

shove, and Kasparov was safely world champion and this book was published by the time Aliev was in disgrace. Later, after Kasparov had imprudently given a Western magazine the outpourings of his frustrations over the alleged “rigging” of the world championship, his career was saved only thanks to an even more important man, Alexander Yakovlev, a personal friend of Gorbachov. Yakovlev had been elected to the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party in the nick of time.

The excellence of Kasparov’s game is beyond dispute: his talents include an elephantine memory, which enables him to hold in his head all the best practical endings of major chess games of the last 25 years. Indeed among the many laudatory comments spattered in the text we have to read the judgment of one fellow grandmaster: “After a highly shaky start, Kasparov has produced what is, almost certainly, the most impressive rearguard action of any sportsman, in any discipline, in the history of recorded sport. . . .”

AT THE AGE of seventeen, he knew he could get to the top, and it is easy to believe that, from then on, “. . . my life was chess and chess was my whole life”. I wonder if his subsequent adventures would not have made better sense if the book had accepted Robert Burton’s definition of chess: “a choleric game and very offensive to him that loses the mate” (*Anatomy of Melancholy*, 1621). Instead we are told:

“The image of the chess player corresponds with the ideal Soviet Man, possessor of logic, will and decisiveness, the thinker and man of action rolled into one.”

With that calibre of Soviet Man, one is left wondering how Stalin managed to keep the country subservient for so long.

All Soviet biographies retain a Victorian reticence about sex, and this book reveals no more than that that side of Kasparov’s life presented certain difficulties. His heart belongs to Mummy: she cherished and fed him through his ordeals, and during the triumphal finale he took to sharing a bedroom with her “. . . in case I awoke during the night and wanted to go on talking. . . .”

The “Autobiography” seems to be primarily a combination of the zeal of the Gorbachov apparatus (Trelford in Moscow was even chauffeured in style to the Central Committee, a privilege rarely accorded to any foreigner) and the authors’ eagerness to give the book a nobler significance than mere sport.

Kasparov may not really be anything like as boastful as these pages suggest. Yet some of the reflections can only have come from the master himself—the revelation, for example, of a quite unusual form of personal ambition: “I imagined new generations of little boys shaking hands with Kasparov. It is good for boys to meet such heroes. . . .” Or this account of his social limitations when, as a young man in Baku, he had “great fun meeting a group of ordinary people—a mixed bunch of workers, drivers, and mechanics, simple people from the streets”, with whom, he says, “We did harmless but exciting things” (unelaborated). He then, rather class-consciously, comments: “Curiously, I found I could mix with the higher orders of officials and such like and with these lower orders—but not with the people in between.”

So much for classless Soviet Man.

## Maps

Birds balance on cloud,  
reveal invisible  
landscapes,  
hills of air,  
sudden clefts where  
sky gives way under wings.

We too  
have unseen strata,  
hidden rifts,  
where words manoeuvre  
like birds,  
circle holes of unease,  
navigate cliffs.

Like medieval cartographers  
we learn  
to chart territory  
in our heads,  
afraid  
at the edge of conversation,  
we fall off the world.

## Isobel Thrilling

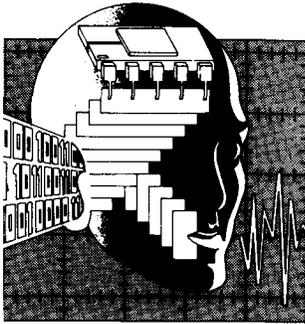
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# BOOKS & WRITERS

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## End of a Revolution

### *The Resurrection of Vladimir Mayakovsky—By ANDREI NAVROZOV*



ON THE MORNING OF 14 April 1930, just after ten o'clock, Vladimir Mayakovsky took out the pistol he had used as a prop in the film *Not Born For Money* some twelve years before, and shot himself in the heart. For the funeral, on 17 April, the poet's coffin was decorated with a massive wreath inscribed "*To the iron poet—an iron*

*wreath*". It was a huge flywheel ornamented with hammers, screws, and bolts.

On the day before Mayakovsky's suicide, Lili Brik—the woman he had loved since their first meeting in 1915—left London for Amsterdam in the company of Osip Brik, her husband of nearly twenty years. On 14 April, from Amsterdam, Lili sent Mayakovsky a postcard: *Hollandsche Bloemenvelden*, hyacinths in bloom. The Briks came back to Moscow in time for the funeral.

Boris Pasternak once thought that Mayakovsky was his teacher. Mayakovsky's pupil? Reading Pasternak, who would believe it?<sup>1</sup>

*My friend my tender O as in the flight at night from Bergen  
to the Pole  
By the hot down falling off the feet of ember-geese like snow  
across the land  
I swear my tender I swear it is my soul  
When I implore forget and sleep my friend.*

And yet there they were, the passages in Pasternak's 1931 autobiography, *Safe Conduct*, in which Mayakovsky was remembered. The first time:

"I listened raptly, with all my heart, holding my breath, forgetting myself. I had never heard anything like that before.

It contained everything. . . . And how simple all this was! Art was called tragedy. And that is what it ought to

be called. The tragedy was called 'Vladimir Mayakovsky'. The title contained a simple discovery of genius, that a poet is not an author but a lyrical subject, addressing the world in the first person. The title was not the name of the writer but the surname of the work. . . .

It was then that I carried the whole of him away with me and took him into my life."

Later:

"What one could not get used to was not Mayakovsky but the world which he held in his hands and which, capriciously, he took turns setting in motion and bringing to a standstill. . . . In all history there can hardly be such an example of a man so far advanced in a novel experiment—at a time, as he himself had foreseen, when this experiment was so vitally needed, albeit for inconvenient reasons—who could abandon it so completely. . . . But whenever I was asked to say something about myself, I spoke about Mayakovsky. That was no error. I worshipped him. He was the personification of my spiritual horizon."

And at the very end:

"The beginning of April caught Moscow in the white stupor of returning winter. On the seventh it began to thaw again, and on the fourteenth, when Mayakovsky shot himself, not everyone was used to the new spring situation. . . .

His sister was the first to weep for him by her own will and choice, as people weep for greatness, and to her words one was able to weep with infinite breadth, as to the roar of an organ.

She could not stop. . . . 'Remember, remember, Volodya?' she suddenly reminded him, as alive, and began to recite:

*I fear in my 'I' I am too alone,  
Too desperately afraid to smother.  
Hello?  
Hello, who is speaking?  
Mother?  
Mother! Your son is fabulously ill.  
Mother! His heart is a burn.  
Tell his sisters, Lyuda and Olya,  
He's got nowhere to turn."*

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<sup>1</sup> Here and elsewhere in this essay, the English translations of Russian prose and verse are my own, unless otherwise noted. The verse translations of Pasternak are quoted, in revised form, from my 1978 collection *Transport of Elements* (New Haven, privately printed).