



News That Stays New

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2014 AATSEEL DISTINGUISHED PROFESSOR
LECTURE: AATSEEL KEYNOTE ADDRESS,
CHICAGO, JANUARY 11, 2014

It is hard to know where to start with Stephanie Sandler, who for decades has pulled together so many different and distant edges of the profession. Stephanie began at Yale University with a dissertation under Victor Erlich on Pushkin's Boris Godunov—which became the best book on that masterpiece in English, Distant Pleasures: Alexander Pushkin and the Writing of Exile (1989). At Amherst College for many years, she never ceased being a Pushkinist, but branched out to other fields: contemporary Russian poetry (especially Olga Sedakova, Elena Shvarts, and Elena Fanailova), generating essays, anthologies, and translations that allowed these poets to live miraculously beyond Russian. She does poems better than anyone (and poems are the hardest things to do); but she also talks about film (supposedly an easy and accessible thing to do), devoting a large and illuminating section of her 2004 book Commemorating Pushkin to wonderfully inventive movies.

Her 21st century at Harvard has seen workshop after workshop, forum after roundtable, where Stephanie is the guiding light. Her editions and translations are beginning to win prizes. At AATSEEL conferences she has sponsored poetry readings that are a major draw of our gatherings. And the work in progress is tantalizing: "Dreaming the Real," "Music for a Deaf Time," "The Creative Work of Translating," and a book on "Contemporary Poetry in Russian: Breaking Down the Walls." Everything Stephanie touches come to life, and generates a group of enthusiasts around it.

We are honored to recognize her scholarship.

Caryl Emerson, Princeton University

NEWS THAT STAYS NEW

Stephanie Sandler, Harvard University

It is a very great pleasure and honor for me to speak to you this morning. Since I joined AASTEEL in 1981, I have experienced this organization as an ideal integration of scholarly inquiry and friendship. At AATSEEL, I first heard some of the scholars I most admire; here, I have also been able to see my friends from graduate school, to make many new friends in Slavic Departments across the country, and increasingly to see my own former students. Their faces light up my recollections of AATSEEL meetings, blurring, thank-

fully, the anxieties associated with job searches and all that last-minute paper writing that AATSEEL can also mean. I feel immensely grateful for the friendship and continuing education that AATSEEL has enabled, and in that I suspect I speak for many of us in this room.

I wonder if the graduate student who joined AATSEEL in 1981 would recognize me now. I had no idea then, as I finished a dissertation on Pushkin, that I would take long detours through feminism, psychoanalysis, and deconstruction, or that I would start to write about contemporary poetry. As pleasurable and valuable as it was for me to begin as a scholar with Pushkin as my intellectual companion, and as much as I learned from my teachers and from fellow Pushkin scholars, I have felt connected to the world around me in entirely different ways by studying the poets of our lifetime. To write about contemporary culture is to write the news, even when poets, like those I will speak about today, have nothing to say that is topical or directly related to current events. To study contemporary culture, I believe, is also to renew scholarship itself. More importantly, as I will try to show in this talk, contemporary poetry, not least in Russia, is finding new ways to register its place in the world. Poetry is itself being born anew and it is finding a public voice.

There are many ways to do this keynote address and as you can see, I will be talking about contemporary poetry, which is one example of where scholarship in Slavic studies might go. We rightly lament our students' seemingly total focus on the present. But excavating the material of the present is also an increasingly complex research challenge. Today I will take advantage of the constant archiving of new material on the Internet, and the ways that web-based publication, blogs, and social media have opened up access to cultural formations as they are occurring. By the end of this talk, my subject will be free speech, the possibilities for which are on the rise, in part thanks to these new digital media.

I have taken my title from Ezra Pound's *ABC of Reading* [1934], and I have slightly changed his phrase, "news that STAYS news" (which was his definition of literature) because I am interested less in the newsworthiness than in the newness of contemporary cultural innovation.¹ Nothing so inspires our own continual intellectual renewal as the possibility of surprising discoveries, of unexpected transformations. I would not give up my work with material from the past, but I am increasingly aware of how I am remade, as a teacher, thinker, writer, and citizen, by the poems of our lifetime. (We had a splendid example of that last night, when the Belarusian / American poet Valzhyna Mort read her poems here at AATSEEL.) The poems of those who are living through the same historical moments, and who have the wherewithal to respond to them in real time, sustain and inspire me, and it is a remarkable feeling to know that the material I am writing about is changing every single day.

1. Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (New York: New Directions, 1960), 29.

Whatever else you do with your lives as scholars and teachers, I hope you will make some small space for the work being created around you, including poetry. I could actually stop speaking right there, to be perfectly honest, because there is really nothing else I want to imagine than that you will go off, seeking out the poems, films, stories, paintings, dances, dramas, and museums that are being made around us. We all sometimes sneak in such scavenger hunts when we come to conferences, and rightly so.

To whet your appetite for the hunt, let me offer you three poets' work. If I have guessed correctly, you'll have heard of one or two of them, but maybe not. I wanted what follows to be new to you, and also to me. I set myself the task of writing on poets I know barely or not at all, and poets about whom I have not previously written. It has been a great pleasure to spend time reading and thinking about these three poets and contemplating the innovations they represent.

I begin with the best-known of the three, Maria Stepanova, and here I must admit to a little bit of previous knowledge, having read her in a poetry-reading group with Polina Barskova, Catherine Ciepiela, Katherine O'Connor, Sarah Pratt, Gerald Smith, Michael Wachtel, and Boris Wolfson several years ago. We chose her knowing that she was already regarded as one of the most talented poets of her generation—born in 1972, she is 41 years old. She has published nine books of poetry since 2001, which is even more astonishing when one considers that in these same 12 years, she has also been a tireless editor, critic, and active promoter of others' work.

Stepanova's poetry is next to impossible to translate, although miracles have been worked by Sibelan Forrester in the excellent new volume *Relocations* (which also features the poetry of Polina Barskova and Anna Glazova).² There is stellar writing about Stepanova in Russian, by a wide range of poets and critics, including Ilya Kukul'in, Mark Lipovetsky, and Grigory Dashevsky.³ In characterizing her poetry, critics tend to gasp in awe at Stepanova's formidable technical skill. There is pretty much nothing she can't do, from ballads and songs to free verse. Her boldness in violating conventions of every sort gives even the apparently traditional, formal poems a sharp sting of the new.

2. *Relocations: 3 Contemporary Russian Women Poets: Polina Barskova, Anna Glazova, Maria Stepanova*, ed. Catherine Ciepiela, trans. Catherine Ciepiela, Anna Khasin, Sibelan Forrester (Brookline, MA: Zephyr Press, 2013).

3. Il'ia Kukul'in, "Aktual'nyi russkii poet kak voskresshie Alenyshka i Ivanushka: o russkoi poezii 90-kh godov," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 53 (2002): 273–97; Mark Lipovetskii, "Rodina-zhut': O Proze Ivana Sidorova Marii Stepanovoi," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 89 (2008): 248–56; Grigori Dashevskii, review of Stepanova, *Schast'e*, *Kriticheskaia massa*, no. 1 (2004); Dashevskii, review of Stepanova, *Kireevskii*, *Komersant-Weekend* (April 13, 2012); these essays and many more are linked on Stepanova's page at Litkarta: <http://www.litkarta.ru/russia/moscow/persons/stepanova-m/>.

Only a poet with such sublimely confident knowledge of the poetic tradition and of her own capacity to manipulate it would move to align her poetry with prose, and it is that move I want to highlight. I refer to her 2008 book of poems *Proza Ivana Sidorova*, and to her selected poems, published as *Stikhi i proza v odnom tome* (2010).

In *Proza Ivana Sidorova* and elsewhere, Stepanova revels in the confident and assertive narrator that she creates.⁴ There is a strong, knowing intonation behind this poem, a narrative consciousness fully in control of the tempo and rhythm at which information is to be disbursed.⁵ This certainty of tone is Stepanova's, too. It establishes her persona as a contemporary Russian intellectual, as a firmly intelligent, unshakably tough-minded individual. She is not alone among women in assuming this role (another contemporary poet, Elena Fanailova, does so as well, although with more self-consciousness and self-irony; the publisher Irina Prokhorova is assuming that role, too, and how splendid that AATSEEL this year honors her with its award for distinguished service to our profession). Where we have seen women as public intellectuals in modern Russia for the most part has been among dissident leaders, and among widows. It is a new and welcome way to see Russia's women poets.

In that intellectual context, it is all the bolder for Stepanova to have made her mark writing songs and ballads, where imagined persons, animals, and things have supernatural encounters. Her vampires, ghosts, and other revenants blur the boundary between life and death. They inhabit the magical space of fairy tales but also contemporary Moscow or the provinces. Her ballads have been read as political allegories, as compulsive reenactments of traumatized subjectivities in a social order where wrongs have no means of being righted, and where losses gape as wounds that cannot heal.⁶ Most of these readings focus on historical trauma, where the repressed returns as vampire or ghoul.⁷

These allegories of trauma, however, put me in mind of Russia's present, not just its traumatic past. They are representations of contemporary Russia as a boundless space in which the living can at any moment encounter the

4. Lipovetsky, in the essay cited in n. 3, comments on the poem's narrative energy as the sign of its status as prose.

5. We hear that strong voice promptly in the poem's opening: at the mention of one of the main characters, the "p'ianitsa-muzhik" whose arrival is trumpeted in the poem's first sentence, the narrator comments "Pochemy p'ianits—budet iasno iz nizheskazannogo": see Stepanova, *Proza Ivana Sidorova* (Moscow: Novoe izdatel'stvo, 2008), 5.

6. I refer to essays by Dashevsky, Kukulin, Lipovetsky, cited in n. 3, and the many others available through Stepanova's page at Litkarta.

7. As Mark Lipovetsky writes, in my translation: "what's at stake here is an incomplete process of assessing the past—the Soviet past as a whole and the Stalinist past in particular." He adds that the victims, "at the same time the forgotten and the remembered, return in the form of monsters and vampires" (250).

dead, the undead, and the evil forces who seem to bring about death at every turn. So long as authoritarian rule governs Russia, one could speculate, such supernatural representations of evil will have a massive cultural function, creating narratives in which the unchecked power of the state is registered as a set of forces ungoverned by natural laws.⁸

To read Stepanova in this way is to my mind persuasive, and it is a way in which her work connects to immediate, newsworthy topics, and yet it isn't the whole story. Consider *Proza Ivana Sidorova*, her long poem which tells one of those improbable, supernatural stories. It features a drunken man, a child, a policewoman, and a black hen, and it is a tale of capture, release, and redemption. In this segment, the man, the child, and the chicken have been arrested. You will hear an appeal to liberate the chicken, transformed into the Eternal Feminine, "*sama-ona*." The appeal is being broadcast to an assembled group of monsters, vampires and the like, who are called to rescue the hen. Let's listen to Stepanova read.⁹

XII

И сказал приемник: "Едрена вошь,
наступили за здорова живешь
предпоследние времена,
и не знаю, кто здесь подставил нас,
но у них на нарах в недобрый час
оказалась сама-она.

Я не буду ждать и слова жевать:
горло драть, ребята—не глотки рвать,
это совестно пахану.

Я зараз поставлю вопрос ребром:
если надо, поляжем под серебром
все, спасая саму-ону.

Кто любил вас так, как сама-она?
Вынимал из петли, доставал со дна,
как каштан, тащил из огня?
Ни греха на черных ее крылах,
но она при черных наших делах
пожалела вас и меня.

Мы живем, как прах в водяной пыли,
под собой не чую родной земли,
но забота самой-оны

8. So it was for Bulgakov in creating *Master i Margarita*, and so it is for the contemporary cultural texts where the forces of evil are sinister and uncontrollable. Unlike Bulgakov's reliance on the Faust myth and the Christ story, no unified plots fully contain Stepanova's ballads, and even when the endings are happy, the sources of harm and the incomprehensible intrusions of chaos remain so fully unassimilated as to leave them ready for the next visitation, the next ballad.

9. For the video, go to <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5RDwd9FPbOU> and begin at 1:46.

согревает нас, ограждает нас
от серебряных пуль и нелетных трасс.
И за это мы ей должны”.

Помолчал. “А теперь о том, как отбить подругу.
Делают предложения все по кругу.
Она у ментов содержится в специальной
камере герметичной, пара-нормальной.

Камера эта для наших непроходима.
Взять ее с бою завтра необходимо”.¹⁰

I choose this example in part because in the recording you get such a fine specimen of Stepanova’s fiercely focused style of reading. She describes a voice speaking through a radio, and her reading voice matches the idea of amplification and distance. The assembled supernatural forces, very much like the monsters at the feast in Tatiana’s nightmare, are called to rescue “sama-ona” (who is an intercessor and protector). She must be wrested from an impenetrable chamber, a rescue at once impossible and necessary (and so the final rhyme “*neprokhodima*” / “*neobkhodimo*”). The rescue is all the more important in what Stepanova calls in the performed version these “*nekhoroshie vremena*” which become, in the published text cited here, “*predposlednie vremena*.”

In these unkind times, says the radio-transmitted voice, we live as bits of ash amid watery dust (“*kak prakh v vodianoi pyli*”). And the earth, the familiar dear earth, seems to be crumbling away beneath our feet (“*pod soboi ne chuiia rodnoi zemli*”). This formulation repeats a well-known image from Mandelstam’s Stalin epigram, which begins “*My zhivem, pod soboiu ne chuiia strany*,” not, I think, so as to engage in a poetics of citation, but rather to suggest that this daring radio speech resembles Mandelstam’s poem in its act of courage.¹¹ His poem was not an insane or desperate gesture, Stepanova has said, characterizing it as a sober, consciously chosen act of protest (“*ne tol’ko ser’eznyi postupok, eto byl osoznannyi, raschitanyi protest i akt*”).¹²

Stepanova’s poem, *Proza Ivana Sidorova*, with its layers of folklore and

10. Stepanova, *Proza Ivana Sidorova*, 42–44.

11. For the poem, see O. Mandel’shtam, *Polnoe sobranie stikhotvorenii*, ed. A. G. Mets (St. Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 1995), 226.

12. For her December 2013 comments on the occasion of the 80th anniversary of Mandelstam’s poem: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XGeww6EZHD>—Stepanova speaks at 2:32. There is more to say about the use of this poem in *Proza Ivana Sidorova*—the opening of Mandelstam’s poem is about speech, about words that cannot be heard ten footsteps away, but the words quickly translate into violent acts as the cockroach-whiskered leader’s words call forth injury and murder; in Stepanova’s poem, the words heard through the radio are by comparison a call to rescue, to liberation, and the object of saving is one who is herself characterized as an intercessor, a protector. Elena Fanailova observed that the women in Stepanova’s poems were remarkably often versions of the Virgin Mary (and for Fanailova, the pun on Stepanova’s own first name was part of the poet’s gesture of re-mythologizing; see Fanailova, “Marii Stepanovoi,” *Vozdukh* 4 (2008): 5–7).

cant, and with its riddling brilliance in language and tone, is shot through with what it hopes will be the same infectious courage. Her courage is aesthetic. We sense some hint of the risks associated with the poem when we consider Stepanova's swathing it in a protective cover of impersonation. The poem was first published piecemeal as if an act of ventriloquism, on the LiveJournal account of Ivan Sidorov. I am not alone in comparing that act of concealment to Pushkin's creation of Ivan Petrovich Belkin, in order to do something aesthetically unexpected and bold; like Pushkin, Stepanova soon made her authorship clear.¹³ Pushkin's turn to prose foreshadowed his more ambitious move into the sphere of public intellectual life, leading to the founding of his journal *Sovremennik* and his efforts in the 1830s to write history.¹⁴

Stepanova was making a similar move in the 2000s, and she traced the lineage of her journalistic efforts to Pushkin's creation of *Sovremennik*.¹⁵ Within two years of *Proza Ivana Sidorova*, the remarkable web journal OpenSpace.ru made its debut in May 2008 with Stepanova as editor in chief, and, although it closed in June 2012, its successor site, Colta.ru, flourishes. What Stepanova is doing, across the many forms of her work, is showing her culture, as Pushkin showed his, what intellectual life looks like. She aims to show what the word is good for, and how poets, among other writers, can practice free speech as an exemplary form of public discourse. In creating OpenSpace and Colta, in other words, Stepanova is not just sharing the latest cultural news, she is also enabling a public forum in which conversation about that news in its very form and spirit can engender new possibilities for national self-understanding, for the very idea of speech in an open public space. The extreme openness of these web-based projects cannot be over-emphasized, nor the capacity of the web to keep them in permanent archive.

In turning from Maria Stepanova to the second of the three poets I want to speak about, Faina Grimberg (b. 1951), I am asking you to consider a very different kind of public persona. Grimberg has chosen to put her formidable intellectual energy into writing nearly two dozen volumes of historical fiction, and three books of poetry. When you hear her read in a moment, you will find yourself in the presence of someone who is so deeply immersed in the world of her writing that she holds a book in front of her face. Grimberg is some

13. On the LiveJournal blog itself, <http://sivash.livejournal.com>, where the publication of the book by the name *Proza Ivana Sidorova* was announced.

14. Indeed we could say that his writing *Mednyi Vsadnik* in 1833 was as significant for his emergence as a major intellectual figure in the 1830s, for it was in that "povest'"—note his generic marker—that Pushkin set forth the complex vision of Petersburg mythology and of Russian history more generally that in many ways still defines Russia's imagination of itself.

15 See the interview she gave to *Afisha* in June 2012: http://gorod.afisha.ru/archive/openspace_is_over/

twenty years older than Stepanova. Her mentality as a writer was shaped by the divisions and evasions of a Soviet-era education.¹⁶

In her fiction, Grimberg has created multiple authorial mystifications. These are not just pseudonyms or masks, of the sort used by Kirill Reshetnikov (Shish Briansky), or by Elena Shvarts in creating Lavinia or Cynthia. Nor is it the same thing as Stepanova's creation of Ivan Sidorov (which is a kind of John Doe name, it bears remembering). Rather, Grimberg tells her stories through fully imagined individuals with biographies she stands ready to recount. Grimberg often presents herself as transmitting historical fictions that might otherwise be lost, relying on an updated version of the found manuscript topos. In many cases, she lists herself as the translator of these texts, indeed most of her alter egos are foreign.

Why create these authors? Grimberg's answer is fascinating in psychological terms: when she was a little girl, she has said, she didn't understand why she had to be a single person with a distinctive name—why not have multiple selves, multiple lives? In her prose fiction, Grimberg has lived those alternative lives, if only through the word. Here are a few of the more than half a dozen mystifications:

Ягоб Ланг

Наложница фараона (1994), *Тайна магического знания* (1994)

Софья Григорова-Алиева и Сабахатдина-Бора Этергюн

Судьба турчанки, или времена империи: Трилогия (1992–94)

Мирианна Бенланд

Демоны пустыни (1994)

Ирина Горская

Недолгий век, или Андрей Ярославич (1996)

My list is not complete, but you get the idea. Grimberg has also had two LiveJournal accounts, one as villon-14, and in her poetry there is a remarkable book-length poem written as if by the daughter of François Villon, the great French fifteenth-century poet.¹⁷ As if this were not enough, Grimberg has also translated extensively from Bulgarian, Greek, English, German, Finnish, Czech, and Swedish.

To translate is to inhabit the creative world of another writer, but in Grim-

16. In this spirit, she has much in common with poets of her generation, who include Elena Shvarts (1948–2010), Larisa Berezovchuk (b. 1948), Sergei Gandlevsky (b. 1952), poets with less faith in institutions than Stepanova has, although all with a firm insistence on the idiosyncratic nature of poetic utterance and poetic experience. Like these poets, and like Stepanova, Grimberg has strong views and is not shy about expressing them, when asked. She has participated often in the forums sponsored by Dmitry Kuzmin's journal *Vozdukh*, answering questions on everything from the notion that poetry can be taught to the death of the author.

17. Grimberg also blogs as <http://jaschil-14hane.livejournal.com>. She has to be the only Russian poet comfortably using the web and social media not to have made the move at least partially to Facebook.

berg's production of so many alter egos, she in effect takes the further step of not just transmitting that world but making it up in the first place. She translates herself, in fact, when she recreates herself as a German, Bulgarian, Turkish, or Hebrew writer, or even as a Russian émigré, to give the national identities of the pseudonyms listed here, in effect transporting herself outside the physical space of Russia without losing her identity as a speaker of Russian. As a student, Grimberg specialized in Balkan history (born in Kazakhstan, she got a degree from Tashkent University), and one has to imagine that that part of the world, with its tangled history of cultures and its claim to be a point of origin for Slavic cultures, has both an enduring fascination for Grimberg and a way of mirroring the complexity and flexibility of her own identity as a writer.

We have then something that dramatically intensifies the escape from lyric individualism that has mostly marked the poetic career of Maria Stepanova, and, like Stepanova, Grimberg is a teller of tales. But the sound and shape of the work could not be more different from Stepanova's. No stanzaic ballads, no syllabo-tonic scaffolding, no formal strictness on which linguistic experimentation and deformation can be draped. I want you to have something of the shock of her work by playing for you a fairly long segment (about three minutes) from the end of her best-known poem, "Andrei Ivanovich vozvrashchaetsia domoi." Its roots are in folk lament, and its chronotope is a timeless space of war. Andrei Ivanovich appears in other Grimberg poems and in other eras. Here he is every soldier who ever departed into senseless battle, every missing son or husband. The "my" / "we" of this narrative voice represents two women, and although it is not specified, we are made to understand that one is the mother of Andrei Ivanovich, the other, who is named Marina Markovna, is his wife.¹⁸ It is a long section that we will listen to, so I do not cite it here (in a moment we will look, however, at the poem's beginning). The poem's ending rises to a surprising conclusion. When Andrei Ivanovich's mother and wife recover a child from the waters near the gravesite, and when they say that bringing home this child means bringing home Andrei Ivanovich, they wrest an improbable and astonishing affirmation from the insistent elegy of this poem. They transform its sustained, wrenching lament into an announcement of renewal, and they do so in the last page or two of the fourteen-page poem.

Structurally, the most important element of this poem is its refrain, as is often true in Grimberg's work. One effect of a multiply repeated sentence is its hammering emphasis on an unchanging truth. Nothing can change the force of the assertion "Andrei Ivanovich ne vozvrashchaetsia domoi [Andrei

18. See the videotape of Grimberg reading as a guest on the television program *Shkola zlosloviia*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oxlv1jGrYW8>. The reading is at the end of the program, starting at about minute 37.

Ivanovich is not returning home],” which is repeated so often that it comes to seem the speech of the very landscape through which the two women move. How could anything, even the poem’s title, undo its negation?

The poem has a troubling, circular motion, which is intensified by the static quality of that recurring refrain. Circularity is a disturbing, pain-inducing element in the poem.¹⁹ You have just heard the poem’s end, but you should know as well that many of these images and lines are also uttered when the poem begins. Here is the poem’s opening:

Жизнь затмевается,
становится тюрьмой;
Всё в этой жизни станет мелкой кутерьмой.
Всё кончилось.
И больше нет для нас пути.
Андрей Иванович не возвращается домой.
Сначала круглолицый мальчик был.
Но он ушёл однажды,
он уплыл.
На пароходе по реке уплыл.
И больше нет его совсем,
а был.
Потом он молодой красивый был.
Красивый был, светловолосый был—
мы приговариваем со слезами.
Он был красивый, пестроглазый был,
с такими серыми и пёстрыми глазами.
Такой красивый был,
такой любимый был!
Андрей Иванович не возвращается домой. (17)

Those repetitions strengthen the poem’s acts of verbal return, as if in compensation for the utter impossibility of human return.

The child who returns home as if in substitution for Andrei Ivanovich, the child who replaces the dead warrior from all of the world’s wars, will implicitly live only to repeat that same life of travail and death. Grimberg’s poem becomes an archaic ritual whose only reality is the lamenting words of its female speaker. Unlike traditional ancient laments, she does not give us the consolation of a list of mourners, nor is nature itself much of a consolation—indeed, the natural world is represented as if it were the embodiment of the

19. When Andrei Ivanovich is said to be a tree upon a hill, a huge pine tree with branches like his arms, he is also said to be something in rotation, in circulation, a “*krugovorot*.” That circularity is rendered as if nature’s law, science’s law: “I eto nazyvaetsia v prirode i v nauke: / *krugovorot*”; see Faina Grimberg, “Andrei Ivanovich vozvrashchaetsia domoi,” *Chetyrekhlstnik dlia moego ottsa* (Moscow: NLO, 2012), 23. And the two women who look for him are locked in a terrible circle of friendship, “Poidem iskat’ ego,” says the speaker to Marina Markovna, “poidem, moia podrug / Ty teper’ / moia podrug. / V tosklivom serdtse zamknuto go kruga—/ ty moia podrug” (23).

dead Andrei Ivanovich. Rather than trees bent over in sorrowing comfort, the tree is itself a spectral transformation of the missing man. All the world is a representation of what is lost, even the waters that send forth the child who is fated to die in turn.

What is anyone doing writing poetry like this in the twenty-first century? Grimberg has lived through the Chechen wars in post-Soviet Russia, and earlier through the losses of Afghanistan and earlier. As a Jew, she has registered acute awareness of the Nazi genocide, and the Second World War took its toil on her family—but her choice is not Akhmatova's, her poetry is not that of witness. It is as if she recoils in this poem from telling stories about precise historical experiences, for all the ways in which her prose fiction is historical.

Grimberg's poetry strikes a position that we might call, particularly when compared to the astutely political and institutional embeddedness of Stepanova, child-like. She inherits, I would argue, the poetics of foolishness associated with OBERIU. But Grimberg is so far removed from institutional culture that she was not even connected to unofficial or underground poets, and the result may be that she occupies something more like the position of a Holy Fool.²⁰

Grimberg is leading poetry in a direction completely unlike Stepanova's clear-headed, fearlessly rational exploration of the supernatural: Grimberg's poems suggest that there is no limit to the intensity of pathos that language can contain. She demonstrates that extravagance of emotion need not mean extreme sentiment, and, in her choice of a soldier and his wars as one object for lament, or in her poem about François Villon, she suggests as well that the vastness and intensity of the poem's emotion is meant to be commensurate with the tragedy that is human experience. Grimberg's fiction explores the regions of fantasy and fantasized human history, indeed of the fetishized, exotic realms of human history that make up so many popular accounts of the past, but she chooses in her poetry to make language cast its steady, unshaking gaze on the terrains of loss.

Grimberg has one equal in contemporary Russian poetry, I believe: Elizaveta Mnatsakanova (b. 1922). Both are positioned so far on the outside of institutional structures that it is a surprise when the institutions recognize them with prizes and critical attention (Mnatskanova won the Andrei Belyi Prize for 2004; Grimberg is the first recipient of the very interesting Razlichie Prize, awarded in 2013). Each writes a highly repetitive, astonishingly musi-

20. You can see how completely she elicits an uncharacteristically gentle response from Tatyana Tolstaya and Avdotya Smirnova on their program *Shkola zlosloviia* in the same tape cited above (in fact, in their usual pre-interview chat that airs with each program, Tolstaya and Smirnova warned their audience that the usual banter and edginess of their program would be completely absent); or, better yet, watch how Grimberg utterly confounds the clever host of *Za obedom*, Vladimir Raevsky (see <http://www.m24.ru/videos/33962>—the program aired Nov. 15, 2013).

cal form of poetry that relies on repetition.²¹ The texture of the poetry is not the same, but there is an incantatory, primeval magic to the poems, especially as they perform them, and in each case, a determined philosophy of love lay beneath poetic worlds in which death wreaks terrible havoc.²²

What they have in common as well is a capacity to push contemporary poetry out of its comfort zones, demanding patience and flexibility from us as readers. If poetry is news that stays new, then it is their role as poets to always be testing the boundaries of innovation and invention, paradoxically by marrying the new to archaic rituals of recollection, requiem, and impossible rescue.

I want to speak about a third poet today, and again, it is a poet of a completely different kind. He is Grigory Dashevsky, who died in December 2013, just as I was writing this essay and preparing to come to AATSEEL. His death was noted by Faina Grimberg on her blog with a single sentence, lamenting that he was only 49 years old. Many others wrote extensively and with striking warmth about his courage in facing years of pain and physical limitation; Sergei Kozlov described his temperament, with its radiant embrace of others' ideas, as Pushkinian, and every testimony that I have read lauded his generosity as a teacher, critic, translator, and friend. Maria Stepanova compared his death to the loss of Alexander Blok in 1921, and she suggested that Dashevsky was a figure of proportionate charisma and impact.²³

Including Dashevsky today is my own small act of tribute to a remarkable poet and teacher—and it is as a teacher that so many remembered him—and it allows me to say how powerfully the deaths of our contemporaries push us to rethink the present they have now marked by their departure. It is perhaps a cliché to say so, but one that cannot be avoided: these deaths punctuate the ongoing flow of contemporary cultural practice, more with commas and semicolons if not with question marks and exclamation points. In the last decade, Russian poetry has lost Gennady Aygi, Dmitry Aleksandrovich Prigov, Anna

21. Repetition of sounds, syntactic structures, and key phrases in Grimberg; of morphological structures and sounds in Mnatsakanova. Both poets are deeply educated, work in multiple languages, and, beneath deceptively gentle manners, extremely firm in their opinions and cultural positions.

22. The contexts for their work as poets could not be more different—Mnatsakanova is a visual poet, a creator of elaborately designed books and a graphic artist and calligrapher, and has absorbed the ornamental style of her adopted city since the 1970s, Vienna; Grimberg's allegiance is to the Balkans, subject of so many of her prose texts, and her visual imagination is limited to the painted representations of feasts and aristocratic pleasures that frequently appear on her blog.

23. On Dashevsky's death, see Sergei Kozlov, "Pamiati Grigoriia Dashevskogo," <http://gefter.ru/archive/10856>; Stepanova, "Nashe solntse," <http://www.komersant.ru/doc/2371268>; and many others besides.

Alchuk, Elena Shvarts, Bella Akhmadulina, Lev Losev, Mikhail Gendele, Marina Georgadze, Alexander Mironov, Vasily Filippov, Vsevolod Nekrasov, Aleksei Parshchikov, Vladimir Ufliand, Arkady Dragomoshchenko, Natalia Gorbanevskaya, and many more besides. At every death, their friends and readers offered statements that began the work of fixing the place each poet might occupy in the constellations of the present. For some, their stars had long been attested and named—Shvarts, Prigov, Gorbanevskaya—but for others, and in some ways even for these widely read poets, the skies shifted. Evgeny Baratynsky famously saw in Pushkin a completely different poet from the one he thought he had known as of 1837, and we have begun to hear new estimations of poets like Aygi and Dragomoshchenko in the short time since their deaths. All of which is to say that the element of flux, which so obviously defines contemporary culture, is paradoxically emphasized by the potentially pause-inducing moment of death. Loss shows us how provisional our readings truly are.

Grigory Dashevsky was not prolific, indeed quite the opposite, publishing four books of poetry alongside a small group of significant translations, including translations of philosophical texts—Hannah Arendt, René Girard, Truman Capote, Joseph Brodsky, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Raymond Carver. Trained as a classicist, he brought the ancient world alive through his translations, his poems based on ancient texts, and his classes. You can watch him teach students how to conceptualize the translation of two lines of Catullus in a terrific seminar at MGU from 2010 that is up on Youtube, and when you watch his 2012 conversation with Tatyana Tolstaya and Avdotya Smirnova on *Shkola zlosloviia* you sense as well his disciplined but tremendously flexible mind, his responsiveness to questions, and his warmth.²⁴ None of that prepares you exactly for his poetry, although the poems distill these qualities into a set of linguistic practices where every word choice stands on a deeply logical foundation and resonates with emotional truth. Many of his poems are translations; many, as in this poem, which he read for the *Stikhi Vzhivuii* series on OpenSpace, instead translate the mindset of an imagined but never named person. When Dashevsky first published this poem in his book *Generikh i Semen* (2000), he included it in a section he called “Ballady,” and he is presenting here that gesture of ventriloquism and song that defines Stepanova’s ballads.

24. For the interview, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VZk3FdQotlk>; Colta has also now made available the unedited recording of the *Shkola zlosloviia* interview: <http://www.colta.ru/articles/literature/1790>. For the class on Catullus, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2iAlGTcyTE8>. In the weeks since the AATSEEL meetings, his entire seminar on translation with those students has now also been put up on the web: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xI2uWEQGixw>.

ЧЕРЁМУШКИ

В Черёмушках вечером как-то пресно.
 Зато у некоторых соседок
 глаза—хоть к вечеру и слезясь—
 чересчур рассеянные, ясные,
 усталились мимо прекрасных нас.

Пошли над какою-нибудь нависнем.
 Тихо так, слабо.
 Хорош.
 Вот и не видишь, чего ты там видела.
 Будем звать тебя крошка,
 а ты нас—*nana*.²⁵

Dashevsky here catches a moment of daily life when glances, gestures, and speech acts cut across human separateness, not in gentleness or connection, but as threat. His reading style, as one can see in the OpenSpace reading of this poem, has a seriousness and focus that seems to keep its steady gaze on the words themselves, until the end, when he nods his head knowingly, perhaps to acknowledge the slightest similarity between the aggressive, seductive adult sexuality just described and the unseemliness of all desire. It was not for nothing that Dashevsky translated two of Girard's books into Russian, although his focus was less Girard's idea of mimetic desire than the scapegoat as a constant figure in human cultural history.²⁶

Dashevsky's poems are often cast as these thrown voices, perhaps most extremely so in his translations. In October 2013, that is, not long before his death, he published a version of Robert Frost's "Stopping By the Woods on a Snowy Evening" in *Kommersant.ru*, the remarkable last stanza of which looks like this:

Лес сладок, темен и глубок,
 но в путь пора мне—долг есть долг.
 И ехать долго—сон далек,
 и ехать долго—сон далек.²⁷

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
 But I have promises to keep,
 And miles to go before I sleep,
 And miles to go before I sleep.²⁸

25. Dashevskii, *Genrikh i Semen* (Moscow: Klub 'Proekt OGI,' 2000), 25; also *Duma ivanchaia* (Moscow: NLO, 2001), 77; he reads the poem for the Stikhi Vzhivuiu series at OpenSpace at <http://os.colta.ru/literature/projects/75/details/6718/>.

26. The translations are *Kozel otpushcheniia* (Moscow: Izd. Ivana Limbakha, 2010); *Nasilie i sviashchenie* (Moscow: NLO, 2010).

27. Robert Frost, "Ostanovivshis' u lesa snezhnym vecherom," trans. Grigorii Dashevskii, *Kommersant-Weekend*, October 4, 2013, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2309853>.

28. *The Poetry of Robert Frost* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1975), 224–25.

One of Dashevsky's former students, Nikolai Epple, said that the appearance of this poem, as Dashevsky was thought to be almost certainly dying, felt like an embrace—"одновременно литературным событием и очень интимным жестом человеческой поддержки, как объятие или рукопожатие."²⁹ The sense of Dashevsky's every word as a potentially final word is perhaps inevitable, especially for a poet who struggled against illness for more than two decades, and it will be a while before his legacy is not dwarfed by his example of courage and sheer force of will against terrible odds and advancing disease.

Compare a poem that Maria Stepanova put up on her Facebook page when news of Dashevsky's death came on December 17. It is Dashevsky's translation of a poem that William Blake rejected for *Songs of Innocence and Experience*:

Never pain to tell thy Love
Love that never told can be
For the gentle wind does move
Silently invisibly

I told my love I told my love
I told her all my heart
Trembling cold in ghastly fears
Ah she doth depart

Soon as she was gone from me
A traveller came by
Silently invisibly
O was no deny³⁰

Сердце от коханой навек умолчи:
вовек оно не говоримо,
ибо глядя ходит бриз
невидимо немо.

29. Nikolai Epple, "Pamiati Dashevskogo," *gefter.ru*, 12/20/13, <http://gefter.ru/archive/10881>. Epple's comment seems unconsciously to recycle Keats's "This living hand" in its image of "rukopozhatie." For the poem:

This living hand, now warm and capable
Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold
And in the icy silence of the tomb,
So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights
That thou would wish thine own heart dry of blood,
So in my veins red life might stream again,
And thou be conscience-calm'd. See, here it is—
I hold it towards you.

The Poems of John Keats, ed. Jack Stillinger (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1978), 503.

30. *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman, Newly Revised Edition (Berkeley: U of California P, 1982), 467. The original poem ends without a punctuation mark.

До самого дна, по самое дно
 сердце говорю ей:
 вздрогнет плача холодна—
 и прочь на волю.

Едва меня покинет она,
 идет прохожий мимо:
 единым вздохом поймана
 немо да невидимо.³¹

We can note that this poem's traveller, "*prokhozhi*," silent and invisible as the gentle breeze, is a perfect figure for the poet himself. I am mesmerized by this translation's great fourth line, "*nevidimo nemo*," transformed in the final line into the still more paronomastic "*nemo da nevidimo*" to create a final rhyme. It is a final line as memorable as Dashevsky's last lines in the Frost poem.

Dashevsky spoke powerfully through others' poems, not just as if they were his own, but because they were his own. He articulated a theory of his translations' often significant departures from the originals in what he called "minus translation."³² We note that in the Blake poem, he works in part by subtraction, pulling back from the distinctiveness of some of its lexicon.³³

Minus translation is not the same thing as minus subjectivity, but the two rhyme, which is another way of saying that the reduction of self that inheres in translation suited Dashevsky. It gives us another reason to see his translation work as a seamlessly present part of his poetic practice.³⁴ Dashevsky has left us a third exemplary notion of how a poet does the work of poetry, in other words, one marked not by moving the boundaries between poetry and prose, but by blurring any possible distinction between "original" poetry and translation.³⁵ He has also left us a powerful legacy as a critic, and I want to close by repeating for you one of his more remarkable formulations, which is about free verse.

31. Dashevskii, *Duma ivan-chaia*, 81.

32. See Dashevskii, "Perevody v rezhime 'minus,'" *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 73 (2005): 216–17.

33. Dashevsky, speaking about translating two lines of Catullus to seminar students of Aleksandra Borisenko and Viktor Sonkin, brings up a further intriguing form of renunciation associated with translation: the need to avoid importing superfluous connotations into one's translation. For the seminar, mentioned above, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2iAIGTcyTE8>.

34. In my reading of translation as a central part of a poet's creative work I am drawing on the superb recent dissertation by Maria Khotimsky on twentieth-century Russian poets' overcoming of solitude in their translating activities. See Khotimsky, *A Remedy for Solitude: Russian Poet-Translators in the Soviet and Post-Soviet Eras*, PhD Dissertation, Harvard University, 2011.

35. This aspect of his work is all the more apparent in a posthumously published volume of his work, *Neskol'ko stikhotvoreniĭ i perevodov* (Moscow: Kaspar Hauser, 2014), which appeared a few weeks after the AATSEEL meetings. For a fine review of the volume, which includes observations reiterating the interlocking nature of his work as poet and translator, see Anna Glazova, "Nartsiss," *Colta.ru* (February 6, 2014), <http://www.colta.ru/articles/literature/1954>.

Free verse is a sore subject in contemporary Russian poetry, and I won't rehearse here the squawking denunciations and intemperate reviews that can be found easily enough. Dashevsky has a different idea, one free of bile or grievance, perhaps based on his own wide-ranging poetic practice. He suggested, in a long piece that appeared on OpenSpace in 2012, that free verse is the metrical formation for public speech, and that its rise—as well as the decline in a poetics of quotation—signals a shift in poetry toward the challenge of speaking not to a cozy elite, not to like-minded initiates, but to the absolute otherness that confronts the poet who steps out of the underground, out of the kitchen, out of the *tusovka*, and onto the square, and, we might add, into the virtual reality of web journals, social media and blogs.

Of all the things that I have read about Russian poetry in its current manifestations, this idea of Dashevsky's about free verse and public address strikes me as one of the most optimistic politically, and these are times in Russia when optimism is a precious thing. His insight opens up a radically new sense of poetic audience, and of poetic speech itself. Dashevsky explained that when a poet speaks to this "absolutno chuzhoi chelovek," poetic speech becomes an interiorized conversation that carries with it this otherness. Here is what he predicts for the poet who utters such words:

Ты будешь говорить сам с собою уже не в ритмическом и отчасти внутриутробном убаюкивании размера, а как если бы внутри у тебя существовал холод и голод публичного пространства. Вот это пространство, голодное, холодное и освещенное, будет теперь создаваться параллельно—на площади, в суде, в парламенте, внутри человека и внутри стихов.³⁶

Dashevsky is unsparing in defining public space by its absence of warmth and nourishment, but to create this space as one's internalized audience is the fundamental creative gesture of the poet, he says. To speak into that space is to speak the truth.

I leave you with the possibility that these three poets, in their very different ways, are contemplating and in some cases actually creating that internalized sense of public space. They are producing poems that range about as far from traditional lyric utterance as one can go, yet the poems respond to an urgent demand that the poet's distinctive, authentic voice well forth. Stepanova, Grimberg, Dashevsky, and the dozens of other poets who are also flourishing at this moment, in this time, are renewing Russian poetry. Decades from now, we—or better yet, those who come to AATSEEL fifty years from

36. Dashevskii, "Kak chitat' sovremennuiu poeziyu," recorded by Varvara Babitskaia, Feb. 10, 2012, <http://os.colta.ru/literature/events/details/34232/page1/>. One could translate his words this way: "You will no longer be speaking with yourself in the meter of a rhythmic womb-like lullaby, but as if inside of you now existed the cold and hunger of public space. And as a result, this public space—cold, hungry, and lit up—will begin to be created in parallel to your speaking: on the public square, in the courts, in the parliament, inside of people and inside of poetry."

now, may well look back at the first years of the twenty-first century, and try to understand how it came to be such a time of poetic flourishing—a third era of poetic splendor at the dawn of a new century, like the Golden Age and the Silver Age. Dashevsky will be one of the centers of this poetic culture, as will Stepanova, and it seems to me that Grimberg will be one of the many distinctive, unforgettable voices who speak from the margins. They are widening the reach of poetry, and they are internalizing, in the ways that Dashevsky has described, that voice that speaks to absolutely unknown audiences, even the audiences of the unimaginable future. They raise the possibility that words may yet be used to tell the truth in public, and that poetry will once again be heard as the freest speech in Russia.

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