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## INTRODUCTION

# Thirty Years of Free Poetic Speech

THIS IS A BOOK that began with a falling wall, a wall that came down literally in Berlin in 1989 and then figuratively within and around poetic expression. My working title was *Breaking Down the Walls*, and I knew that the book I wanted to write would chart the ways in which contemporary Russian-language poetry was being built on the ruins of walls that no longer cordoned off generations, genres, aesthetic movements, geographic entities, and individual persons. I had the hypothesis that the lowering of barriers both physical and psychological was the source of explosive energy in the new poetry, and a reason for its flourishing against considerable odds.

That metaphor of the breached wall remains, and it will help make sense of the impulses and reactions that give such an emotional charge to poetry written in the last thirty years. The wall, though, has become to my mind less an architectural structure meant to keep populations separate, but instead more like a membrane, like the wall that keeps a cell intact. I came to see that it wasn't a matter of a wall that was knocked down, but rather of a permeable barrier, one that increasingly permitted the exchange of persons and materials, or—and this metaphor emerged as more significant, the more I worked—the circulation of air.

A further change in my argument occurred as I tried to account for the emotional intensity, the sense of a life force that this poetry exuded. I wanted to understand the fierce allegiances, the surging anguish, the joyous praise, and the shifting metaphysical moods of these new poems. The only word that felt able to accommodate that expansive surge of possibilities was freedom, a term I approached with some wariness. As an American, I had seen it co-opted by right-wing radicals for whom the right to bear arms, for example, was the epitome of US values. But I resisted the idea that a value like freedom could

be contaminated by its most perverse uses. In fact, I was increasingly finding in the poets I was reading an idea of freedom that was quite different. It was captured well by the poet Elena Fanailova in the announcement that regularly introduced her podcast *Babylon-Moscow* (*Vavilon Moskva*), as she adjusted it in 2022: she would be featuring cultural figures who loved their own freedom and that of others (“oni liubiat svobodu—svoiu i chuzhuiu”).<sup>1</sup>

This belief that someone else’s freedom is as much to be prized as one’s own has a history in Russia. Fanailova’s wording recalls the slogan that poet Natalia Gorbanevskaya unfurled on Red Square in 1968 to protest the deployment of Soviet tanks against Czechoslovakia: “For your freedom and for ours!” (*Za vashu i nashu svobody*). Gorbanevskaya was herself reprising a famous phrase by nineteenth-century writer Alexander Herzen, meant to support Poles fighting for independence from imperial Russia.<sup>2</sup> Fanailova, a fierce supporter of Ukrainian independence, surely intended the parallel.

Shared freedom, and the idea that poetry is responsible for spreading that freedom, is a value explored here from multiple angles. In writing this book, I started from a curiosity about what had set poems and poets free (what walls had come down), but what sustained my work was a desire to explain how that sense of freedom might spread, and how the poems generate intense emotional and affective charges that make them so compelling.

Let one signal example stand at the outset for many others, to show concretely where the sense of freedom starts and then how it reverberates. It occurs at the end of Polina Barskova’s poem “The Battle” (“*Bitva*,” 2011), where the speaker, who has unflinchingly described the Siege of Leningrad in the winter of 1941, ends with the claim that, at that moment, she “was happy” (*byla schastliva*). This revelation comes after lines that juxtapose the blockade’s starvation and privation with the clatter of music and of bombardment. Here is the poem’s conclusion:

She listened to Tchaikovsky on the radio yesterday she was happy  
*Soyez hardiz en joye mis!*

It was lovely to hear:  
Loud music  
Loud music  
and she was happy

Слушала вчера по радио Чайковского была счастлива  
*Soyez hardiz en joye mis!*

Было красиво на слух:  
 Громкую музыку  
 Громкую музыку  
 и была счастлива<sup>3</sup>

Barskova is not just a poet but also a scholar of the Siege of Leningrad.<sup>4</sup> Here she imagines the blockaded city, where the barricades are keeping out food, where people are freezing and starving. Within that horror is someone radiant with improbable happiness amid the alarming sounds, smells, and sights of war. Where does that freakish joy come from? And where did Barskova, originally from the city that suffered the blockade, find the inner freedom to rewrite that most iconic of historical moments not as a scene of deprivation, but as one of plenitude?<sup>5</sup>

One answer to that question has shaped many modern studies of Russian poetry: the poet found her freedom by reading other poets. The poets, the argument has it, imbibe an inner experience of independence and liberation from the tradition even amid the worst experiences of war, repression, censorship, or terror. Barskova flaunts the possibility that poets may yet gain inspiration from their predecessors, quoting intermittently from a French Renaissance poem by Clément Janequin, “La Guerre” (1528), as in the passage just cited. She uses Janequin’s title to inspire her own, “The Battle,” and she borrows his theme of music. But her turn to Janequin is also a marked turn to a foreign source. Barskova’s radically liberating gesture is to connect the Siege of Leningrad, a defining Soviet historical event, to the struggles of another country and another time. She opens a space where the music of the Siege can be imagined outside national mythologies.

Barskova enacted a further form of freedom in her first public performance of the poem, using the text as a kind of script on which she freestyled. She said, by way of preface, that the poem was inspired by another and notably non-Russian source, the poet Ernesto Estrella, who was in the Philadelphia audience where she read.<sup>6</sup> The poem sounds like nothing Estrella (or Janequin, for that matter) had written, and in many ways it does not even sound like what Barskova had written to that point. It represented a radical gesture of one poet’s freedom, a form of free speech.

Polina Barskova’s pathway to that freedom is telling. Some of that freedom surely came to her as a result of her years in the United States; her intense contact with poets writing in English, Spanish, and other languages; her years of graduate study and teaching in an American context; her peregrinations

from place to place to recite her poems, share her scholarship, meet her peers. After 1989, that free movement was the rule, not the exception, for poets writing in Russian. Many began to move easily among the institutions of higher education, journalism, publishing, and performance art, and, like Barskova, they could travel widely. Those who emigrated were no longer cut off by cultural or political boundaries. The end to restrictions on travel, the end to censorship, and the advent of the internet, with its boundless access to others' writings—these are all definitive aspects of the last thirty years of poetry, as definitive as changes in government or economic structure. The fact that the Russia-Ukraine war has increased the numbers of those leaving and that travel back and forth is (one hopes, temporarily) curtailed makes the years of freer movement until 2022 all the more significant.

It is hard to overstate how powerfully these forms of openness changed Russian poetry. What exploded, because of travel across actual boundaries and the mental travel afforded by the internet, with its information overload and ease of sharing ideas across multiple platforms, is the very notion of daily experience in the present. An intensified sense of the present moment, of the felt experience of the body in space and of the sensory impact of sights, sounds, smells, and the movement of the air itself—these are defining traits of the poetry as studied here. And they were amplified by the wish to let that intensity saturate one's creative output, to hang on to it long enough to let it make a poem. A focus on the present had important political implications, too: as the artist Vitaly Komar pointed out, totalitarian regimes live in a temporality of the past (often glorified and distorted) or the future (a promised utopia).<sup>7</sup> To focus on the present was to insist on an alternative temporality, one in which life could be experienced in the moment, one that was potentially liberating. Freedom came to poets from the experience of the present, wherever they found themselves, and their reaction, in turn, was to register the experience of presence in new forms of poetry.<sup>8</sup> They defined that experience in political, philosophical, psychological, and spiritual ways, all tracked in the pages to follow.

Freedom may be a surprising metaphor for writing and thinking about Russia, especially given all it has done to try to curtail the autonomy of Ukraine. The limits on freedom are more repressive as of 2022, but they are not new. In 2018, Timothy Snyder published a widely reviewed book, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America*.<sup>9</sup> His approach is comparative, but he tells a brutal story about Russia.<sup>10</sup> The rise of intolerance, the ruthlessness of the country's leader, the incursion into Ukraine, the meddling in foreign elections, and the

inability to hold free and open elections internally all mark the current regime as the opposite of liberal democracy. One can challenge some of Snyder's conclusions, perhaps especially his seeing little opening for individual acts of resistance.<sup>11</sup> But there can be no doubt that the Russia he describes suppresses many of the freedoms its citizens might hope to enjoy.

I take a different approach to Russia's cultural life since 1989, without for a moment diminishing the depravity of the current regime. The difference is less in the assessment of just how authoritarian Russia's government is and more in how citizens—and poets—behave under such a regime. As Orwell might have said, it isn't a question whether the state grants freedom of speech, it's a question whether people use it, and the time may be ripe for reconsidering the idea of free speech in Russia's story of itself. It is not a straightforward tale. Even in periods of relative tolerance, the spirit of individualism inherent in ideals of free speech was often missing. If we cast a backward glance, from post-Soviet Russia to the USSR, and still further back to imperial Russia and the earlier cultural formations known as Rus', authoritarian rulers insistent on demonstrative loyalty seem more emblematic than free-speaking citizens. And yet there were free-speaking writers and public figures, some famous, like Alexander Radishchev, some fictionalized, like Nikolai Leskov's hero in "Singlemind" ("Odnodum," 1879) or Tolstoy's Pierre Bezukhov in *War and Peace*.

Still, the idea of governmental rule did not depend on conversation and debate among citizens. One had duties to the state, and by long tradition, any lack of authentic deference could be concealed behind the common performances that, as Sheila Fitzpatrick has shown, had no small share of imposture. The communal social patterns that enabled the creation of a Communist state after 1917 deemphasized individual speech acts, preferring instead public gestures of patriotism and ardent commitment to building the new state. Diaries from the Communist period have shown individuals building a self from the familiar slogans of public life.<sup>12</sup> Despite a whole host of differences in the circumstances of the post-Soviet period, many of the shared values and rhetorical patterns persisted. Fitzpatrick rightly called the 1990s a period of "anxious individual reinvention."<sup>13</sup>

Of course, a tradition of unofficial literature also appears throughout Soviet history, a tradition on which all the poets I treat here in some ways rely. Among the many singular traits of that tradition was an attempt to recover some measure of authenticity in personal identity formation and in public (if restricted to a small counter-public) utterance. Unofficial culture particularly flourished in and after the 1960s, and a poem written at that time offers a splendid

image of the complexity of these forms of free expression. The author is the Conceptualist poet Vsevolod Nekrasov, and it is one of his typically gnomic short poems. The text consists of little more than the Russian word for freedom, *svoboda*, plus the verb “to be.” Nekrasov does an immense amount with these meager lexical resources:

freedom is  
 freedom is  
 freedom is  
 freedom is  
 freedom is  
 freedom is  
 freedom is  
 freedom is freedom<sup>14</sup>

свобода есть  
 свобода есть  
 свобода есть  
 свобода есть  
 свобода есть  
 свобода есть  
 свобода есть  
 свобода есть свобода<sup>15</sup>

Nekrasov often took public slogans and made them into poetic utterances. Here, familiar Soviet assertions about its free, strong people create a repeating six-line foundation for a poem whose seventh line appears to round out the repetition. Nekrasov transforms the hammering repetition that freedom exists into a tautology. That closed logical loop might hint that freedom is its own dead end, but it also asserts that freedom becomes freedom by means of being repeated: its meaning accumulates, intensifies, even accelerates.<sup>16</sup> Neither possibility can be excluded. There is an ambiguous stance before freedom, at once affirming, insistent, and wary that freedom may be a fantasy no more real than the word that asserts its existence.<sup>17</sup>

That ambiguity was turned into a visual image in the artwork of Erik Bulatov, a Conceptualist painter (and friend of the poet), who used Nekrasov’s poetry to create a memorable set of images.<sup>18</sup> There are several of these paintings, one of which is shown in figure 1. Bulatov repeats the lineation of Nekrasov’s poem, seven iterations of the phrase “freedom is” (*svoboda est’*), but he repositions that last word, “freedom” (*svoboda*), moving it from the end of the last line up into a skyward overlay, so that the word is aimed, arrow-like, into



FIGURE 1. Erik Bulatov, *Freedom Is Freedom II* (2000–2001). Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

a blue distance of ever-receding space. Bulatov lifts that last word of the poem off the text, creating a grid of identical lines of poetry, rather than replicating the text's asymmetry of that extra word “svoboda” in l.7. Those repeating words, “svoboda est,” become a grid-like background onto which the blue sky of freedom can be painted.<sup>19</sup>

I placed Bulatov within late Soviet Conceptualist work, entirely appropriately, but his visualization of Nekrasov’s poem was completed in the post-Soviet period, at the dawn of the apparent new freedoms of the early 2000s. Tellingly, his grid-like arrangement of repeating letters layered beneath a blue sky penetrated by the word for “freedom” yields neither the dream that freedom will hurtle into space unfettered, nor a grim reality that it might be an entrapping, empty repetition of sounds. Bulatov, like the poets I study here, is committed



to getting his viewers to *think* about freedom, to enter the space of the picture. In his theoretical statements about painting, he contrasted the surface spaces of an artwork with its depths. Bulatov explained that in the history of painting, there had been an expectation that a canvas was either surface or depth, but he sought a way for the artwork to be both. The use of words, he claims, lets a painting exist as both surface and depth, enabling the viewer to “enter the space beyond the window” and “change from being a non-participating viewer to a participant in the events in the picture.”<sup>20</sup> Bulatov wants the participation of the viewer. He seeks engagement, conversation.<sup>21</sup>

The doubled example of Nekrasov and Bulatov shows how that engagement might work between art forms (a conversation across media reprised here in chapters on poetry and music, and on poetry and photography). Bulatov in 2000 draws on a poem from 1963, but his picture can bring us directly to the present. In this contemporary moment, an unlikely and unfree moment, we can rethink and refine our ideas of how freedom gets used. An older idea of free speech as practiced only by a small minority of dissidents or innovative artists is ripe for reassessment. The stark division between loyalists and critics lost its salience after the fall of the Soviet Union; with the demise of state censorship and the explosion of venues for creative expression, free speech seemed available to anyone. By any standard, the 1990s, a chaotic time in terms of social structure and economic security, was a high point in the free exchange of ideas and the expression of dissent. Yet all of this has many gray areas. Current histories associate diminishing freedoms with the return of Putin to the presidency in 2012, but as Daphne Skillen has demonstrated in her excellent history of free speech in Russia, the legal groundwork for curtailing and regulating speech was laid in 2000 (and thus Bulatov’s picture catches that transitional moment with uncanny precision). Skillen assesses the surprising lack of resistance from journalists in the Putin years, but the measurable decline in unregulated free speech does not mean its absolute curtailment. She notes that “as free speech declines from the 2000s, protest spread in the arts, which have always played an oppositionist role in Russian and Soviet society.”<sup>22</sup> I share her view of the arts as an arena for free speech but want to challenge an idea that only a few lone artistic voices use their freedom to speak up. Free speech is generative. Expressive free speech can inspire others to know better their own ideas and to express them. Even as the state’s brute force made protest within Russia rarer, it did not quell it entirely. The continuities across the post-Soviet period remain telling, as does the reverberating effect on social media of photographs and videos from protests.

Let the young woman in figure 2, who carries a Russian flag and a sign that declares, “Russia Will Be Free!,” stand in for the millions who spoke out in praise of freedom and demanded it for themselves. They marched in cities across Russia, protesting manipulated elections, the war in Ukraine, a culture of corruption, the arrest of Aleksey Navalny, the mobilization of soldiers and reinstatement of a draft, and much else.<sup>23</sup> The image is from a day of nationwide demonstrations in 2017 and a day of brutal arrests; it is an emblem of confidence and calm.<sup>24</sup> Everything in the marching woman’s posture and demeanor conveys a sense of patient optimism, which is all the more astonishing when one realizes that she is also being escorted in arrest. The image teaches a political reality as much as a moral truth. It is a moment when the state seeks to curtail speech, but a citizen affirms her right to display her inspiring hope for a better future. Like the artist Bulatov’s use of words, this photograph layers a written speech act onto an image of bodies moving toward a different space (in this case, detention rather than the endless blue sky). But it is her calm confidence that lingers from this photograph. How to learn that lesson in courage and clear-sightedness? How does one become that woman? This is the same question one asks of Polina Barskova’s poem “The Battle”: how does one gain the freedom to write such a poem?

The questions are even more pressing in the face of violent efforts to curtail such independence and optimism. This did not begin in 2022. News reports in the 2010s regularly testified that the state was clamping down. Human Rights Watch noted in its World Report 2017 that Russia’s “government tightened control over already shrinking space for free expression and stepped up persecution of independent critics during 2016.”<sup>25</sup> Pussy Riot’s performance and trial in 2012 was a signal moment in this clampdown. The band’s choice of the canonical, controlled cultural space of a church for the disruptive performance of punk rock music by masked women challenged the Orthodox Church, but once on trial, when they read philosophical lectures to stone-faced judges in the courtroom, they were challenging the state. They weren’t the first, but their colorful masks became an emblem of free expression and theatrical acts of collective resistance.

The masks, used in other actions by the group, were meant to mark the women of Pussy Riot as bandits and to preserve their anonymity. That they needed the protection of anonymity was a nod toward the dangers they were courting, a danger that was expressed fiercely with the more disturbing 2012 image of performance artist Petr Pavlensky’s face with his lips sewn shut (figure 3). The photograph was taken as he looked on at protests in support of



FIGURE 2. “Russia Will Be Free!,” unnamed woman, detained in St. Petersburg (2017). Photo: George Markov



FIGURE 3. Petr Pavlensky, photograph, REUTERS / Trend Photo Agency / Handout (2012)

Pussy Riot near Kazan Cathedral in St. Petersburg. Pavlensky's self-abusing gesture was directed against his body, a trademark of his performances. It defied Russia's apparent permission of free speech: what that freedom is good for, he proclaimed with his lips stitched shut, is the demonstration that Russia's citizens are being urged not to speak. The government that seems to grant freedom in fact forecloses it by punishing free speech whenever it suits them, including in the Pussy Riot trial and conviction.

Many other examples could be given that use verbal as well as these stunning visual means, some with as much ambiguity and irony as Pavlensky.<sup>26</sup> Writers, whose insistent freedom—both political and aesthetic—challenged the narrative of an adored authoritarian leader in a state where all is well, often participated in demonstrations and at one point staged a “Stroll with Writers.”<sup>27</sup> They insisted on freedom of expression on the pages of their books, in

blog posts and online publications, and in performances of their work. In their writings, they were doing something more than resisting capricious regulation of public assembly, although they did that, too: they were modeling the process by which one thinks and acts freely. That is the quality that makes their words into a superlative, into the freest possible speech—not because they have more daring or always utter more radical thoughts, but because by their words, they set the example for how minds might be ever more unfettered. Their rhetorical performances are doing the work of co-creating freedom, as Svetlana Boym would say.<sup>28</sup> By writing poems that follow ideas, themes, or images along pathways of freedom, Russia's poets are sharing with their readers the pleasures and dangers of free thought and free speech.

### Forms of Freedom

What does freedom mean more broadly in the context of contemporary Russian poetry? Why exactly have I emphasized so sharply the modeling function of free speech, a speech situation that always imagines the presence of others? How exactly does the co-creation Svetlana Boym championed come into being, and why does it matter?

We can find answers to these questions in the writings of several thinkers in and beyond Russia, and I begin with Svetlana Boym, both to use her idea of freedom as co-creation and to take a step back from her work to ask why this pioneering thinker in literary and visual studies, who had written for several decades about patterns and puzzles of cultural life in modern Russia and about individual writers and artists, would write an entire book on what she called *Another Freedom*. As the subtitle had it, her book was meant to be “the alternative history of an idea.” I cannot hope to reproduce the dazzling sequence that traced this alternative history—through etymologies, architectural spaces, and literary texts. But I do want to take her work, highly individual though it is, as a symptomatic turn to a conceptual framework, that of freedom, which has untapped potential to assist our understanding of cultural expression and cultural history. As she put it, there is a discourse of “Russia’s ‘other freedom,’ which was to be found not in the country’s political system, but in its artistic and spiritual heritage.”<sup>29</sup> She foregrounds “the dialogic encounter that fosters free speech,” an encounter that for her has to do with freedoms in the plural and with cross-cultural encounters in philosophy and aesthetics.<sup>30</sup> An important turning point in her study is a powerful critique of the most productive account of dialogism and freedom: Bakhtin’s reading of Dostoevsky. Svetlana Boym insists that the heart of Dosto-

evsky's "freer freedom" is suffering, not liberation. By refusing to downplay the role of violence in his work, she brings into relief the political disaster that looms when a "philosophy of suffering" becomes "a proof of authenticity and a foundation of moral authority."<sup>31</sup>

My thinking was clarified by the reorientation in *Another Freedom* toward Dostoevsky. Russia's contemporary poets do not turn their gaze away from suffering, but even so, they create spaces for free expression in which connections to others opens out a more generous and more creative form of subjectivity. They are building on the foundations of phenomenology and ontology: their forms of lyric expression constantly return the poet to the question of who one is in the moment of free expression. Those subjectivities are grounded in possible communities and in conversations with others.

This notion of personhood is also crucial in the work of a thinker very different from Svetlana Boym, Vladimir Bibikhin. Less well known in the West than he should be, Bibikhin was trained as a linguist under the formidable Andrei Zalizniak, and the nature of the word was always at the center of his work as a philosopher and as a translator. He wrote often on literary texts, including a volume on the diaries of Lev Tolstoy (which won him the Piatigorsk Prize) and a long meditation on the poetry of Olga Sedakova.<sup>32</sup> Bibikhin taught at Moscow State University, the Institute of Philosophy at the Academy of Sciences, and elsewhere, and was a beloved, inspiring teacher. He lectured on topics few others were willing or able to treat at the time, including the thought of Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein, both important sources of his own thinking, as well as the philosophy of law, the origins of Christianity, and the significance of the forest (*hyle*).<sup>33</sup> Bibikhin was deeply knowledgeable about Orthodox and Christian theology, and during the Soviet era, he published on theological topics under the pseudonym Veniaminov. As a translator he was also drawn to the significant thinkers of secular modern thought like Heidegger, Derrida, and Arendt.

His work on Hannah Arendt merits closer attention. He translated a portion of her book *On Revolution*, and he left an unfinished translation of her essay "What Is Freedom?" in his archive.<sup>34</sup> In writing about Arendt, Bibikhin has an interesting point of intersection with the theory of freedom advanced by Svetlana Boym, in whose work Arendt also figures prominently: Arendt is a key thinker for Bibikhin because she was sensitive to the ambiguities of freedom and understood it as a "miracle of infinite improbability."<sup>35</sup>

Bibikhin, too, conceives of freedom as historically located in modernity, and there are important points of intersection with Arendt's essay "What Is

Freedom?” For Arendt, the “field where freedom has always been known” as “a fact of everyday life, is the political realm.”<sup>36</sup> She finds the search for an idea of inner freedom more problematic than do several of the poets read here, and she insistently puts politics back into the discussion of freedom. Bibikhin, in writing about her and translating her essay, similarly sought to open a space for discussion of that political order whose founding was the guarantee of freedom to its citizens.

Bibikhin moved away from Arendt’s insistence that freedom is to be measured by action, not by thought or word (a surprising assertion from her in any case, since she wrote eloquently in *The Human Condition* of words as a form of action). For Bibikhin, our world can never be any better than our conversations.<sup>37</sup> In his writings, great freedom is opened up, and one is left able to see the world as possibility rather than as a time grid or schedule.<sup>38</sup> It is like the world of uncertainty that Svetlana Boym called a requirement for co-creation, a human condition in which change is possible. Imagining change as possible was a startling fact and potent political force after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and it also affected one’s sense of personhood and identity. The potential moral, personal, and spiritual growth is suggested by theorists like Bibikhin and Boym; it is an opening about which many poets treated here are curious, giving a provisional feel to some of their most interesting work.

A rather different thinker can sharpen the ethical edges of these possibilities, as well as the potential for social and political implications. How we use language is a measure of our moral and spiritual growth for Bibikhin, an idea that also echoes throughout the vast work of the American philosopher Stanley Cavell. For Cavell, moral perfectionism is the work of free societies, and the capacity of individuals to talk to one another—to truly hear one another—is a measure of their freedom.<sup>39</sup> To be open to the discourse of others is to be open to change. That openness is important in moral terms, amounting to a measure of one’s recognition of imperfection. His notion of identity formed in conversation with others is not unlike the co-creation championed by Boym, different as their writings otherwise are. But they would meet at the point where encountering an other and allowing for the other’s difference is a value of the highest order—recall Fanailova’s insistence that her podcast guests value others’ freedom as much as their own. There is an intonation of what neither would call enthusiasm but which both exude, alongside an extraordinary, improbable sense of optimism. Cavell would advocate for what he called “passionate utterance,” which he deems successful when it consti-

tutes an “invitation to improvisation,” something Boym also embraced in her scholarship and in her artistic practice.<sup>40</sup>

That optimistic belief that one can catch the intent of the other even when belief systems and local idioms are at variance is a notion of dialogue very far from the definition that has long prevailed in Slavic scholarship, that of Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin’s sense of conflicting voices and his high valuation on aesthetic texts that can maintain the separateness of the distinct voices come from a different way of thinking about language and indeed about freedom. I am trying to create an opening for a different point of view, one not meant to displace Bakhtin’s significance but one that, I believe, has more potential to help us understand poetic discourse. Bakhtin’s theories were built on the foundation of the novel, and although some intriguing work brings his theories toward poetry, his point of origin in the novel and his emphasis on conflict limit his theory’s perspectives on poetry.<sup>41</sup>

Cavell’s chatty self-conscious ease and his agile movement among melodrama, Shakespearean plays, and Hollywood films measure the very great distance between Cavell and Bakhtin. Yet both value the utterance that is not meant to be a final word.<sup>42</sup> Cavell has elucidated a category he calls passionate utterances, which he defines as “an invitation to improvisation in the disorders of desire.”<sup>43</sup> The improvisation he has in mind can be shown as a form of artistic expression—a Fred Astaire dance sequence, for instance—but Cavell uses those examples to press for philosophy to open itself to account for what the improvisation can mean, particularly to persons on some kind of path toward understanding themselves and others. As David Rodowick put it, an opening is created for “acknowledging how we may again become present to ourselves.”<sup>44</sup> The unfinalizability so prized by Bakhtin is at work here—Rodowick words this acknowledgment carefully, for it is the process of becoming present that is at stake for him. Elsewhere, he draws on Cavell to fashion this idea in somewhat different terms, referring now to ontology: “Ontology in Cavell’s sense is therefore not about an attained existence for either objects or persons,” he writes, stressing the complex temporal structure that results on screen—and, to return us to Russian poems, also obtains in poetic texts.<sup>45</sup> The kind of poem that interests me here is one in which an improvised subjectivity emerges on the page, emerges out of words that may remember their own earlier poetic contexts but may also change—in Cavell’s terms, are transformed—by the contact they have with others.

Cavell finds his most abundant examples in the intensely talk-oriented Hollywood comedies of the 1930s and 1940s, or in opera, with its complex back



and forth of voiced emotion.<sup>46</sup> The self-realizations of those films, often mutual discoveries by women and men, are liberating, with characters pressed to recognize past strictures as so many unreasonable obstacles. Russian examples cannot easily find their way to the optimism that is so distinctly a part of American culture—moral perfectionism is nearer to hand in US traditions, Cavell might say—but the process of walking down the pathways of an experience (and it is often a matter of walking, quite literally) toward others who may prove complementary or revelatory is more at stake now than has been the case for Russian poetry in the past.

On such a reading, poetry can contribute to the collective project of enabling freedom by showing how free thought works and how it feels to risk such freeness. This is language not as a form of sublime communication between poet and muse, but as an exchange of ideas among imperfect mortal beings.<sup>47</sup> The openness to other persons is like the openness to the environment and the surrounding world: barriers are down, sensibilities and minds are open, and the possibility that one might connect across stark differences or even become different oneself is an important affective charge of the poetic text.

I have largely relied on philosophical discourse to set out these ideas of freedom, but we might also turn to sociologist Boris Dubin, whose work assessing public opinion led him to emphasize the capacity to recognize difference in others as a mark of free society. In 2014, Dubin was trying to understand the insistence on Russian exceptionalism that his public opinion surveys were affirming. He writes: “The figure of a meaningful ‘other’ or ‘others’ arose in the late 1980s and early 1990s when Russia was trying out all possible forms of freedom. The other was understood as a partner to whom you are connected, one who does not offend because of that difference, but on the contrary is made interesting as a result.” For Dubin, the real effect of this encounter with an other is that one considers the possibility of becoming different oneself, recognizing that “you are not the best, the smartest, the strongest.”<sup>48</sup> The same ambition motivated Boym’s observation that “only a person who can change his or her mind can be a free thinker.”<sup>49</sup> In an era when sanctioned public discourse is ever more chauvinistic and aggressive, such rueful self-recognition sounds a discordant note, and poetry is one place that can accommodate that kind of introspection and even resistance to chauvinism and warmongering. Dubin’s writings increasingly reflected his pessimism that Russia would find its way back to the freedoms once promised in the 1990s.<sup>50</sup> The poets I am writing about can exude their share of pessimism but keep to the hope that

personal freedom enables a readiness to struggle for political freedom and the hope that openness to others deepens an understanding of who one is in a changing world.

For poets writing in the years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, then, all these forms of freedom—inner freedom and political freedom, freedom of speech and freedom of action—can emerge in their poems and public performances. Not all the results are explicitly political (although I take up the more openly political possibilities in the first chapter of this book): Polina Barskova's freestyled performance of "The Battle" is one manifestation of that freedom. Pavel Arseniev's 2013 recitation of a poem containing an obscenity just after the law banning obscene speech is another.<sup>51</sup> Arseniev had gained fame the previous year as the author of a political slogan that may be his most memorable line: it puns on the verb that means both "to represent" and "to imagine" and thus means either "You don't even represent us" (in a legislative sense) or "You can't even imagine us" (in a cognitive sense): "Vy nas dazhe ne predstavliaete."<sup>52</sup> Arseniev caught the rebellious spirit of a moment when it seemed possible that resistance was sufficiently widespread to force the government to grant greater freedoms. What keeps the slogan relevant is its implied rejoinder: we will represent ourselves to your imagination, just as we will do the work of making our claims known. A central claim of this book is that this rejoinder has persisted, despite the successive crackdowns, in the work of poets who are political (like Arseniev) as well as of those whose topics seem quite far from politics, topics like music or photography or religion.

It is that liberating set of possibilities that I take as my subject here, as I seek to capture a dominant element in contemporary Russian poetry and perhaps to provoke a rethinking of poetry's work more broadly. Freedom in poetry is hard to define, as the eminent Slavist Vladimir Markov noted in an essay first published in 1961 and still compelling reading decades later. It encompasses a lack of constraint, a sense of lightness as if in flight, of being untethered from the maxims that would seem to govern poetic composition. There's a wonderful moment when he defines Mikhail Kuzmin's poetry as full of freedom and air.<sup>53</sup> If we look back at figure 1, Erik Bulatov's *Freedom Is Freedom*, we might now be struck as well by the way that freedom flies on currents of air. By projecting that line from Nekrasov's poem into the sky, Bulatov also launched the word for freedom into the atmosphere, into the space where air grows thinner and thinner until it is no more. The word itself narrows down to a point of near invisibility, creating the sense that "svoboda," which is to say, "freedom," depends on air for its very existence.

## On Air

In 2006, on one of my trips to Russia to collect material for this book, I met a well-known poet, translator, editor, and, as I discovered that day, the creator of a new journal, *Vozdukh*. The title, *Vozdukh*, means “air,” but I will call it by its Russian name as we conventionally do with journal names, like *Novyi mir* or *Ogonyok*. I could see quickly that this journal, *Vozdukh*, was unlike those well-known publications: at once a personal project, with a wish to set the record straight and right the wrongs of other journals and critics, and a porously open new space for poets of multiple generations, theoretical orientations, aesthetic sensibilities, and geographical locations. A sharply confident attitude immediately gave *Vozdukh* its distinctive energy, and all who know him recognize that attitude as belonging to its sassy, brilliant, and indefatigable editor and creator, Dmitry Kuz'min, whom I first met on that day in Moscow in 2006.

*Vozdukh* has rubrics that play on the metaphor of its title. There is the “long breath” of one section, the “changed breathing” of another, the “distant wind” of translated poems, the “ventilation” of a discussion section, the “atmospheric front” of the review section (here I translate names for various regular headings). In the early issues, there was a section on those “who have spoiled the air,” which, after a certain point was renamed “Airless Spaces.”<sup>54</sup> The journal is made up like a volume of poetry, its self-conscious internal classification system a way of foregrounding what Roman Jakobson called language’s aesthetic function. Every issue begins with a “declaration of love” from one poet to a featured poet, in a rubric meant to deliver pure “oxygen.” The featured poet is interviewed (by Linor Goralik, herself a premier writer, editor, and creator of collaborative cultural projects) and then described and praised by several poets. A selection of new work by the featured poet follows. In the first issue, the featured poet was Gennady Aygi, a major poet far better known in the West than in Russia and a representative of an earlier generation, even though most poets published in *Vozdukh* are younger. If there was canon formation in the works, it was done in defiance of most expectations.

*Vozdukh* displays a multitude of traits that characterize poetry written in Russian since 1989. Its strong stamp of Kuz'min’s personality is exemplary: in contemporary poetry, personal visions of what counts as poetry are supremely important; there are strong bonds of affinities within communities of poets and readers; aesthetic preferences and notions about poetry’s civic responsibility vary widely, but amid lively communication across boundaries and borders that

are named and interrogated. The journal's section reporting on the poetry culture in a provincial city pushes back against the traditional dominance of Petersburg and Moscow and reminds readers that a significant proportion of major new poets hail from the provinces and have lived outside Russia—this was true even before the urgent migration of 2022. Poems in translation appear in all issues of *Vozdukh*, signaling openness to other traditions.

But most important to my argument is the metaphor of the journal's name. Kuz'min found a felicitous and multivalent metaphor in putting air at the center of the journal's self-conscious gestures of organization. He has featured an epigraph from the writings of Osip Mandelstam on the first page of every issue. It appears as follows, flush right as if lineated, and positioned to emphasize the end stop after the first sentence. As I do for all quotations in this book, I precede the quoted Russian with an English equivalent:

I divide all poems into the permitted and those written  
without permission.  
The first are trash, the second stolen air.

Все стихи я делю на разрешённые и написанные без разрешения.  
Первые—это мразь, вторые—ворованный воздух.

The journal has slightly altered Mandelstam's actual words, as they appear in his "Fourth Prose" ("Chetvertaia proza," 1929–30): instead of "all poems," Mandelstam divides "all the works of world literature" (*vse proizvedeniia mirovoi literatury*) into those two categories, written with or without permission.<sup>55</sup> The change aligns the quotation with the journal's mission, and the phrase "a poetry journal" (*zhurnal poezii*) follows the name of the journal on the title page. Kuz'min may simply have been quoting from memory, as poets are apt to do. The key phrase in any case is "stolen air," which defines genuine art as an act of stealth and theft.<sup>56</sup>

An additional argument may be made, however, to emphasize not the theft but the air, associating stolen air with freedom, which is meaningful for the journal, with its insistent unfettered self-definitions. This emphasis on freedom can be traced to Mandelstam's work as well. Discussing this phrase in Mandelstam, Irina Surat has written that its meanings far exceed the scandalous context that gave rise to the essay where it appears: "'Fourth Prose' consolidates a hierarchy: the artist's feeling of freedom, which cannot be taken away, but which is not available to just any artist: this is what 'stolen air' is."

And Surat adds, “the word ‘air’ means something that belongs to anyone and everyone, from which free discourse flows.”<sup>57</sup> Surat’s emphasis on the accessibility of freedom’s air and on its necessity suggests what in US political discourse would be called an inalienable right. It is a right not given by the state but by nature, so the metaphor of air as the site of that freedom signals its pervasiveness, its status as something necessary to life itself.

The association between freedom and air comes from the words of a poet, and it is in poetry (and to some extent in other forms of art) that the possibilities of that freedom can be deeply explored. Some of the poems discussed in this book write directly about air, breath, or the liberating mental experience of spaciousness that comes from breathing deeply or gazing out into an expanse. And some confront the converse, the stifling denial of what is most precious to creative work.

Some poems ask what it means that air is a medium on which language hangs or depends. One poem that makes that point directly appeared in 2020, by Kira Freger:

not wind  
it’s just  
all  
the deaf  
are speaking  
the same  
language  
  
не ветер  
а просто  
все  
глухие  
говорят  
на одном  
языке<sup>58</sup>

Freger creates a memorable miniature that perfectly emblemizes the potential for air to serve as both the medium of poetic language and as a metaphor for its insubstantiality. Her slightly off-balance lines, with no patterned alternation of one or two words per line, constitute an utterance that is also not really a sentence, although it suggests a complete thought. That thought creates the illusion that users of sign language, a form of communication that varies across

national languages, have reversed the fall of the Tower of Babel. In speaking simultaneously, they have unified language with a force that gives their talking hands the power to alter currents in the air.

To say that air is the medium on which poetry's words are carried is also to remind Freger's readers of the precise cultural and technological moment in which she is writing, and we are reading (or listening, or deciphering gestures and signs). The institutions that make literary culture possible have the solidity of bricks and mortar when they are publishing houses, salons, universities, writers' unions, or bookstores, and they have the lesser but no less tangible material status of paper when they are books, journals, manuscripts, or other documents. Tellingly, I began writing about the metaphor of air by writing about *Vozdukh*, which exists both in print and online. Contemporary poetry has thrived in a more digital and performance-oriented cultural moment, and the metaphor of air can also be a way to register those affordances. There is an emerging notion of air itself as a substance on which language might be carried, exemplified in Kira Freger's small poem—whether as an image of the human breath moving outward in an exhalation of spoken words (think of the etymological richness of the term *inspiration*, also true of Russian *vdokhnovenie*) or as the medium through which radio waves or digital signals might carry language across great distances. Some poems thematize this possibility for us, as hers does; others associate the oxygenating potential of air with poetry's freedoms or create a more embodied experience of the air-filled environment.

Freger begins by saying that the air's motion is not wind, but of course currents of air are felt as wind, sometimes with an intensity that seems to drive air into the body's very pores.<sup>59</sup> Tobias Menely has called this "the phenomenology of air": he describes air as "a substance pervasive but perceptually elusive, life-giving but ghostly, occasionally felt as pressure on the skin and only rarely made visible as smoke or mist."<sup>60</sup> Registering something so subtle as air's pressure on the skin or as barely seen mist is metaphorically a task that contemporary poets have taken up, often by the deceptively simple labor of noting down the impressions of the surrounding world. That is hardly a new task for a poem, but it has a dramatic potential that marks the poetry of the present in surprising ways.

### Staring at the Present

Russia's self-referential poetic tradition, the tradition that was shaped by modernism and that gave rise to remarkable poetry criticism, has taken some fresh turns in the post-Soviet period. This tradition elevates poems about poetry

making; it potentially orients poetry, poets, and readers toward the past. It was most famously studied by Harold Bloom, focusing on the English-language tradition. Such metapoetical poems, as scholars call them, continue to be written, and subtexts, intertexts, and conversations with earlier poets can be detected; in many of the pages that follow, I note such details when they are pertinent to a poem. But they tell an ever-smaller part of the story of poetry today, and in the gaps left in their wake, some intriguing new possibilities are apparent.<sup>61</sup>

New spaces have opened up, spaces where poems and poets have sought an unmediated, fresh, and often tactile connection with the world—that feel of air on the skin Menely was writing about. This subtle shift in aesthetic priority toward an engaged form of alertness to the outer world intensified in the late 1980s, especially after 1989, as the world itself grew more chaotic and more difficult to grasp. Something was happening in poets' minds that gave a new primacy and a new pleasure to the joys, distractions, and disturbances of the visible or imagined world. More and more, poems began to record the experience of physical and mental aliveness—not the past, lost or irretrievable, and not some utopian fantasy of the future, but the immediacy or inchoate flux or flickering possibility of the present. Mikhail Iampolsky has written eloquently about this tendency in the work of Arkady Dragomoshchenko, but it defines a far broader sweep of poets whose ways of registering that exterior world can be quite varied. Iampolsky's observation that it is not some other text but the surrounding world that enables the act of writing opens out a new way to see contemporary poetry, even by those who are otherwise far from Dragomoshchenko in aesthetic orientation.<sup>62</sup>

To record that external world of changing experience was also to reimagine the interior worlds of poets. Barriers between inner and outer experience were lowering. That potent metaphor, of walls torn down, broadly names a set of important traits in contemporary Russian-language poetry. Yes, it is first suggested by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and the general sense of walls coming down around the former Soviet Bloc, but walls were also coming down around the poetic subject. Even in the very late Soviet period, poets were less barricaded against the world, less urgently defended against the onslaught of stimulation and even harm that daily life might deal out. They began to peer out more intently, to hear all kinds of unearthly, repeating sounds, and to touch, smell, and even taste a world that yet had many powers to surprise them. That world might also have the force to shatter them—let it not seem as if all was rosy in the realms they regarded. For many poets, to look outside

was also to look past the material, physical reality into metaphysical possibilities that far exceeded the mind's ability to grasp them fully. Poems of chaos and unbalance, or those in which the poetic subject seems frighteningly un tethered, were written as often as poems that experienced the pleasures of being. Across this huge range, poetry as a form of imagination and discourse sought to grasp and respond to a vividly changing world, no matter its disturbing or stimulating or numbing features. This attention to the present was already detected by Mikhail Epstein in the 1980s, in an essay that became famous for its opposition between Conceptualism and Metarealism. More important than that antithesis, though, is the way that poetry flourished, as Epstein put it, when it was about both presence and the present.<sup>63</sup>

Russian poetry is not unique in this intense attention to the present, and a similar poetic turn toward the outside world could be detected as early as the 1970s. We could think of the emerging New York school, where a poem by James Schuyler or Barbara Guest or Frank O'Hara might be content to list the sights and sounds of a summer day. This kind of gorgeous poetry was perhaps less radical in the American context, with precursors like Wallace Stevens and Walt Whitman. In Russian poetry, however, something rather new was happening, sometimes fueled by fresh encounters with poets from the American and European traditions, but just as often inspired by a reordering of the canon and by the distinctive, idiosyncratic personalities of several poets, Dragomoshchenko among them.

In turning their gaze to the outside world, poets have not jettisoned all sense of poetic traditions. Dragomoshchenko's engagement with the poets of OBERIU or with American L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets is a case in point. My example of Barskova sampling the lines of Janequin in "The Battle" shows another approach; in a poem by Grigory Dashevsky treated below, images and forms pioneered by Mandelstam and Velimir Khlebnikov are clearly felt. Significantly, earlier poets are mostly invoked in gestures of similarity.<sup>64</sup> Their presence is affirming, and they are conversation partners rather than troubling ghosts.

Contemporary poets' focus on the world around them also has historical and generational contexts. Poets knew the terrors of Stalinism and the losses of the Second World War from family stories and, in the 1980s, from the flood of new publications about the traumatic past, but these histories were increasingly seen from a vantage point of greater personal liberty. The post-perestroika and post-Soviet eras contributed to loosening the hold of poetic traditions and gave poets greater confidence in taking their own impressions of the world in



which they were living. Alertness to the sensory impact of daily life, to the details of felt experience as they accumulated in the mind, became a basis on which poems were built. The sheer fact of feeling oneself mentally freer created an opening toward new and perhaps conflicting impressions, and for many poets it meant a greater ease in living with those contradictions.

The historical underpinnings of contemporary poems, then, are important, and how we understand this history is itself still very much a work in progress. Mikhail Iampolsky has argued that our entire framework for understanding temporality, divided into past, present, and future, has effectively shifted into a different triad, or, as he calls it, a different regime of historicity: memoir, event, and enthusiasm.<sup>65</sup> Iampolsky stresses the ethical consequences in such a shift, a topic I take up in chapter 1. His analytical framework also draws our attention to the ways in which contemporary poets have focused on the event: their investment in its affordances, we might say, is what gives the poems their intense affective charge, and what makes them feel consequentially different. The resulting poems are themselves events, as Jonathan Culler would say, as they record a sensory documentation of some present experience and/or some experience of presence. For Culler, this kind of poem is not something new, and he gives as an example our one complete poem by Sappho, which he calls “lyric as performance and event.”<sup>66</sup> True enough, but what is different is the capacity of such poems to define an era. Registering the experience of the event has afforded new possibilities of disrupting the conventions of poetic utterance.

Changes like this do not happen overnight; they accumulate and at a certain tipping point come to feel definitive. The virtue of a term like contemporary, in fact, is its flexibility, its capacity to move its own boundaries forward as time itself unfolds.<sup>67</sup> One poet who had a similarly uncanny ability to adapt to the exigencies of time and place is Joseph Brodsky. No contemporary Russian poet has been so richly studied, but his astonishing readiness to record in his poetry the sensory impact of the world has been underestimated, and one instance of this work is studied below in the chapter on music. He led the way in this changed consciousness of what poetry might do, and he led by subtle example, not by manifesto or direct argument. We can see instances of such poetry very early, even during his 1960s internal exile (there is no paradox in this, since the poet himself was the first to claim that the exile to the far North brought extraordinary inner freedom). But we really see it in the work after he leaves Russia. In 1972, he in effect becomes Brodsky as we now know him and as his fellow poets apprehended him. The distance was oddly canonizing, and it pushed the

poets left behind (in Leningrad particularly but also elsewhere) to reshuffle allegiances and reestablish some sense of a local hierarchy. Some were liberated by the departure of a charismatic master, and younger poets felt freer to keep his potentially overwhelming influence at bay.

Brodsky was a touchstone, and when the journal *Vozdukh* made its debut in 2006, a questionnaire asked poets about their attitude toward him.<sup>68</sup> It was entitled “Ten Years Without Brodsky” (the issue came out a decade after his death in 1996). The answers range tellingly, with some poets helplessly exhibiting a certain amount of defensive swagger in the master’s shadow, others proclaiming indifference to his legacy, and still others unafraid of saying that Brodsky was simply the foundation on which all else has followed.<sup>69</sup>

To give that kind of emphasis to Brodsky should not deceive us into imagining that he defines the post-Soviet period. It takes away nothing from him to claim, as I do, that other constellations are possible and revealing, or to observe that many exceptionally fine poets now writing in Russian have radically different notions of poetic achievement and experiment. Other contemporaries of Brodsky might also be named as important points of origin, and recent work has productively pinpointed the delayed impact of Leonid Aronzon.<sup>70</sup> Among the many virtues of his poetry is an orientation toward setting, so that what defines the lyric subject is often the setting in which an experience crystallizes, which Aronzon can evoke in considerable tactile and emotionally rich detail. I turn now to one final example from a very different poet. It lays out the terms for the kind of poem that sets forth a distinctive relationship of self to external world, which is then more fully explored in later chapters.

### The Self in Space: Maria Stepanova, Grigory Dashevsky

In the last several decades, poets have productively interrogated the place from which a sense of self emerges. Spatializing subjectivity is but another shift in the paradigm of poetry without walls; it shows the ruptures between genres of poetic utterance, and it imagines a position from which the poet peers out into unaccustomed space.

Work inflected by phenomenology can especially help us understand these disoriented subjectivities. In seeking a theoretical model for the multifaceted, ambivalent subjectivities in contemporary poetry, I am following a trend advanced by leading scholars of English-language poetry, among them Susan Stewart and Charles Altieri.<sup>71</sup> In a post-Structuralist and perhaps not entirely

post-psychoanalytical moment, when critics are suspicious of notions of identity as coherent, knowable, and fixed, projections of a self persist in poetry. Phenomenological arguments offer a sense-based account of the experience of selfhood in the world, and they alert us to the complex ways in which sensory information at once confirms and disturbs our perceptions of language, self, place, and others. They help us read the instabilities and shifting impressions of lyric poetry and track how those instabilities have led not to paralysis but to new forms of freedom. When Maria Stepanova publishes a volume of poems with the title *Not Lyric Poetry* (*Neliricheskaia poeziia*, 2017), she is not just reminding her readers of her virtuoso skills as a narrative poet. She is also saying that her storytelling always stands adjacent to lyric poems, and that the states of mind of her personae, including her lyric personae, are also always her subject.

Stepanova's naming her poetry as nonlyrical signals a broader rethinking around first-person utterance. Her 2014 essay "One, Not One, Not I" ("Odin, ne odin, ne ia") calls poetry a form of extreme tourism that ventures toward secret knowledge. Such poems forge an identification between reader and poetic speaker—she speaks my feelings and makes them seem real, thinks the reader—but also a sharp differentiation: she is "not I," and her pain or joy or capacity for empathy far exceeds my own.<sup>72</sup> Stepanova's trademark narrative lyrics project a parallel relationship between poet and speaker: there is lyric, there is voice,<sup>73</sup> and a poet's consciousness is engaged in acts of considering, deciding, discriminating, or identifying. That awareness of speaking at once as self and as other is not always experienced by the poet as salutary—Stepanova has called it a danger signal in the public space of poetry.<sup>74</sup> But in the terms I am advancing here, it opens a space for poetic utterance to chart its own progress. It is a space of freedom. Stepanova has gone so far as to suggest a thought experiment: what if the first-person pronoun were prohibited from poetry? She writes, "For a poem to be good, the author has to peek out of every pore, share space with every cell."<sup>75</sup> Where there is no pronoun, there is still that speaker. Stepanova's poetic practice and that of many peers show that even in poems bereft of pronouns, there is an abiding, intriguing presence of the lyric subject.

Stepanova's revisionist lyric subject is treated in chapter 1. Here I want to offer an example of complex subjectivity in a poem by Grigory Dashevsky, to whom she dedicated her book of essays. A reticent and perfection-driven poet, Dashevsky wrote in one of his tightest little lyrics the following meditation on being, nonbeing, and subjectivity. He begins with an emphatic denial of the

first-person pronoun—we would call it extravagant were it not for the poem's refusal of all rhetorical extravagance. It is a poem of concentrated minimalism in tone, lexicon, and sound orchestration:

No self, no people,  
not here, not ever,  
The commandment brings light  
to goutweed, burdock, gnats.

Singing faintly whines,  
a gnat buzzing unseen:  
as if a villain saws back and forth  
yet the innocent feels the pain,  
turns pale, turns white.

But law without people  
shines light on personless space:  
here there is no evil, no patience,  
no face—just the flickering light  
of tiny wings, tiny gnats.

Ни себя, ни людей  
нету здесь, не бывает.  
Заповедь озаряет  
снуть, лопух, комара.

Ноет слабое пенье,  
невидимка-пила:  
будто пилит злодей,  
а невинный страдает,  
побледнев добела.

Но закон без людей  
на безлюдьи сияет:  
здесь ни зла, ни терпенья,  
ни лица—лишь мерцает  
крылышко комара.<sup>76</sup>

No translation into English, which takes more words for any utterance than does Russian, can replicate this poem's compactness, nor can one fully recreate the density of negation and sound repetition Dashevsky achieves in

these fourteen lines. Most of the lines have a negating adverb or a noun asserting a lack, the most striking of which is “personless space,” a single word in Russian (*bezliud'e*) and a very striking one. I at first took it for a neologism, but it is attested in Dal’s dictionary.<sup>77</sup> Still, Dashevsky’s usage is unusual, meant to apprehend the space in which no persons can be found—but not in a sense related to, say, physics: this is not a vacuum, as the wild plants and insects make clear. The contemplation is instead ontological: what is the nature of being in a space without people?

The poem’s task, then, is both an ontological form of contemplation—what is the being that is constituted by absence—and an ethical account of where that ontology might lead: is such a space lawless, asks the poem, or, rather, can there be law without persons?<sup>78</sup> The answer seems to be that there *must* be law: even without persons, there is always evil and suffering, and law must regulate that harm. Even in such personless space, there are those who do evil, and those to whom evil is done. Dashevsky, so knowledgeable in English-language poetry, echoes the line from W. H. Auden’s poem “September 1, 1939,” “those to whom evil is done, do evil in return,” but Dashevsky’s poem does not lay out the political or history-tinged territory of Auden’s searing response to the start of the Second World War.<sup>79</sup> Nor does he accept its ethical principles: in his poem, the innocent victims of evil suffer and turn pale; the evildoers make the only noise heard in this deserted space, a whining insect buzz.<sup>80</sup>

Sound is the poem’s defense against emptiness, not the conventional beautiful sound that Romantic and modernist poets loved to offer as their allegories (Keats’s nightingale, Stevens’s blackbird), and not even the “dull rustle of a thousand deaths” (*smutnyi shorokh tysiachi smertei*) in Nikolai Zabolotsky’s poem “Lodeinikov” (1932–47), because the crowd of weird presences in Zabolotsky’s landscape is here reduced to a few common plants and bugs.<sup>81</sup> What fills in the vacant space is the poem’s astonishing linguistic performance: its lines of anapest dimeter, tilted to lightly add stress in some initial syllables; its clenched sound repetitions; and its obsessive rhyming based on only four possibilities—the poet has every line conclude either with an end-stressed *-a* or *-ei*, or a two-syllable rhyme sound, either the verbal ending *-aet* or the noun ending *-en'e*. The sound repetitions are tight but unconsoling, for their pattern is irregular, ragged. Grammar and morphology serve the sound orchestration, and the syntax is relentlessly simple. The stanzas are not symmetrical—four lines, then five, then five—and the one reliable pattern is that each stanza ends with the end-stressed *a* sound, a further indication of

language stripped down to its most elemental sound, the first letter of the alphabet, that open “ah” sound that is the opposite of the buzzing, whining insect hum.

Dashevsky begins the poem with a grammatically strange renunciation of self, almost a renunciation of the underlying logic of grammar—in Russian, it sounds weird to launch a poem with the pronoun *sebia*, which is not so much a freestanding notion of a self as it is like the *-self* in *himself* or *herself*, a half-word that feels like it is missing its defining first syllable. As a pronoun, *sebia* normally comes after the noun for which it is a substitution. So when he negates *sebia*, the poet sets off from the renunciation of reference and pronoun substitution more generally: the poem evokes a deserted space not by means of description, but by pulling out from space the persons and the grammatical hierarchies that could populate it.<sup>82</sup> The word I have translated as “face” (*litso*) intensifies that depopulation, for it is a word that also means person in the grammatical sense, as well as an individual, a person. Emptied of personhood, we might say, the space is also unnamed, and not just in the sense of not having a name (there are no proper names of any sort here, and no title). A hint of a category name is also taken away: the “commandment” of 1.3 is the word “zapoved,” a meaningful word in the poem because the law, and lawlessness, will be taken up in stanza 2. But in stanza 1, the word “zapoved” reverberates like a truncated version of the word for a preserve, for a parcel of land that has been set aside, shielded from further development, *zapovednik*. It is such a preserve that one expects to be the source of illumination for the plant life and insect life named in the stanza’s final line. That unspoken word stands behind the poem’s opening as surely as does a fixed expression, “ni sebe, ni liudiam” (of no benefit or use), flutter in the background of the first line.<sup>83</sup>

The poem becomes a kind of primer in how not to say things in poetry, how to pull back even from renunciation, that “piercing Virtue” in which Emily Dickinson specialized, and how to scrape away at the poem’s own language.<sup>84</sup> Dashevsky pares away at form itself, reducing to a concentrated set of phonemes even the possibilities for rhyme, denying rhyme any sort of regular pattern yet getting readers to hear it in every line.

That form of condensation, of eliciting from readers a kind of intensified alertness, has a well-established point of origin: late Mandelstam. And it seems to me that Dashevsky has built this poem with reference to the last of Mandelstam’s “Octaves” (“Vos’mistishiia,” 1932–35).<sup>85</sup> I want to cite the poem and comment on those references to further open out this difficult, beautiful poem

of Dashevsky's, and because the eight-line form, including Mandelstam's legacy, will figure in chapter 3. Introducing this striking example here will allow that chapter to close a circle I now wish to open. Here is Mandelstam's poem:

And I emerge out of space  
 Into the neglected garden of magnitudes  
 And I tear through imaginary constancy  
 And the internal harmony of causes.

And your textbook, infinity,  
 I read alone, without people—  
 A leafless, wild book of cures,  
 A problem book of enormous roots.

*November 1933*<sup>86</sup>

И я выхожу из пространства  
 В запущенный сад величин  
 И мнимое рву постоянство  
 И самосогласье причин.

И твой, бесконечность, учебник  
 Читаю один, без людей—  
 Безлиственный, дикий лечебник,  
 Задачник огромных корней.

*Ноябрь 1933*<sup>87</sup>

We might first note the semantic connections, particularly Mandelstam's striking phrase "without people" (*bez liudei*), which Dashevsky rewrites as "*ni liudei*" in l.1, then gives as "*bez liudei*" in l.10, both times in rhyme position. Dashevsky intensifies the emptying out effect of Mandelstam's poem with his doubled use of the noun for "people" in genitive plural (*liudei*), and with his noun "*bezliud'e*," a word that gathers up the imagined space without people as if it were a collective.

This first connection between the poems, then, projects an idea of absent personhood to ask what subjectivity in a poem would mean in a space without persons, and the second connection has to do with space itself. Dashevsky's poem stays with the work of representing that peopleless space (Mandelstam's "*prostranstvo*") and like Mandelstam's, gives us concrete points of reference (a garden gone wild, a place of "goutweed, burdock, gnats") and strangely awkward abstractions (imaginary constancy, infinity's textbook, law

without persons). Both poems create a space where the cultivations of land have ceased, where gardens have gone wild, but Mandelstam moves that fantasy toward infinity, even as he brings it back to the culture of books (textbook, mathematical problem book, book of cures).<sup>88</sup> Dashevsky is content to stay in the peopleless space, to consider it sufficiently expansive for a long pause, where the poet can listen for what might otherwise go unheard.

There are implicit contrasts of scale as a result, and here the poem is pointing us in several directions, to be taken up in chapter 3, on magnitude and size in contemporary poetry. Dashevsky is playing with scale in a punning way, as if it were its own musical instrument—his poem is longer than Mandelstam's, yet his lines radically shorter. His choice of fourteen lines feels significant, a wafting gesture in the direction of the sonnet, just as Mandelstam's eight-line form could be read as a truncated sonnet. But still, where Mandelstam reaches for quantities (another translation for the "velichina" in his l.2), or for massiveness (his "huge roots" in the final line), Dashevsky has things get smaller and smaller. Rather than Mandelstam's magnitudes, Dashevsky attunes the poem's ear to a mosquito's whining buzz. And what flickers in the poem's last visual image is the moving light radiated by insect wings. It may be that the last line shows a will to temper Mandelstamian grandeur with the whimsy of Velimir Khlebnikov (the wings recall the great first line of his "Grasshopper": "Glitter-letter wing-winker," in Paul Schmidt's translation; Russian "Krylyshkuia zolotopis'mom").<sup>89</sup> And the idea that the sources of poetry are not sublime but mundane is furthered by Dashevsky's evocation of Akhmatova's poetic disclosure that poems grow out of debris; his use of burdock inevitably echoes hers in "Secrets of the Craft" ("Tainy remesla," 1942).<sup>90</sup>

But I want to pause the backward motion toward subtexts and return to the poem's present moment, asking how it shapes that relationship to the present with its first modest present-tense verb, a habitual form of the verb "to be," "byvat," which appears in l.2. Mandelstam also stayed with the present tense in his choice of verbs, but they began with a sense of adventure, of drama, of discovery (vykhozhu, rvu). Dashevsky prefers usualness, where the drama that unfolds is itself a kind of back-and-forth sawing motion, a buzz of gnats or mosquitoes. Writing about Dashevsky's poetry, Anna Glazova observed its pattern of repeatedly approaching the point beyond which speech and thought become impossible.<sup>91</sup> But he does not give up on language, and that is the element in Dashevsky's work that makes him surprisingly emblematic. There is an evocation of public speech here—in the commandment, in the law, and in the way that law illuminates that dark space where there are no persons.



Dashevsky's poem shows how it is possible, even in a poem that begins with a negation of the self, to create a sense of engaged subjectivity, and in his move toward the law, he brings back the problems of a populated world that the poem's opening cast away.

The work of the poet, living in the contemporary world's darkness, is the work of "recovering the public world," as Robin Blaser put it.<sup>92</sup> Grigory Dashevsky addressed himself directly to that work of recovery, and we can find in his critical writings an expressive and useful account of what a recovered world might feel like. Dashevsky's writings about poetry were often practical, the kind of reviews that fellow poets were writing in the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s as they created a kind of real-time guide to the poetry being made around them. Mikhail Aizenberg is another splendid exponent of this genre of writing, and one can read grateful comments about his discerning work by his fellow poets.<sup>93</sup> Like Aizenberg, Dashevsky stayed close to the texts, teaching his readers how to understand them. And so, when Dashevsky strays toward generalization, readers take note. In 2012, he published a remarkable short essay, "How to Read Contemporary Poetry," which sets out the terms of speaking in the context of contemporary darkness. Here his metaphor is not light but warmth, or its lack. He invites both poets and readers to imagine what it might mean to speak freely in this context. If I translate his words into my own terms, then Dashevsky is showing us how contemporary poetry is finding new ways to register its place in the world. Poetry is finding a public voice.

The example he gives is of the poet's use of free verse, which was still a sore subject in Russia, with squawking denunciations and intemperate reviews persisting in the 1990s and 2000s—even though there had long been significant and innovative poetry in Russian that did not depend on rhyme or meter. But free verse was on the rise in the post-Soviet period, and not every critic was pleased. Dashevsky in 2012 was keen to move past any sense of grievance and argue that free verse is the metrical formation for public speech, and that its rise—like 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 an audience of others. He is returning us to the idea of poetry as conversation associated in my argument with the thinking of Bibikhin and Cavell. But for Dashevsky, no philosophers or theorists impinge at the moment when he describes in his own words 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. I would add that this is also a step into the

virtual reality of web journals, social media, and blogs. Dashevsky first published this piece in the web-based journal *OpenSpace*.

His idea about free verse and public address is breathtakingly optimistic. His insight opens a radically new sense of poetic audience, and of poetic speech itself. Dashevsky explains that when a poet speaks to this “utterly other person” (*absolutno chuzhoi chelovek*), poetic speech becomes an interiorized conversation that carries with it this otherness. Metrical, memorized poetry is what one intones to oneself, but free verse is what one speaks to another. When the poet speaks in free verse as a form of address to someone utterly other, here is what happens:

You will no longer be speaking with yourself in the meter of a rhythmic womb-like lullaby, but instead as if the cold and hunger of public space were inside you. And as a result, this public space—hungry, cold, and well-lit—will begin to be created in parallel: in the public arena, in the courts, in the parliament, inside a person and inside poetry.<sup>94</sup>

Dashevsky, as demonstrated vividly in his poem “No self, no people,” was also an adept practitioner of metrical poetry (and of the poetry one can memorize), so he is not so much advocating the abandonment of that poetic practice as he is using free verse as a metaphorical category: a poetry that advances the cause of freedom. His is not an idealized account of the space in which such poems are spoken—just as the expanse created in “No self, no people” is made out of negations, so the public arena that concludes this essay is marked by a lack of warmth and nourishment. But speaking into that bleak space is the work of poetry. Speaking into that bleak space creates ideas for readers of what free speech sounds like, what kind of sustenance it might offer, what courts or parliaments—which is to say, what public institutions—it might amplify.<sup>95</sup> To create this space as one’s internalized audience is the fundamental creative gesture of the contemporary poet. In the chapters that follow, I propose to test its possibilities, beginning with poems that present themselves as politically and ethically engaged.

