

Title: Mayakovsky as Laughter's Lone Wolf: Private Humor versus Public Laughter in Two Poems

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According to Mayakovsky's autobiography "I Myself," the uniqueness of his own sense of humor, as well as the potential ad hominem sting of public laughter, were impressed upon the poet at a very early age (see the section entitled "First Memory"). Taken at face value, his reminiscence reveals that for as long as he could remember, he was a standalone figure with regard to humor: he found it where others did not, or rather, he created it where others were unprepared or unable to see it. Mayakovsky's concept of humor was thus divided into two opposed spheres: the public and the private, the official and the unofficial. Public, official humor was associated with the laughter of a depersonalized group or crowd at an individual, and private humor entailed a sort of acting out or performance on the part of that individual. Resistance to mob laughter emerges as a central thematic concern in two of Mayakovsky's early poems, "Violin and a Bit Nervously" (1914) and "Being Good to Horses" (1918). In both poems, the speaker allies himself with a lone victim of widespread but mindless scorn and laughter, offering idiosyncratic consolations that utilize private humor or absurdity as an antidote to and shield from public laughter. The poems can be viewed in part as counterexamples to Bergson's theory of laughter as a social corrective applied to mechanistic, automatized behavior, for in them Mayakovsky shows that laughter itself can become a dead mechanism in need of correction. Furthermore, his characterization of the laughers in each poem inverts, by way of personification and metaphor, Bergson's central idea that life laughs at death: in both poems, broadly speaking, representatives of nonlife—whether literally inanimate objects, or stylistically dehumanized automatons—laugh at representatives of life.

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