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## P R E F A C E

Poetry today is without question a luxury, just as much a luxury as a free mind and free speech.

—ALEXANDRA TSIBULYA, 2016

THREE ENCOUNTERS with poets made me the person who could write this book, and I retell them here because they are emblematic of this book's aims and approach. Joseph Brodsky taught in the Five College area during my first fifteen years of teaching at Amherst College. I barely knew his work then, so much did I live my scholarly life in Russia's Golden Age. I audited his poetry classes and was lucky enough to have had any number of conversations with Brodsky. He kept telling me that I was missing out on the greatness of contemporary poetry in English, and he put poems by Paul Muldoon, Seamus Heaney, Derek Walcott, and Les Murray in front of me. This was his pantheon, and I could soon begin to create my own as I set about reeducating myself in the poetry of my lifetime, in English and in Russian.

Then, on one of my research trips to Russia in the 1980s, when I was still writing about Pushkin and Pushkin myths, I went to see Arkady Dragomoshchenko on the recommendation of Andrew Wachtel. Here was another poet whose work I had barely read. He, too, pressed on me some poetry in English that I did not know, starting with Lyn Hejinian. This was a canon quite different from Brodsky's. Dragomoshchenko had translated Hejinian, as well as John Ashbery, Susan Howe, Charles Olson, and others. Through him, I met Lyn Hejinian, and through her, Marjorie Perloff, and there opened a whole new approach to English-language poetry, different from the Eliot-Stevens-Frost-Auden modernism in which I had been educated as an undergraduate. It was a shift in my view of American literary culture, and of Russia's recent poetry as well.

The third encounter began with a text, not a person. During the heady years of glasnost and perestroika, I was following every month's fresh journals (in paper copies in our college and university libraries, it's worth remembering). Like everyone else, I was keen to read daring new work as well as long-suppressed masterpieces. The October 1988 issue of *Druzhba narodov* included a small selection of poems by someone named Olga Sedakova. The preface by the legendary scholar Vyacheslav Ivanov got my attention, too. The poetry was otherworldly, potent, with a Pushkinian lucidity that intensified the sense of mystery. How could someone be writing this poetry in the Soviet Union? Sedakova's work, and the very different poems of Arkady Dragomoshchenko, signaled to me that beyond Brodsky, who the previous year had won the Nobel Prize in Literature, there was a flourishing and tremendously variegated poetic culture in Russia. That culture and its evolution over the next twenty-five years is the subject of this book.

I tell these three encounters not just to rehearse my many stages of ignorance, but also because the stark differences among these three figures—Brodsky, Dragomoshchenko, Sedakova—define me as a chronicler of these years and as a reader of poetry. Just as American poetry has accommodated voices so different as to seem to be speaking multiple languages—including in multilingual poetry—in Russian poetry, advocates of strict form have flourished alongside those whose poems are spread out on the page like fireworks; stridently political prose-like poems have come from the pen of a poet who also writes tenderly of a loved child, a dead father, or a provincial town where factory whistles toot; and poets who have taken subtly different positions on social issues have argued about all of this on Facebook, at symposia and public readings, and on the print or web pages of Russian-language journals published in Latvia, Israel, New York, and Moscow. Inspiring criticism is addressing specific strands of aesthetic and philosophical argument within this multiplicity. My project is to offer a wide-angle if still partial view of this rich body of work, contextualizing unfamiliar poets, offering fresh views of the better known, and finding for all the poets, I hope, new readers and new critics.

One thing that Brodsky, Dragomoshchenko, and Sedakova have in common is their status within the tradition of unofficial literature of the late Soviet period. All the poets treated in this study are the heirs of that tradition of unofficial literature, and this lineage has defined my own take on contemporary poetry and my choice of poets to study.<sup>1</sup> Ilya Kukulkin has argued that the defining feature of unofficial poetry was not political but aesthetic, even though the crucial trait is its not having been subject to censorship: "Uncensored art

is art that is aesthetically free.”<sup>2</sup> By making freedom a key element of unofficial art and, as he goes on to show, of unofficial poetry in particular, Kukulin sets up the lineage that I pursue here. I am following trends initiated by unofficial poets—their themes, their formal innovations, and their intonations. Of the last, there are several, from spiritually urgent to comically ironic to ostentatiously lazy. The freedom to choose a tone, a form, a crucial image defines their work. It is a reason I have emphasized freedom throughout: this poetry has been considering its own potential to create the grounds for political freedoms; and these poems exude a freedom to roam among ideas, poetic forms, affiliations, and instances of self-fashioning.

Kukulin’s sentence has one more important clause. Here it is in full: “Uncensored art is art that is aesthetically free and thereby responsible.” The word with which he ends that sentence, *otvetstvennyi*, holds a richer set of connotations than the English word *responsible*, because the Russian suggests a kind of ethical responsiveness, a capacity to respond to many kinds of stimuli and an awareness that one is responsible for one’s reactions. The word played its own role in official Soviet public discourse, where it could be a coded signal of what the theory of socialist realism called the “social command” (*sotsial’nyi zakaz*). A writer was meant to be responsible to uphold certain standards, to tell the stories of a society building socialism, and so forth. But Kukulin is not trying to sneak in some hidden criticism of underground writers with this word. He is rescuing this term for its ethical potential and listening for its presence even in unlikely texts.<sup>3</sup> I share his conviction that the term is valuable. That conviction is felt when I choose, for example, to write of poets who have spoken out about sexual violence and about Russia’s war on Ukraine, or of poets who have sought a language of faith and spiritual quest that does not replicate the harms of institutional power.

The story of this book’s origins is expected content for a preface, but I need to conclude with a note about how my writing ended. The world of Russian poetry faced radical changes just as I was finishing the book. The war Russia unleashed on Ukraine in February 2022 and the radical curtailing of freedom of expression on Russia’s territory and in internet sites reach far beyond the world of poetry, but poems and poets have also been powerfully affected by this horror. The leadup to this more aggressive and destructive phase of the war had long been a part of this book, and texts about the Russia-Ukraine war are treated in chapters 1 and 2, as well as in the afterword. But nearly the whole book was drafted before February 2022, written in a spirit of openness and optimism that could sound grotesque in a time when Russian forces are targeting

civilians in Ukraine and when thousands of Russians who oppose the war have fled to a safety that Ukrainian citizens cannot find anywhere in their homeland. At the least, the dream that poetry's free speech would inspire greater freedoms was rudely interrupted on February 24, 2022. It could be a painfully long time before the sense of community, online and in public, which is this book's subject, is once again fully flourishing, although I hasten to add that it has persisted in crucial ways. Or it could be a very short time indeed before we see it thriving in all its vibrancy: the precipitous demise of the USSR proved that Russians' supposed penchant for endless endurance of the state's deprivations and horrors can turn on a dime.

Either way, the story I tell here no longer has the open-ended quality I had celebrated as I was drafting this book. I used to joke that it took me so long to write it because more and more remarkable poems were turning up, because new journals and websites were opening, and because poets themselves were regrouping and reconnecting in ways that made me change my mind. Joking comes less easy now, but the spirit of expecting fresh new work persists. The war will end, Ukraine will be free, and Russians will begin the hard work of rebuilding their own national identity. Russian poetry will be there through it all, and the poems of the near future and perhaps for a longer term will be haunted by the violence and terror that the state is exporting, on a scale exceeding even what it did in Syria or Chechnya. Poems are already being written about the guilt and chaos this cannot but wreak on language itself. I occasionally will note some of this very new, raw work, and I speak to it directly in the afterword. Still, the material for this book largely predates the current war.

Especially since February 2022, but beginning before then, the term *Russian* has become highly charged. I want to explain why and how I use it. When I refer to Russian poetry, I do not mean poetry by ethnic Russians, or even necessarily poems written by Russian citizens. This book includes poets who have renounced Russian citizenship and who live outside Russia's borders. It does not include Russian nationalist poets, known since 2022 as *Z* poets; it focuses instead on a community of poets who view critically the imperial ambitions of the Russian state, and who, wherever they live and whatever their citizenship, value the project of investigating Russia's past and present, and even its possible futures. I define the contours of this community further in the introduction, particularly its inheritance of the tradition of unofficial Russian poetry from the Soviet period.

Some critics are using the term *Russophone* to denote this broader community. The analogy is to Francophone writing, an established term that marks

writing by those living outside France, most often in former French colonies. The analogy is imperfect, both because of the imprecise match of Russia's and France's colonialist legacies, and because some poets included here are not, or while they were alive were not, living outside Russia at all. These poets have many and quite varied identities and affiliations, and I situate each of them as they are discussed. Overall, and with some reluctance, I have stayed with *Russian* as an umbrella term, for all its imperfection. The poets themselves have reckoned with the term, and with the legacy of Russia's violence, and they have used the term *Russian* in that reckoning. It remains the best recognizable term in English. The poets have not given up on the project of creating a version of the culture that is not imperial, dishonest, and violent, and part of my project is to chart their labor in probing a relentlessly disturbing past and present.

I am finishing this book at a moment unimaginably unlike the hopeful mood of its inception. I feel enduring respect for what the poets have done in the thirty years since the fall of the USSR, and I believe that we all stand to learn from their exhilarating, complicated, and bold work. It is a foundation on which the culture will rebuild when the Russia-Ukraine war ends.

