, Afterword to Karabchievskii, *Voskresenie Maiakovskogo*, 221.