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Alternative Chronicles of Russian Poetry
Essays by Mikhail Aizenberg

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Editor’s Note

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Introduction

MICHAEL MAKIN

The last eight or nine years have provided more than enough material to astonish every student of Russian culture. Indeed, the period has been so remarkable that it is worth pausing occasionally to remember that the assumptions, divisions, polemics, and publications of, say, 1985 are only ancient history in the same sense that all time is flexible. The reintegration into one complex and contradictory, publicly available whole (all qualifications notwithstanding) of the divided pieces of Russian literature has completely transformed many interpretive tools and scales of values and rendered others obsolete. Not only does the term “Soviet literature,” ever redolent of extraliterary preoccupations, now belong firmly to the past, but such familiar alternatives as samizdat and samizdat are equally eloquent testimony of a completely different cultural situation. Suffice it to say that there are now millions of Russian readers (and some writers) who could not, as adults, have encountered these concepts as active terms in current literature.

It is now equally obvious that, for readers of Russian literature abroad, almost everything has had to be rethought, and much history has had to be rewritten—not only because so much new material from every period of the twentieth century has come to light, but also because the rules of the game have changed so much that it sometimes seems like a completely different game (and in some ways it is). The confident positions of superiority from which we might previously have assumed to survey from afar Russian literature in its full extent—Soviet, non-Soviet, and anti-Soviet—have by now proved to be not only outdated, but also, in crucial ways, historically inadequate.

So total and overwhelming, and, to be sure, so rapid have these transformations and abolitions been that some aspects of them seem
largely to have passed foreign observers by, and to have been reflected even in domestic Russian criticism only partially. The essays of Mikhail Aizenberg selected and translated for this volume are guides to a territory for which very few maps exist, and within which even the forays of contemporary criticism are often hampered by difficulties in orientation. Yet the territory is of the very greatest importance both for the history and for the future of Russian culture. In fact, these essays explore what was largely a hitherto hidden continent—postwar Russian poetry outside of the obvious and public material of Soviet, and, for the most part, even émigré and tankist publications.

Standard English-language histories of Russian poetry—even new ones—refer to Voznesenskii and Yevtushenko as the “foremost” poets of the 1970s in the Soviet Union; of course, everyone has long known the work of the late Joseph Brodsky, and many the poetry of Akhmatova’s other “orphans,” Rein, Naiman, and Bobyshov; the poetry of Tsvetkova, Losev, Aigi, and a few others has had its supporters and publishers abroad. But the richness and depth of the material discussed by Aizenberg in the following pages was known to a very few (in contrast to the equally complex mosaic of postwar Russian prose). And while some figures from the avant-garde of the 1970s and later were more or less widely known—Prigov, in particular—very few Western scholars suspected that this poetic underground was already at least a whole generation old. Even today, when the names of Timur Kibirov and Sergey Gandlevskii are very familiar in Russia, to name but two of the best poets to come to the fore in the last decade, few foreign observers (and not so very many Russians) will have a strong sense of the genealogy of this “new poetry.” Mikhail Aizenberg’s essays make that genealogy, and the full extent of that poetry itself, accessible to us for the first time.

Aizenberg is a Muscovite, born in 1948. He graduated from the Moscow Institute of Architecture in 1972 and, until 1989, worked for Mosoblorestavratsiia on architectural restoration projects in the Moscow area. But like so many intelligentsia of his generation, employment and professia had little to do with one another: Aizenberg has been a professional poet and essayist all his adult life. His poetry appeared occasionally in émigré journals in the 1970s and the early 1980s, and four of his essays made it into print in the Soviet Union (in the journals Teatr and Dekorativnoe iskusstvo for 1974 and 1975). In 1989 his name reappeared in print in the Soviet Union (Teatr, no 11; Teatr’naia zhizn’, no 24), since which time he has published verse and prose extensively in his homeland. But until that reappearance in print, as was so often the case in the years of so-called “timelessness” in sociopolitical life, his major literary activities took place in that vital world of alternative Russian culture: the apartments of educated and cultural Moscow. Aizenberg was both a prominent member and a student of that world, and over many years of observation and collection he acquired a profound and sophisticated knowledge not only of the contemporary poetry of the Russian underground, but also of its predecessors, including outstanding poets who had never been published—nor even dreamed of being published—anywhere. For many years, beginning in 1972, Aizenberg’s own apartment was the physical and intellectual locus of weekly gatherings of poets and artists, linked as much by personal ties and affections as by united cultural interests. Aizenberg’s “Mondays”—the chosen day for most of those years—embodied and continued that powerful and essential Russian tradition of artistic interchange within circles, a tradition that has had especial importance when the political climate on the streets outside has been indelent. Artists, directors, actors, political dissidents, as well as writers and critics would gather in his apartment, which became one of those cultural forums at the intersection of private and public discourse—a crucial and formative intermediate ground for the literary underground. Among the most regular latter-day frequenters of these “Mondays” were the poets and artists Prigov, Rubinshtein, Gandlevskii, Kibirov, Koval’, and Faibisovich—each of them prominent in the almanacs Ponedel’nik and Lichnoe delo. As the climate changed—indicated in part by the appearance of those Moscow almanacs in 1990 and 1991, respectively—these and other representatives of Russian avant-garde and alternative poetry came before a wider public, and several have since achieved considerable fame. Aizenberg’s essays set these processes in context, and explain where these new poets have come from.

As the diversity of Aizenberg’s associates indicates, there can be no question of a “school” (although several of the essays that follow do presuppose a basic, although far from consistent, division between the poetry of Leningrad/St Petersburg and the poetry of Moscow). Indeed, in Russian poetry of this era, association without regard for esthetic similarities or programs (as it were, across the boundaries of literary territories) is as characteristic as the more obvious archonological patterns created by the “pre-Gutenberg conditions” of Russian literature.
in the period of “stagnation.” Even the Moscow Conceptualists or Moscow Time—opposite phenomena of roughly the same age—are barely literary groupings in the conventional sense of the term.

Of course, it is especially remarkable that in precisely those “pre-Gutenberg” conditions Aizenberg became such a meticulous observer and historian of alternative poetry in its entirety. All the more remarkable that he did so while also participating actively in that world as a first-rate poet himself. Aizenberg’s poetry has been published extensively in the new circumstances of Russian literature: his verse first appeared in print in the Soviet Union in 1989, and in 1993 a major collection, Ukazatel’ imen [Index of names], was published in Moscow, followed two years later by a smaller collection, Punktuatsiya mestnosti [Punctuation of the locality]. The most detailed examination of Ukazatel’ imen came in a lengthy review in Novyi mir by Vladislav Kulakov (one of the best commentators on and proponents of the “new poetry”; Alena Solntseva should also be mentioned in this respect). Kulakov observes that Aizenberg’s esthetic position is close to that of the founders of Russian Conceptualism, Vsevolod Nekrasov and Ian Satunovskii. Aizenberg’s lexical precision and minimalism, his play with the “shadows of words,” is combined with an elevated inner, secret speech, which Kulakov links to the legacy of Mandelstam. His review concludes:

Thus, Aizenberg emerges from Acmeism in its late-Mandelstamian form, but the result is the creation of a quite different artistic space. Aizenberg can, in all seriousness, be called one of the few poets genuinely to have “overcome Acmeism.” It is not even that Aizenberg is without the principal Acmeist zeal for “World Culture,” but rather that his self-perception as an artist is new, as is his approach to expression. This is a path of constant self-imposed restriction, but only in this way is Aizenberg able to win for himself that ancient and coveted “secret freedom” of the poet. (Novyi mir, 1994, no 11, p. 241)

Indeed, his verse has a magical, liberating effect, even when heard for the first time (and hence rarely understood intellectually). Like Satunovskii, Nekrasov, and their successors, Aizenberg is able to make elegant play with the apparently disposable parts of conversational speech. Perhaps rather unlike those poets, however, Aizenberg is clearly, even on first reading, a lyric poet. Even before the reader disentangles, for example, the subterranean romantic or elegiac content of a poem, its surface linguistic structure has captivated and enthralled. An elegantly broken cliché, a surprising (or suspiciously trite) rhyme, a sudden break in discursive level—every poem seizes the reader’s or listener’s attention with its emulation and, simultaneously, disruption of the rhythms and manners of conversational speech. Meanwhile, his oeuvre as a whole shows all the signs of the careful study, selection (and rejection) of many of the traditions of Russian poetry, including those traditions that developed within avant-garde circles from the 1940s.

Therefore it is important that the reader of this volume of essays remember not only that Aizenberg is himself a poet, but also what kind of poet he is. Much of the complexity and much of the elegant simplicity of the thought and style of his prose stems from that practice and experience as a poet. And his prose must be read as the work of a poet who is himself active in the very “literary process” on which he reflects. His essays, although they treat for the most part recent and contemporary poetry, are very unlike typical literary criticism (from which he is often at pains to distance himself). They are, in one sense, within the brilliant tradition of the discursive prose of twentieth-century Russian poets: from Aleksandr Blok, Osip Mandelstam, and Marina Tsvetaeva to Joseph Brodsky. And like the prose of those poets, his essays are in part attempts at poetic self-definition (hence, in part, the actual or shadow presence of Mandelstam on the one hand and the Oberiu on the other in almost all of the essays). But in addition to the sharpness and originality of perception and style that characterize this tradition of poets’ prose and shape its polemics—cultivating and advocating a particular education of literary taste—Aizenberg’s own essays have a genuinely profound sense of historical literary process, which renders “A Few Others” in particular a brilliant introduction to the poetry of a whole period, and “The Possibility of Expression” such a fine account of the circumstances that created the “new” poetry.

Another element that contributes to the conceptual and stylistic shape of these essays is the context of their emergence—a factor to which Aizenberg himself attaches great importance for all contemporary literature. Like so much new Russian writing, these essays were formed by the language and thematics of prolonged cultural discussions in those semiprivate, semipublic spaces of Russian alternative culture, where so many different artistic interests met and interacted. In
the most literal sense, they were shaped by institutions such as Aizenberg’s own “Mondays.” That is to say, they have emerged from a sophisticated but essentially oral discourse, where elegant, polished, yet informal discussions, even conversations, provided the vital elements for artistic thought and practice, often in the absence of all or most of the other vital elements usually required by art. Hence, these essays, just like his poetry, are marked by an almost lapidary approach to the actual business of writing, and simultaneously by a quite opposite orientation toward speech—the clever, elegant speech of a sophisticated Moscow literary conversation, where the most complex stylistic gestures are immediately recognized, but where the spontaneity and sly humor of casual table talk, accompanied by overt and covert allusion, provide the sparkle. Indeed, there are moments when the reader of the Russian originals of these essays seems to hear the text.

By now, in the middle of the 1990s, most of the exceptional socio-political circumstances that fertilized this verbal practice (and that fundamentally shaped the poetry of this period too) are, of course, long gone. Consequently, some of Aizenberg’s more recent essays must be seen as part of a self-conscious attempt to integrate that special and exclusive subculture into the new situation of Russian letters, while asserting its special status, hence the polemical edge of essays such as “The Place of a Shadow” or even “Division of Reality” (the original of the latter was part of the almanac Lichnoe delo). In particular, these essays address the old liberal establishment of Russian culture, with its confident social preoccupations and sense that Russia’s literature is (or should be) the country’s parliament. That establishment has often reacted with outraged hostility to the work of the new avant-garde—part of its doomed attempt to retain its anachronistic parliamentary role in a country where political process should no longer be confused with literary criticism. Other essays attempt to address the failings of criticism in this new situation (“Criticism of Criticism”), or to redress the historical or current imbalances in writing on Russian poetry (“The Possibility of Poetry,” “An Odyssey of Versification”). Aizenberg’s treatment of Brodsky, and of the “Leningrad poets” in general, has a programmatic quality: his preference for kosnotazhie over krasnoterechie (“difficult articulation” over “eloquence”—“An Odyssey of Versification”) is a natural consequence of his own literary situation, but it is also a useful corrective to the unquestioning identification of Brodsky (and, by association, Krivulin, the Muscovite Sedakova, and others) as the evident main line of Russian poetic development. It should also be remembered that some essays are themselves part of a literary situation that is by now significantly distant in time and in character. “A Few Others” was published in 1991 (typically for Russian letters of that time, in a theatrical journal, and because of personal, not strictly professional, associations)—that is, the essay was published before most of the contemporary poets described had emerged completely from the underground, and before the national popularity of Kibirov and others.

Aizenberg’s reputation as a poet and as a writer on poetry has continued to grow since the last of these essays were written. Despite his aversion to formal institutional associations—another characteristic of his literary world—he has achieved extensive recognition, even within the formal institutions of academia. In 1994 he spent two months at the University of Michigan, giving a series of seminars on the “New Russian Poetry” (it was here that the idea for the present volume was conceived). Since 1995 he has been an affiliate of the School of Contemporary Art at the Russian State University for the Humanities in Moscow, where he lectures on modern poetry. His essays have been widely admired, and a collection of them, including many translated here, is now in press, with the Moscow publisher Gendal’f, under the title Vzglyad na svobodnogo khudozhnika [A look at a free artist].

This volume would not have been possible without the active support and assistance of Mikhail Aizenberg himself. Not only did he provide the texts, some of them unpublished, others corrected published versions, from which this selection was made, but he also answered myriad questions of facts and of language. All remaining errors are, of course, the responsibility of the editor, who nonetheless hopes that the erudition and elegance of these essays will gain for their author and for their subject a new following among anglophone readers of Russian poetry.