

Introduction

Поёт – издалека́ заводит рѣчь.

Поэта́ – далеко́ заводит рѣчь.

Цветаева, «Поэты»

The poet brings language from afar.

Language brings the poet far.

Tsvetaeva, “Poets”

When poets read their works aloud, we may not understand every word, but we immediately recognize that their intonation differs from that of everyday speech. This “unnatural” declamation often causes confusion among those who first encounter it. “Why don’t they just read it *normally*?” one is tempted to ask. The reason is simple: poets *want* to set their speech off from everyday language. Individual poets vary widely in the degree of “unnaturalness” they introduce to their readings, but in virtually all cases their goal is the same: to destabilize the familiar world of their listeners, to make them hear anew.

All of us, poets or not, alter our tone of voice and choice of words in accordance with specific circumstances. We speak differently with our parents than with our peers, we address the auto mechanic differently than the policeman, we speak differently when giving a toast than we do when calling for an ambulance. In many life situations, what might be called the prosaic attitude toward language dominates. Our object is to relay information as quickly and unambiguously as possible. At other times, getting the point across is not enough; it is essential to do so convincingly and fervently. We select our words carefully and consciously organize them. In this case, we are not necessarily creating poetry, but it is fair to say that we are moving in the direction of poetry. It is no coincidence that most of the rhetorical terms now associated with poetry originated in the law courts of antiquity. The court is a place where eloquence matters, and the lawyers of ancient Greece and Rome were trained in the art of persuasion.

A precise example may make it easier to distinguish between the poetic and the prosaic poles. Readers who opened *The New York Times* on July 11, 2000 were greeted by the following article on the upper left-hand corner of the first page.

Thirty-five years after the dismantling of legalized segregation, a majority of Americans maintain that race relations in the United States are generally good, but blacks and whites continue to have starkly divergent perceptions of many racial issues and they remain largely isolated from each other in their everyday lives, according to a nationwide poll by The New York Times.

Despite a superficial visual resemblance to verse, it is highly unlikely that any of the countless readers confused this passage with poetry. No sane person would stop to ponder why each line of this passage ends at the precise point where it does. No one would ask questions like “Is the word ‘dismantling’ broken into ‘dis’ and ‘mantling’ to emphasize the concept of ‘break’?” or: “Does the second line end on the word ‘segregation’ because this emphasizes a concept pivotal to the history of race relations in America?” We do not ask such questions because, as experienced newspaper readers, we know that the layout of individual lines is determined by printing necessity and does not reflect the individual author’s intent. Likewise, no reader would notice (let alone puzzle over) the unusual frequency with which the letters “m” and “a” appear in adjacent positions in the first lines: *mantling*, *majority*, *Americans*, *maintain*. We assume that the reporter’s primary goal is to convey basic factual information. If certain combinations of letters recur, we attribute this to coincidence, not to a conscious attempt to achieve some sort of aural patterning. News writing is focused almost entirely on the message, and whatever might distract from its direct and unambiguous presentation is considered inappropriate.

In poetry, on the other hand, the presentation becomes part of the message. Every aspect of the word (sound, spelling, placement on the page) is potentially meaningful. If the newspaper writer aims for immediate and unambiguous communication, the poet seeks to communicate in such a way that the audience will want to read (or hear) *again*, so that the individual word becomes maximally expressive and the audience maximally alert to that expression. For this reason, repeated encounters with the same poem will deepen – and at times even contradict – the first impression, while rereading a news item produces only tedium. This opposition between the newspaper (with its immediate cognitive gratification) and poetry (with its subtle interplay of sight and sound) is at the basis of Marina Tsvetaeva’s poem «Читатели газет» (“Readers of Newspapers”), of which the opening lines follow:

Ползёт подземный змѣй,	The underground snake crawls,
Ползёт, везёт людей.	[It] crawls [and] carries people.
И каждый – со своѣй	And each of them is with his
Газѣтой (со своѣй	Newspaper (with his
Экзѣмой!) Жвачный тик,	Eczema!) A chewing reflex,
Газѣтный костоед.	A newspaper bone-eater.
Жеватели мастик,	Chewers of mastics,
Читатели газѣт.	Readers of newspapers.

Tsvetaeva's short lines mimic the effect of a newspaper column. However, even a novice reader of poetry will recognize that the length of these lines is not determined by coincidence or printers' conventions, but by the poet's careful planning. If read aloud (and poetry should *always* be read aloud, if only to oneself), it becomes evident that the end of each line is marked by rhyme. This gives prominence to the final word of each line, which causes the experienced reader to make a slight pause. Ordinarily, the end of a line of poetry coincides with a logical break, usually reflected in the punctuation (a comma or period). Tsvetaeva's opening lines satisfy this expectation, but already in lines three and four, the reader is torn between pausing at the end of the line to emphasize the rhyme and rushing onwards to reach the thought's logical completion: «И каждый – со своѣй / Газѣтой (со своѣй / Экзѣмой!)» – “And each of them is with his / Newspaper (with his / Eczema!)” In this case, exact repetition at the end of the line helps us to recognize the symmetry of what follows. Both lines conclude with the same truncated prepositional phrase, leaving the object of the preposition to the *beginning* of the next line. These grammatically parallel words (“Gazetoi” and “Ekzemoi” are both feminine nouns in the instrumental case) are placed in graphically parallel positions. In everyday language, they would rarely be used in the same sentence, but Tsvetaeva wants us to see (and hear!) their similarities. In Russian, both words consist of three syllables, with a stress on the second. Moreover, they have a high percentage of repeated sounds: “Gazétoi” and “Ekzémoi” (according to rules of Russian pronunciation, “k” before “z” is pronounced as “g”). Why does Tsvetaeva do this? Presumably, she wants us to equate newspaper reading with disease (a theme she develops in the lines that immediately follow). She establishes this point indirectly, through rhyme and parallelism. By placing dissimilar concepts in the identical position in the line, she emphasizes their similarity in sound and suggests that they are related by sense. Our English translation can preserve the word order but not the essential sound play.

Indeed, English translation proves wholly inadequate as early as the poem's first line. Rather than stating the setting directly, Tsvetaeva introduces the image of a «подзѣмный змѣй» (“underground snake”). Some ingenuity is required to recognize this as a roundabout way of describing a subway. What

has Tsvetaeva gained by this indirect locution (a metaphor, to use a term we shall define later)? For one thing, she introduces a certain foreboding, not simply because the subterranean realm (“podzemnyi”) is traditionally associated with unclean things, death, and hell (all of which will be directly relevant to this poem), but also because the snake (“zmei”) recalls the biblical tale of the fall from Eden (which Tsvetaeva will allude to a few lines later when she compares a newspaper to a fig leaf, punning on Russian «ЛИСТ» as “leaf of paper” and “leaf of a tree”). No less important is the acoustic quality of these words. “Podzemnyi” not only shares its “po . . . ze” with the previous word (“*polzet*”), but it also contains in anagrammatic form every single letter found in the subsequent word (“zmei”). Thus, the striking opening image is supported – perhaps even motivated – by the sound.

Like so much of Tsvetaeva’s verse, this poem brims with linguistic inventiveness. These few comments cannot begin to do it justice, but they allow us to make some general observations on poetry. Tsvetaeva’s theme in “Readers of Newspapers” is, on the surface, absolutely prosaic. (She is writing about tabloids, the lowest form of journalism.) It is not the subject that makes her work poetic, but rather her approach to that subject. By taking advantage of the very sound of words, she introduces a coherence to language that one would never find – or even seek – in a newspaper. The more one ponders her specific images, the deeper their meaning becomes. For example, the comparison of a subway to a snake could upon first glance be understood simply in terms of their crawling motion. However, additional reflection (prompted by the knowledge of the entire poem) allows one to see this as part of a carefully structured system of biblical references, which in this poem range from Genesis to Revelation. For Tsvetaeva, the newspaper is not simply the nemesis of poetry. It is poetry’s demonic double, whose surface resemblance masks infernal designs. Such a view appears to have been shared by other modern Russian poets: Vladislav Khodasevich’s «Газетчик» (“The Newspaper Vendor”) is based on a similar assumption.

Whereas a newspaper concerns itself with current events, a poem tends to focus on the general or even archetypal. However, the two forms differ less in what they say than in how they say it. The effect of poetry depends on the combination of a number of elements (concision, imagery, grammatical parallelism, sound organization). It is this constant and complex interplay that distinguishes poetry not simply from newspapers, but from virtually all prose. While a novel or short story will undoubtedly reveal more careful organization than a newspaper article, it will never achieve the concentration and variety of patterning found in poetry.

The present book is conceived of as an introduction to Russian poetry, not a literary history. However, the task of introduction will be simplified if the reader has at least a rough knowledge of who the leading poets were, when they lived, and what “school” or “movement” they represented. The following thumbnail sketch is intended to situate *only* those poets cited in this book.

Compared to other national traditions, Russian poetry has a brief history. In the centuries when England enjoyed the creativity of Chaucer and Shakespeare, when Germany and France celebrated a flowering of medieval and baroque poetry, Russia’s muse was silent, at least as far as literate secular culture was concerned. Epochal events like the Renaissance and Reformation left no trace on the Russian cultural consciousness. Even had a talent of Shakespearean proportions arisen, three conditions would have conspired against it: the lack of a literary language, the lack of a literate public, and the overt hostility of church and state toward any form of artistic expression not intimately linked to the liturgy. Among the people at large, various forms of folklore existed, but these were independent oral traditions.

Peter the First (the Great), who ruled from 1689 to 1725, altered every aspect of Russian life, including commerce, social interaction, the military, education, and the arts. While there had been isolated attempts at Westernization under his immediate predecessors, no one could match Peter in terms of energy and urgency. However, not all reforms could be implemented as quickly as lopping the beard off a boyar. With typical impatience, Peter built a theater on Red Square, succeeding in shocking centuries-old religious sensibilities, but not in creating serious art. After all, the physical edifice alone could not compensate for the absence of a theatrical tradition.

Peter’s reign was essentially a gestation period for Russian secular culture, which only came into its own after his death. A handful of ambitious and talented individuals from the new educated class took it upon themselves to create Russian poetry. Most of these pioneers spent time abroad, so their innovations tended to be adaptations of models they encountered in Europe’s most advanced countries. However, historical and social circumstances specific to Russia also left their mark. Most obviously, Russian poets were completely dependent on the patronage system. Without support from the ruling institutions, nothing could be earned or published. These institutions included the court and the Academy of Sciences (which was itself controlled by the tsar). With the rare exception of men whose livelihood was not dependent on their verse (e.g., Antiokh Kantemir [Антио́х Кантеми́р], a professional diplomat whose work was not published in his lifetime), poets were members of the Academy of Sciences and therefore

essentially court employees. Their work consisted largely in writing odes to commemorate specific occasions and praise the wisdom of the sovereign and the valor of the military. The primary means of dissemination of verse was recitation, which meant that poets gave considerable thought to performance (public reading). Though continuous squabbling complicated their task, Mikhailo Lomonosov [Миха́йло Ломоно́сов] and Vasily Trediakovsky [Васи́лий Тредиако́вский] achieved remarkable success in domesticating poetry in Russia. In the course of a few decades, a genuine poetic tradition was established, with erudite talents contributing both verse and treatises on verse composition. If Lomonosov and Trediakovsky codified the poetic language, more unorthodox talents toward the end of the century experimented with it. These included Aleksandr Radishchev [Алекса́ндр Ради́щев] and, in particular, Gavriila Derzhavin [Гаври́ла Держави́н], the most inventive and aesthetically significant poet of the century.

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, Russian poetry changed direction. Poets emerged from the ranks of the aristocracy. Most served the country in some capacity, but not as poets. State-sponsored poetry ceased to exist, and the salon replaced the court as the primary venue. Instead of an audience of rulers and high-ranking nobles, poets wrote for their peers and, especially, for their friends. Accordingly, the themes of poetry now concentrated on the personal (friendship, longing, love) rather than the civic. Even the language of poetry changed. Influenced by the French-flavored Russian of Nikolai Karamzin [Никола́й Карамзи́н], poetry sounded much closer to the spoken idiom than it had in the previous century.

The first few decades of the nineteenth century are traditionally considered Russia's "Golden Age." Ushered in by the Italophile Konstantin Batiushkov [Константи́н Бати́шков] and the Germanophile Vasily Zhukovsky [Васи́лий Жуко́вский], it reached its apogee in Aleksandr Pushkin [Алекса́ндр Пу́шкин], who seamlessly adapted the innovations of his predecessors and added his own. Pushkin brought his "Midas touch" to everything he wrote, from epigrammatic insult to religious verse, from love poem to fairy tale, from comedy to tragedy. His works, characterized by a surface clarity that often masks their profundity, set the standard for contemporaries and successors. Most of the other major poets of the time were Pushkin's friends. Nikolai Iazykov [Никола́й Язы́ков], who made a name for himself singing the carefree joys of student life, later devoted his poetry to nationalistic themes and conservative causes. Evgenii Baratynsky [Евге́ний Бараты́нский], the only contemporary poet who could rival Pushkin, began as a follower of Batiushkov, but developed a distinctly brooding tone and a complicated syntax and language unique in his day. Petr Viazemsky [Пётр Вязе́мский], who outlived all of his friends and grew increasingly stodgy

and conservative, was in his youth a free-thinker and poet of great wit and irreverence.

After Pushkin's death, Russian poetry enjoyed a final brief outburst of creativity in Mikhail Lermontov [Михаи́л Ле́рмонтов], a Romantic in the Byronic mode, whose powerful, uncompromising, and always dissatisfied persona dominated his verse. After Lermontov's death, Russian poetry went into relative decline. It was not so much that great poets ceased to exist as that the sudden emergence of prose made poets less numerous and poetic interaction less animated. The greatest flowering of Russian poetry has always occurred in eras when numerous excellent poets are at work together, spurring each other on. In the decades following Pushkin's death, the handful of outstanding poets worked more or less independently. Fedor Tiutchev [Фёдор Тютчев], whose early poems were published in a journal that Pushkin himself edited, was a diplomat. He wrote poetry primarily for himself, took little interest in whether it was actually published, and at one point inadvertently destroyed a stack of his own manuscripts, in one stroke depriving posterity of some of the century's potentially finest verse. If Lermontov represented the Romantic cult of the poetic personality, Tiutchev followed the more speculative side of Romanticism. Afanasy Fet [Афанáсий Фет], whose "art for art's sake" credo alienated him from the socially engaged critics of his time, withdrew to his estate, refraining for decades from publishing his introspective and innovative verse. Only Nikolai Nekrasov's [Никола́й Некра́сов] poetry really fit in with the spirit of the times; in his work, the plight of the masses gets expression, often in satiric or folkloric style.

The last years of the nineteenth century marked a rebirth of interest in poetry and the dawn of Russia's "Silver Age" (as the period from the 1890s to the early 1920s has come to be known). The term is somewhat misleading, since in quantity of excellent poets and quality of work the "Silver Age" is not inferior to the "Golden Age." The first phase of the "Silver Age" saw the ascent of Russian Symbolism. After Valery Briusov's [Вале́рий Бру́сов] adaptations of European Decadence, Symbolism soon took a strong religious turn in the works of Zinaida Gippius [Зинаи́да Ги́ппиус]. Building on Vladimir Soloviev's [Влади́мир Соловьёв] philosophy and mystical poetry, the influential triumvirate of Aleksandr Blok [Алекса́ндр Блок], Andrei Bely [Андре́й Бе́лый], and Vyacheslav Ivanov [Вячесла́в Ива́нов] sought to redefine the goals of art. Consciously fusing myth and religion with aesthetics, they saw poetry as a means of transcending the physical world and achieving knowledge of a mysterious other world. Blok began as a love poet, but later turned his attention to urban and civic themes. Bely, an inveterate experimenter, explored almost every aspect of verse language in works that

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ranged from the confessional to Nekrasov-like folk stylizations. For Ivanov, whose fascination with antiquity affected both the texture of his verse and its themes, poetics meant mythopoetics, with personal and contemporary themes always submerged in the timeless and selfless world of myth. The Symbolists' contributions went beyond the writing of verse, for they were untiring educators and proselytizers. Through translations, public lectures, and personal example, they raised public consciousness about art. Though not a Symbolist, Mikhail Kuzmin [Михаил Кузмин] had similarly wide-ranging talents and interests: his poetry ranges from the precise miniature to the mystical and hermetic.

The Symbolists continued to write for decades, but the movement as such more or less collapsed in 1910. At this point, many new schools appeared, the two most significant being Acmeism and Futurism. Acmeism was a neo-classical form of modernism, which purported to reject the excessive mysticism of Symbolism and replace it with a new ideal of clarity. In many respects, however, the Acmeists were a logical extension of the Symbolists, with their emphasis on poetic craft and cultural continuity. Acmeism left its mark on Russian poetry less as a unified movement than through the achievements of its two greatest poets: Anna Akhmatova [Анна Ахматова] and Osip Mandel'shtam [Осип Мандельштам]. Perhaps even less unified than Acmeism, Futurism sought to provoke and outrage. If the Symbolists and Acmeists revered the past, the Futurists – at least the Cubo-Futurists, who represented the most extreme of several Futurist camps – claimed to reject it entirely. In its place, they proposed either a neo-primitivism (which sought its linguistic ideal in a historically nonexistent form of early Slavdom) or a cult of the new technology (machines, speed). The former was represented by the eccentric Aleksei Kruchenykh [Алексей Кручёных] and visionary Velimir Khlebnikov [Велимир Хлебников], the latter by Vladimir Mayakovsky [Владимир Маяковский]. Arguing that radical poetics went hand in hand with radical politics, Mayakovsky greeted the Revolution with open arms and became one of the most visible apologists for the Soviet regime. His influence, which waned toward the end of his life and for a few years after his suicide in 1930, ultimately proved decisive through the entire Soviet period.

Two of Russia's most outstanding poets emerged from the ferment of the pre-revolutionary years without belonging to any "school." Boris Pasternak [Борис Пастернак] began his career close to one of the more docile Futurist factions, but soon became a poet without an "ism." Marina Tsvetaeva's [Марина Цветаева] poetry reflects the influence of Cubo-Futurism, but she herself never joined this or any other movement. Both Pasternak and Tsvetaeva synthesized the most compelling aspects of many rival groups, creating exuberant yet profound poetry with linguistic brilliance and

extraordinary emotional range. Their works are among the most challenging, but also the most rewarding in the entire Russian tradition.

The Russian revolution was a watershed event not only in terms of politics, but also in the cultural sphere. If Russian visual artists and musicians could easily continue their careers in emigration, poets found themselves choosing between highly undesirable alternatives. Many emigrated, only to live unhappy and often creatively unproductive lives in countries that could not appreciate them. In Paris, the capital of the Russian emigration, Vladislav Khodasevich [Владисла́в Ходасе́вич] and Georgy Ivanov [Геор́гий Ива́нов] provided bleak but powerful poetic voices. Others remained in a Russia they distrusted, often with tragic professional and personal consequences. Akhmatova endured years of persecution, while Mandel'shtam was arrested twice and perished on his way to a Stalinist labor camp. Tsvetaeva combined the worst of both fates, spending bitter years as an émigré, only to return to Russia, where, obscure and destitute, she committed suicide.

The Soviet regime valued culture insofar as it could inspire loyalty to the party. A new patronage system arose, with the party leaders standing in for the tsars and the ever more powerful Writers' Union playing the role that the Academy of Sciences had played in the eighteenth century. However, the stakes were even higher, since a poem that misinterpreted the often inscrutable party line could result in a stiff prison sentence or worse. As in the eighteenth century, panegyric genres were favored. With the exception of Mayakovsky's work, little of the reams of officially published poetry is worthy of serious attention. On the other hand, a rich tradition of unofficial poetry emerged in the relative freedom after Stalin's death. In the 1960s, Evgeny Evtushenko [Евге́ний Евтуше́нко] tried to resurrect the tribune that Mayakovsky had established, filling stadiums with crowds who came to hear his daring, if somewhat compromised (both poetically and politically) verse. More influential, perhaps, was the quiet revolution of the bards, genuine non-conformists who sang their verse, accompanying their unschooled voices on the traditional Russian seven-string guitar. Of these, Bulat Okudzhava's [Була́т Окуджа́ва] plaintive lyrics were among the most celebrated. Though never officially produced, cassette recordings of the bards' work spread throughout the country, making it known far and wide. Various non-conformist poetry movements also took shape in the 1960s and 1970s, ranging from avant-garde experimenters like Nina Iskrenko [Ни́на Искре́нко], who embraced a diverse panoply of styles ("polystylistics"), to conceptualist poets like Dimitri Prigov [Дми́трий При́гов] and Timur Kibirov [Тиму́р Кибі́ров], who questioned the validity of all previous discourse (especially the official Soviet language). Finally, some poets built on the legacy of the officially repudiated "Silver Age," celebrating the richness

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and variety of pre-revolutionary poetry. Though a member of the Writers' Union, Viktor Sosnora [Виктор Соснора] wrote on unorthodox themes in unorthodox style, revitalizing Futurist experiments with language. A complete outsider to the system, Joseph Brodsky [Иосиф Бродский] created a richly allusive poetics, combining high and low genres and styles. After his forced emigration, he tried tirelessly to inculcate his reverence of tradition to American audiences through interviews, readings, and translations, as well as in the capacity of university professor, American poet laureate, and Nobel prize winner.

By the time of Brodsky's death in 1996, Russian culture had experienced perhaps the most decisive paradigm shift in its entire history. For an outsider, it is difficult to appreciate the extent to which the demise of the USSR altered the landscape of Russian poetry. On the one hand, poets experienced an unprecedented sense of freedom. For the first time in Russian history, censorship was abolished. For the first time in living memory, poets could write without giving a thought to political expediency, without depending on the state as the sole sponsor and publisher of literature. On the other hand, a rich culture of secrecy was demolished in a single stroke. Through threats, admonishments, punishments, and rewards, the Soviet Union had granted the poet an exalted place in society. Evtushenko, who fully appreciated this status, had been right on the mark when he entitled one of his books *A Poet in Russia Is More Than a Poet* (1973). The "system" created no shortage of sycophants, but it also gave birth to non-conformist poets as well as a colorful vocabulary to describe their subversive activities: «спіски» (copies of unofficial verse which circulated among the conspiratorial cognoscenti), «самиздát» (the system of unofficial publication [typewriter and carbon paper being the primary means of reproduction]), «эзбóв язýк» (Aesopian language, needed to express the truth in a fashion sufficiently obscure to sneak it past the censor), «писáть в стол» ("to write for the desk drawer," the term for work so critical that it could only be put in a folder to await publication in some distant era). The dissident poet was an extremely appealing figure, and the attendant mythology helped make him (or her) a cultural hero unimaginable in the West.

In a society that controlled all sources of information, people looked to literature as a secret source of wisdom and a moral compass. With the fall of the Soviet Union, the familiar and accepted roles of poet as martyr or poet as prophet lost their relevance. If the non-conformist Soviet poet had to outwit the increasingly clumsy totalitarian system, the post-Soviet poet has to contend with new adversaries, more mundane, but no less powerful. As entertainment, poetry now competes with Harlequin romances, television sit-coms, and Hollywood-style films. As social commentary, it has lost considerable ground to the news media. While many bemoan this turn of