

Vladimir

MAYAKOVSKY

Selected Works
in Three
Volumes



Raduga
Publishers

Vladimir

MAYAKOVSKY

1

Selected Verse

no warning
 and no twilight.
 All lines are blurred
 both near and far.
 Where's the horizon?
 Try
 and make out
 which is really star
 and which
 a panther's eye.
 The best accountant
 couldn't count
 the stars
 that local midnights mount,
 so tight
 these August nights
 are packed
 with stars,
 you'd think they should have cracked!
 No glimpse of either light
 or path.
 Life dawns anew upon us.
 Through tropics runs our train:
 puff-puff!
 through smells
 of ripe bananas.

1926

MEXICO*

This life—books about it
 were read at one go!
 You'd walk
 and tread on folk's feet.
 In your hands
 the schoolbag became a lasso,
 mustangs—
 all the hansom cab nags in the street.
 A toyshop's entrails
 grew real and grand.
 When a steamship's hooter
 hooted—
 You'd run off that moment
 to moccasin-land,
 just pinch a ruble and bulldog! 120
 But today
 it's not just a dream any more:

*Translated by
 Dorian Rottenberg*

*English translation
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mile on mile,
 the waters recede,
 and alive
 lies the country
 of Fenimore
 Cooper
 and Thomas Maine-Reed.
 A roar of sirens.
 The water ends.
 Lashed to land,
 our ship halts its engine.
 To my suitcase
 packed with LEF¹²¹
 attends
 Montiguomo Hawk Talon,¹²²
 the Indian!
 In a jiffy
 the tears
 my eyesight smother.
 Never
 was joy so pure!
 "Hawk Talon,
 hullo,
 I'm your pale-faced brother,
 Sure!
 Where's our comrades?
 Why are you embarrassed?
 Remember:
 from flowerbeds in the street
 back in Kutaisi
 with poisoned arrows
 we'd shower Columbus'
 invading fleet! "
 Through his teeth then
 Hawk Talon
 gloomily grated,
 slowly,
 like a clock with broken innards:
 "No more redskins—
 all exterminated
 by the Gringoes
 and Gachupinoes.¹²³
 Well,
 and those of us
 whom the bullets
 spared,
 whistling past
 without playing havoc,
 in wineshops
 the deadly cactus pulke¹²⁴
 kills off
 for 12 centavos.

Suitcase piles
 have replaced forever
 arrows
 which so many enemies killed.”
 So he snarled
 and slapped on his sombrero
 instead of a rainbow
 of quetzal quills.
 Though centuries
 have chopped off without pity
 the heads of days bent low,
 yet the time-gnarled stones
 of Mexico City
 still tell me the tales
 of long ago.
 Even grandmas of age-old parrots
 can't remember
 when it dissolved
 in History's gloom;
 from the ripples of a lake
 once rose the Pueblo,
 a house-commune
 for 10,000 rooms.
 In the lake
 lay sunken gold
 in tons;
 no need even to mine it,
 sparkling yellow.
 So it lived and thrived
 in its marble and bronze,
 twin-sister of Europe's
 ancient Hellas.
 But with whites overseas
 things which Indians don't need
 were as ever
 in high demand.
 Over in Spain
 a white bitch burst with greed—
 Isabella,
 the wife of King Ferdinand.
 Armed with their cannon,
 the Spaniards cruise.
 Through palm-trees,
 through cactuses,
 along this highway
 from Vera-Cruz
 marched general
 Hernando Cortés.¹²⁵
 He arrived,
 and the lakewater came alight,

all
 a-boil
 with the blaze.
 They fought
 for 72 whole nights
 and 72
 whole days.
 The redskins
 were saved by their double-faced idols
 from the battering
 cannonade.
 Yet, like mice by lard
 lured by noble titles,
 Moctezuma¹²⁶ his folk betrayed...
 In vain,
 reforging his scattered force,
 Guatemoc¹²⁷
 soaked on a lakeside hummock.
 Small use against cannon
 were arrows and swords.
 Under torture
 perished Guatemoc.
 And here now
 we stand—
 the Indian courageous
 and I—
 our friendship from childhood dating.
 He perished
 to stand here
 in bronze for ages
 just over the street—
 near the Embassy gateway.
 Beneath him
 the chain of centuries rumbles.
 The Indian stands there,
 bitter.
 What to him
 and his co-slaves
 the tumble
 of all these Diazes,
 Huertas?¹²⁸
 The years flew past
 in a three-digit numeral.
 Heroics today
 don't attract clientele.
 A trade-mark
 for beer
 became Moctezuma,
 and so did
 Guatemoc
 as well.

Bourgeois trim everything
 all the world to a single fashion;
 of its colour's been drained.
 And,
 as the old planet's
 sole consolation,
 two competing firms
 still remain.
 No sun-coloured clothing,
 no yellow-tanned features...
 From what slum-district
 could you now scoop,
 extinct today
 as fossilized creatures,
 one serape
 or guadeloupe?¹²⁹
 Riga,
 Mexico—
 try and tell 'em—
 Latvia
 in a tropical dressing,
 only that Rigans
 hold umbrellas
 and Mexicans—
 Smith and Wessons.
 Two Latvias
 at the earth's two ends...
 Difference?
 Only this:
 here they kill bulls
 in slaughterhouse pens,
 there—
 in circuses.
 And just as in Riga
 round about five,
 cursing mothers
 who keep them well under check,
 in Fords,
 whetting suitors' appetites,
 daughters drive
 along the Chapultepek.¹³⁰
 And if all these palm-trees
 deck out the earth
 and the feed-crop here's
 without precedence,
 it's from the sun—
 just sprawl down and give birth
 to bananas
 and presidents.

On top
 sit ministers
 underneath— with gems aflame,
 plain folk
 with their bottoms bare.
 No pants,
 first, because they've none to their name,
 and second,
 they're things
 which Indians don't wear.
 Today,
 where the city-boundary slants
 Moctezuma's
 beggar-tribe
 stands
 before the municipal sign:
 "Without pants
 entry
 into Mexico city
 is banned".
 500 beggarly tribes in the land,
 while the wealthy
 one language
 talk:
 squeeze out Indians
 like lemons
 with one hand,
 lock 'em up
 with a single lock.
 Don't let
 your struggle
 split up into tribes!
 Beggars,
 stand brother by brother!
 From the Mexicans' country
 worldwide fly
 the uniting call
Camarada!
 Hunger's
 an expert
 at levelling men.
 Indians,
 blacks
 and all,
 You're kindred embers
 in the future's flame,
 Aztek,
 Mulatto,
 Creole!
 No one can silence
 a whole huge country.

Mexico City
20 July 1925

BROADWAY*

The asphalt's glass.
Each step rings forth.
Trees,
grassblades—
all shaved off neat.
Avenues
run
from South to North,
from East to West
run streets.
In between—
who on earth could have stretched them up so! —
houses
a mile high each.
Right up to the stars
some houses go,
up to the moon
others reach.
Too lazy to foot it
are Yankees and kin.
Plain
and express elevators
throughout.
At 7.00
the human tide rolls in.
At 17.00
it rolls out.

*English translation
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Engines
clattering,
clanging
and humming,
people
go deaf and dumb,
while past them
other dumb people go running
and just quit chewing
their chewing -gum
to snap at their mates:
“Make money?”
A mother suckles a baby.
“Don’t holler! ”
The kid,
with drops from its nose,
seems to be sucking
not a breast but a dollar,
like everyone else
damn busy.
The workday’s over.
Your body all round
by electric whirlwinds
get swept.
You can take the subway
and go underground
or up
on the elevated railway
step.
You can ride as high
as the chimney-smoke’s trail
or rub
at the feet of a house.
On Brooklyn Bridge
the tram wags its tail
or under the Hudson
hides like a mouse.
You’re blinded and deafened,
you’re going goofy,
but here
like drum-tattoos,
from the top
out of the darkness
comes
“Maxwell’s Coffee—
Good to the Last Drop! ”
And the lamps,
when they start to dig the night,
I’ll tell you, some conflagration!
You look at your left—
Good Lord, what a sight!

FAREWELL (AT A CAFE)

- 112 *A Chekist*—member of Cheka—security forces.

FROM POEMS ABOUT AMERICA

113 In 1925 Mayakovsky made a trip to America. After a short stay in Paris, he sailed on board a steamer to Mexico. After a while in Mexico, he received a visa for entry into the United States, where in the course of three months he visited a number of major cities. The impressions from this trip were used in a cycle of poems written in 1925-26, part of which are included in this edition. Many of the names, facts and events reflected in this cycle are also mentioned in *My Discovery of America*, a series of essays written by Mayakovsky at the same time.

ATLANTIC OCEAN

114 *Revkom*—revolutionary committees, sprung up spontaneously in October 1917 as headquarters of local uprisings.

115 CEC—Central Executive Committee—functioned as a supreme state body in the intervals between Congresses of Soviets.

SOME SHALLOW PHILOSOPHY OVER THE DEEPS

116 *Yu. M. Steklov*—editor of newspaper *Izvestia TsIK*, where he regularly published extremely long articles. In this case Mayakovsky's irony is directed at the abundance of vacuous periods, "a lot of water", as they say.

117 *Demyan Bedny* (1883-1945)—a well-known Soviet poet.

118 The Russian for whale-bone is a word meaning whiskers.

BLACK AND WHITE

119 *Antonio Maceo*—Cuban national hero.

MEXICO

120 *bulldog*—vernacular for revolver; in this instance a toy pistol.

121 *LEF*—magazine of the Left Front of Arts (1923-1925), whose editor-in-chief was Mayakovsky. During his trips abroad the poet usually took numerous copies of the magazine in order to acquaint progressive-minded readers with it.

122 *Montiguomo Hawk Talon* and *Pale-Faced Brother*—nicknames of gymnasium pupils enthusiastic about novels about Indians; the said pupils are characters in A. P. Chekhov's story "Boys".

123 *Gringoes and Gachupinoes*—contemptuous nicknames for Americans and Spaniards in Mexico.

124 *pulke*—alcoholic drink.

125 *Hernando Cortés*—fifteenth century Spanish conqueror.

126 *Moctezuma*—the last Aztec king who betrayed his people.

127 *Guatemoc*—leader of the Aztecs.

128 *Porfirio Díaz, Victoriano Huerta*—presidents of Mexico.

129 *serape*—national costume; *guadeloupe*—textile from which it is made.

130 *Chapultepek*—garden and square in Mexico City.

131 *Emiliano Zapata*—leader of peasants in Mexican Civil War in the early twentieth century.

132 *Galvana, Moreno, Carillo*—Mexican revolutionaries.

A SKYSCRAPER DISSECTED

133 *Yelets or Konotop*—small provincial towns in pre-revolutionary Russia, synonymous of stagnation.

134 *Coolidge*—30th President of the USA in 1923-29.

A DECENT CITIZEN

135 *NEP*—New economic policy, conducted in the USSR in 1921-1929, aimed at restoring and developing the national economy destroyed during the Civil War. NEP offered a certain freedom of activity for private enterprise, which led to a revival of bourgeois tendencies in the country. This situation had an adverse effect on the revolutionary enthusiasm of certain participants of the recent struggle against the tsar, which is indirectly alluded to in this poem.

136 *Father Platón*—priest of Russian Orthodox Church in New York.

HOME!

137 *Gosplan*—State Planning Committee of the USSR, carries out long- and short-term economic planning.

TO SERGEI ESENIN

138 ...*poor class-contact*—contact with the masses—a slogan widespread in the twenties, addressed to art workers, calling them to establish firm ties with the broad working masses. Such ties were considered a reliable guarantee against erroneous behaviour and ideas. Mayakovsky ridiculed the vulgarization of this concept.

139 *kvass* (Russ.)—popular non-alcoholic beverage.

140 ...*by someone "at the post"*—*Na postu* (At the Post)—magazine, mouthpiece of one of the leading literary groupings of the twenties, the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP).

141 *Nikolai Doronin*—poet, contemporary of Mayakovsky.

142 *Leonid Sobinov*—famous tenor who sang at the Esenin memorial meeting in the Moscow Art Theatre.

143 *Not a word, my friend, not a sigh*—initial words of a romance by Tchaikovsky to the words by Pleshcheyev.

144 Loengrin's part in Wagner's opera was considered one of Sobinov's finest.

145 *P. S. Kogan*—Soviet critic, target of many sarcastic quips on the part of Mayakovsky (see Note 94).

146 *Dying in this life is not so hard, building life is harder, I daresay*—paraphrase of Esenin's lines: "Dying in this life is not so new, yet living, certainly, is not much newer."

TO BRITISH WORKERS

147 Written in connection with the general strike of British workers on May 4-12 1926, printed in a newspaper with the note:

"I donate the money for this poem to the Striking Fund and challenge my comrades-poets to do the same. VI. M."

148 ...*the dawn of our Revolution*—the date of the Great October Socialist Revolution in Russia is October 25 (November 7) 1917.

BRIBE-TAKERS

149 *GUM*—Central Department Store in Moscow, one of the biggest of its kind.

150 ...*October's glow*—October is synonymous to the Great October Socialist Revolution.

151 ...*I could give a White Guard my hand...*—White Guard (opposite to Red Guard)—member of the counter-revolutionary forces in the Civil War.