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ABSTRACT

The Independent Turn in Soviet-Era Russian Poetry: How Dmitry Bobyshev, Joseph Brodsky, Anatoly Naiman and Evgeny Rein Became the ‘Avvakumites’ of Leningrad

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The first post-World War II generation of Soviet Russian writers was faced with a crisis of language even more pervasive and serious than the “Crisis of Symbolism” at the beginning of the 20th century: the level of abstraction and formulaic speech used in public venues had become such that words and phrases could only gesture helplessly in the direction of mysterious meaning. Due to the traditional status of poetry in Russian culture and to various other factors explored in this dissertation, the generation of poets coming of age in the mid-1950s was in a unique position to spearhead a renewal of language. Among those who took up the challenge was a group of four friends in Leningrad: Dmitry Bobyshev, Joseph Brodsky, Anatoly Naiman, and Evgeny Rein. Because of the extreme position this group adopted regarding the use of language, I refer to them in this work not as “Akhmatova’s Orphans”—a term commonly applied to the quartet—but as literary “Avvakumites,” a name Anna Akhmatova suggested that invokes the history of Archpriest Avvakum, who by rejecting reforms in church ritual founded the Orthodox sect now known as Old Believers. In a similar fashion, the “Avvakumites” of Leningrad eventually became exemplary for their generation in their creation of an alternative cultural space that simply ignored the demands of Soviet literature, cleaving instead to the much older tradition of humane letters.

For the purpose of establishing the development of the Avvakumites into poets of the humane letters who absolutely rejected the language and dictates of Soviet Realism, I have
focused on the contemporary scene: poetry and living poets published in the Soviet press, radio waves from the West, and the lively interactions among various groups within the new generation of Russian poets. The four poets at the center of my study coalesced as a group in Leningrad by the late 1950s, eventually finding their shared link to the humanist tradition in Russian letters in the person of Akhmatova, with whom all four became more or less friendly.

Chapter 1 of my dissertation begins with a consideration, based largely on the important and influential anthology *Poetry Day* (*Den’ poezii*, 1956), of the state of Soviet poetry following World War II and especially after Joseph Stalin’s death. In the second part of Chapter One I discuss poets represented in the pages of Thaw era publications in relation to the development of the Avvakumites’ poetry. Among the poets under discussion here are: Nikolai Aseev, Viktor Bokov, Sergei Esenin, Yevgeny Yevtushenko, Dmitry Kedrin, Leonid Martynov, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Boris Pasternak, Boris Slutsky, Marina Tsvetaeva, Konstantin Vanshenkin, Evgeny Vinokurov.

Chapter 2 examines how the Avvakumites came to their uncompromising position in regard to publishing, via studies of the Leningrad Technological Institute’s short-lived wall newspaper, *Kul’tura* (Culture) and of several poems written on the occasion of the launching of Sputnik (1957). In the final section of Chapter Two, I consider the role of poetry circles called *Literaturnye ob’edineniia*, or LITOs, in providing an alternative space in which to share poetry, their influence in the formation of distinct poetic groups [*kompanii*], and how the Avvakumites’ humanist focus distinguished their group from other *kompanii*. Among poets discussed in this chapter are Mikhail Krasilnikov, Stanoslav Krasovitsky, Yaroslav Smelyakov, and Vladimir Uflyand.
Chapter 3 takes up another influential contemporary source of exciting new rhythms and themes: the Voice of America’s radio jazz program, *Music USA*, hosted by Willis Conover. Beyond showing how the Avvakumites incorporated jazz rhythms and themes into their poetry, I argue that Conover’s interviews with jazz artists conveyed to the Avvakumites and their generation an attractive and influential narrative of independence and human dignity. Russian and western artists discussed here include Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie, Eartha Kitt, Gerry Mulligan, Valery Mysovsky, Charlie Parker, Nonna Sukhanova.

In Chapter 4 I discuss how Anna Akhmatova became the culminating shaping force on the young Avvakumites. Akhmatova was a living bridge to the broken-off traditions of Russian poetry, the warmth of whose personal relations with these young poets marked an intense era of collective growth and sharing that ended with her death.

The Avvakumites emerged early and strongly as a group of gifted poets who rejected the strictures of Socialist Realism while embracing the humanist tradition in Russian letters. Brodsky has become emblematic to the world at large in that regard, his pivotal role in the history of literature marked by the Nobel Prize in 1987. In this dissertation I have tried to place the emergence of Brodsky in its broader context, analyzing the surprisingly rich contemporary landscape of rhythms, sounds, and ideas, and especially the roles of the members of his friendship group in making the independent “Avvakumite” turn that signified, in a way, the beginning of the end of Soviet rule.
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Irina Reyfman has been much more than a second reader: she has been an unrelentingly sustaining mentor. She has unstintingly provided intellectual, moral, administrative, collegial, and every other possible kind of support throughout my time as a graduate student, and particularly during the writing of the dissertation. She has read every word of my dissertation numerous times and helped me at crucial moments—particularly during the year my sponsor was away on leave—to find and straighten the thread running through what sometimes seemed like a hopeless mess. And throughout the years, she has communicated a deep, joyful, and unflagging intellectual engagement with literature and teaching. In short, Irina Reyfman sets the standard to which I, sinner that I am, aspire.

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Introduction

The Post-Stalin Language Crisis and an “Avvakumite” Response in Poetry

The first post-World War II generation of Soviet Russian writers was faced with a crisis of language. For decades prior, the doctrine of Socialist Realism had dictated that literature both reflect and provoke the construction of a Communist future. Over the years, many of Russia’s best writers were silenced—imprisoned, exiled, killed, or simply prevented from publishing. By the time Joseph Stalin died in 1953, those writers who did publish were unwilling to risk submitting anything that amounted to more than a collection of banal clichés. In the case of poetry, literary journals resorted to printing mostly translations of innocuous or programmatic poets from the east bloc “brother countries” and from the “brother nations” within Soviet borders, interspersed with Russian poets’ own praises of Lenin, Stalin, and the Soviet Union in general. Words published in the literary journals had simply lost their direct connection with actual life. It was a crisis of language not unlike the “Crisis of Symbolism” at the beginning of the twentieth century: the level of abstraction and formulaic speech had become such that words and phrases helplessly gestured in the direction of mysterious meaning. But unlike that purely literary crisis, the Soviet-era predicament was a political problem as well: the stagnation of literary creativity was an all-too-visible symptom of a statewide problem with public language use.

Due to the traditional status of poetry in Russian culture and to various other factors explored in this dissertation, the generation of poets coming of age in the mid-
1950s was in a unique position to spearhead a renewal of language. Among those who took up the challenge was a group of four friends in Leningrad: Dmitry Bobyshev, Joseph Brodsky, Anatoly Naiman, and Evgeny Rein. Because of the extreme position this group adopted regarding the use of language, I refer to them in this work as literary “Avvakumites”—a name suggested to them by Anna Akhmatova—after Archpriest Avvakum, who by rejecting reforms in church ritual founded the Orthodox sect now known as Old Believers. In a similar fashion, the “Avvakumites” of Leningrad rejected the dogma of Socialist Realism in order to practice their art according to the ancient tradition of humane letters (I will explicate this in more detail below). I follow this particular group’s development not only because it included a famously independent poet who achieved world recognition (Brodsky was to be both a Nobel prize-winner and United States Poet Laureate), but also because in many ways these four poets were both typical and exemplary for their time; and because part of the story of their development as poets is the story of their interaction with others of their generation. By studying this group in its formative years, I can demonstrate via close reading how source material found its way into new poetry, show how the Avvakumites came to their absolute rejection of the literary standards dictated by Soviet policy, and simultaneously suggest approaches to the study of other writers of this period, or of any developing literary voices in a “closed” society.

In retrospect, the work of Alexei Yurchak can be useful in thinking about the Soviet language problem. Yurchak, in *Everything Was Forever until It Was No More*, an anthropological consideration of the “last generation” of Soviets, does a brilliant job of synthesizing and critiquing theoretical approaches to the Soviet language crisis.
Considering theoretical frameworks from Marx, Lenin, and Gorky to Marr and Stalin and onward through Bakhtin, Derrida, Baudrillard, Seriot, Epstein, and Groys, Yurchak charts linguistic theory as it was transformed in Soviet times from descriptive to prescriptive. In Yurchak’s reading, Stalin emerges as the single “outside” authority capable of determining whether any particular phrase or word was being used in conformity with its Socialist/Communist function. With the death of Stalin, Yurchak convincingly shows, no outside authority remained to judge language use, and language in public functions—or, as Yurchak terms it, “authoritative discourse”—became limited to already existing forms.\(^1\)

Drawing largely on postmodern language theorists Jean Baudrillard and Mikhail Epstein, Yurchak shows how this authoritative discourse became something like the “simulacra” Baudrillard describes, in which words represented a reality that in fact did not exist. Disagreeing with Epstein’s argument that “since Soviet people read authoritative discourse for constative representations of their world, and these representations were hegemonic and could not be verified or challenged, Soviet people could never be certain what was real and what was simulated,” Yurchak points out that “precisely because authoritative language was hegemonic, unavoidable, and hypernormalized, it was no longer read by its audiences literally, at the level of constative meanings [...] Instead, Soviet people engaged with authoritative language at the level of the performative dimension, which Epstein ignores.”\(^2\) Yurchak elucidates theoretically


\(^2\) Yurchak, 76.
what Soviet citizens knew practically: that one had to do, say, and write certain formulaic things in public in order to ensure one’s material well-being.

It is well to keep in mind that even though Yurchak is working to break down old binary oppositions used in thinking about language and behavior in the Soviet Union (official/unofficial; public/private; censored/uncensored, etc.), he remains largely concerned with the use of language in public—versus private—spaces, whether in newspapers and edicts, literary publications, textbooks and handbooks, or in speeches, meetings, and other public gatherings—and this is inevitable because it was precisely when used in such functions that language was distorted by its users. Moreover, even during the crisis of language Yurchak describes, in which people used it “performatively” (where the form it takes—say, the activity of voting for the current Communist candidate—is more important than the content [“Yes,” in the case of the vote]) rather than “constatively” (where, conversely, the content carries the main import), they were simultaneously using language as “constatively” as ever in other spheres of life. “Nuka idi siuda!” still communicated to a child in plain language that he better come [idi] over [siuda] right this minute [nuka], whether or not he and/or his interlocutor had read Gorky, Marx, Lenin, Stalin, Pavlov, or anybody else. What Yurchak is really describing is the use of a specific register of language (and the behaviors that went with it) within the greater whole: this register was created and used to navigate (and to some extent to control) the governmental system, within the context of language used to participate in human life in general. The important turn made by the Avvakumites of Leningrad was precisely in their more instinctive than theoretical rejection of this “authoritative discourse” altogether in the larger context of language use, in favor of language that
aligned itself as closely as possible to the task of describing the human condition as it actually was, rather than what it was projected to be. I will refer to language used in this function as “humanist,” and locate the deployment of such language in Russian and specifically Avvakumite poetry within the larger tradition of humane letters (the humanities).

A way of understanding the language crisis of the Thaw period perhaps closer to how the Avvakumites experienced it would be to describe it in terms of the tension, traditional in the history of Russian literature, between Tsar and Poet. At the root of this tension is a struggle for control over metaphor in public space: metaphor used by the State to portray violence and enslavement as public service and metaphor used to describe the same violence and enslavement from the humanist perspective. In the Soviet Union, the first kind of metaphorical language was appropriated for public pronouncements, and the second kind pushed out of the public sphere altogether by the 1930s. In private, the latter kind of metaphorical language continued to be cultivated by a handful of writers, notably poets like Osip Mandelstam, whose “longing for worldwide culture” [toska po mirovoi kul’ture] gave him a more universal framework that eventually led him to pen lines about Stalin’s “cockroach whiskers” and “forged” decrees—images that assured Mandelstam’s subsequent death in a labor camp transit point; and Akhmatova, whose Requiem cycle immortalized the agony caused by Stalin’s Terror with lines such as “And the stone word fell on my still-living breast.”

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Stalin era’s few remaining practitioners of humane letters was so great that they, in the effort to ensure that language accurately reflected its most directly descriptive meaning, even resorted to images that had a one-to-one correspondence with the reality they conveyed. Akhmatova, for example, would write in 1933, “But we have found out for all time / that the only thing that smells like blood is blood” [No my uznali navsegda / chto krov’iu pakhnet tol’ko krov’]. Thus, if Stalin appropriated metaphor to say, “If you want to make an omelette, you have to break eggs,” what he was actually doing, from the humanist point of view, was distorting meaning by reducing the idea of “human being” to a commonly available product one destroys routinely before breakfast in order to consume it and thereby sustain oneself. This is why Joseph Brodsky, upon further reflection, would reject that metaphor by writing, “Broken eggs make me grieve; the omelette, though, makes me vomit.”

Anatoly Naiman wrote about this very use of language in 1994, describing language employed for its humanist import as “naming things by their proper names” and referring to the power-influenced use of language as “artificial”:

It was impossible, for example, to name by their proper names the fraud, treachery, theft, and murder that became Soviet state policy. The necessity

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4 For these lines, see Akhmatova, Sochineniia v dvukh tomakh, v. 1, 180.


of replacing these terms with words that expressed the same concepts yet somehow covered over their ugly reality (with a web of strategic commonplaces cast over it from critical angles)—this led to the creation of a special language of double-entendres, a two-track phenomenon that Orwell later named “doublespeak.” A man is fired from his job, arrested, and shot; this comes to be called “purge.” In effect such renaming resembled someone’s deciding that alongside the standard number system, based on 10, one could also employ a base-two system when the mood struck—so the number 100 could mean either 100 or four, depending. “So-and-so was shot” was the truth, but “such-and-such an establishment cleansed its ranks of an alien element” was not an untruth. The “element” who had been shot really was “alien,” and the “ranks” really had been cleansed of him. The concept of “destruction” was invested with a positive connotation by the substitution of the word “cleansing.” Such an operation, however, required the effective demotion of the concept of “people” to the category of “ranks” and “elements.” The organism of speech, forced to function in an environment of artificiality, compensates for the overload on some of its parts by diminishing the activity of others.  

In other words, this destructive (of humans) use of metaphor distances the actions it describes from their human costs. For Naiman, the poet’s work is “naming things by their real names,” a task not at all far removed from the work of the early twentieth century “Acmeist” (also sometimes called “Adamist” after the first human granted the power of naming) group of Russian poets that included Akhmatova, and came into being in response to the above-mentioned Crisis of Symbolism. But for Naiman’s generation, much more was at stake than the direction of literature, as we will see.

In 1956 Nikita Khrushchev’s “Secret Speech” (revealing and admitting the colossal scale of Stalin’s crimes against humanity) decisively demoted Stalin from his position of unerring authority, and thereby unlocked the door to a renewal of literary language. The generation of Russian poets coming of age at this moment, those who had not yet been physically and/or psychically crippled by prisons and labor camps, were

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ready and eager to re-invent language, to divest themselves of the clichés and didactic
drivels that surrounded and oppressed them, to allow the present to exist for its own
sake—in short, to fix their perceptions and experiences in living language. A whole
generation searched for a way to re-invigorate literary language, the most immediate
venue for which work was poetry.

In this project burgeoning writers were aided, as Emily Lygo has shown, by
government policies aimed at shaping a new generation of Soviet poets.\(^8\) Lygo writes:

\begin{quote}
By the end of the Stalin period, Soviet poetry had become restricted to a
very narrow range of subject, tone and form, and much of it was
repetitious and uninteresting. This had come about because in the post-war period, the Party waged war against lyric poetry—which it characterised
as overly subjective and individualistic—to such a degree that it had
practically disappeared from published literature [...] In 1953, Soviet
poetry was officially criticised as being ‘behind’ other literary genres in its
development, and in order to catch up with the novel and the short story it
was understood that some changes to its current condition had to be
made.\(^9\)
\end{quote}

One of the chief problems with Soviet lyric poetry’s sorry state, as members of the local
and national writers’ unions saw it, was the lack of contributions from young poets. In
Leningrad in particular, specific policies were instituted to encourage young writers, from
the re-invigoration and new creation of poetry circles guided by older writers to increased
publication of young writers in the literary journals.\(^10\) Lygo notes, “The initiatives which
were taken in the early 1950s to promote work with young writers put in place an
apparatus which allowed the latter to be trained and encouraged by writers in positions of


\(^{10}\) Because of this dissertation’s focus on a group of four Leningrad poets, I will only occasionally refer to
the situation in Moscow and elsewhere in Russia. Due to the uniform, top-down nature of State Socialism,
however, one can assume that similar processes were taking place elsewhere in the Soviet Union.
authority. Whatever else may have contributed to the sharp increase in the popularity of poetry in the 1950s […], there can be little doubt that major roles were played by the establishment of new institutionalised groups, conferences, and almanacs, and the accompanying drive to improve work with young writers.”

Ironically, a significant number of budding poets helped along by these new policies would eventually turn their backs on Soviet poetry altogether in favor of simply poetry—poetry that was unbound by policy dictates and answered only to the laws of language and the identity of the poet who shapes language into form. The poets under study in this dissertation were among a handful of a-Soviet writers whose ranks also included groups like that of Vladimir Uflyand, Mikhail Eremin, and Leonid Vinogradov in Leningrad, and Leonid Chertkov, Valentin Khromov, and Stanislav Krasovitsky in Moscow. These young literary bands were laying the foundations in the 1950s that would turn a generation into the “men of the ’60s”—dissidents, refuseniki, and writers “for the drawer.” The generation that was formed during the Thaw ended up creating an alternative cultural space that competed with, rejected, or simply ignored the demands of Soviet literature.

Unlike the living poets of older generations (foremost, Anna Akhmatova and Boris Pasternak, and poets such as Boris Slutsky and Evgeny Vinokurov, who were formed by the war), the new generation had not yet had time to amass a wealth of experience and memories that could provide material for their poems indefinitely. Where, then, did they find the rhythms and themes for their new poetry? How did they develop what they found into a poetics independent of the Soviet project? In Moscow and

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Leningrad, young poets typically came together in groups of three or four, looking to the past and present, rather than the happy Communist future, to find their sound and language. Russian literary movements that had been broken off by the imposition of Socialist Realism were taken up again. Some groups reached back to Russian Futurism and the avant-garde, experimenting with sound and form like Velemir Khlebnikov did. Others, like the group of Leningrad poets I will focus on in this dissertation, were drawn to bridging the gap between the modernist trend called Acmeism (its chief representatives being Nikolai Gumilev, Mandelstam, and Akhmatova) and the present day. Where there were neglected or formerly suppressed masters, there were students eager to find them and learn from them—personally, if they were still alive, and from their poems, if they were dead. The generation of poets that came of age during Khrushchev’s “Thaw” had in common the project of releasing language from its Socialist Realist constraints. Their methods, however, were as varied as the personalities of the poets themselves and the literary material they took up.

The four poets at the center of my study coalesced as a group in Leningrad by the late 1950s. Bobyshev, Naiman and Rein met during their studies at the Leningrad Technological Institute, and Rein introduced the younger Brodsky, who soon fell in with them, in 1958 or possibly early in 1959 (see Chapter 2). The four young men, individually and as a group, became close with Anna Akhmatova, who over the course of the early 1960s proposed a number of possible names for them: the Avvakumites, the Magic Choir, the Golden Cupola (crowning the “Silver Age” of poetry of the early twentieth century in Russia). Potential monikers from other sources include the Leningrad School and Akhmatova’s Orphans, the latter taken from a line of a poem
written by Bobyshev after Akhmatova’s death. None of the labels fits perfectly—Akhmatova’s Orphans and the Magic Choir feel sentimental, the Leningrad School is too broad, the Golden Cupola perhaps a bit too aggrandizing—but Avvakumites [Avvakumovtsy], comes closest to defining what exactly bound this quartet together.

The term “Avvakumites” derives from the remarkable history of Archpriest Avvakum, who in the mid-1600s rejected the modifications in Russian Orthodox Christian worship instated by Patriarch Nikon. Avvakum’s devotion to the traditional forms of worship was vociferous, and his written record of the travails he endured because of his faith literature gifted. Avvakum left us with one of Russian literature’s most fascinating and important early autobiographies, his Life [Zhiti]. In it, he resorts to his own vernacular Russian to tell of his relations and clashes with authorities, demons, and sinners (not least of all himself), his imprisonment, the exile and hardships he and his community of followers underwent, and his admiration for nature’s beauty. As Priscilla Hunt writes, “[Avvakum’s Life] was unprecedented for its evocation of the protagonist’s humanness, for its historical concreteness, and for its introduction of the vernacular as a literary language on a par with Church Slavonic.”12 After years of battling the authorities, imprisonment and exile, Avvakum was finally burned at the stake. By the time of his death, Avvakum had acquired a significant number of followers, who came to be called Old Believers, and whose descendents still reject Nikon’s reforms and continue to practice Orthodoxy according to the older traditions. Avvakum’s copious writings were

never published during his lifetime, but were “copied and distributed [...] in an underground network throughout Russia.”

The analogy works pretty well for the stance taken by the quartet of poets I will follow Akhmatova in referring to as Avvakumites. Soviet authorities tried to dictate altered standards (Socialist Realism) for the practice of literary writing. The Avvakumites rejected these revisionist laws and adhered to their own vernacular in pursuing the ancient practice of humane letters. By thus doing they risked persecution, arrest, imprisonment, the labor camps and exile. While such punishments cannot be compared to the eventual fate of Archpriest Avvakum, the cost was nonetheless high: Rein was expelled from the Technological Institute, while Brodsky was arrested, imprisoned, sent into internal exile, and eventually compelled to leave the Soviet Union. All four poets were under observation by the KGB. Their poetry (with a couple of minor exceptions) was not published inside the USSR until the 1980s or even later. Like Avvakum’s writings, however, it was circulated unofficially in handmade copies, a process that became known in the 1960s as samizdat. Barred from publishing their own writing, the four poets worked in the industrial sector until it became possible to earn a living in some sort of secondary literary endeavor, such as literary translation or screenwriting for documentary films. Some poets of their generation learned how to write Soviet-style poems that “pulled” their other poetry into publication. The Avvakumites, like their namesake Avvakum, remained absolute in their refusal to adapt to the artificially imposed standards, to the significant detriment of their material wellbeing. In doing so, they forged an alternative literary path for poets of their own and subsequent generations.

The scope of a dissertation is not nearly broad enough to include even a representative range of the important influences on the “Thaw” generation of poets in their formative years. For the purpose of establishing the development of the Avvakumites into poets of the humane letters who absolutely rejected the language and dictates of Soviet Realism, I have focused on the contemporary scene: poetry and living poets published in the Soviet press, radio waves from the West, and the lively interactions among various groups within the new generation of Russian poets. Perforce, this all but leaves out such hugely influential figures such as Osip Mandelstam, Velemir Khlebnikov, Alexander Blok, the poets of Alexander Pushkin’s pleiade (of whom I would single out the all-but-forgotten Nikolai Yazykov in addition to Joseph Brodsky’s beloved Evgeny Baratynsky, aside of course from Pushkin himself), and earlier Russian poets, including Lomonosov and Derzhavin. I am especially distressed to pass over Derzhavin, as his influence is profound, direct and demonstrable. What better poet to turn to in re-inventing literary speech about the pleasures of everyday life and the present moment than the author of To Evgeny. Life at Zvanka? The publication of the second edition of Derzhavin’s volume of the “Poets’ Library” series in 1957, in Leningrad, could not have happened at a more opportune time for the Avvakumites.

With the exception of American jazz musicians, the dissertation also more or less disregards the impact of non-Russian artists, both living and dead. It all but ignores the accessibility and influence of east-bloc journals, especially those of Poland. The role of books, newly returned to accessible library shelves after years in “spetskhrany” (limited-access archives), the influx of foreign exchange students and international festivals and exhibitions, such as the 1957 International Youth Festival and the American National
Exhibition of 1959 (both in Moscow), the books, clothes, and records these students brought with them, the role of Russian language publishers outside of Russia—all these factors and others as well had to go by the wayside in order for the dissertation to retain focus and form.

One of the most surprising results of my investigation has been the discovery of how rich in exciting rhythms, sounds and ideas was what had looked to many scholars over the past half century like a cultural desert. Soviet publications, which even Soviet critics complained were empty and dull, actually yielded a wealth of inspiring and influential writing. The “iron curtain” that seemed to so effectively close off the east bloc from the western world turns out to have been surprisingly porous. And the postwar generation was vigorous and ingenious in finding what it needed in museums, concert halls, movie theaters, bookstores, and libraries, over the airwaves, and among friends.

Structure of the Dissertation

Chapter 1 of my dissertation begins with a consideration of the state of Soviet poetry following World War II and especially after Joseph Stalin’s death. The anthology called Poetry Day (Den’ poezii, 1956) proved an excellent focal point for discussion of how Soviet literary publications were read at the time, the features of a “good” Soviet poem, and the emergence during the Thaw of previously suppressed or forgotten poets along with new voices and themes. In the second part of Chapter One I discuss poets represented in the pages of Poetry Day and other Thaw era publications (notably Literary Moscow [Literaturnaia Moskva] and the mainstream literary journals) in relation to the development of the Avvakumites’ poetry.
Chapter 2 examines how the Avvakumites came to their uncompromising position in regard to publishing. I first take up the case of the Leningrad Technological Institute’s short-lived wall newspaper, *Kul’tura* (Culture), for which Bobyshev, Naiman and Rein were key writers in 1956. Its history is a lesson in the vagaries of the Thaw: in the wake of the student-led Hungarian Revolution (crushed by the Soviet military), *Kul’tura* and its writers came under criticism, while an outspoken student acquaintance, Mikhail Krasilnikov, was arrested and sentenced to labor camp. This first experience with the arbitrary and harsh nature of the post-Stalin response to relatively free written and oral speech was enough to discourage the Avvakumites from further attempts to write in a way that accommodated the stylistic demands of Socialist Realism. In the second part of Chapter 2, the three possible fates for a new poem—publication, illegal publication, and no publication—are considered in the context of the launching of Sputnik in 1957, and I show how the Avvakumites were already firm in their rejection of the path to official publication by this time. In the final section of Chapter 2, I consider the role of poetry circles called *Literaturnye ob”edineniia*, or LITOs, in providing an alternative space in which to share poetry, their influence in the formation of distinct poetic groups [*kompanii*], and how the Avvakumites’ humanist focus distinguished their group from other *kompanii*.

Where did the Avvakumites find models by which to shape their independent stance? Chapter 3 takes up another influential contemporary source of exciting new rhythms and themes: the Voice of America’s radio jazz program, *Music USA*, hosted by Willis Conover and broadcast six nights a week behind the Iron Curtain. Although Conover’s influence on the Thaw generation of artists has been widely acknowledged, it
has been little explicated, aside from its impact on jazz musicians. In this chapter I show how the Avvakumites incorporated jazz rhythms and themes into their poems. In the case of Brodsky and Naiman especially, Conover’s show sparked a lifelong engagement with the culture of jazz. Perhaps even more importantly in the immediate context of the Thaw, I argue that Conover’s regular interviews with jazz artists, often touching on the difficulties of pursuing their art in the face of mainstream disregard, disdain or rejection, conveyed to the Avvakumites and their generation an attractive and influential narrative of independence and human dignity, as well as a healthy dose of plain old fun.

In Chapter 4 I discuss how Anna Akhmatova became the culminating shaping force on the young Avvakumites. Akhmatova was for the Avvakumites first of all a living, responding voice—a flesh-and-blood Russian poet who had worked out at great personal cost how to maintain her fidelity to language in the most discouraging of circumstances. Secondly, her experience of the twentieth century was a vast repository of history that the Avvakumites could not find in books: she was a living bridge to the broken-off traditions of Russian poetry. Lastly, the warmth of her personal relations with these young poets marked an intense era of collective growth and sharing that ended with her death. The virtual reality of serious, life-loving, and independent artistry transmitted so attractively in Willis Conover’s broadcasts was transmuted by the person of Akhmatova into the very real circumstances of Russian poetry in the Soviet Union.

The Avvakumites emerged early and strongly as a group of gifted poets who rejected the strictures of Socialist Realism while embracing the humanist tradition in Russian letters. Brodsky has become emblematic to the world at large in that regard, his pivotal role in the history of literature marked by the Nobel Prize in 1987. In this
dissertation I have tried to place the emergence of Brodsky in its broader context, analyzing the surprisingly rich contemporary landscape of rhythms, sounds, and ideas, and especially the roles of the members of his friendship group in making the independent “Avvakumite” turn that signified, in a way, the beginning of the end of Soviet rule.

Sources and Methods

The poetry of the emergence of the Thaw (circa 1953-1960) is remarkably understudied, due in large part to the difficulty until the demise of the Soviet Union in obtaining the poetry of unpublished poets. Therefore the bulk of my work has been with primary sources. During the exciting first years of the Thaw, several literary anthologies came out in the west. Some of these anthologies have very helpful introductions, selections and short biographies of the poets represented. As a rule, however, these collections and the few studies that came out in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s take their cue from the Soviet press of the time, concerned mostly with published poetry and treating literary works from this period in light of the Soviet political battle between “dogmatists” and “reformers” (from the Brezhnev period on, other binary approaches—“Soviet” vs. “dissident,” “official” vs. “underground”—held sway in western scholarly works on literature). Since the late 1980s, several early poems of the Avvakumites and their contemporaries have found publication in collections in Russia and abroad, and Dmitry Bobyshev and Anatoly Naiman have been especially generous in providing other unpublished poems, documents, and commentary for my research. Internet sites http://antology.igrunov.ru and http://vivovoco.rsl.ru have been invaluable in making
1950s-era poems available to the public. Especially useful in that regard, 

http://www.rvb.ru reproduces the contents of the illegal journal Sintaksis.

http://www.sovlit.com is full of key texts in English translation.

A very rich resource has been Konstantin Kuzminsky’s remarkable (if nonetheless highly subjective and idiosyncratic) multi-volume The Blue Lagoon Anthology of Modern Russian Poetry (and its website: http://kkk-bluelagoon.ru), of which volume 2B (1986) contains both poetry of the Avvakumites and commentary. Unfortunately, due to conflicts over permissions between Kuzminsky and several poets, including three of the four Avvakumites, Avvakumite poetry is represented less fully than might have been the case. Moreover, both Kuzminsky’s anthology and the internet sites had to be used with care: Kuzminsky reconstituted much of the poetry he anthologized from his own memory and that of friends and colleagues, and the internet entries are subject to the same methods. Because of the haphazard way many poems from this era were remembered and written down, it was necessary to double-check poems for accuracy where (subsequently) published versions could be found or authors could be consulted.

The 1956 Soviet poetry anthology Poetry Day turned out to be a veritable encyclopedia of the poetry of the time. This publication, the two 1956 anthologies of Literary Moscow, and two mainstream literary journals of the time, Znamia (Banner) and Novyi Mir (New World), produced a wealth of fascinating poetic material and critical articles that comprised the subjects of a great portion of my research. A month in the Library of Congress (thanks to a short-term grant from the Kennan Institute of the Woodrow Wilson Center) listening to recordings of Voice of America (VOA) broadcasts and researching the roles of Radio Liberty, the BBC and the VOA broadcasts behind the
Iron Curtain made possible the Willis Conover “Jazz Hour” chapter. Memoirs—and here Bobyshev’s *Ia zdes’* (I am Here, 2002); Naiman’s memoiristic works, *Slavnyi konets besslavnykh pokolenii* (Inglorious Generations’ Glorious Finish, 1998), and *Remembering Anna Akhmatova* (1993); Solomon Volkov’s *Conversations with Joseph Brodsky* (1998); Rein’s *Mne skuchno bez Dovlatova* (I’m Bored without Dovlatov, 1997) and *Zametki marafontsa: nekanonicheskie memuary* (A Marathoner’s Notes: Uncanonical Memoirs, 2003); and the first section of Elena Kumpan’s *Blizhnyi podstup k legende* (Close Access to a Legend, 2005) must be singled out—have yielded essential clues and facts about the era. The almost countless interviews, essays, articles, and monographs with, by, and about Joseph Brodsky are also rich in information.

Because the bulk of my analysis is done by close reading of the poems themselves, because of the peculiar historical niche the materials of the dissertation occupy, and also quite simply because so little work has been done on the topic, the list of essential secondary and theoretical sources is rather short. Alexei Yurchak proposes a very useful way of understanding the dilemma of language in public space and its history in his *Everything Was Forever until It Was No More* (2006), but he is most concerned with the “authoritative discourse” rejected by the Avvakumites and moreover focuses on the last years of the Soviet Union. David MacFadyen’s *Joseph Brodsky and the Soviet Muse* (2000) makes an approach related to my research, but again, he devotes most of the space in his book to a later Brodsky. Emily Lygo’s Oxford dissertation,

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14 Until the collapse of the Soviet Union, finding material that was unpublished in the 1950s was perhaps too daunting a task, both for western scholars with limited access to Russia and Soviet scholars under restrictive conditions. With the post-Soviet embrace of the internet by lovers and historians of poetry, material has now become more accessible. Once outlawed unofficial journals are merrily posted on internet sites, poems of hard-to-find authors can be googled, conference papers have been given and collected in volumes. The flow of books and articles in Russian on the period and on individual poets, as well as the publication of memoirs, has been slowly increasing since the early 1990s.

A Note on Transliteration and Translation

Throughout the dissertation, I use the Library of Congress transliteration system without diacritical marks. In the body of the dissertation, for ease of reading, Russian names are written as they are commonly spelled in English: Dmitry rather than Dmitrii, Brodsky rather than Brodskii. In the case of Russian writers who preferred or prefer a particular spelling of their own name in Latin letters (as evidenced either by their English language publications or stated preference), I have preserved that spelling: Yevgeny Yevtushenko, but Evgeny Rein. Translations throughout the dissertation, unless otherwise noted, are my own.
Chapter 1

Rhythms of the Thaw: Poetry in the Contemporary Soviet Press

Even Soviet sources concede that the immediate post-World War II decade did not yield much in the way of interesting poetry (at least in publications). The *History of Russian Soviet Poetry, 1941-1980* [*Istoriia russkoi sovetskoi poezii*] tells us that throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s, there was deep concern at the highest levels of the Writers’ Union that contemporary poetry lacked depth and substance:

In the 50s N. Aseev, giving a speech “at a certain high-level meeting,” directly accused all poetry from the end of the 40s to the beginning of the 50s of being “grey and monotonous.” And although at the Second All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers a lot of prominent poets (S. Shchipachev, A. Prokof’ev, N. Tikhonov) argued against this opinion, it remained dominant for a long time and even grew stronger. In the 60s a few critics assessed the period 1945-55 as an “empty decade,” when it seemed that Soviet poetry was dominated by “a great wave of rhetoric, grandiloquence, showiness, and superficiality in the description of the great deeds of our people.”

Much of what was published in the major literary journals of the time (*Znamia* [Banner], *Novyi mir* [New world], *Oktyabr’* [October], *Zvezda* [Star]) for years after the war was devoted to war experiences and to the task of rebuilding after the war, and to translations from other languages, especially those of the Soviet Union and the “brother countries” of the Soviet bloc. If one takes at random an issue of *Novyi mir* as late as July, 1954, for instance, one finds two translations of Cuba’s national poet, Nicolás Guillén, a set of

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translations of Latvian folk poetry, one poem about a soldier’s impressions upon returning to his village, and another nostalgic reflection about what it used to be like to come home to one’s family.\footnote{Novyi mir 7(1954). Translations by O. Savich (74-5) and S. Marshak (193-7), poems by V. Semenov (138) and V. Sergeev (139).} It was as if no one knew how—or dared—to move on to new material.

Perhaps it was not the poetry of the era that was gray and monotonous, but only the poetry that was published. While only passing mention of Boris Pasternak and Anna Akhmatova is made in the postwar chapter of the Soviet history quoted above, it was precisely in the 1940s and 50s that Akhmatova was writing her crowning masterpiece, the 
\textit{Poem without a Hero [Poema bez geroia]}, while Pasternak was creating his most famous work, the novel \textit{Doctor Zhivago [Doktor Zhivago]}, including the “poems of Yury Zhivago.” These works were certainly being read and heard by friends close to the writers, but found even partial publication only with great difficulty.

Joseph Stalin’s death in 1953 opened the possibility of saying something interesting in print, but it was not at all clear what could or ought to be written and published (and by whom). For the first couple of years after Stalin’s death, the renaissance of poetry was a slow and cautious process.\footnote{After Stalin’s death, some of the “poems of Yury Zhivago” were eventually published: in Znamia 4(1954): 92-5, and in Poetry Day (27).} That process was considerably sped up in 1956 by Nikita Khrushchev’s “Secret Speech” (at the Twentieth Party Congress), which decried Stalin’s “Cult of Personality.”
The appearance in 1956 of the first Poetry Day [Den’ poezii] anthology testified to the revival of printed poetry and was met with substantial enthusiasm. In this precedent-setting volume the reader could find—along with frequently published authors such as Margarita Aliger, Nikolai Aseev, Sergei Mikhalkov, and popular young poets Robert Rozhdestvensky and Yevgeny Yevtushenko—poems by Pasternak, Akhmatova and even Marina Tsvetaeva, whose work had not been published in the USSR since the early 1920s. The anthology proved such a popular success that it became an annual publication. The first Poetry Day paints a remarkably full picture of the rhythms and concerns of Soviet-era Russian poetry during the watershed year of Khrushchev’s Thaw. It thus provides an excellent focal point for the study of the literary atmosphere of the mid-1950s, when the Avvakumites were coming of age as poets.

The material in the major literary publications of the Thaw, notably the journals mentioned above and the two important 1956 anthologies called Literary Moscow [Literaturnaia Moskva] (hardcover, book-length collections of contemporary drama, prose, poetry, and literary journalism, in print runs of 100,000 and 75,000 respectively), tends to amplify—rather than alter—the picture of the literary scene found in Poetry Day. In the chapter that ensues, therefore, Poetry Day provides the main focus for isolating and analyzing a wealth of important poetic influences on the Avvakumites as they came of age at the beginning of Khrushchev’s Thaw.

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18 Throughout this dissertation I will refer to the inaugural issue of this anthology simply as Poetry Day. Subsequent Poetry Day anthologies will be referred to followed by the year of publication, e.g. Poetry Day 1957.
Poetry Day

The first Soviet celebration called “Poetry Day” was held in 1955. A few years later the much published Yevtushenko recalled the occasion as a day when “poets stood behind the counter in all the Moscow bookshops, read their poems and signed copies of their books.” Yevtushenko recalls being “literally carried” out of the cramped bookshop where he was reading so that “a crowd of more than a thousand” outside could hear the poems. In the introduction to the first Poetry Day anthology the editors (poets themselves) affectionately recalled, in images similar to Yevtushenko’s, the popularity of 1955’s inaugural Poetry Day readings: “A year ago, when Poetry Day was celebrated for the first time, we ourselves stood behind the bookstore counters, and the falsehood about the unpopularity of our poetry was refuted by the thousands of hands reaching for our books.” The excitement with which Poetry Day was greeted, even if (possibly) exaggerated in these recollections, was symptomatic of the changes in the literary environment since Stalin’s demise.

Poetry Day gives a good feel for the “Thaw” atmosphere. The inaugural anthology came out in a softcover, large magazine-style format, less expensive and imposing than a hardcover would have been. The print run was 30,000 copies—quite ambitious for a first-time poetry publication. The short introduction addresses the reader directly and somewhat informally, beginning with the heading Dobryi Den’! which, although it literally translates as “Good Day!” feels closer in tone to a simpler “Hello!”


The opening statement continues to play up the informal, just-another-day-in-the-life feel, noting that Moscow poets have “gathered” within the anthology’s pages to present “one of the ordinary days in our poetic life, in which poets of various ages, different manners and styles participate. We wanted to show you our day without deliberate formality, without dressing it up—the way it really is. Everybody brought what he had—nobody wrote specifically for this anthology.”

The focus on casual collectivity is so complete that the introduction is left unsigned, as if collectively written. In the short, final section of the volume, the editors even include a caricature of themselves busily, passionately, collectively and relatively informally gathered around the principal editor’s desk as they promote their literary choices for the journal.

The number of participants shown is much greater than the listed members of the editorial board: P. Antokolsky, S. Kirsanov, V. Lugovskoy, L. Martynov, L. Oshanin, Z. Papernyi, R. Rozhdestvensky, Ya. Smelyakov, Ya. Khelemsky, A. Yashin. The mostly middle-aged men in suits and ties waving manuscripts and flanked at the back by depressed-looking young guys with their hands at their sides may say more about the

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22 Den’ poezii, 3.
atmosphere of *Poetry Day* than was intended. As we will see, the content is an odd mix of conservatism with the cautious attempt to revive both the lyric and connections with the avant-garde of the 1910s and 20s.

The first issue of *Poetry Day* sets the standard for subsequent issues by incorporating several strands of Soviet-era poetry. *Poetry Day* is divided into six sections (no rationale for the division is stated). The first three consist of poems organized in roughly alphabetical order by author, while the other three are related by genre. Sections 1 through 3 mix programmatic patriotic verse and old guard Soviet poets with newer voices from the older generation (Leonid Martynov, Boris Slutsky, Evgeny Vinokurov), up-and-coming poets of the postwar generation (Yevtushenko, Rozhdestvensky, Gleb Gorbovsky) and new work from little published or long unpublished living masters such as Akhmatova, Pasternak and Zabolotsky. The groundbreaking fourth section is devoted to archival material on deceased poets. Section 5 contains essays about poetry. The sixth and shortest section is a miscellany. It includes, in addition to the foldout caricature discussed above, parodies, fables, epigrams, and other humorous and/or didactic verse.

*A Note about Political Considerations (And The Impact of Poetry Day), Or: How Poetry Day Was Read in 1956*

The days are gone and already almost forgotten since Soviet censorship and political demands (rather than the reading market) heavily influenced what and how literature made it into print, so it is worth taking a moment to consider the politically influenced aspects of *Poetry Day*. These strands run throughout the anthology, from their
first statement in the introduction, to the arrangement of sections and of poems within sections, to the nature of the sections themselves.

Firstly, the insistence of the editors in the introduction on the anthology’s informality should be read primarily as a defense of the volume’s shift in focus from the standard odes celebrating socialism, communism and heroes of the Soviet Union to a more personal lyric poetry. In trying to break out of the ode mode and prepare for a new look at lyric poetry, the editors clearly felt a need to carefully rationalize the change from former subject matter. Their approach was to claim that focusing on the lyric, in comparison to the ode, is also patriotic and serves the nation’s peasants and workers. The editors are quite specific about this in the introduction:

There were days as well in our poetry when literary dogmatists wanted to limit it artificially and place it within dogmatic frameworks, to put the civic theme on bad terms with the lyric. But does civic ardor really abolish the heat of personal feelings? Our poetry has every right to proclaim, “Everything human is dear to me.” The Soviet reader who has just given the country bread, or just come down from the scaffolding of housing under construction, would like to hear a word about both his labor and his heart. Poetry’s word has become for us nourishing like bread and necessary like housing.23

The key concept, repeated twice in the first sentence of the excerpt, is the label “dogmatists/dogmatic.” In the press at this time, the handy formulation “dogmatists vs. reformers” became shorthand for the struggle for control of power between those who wanted to stick to Stalinist methods (perhaps most succinctly expressed in formulations commonly associated with Stalin such as “No man, no problem” and “When you fell a forest, chips fly”) and those who were in favor of liberalizing reforms. The editors of Poetry Day here call to their side the latter and distance themselves from the scorned

23 Den’ poezii, 3.
dogmatists, who are portrayed as neglecting the development of the Soviet worker and peasant by denying poetry the right to portray said laborers’ feelings. Finally, the writers of the introduction (no individual is credited, and the inclusive “we” is used throughout) stake poetry’s claim to be as essential to the ordinary worker as the promised fruit of the Socialist economy: decent living conditions for all. The bid is to establish lyric poetry as a genre in service to Socialism, every bit as much as the previous era’s odes to Stalin, labor, construction, and defending the Motherland. That said, let us not be misled: there are still more than enough standard odic celebrations of the worker, the peasant, the simple people, and the greatness of the Soviet Union in this collection. The editors are far from seeking to demote the ode—their much more modest goal is to broaden the scope of acceptable themes and genres—ultimately, to re-legitimize the lyric.

So much for the introduction, then. What political considerations must we be sensitive to in regard to how the journal is organized? Back in the day, western analysts based their speculations about the power struggle in the Kremlin on who was standing next to whom during public events on Red Square: if Khrushchev was standing in the middle and slightly raised in relation to other members of the Politburo, who was immediately to his right and to his left? These men were then considered “closest” to the leader not only physically, but also in political power. In a somewhat similar fashion, we can draw conclusions about the importance and novelty of the various contributions to Poetry Day based on the arrangement of poems and sections. Each section, as I noted earlier, is arranged in roughly alphabetical order. But there are irregularities that alert us to the political aspects of putting together this liberalizing anthology of poetry.
Section 1, for instance, opens with two poems by Nikolai Aseev. If alphabetical order were strictly respected, Pavel Antokolsky, the second poet in Section 1, would have been first, followed by Aseev and then Anna Akhmatova. Since no rationale is given for the aberration, and no apparent problem is raised by formatting, we need to speculate about why Aseev had to come first.

As with any anthology, the opening poem was likely thought to need certain characteristics—to set the tone for the rest of the volume. And indeed, Aseev, a stalwart of the Writers’ Union throughout the Stalin period—but also a writer with a history of deep engagement (in his beginnings) with early twentieth century avant-garde poetic groups—would seem to embody the balance of literary conservativism and progressiveness that the editors hoped the new anthology would model. For the opener, Aseev provides two poems on one page. The first, “People still depend on money...”

[Eshe za den’gi liudi derzhatsia], is a Socialist Realist poem for its era:

Еще за деньги люди держатся,  
как старины держались люди,  
во времена глухого Керженца,  
но скоро этого не будет.

Еще ко власти люди тянутся,  
не зная меры и цены ей,  
но долго это не останется:  
настанут времена иные.

Еще гоняются за славою, —  
охотников за ней несметно, —  
пытаясь хоть бы тенью слабою  
остаться на земле посмертно!

Мне кажется, что власть и почести —  
вода соленая морская:  
чем больше пьешь, тем жгучей хочется,  
а жажда все не отпускает.

People still rely on money,  
as people did of old,  
in the time of far-off Kerzhenets,  
but soon this will be no more.

People are still drawn to power,  
not knowing its measure and price,  
but this will not remain for long,  
new times will come.

They still strive for glory—  
the number of such hunters is countless—  
trying to remain on earth after death,  
if only as a shadow!

It seems to me that power and laurels  
are sea salt water:  
the more you drink, the thirstier you get,  
and the thirst won’t let you go.

24 Den’ poezii, 7.
With its three stanzas listing age-old foibles that prevent the perfection of humanity, its central stanza of personal opinion that condemns such foibles, and its final three stanzas projecting a beautiful future of world harmony, this poem seems made to order for Poetry Day, and probably was. The message, couched in the language’s most common poetic form—quatrails of iambic tetrameter—is simple: people still love money, power, and fame; I think those are empty dreams and such people would do better to think about the good of the whole; that way someday all the peoples of the world will be united in brotherly love; and for the first time in history this is beginning to happen. The gently didactic poem projects the balance of the collective and the personal, criticism and optimism, imperfect present and brilliant future that the editors of Poetry Day needed.

The socially necessary aspects of this poem are then further balanced by Aseev’s second selection, “The Nightingale” [Solovei]—a lyric defense of the lyric.

A nightingale is the classic image of a lyric poet: he sings after hours to court his beloved; his song is breathtakingly beautiful and emotionally moving, even if little understood by non-nightingales; artistically, he can do things that other birds can’t. Aseev notes still other features of the nightingale that resonate with those of the lyric poet—and said poet’s position in the Soviet Thaw context:
Вот опять
соловей
со своей
стародавнею песнею...
Ей пора бы
dавно уж
на пенсию!

Da и сам соловей
инвалид...
Очего же
его переливами
волоса до корней
шевелит
и становятся
вздохи счастливым?

Песне тысячи лет,
a нова,
будто этой же полюю
сложена;
перед ней
и луна,
и трава,
и деревья
стоят завороженно.

Песне тысячи лет,
a—гова,
с нею вольно
и радостно дышится,
в ней почти человечьи
слова,
отвечаясь, отчетливо
слышаться.

То слова
о бессмертьи страстей,
о блаженстве,
предельном страдании,
будто нет на земле
новостей,
кроме тех,
что, как мир, стародавние.

Вот каков
этот старый певец,
все заклявший
любовною клятвою...
Страсть утихнет –
и делу конец,
и сердца
разбиваются надвое!

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25 Den’ poezii, 7.

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Once again
the nightingale
with its
age-old song...
So old
it should’ve retired
long ago!

And the nightingale himself
is an invalid...
So why
do his trills
stir one’s hair
to its roots
and why do one’s sighs
become happy?

The song’s thousands of years old,
but it’s new,
as if it were made
this very midnight;
before it
the moon,
and the grass,
and the trees
all stand entranced.

The song’s thousands of years old,
but it’s alive,
one breathes joyously
and freely with it,
in it almost human
words,
being newly minted, are clearly
heard.

They are words
about the immortality of passions,
about bliss,
about extreme suffering,
as if on earth
there is no news,
besides that
which, like the world, is age-old.

That’s what
this old singer is like,
having sworn everything
with a lover’s oath...
His passion will quiet—
and then it ends,
and hearts
break in two!
From a philosophical perspective, the poem asks, “Why do we need the lyric? It’s been around for ages—why not just move on?” Aseev’s defense of the lyric is just as old as lyric poetry itself: because we recognize something of our own emotions in the song, something in it that is as vital today for us as it was in ancient times for ancient humans (“...it’s alive, / with it one can breathe freely and joyously”). In other words, the lyric captures something intrinsically and eternally human, and therefore has and will always have an important function in human existence. For the purposes of setting the tone for the Poetry Day anthology, Aseev gives his readers two poems that build on one another, whereby lyric poetry is granted a legitimate and even intrinsic place in the project of building the future happiness of the people. Somewhat oddly, the opening poem—most “progressive” in content—is quite conservative in form, while the second (lyric) poem’s lines, which are essentially in iambic trimeter, are broken up on the page for a more avant-garde look. Together, the two poems model the balance the editors hoped to achieve between the odic and the lyric, between useful “socialist” poetry and the new, more “personal” type of poem. Two rather ordinary poems by a reliable author, Pavel Antokolsky, come next, restoring alphabetical order before Akhmatova’s “Memory has three ages...” [Est’ tri epochi u vospominanii]. The appearance of the latter poem, played down by its placement in strictly alphabetical order, marks the first publication of her verse since a political campaign against her in 1946.

Other, more striking exceptions to alphabetical order are to be found in Poetry Day. Ilya Selvinsky’s poem on Henri Rousseau, for instance, is sandwiched between three pages each of his fellow-Constructivist Vladimir Lugovskoy and Leonid Martynov.
Was the rationale simply to put the two Constructivists close to each other? Are Lugovskoy’s five poems providing some kind of cover for Selvinsky’s poem? Is the content of Selvinsky poem, subtitled “From an Old Notebook” and even further dated “Paris, 1936” at the bottom, somehow politically questionable for socialism? Was Henri Rousseau considered a bourgeois painter? Had Selvinsky’s poems written abroad previously been suppressed? What was he even doing in Paris in 1936, when any poet worth his salt was rotting in a labor camp? Or perhaps the editors felt they needed both Lugovskoy (one of the editors of the collection) and Selvinsky to balance the more personal lyrics of the Martynov selection (more about Martynov’s important place in the anthology below). I could find no hard evidence to shed light on any of these questions, and I just don’t know why the editors put Selvinsky’s poem where they did. The point I want to make with such unresolved speculations is that as a researcher, I have to read literary documents of the Soviet Thaw era with such considerations in mind, becoming—for better or worse—a sort of literary Kremlinologist. Whether or not I can discover the logic behind poem placement or published variants of lines or words within a poem, I—like anyone researching documents of this period—must keep in mind not only the implications of a poem’s particular location, but especially these possibilities: that words and lines may have been removed or added to the original poem in order to make it publishable; that the poem may have been written to “pull” other, better poems along with it into print; and that the mere publication of lines by a particular poet might have had greater ramifications in literary society than the poems themselves, due to the poet’s previous history of being suppressed.
The more serious of these considerations come to the fore in treating the content of the fourth section of *Poetry Day*. Section 4 is devoted to deceased poets, most notably Marina Tsvetaeva. The order here, no longer alphabetical, can be interpreted from a political standpoint as well: Sergei Esenin, for example, was clearly a good candidate to open the section.\(^{26}\) In the context of the Thaw, it was a good time to reclaim Esenin’s “Peasant Poet” status while acknowledging at least some of the difficult facts of his biography. In the pages of *Poetry Day* editors were able to bolster their decision to take a new look at Esenin by reproducing photos of Esenin holographs on epic and Leninist themes.\(^{27}\) Still, the limits of the Thaw in 1956 are clearly delineated by the lacunae of the Esenin section: while the time was finally ripe to bring forward new material, both biographical and literary, no mention is made of the poet’s still taboo bisexuality or his suicide.

The same limits are observed in the section on Marina Tsvetaeva, only to an even greater degree, since Tsvetaeva had never been considered an exemplary practitioner of any variety of Soviet poetry, and furthermore had lived for some years in emigration before her disastrous return to Russia in 1939. Tsvetaeva, doubtless one of the great Russian poets of the twentieth century, had to be carefully reclaimed by a Soviet literary

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\(^{26}\) At the beginning of his career in the mid- and late-1910s, Esenin had been considered a prime and popular example of the “Peasant Poet,” but his biography became problematic for Soviet ideologists because of his marriage and lengthy travel abroad with Isadore Duncan in the early 1920s, as well as his severe alcoholism, culminating in his suicide in 1925 (Victor Terras, ed., *Handbook of Russian Literature* [New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985], 130-1).

\(^{27}\) *Den’ poezii*, 123.
establishment that had essentially facilitated the destruction of her and her family upon their homecoming.\footnote{Within two months of Tsvetaeva’s return to the Soviet Union, both her daughter and husband had been arrested and imprisoned. Tsvetaeva struggled for the next couple of years to provide for her young son by translating or in fact doing any work at all. After her personal appeal to the very Aseev whose work opens \textit{Poetry Day} fell short, she, like Esenin, hung herself, in 1941. For a discussion of Aseev’s role in Tsvetaeva’s last days see Irma Kudrova’s \textit{The Death of a Poet} (Woodstock: Overlook Press, 2004), 143-5 and 156. See also Anna Saakiants, \textit{Zhizn’ Tsvetaevoi: Bessmertnaia ptitsa-feniks}, (Moskva: Tsentrpoligraf, 2000).}

Since with the exception of a single poem published in 1941 not a word of Tsvetaeva’s poetry had made it to print in the Soviet Union since her emigration, the appearance of even a cursory biographical article along with a handful of poems was one of the biggest sensations of \textit{Poetry Day.}\footnote{The poem published in 1941 was “\textit{Vchera eshche v glaza gliadel...}” [Yesterday you were still gazing into my eyes]. For commentary, see Marina Tsvetaeva, \textit{Knigi stikhov} (Moskva: Ellis Lak 2000, 2004) 846-7.} (The impact of Tsvetaeva’s poetry on Joseph Brodsky in particular has been frequently remarked.\footnote{See, e.g., Brodsky’s own comments in Solomon Volkov, \textit{Conversations with Joseph Brodsky} (New York: The Free Press, 1998), 39-56.)} The five-page spread on Tsvetaeva is positioned after the Esenin opener discussed above plus a look at Eduard Bagritsky’s poems from the 1920s. Bagritsky had written enthusiastically and well on revolutionary themes before his death of natural causes in 1934. So Tsvetaeva’s pages follow the reclamation of a Soviet peasant poet and republication of an established Soviet writer.

In Tsvetaeva’s case, editors seeking to justify her presence in a Soviet journal had to look further than had been necessary in the cases of Esenin and Bagritsky. The editorial intro by Anatoly Tarasenkov focuses on her poems in support of Czechoslavkaia’s resistance to German invasion and her tribute to Vladimir Mayakovsky (the closest thing the Soviet Union had to a national poet), adding offhandedly that the
selection presented also included “a few lyric poems.”\textsuperscript{31} It is, however, the lyric poems that are the most sensational in the context of their Soviet publication, particularly the two poems under the rubric “Poet and Tsar”—about the uneven relations between Alexander Pushkin and his personal censor, Tsar Nikolai I, but clearly relevant to Tsvetaeva’s own situation—and the last selection with the dedication to “S. E.” This dedication is her final expression of deep loyalty to her husband, Sergei Efron, who at the time of writing was deep within the Soviet prison system. Any reader with even a passing knowledge of Tsvetaeva’s biography would immediately understand the context of the poem. The inclusion of these “few lyric poems” could be compared to the planting of literary dynamite—not only because of their explosive themes, but because Tsvetaeva’s strong and innovative poetic techniques were subject to accusations of “formalism.”

Printing Tsvetaeva’s poetry was such a tricky process that the editors might have been secretly relieved that Tarasenkov, the writer of the accompanying biographical sketch (and implicit defense) of Tsvetaeva, and the man who chose the selection representing her in Poetry Day’s pages, died before the journal went to press. An editorial footnote—the only one of its kind in this publication—explicitly lays the responsibility for the Tsvetaeva selections at Tarasenkov’s feet: “The poems of M. Tsvetaeva published below were chosen by deceased An. Tarasenkov.”\textsuperscript{32}

Section 4—typically for the Thaw period—can be thought of as what Boris Gasparov terms a “postmortem Noah’s Ark” of recovered poets, in which poets of various positions and persuasions, having been suppressed or pushed into obscurity in the

\textsuperscript{31} Den’ poezii, 127.

\textsuperscript{32} Den’ poezii, 127.
previous decades, find themselves sharing the same space upon their re-emergence.\textsuperscript{33} Tsvetaeva and Esenin are elbow to elbow not only with one another and with Mayakovsky, but also with other vanished poets of the first half of the twentieth century. Peretz Markish and Lev Kvitko, both represented here, had been members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee and both were executed on Stalin’s orders in 1952, along with eleven other Jewish artists and ten Jewish engineers. Pavel Vasil’ev’s biographical notes are limited to “Below we publish two previously unpublished poems by the talented poet Pavel Vasil’ev (1910-1937).”\textsuperscript{34} The death date tells what remained unsaid in the statement: Vasil’ev was arrested and executed at the height of Stalin’s Terror. Dmitry Kedrin, a poet who was pushed to his death off a commuter train in 1945, is most famous for his poem “Architects” [\textit{Zodchie}] (1938), about how Ivan the Terrible had the architects of St. Basil’s Cathedral blinded so they could not build another cathedral surpassing St. Basil’s in beauty. The resonances between Tsar Ivan’s actions and Stalin’s are too strong for \textit{Poetry Day}:

\begin{center}

И запретную песню
Про страшную царскую милость
Пели в тайных местах
По широкой Руси
Гусляры.\textsuperscript{35}
\end{center}

And the forbidden song
About the Tsar’s terrible mercy
Was sung in secret places
over the breadth of Rus’
By bards.

These closing lines of “Architects” could not be included in the selection of Kedrin’s poems. Yet Kedrin, whose work had been little published during his lifetime and suppressed after his death, is nonetheless resurrected in the fourth section of \textit{Poetry Day}.

\textsuperscript{33} Personal email, 29 Oct 2010.

\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Den’ poezii}, 133.

\textsuperscript{35} Dmitrii Kedrin, “\textit{Vkus uznashii vsego zemnogo}...” (Moskva: Vremia, 2001), 264.
“Architects”—passed hand-to-hand, well known but not published, asserts a ghostly presence by association. For the new generation of Thaw poets, the Noah’s Ark of Section 4 must have presented a dizzying conglomeration of literary history that would take some time to sort out.

In sum, Section 4 of Poetry Day provides a good lesson in reading documents of the Thaw. The more you dig, the more you find: what is on the surface—the published page—is often something like the secret sign that marks pirates’ buried treasure. Another way of looking at the poems published here would be to see them as little experiments. If these poems can be published without retribution, then perhaps a bolder selection could follow? Unfortunately, the trend over the next decade was far from increasingly relaxed censorship—on a graph measuring freedom of (published) literary expression, the decade would look like a wavy line of alternatingly looser and tighter censorial control, with 1956 as a mountainous peak of expression. Poetry Day, in retrospect, turned out to be one of the most stunning, bold and widely read literary documents of Khrushchev’s Thaw. It stands to reason, then, that special attention to its contents in the context of the readership that included the Avvakumites should be paid.

The Difference between Verse and Poetry in Poetry Day: Contributions by Viktor Bokov and Boris Pasternak

Poetry Day distinguishes itself from previous publications notably by including within its pages a poem by Akhmatova, two by Pasternak (from the “poems of Yury Zhivago”) and the handful discussed above by Tsvetaeva. As Anatoly Naiman recalls, “You can imagine what it was like, after decades of deathly silence, or worse, the
mumblings that passed for poetry, to come across poems like these…”36 The poems by these and a few other poets stand in stark contrast to typical published poetry of the era.

One can get a feel for the difference between these masters’ poems and standard publishable verse by paging through the journal: the number of poems ending with exclamation marks is quite striking, for instance, as is the number of poems that end by repeating the opening line or lines. Poems tend to be didactic, often in a patriotic/nationalist vein, and many might be thought to be written for children because of their very simple vocabulary and ideas, tending to be expressed in short lines, heavily accented meter, and simple, exact rhyme. The following poem by Viktor Bokov, “Geography” [Geografiia] (6 June 1956), is exemplary in this regard:

О, земля моя! Ты—кафедра.
Мне с твоих родных страниц
Открывалась география
Гор и рек, и русских лиц.

В Омске, в Томске или в Глазове,
Или где-нибудь в Орле,
Улыбались кареглазые
Не кому-нибудь, а мне.

Чем я радовал их? Песнями
Своей родной страны.
Не изысканностью Гнесиной,
— Балалайкой в три струны.

Да частушечною азбукой,
Со звоном в край заря,
Да словами, что за пазуху
Убирал, как сухари.

Да готовностью откликнуться
На каждый зов людей,
Поделиться, как из житницы,
Весельем и тоской.

О, my land! You are a rostrum.
From your dear pages
A geography has been opened to me
Of mountains and rivers, and Russian faces.

In Omsk, in Tomsk or in Glazov,
Or somewhere in Orel,
Brown eyes have smiled,
Not to just anyone, but to me.

How did I make them happy? With songs
Of my dear country.
Not with the elegance of the Gnesins,38 But with a three-stringed balalaika.

And with my a-b-c’s of folk verse,
With ringing to the edge of dawn
And with words that I swept
Into my bosom, like biscuits.

And with my readiness to respond
To every human call,
To share, as from a granary,
In happy times and sorrow.

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36 Helga Landauer and Anatoly Naiman, A Film about Anna Akhmatova (2008), Part 1. The poetry of Osip Mandelstam, the fourth of the great quartet of twentieth century Russian poets, is conspicuously absent from published pages of the Thaw. Mandelstam’s poetry eventually worked itself back into the public’s consciousness by a number of “back doors.” The impact of Mandelstam’s poetry on poets of the Thaw generation would prove so great—even by the late 1950s and early 1960s—that it calls for separate study.
Bokov uses a very common meter and rhyme scheme: his trochaic tetrameter rhymes AbAb. His rhymes are exact and tend to rhyme the same parts of speech with each other. His syntax is simple. His message manages to be both nationalist and patriotic, in that it elevates Russia above the other USSR nationalities (“Russian faces,” Russian places, Russian balalaika songs), yet sings of how the poet is treasured by “the people” because he participates in their life and reflects the best of that life in his poems. This poet has absorbed the lessons of Socialist Realism and performs his function as a Socialist Realist artist: to portray the life of the people while simultaneously creating a vision of a bright, happy Socialist society. The poem is inhabited by didacticism, as the main trope is the poet’s claim that his land is teaching him (“O my land, you are a rostrum”). The first quatrain is repeated as the closing stanza, in a slightly more universally aimed and ecstatic guise (“kind” rather than “Russian” faces, and a geography that “radiates” rather than one that “has been opened”). Altogether Bokov’s poem is a

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37 Den’ poezii, 42.

38 Bokov may have in mind either the highly-regarded Musical and Pedagogical Gnesin Institute (since 1993 called the Rossiiskaia akademiiia myzyki imeni Gnesinykh), or perhaps the (Jewish) founding family of that institution, several of whom became more or less well-known as muscians and/or pedagogues. If the latter, the ethnic nationalist reading of the lines is rather strident.

39 Capital letters represent feminine rhyme and lower case letters represent masculine rhyme throughout this dissertation.

40 In Russian, rhyme is considered exact when the vowel quality and the closing consonant (if any) in the stressed syllable of the rhyming word sound the same (stran-ITS/ LITS). In cases where one or more unstressed syllables follow the stressed syllable, the sound of the unstressed syllable(s) must be similar, but need not be exactly the same (see Georgii Shengeli, Tekhnika stikh, Moskva: Goslitizdat, 1960, 241ff.). Therefore, the dactylic rhyme ‘kafedra/geografiia’ is considered exact.
standard, politically safe piece of versified propaganda, displaying many of the clichéd traits of the era’s publishable poetry that the Avvakumites would decisively reject.

Pasternak’s “Winter Night” [Zimniaia noch’] makes a fascinating counterpart to Bokov’s poem. Reading it, the Avvakumites would have seen how, in the hands of a master, many of the same characteristics that combined to make Bokov’s verse so banal could result in a beautiful poem. “Winter Night” remains one of Pasternak’s most beloved poems years after its first publication in Poetry Day:
Мело, мело по всей земле
Во все пределы.
Свеча горела на столе,
Свеча горела.

Как летом роем мошкара
Летит на пламя,
Слетались хлопья со двора
К оконной раме.

Метель лепила на стекле
Кружки и стрелы,
Свеча горела на столе,
Свеча горела.

На озаренный потолок
Ложились тени:
Скрещенья рук, скрещенья ног,
Судьбы скрещенья.

И падали два башмачка
Со стуком на пол,
И воск слезами с ночника
На платье капал.

И все терялось в снежной мгле,
Седой и белой,
Свеча горела на столе,
Свеча горела.

На свечку дуло из угла,
И жар соблазна
Вздымал, как ангел, два крыла
Крестообразно.

Мело весь месяц в феврале,
И то и дело
Свеча горела на столе,
Свеча горела.41

It stormed and stormed over all the earth
To the ends of everything.
A candle burned on the table,
A candle burned.

As in summer moths fly
In a swarm into a flame,
Snowflakes flew down from the yard
To the windowsill.

The blizzard pasted on the glass
Little circles and arrows,
A candle burned on the table,
A candle burned.

On the illuminated ceiling
Shadows lay down:
Crossed arms, crossed legs,
Crossed fates.

And two shoes fell
With a knock to the floor,
And from the nightlight wax tears
Dripped on a dress.

And everything was lost in the snowy darkness,
Grey and white,
A candle burned on the table,
A candle burned.

From the corner it blew on the little candle,
And the heat of temptation
Lifted up, like an angel, two wings
Shaped like a cross.

It stormed all month in February,
And now and then
A candle burned on the table,
A candle burned.

“Winter Night” uses a simple meter and rhyme scheme: its eight quatrains are made up
of iambic lines of four and two feet in alternation, rhyming aBaB. The rhymes are exact,
and often rhyme the same part of speech (especially nouns) with each other. As in

41 Den’ poezii, 27.
Bokov’s poem, the final quatrain of the poem is a slight variation on the first. So what is the crucial difference that makes Pasternak’s poem work, while Bokov’s falls flat?

Above all, the difference lies in the content of Pasternak’s poem. To begin with, people are all but missing from the poem—no overt “I” or “you,” to say nothing of plural collectives like “people” or any kind of masses. The main actors of the poem would almost appear to be the winter weather and the burning candle, which together dominate the first three stanzas. The presence of a pair of passionate lovers is only inferred in the fourth and fifth quatrains by the shadows on the ceiling of “crossed arms, crossed legs, crossed fates” and sound of shoes hitting the floor. The union of the two lovers has its counterpart in the storm and the candle. The storm rages outside all winter, its snowflakes painting their primordially erotic “circles and arrows” on the window of the lovers’ room, but unable to extinguish the steady burning of the candle inside. It is an evocative metaphor of public and private passions, of “History” with a capital “H” and the simultaneous, intimate events that make up human beings’ personal history, and of the aggressive attack of the first versus the private sanctuary of the second. This private sanctuary has religious overtones—the burning candle’s vigil, the cross imagery, the angel wings. Most importantly, though, something happens in this tiny poem—between the first line and the last, the savage winter storms “over all the earth” are transformed into a kind of womb surrounding the lovers. Their coming together throughout the winter invests this single, candle-lit room with a simultaneous passion and calm that counterbalances the harsh outside conditions. The storm and the candle become more than simple symbols for outside events and lovers’ passion—by the end of the poem, both storm and candle are somehow appropriated by the lovers, or by their passion, so
that the whole world’s life—time and space—becomes concentrated in the tiny point of
the lovers’ room. The shoes fall, the candle weeps, and a mysterious breeze stirs from the
corner of the room as the lovers unite.

The syntax of Pasternak’s poem reinforces its content in its bare simplicity, its
repetitions and variations on repetitions, and its impersonal constructions. The subjectless
repetitions “melo, melo” [it stormed and stormed] (the Russian is an impersonal neuter
past tense singular construction) evoke the aimless buffeting of the winter storm in a way
the English translation does not convey. Melo is the past tense of mesti, a verb that also
has the meaning “to sweep” and “to whirl.” When used as an impersonal singular
construction—verb without subject or object—it means “there is/was/will be a
snowstorm” (depending on which tense it is in). Pasternak’s word choice thus evokes an
unknown hand sweeping the world clean as the snowstorm erases the world’s features,
bringing the candle-lit room into sharp focus by contrast. The equally persistent candle
burns, syntactically speaking, in the form of a straightforward subject plus verb,
represented accurately by its English equivalent: “A candle burned.” Thus the activities
of the storm and candle are opposed not only by their outside versus indoor locations, by
their respective buffeting versus steadiness and cold versus warmth, but also
syntactically—by their agency. The storm rages with no nominative subject, no clear
cause, while the indoor burning is grammatically governed by its nominative candle. Far
different in function from “O my land, you are a rostrum,” Pasternak’s repetitions of
melo, melo and “a candle burned” invest his poem with life, movement, and deceptively
simple-looking complexity, on both the lexical and syntactical level.
Pasternak gives the storm agency in the second stanza. There, individual elements of the storm—snowflakes—are pinpointed approaching the lovers’ window: “sletalis’ khlop’ia.” Again, the English equivalent, “[snow]flakes flew in a group” or “flew down together” (“to the windowsill”) fails to do justice to the simple and elegant syntax of the Russian. The nominative khlop’ia can be adequately conveyed by “snowflakes,” but the past tense plural, reflexive imperfective verb sletalis’ defeats equivalent translation. Moreover, the form syntactically parallels “lozhilis’ teni” (“shadows lay down”) two stanzas later. Again, Pasternak has both opposed and conflated the outside storm and the indoor passion, by syntactically paralleling the snowflakes “flying together” to the sill and the lovers’ shadows “lying down [together]” (on the ceiling, as the lovers lie down on the bed).\(^{42}\) The play between impersonal and nominative subject-verb constructions continues throughout the poem and is one of the elements that blurs the line between the outside storm and the lovers’ passion.

We noted that Pasternak often rhymes nouns with nouns in “Winter Night.” This is partly because nouns predominate in the poem, Pasternak having pared his lines down almost exclusively to nouns and verbs. In the first four quatrains, for instance, he has only four modifying words. In Bokov’s “Geography,” by comparison, there are four modifiers in the first quatrain alone, and in the first four quatrains altogether a total of ten adjectives and possessive modifiers. Pasternak uses a total of ten such forms in his entire eight-stanza poem, while Bokov uses sixteen in his six quatrains.\(^ {43}\)

\(^{42}\) By focusing on the lovers’ shadows up on the ceiling, Pasternak actually makes an image in which it seems that the two opposed elements trade places: while the snowflakes come together and fall down, the lovers come together and rise up. The religious connotations are also thereby intensified.

\(^{43}\) When comparing quantitatively, one must bear in mind that the second and fourth line of Pasternak’s quatrains are only half as long as Bokov’s—thus the relative lack of adjectives per stanza in “Winter Night”
Moreover, Pasternak’s rhymes work metaphysically within the poem, whereas Bokov’s rhymes tend to be banal. In the first stanza of “Winter Night” Pasternak sets up two opposing planes of space—outdoors and indoors—with his end-rhymes “earth” [zemle] and “table” [stole]. In the third quatrain, as he makes the transition in his poem from the storm outside to the passion in the room, he links a transitional plane—the window glass [stekle]—with that same table [stole] in the end-rhyme. He continues marking the relations of “inside” and “outside” as the poem leaves the small, focused space of the room, rhyming stole with the outside “darkness” [ngle] and the winter season, February [fevrale]—opening back out to more general Space and Time. In other words, the rhymes do much more than mark the ends of lines and anchor memory—they work to guide the listener through the physics and metaphysics of the poem.

Compare Bokov’s end-rhymes in the first (and almost identical last) quatrains of “Geography”: rostrum [kafedra]/geography [geografiia] and pages [stranits]/faces (lits). Most obviously, the quatrain’s first rhyme contains a repeat of the title, even in grammatical form (nominative singular). The rhyming of “rostrum” with “geography” at lines 1 and 3 has made the poem feel repetitious and didactic before the end of the first quatrain. Moreover, with his opening line “O, my land, you are a rostrum,” Bokov has set up an expectation that the poem will convey something the speaker learns about the geography of his country. But the geographical names of Omsk, Tomsk, and Glazov in the second stanza are as specific as he gets. Looking at the locations of Omsk, Tomsk, and Glazov on a map, one wonders what the poet hoped to represent, geographically compared to “Geography” is actually even more pronounced than might appear from the count alone. The poems as a whole are roughly equivalent in total length, as each consists of a total of 96 two-beat metrical feet, so the total count reflects the approximate ratio, Pasternak using five adjectives for Bokov’s every eight.
speaking, by choosing these locations. They are not opposed to one another in any clear way—for example, by representing the extremes of west and east, or north and south. It appears that Omsk and Tomsk are associated only by their attractive rhyme, and Glazov chosen for the sole reason that it rhymes with *kareglazye* (“brown-eyed”)—a versification choice rather than a poetic sound/sense rhyme. After this, the geographical theme is all but dropped in favor of very general indications of what the speaker (here, presumably, the poet) does: to make the people (which people?) happy, he sings songs (which songs?) and plays the balalaika (at least we know what instrument he plays); he gathers simple poems (which poems?) and words (again, what kind?) from them; he responds to their every call (what do they say?) and shares their joys and sorrows (about what?). The poem is a jumble of unrelated generalities and metaphorical banalities, perhaps most tellingly foreshadowed by the clichéd end-rhyme of the first stanza, pages/faces (*stranits/lits*).

Bokov’s poem is syntactically static. The entire first line is in the nominative case. There are only three verbs in the first three stanzas. Compare “Winter Night,” in which four words in the first quatrain alone are verbs (technically speaking, two verbs, each repeated once in the quatrain). In all of “Winter Night” verb forms occur twenty times. Bokov’s poem contains seven verbs altogether. Even the qualities of the verbs chosen by each poet differ. Pasternak’s verbs evoke processes that are accompanied by emotionally-related sensory effects: it “stormed” (sound, sight, feel, passion), the candle “burned” (heat, light, passion), the shoes “dropped” (sound, excitement) and the wax “dripped” (heat, sight, tears). In Bokov’s poem the verbs are as generalized as the rest of
the poem: a geography “was opened,” brown eyes “smiled,” and the speaker “made people happy.”

The Avvakumites could not have asked for a clearer lesson in reclaiming poetry than Pasternak’s poem offers, especially in the context of the pages of *Poetry Day*. Pare down your poem, get rid of adjectives, make it move, make syntax and end-rhyme work for the poem, don’t be afraid of simplicity, steer clear of banalities, be light-handed with your poem—not everything needs to be spelled out—and most of all, write about what moves you. This last injunction, if such is to be read into a poem like “Winter Night,” frees a poet to answer not to the mandates of his social collective, but only to poetry itself, and this is the main thing that separated the Avvakumites from publishable “stadium” poets like Yevtushenko, as we shall see. However, the significance of Pasternak’s poem lies in more than the contrast it highlights between real poetry and clichéd verse. The existence in print of “Winter Night” pointed its readers towards the larger work of which the poem is a part, namely, Pasternak’s novel *Doctor Zhivago*.

In the April, 1954 issue of the literary journal *Znamia*, a selection of ten poems by Pasternak had been published under the title “Poems from the Novel in Prose, *Doctor Zhivago*.” Beneath the title, a note from the author informed readers that Pasternak expected to finish the novel that summer, and that a cycle of poems including the selection published in *Znamia* would comprise the last chapter of the novel.\(^4^4\)

Scholar George Gibian, in his 1960 study of Thaw literature, notes:

> While [Pasternak] had worked for years on translations from English, German, and other languages, and was widely known as a translator of Shakespeare, since the war he had not been able to publish any of his own excellent, difficult, reflective, totally un-socialist-realistic poetry. In the

May 1954 issue [Gibian is mistaken here: as we noted above, the poems came out in the April issue] of the magazine Banner (Znamya), a group of his poems, part of his novel Doctor Zhivago, were published. At that time it was apparently expected that the entire novel would be published in Russia.45

The difficult history of the publication of Doctor Zhivago and how Pasternak was forced to turn down the 1958 Nobel Prize for literature are now well known.46 In 1956 in the Soviet Union, however, the only signs of what would become a very influential novel were the poems published in Znamia, followed in Poetry Day by two more poems from the cycle, “Dawn” [Rassvet] and “Winter Night.” In Poetry Day, though, no mention was made of the novel behind the poems. As literary Kremlinologists, we would construe the absence of mention of Doctor Zhivago as a sign that by 1956 the plan for publication of the novel had undergone some serious setbacks. The editors may have felt they would have a better chance of getting Pasternak’s poems into the anthology if they suppressed the information about the cycle and the novel. For astute readers, on the other hand, the two poems published in Poetry Day may have piqued curiosity about the rumored novel.

By the time Doctor Zhivago got published (abroad, with the help of the CIA, in time for Pasternak to be considered for and win the Nobel), readers in the Soviet Union—teased by the publication and also clandestine circulation of the poems, the rumors of the novel’s imminent publication, and finally the Nobel scandal—eagerly anticipated reading Doctor Zhivago for themselves. The influence of Doctor Zhivago itself, however, would come later than the shaping forces discussed in this chapter, and moreover is one of the


46 Most recently and thoroughly, Ivan Tolstoi traces the publication history in his study, Otmytyi roman Pasternaka: “Doktor Zhivago” mezhdu KGB i TsRU (Moskva: Vremia, 2009).
better studied works of the Thaw. For the time period and subject of this dissertation, it is important to note that the appearance at that time of Pasternak’s poems “from a novel” conveyed only the subject of the poems, without the historical panorama and counterpoint that would emerge several years later with the publication of Doctor Zhivago. As Anatoly Naiman writes in his semi-autobiographical novel, Poetry and Untruth [Poeziia i nepravda] (1998), “the poems, individually and as the cycle ‘Poems from a Novel,’ were being circulated by hand at that time. The title ‘Poems from a Novel’ by no means indicated that a real novel existed—it read like the name of a genre, and I had figured that the mention of a novel was a mystification.”47 In retrospect, the appearance of the poems and the mystery surrounding them no doubt increased the ultimate impact the novel had when it finally did make it into the Avvakumites’ hands, but at the time there was no way to know that the outside storm in “Winter Night” had all the characteristics of half a century of war and catastrophic change.

**Contributors to Poetry Day: Generations Set Apart by World War II and Their Influence on the Avvakumites**

Regarding the fresher voices from the older generation (putting aside for the moment the quartet of acknowledged masters of the twentieth century in Russian poetry Akhmatova, Mandelstam, Pasternak and Tsvetaeva), Naiman pinpoints Martynov, Slutsky, Vinokurov, and Konstantin Vanshenkin as drawing his attention and that of his circle.48 Naiman still keeps a volume of Martynov on his bookshelf. Rein remembers

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introducing Brodsky to Slutsky. Martynov (b. 1905) and Slutsky (b. 1914), although both were active in literary life before World War II, gained wide recognition for their poetry only in the Thaw period. Vanshenkin and Vinokurov, in contrast, came of age as soldiers in World War II, and their poetic output really began after the war. All four poets are generously represented in _Poetry Day_.

**Martynov**

A whole article in _Poetry Day_ is devoted to Martynov’s poetic career. Boris Runin takes Martynov as a sterling example of the talented and accomplished poet whose work has been to a large extent ignored because it does not fit the ideological demands of the Stalin era. However, it is not until the reader is a third of the way into the lengthy article that Martynov’s fate is discussed in more detail:

Leonid Martynov’s literary fate, as it formed after the war, may serve as a compelling example of the manifestation of critical and editorial dogmatism and extreme narrowness and one-sidedness of view in the course of the development of the Soviet lyric that have been characteristic of a time all too close to the present one. And although this narrowness is now being overcome, nonetheless it is being overcome slowly and indecisively. In order to be healed conclusively from this chronic affliction, in order to prevent deplorable recidivists from tormenting us in the future, and residual phenomena from causing us distress, this must be spoken about loudly and clearly. [...] [A 1945 collection of poems by Martynov, _Lukomor’e (Bay)_] was, undoubtedly, talented, but in it the old and new were woven so tightly together that critics, without putting themselves to the trouble of grasping the details of the poet’s gift and guiding him in the right direction, rushed to “close” him. The case turned out to be too complex for the critics, as they were accustomed to either immediately register every kind of satisfaction or make heads roll.

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50 Den’ poezii, 166-7.
Soviet-era readers were familiar with what it meant to “close” a poet: the term euphemistically refers to the barring of his works from publication. In the wake of the Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of 1946 (that excoriated certain writers, notably Akhmatova and Mikhail Zoshchenko, in the call for literature to be more active in promoting the Communist line), a campaign against Martynov had begun. Vera Inber in *Literaturnaia gazeta* (Literary Gazette), after censuring Martynov for insufficient Sovietness in his poems, concluded, “Our romanticism is in our respect for the great creative labor of the Soviet worker, our best inspiration. But in this, apparently, Leonid Martynov does not share our road. And if he does not re-examine the positions he now holds, our paths may diverge forever.” After this rebuke, Martynov would publish almost nothing of his own for the next nine years. Runin, after so delicately hinting at the campaign against Martynov, goes on to note, “The years passed. And now, after a decade’s interval, a new meeting has come about.” Runin’s article amounts to a defense of Martynov’s poetry in the cultural code of the times: Martynov has matured, he’s no longer a looker-on, a casual observer, but now understands his social obligation—Runin returns to such statements again and again throughout the article. This is all to bolster Runin’s next move: a defense of individualism, creativity and complexity in lyric poetry, specifically in the poems of Martynov.

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52 *Den’ poezii*, 167. Despite the “closing” of Martynov, I found one case of a poem of his being published between the end of World War II and 1956. It may be that “Kryl’ia” (Wings) was cleared for publication in *Novyi mir* 2(1947) (amidst a large selection of lyrics from thirty-seven authors) before the campaign against him was fully geared up.

53 One example: “His former abstracted artistry, active mainly in his disdain for the everyday, the quotidian, is being exchanged for a consciously realized feeling of obligation to society, a clarification of the responsible role of the artist in our days” (167).
Runin takes an ideologically “safe” poem of Martynov’s, entitled “Peace” [Mir] (a favored topic in post-World War II Soviet literary journals), for his opening gambit of showing that Martynov’s poetry in general is notable for its “independence, imaginative [obraznaia] logic, unusual means of expression, and originality of creative style.”54 Runin notes, in implicit contrast to the many recently published poems on the subject of peace, the things Martynov’s poem is not: not an illustration of an already tried-and-true thesis, not an exercise on a given theme.55 Well, really it is an exercise on a given theme, running along the predictable lines of “Peace is neither this, nor that, but what the people want and will bring about.” But Runin’s other points about Martynov’s creative style are well taken, even within the confines of the genre. The poem’s first stanza is enough to demonstrate this:

Мир велик!
До того он велик,
Что иные писатели книг,
Испытав бесконечный испуг,
Уверяли, что мир только миг,
Лишь мгновенье, полное мук,
И оно обрывается вдруг,
Ибо жизни неведома цель.56

The world is great!
It is so great,
That some writers of books,
Having felt endless terror,
Avouched that the world is just an instant,
Just a moment, full of torments,
And it breaks off suddenly,
For the goal of life is unknown.

So Martynov sums up the existentialist position. The entire description is generated from the sounds of the first two-word statement, “Mir velik” (“The world is great”), in a way the translation can’t show. But from these two short words, Martynov spins a web of rhyme and sound mutation: mir-velik-mig-knig-muk-ispug-vdrug (world-great-instant-

54 Den’ poezii, 165.
55 Den’ poezii, 165.
56 Den’ poezii, 165.
books-torments-terror-suddenly). Unlike Bokov’s rhymes in “Geography,” Martynov’s rhymes literally carry his theme forward. Observe how the suggestion that the world is just a moment (mir mig) divides the vowel register in the stanza between the high frontal i of mir-velik-knig (world-great-books) to the low, back vowel u of muk-ispug-vdrug (torment-terror-suddenly). Martynov’s rhyme scheme, too, is innovative. The stanza rhymes aaababbc, and the c-rhyme will be taken up in the first line of the next stanza. The stanzas themselves are of varying length, and irregularities in the metrical scheme add a feeling of lively unpredictability to the poem. One can’t help but suspect that Martynov might be having fun, even with a poem that will have to end like this:

Люди мира и счастья хотят,
И когда на добычу летят
Двойники отплясавших в петле,
Человек предает их земле.

It’s peace and happiness people want,
And when the doubles of the gallows dancers
are flying for prey,
Man buries them.

Человек предает их земле!58

In the context of the historical moment “gallows dancers” refers to the convicted criminals hung at the Nuremburg trials; the flyers for prey are bomber planes, and may refer to either the French/English/Israeli conflict with Egypt over the Suez Canal or to the threat from American nuclear weapons.59 The closing “Man buries them” paraphrases Marx, who famously concluded the first part of his Communist Manifesto, “What the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable.”60 In 1956, Martynov’s images may have

57 Keep in mind that in Russian, both g and k at the end of a word are pronounced as “voiceless” consonants, that is to say, they both sound like k.

58 Den’ poezii, 165.

59 Thanks to Grigory Dashevsky for help (email, 14 Aug 2009) with this passage.

come across as concentrated and piercing. From the perspective of half a century, however, this poem falls in the category of topical verse—talented, well executed topical verse, but probably not for the ages, mostly because of the propagandistic nature of the last lines.

In the somewhat Byzantine world of Soviet literary life in 1956, we, the readers, are supposed to know that Runin, due to political considerations, has taken Martynov’s “Peace” poem to make points he would rather make about better poems of Martynov’s. He does it with “Peace” because there can be no question of Martynov’s patriotism in a poem that ends with the final stanza quoted above—and in rehabilitating Martynov’s reputation it is important to underline his patriotism. Since we are not under the same strictures as Soviet literary critics, let us turn to another poem of Martynov’s to take note of that independence and creative approach for which he became one of the most popular poets of the 1950s and 60s.

As in “Peace” above, the subject of “In the Night” [Noch ’iu] (published in Poetry Day) is generated by sound association in the opening lines. Sense arising from sound is characteristic of Martynov’s poems, and propels this one unpredictably forward:

Этой ночью,
Ночью летней,
Вьется хмель тысячелетний,
По железу,
По бетону,
По карнизу,
По балкону…

On this night,
this summer night,
the thousand-year-old hops entwine,
Along iron,
Along concrete,
Along the eaves,
Along the balcony…

Etoi NOch ’iu,
NOch ’iu LETnei,
V’IOTsia KHMEL’ tysiacheLETnii,
Po zheLEzu,
Po beTOnu,
Po karNIzu,
Po balKOnu…

The English does not convey the way the sound mutates line by line, as meaning emerges, but one can see it in the phonetic (accented syllables are capitalized) transcription. Thus, we have: NOch ’iu…NOch ’iu: LETnei…tysiacheLETnii; and the

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61 Den’ poezii, 22.
anaphoric po ("along") in lines 4-7, that pulls the reader “along” the poem, as the poem itself twines among its own sounds, and as the hops is described twining along the balcony. Characteristically for Martynov, as Runin points out in his essay, the poem carries the reader along the flow of its development rather than presenting a static, finished picture.

“In the Night” then takes an unexpected turn: the speaker goes on to speculate about a Romeo-and-Juliet-like potential balcony scene, in which he, the speaker, might climb up to the balcony and tap like a bird on the window. The suddenly present addressee, a girl, would come out looking for the source of the sound. Not finding the speaker, she would be reluctant to go back inside and close the balcony door:

Что
Творится
Там, за шторой,
Той вот самой, за которой
В мученические позы
В мутных вазах встали розы?

Чем же
Тут могу помочь я?
Может быть, вот этой ночью
На балкон пробраться снизу
По железу,
По карнизу,
Цепко, с выступа на выступ,
Взять и пыль,
И хмель
На приступ,
У окошка очутиться,
Стукнуть, будто клювом птица,
Чтоб окно ты распахнула.

Что
Творится
Там, за шторой,
Той вот самой, за которой
В мученические позы
В мутных вазах встали розы?

Чем же
Тут могу помочь я?
Может быть, вот этой ночью
На балкон пробраться снизу
По железу,
По карнизу,
Цепко, с выступа на выступ,
Взять и пыль,
И хмель
На приступ,
У окошка очутиться,
Стукнуть, будто клювом птица,
Чтоб окно ты распахнула.

What
Is happening
There, behind the blinds,
Those very blinds, behind which
In martyred poses
In cloudy vases roses stood up?

How, then,
Can I be of help?
Maybe, this very night
Climb from below onto the balcony
Along the iron,
Along the eaves,
Clinging, from ledge to ledge,
Take both the dust,
and the hops
By storm,
find myself at the window,
Knock, as with a bird’s beak,
So that you would open the window wide.

62 Den’ poezii, 22.
The brevity of each line keeps the (imagined?) action moving along. The poem has developed from a description of hops twining along what turns out to be a balcony into a full-fledged romantic love scene. The image of the bird tapping at the window evokes the potential of Catullus’ poems of Lesbia and her sparrow, but in perhaps a more comical vein, as the concluding stanza will reveal.

In a final unexpected twist of the poem, it turns out that the whole thing actually took place, but—disappointingly to the speaker—the girl did not keep looking for him, but in fact did go back inside:

И не надо, And don’t do it,
И не трогай, And don’t touch it,
И напрасно закрывала: And you shouldn’t have closed it:
Я иду своей дорогой, I go along my way
Как ни в чем и не бывало! As if nothing happened!

The poem ends with the speaker boyishly keeping up his pride: “I go along my way / as if nothing happened!” he says. But didn’t he make the whole thing up? Why, then, bravely suffer this humiliation? In the end, the reader still can’t be sure if the whole thing is supposed to have taken place only in the speaker’s imagination—in which case it is funny that his imagined beloved goes back inside and that he shores up his pride at the end—or if it is a syntactically playful narration of a real event—in which case it is fascinating that he begins the telling in the subjunctive, as if he is only imagining what is actually taking place. Does his imagination cause the “what if?” scenario to become a reality, in which the characters defie his authorial control? The lines intriguingly blur imagination and fact. This makes “In the Night” fun to read. The poem as a whole has a graceful, playful,

\[63\] Den’ poezii, 22.
and unpredictable sound-driven narrative, in which the lines of poetry barely manage to hold the fanciful imaginings—or reality?—of the speaker.

Martynov’s themes include personal relations and metaphysical pondering; his poems can be allegorical. They often end with an interesting twist or a question—in contradistinction to the typical didactic declaration of the Stalin era. That said, he is not averse to the line-final exclamation point, which is rather characteristic of the Soviet programmatic poem. However, Martynov’s final exclamation is rarely a clichéd Sovietism. Rather, it is most often an enthusiastic affirmation of a specific aspect of life or an ironic (often self-directed) witticism. Martynov’s address is often intimate, and sometimes in the form of conversation, frequently with a woman. His voice is not loud, his manner not insistent, and he doesn’t claim to speak for lots of people. These characteristics combined in Martynov’s poetry to create a voice that was refreshingly unambitious.

Overall, what Yevtushenko wrote about Martynov in his *Precocious Autobiography* remains remarkably apt: “Martyonov’s book, published at last, was strictly a flute, but the young people heard in it a trumpet call, since that was what they so passionately wished to hear. Perhaps the complexity of his metaphors and hyperbole made them read much more into his poems than was there. So to his own surprise, the voice of Martynov the lyricist resounded like the voice of a civic poet in the turbulence of those times.”64 In the terms of Yevtushenko’s metaphor, it may have been precisely Martynov’s lack of interest in being a trumpet (a voice for all the people, a rallying cry) that caused people to see one in him—in effect, discovering in his poetry a rallying cry

for poetry without a rallying cry. Unlike the case of Boris Slutsky, as we will see below, it is difficult to point directly to Martynov as a source of influence on the Avvakumites. But the sound-driven nature of his poetry and his dialogic approach are prominent features of Avvakumite poetry as well, and it is easy to see, from that perspective, what seemed fresh and attractive about Martynov’s poetry.

**Slutsky**

Like Martynov, Boris Slutsky is given a full spread in *Poetry Day*. And like Martynov, Slutsky doesn’t dictate what his reader should think and do. But he does feel an obligation to write about painful things that touch or maim ordinary peoples’ lives—things that he can attest to because he has seen them with his own eyes. Slutsky’s voice is more clarion than Martynov’s, and couched in a less evidently crafted way. He makes his poetic function explicitly programmatic in “I spoke in the name of Russia...” [*Ia govoril ot imeni Rossii*], in which he remembers a day fraught with the hardships he and his fellow soldiers shouldered uncomplainingly during World War II, for the sake of protecting Russia. He remembers how, in his job as a political worker, he exhorted soldiers fresh from hard battle to fight for the Motherland—and though they were tired, discouraged, cold, hungry and sleepless, they went. Slutsky closes his narrative with:

Я этот день,
вспоминанье это,
Как справку, собираюсь предъявить,
Затем, чтоб в новой должности поэта
От имени России говорить.  

This day,
this memory—
I’m going to present like a certificate,
so that, in my new assignment as a poet,
I may speak in the name of Russia.

Slutsky’s function as a professional speaker has turned 180 degrees. Formerly, his job was to tell these willing soldiers what Russia was. Now, he knows that it is they who

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65 *Den’ poezii*, 74.
define Russia, and his obligation is now to articulate that. In other poems on the pages of *Poetry Day*, Slutsky remembers a young poet who died in the fighting around Stalingrad; a town slut who by going through the pain of giving birth and starting a family somehow redeems herself; and the seventy thousand prisoners of war near Cologne who were dying of hunger, yet nobody fed them. Slutsky doesn’t call for retribution—he just states the way it was:

Землю роем
когтями-ногтями,
Зверем воем
в Кёльнской яме,
Но все остается, — как было! как было! —
Каша с вами, а души с нами.66

We dig the earth
with our claw-nails,
We howl like an animal
in the pit at Cologne,
But everything remains—like it was! like it was! —
You’ve got your porridge, but we’ve got our souls.

Slutsky’s exclamations are not hortatory, as is the case with much mainstream Soviet poetry of the time, but express his anguish over ongoing human cruelty and suffering.

While we can get a feel for the popularity and influence of poets of the mid-1950s by paging through *Poetry Day* and other literary publications of the time, it is important to remember that some of the poems for which they were best known and loved could not be published at all due to censorship, and therefore were read and heard only privately.

Slutsky’s “The Master” [*Khoziain*], a meditation on Stalin’s paranoia, was widely circulated in the mid-1950s before eventually being published in 1962:

А мой хозяин не любил меня.
Не знал меня, не слышал и не видел,
но все-таки боялся как огня
и сумрачно, угрюмо ненавидел.

But my master didn’t like me.
Didn’t know, didn’t hear and didn’t see me,
but still was as afraid of me as of fire
and drearily, morosely hated me.

66 Den’ poezii, 75.

67 Boris Slutskii, *Strannaia svoboda: Kniga stikhov* (Moskva: Russkaia kniga, 2001), 175. Slutsky’s “The Master” and another poem we will come to later in this chapter, “God” [*Bog*], were published in *Literaturnia gazeta*, 24 Nov 1962, but written much earlier. In *Strannaia svoboda* a date of 1954 is given for “The Master,” but no date is given for “God.”
Когда пред ним я голову склонял –
ему казалось, я улыбку прячу.
Когда меня он плакать заставлял –
ему казалось, я притворно плачу.

А я всю жизнь работал на него,
ложился поздно, поднимался рано,
любил его и за него был ранен.
Но мне не помогало ничего.

А я всю жизнь возил его портрет,
в землянке вешал и в палатке вешал,
смотрел, смотрел, не уставал смотреть.
И с каждым годом мне все реже, реже
обидно казалась нелюбовь.

И ныне настроенья мне не губит
tот явный факт, что испокон веков
таких, как я,
хозяева не любят.67

“The Master” is a striking example of how Slutsky, speaking with seemingly simple vocabulary and uncomplicated syntax in the first person, is able to convey an experience that resonated with so many of his compatriots. I say “seemingly” simple because Slutsky’s declarative, fact-laden lines and narratives are in fact finely crafted and elegantly structured. Even the above poem, most famous for being a strong early statement of a power dynamic few cared to articulate even in their own minds, let alone in print, has features that elevate it from the realm of verse to poetry.

Throughout the poem, Slutsky paints his neutral canvas of iambic pentameter quatrains with language that subtly provokes associations with larger ethical and historical contexts. First of all, the word Slutsky uses for “master” [khoziain] comes from the pre-Soviet relationship of landowner and serf, later landowner and peasant sharecropper, or factory owner and worker. Using this term in print to refer to the Communist leader forces the reader to consider that under Stalin the revolution may have preserved or even re-instated more of the pre-revolutionary power structure than it transformed. Further, Slutsky regularly incorporates pre-Soviet vocabulary—the Church
Slavonic *pred* (before) in line 5 instead of the ordinary Russian *pered*; the liturgical-sounding idiom *ispokon vekov* (since the dawn of time); the archaic adjectival form *’e* instead of *-ie* in line 22—to further situate the circumstance he describes within its larger historical context. Biblical textual undertones begin with anaphoric and other built-in repetitions. They build with the image of the obedient servant, like Abraham or Job, accepting what his god does with him. Further, like Russian Orthodox Christians, he adores the image/icon he carries with him and hangs in even the most humble of shelters. As MacFadyen notes, “Christlike, he was even ‘wounded’ for him at war. As a failed Abraham, the poet risks all but gains nothing: ‘Nothing helped me.’”\(^{68}\) Perhaps the strongest moment of the poem is the assertion that, through years and years of looking at the image—and thereby of getting to know the reality behind it—the speaker comes to recognize a truth more profound than the myth he has believed his whole life of the greatness of his master. This truth is not necessarily that the master is not great—but incontrovertibly that the master does not love the slave.

Slutsky has brought his reader to a conclusion provocatively different from what one might have expected. A Soviet-style poem would tell us outright that Stalin was a criminal or a dogmatist, or that he perverted the Leninist path. But the more this reader reads “The Master,” the less I feel sure I know exactly how Slutsky feels about Stalin. I’m not sure that the “I” of Slutsky’s poem (here sharing much of the author’s own experience) feels regret or self-reproach for having so faithfully served a cruel master for so long. But he does seem to feel that his full-hearted service—working hard, going to

war, even getting wounded, not for his own sake but for the good of the whole—ought to add up to something of human value.

For the generation of poets who came of age during the Thaw in particular, Slutsky’s credentials as a World War II veteran, his profound humanism, and his reliance on (at least seemingly) plain language to “name things by their real names” (here, the master-and-slave relations between Stalin and the Soviet people) made him a poet easy to admire. Slutsky’s poetry was especially attractive, among the Avvakumites, to Joseph Brodsky.

Brodsky’s very earliest poems look heavily influenced by Slutsky, both thematically and stylistically. One of Slutsky’s well known (but not published in Poetry Day) poems, “About the Jews” [Pro evreev], contains his thoughts about what it is to be Jewish in a Jew-hating society:
Евреи хлеба не сеют,
Евреи в лавках торгуют,
Евреи раньше лысеют,
Евреи больше воруют.

Евреи – люди лихие,
Они солдаты плохие:
Иван воюет в окопе,
Абрам торгует в рабкопе.

Я все это слышал с детства,
Скоро совсем постарею,
Но все никаку не деться
От крика: «Евреи, евреи!»

Не торговавши ни разу,
Не воровавши ни разу,
Ношу в себе, как заразу,
Проклятую эту расу.

Пуля меня миновала,
Чтобы говорили нелживо:
«Евреев не убивало!»
Все воротились живы!69

The Jews, they sow no grain,
The Jews, they trade in stores,
The Jews are sooner-balding,
The Jews are always stealing.

The Jews are cunning people,
They are bad soldiers:
Ivan fights in the trenches,
Abram trades goods in the workers’ coop.

I’ve heard this all since childhood,
Soon I’ll be old altogether,
But there’s still no getting away
From the cry, “The Jew, the Jew!”

Not ever having traded goods,
Not ever having stolen anything,
I carry in myself, like an infection,
That cursed race.

The bullet passed me by,
So they could say without lying,
“The Jews didn’t get killed!”
“They all came back alive!”

Slutsky builds his poem on the anaphoric repetition of the phrase that begins so many
typical Jew-hating remarks: “The Jews [do this, do not do that]…” His speaker, closely
linked with or perhaps even identical to the author (as is more often than not true of
Slutsky’s narrative voice), considers the typical functions Jews are said to have—or to
lack—and the impact of such constant racism on his own self-image as a Jew and a
World War II veteran. The ironic point of the poem is that for Slutsky to disprove Jew-
hating prejudices, he would have had to die in the war: “Jews are terrible soldiers…The
Jews were never killed, they all came home alive!” Despite having served bravely and
well, this Jewish soldier-poet returns home to the same prejudices he grew up with—and
the implicit reproach that his return alive must mean that he dodged a bullet that a “real
Russian” would have taken.

69 Boris Slutskii, Strannaia svoboda: Kniga stikhov, 134.
One of Brodsky’s earliest well known poems, “A Jewish cemetery near Leningrad…” [Evreiskoe kladbishche okolo Leningrada] (1958), considers the outsider status of Jews in Russian society in ways strikingly reminiscent of Slutsky’s approach.

The first and last stanzas of Brodsky’s poem serve to emphasize the Jews’ outsider status in Russia—one that Brodsky, like Slutsky, shares—and to drive home the point that even

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after death Jews remain outsiders.\textsuperscript{71} The Jewish cemetery is located not in, but near Leningrad, well outside of the circular tramline that functionally separates the city from its environs. The cemetery’s “crooked fence of rotting plywood” corrals Jewish corpses in their own neglected ghetto outside the city.

Like Slutsky, Brodsky opens his poem by defining Jews functionally. His third and fourth lines name the occupants of the cemetery by their most common professions: “Behind the crooked fence together lie / lawyers, merchants, musicians, revolutionaries.” Slutsky’s poem had made no reference to Jews as musicians or revolutionaries—he depicted a simpler prejudiced view. Brodsky’s poem takes Slutsky’s as a point of departure: he exchanges the non-Jewish viewpoint explicated by Slutsky for an exploration of the stereotypes from a more sympathetic perspective. Thus the listing of typical professions is both less negative (“musicians”) and more ironic (“revolutionaries”—by Brodsky’s time Jew-hating people around the world were also blaming the Jews for the Bolshevik Revolution [for which they had some grounds, as Jews formed a disproportionately high percentage of participants and supporters]).

In the second stanza of Brodsky’s poem, the speaker lists activities of these Jews that are inarguably common to everyone: “For themselves they sang. / For themselves they saved up. / For others they died. / But first they paid taxes…” Nothing is certain, goes the saying, except death and taxes, and here Brodsky makes sure that Jewish daily life is perceived as universally human. With “For others they died,” Brodsky perhaps

\textsuperscript{71} It is not clear to what extent Brodsky was aware of Jewish traditions that require cemeteries to be located away from inhabited spaces (for hygienic reasons). On the face of it, Russian cemeteries tend to grow around churches and monasteries, while Jewish cemeteries are often located some distance from the center. With the growth of cities, however, new cemeteries of all persuasions tend to be opened in less-populated areas. To complicate the picture, throughout history Jews have been compelled by non-Jewish authorities to conform to various requirements in regard to the location of cemeteries, and of course Jews themselves have traditionally preferred to have burial places that are apart from the non-Jewish dead.
makes an ironic nod to Slutsky’s lines from “The Master,” “But I worked my whole life for him, / went to bed late, got up early, / loved him and for him was wounded.” The irony continues with the penetrating line, “respected the police.” That is, everyone respects the police, right? But the Jews buried in this cemetery lived within the constraints of special laws that applied to Jews specifically: Jews were allowed to live only in certain places and practice certain professions. Finally, Brodsky lists an occupation that is specific to Jews: they “interpreted Talmud, / remaining idealists.” The Jewish habit of active, engaged reading is never referred to by Jew-haters. But it is important for Brodsky, as is the Jews’ incredible and perhaps even quixotic ability, given the cramped strictures of life within Russian society, to continue their reading, worshipping, and communal practices—which is to say, to continue being idealists.

One of the central laws applied to Jews was the prohibition against owning farmland, which leads directly to the prejudice heading Slutsky’s list: “The Jews, they sow no grain.” Brodsky takes up this line and re-enforces it, again with irony, at the center of his 33-line poem, lines 18-19: “And they didn’t sow grain. / They never sowed grain,” he writes. “They just lay down themselves / in the cold earth, like seeds.”

Slutsky considers the same question more generally in this poem (1953?):
Abram, Isak and Yakov have preserved something from Avraam, Isaak, and Iakov—gentlemen honored everywhere.

Avraam is universally respected—forefather and wise man, Abram is wronged everywhere, as a saboteur and scoundrel.

Isaak is universally glorified, From every altar he is proclaimed. But Isak gets all kinds of treatment And isn’t allowed past the doorways.

Since the time Iakov wrestled with God, and God conquered him, he became Yakov, and this Yakov under any law is poor.

With its play between the single and double vowels of the names of Jewish men who became special in God’s eyes, Slutsky’s poem arguably provokes another of Brodsky’s better known early poems, “Isaac and Abraham” [Isaak i Avraam], dated 1963. But Slutsky’s axis rhyme of бог/убог [bog/ubog] (“god/poor”) looks to have influenced an even earlier Brodsky poem.74 Brodsky’s 1958 “Poem under an epigraph” [Stikhi pod epigrafom] revolves on the same axis:75

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73 The Russian spellings of the names of biblical personages English speakers know as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is preserved in the translation so the non-speaker of Russian can see the play between single and doubled vowels in the names as Slutsky knows them.
74 The bog/ubog rhyme is implicit in another of Slutsky’s famous “Stalin” poems, which begins, “We lived with a god to guide us, / with a god at our very side,” [My vse khodili pod bogom, / u boga pod samym bokom]. (Emphasis mine.)
75 For some background on Slutsky’s influence on Brodsky and a quite different reading of it, based in part on this same poem, see MacFadyen, 63-75.
Стихи под эпиграфом

Что дозволено Юпитеру,
то не дозволено быку.

Каждый пред Богом наг.
Жалок, наг и убог.
В каждой музыке Бах,
в каждом из нас Бог.
Ибо вечность – богам.
Бренность – удел быков...
Богово станет нам
сумерками богов.
И надо небом
рискнуть,
и, может быть, невпопад.
Еще нас не раз
распнут
и скажут потом:
рассад.
И мы завоем от ран.
Потом взалкаем даров...
У каждого свой храм.
И каждому свой гроб.
Юродствуя,
воруй,
молись!
Будь одинок,
как перст!..
...Словно быкам – хлыст,
вечен богам крест.76

Poem under an Epigraph

What is permissable for Jupiter
is not permissable for the bull.

Before God everyone is naked.
Parful, naked and poor.
In every music is Bach,
in every one of us is God.
For eternity is for the gods.
Mortality is the lot of bulls...
What is God’s will be for us
the twilight of the gods.
And the sky must be risked,
and, perhaps, the mark be missed.
Again and more than once they’ll crucify
and then they’ll say: decay.
And we will howl from the wounds.
Then we’ll hunger for gifts...
Each has his own temple.
And for each his own grave.
Be a holy fool, steal, pray!
Be alone, like a finger!..
...As to bulls is the whip,
eternal to gods is the cross.

The “stepladder” format and sound play clearly link Brodsky’s poem to Vladimir Mayakovsky’s “Our March” [Nash marsh], and Mayakovsky’s influence on “Poem under an Epigraph” will be considered in the following section. However, the poem is equally closely linked—by theme, lexicon and rhyme—with the two Slutsky poems analyzed

76 Brodskii, Sochineniia, v. 1, 22.
above. Like Slutsky’s “The Master” and “Abram, Isak and Yakov have...” this poem of Brodsky’s centers on the hugely unequal relationship between a god and his subjects. Brodsky echoes the bog/ubog sound and sense nexus in the opening lines (“Each before God / is naked, / pitiful, / naked, / and poor”)—and then proceeds to complicate the nexus by surrounding it with a cluster of similar-sounding words: nag, Bakh, byk, khram, grob, odinok (“naked,” “Bach,” “bull,” “temple,” “grave,” and “alone,” respectively). By introducing words like “Bach” and “temple” Brodsky adds many facets to Slutsky’s very generalized use of “god.” Already in the epigraph we were referred to the chief of the Roman gods, Jupiter; the name of Bach brings that composer’s myriad devotional Christian works to mind; “temple” evokes a variety of devotional styles; and “grave” and “alone” resonate with the poem we analyzed above, “A Jewish cemetery near Leningrad...” in which the Jews “simply lay down themselves / in the cold earth, like seeds.”

Brodsky returns to the original relationship of god and bull (bog/byk) in the final couplet: “...as the whip is to bulls, / eternal to the gods is the cross” [slovo bykam—khlyst, / vechen bogam krest]. Here Brodsky complicates the god/bull dichotomy with a synechdocal correspondence: cross/whip. But the correspondence is not a simple equivalent—god is not to cross as bull is to whip. If we can posit that “whip” stands in for what the bull understands about his relationship with his god, then what is “cross”? To complicate matters further, consider that in the case of Jupiter, the god is the bull, famously in the story of the rape of Europa. The identity is re-enforced in Brodsky’s line mid-poem, “God is in each of us.” “And we will wail from our wounds,” which follows shortly, forges an implicit identification between each “of us” and the passion of Christ.
Now God-in-man suffers the whip as does the bull and mortal man. So, returning to the correspondence between the synecdochical pair whip/cross, we end up with a blurring of identities, rather than the distinct hierarchical separation laid out in Slutsky’s “Master.” Coming back to the epigraph, “What is permissible for Jupiter / is not permissible for the bull,” we can no longer be sure this is the case. Jupiter is the bull, and the bull, therefore, is Jupiter. Brodsky’s lifelong preoccupation with the metaphysical positions of the powerless and the powerful in a complicated universe has already been set out, with the help of Slutsky’s bog/ubog nexus, in this 1958 poem. As we shall see in the following section, however, Brodsky’s poem owes as much to the posterboy for Soviet poetry, Vladimir Mayakovsky, as it does to Slutsky.

**Mayakovsky, a Special Case**

One of the most compelling marks of the Avvakumites’ a-Soviet approach is their willingness to learn from any poet with something to offer. A striking such case is that of Vladimir Mayakovsky. Mayakovsky, a member of the Bolshevik party from the age of fourteen, cast himself as the voice of revolution in Russia and harnessed his tremendous poetic talent in the service of the Bolshevik platform until his suicide in 1930. The status of his works as “revered classics” and central to the Soviet school curriculum was firmly established by the end of the 1930s. Scholar Evgeny Dobrenko concludes his discussion of the Soviet literary canon as taught in schools, “Suffice it to recall the general background against which the formation of this canon took place: the pompous celebrations, at the highest state level, of the jubilees of Pushkin (1937), Shota Rustaveli
Mayakovsky became one of the pillars of the Soviet literary canon.

Mayakovsky permeates *Poetry Day*. He is used in the introduction to bolster the political correctness of this precedent-setting publication. Just as a priest would cite a passage from the Bible or an academic from a venerable scholar to give weight to his sermon or article, the editors turn to Mayakovsky to justify their support of lyric themes:

> Our poetry has always been opposed to both egotistical self-anthemizing and the composition of made-to-order odes. The baton of poetry is passed to us from afar—since Radishchev’s time, it has been in the hands of Pushkin, Nekrasov, and Blok, then passed into our own hands from Mayakovsky, and it will always be grasped by young, brave hands. It is the poetry of the battle for happiness for all human beings. Inspired by the great deeds of the Party, poetry is ever more confidently earning the right to be called the Poetry of Communism.

> I don’t want to brag with a new thought, but, in my opinion— I assert without authorial arrogance— the commune is a place, where clerks will disappear and where will be many poems and songs.

Thus spoke Mayakovsky in his “Epistle to proletarian poets.” We take these words as an epistle to our own poetry of today as well.78

Thus the editors seek to place *Poetry Day* securely in the established heritage of revolutionary poetry. While their quote from Mayakovsky does not directly justify either

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lyric poetry or the case they make against made-to-order odes, the editors nonetheless manage to convey via his lines that hack work is to be avoided (“where clerks will disappear”) and that an abundance of poetry (presumably of any “sincere” type) is a positive sign for Communism (“where will be / many / poems and songs”).

Having used Mayakovsky to legitimize the thrust of *Poetry Day*, the editors are not shy to do the same for perhaps the most controversial Section 4, which was discussed above. Before launching into the poems that make up the section, Pavel Lavut (who traveled with Mayakovsky and is mentioned in the sixteenth section of Mayakovsky’s long poem *Khorosho! [Good!]*) prefaces with a short piece called “Mayakovsky Talks with Young People.” Here, Mayakovsky justifies his signature “stepladder” line breaks, saying that it makes his often-changing rhythms easier to read. He maintains that poetry is meant to be spoken aloud (to a mass audience), that it can be difficult—but necessary—to adjust to new things, that it is important to have a sense of humor, and that if an aspiring poet makes better boots than poems, he should stick to boots. We can infer from the respect and even adulation afforded to Mayakovsky that a good poem is as important to Communism as a good boot. Once again, the take-home lesson is that the poems within the covers of *Poetry Day* are a contribution to the building of Communism, even if they display a sense of humor or innovative characteristics.

Mayakovsky is also indirectly associated with the pages of *Poetry Day*. As we noted in the discussion of Tsvetaeva, her poems in memory of Mayakovsky are included as a way of justifying her own inclusion in the volume. Mayakovsky’s colleagues and

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79 Den’ poezii, 117.
followers of the Constructivist movement are well represented in the volume, notably Bagritsky, Selvinsky, and Lugovskoy.

As the “voice of the people,” Mayakovsky established many of the poetic traits and tropes that would continue to characterize Soviet poetry as long as the USSR remained in existence. Such traits included: most obviously the all-encompassing “we,” in whose voice Mayakovsky would trumpet; frequent use of the imperative; self-righteous, didactic tone; and the themes of crushing the opposition and constructing an incredible future. In the pages of Poetry Day the editors make use of Mayakovsky explicitly and implicitly to bolster and justify their inclusion of poets, poems, and genres. Mayakovsky would thus seem to be a poetic example the Avvakumites would automatically and fully reject, but this is not the case. The Avvakumites learned from Mayakovsky, and traces of his influence are especially easy to see in some of Brodsky’s early poems.

As we noted in our previous analysis of Brodsky’s “Poem under an Epigraph,” Mayakovsky’s influence is immediately recognizable in the “stepladder” form of the lines on the page: each rhymed line is broken into parts that are progressively indented, each below its predecessor. Recall just the opening lines:

Before God everyone is naked. Pitiful, naked and poor.

If you eliminate the stepladder breaks and type out each line as an unbroken string, you will see that, despite the avant-garde look, Brodsky’s meter is actually quite conventional. The lines, then, are not broken up to accommodate tricky rhythms, but—as
was often the case with Mayakovsky’s stepladder poems as well—for purely expressive purposes.

Brodsky clearly alludes to Mayakovsky with the stepladder format. But the poem by Mayakovsky from which Brodsky derives his own poem most directly, “Our March” [Nash marsh] (1917), while typical of Mayakovsky’s oeuvre in many ways, does not itself take the stepladder form.

Бейте в площади бунтов топот!
Выше, гордых голов гряда!
Мы разливом второго потопа
перемоем миров города.

Beat in the square the stamp of revolts!
Higher, ridge of proud heads!
As the surge of a second flood
we’ll wash one by one the cities of the world.

Дней бык пег.
Медлена лет арба.
Наш бог бег.
Сердце наш барабан.

The bull of days is skewbald.
The cart of years is slow.
Our god is a run.
The heart is our drum.

Есть ли наших золот небесней?
Нас ли сжалит пули оса?
Наше оружие — наши песни
Наше золото — звенящие голоса.

Are there golds more heavenly than ours?
Will the wasp of a bullet sting us?
Our weapons are our songs
Our gold is our ringing voices.

Зеленью ляг луг,
выстили дно дням.
Радуга дай дуг
лет быстролётным коням.

Lie down in green, meadow,
make a bed of the ground for days.
Rainbow give your bow
to fast-flying horses of years.

Видите скучно звезд небу!
Без него наши песни вьем.
Эй Большая Медведица! требуй,
чтоб на небо нас взяли живьем.

See the sky of stars is bored!
Without it we’ll spin our songs.
Hey Ursa Major! Demand
that we be taken alive to the sky.

Радости пей и пой!
В жилах весна разлила.
Сердце бей бой!
Грудь наша — медь литавр. 80

Drink of gladness and sing!
Spring is poured into our veins.
Heart beat the battle!
Our breast is a copper kettledrum.

Brodsky combines Slutsky’s metaphysical nexus of god/poor [bog/ubog] with

Mayakovsky’s play on sound in these lines: “Dnei byk peg / medlenna let arba. /
Nash bog beg. / Serdtse nash baraban.” Along with “god is a run” [bog beg] Brodsky

assimilates “the bull is skewbald” [byk peg] and adds his own sound association, “Bach” [bakh] to the group. The pair “god/Bach” [bog⁸¹/bakh] is tried and true (banal), but in combination with both “bull” [byk] and the previously established “god/poor” pair and the Jupiter mythology, Brodsky’s poem is more than assimilative: it becomes inventive and complex.

Mayakovsky’s poem is a march both in name and in instrumentation—the line “the heart—is our drum” [serdtse—nash baraban] reflects the sharp, penetrating rhythms of drumbeats at the heart of the poem itself, evoking a revolutionary military parade. Brodsky freely borrows from Mayakovsky’s sound complex, but rejects the drum rhythm in favor of Bach’s music (“in every music is / Bach”), which in large part was written on commission for liturgical use. Indeed, the young Brodsky’s meditation on things eternal associates itself more readily with Bach than Bolsheviks. Brodsky identifies rather with the crucified than the crucifiers, with the martyred believers than with the destroyers of religion. This is what brings his poem to its closing association of the bull with the cross: the bull accepts the whip, like a martyred Christian, from the man who has mastery over it like a god. In parallel, it is the gods who accept the pain of the cross—pain inflicted by the gods’ subjects, people. In both cases, the pain is inflicted by people, regardless of the supposed hierarchy of power. Where Mayakovsky used his sound identities and permutations to celebrate the victor, Brodsky, like Slutsky, brings out the plight of the victim. Moreover, for Brodsky, who is already more philosophically complex than Slutsky, even a god can suffer at the hands of humans.

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⁸¹ The g in bog is normally pronounced as a voiceless fricative velar [bokh], and would assimilate to the b that follows it in the given line by becoming voiced: [bogh].
“Poem under an Epigraph” is not the only early poem of Brodsky’s to reveal Mayakovsky’s influence. But more importantly, Brodsky was not the only Avvakumite to learn from Mayakovsky. As completely as this group turned away from the politics of Soviet poetry, they were poets above all, and sensitive to Mayakovsky’s talent and impact despite the regularity with which his poetry was crammed down their throats in school.

Perhaps the most fascinating case in point is Bobyshev’s “There were houses there” [Tam byli doma], written in 1956 and published in the underground journal Sintaksis (Syntax) in 1960. In this poem Bobyshev takes the model of Mayakovsky’s plosive lines, “Nash bog beg. / Serdtse nash baraban” (“Our god is a run. / The heart is our drum”) to undo Mayakovsky. Deriving his own lines from Mayakovsky’s trumpeting, destructive material, Bobyshev unearths the human aspect hidden by the Mayakovskian approach:

Там был дом, на другом берегу.
У солдат был там перекур.
Там был дом.
Люди жили в нем.
А солдаты пришли потом.
Перед этим.
Утром — тихо. А днем
пели дети.
А солдаты шли по дороге,
видят — дом.
У деревьев сломали ноги,
разожгли с трудом.

A house was there, on the opposite shore.
Soldiers had a cigarette break there.
A house was there.
People lived in it.
But the soldiers came after.
Before this.
In the morning—quiet. And in the afternoon
children sang.
But the soldiers were going down the road,
and see—a house.
They broke the feet of trees,
and lit them on fire with difficulty.

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83 Bobyshev gave the date of composition as April, 1956, in a personal email of 8 Oct 2010.

Слушали, как один поет — через тело шрамы — разворачивали паек, шелестели, жрали. Покурили. Потом огонь притоптали своей ногои и ушли. И конец на том.

Там был дом. Там был дом.84

Bobyshev’s first line, “Tam byl dom” (“A house was there”), which repeats at the end of the poem, derives its rhythm directly from “Nash bog beg” (“Our god is a run”). It has the same strong three-beat, single-syllable, drumbeat feel. But both the sound quality and the narrative content differ radically from “Our March.”

Bobyshev tells a story of an event so incidental, it hardly registers as such. Essentially, the narrator is looking at a spot where there used to be a house. He says that one time some soldiers going by (no mention of “marching”) saw the house and stopped near it for a cigarette break. They broke some branches or roots off a tree and, with some difficulty, made a fire. After having a snack and a smoke, they put out the fire and moved on. That’s the end of that. A house used to be there. Typical of Bobyshev, the focus here is on the little events that make up daily life. He puts the strongest emphasis on the memory of the house with people living in it—the line “A house was there” occurs four times. The final time it is even broken up for emphasis into one-word lines. The word “house” [dom] occurs five times, always in final rhyme position, generating the pervading rhyme of the poem on the end-stressed -om sound. The -om reverberates like the tolling of a bell throughout the poem.

I wondered if events happened in the poem that weren’t related in words. What happened to the house? What about the people in it? Did the soldiers burn it down? Did
“scars across his body” mean someone got shot? Luckily for me, I could email Bobyshev and ask him. He replied, “The most simple version is the right one. Soldiers took a rest on a march at some place close to a house. They broke lower branches of the tree or perhaps roots (‘feet’ of the tree) and set a fire. The singer is one of them with more experience (with scars). And that’s it. Why the house disappeared? I don’t know. Probably burnt out. No answer.”\textsuperscript{85} Bobyshev thus confirmed the “not much happened” reading that the poem signaled on its surface. The contrast with Mayakovský’s stirring march could hardly be greater. Bobyshev’s soldiers are described not marching, causing revolution and being swept alive up to the stars, but relaxing with a bite to eat and a smoke, almost snuggling up, as it were, to the nearest human habitation. There is a memory of children singing, and the oldest of the soldiers “sings” for the younger ones, almost as if he is their father. Again in contrast to Mayakovský, Bobyshev focuses not on the blazing, destructive nature of the fire, but how hard it was to start and how carefully the soldiers put it out before leaving.

Bobyshev undermines Mayakovský’s “Our March” on the level of sound as well. He deflates the tense enthusiasm of Mayakovský’s revolutionary anthem by, essentially, replacing key plosive sounds with liquids. Instead of “\textit{Nash bog beg},” each word ending in a Russian’s “hard” (phonetically speaking) sound (\textit{sh} and the two \textit{g’s}), Bobyshev writes “\textit{Tam byl dom},” subverting the plosive beginnings of words that recall Mayakovský’s line with the word-final liquids \textit{m} and \textit{l}. The effect is that of replacing the sharp outlines of drumbeats with a sound that lingers in the air, like a bell, or the echo of drops of water falling into a well. The way Bobyshev breaks up the poem-final repetition

\textsuperscript{85} Personal email, 29 Jun 2009.
of the key line “Tam byl dom” into three separate lines enhances that reverberating effect by placing greater acoustical distance between each word. And it marks a strategic subversion of Maykovskian line breaks as well, since the effect is not of sharp breaks and short, barking cries, but almost of the reminiscing narrator gently trailing off or even falling asleep on that domestically charged last word, “house” [dom].

In “A house was there,” Bobyshev has used Mayakovskian techniques to undermine Mayakovskian themes. Instead of Mayakovsky’s typically exaggerated images of people as things and things as people (think of the enormous image of, say, a “Cloud in Trousers”) we get only a hint of anthropomorphization in the trees whose “feet” get broken to provide fodder for the bonfire. The subsequent de-individualization of the soldiers putting out the fire “with their foot” (singular, rather than “feet”), serves to connect, rather than set in conflict, the animate and inanimate elements of the poem. It makes the soldiers and the trees more similar to one another, because tree roots have been moved towards the human end of the scale by being described as “feet,” while human feet have been moved towards the tree end of the scale by losing their individuality. As a whole, the poem creates an atmosphere that is tender towards all its elements. We will see the same attitude in Bobyshev’s “Sputnik” poem, with its focus on the everyday, unimportant human being, in the next chapter.

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86 In Russian the sentence order is there-was-house—an order not reproducible in English translation without altering the meaning, due to English’s less flexible subject-verb-object word order.
The Return of the Everyday: Vanshenkin and Vinokurov

The young Bobyshev may very well have drawn from the poems of Konstantin Vanshenkin and Evgeny Vinokurov in creating his own tender worldview. Vanshenkin and Vinokurov, like Slutsky, are soldier-poets who became quite popular after World War II. But these poets belonged to the youngest possible generation that could have been formed by service in the war—both were born in 1925 (six years after Slutsky), and thus went straight from school into the army. Vinokurov and Vanshenkin published quite a number of books of poetry in the 1950s and 60s. Vinokurov continued to publish until his death in 1993, and Vanshenkin is still publishing a handful of poems per year, mostly in the journal Znamia. In 1956, both poets were anthologized in Poetry Day and Vanshenkin could be found in both volumes of Literary Moscow as well.

Vanshenkin and Vinokurov have much in common, not only biographically, but poetically as well. Both reflect in their poetry on their experience as soldiers, and both have a penchant for the everyday and intimate rather than the grandiose and didactic—this last would have been particularly refreshing for the Avvakumites, as it was for the population at large. In terms of form, Vanshenkin and Vinokurov are more classical than experimental.

One of the most surprising poems in the first volume of Literary Moscow is Vanshenkin’s “Amongst red larches…” [Sred’ listvennits ryzikh]. The narrative “I” of the poem, closely identifiable with the poet himself, recalls how he first skied down steep hills, later jumped on a trampoline, and finally, as a military parachutist, jumped from a plane for the first time—and spent the night with a broken leg waiting for rescue. The poet depicts his hero not as a bold soldier whose childhood athleticism now stood
him in good stead, but as a scared boy who, just before the jump, hopes they call off the
mission:

Я ждал того мига,
И знал я, чего захотеть,—
Сказали бы: «Не прыгай!» —
Всю жизнь согласился бы лететь.87

I waited for that moment
And I knew what to wish for:
If they would only say: “Don’t jump!”
I’d happily continue flying for the rest of my life.

However, no one calls the mission off and our protagonist jumps. Here the poem reaches
its climax: the narrator reflects—while his protagonist is in freefall between the plane and
the earth—that the person falling was no romantic hero, no symbolic poetic moment, but
a flesh-and-blood young man:

Хлестнула с налета
Тяжелого ветра струя.
Был это не кто-то,
Был это, товарищи, я.

A stream of heavy wind
Whipped at me with a swoop.
It wasn’t just someone,
It was, comrades, none other than I.

Не кто-то другой,
Не лирический общий герой —
С разбитой ногой
Это я
ночевал под горой.88

Not somebody else,
Not a generalized lyric hero—
With a broken leg,
It was I
spending the night at mountain’s base.

After deflating the grand poetic war hero to a scared boy with a broken leg hoping for
evacuation, Vanshenkin closes with the heartfelt and lightly ironic admission, “I’m happy
to be able / to write this about myself” [Ia schastliv, chto eto / Mogu napisat’ o sebe]. The
sentiment is quite similar to the closing couplet of one of Vanshenkin’s early successful
poems (now a standard in the form of a popular song), “I love you, Life” [Ia liubliu tebia,
Zhizn’]: “I love you, Life, / And hope it is mutual!” [Ia liubliu tebia, Zhizn’/I nadeius’,
chteto vzaimno!]. Vanshenkin’s humorous and simple celebration of the pleasure of

87 Literaturnaia Moskva (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1956), 621.
88 Literaturnaia Moskva, 621.
simply being alive marks an important turn away from the war-time and postwar literature about the glory of self-sacrifice for the Motherland and Stalin and the guilt and pain of failing to rescue fallen comrades.

Said guilt and pain is, however, a staple of both Vanshenkin’s and Vinokurov’s poetry. Even here, though, their treatment of these themes differs from their predecessors. A typical strategy is to introduce the reader to a fallen companion by talking about the friend’s intimate, familiar characteristics—what neighborhood or town he was from, how they shared rations in the field and told each other stories, slept side by side. In the end, the reader feels as though the fallen soldier might be someone s/he could have known, the boy from across the street. Neither Vanshenkin nor Vinokurov step back from such descriptions, as Slutsky might, to make an explicitly ethical or didactic statement. Their approach is more akin to elegy or even folksong, like the American “Johnny has gone for a soldier.”

Another attractive theme for both Vinokurov and Vanshenkin was the newly permissible love poem without a Soviet propaganda component. In Poetry Day Vanshenkin’s lyric heroes wait hopefully at the gate for a glimpse of the girl, or bring a bouquet of flowers (“I waited outside the gate for half an hour / I forgot what you call / this peerless dog…”; “On my way to your place with such a nice bouquet…”). Vinokurov, likewise, has a poem with the sweet, seemingly unbelievable (to the hero of the poem) line, “She is my wife.” “No, not my fiancée, / She’s my wife,” the poem goes on. The reader imagines a dazed and proud new husband until reaching the second part of the poem, in which the wife, dark circles under her eyes, begins to openly contrast with
the girlfriend the hero fell in love with. The concluding couplet’s twist is “Don’t confuse my wife with that girl. / I don’t even know that girl.”

Similarly, Vinokurov brings the everyday together with the love theme in a 1957 poem, “My beloved was doing laundry” [Moia liubimaia stirala]. The hero is touched by the sight of his beloved’s thin arms and feels tender at the sight of her looking, in general, fragile, as he, unseen by her, observes her from a distance. He closes:

Покрассней нет на целом свете,  
Все города пройди подряд!  
Чем руки худенькие эти,  
Чем грустный, грустный этот взгляд.

There’s nothing more marvellous in the whole world,  
even if you were to go through every single city!  
Than these poor thin arms,  
Than this sad, sad look.

It might seem odd that the poet’s hero is so taken with his pathetic wife’s laundering. But the happiness he feels has to do with the fact that his wife is in the process of creating the present, domestic moment. He can celebrate her thin arms and sad look because they belong to a reality he shares with her, and not to some fairytale about the peoples’ future happiness under Communism. Like Vanshenkin’s portrayal of a soldier parachutist as a scared boy, Vinokurov’s picture of a tired wife marks a humanist turn in Soviet poetry.

There is nothing in the least Soviet (or anti-Soviet, unless it is the admission that all is not yet perfect) about these love poems. They are universal in their intimacy, whether what is being expressed is a wry comment on girlfriend-turned-wife or tender thoughts about the beloved doing laundry. Sometimes the poems border on the sentimental, or even slip over the edge, but perhaps the main thing about them was that

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89 Den’ poezii, 46.


91 In general, there’s something about soap and water that both Vanshenkin and Vinokurov return to again and again. Maybe a reflection of having to have spent so many unwashed nights in the army at such a tender age, or simply the time and effort it took to get things clean under Soviet conditions?
they proclaimed not, “My beloved is building Communism!” but “My beloved, a fragile human being, is tired and wet.” With statements such as these Vinokurov and Vanshenkin are working to bring back the present tense and the personal to a literature that for decades spoke only for the future and the masses.

The rediscovered humanist approach to love and the love object opens new possibilities for the Avvakumites. Bobyshev’s “A few first flowers” [Neskol’ko pervykh tsvetov], written in 1958, shares Vanshenkin’s tender approach and focus on washing. It is an elegy to lost love:

Тогда, в начале дня, в начале месяца
Я нёс к тебе весеннее созвездье.
Должно быть,
И нелепо, и потешно
Я шёл, как с чистой склянкою аптекой.

Ты мыла волосы. Ты не хотела выйти.
Как будто с возрастом,
как будто можно вырасти.
Должно быть,
так потешно, так застенчиво
Я нёс его в ладонях, словно птенчика.

Весеннее прохладное созвездье,
Оно ночами
из-под снега светится.
Нечаянно приснится мне.
Нечаянно.
Как ты.
Ах, это всё было вначале.92

Then, in the day’s beginning, in the beginning of the month,
I was bringing you a little spring constellation.
It must have been
Awkwardly and comically
I went, as if with a clean drugstore phial.

You were washing your hair. You didn’t want to come out.
As if with age,
as if it were possible to grow up.
It must have been
so comically, so shyly
I carried it cupped in my hands, like a baby bird.

A little spring, cool constellation,
During the nighttime
it shines from beneath the snow.
By accident I will dream of it.
By accident.
Like you.
Ah, this was all in the beginning.

Bobyshev’s poem has much in common with Vinokurov’s. The poem places value on fragility and purity in the memory of love. The speaker’s spring bouquet, by nature fragile because these first tender flowers of the season are at risk of being killed by a late frost, is compared to a clean phial—like a phial, the bouquet could be destroyed if its carrier carelessly dropped it; and like the drugstore phial held to high standards of

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92 Dmitrii Bobyshev, Partita (privately published, 1962), 20. Copy of poem provided by author.
cleanliness (does it contain a love potion?), the fragile spring bouquet is symbolic of young love.

The poem continues to focus on the fragile, most notably in the speaker’s hesitant approach to his beloved. “It must have been / so comically, so shyly / I carried it cupped in my hands, like a baby bird.” The bouquet, progressively imagined as more and more delicate, has gone from being fragile flowers to breakable glass and now is compared to an even more precious living, baby creature. But the heroine is washing her hair. This takes us back again to Vinokurov’s poem, in which he imagines his beloved at a washtub doing laundry. The intimacy of the domestic setting is for Bobyshev, as it was for Vinokurov, tenderly erotic. But Bobyshev, perhaps a more elegiac poet than Vinokurov, is already mourning the passing of those first sweet moments. “Ah, this was all in the beginning,” his poem ends, leaving his reader to sigh sympathetically about the fragility of early love and the probably now dead bird/bouquet (had Bobyshev been reading Martynov’s “In the night...”? Here, too, the sparrow of Catullus’ Lesbia poems comes to mind). The last line brings him nostalgically back to the poem’s—and the love’s—beginning: “Then, in the beginning of the day, in the beginning of the month…”

In a poem published in 1956, Vanshenkin speculated about what might be keeping a neighbor pacing the floor at night. The narrator’s guesses about what could be keeping his neighbor awake begin with the least catastrophic—a love spat, or perhaps the neighbor is waiting for a letter. As he ranges through the possibilities, the causes of insomnia grow increasingly ominous: trouble at work, a friend betrayed him, or—and this is what the poem has been leading up to—the neighbor himself may be struggling with his conscience. That question was one many Soviet citizens must have been asking
themselves: to what extent did my neighbor contribute to the miseries of Stalin’s rule?
And of course people were asking such questions of themselves—this poem’s narrator’s own insomnia may suggest that he, too, had something on his conscience to keep him awake at night. The publication of the poem was part of the process of airing such questions. But Evgeny Rein would take the nocturnal neighbor plot to a higher—and unpublishable—level, with his poem “Kotov, the Neighbor” [Sosed Kotov].

It is unclear to what extent Vanshenkin’s mystery neighbor poem directly inspired Rein’s “Kotov, the Neighbor.” Rein, in an interview published in 2002, dates his own poem somewhere between 1956 and 1958, which is the right time frame for a response to Vanshenkin’s poem, but also leaves open the possibilities that Rein’s poem could be slightly earlier, or that he did not know of Vanshenkin’s poem when he wrote his own.93

In essence, however, it is as if Rein takes the rather generic outline provided by Vanshenkin and gives it unforgettable features:

В коммунальной квартире жил сосед Котов,
расторопный мужчина без пальца.
Эту комнату слева он отсудил у кого-то,
он судился, тот умер, и Котов остался.

Каждый вечер на кухне публично он мыл ноги
и толковал сообщенья из вечерней газеты «Известия»,
а из тех, кто варили, стирали и слушали, многие
задавали вопросы – всё Котову было известно.

Редко он напивался. Всегда в одиночку и лазил.
Было сложно и страшно, куда-то он лазил ночами.
Доставал непонятные и одинокие вазы,
пел частушки, давил черепки с голубыми мечами.

Он сидел на балконе и вниз, улыбаясь, ругался,
курил и сбрасывал пепел на головы проходящих.
Писем не получал, телеграмм и квитанций пугался
и отдельно прибил – «А. М. КОТОВ» – почтовый ящик.

In the communal apartment lived Kotov, the neighbor,
a dextrous man missing a finger.
He sued somebody to get the room to the left,
He litigated, the other guy died, and Kotov remained.

Every evening in the kitchen he publicly washed his feet
and interpreted reports in the evening paper, The News,
and of those who were cooking, washing and listening, many
asked questions—Kotov knew everything.

Rarely he got drunk. Always by himself and rummaging.
It was audible and scary, he rummaged around nights.
He would get out incomprehensible and lonely vases,
sing dirty ditties, squeeze crockery with blue swords.

He would sit on the balcony and curse, smiling, at those beneath,
smoked and scattered ashes on the heads of passersby.
He never got letters, was afraid of telegrams and receipts
and separately nailed up—”A. M. Kotov”—his mailbox.

94 Evgenii Rein, Izbrannye stikhotvoreniia i poemy (Moskva: Letnii sad, 2001), 383. The poem was published illegally in Sintaksis #3 (April, 1960), and subsequently abroad in Grani #58 (1965).
Летом я переехал. Меня остановят и скажут: «Слушай, Котов помнишь? Так вот он убийца, или вор, или тайный агент.» Я поверю, мной нажит темный след неприязни. За Котова нечем вступиться.

За фанерной стеной он остался неясен до жути. Впрочем, как-то я видел: из лучшей саксонской посуды на балконе у Котова пили приблизные птицы.94

In the summer I moved. People will stop me and say, “Hey, remember Kotov? Turns out he’s a murderer, or a thief, or a secret agent.” I’ll believe it, I’ve accrued a dark trace of aversion. No reason to take Kotov’s side.

Behind the plywood wall he remained horribly unclear. What was he hiding? And how to take his side? Incidentally, once I happened to see: from his best Saxon dishes on Kotov’s balcony stray birds were drinking.

This poem begins, quite typically for Rein, with a location. The location, again quite characteristically, is most domestic: that of a communal apartment, where whole families had to come to terms with sharing living space with complete strangers. In this context, Kotov is considered the best interpreter of the news in the evening paper (today’s readers will not necessarily realize that Soviet newspapers were almost talmudically interpreted due to the distorted nature of reporting at that time). The speaker feels that Kotov may work for a secret agency—legitimate or criminal—and has some kind of special access to information. Kotov’s revolting activities (suing his neighbor, taking over the neighbor’s room when the neighbor dies, washing his feet in the kitchen, rummaging around in the night, singing dirty ditties to himself, drinking alone, fondling his crockery, dropping cigarette ash on passersby and cursing at them) make it easy to suspect that he does horrible things in his job as well. The speaker speculates that it could turn out that he was a murderer, a thief, or a secret agent. Kotov’s last name clearly signals his nocturnal, predatory nature (kot means “male cat”).

Rein’s description of Kotov raises questions: if Kotov is “dextrous,” why is he missing a finger? If he gets no letters and is afraid of receipts, why does he nail up his own mailbox, with “A. M. Kotov” prominently displayed?95 The answer may lie in the

95 Did Rein know enough English in the 1950s to play with the homophonic possibilities of this name? In a Russian accent, the neighbor’s name, thus spelled out, sounds remarkably like the statement in English, “I am cut off,” which is certainly a good description of Kotov’s finger, his nighttime activities, and his
delicate china with blue swords, of which Kotov is so fond. Towards the end of the poem, the china is identified as from Saxony, and the blue swords identify it further as most probably Meissen porcelain.

Illustration: Various versions of the blue crossed swords that mark Meissen porcelain.\textsuperscript{96}

The identification of the china’s origin makes the rest of the poem fall into place: Kotov likely looted the German china during the war. That may be how he lost his finger, although he was fleet-fingered enough both to extract the china and to get it home unbroken. If he did lose his finger at that time, somebody must have put up a fight. Did he rape? kill? to get that china? As for his fear of getting mail, perhaps he is one of the many who abandoned their families during the war. That would account for why he wants his mailbox separate—if he does get a letter from a lost family member, he might want to keep it secret from his neighbors. In view of the china-looting scenario with its relationship with society, although it doesn’t match his knowledge of everything the newspapers only hint at.

\textsuperscript{96} \url{http://www.meissen.com/de/ueber-meissen/marken}, 25 Feb 2011.
possible rape and/or murder, the detail of how he puts out the china for birds to drink
from comes across as decadent and perverse.97

Still, in the last stanza of the poem, the question remains at least provisionally
open. The reader/listener is left to wonder: is Kotov a completely misunderstood, lonely
human being, who perhaps bought his china at some second-hand shop and whose only
pleasure is watching the birds on his balcony drink from his most precious dishes? Or is
he so perverted that he spends the night rummaging for the beautiful china specifically in
order to lure the birds close enough that he can snatch them with what is left of his cat-
claws? Did Kotov’s neighbor die a natural death? What sorts of people are living on the
other side of the thin wall from me, the Soviet reader who also shares a communal
apartment with strangers? “Kotov, the neighbor” captures the gritty essence of communal
apartment life in a way that Vanshenkin’s poem didn’t even begin to imagine.

The potential horror of one’s neighbor’s identity might not have been a traditional
Soviet literary motif (although it had always been a part of daily life in the Soviet Union).
Yet it must have resonated with Rein’s listeners, as “Kotov, the Neighbor” has been
frequently anthologized. Rein, like Vanshenkin, Vinokurov, and his fellow Avvakumite
Bobyshev, was interested in capturing the everyday details of life in many of his early
poems. But where Vinokurov seeks to recapture the perhaps symbolic simplicity of “My
beloved is doing laundry,” and Bobyshev waxes elegaic over a girl washing her hair,
Rein—an Acmeist at heart—wants to return the real meaning of washing to the word: his
hero “publicly” washing his feet in the kitchen fully evokes the dirt and offense of living

97 I owe the (almost certain) solving of the puzzle of Kotov’s crime to Irina Reyfman, who was struck by
the blue swords that are the identifying feature of Meissen china, and put that together with her personal
knowledge of the cultural context of Rein’s poem and Kotov’s approximate age.
in a communal apartment. If Vanshenkin gently empathizes with the possible prickings of a neighbor’s conscience, Rein makes his reader want to move elsewhere.

Rein, often referred to in memoiristic literature as a teacher of other poets of his generation, looks more comfortable with metric experimentation than the published poets we have been examining. “Kotov, the Neighbor” settles longest on anapestic pentameter, but some lines are shorter (notably the line about Kotov missing a finger—the line is the shortest in the poem, perhaps missing its “foot” in imitation of the sense of the line), and not every anapest is realized, some missing an unstressed beat. Rein refers to the rhythm of “Kotov, the Neighbor” as his own taktovik, and says that he derived it from Selvinsky’s long poem, Ulialaevshchina. Taktovik is a rhythm with anywhere from one to three unstressed beats between ictuses. The loose form suits the narrative style.

As a whole, the poem is incredibly innovative in both form and content. Above all, its a-Soviet (non-didactic, subjective) approach to a perhaps typical Soviet situation not officially acknowledged (unpleasant neighbors—possibly going unpunished for war crimes—in one’s communal apartment) would have made the poem unpalatable for official publication. While poets like Vinokurov and Vanshenkin may have helped legitimize the publication of everyday lyrical subjects, Rein’s practice is rhythmically, textually, and philosophically daring beyond what those two soldier poets were

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98 For Rein as teacher, see, for example, Volkov, Conversations with Joseph Brodsky, 210.

publishing—and, in the case at least of “Kotov, the Neighbor,” evoked a life so gritty it could only find readers via samizdat.

**Widely Published Near-Contemporaries: Yevtushenko and Voznesensky**

One of the most remarkable and remarked-upon facets of the revival of literature during the post-Stalin “Thaw” period was the enormous popular success of two poets who came of age in the postwar period: Yevgeny Yevtushenko and Andrei Voznesensky. Yevtushenko and Voznesensky, both born in 1933, soon became the apparent leading representatives of the “Thaw generation” of poets. Victor Terras’s still indispensable *Handbook of Russian Literature* tells us that Yevtushenko published his first poem in 1949, and Voznesensky his after his graduation in 1957 from the Moscow Architectural Institute.\(^\text{100}\) Both poets had ascended to what can most vividly (though anachronistically) be called “rock star status” by the year 1962, during which large printings of their books would sell out immediately, and fans were known to throng to readings in the thousands. Patricia Blake, in the introduction to an anthology of new Soviet literature in translation, published in 1963, writes:

> Editions of 100,000 copies of Evtushenko’s books have sold out within the first forty-eight hours of publication. Advance orders alone for Voznesensky’s last book of verse, *The Triangular Pear* (1962), reached 100,000 two months before its publication…The quite inadequate size of printings of books by the new poets may have contributed to the rage for public readings which recently seized Russia—until both printings and readings were halted in the winter of 1963. The most spectacular of these readings took place in November 1962 in Moscow’s Luzhniki Sports Stadium where 14,000 people gathered to hear Voznesensky,

\(^{100}\)Terras, 132, 514.
Akhmadulina and Boris Slutsky. Poetry readings on a more modest scale had become the principal entertainment of intellectuals and students in Moscow, and in provincial towns as well, where poets went by the truckload.\footnote{Patricia Blake, ed., \textit{Halfway to the Moon: New Writing from Russia} (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), 9-10.}

Blake, who went to Moscow in 1962 to collect the material for the anthology quoted from above, goes on to describe a poetry reading she attended in August of that year:

This poetry reading was one of a series of six I attended in the public auditorium of Moscow’s Polytechnic Museum in August 1962. These began at 5 pm and, with only brief intermissions, lasted until midnight. The auditorium was filled to capacity—about 700 people, largely students from the university and from various institutes where tickets had been distributed. A majority had brought books of poetry which they followed, like music scores, during the performance. On stage […] sat four poets, Evtushenko, Voznesensky, Bulat Okudzhava (the immensely popular half-Georgian, half-Armenian who accompanies his poems on the guitar), and a lesser-known poet, Sergei Polikarpov.\footnote{Blake, \textit{Halfway to the Moon}, 20.}

It is worth quoting Blake at such length because she combines facts she researched and witnessed in her function as a journalist with the experience (from Western eyes) of the astonishing enthusiasm shown by audiences for these poets at the peak of the Thaw poetry phenomenon.\footnote{Blake, \textit{Halfway to the Moon}, 9.} Blake suggests that the enormous popularity of these readings was due in part to the difficulty of obtaining printed volumes, and in part to the relief people felt at having their feelings and thoughts publicly validated:

What happened was that the verse of such poets as Evtushenko, Voznesensky, Akhmadulina, and Vinokurov, the stories of Kazakov, Aksyonov and Nagibin, the novels and essays of Nekrasov, the plays of Volodin and Rozov, found an echo among a vast number of people who discovered at last that they too were not alone—that there existed others who could both articulate and share their yearnings, their preoccupations, their tastes. These people are by no means all students. Voznesensky told a Times correspondent that his readers are mainly members of the
‘technological intelligentsia’ [...] It is the poets who communicate most directly to Soviet readers, possibly because of the traditional response to poetry in Russia, but more likely because the immediacy of the form meets the urgency of the need…

In other words, a lyric poet can get a new piece out to his readers much faster than a novelist or dramatist can. In retrospect, thanks largely to the recent work of Emily Lygo, we can see that the impetus given by the Writers’ Union to the revival of lyric poetry played an important role as well (more about this in Chapter 2). Blake, who was able to spend time with both Yevtushenko and Voznesensky, quotes Voznesensky as telling her, “When I read my poetry to a great number of people, their emotional, almost sensual expression of feeling seems to me to reveal the soul of man—now no longer hidden behind closed shutters, but wide open like a woman who has just been kissed.”

Although that closing simile has not aged well, Blake’s observation of his public reading confirmed the gist of what Voznesensky said: “As Voznesensky, smiling now, sweat streaming down his face like tears, was called back again and again to the footlights, I saw young men and women all around me rise and crying real tears call out their thanks.” The effect of these public readings on the audience sounds akin to the cartharsis we, through reading (and perhaps misreading) Aristotle’s Poetics, have come to imagine as one of the functions of ancient performances of Greek tragedy.

The Avvakumites, coming of age as poets just as Yevtushenko’s star was meteorically rising in the mid-1950s (Voznesensky did not attract attention until 1959,

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104 Blake, Halfway to the Moon, 9.
105 Emily Lygo, Leningrad Poetry 1953-75.
106 Blake, Halfway to the Moon, 22.
107 Blake, Halfway to the Moon, 23.
see below), would naturally define their own poetic character to some extent in relation to Yevtushenko especially. In fact, the remarkable extent to which Brodsky in particular felt himself to be in antithetical relations with Yevtushenko as a poet is recorded in the memoiristic literature of Brodsky’s friends. Naiman remembers asking Brodsky why he resigned “with so much fuss” from the American Academy of Arts and Letters not when Voznesensky joined (in 1972), but when Yevtushenko did (in 1987).108 “He gave some pretty inconsistent, unconvincing explanations and then added, without any apparent logical connection, ‘AG [Brodsky’s shorthand for ‘Anatoly Genrikhovich’], can you imagine what it would have been like if they’d given the Nobel to one of them?’”109

Naiman explains what he thinks Brodsky meant:

For twenty five years or so, that is to say, for two generations or maybe more, they [Yevtushenko and Voznesensky] taught people how to speak and what to say, which means how and what to think. They dictated not only the fashion, a beggarly one for poor people, re-drawn in accordance to the political and aesthetic possibilities from journals—western journals and our own old ones, both locked away from the public in special archives—but also the equivalent prosody of society’s speech and through this a way of thinking: they dictated it to those who were conceiving children in the ‘60s, and to those children, now grown up, in the ‘80s. And Brodsky shattered those plaster masks of grimaces and winks and re-taught people their own native language. Party jargon was permanently relegated by this poetic-jive mutant [Naiman means Brodsky] to the journalists, and speech became more natural, more precise and more responsible. Brodsky’s grammatical and linguistic “models,” both kinds demanding effort from ordinary brains, prevailed. Not bad, eh? For this it was worth giving your audience a scare, bearing hard on eardrums grown numb from dull “Babi Yar” and “Goya.””110


109 Naiman, Slavnyi konets besslavnykh pokolenii, 230.

110 Naiman, Slavnyi konets besslavnykh pokolenii, 230-1.
Here Naiman lumps Yevtushenko (author of the long poem “Babi Yar,” about a Nazi massacre of Jews in Ukraine during World War II) with Voznesensky, whose early poem “Goya” (also about the victims of World War II) was one of his first to gain immense popularity. The naming of these two poems in particular may hint at something Naiman says more explicitly elsewhere, in the words of his fictional character Alexander Germantsev:

Yevtushenko is quite a character. An artist. All his poems are written with a vague ulterior motive. Supposedly in the beginning of the war he—then a little boy—danced at the village weddings that were being held hurriedly because the bridegrooms were leaving for the front. One gets the impression that he was dancing—and at the same time estimating how much it could come in handy in fifteen years, for a poem. And because of this it isn’t clear whether he really danced at the time, or just made it up. If someone taught him such a concept of the “lyrical hero,” then it must have been a joke or a trick: if it were so, you could then say that you danced, and that you played on the Moscow soccer team, and whatever you want. More than anything it’s like only a character, not a lyrical hero—and therefore like Salome, or Rilke’s “Spanish Dancer,” but with Yevtushenko’s legs: “Feet like wood, when you get home.”

This rather harsh passage refers to Yevtushenko’s account of his childhood and youth as recounted in *A Precocious Autobiography*, and quotes (slightly inaccurately) a line from Yevtushenko’s similarly autobiographical (and during the mid-1950s quite popular) poem “Weddings,” dated 1955. In the poem Yevtushenko describes how he, as an eight-year-old boy, would perform folk dancing at the weddings of soldiers leaving for the front:

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111 Naiman, *Slavnyi konets besslavnykh pokolenii*, 373.

112 Naiman’s Germantsev remembers the line “Kogda pridesh’ domoi” (“When you get home”), but the poem as printed reads, “Kogda vernus’ domoi” (“When I return home”).
О, свадьбы в дни военные!
Обманчивый уют,
слова неоткровенные
о том, что не убьют...
Дорогой зимней, снежною,
сквозь ветер, бьющий зло,
лечу на свадьбу спешную
в соседнее село.
Походочкой расслабленной,
с челюкой на лбу,
вхожу,
в гудящую избу.
Наряженный,
взволнованный,
среди друзей,
родных,
сидит мобилизованный
растерянный жених.
Сидит
с невестой — Верею.
А через пару дней
шинель наденет серую,
на фронт поедет в ней.
Землей чужой,
не местною,
с винтовкою пойдет,
под пулею немецкою,
быть может, упадет.
В стакане брага пенная,
но пить ее невмочь.
Быть может, ночь их первая — последняя их ночь.
Глядит он опечаленно
и — болью всей души
мне через стол отчаянно:
«А ну давай, пляши!»
Забыли все о выпитом,
все смотрят на меня,
и вот иду я с вывертом,
подковками звения.
То выдам дробь,
то по полу
носки проволоку.
Свищу,
в ладоши хлопаю,
взлетаю к потолку.
Летят по стенам лозунги,
что Гитлеру капут,
а у невесты
сезьыньки
горючие
текут.
Уже я измочаленный,
уже едва дышу...
«Пляши!...» –
кричат отчаяно,
и я опять пляшу...

Ступни как деревянные,
когда вернусь домой,
но с новой свадьбы
пьяные
являются за мной.
Едва отпущен материю,
на свадьбе вновь гляжу
и вновь у самой скатерти
вприсядочку хожу.
Невесте горько плакается,
стоят в слезах друзья.
Мне страшно.
но не плясать –
нельзя.

and on the bride’s face
bitter tears
are flowing.
Now I’ve used up all my energy,
I can barely breathe...
“Dance!”—
they cry despairingly,
and again I am dancing...
My feet are like wood,
when I return home,
but from a new wedding
drunken guests
come for me.
My mother barely lets me go,
and again I’m looking at a wedding
and again at the very tablecloth
I do Cossack kicks.
The bride is weeping bitterly,
Friends stand around in tears.
I’m scared.
I don’t feel like dancing,
but not to dance—
is impossible.

This poem is talented, the extended feminine line-endings giving it a folk verse feel, with some fascinating sound play. Try reading, for instance, the lines “Dressed up, excited, /
among friends and family, / sits the mobilized / bewildered [rasterianny] bridegroom” without making the mistake of reading rastrelianny (“gunned down”) for rasterianny (“bewildered”). And consider the pathos of the bridegroom soldier caught on the narrow verge of two opposing worlds in the concentration of sidit mobilizovanny (“sits the mobilized”)—he’s like a live butterfly pinned to a board, fluttering, yet unable to fly.

Yet the poem clearly stimulates the antipathy of Naiman’s character, Germanstev. While we cannot necessarily equate the views of the fictional character with those of Naiman, the passage voices what had been a common criticism leveled at both Yevtushenko and Voznesensky: that they had a sense for precisely which themes were going to be politically acceptable and how far they could take their liberal, even “bad
boy” image without getting into serious trouble with the regime. In other words, that Yevtushenko and Voznesensky were politically adept and therefore poetically impure—that their poetic talent was subservient to politics and perhaps to their ambitions, whereas the Avvakumites were ready not to publish rather than compromise their poems with lines like these of Yevtushenko’s, published in Novyi Mir in 1955:

Милая, не надо слов обидных, что ищу тревог и мятых. У меня на свете две любимых – это Революция и ты.  

Darling, don’t say such hurtful things, that I seek out troubles and suffering. I have two loves in this world: they are the Revolution and you.

This was the controversy that surrounded Yevtushenko in particular, the controversy Brodsky stirred up further with his noisy resignation from the American Academy of Arts and Letters when Yevtushenko was inducted. Plenty has been written, pro and con, about the official and moral standing of these “civic” poets during the Soviet era and the sums of their deeds, poetic and political, and my focus here is not to sort out those claims. Rather, it is to investigate Naiman’s main point, which has to do with the way Yevtushenko, Voznesensky, and their published peers used language and how their massive popularity promoted and encouraged that particular way of speaking. In the end, the Avvakumites’ feel for language deserves careful consideration, and Naiman’s point that Yevtushenko and Voznesensky’s language was “Party” and clichéd and that Brodsky’s was fresh and natural is, in my view, most relevant to the difference between

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115 To get a feel for the background to Brodsky’s antipathy towards Yevtushenko, see Volkov, Conversations, 116-22.
the two groups generationally—even though they were separated in age by just a few years.\textsuperscript{116}

A final note before having a closer look at Yevtushenko’s poetry: it is possible that Yevtushenko in particular provoked so much ire in Brodsky because he (Yevtushenko) came so close to expressing what the Avvakumites were looking for, but chose to orient himself from within the Soviet project rather than independently of it. For the Avvakumites, then, Yevtushenko was the poet most representative of the emerging trend they rejected. A closer look at his poetry of that time can illuminate more precisely what the Avvakumites found provoking and eminently rejectable about it.

Yevtushenko’s early poetry, as represented in \textit{Poetry Day} by a poem that begins “I don’t know — what he wants…” [\textit{Ne znaiu ia} — / chego on khochet], shows talent and a sensibility not at all far removed from the kinds of poems the Avvakumites were writing at the time:

\begin{quote}
 Perhaps the lessons learned by young Yevtushenko in wartime Siberia were what would subsequently guide him in his rather masterful balancing act between official acclamation and opprobrium. He had learned via his hungry stomach that if his employer told him, «Ну давай, пляши!» (“Come on then, dance!”), he had better do it. Whereas the younger Avvakumites, not having experienced the war in this way, were far more likely to respond, “I’d prefer not to,” and walk away. For provincial Yevtushenko, publication was an important affirmation of his talent. For the Avvakumites, rejection from publications affirmed their independence.

A quite telling difference between Yevtushenko and the Avvakumites is that his is a story of being accepted and embraced by one establishment figure after another (that is how he tells it in his \textit{A Precocious Autobiography}, and it is also in evidence via poems he dedicated to various influential literary figures of the time). The Avvakumites, three of them Jews (then a passport item), found themselves repeatedly pushed out of the mainstream culture (there was a quota for Jews in institutions of higher learning, for instance). When we take these main elements—the ambitious, small-town Yevtushenko who understood what it meant to perform for food during the war versus the urban Avvakumites who came of age just a couple of years later (two of them, Naiman and Brodsky, with both parents intact), plus the culture that embraced Russian Yevtushenko and rejected the Avvakumites—we get a picture of a fairly important generational and cultural divide that would set the Avvakumites largely in reaction against Yevtushenko and his companions.
\end{quote}

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Like most of the poems we’ve examined so far in *Poetry Day*, this poem is built on standard meter and rhyme. Its iambic tetrameter is rhymed AbAb. Yevtushenko plays with the layout a la Mayakovsky, breaking up some of his lines into stepladder formations. It is not clear why Yevtushenko breaks up some lines (always those with phrases separated by commas) and not other, similarly comma-laden lines. Perhaps his reason is the same as Mayakovsky’s (in the interview cited above): as an aid to recitation.

The vocabulary is also more or less ordinary, the syntax straightforward. As we noted in regard to “Weddings” above, Yevtushenko’s sound play and lexical choices can

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117 *Den’ poezii*, 100.
be inspired. In this poem his rhymes are sometimes interesting and even risky: 

_khochet/khodit_ (“he wants/he walks”), _shorokh/bol’shogo_ (“rustle/big”), _migom/mirom_ (“moment/world”). But just as often he exact-rhymes verbs with verbs, which is easier to do than not to do in Russian. Still, his rhyme can echo philosophically, as in the final lines of this poem, _svoi prava/novye slova_ (“his rights/new words”). This pair almost encapsulates the position and promise of the new poets—to exercise their rights to say new words. And his poem contains some mystery in it: who is this person who wanders, who wants something that the speaker can’t quite grasp? What will be those new words and what will happen when he says them? What does the apple mean? It’s something fresh, crispy and delicious and it is nurturing this mysterious walker. Is the mysterious walker Yevtushenko’s muse? Is he Yevtushenko himself, biting into crisp new words? Certainly the desire for recognition (“He rises, recognized, above the world / And says new words”) would suggest it.

In “I don’t know what he wants…” Yevtushenko articulates some of the desire and searching of the new generation, and he does so with talent, sensitivity, and an eye to the pathos of the everyday (how change is passed in the trolleybus, munching on a crispy apple). However, Yevtushenko differs greatly from the Avvakumites in that he places himself squarely behind the principle of subjecting poetry to the civic mission of building a socialist future, as can be seen by another of his poems published in 1956, this one in _Literary Moscow_: 
Тебя после каждой лекции
со всех сторон теребят.
Ты комплименты лестные
слушаешь от ребят.
В жизни так много славного—
свиданья, театр, цветы,
но нету чего-то главного,
которого хочешь ты.

Вот ты бежишь по лестницам.
Тебе восемнадцать лет.
В сумочке—
с профилем ленинским
твой комсомольский билет.
В потихоньку полночи
сонной квартиры твоей—
знаю—
ты просишь помощи
у строгих великих идей.
И, распустив светлорусые
косы густые свои,
думаешь о революции,
хочешь большой любви.
В квартире—
шаганье маятника
да твой разговор с душой...
Очень еще ты маленькая.
Я рядом большой, большой.
Ты моя младшая спутница.
Спутник я старший твой.
Мне беспокойно,
что сбудется
с русой твоей головой.
Муча тебя тревогою
поиска высоты,
сам я поверил во много,
чтобы поверила ты...  

After every lecture
they pester you from all sides.
You listen to flattering
compliments from the guys.
So much in life is great—
dates, the theater, flowers,
but some main thing you want
is not there.

There you are running along the stairs.
You’re eighteen years old.
In your bag is—
with its profile of Lenin—
your Komsomol card.
In your sleepy apartment
as midnight ticks away—
I know—
you’re asking for help
from strict great ideas.
And, letting down your fair,
thick braids,
you are thinking about revolution,
you want a great love.
In the apartment is
the pendulum’s pacing
and your conversation with your heart...
You’re awfully little still.
Next to you I’m big, big.
You’re my younger companion.
Your older companion—that’s me.
It worries me,
what will happen
with your fair head.
Tormenting you with anxiety
of the search for the heights,
I myself believed in a lot,
in order that you would believe...

Here Yevtushenko mixes the newly permitted intimate motif with the standard promotion
of the Soviet project. A young man addresses his beloved, who at eighteen years old is
younger than he and the object of general adoration. Standard Soviet features within this
time-worn love plot are the inclusion of Lenin and Komsomol membership and the theme
of striving forward and upward (“you are thinking about revolution, I you want a great

118 Literaturnaia Moskva, 449-450.
love”; “search for the heights”). On the newly rediscovered intimate end of things, the poem displays a young couple in her room late at night, his anxiety and desire for her and simultaneous desire to protect her, and the unusually ambivalent ending, in which he admits believing in many things in order that she would believe them. The line-final ellipsis makes a stark contrast to the strong declamatory statement more usual for Soviet verse. In fact, those closing lines “I myself believed in a lot / in order that you would believe…” seem to come out of nowhere, contradicting what came before and weakening the poem (or conversely, what came before weakens those last, ambivalent lines). This could be because in order to publish the poem in 1956, Yevtushenko may have had to make alterations and substitutions in what he had originally written. Support for this theory can be found in variants of Yevtushenko’s poem published decades later.

In Yevtushenko’s First Collected Works in Eight Volumes [Pervoe sobranie sochenii v vos’mi tomakh] (1997), “After every lecture...” is a different animal. There is no mention of Lenin or the Komsomol, and a love triangle plot completely absent from the 1956 publication comes to the fore. The discrepancy between the two versions is not accounted for by any explanatory note. Generally, it would be assumed that the 1997 printing would be what Yevtushenko originally wrote—the poem that had to be altered to make it politically palatable and publishable in 1956. This was a standard practice at the time. Sometimes the poet himself altered lines, other times the editors took changes upon themselves, with or without informing the author.\footnote{Yevtushenko is quite frank about the

\begin{itemize}
\item Naiman writes about similar editorial interference in a poem by Akhmatova. The lines “A crucified city / now leads to my home” was deemed impermissible by her editor. Samoilov, Brodsky, and Naiman sat with her, trying to think up a substitute. Naiman proposed “Another misfortune / Dispatches me home.” Akhmatova agreed to it immediately and laughed the whole thing off (Naiman, Remembering Anna Akhmatova [New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1993], 138). From this episode we can glean that Akhmatova—sometimes, at least—even produced her own alternative lines. But note that the alternative chosen is very much in the style and spirit of Akhmatova—there is no “Komsomol card” here. Which leads
\end{itemize}
practice even in the early 1960s. In his *Precocious Autobiography*, he looks back on his developing career in the last years of the Stalin era:

I remember Tarasov ringing me up and summoning me to his office. That day *Soviet Sport* was carrying my May Day verses.

‘There’s been a bit of a crisis, Zhenya,’ he smiled, embarrassed.

‘The chief editor got in a panic—he discovered your poem didn’t mention Stalin once and it was too late to scrap it.’

‘So what happens now?’

‘Well, I didn’t want to bother you…so I added four lines to the poem myself.’

‘Fine, that’s all right with me,’ I said cheerfully. With or without Stalin—it was all the same to me. I was a real brat.

Another time one of my poems appeared in the paper *Trud*.

I found some lines in it I had never written.

I went to the *Trud* office to kick up a row.

“We did it to make your poem publishable,” one of the editors said appeasingly. “What’s so shocking about it?”

And indeed, what was so shocking about it, I began to wonder. After all, I had myself worshipped Stalin since my early childhood.

I soon had a thorough understanding of the rules: for a poem to be published there had to be some verses about Stalin in it. It even seemed to me perfectly natural.

I no longer had to have such verses written for me—I wrote them myself.120

Yevtushenko writes this in order to show how undeveloped and irresponsible he was as a young poet. He refers to his commemorative poems as “loud and empty exercises”121 (which sounds like language used in the newspapers of the time) and goes on to say how he learned that he must write poems that help people. He does not specifically say that he gave up accommodating his editors and publishers by inserting politically appropriate lines, however.

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Without a reliably dated manuscript from 1956 or earlier, there is no way to know whether “After every lecture...” was originally the 1956 version, the 1997 version, or some other variant. What we do know is that Yevtushenko and other poets were familiar with the editorial insertion practice and that they relied on what would in the 1960s become a widespread phenomenon called *samizdat*, or self-publishing, to distribute their poems in undistorted form. For some poets, the passing of hand-written or typed copies from person to person was the only way their poems got read. For others, the appearance of a distorted variant in a journal signalled that an unscarred original might exist. In the case of this poem, the variant published in 1997 is certainly the superior of the two:

Тебя после каждой лекции
со всех сторон теребят.
Ты комплименты лестные
слушашь от ребят.
Вечером,
с мной значительной,
весь почему-то в снегу,
к тебе приходит начитанный,
очкистый студент МГУ.
Он винограда болгарского
тебе приносит кило
и, продолжая богатствовать,
в театр ведет,
не в кино.
В жизни так много славного—
свиданья,
театры,
цветы,
но нету чего-то главного,
которого хочешь ты.
В квартире—
шагание маятника
да твой разговор с душой...
Очень еще ты маленькая.
Я рядом большой-большой.
Я прихожу.
Не кушаю.
Чаю с вареньем не пью.
Очень тебя я слушаю.
Очень тебя люблю.

After every lecture
they pester you from all sides.
You listen to flattering
compliments from the guys.
In the evening,
with a significant air,
and for some reason all covered with snow,
a well-read, glasses-wearing
MGU student comes to see you.
He brings you a kilo
of Bulgarian grapes
and, continuing to show off his wealth,
takes you to the theater,
not the movies.
So much in life is great—
dates,
the theater,
flowers,
but some main thing you want
is not there.
In the apartment is
the pendulum’s pacing
and your conversation with your heart...
You’re awfully little still.
Next to you I’m big, big.
I come over.
I don’t eat anything.
I don’t drink tea with jam.
I really listen to you.
I really love you.

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Ты моя младшая спутница,
спутник я старший твой.
Мне беспокойно,
что сбудется
с русой твоей головой.
Вместе мы дышим тревогою,
поиска высоты.
Сам я поверил во многое,
чтобы поверила ты…

You’re my younger companion.
Your older companion—that’s me.
It worries me,
what will happen
with your fair head.
Together we breathe anxiety,
of the search for the heights.
I myself believed in a lot,
in order that you would believe...

This poem, compared to the static published version, has gained a narrative: now it’s a kind of folk tale in which the princess has a rich suitor and a poor one and longs for the true love offered by the poor one rather than the rich one’s Bulgarian grapes. The “some main thing you want” is transformed from a political desire for some kind of “revolution” to simple love and companionship. Towards the end of the poem, the conflict between the hero and heroine that in the 1956 poem was expressed as the “I” of the poem “Tormenting you with anxiety / of the search for the heights” has been changed so that the two together experience the same thing: “Together we breathe anxiety, / of the search for the heights.” This subtly re-orientates the conflict in the poem to that between poets and some outer force that is causing them anxiety. If we read that force as the Communist Party, the closing lines, “I myself believed in a lot, / so that you would believe in them…” come across as poignant and loaded with unspoken criticism of and disappointment with the system that promised them both so much and let them down—but nonetheless Yevtushenko himself still comes across as making the poem serve his political needs (in 1997, to play down his prior associations with the Soviet apparatus). This is in part because neither the 1956 nor the 1997 publications look like the original poems. The 1956 poem lacks unity, and the Komsomol card and the profile of Lenin are classic examples of lines added for the sake of publication. The 1997 poem has new lines, “I come over. / I don’t eat. / I don’t drink tea with jam,” that seem clumsily inserted—
making the hero enter the apartment right after the old line in which the hero is already “next to” the heroine (“Next to you I am big, big”). That is to say, these lines seem to bear the marks of being a later interpolation. These new lines are what give the poets vs. authorities cast to the poem: the two lovers don’t eat or drink, but talk, worry, and love each other as they “search for the heights.”

From the technical point of view, both variants of Yevtushenko’s poem display a mixture of bold and banal rhymes. In the 1956 version, it is bold and innovative to rhyme the hair color “fair” [svetlorusye] with the politically loaded “revolution” [revoliutsii]—the mixing of political/patriotic and intimate themes is distilled in this rhyme, and the nod towards “Russian” in the word for the speaker’s heroine’s hair color points subtly towards a gently nationalistic reading of the poem. On the other hand, “flowers/you” [tsvety/ty] in both variants has got to be one of the oldest rhymes in the book.

Quite probably Yevtushenko was well aware of that. In his Precocious Autobiography, Yevtushenko writes:

For several years I sat down every evening with an enormous Russian dictionary and, going through it in alphabetical order, tried to find an unused rhyme for every word. In the end I had a note-book with something like 10,000 new rhymes in it. Unfortunately it vanished, but by then I had worked out a new system which was afterwards called ‘Yevtushenkian’—the attribution was too generous for I had invented nothing, I had only made use of certain principles taken from Russian folklore. Unfortunately it would be difficult for me to explain to the Western reader because the point gets lost in translation.

123 Judging by where the poem achieves unity and where that unity falls apart, I would guess that the Bulgarian love plot and most of the 1956 poem, including the images of the heroine’s heart-to-heart alone in her apartment, are the original elements. But, as noted, without dated manuscripts, that must remain speculation.

Yevtushenko writes that he was consciously, studiously, and specifically trying to bring fresh rhymes to Russian poetry. And yet, “flowers/you” [tsvety/ty] ought to be one of those rhymes that can’t really be used anymore. The last poet to use that pair successfully might have been Innokenty Annensky (1855-1909), in the closing line of a poem called “Thirteen Lines”: “Because the flowers—are you” [Potomu chto tsvety—eto ty]. In that line Annensky used sound identity (tsvety / ty) to great effect in underscoring the harmony and even unity between flowers and the love object.

From the Avvakumite point of view, Yevtushenko’s use of the powerful “flowers/you” pair in such a throwaway fashion, burying it in mid-poem, and then allowing the re-appearance of “you” as the last word of the poem, might have seemed in poor taste, undeveloped, insensitive or just plain careless. And really, as one reads this poem, one feels the rhymes much more as verse rhymes—what the poet needed in order to make the poem rhyme, rather than what the poem attracted to itself to result in something like Coleridge’s famous formulation, “The right words in the right order.”

Yevtushenko writes as straightforwardly in A Precocious Autobiography about his decision to write “civic poetry”—that is, to make poetry subservient to a civic function—as he wrote about allowing his poems to be altered for publication:

To a Russian the word ‘poet’ has the resonance of the word ‘fighter.’ Russia’s poets were always fighters for the future of their country and for justice. Her poets helped Russia to think. Her poets helped Russia to struggle against her tyrants. So when after Stalin’s death, Russia was going through a difficult moment in her inner life, I became convinced that I had not the right to cultivate my private Japanese garden of poetry. And the great Russian poets came to my help, their example making me believe that civic poetry

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125 Innokentii Annenskii, Lirika (Minsk: Kharvest, 2002), 178.
can be more intimately lyrical than any other if it is written with single-minded generosity. To write only of nature or women or world sorrow at a time of hardship for your countrymen is almost immoral. And it was a time of hardship for the Russians.\textsuperscript{126}

In the press during Soviet times, cultivation of a “private garden” of poetry was a serious accusation leveled at lyric poets like Anna Akhmatova. In this and other similar writings, Yevtushenko places himself firmly within the mainstream of the old Soviet ideology of producing “useful” art:

A strong man is not afraid of showing his weaknesses. I believed then and I believe now in the spiritual strength of our people, and I therefore think it my duty to speak openly about whatever I think our shortcomings are. This is precisely my way of showing my love for the people and my boundless trust in them [...] The best of the younger generation may wear stove-pipe trousers, like jazz music, even dance to rock ‘n’ roll, but this in no way prevents them from believing in the Revolution...they stand in an endless queue for an exhibition of Picasso or Léger, but they criticize bourgeois culture and fight for their own socialist culture nonetheless.\textsuperscript{127}

Here the Avvakumites, who are strongly linked to one another by their commonly held perception of being outside the mainstream, writing poems that answer only to the artistic demands of poetry, decisively part ways with Yevtushenko. Yevtushenko’s decision to harness his talent to a printable conception of “civic poetry” meant, in the final analysis, that his poetry—however necessary and refreshing—would be middlebrow. It had to be accessible to a broad spectrum of the populus and speak in a way not too demanding of the listener/reader. The Avvakumites, in contrast, rejected any language that sounded pat, packaged, clichéd, or compromised. Let it be highbrow or lowbrow—anything would be preferable to middlebrow.

\textsuperscript{126} Yevtushenko, \textit{A Precocious Autobiography}, 94-95.

\textsuperscript{127} Yevtushenko, \textit{A Precocious Autobiography}, 100, 104.
Yevtushenko remains the most emblematic of that postwar, newly-critical-of-the-establishment-from-within-the-establishment generation. He had three poetry collections published between 1952 and 1956. Thus his work and stance were already prominent as the Avvakumites were defining their own poetics, and it follows that the features of his work highlighted above would provoke the Avvakumites as they shaped their own poetry and world view. It explains in large part Brodsky’s otherwise inexplicably long-standing opposition to Yevtushenko in particular, even when Yevtushenko’s almost equally famous contemporary, Andrei Voznesensky, went relatively unremarked by the Avvakumites.

Voznesensky’s name was often mentioned in the late 1950s, the 1960s, and 1970s in the same breath with Yevtushenko’s. To some degree, Voznesensky shared Yevtushenko’s civic stance and publicistic voice, speaking on behalf of “the people”:

Я не знаю, как это сделать,
Но, товарищи из ЦК,
уберите Ленина с денег,
так цена его высока!
Понимаю, что деньги – мерка
человеческого труда.
Но, товарищи, сколько мерзкого
прилипает к ним иногда…
Я видел, как подлец
мусолил по Владимиру Ильичу.
Пальцы ползали малосольные
по лицу его, по лицу!
В гастрономской бакалейной
он ревел, от водки пунцов:
«Дорогуша, подай за Ленина
da поллитра и огурцов».
Ленин – самое чистое деянье,
он не должен быть замутнен.
Уберите Ленина с денег,
on – для сердца и для знамен.

I don’t know how to do it,
But, comrades from the TsK,
take Lenin off money,
since his value is high!
I understand that money is the measure
of human labor.
But, comrades, how much filthiness
sticks to it sometimes...
I’ve seen a scoundrel
paw Vladimir Ilyich with grubby hands.
His sweaty finger crawled
over his face, his face!
In the grocery store
he roared, ruddy from vodka:
“Darlin’, for Lenin give me
two half-liters and some pickles.”

130 Central Committee (of the Communist Party).
In general, however, Voznesensky’s poetry was appreciated more for his focus on formal invention and technical experimentation (not in the above-quoted poem, but in others) than for his politics. Moreover, since Voznesensky came to notice significantly later than Yevtushenko—with the publications of “I am Goya!” [Ia—Goia] and “The Masters” [Mastera] in 1959—he was a less important figure to the Avvakumites in terms of establishing their own position. By the late 1950s, the Avvakumites were too busy with their discoveries of poets like Mandelstam and Akhmatova to think much about Voznesensky, who anyway—as a follower of the Moscow/Futurist line—was a poet whose work was alien to the Avvakumites’ more Petersburgian aesthetic. On the whole, Voznesensky got lumped together at that time with Yevtushenko as “stadium” poets within the establishment, meaning that like (and often with) Yevtushenko, Voznesensky was known for giving theatrical recitations for large, even huge audiences.

Although Bobyshev, Brodsky, Naiman, and Rein were only a few years younger than Yevtushenko and Voznesensky, the two older poets’ output and performance practice in the late 1950s formed a career path the Avvakumites found eminently rejectable. Sergei Dovlatov remembered a visit with Brodsky three decades later, during the Gorbachev era:

Brodsky had undergone a serious operation on his heart. I went to visit him in the hospital. I hasten to add that even under normal circumstances, Brodsky stifles me. And here I’m completely at a loss.

There lies Joseph—pale, barely alive. Machines, tubes and dials all around him.

And so I come out with something completely irrelevant: “Here you are lying sick, and you shouldn’t be. In the meantime, Yevtushenko’s coming out against the collective farms...”
It really was true, something like that was happening. Yevtushenko’s speech at the Moscow Writers’ Congress had been rather decisive.

So I said, “Yevtushenko gave a speech against the collective farms...”

Brodsky, barely audibly, answered, “If he’s against, then I’m for.”

A self-ironic joke, certainly, but one founded on the same principles with which Brodsky began trying his poetic voice of total independence. If Yevtushenko was for Brodsky a political poet, then Brodsky was only and at all costs only a poet. Naiman notes that to some degree this put Brodsky in an awkward position of being dependent on being independent, as Dovlatov’s anecdote humorously illustrates.

The Avvakumites’ outsider status in regard to the question of whether a poet was to be considered a “dogmatist” or a “reformer” or whether their poems were thought to be pro- or anti-Soviet is well expressed by another of Dovlatov’s witty and telling episodes:

“Tolya!” I call to Naiman, “Let’s drop by to see Lyova Druskin.”
“Not for me,” he says, “he’s too Soviet.”
“What do you mean, Soviet? You’ve got it all wrong!”
“Soviet, anti-Soviet—what’s the difference.”

Whereas Yevtushenko eagerly took sides in the struggle between the so-called “dogmatists” and the “reformers,” the Avvakumites simply rejected the whole framework.

It may be that it was easier to reject the political debate for poets living far away from Moscow, in Leningrad with its own political and poetical traditions. Naiman writes about just this in Inglorious Generations’ Glorious Finish:


132 Naiman, Slavnyi konets besslavnykh pokolenii, 229.

We (who is “we”? Some people in Leningrad; a handful of people altogether) wrote poems by words, while they wrote by expressions. This was completely alien to us, in part antagonistic, but primarily for us—simply unacceptable. Because poems made with expressions were written by the whole gang of Soviet poets, both the worse ones and the very best. And their most beautiful expressions—their apt, profound, pure-hearted expressions—made us, in Leningrad, a bit queasy. But in Moscow who cared? At that time in the golden-headed [city], all the progressives—both the old, and, strange as it seems, the young—were knocking themselves out for “sincerity in literature.” We, on the other hand, in our Northern Palmyra, whether because of the White Nights or some equally artificial reason, were rather more for insincerity. (I’m trying to convey how I understood it then—now I think somewhat differently about writing in words and expressions.)

Living in Leningrad—whether due to the White Nights or the more than 700 kilometers that lie between the two cities—seems to have given its residents critical distance by which to evaluate goings-on in Moscow. The image of Leningrad as a “Northern Palmyra” suggests a quasi-independent status for Leningrad, as Palmyra was known for being an important oasis city, connected to the Roman empire by trade and culture, but not under Roman rule. Whatever the case, the Avvakumites clearly felt both their cultural status and creative impulse to be distinct from the norm dictated in Moscow and demanded by publishers. As we will see in Chapter 2, the Avvakumites came to terms early with the unpublishability of their work.

By the mid-1950s, then, the Avvakumites-to-be had been able to absorb at least a taste of the poetry of some of the century’s greatest masters—especially Akhmatova, Pasternak, Tsvetaeva, Mayakovsky—and also of an array of lesser, but still important talents. Already they gravitated towards the humane cores and poetic talent and achievement of living poets from older generations, such as Martynov, Slutsky,

134 Naiman, Slavnyi konets besslavnykh pokolenii, 103.
Vanshenkin, and Vinokurov, and found things both to appreciate and to reject in the poetry of their own slightly older peers, especially the most well known, Yevtushenko.

As for the resurgence of official interest in publishing groundbreaking new poetry and rehabilitating suppressed poets, 1956 marked a high point that was not to be reached again for several decades. The de-prioritizing of Soviet investment in poetry can be roughly measured simply by the shrinking physical size of *Poetry Day* from year to year. By 1964 *Poetry Day* was little over half the size of the original:


In 1956, though, the explosive juxtaposition of standard Soviet lyrics with a veritable “Noah’s Ark” of forgotten, suppressed, and neglected masters, along with the state-approved impulse for a sort of new, more humanist Constructivism—all reflected in the pages of *Poetry Day*—would have a profound effect on the Thaw generation of poets. The effects on the Avvakumites-to-be in particular, as they came to consciousness of themselves as poets, will be the subject of the following chapter.
Chapter Two
Parting with the Publishable

The Avvakumites, like many beginning writers of their generation, were excited by the new possibilities opened up by the Thaw and eager to publish. Over the next several years, experience proved that official publication was not going to be possible for them. In this chapter I will trace the process by which these poets turned from the prospect of publication in Soviet journals to alternative ways of sharing their poetry. This process played a significant role in bringing the Avvakumites together as a group and helping to define what they wanted most from their own poetry.

The Avvakumites’ writerly activities in 1956 were characteristic of a broader trend during the Thaw of unsupervised student literary publishing. Due in part to a push from the Writers’ Union to encourage younger writers, students in a number of institutions were allowed to publish unsupervised wall newspapers, journals, and collections of their own writing during the first years of the Thaw.\(^{135}\) This type of self-publishing (what would come to be known in the 1960s as *samizdat* as it was pushed “underground”) appeared even before Khrushchev’s Secret Speech. In Leningrad, students at Leningrad State University’s Philological Faculty put out what is commonly accepted as one of the first post-Stalin self-published student literary journals, *Goluboi buton* (Light-blue Bud).\(^{136}\) Students at the Mining Institute printed two poetry anthologies, in 1955 and in

\(^{135}\) See Lygo, *Leningrad Poetry 1953-75*.

The second of these anthologies was destroyed prior to distribution, but several copies survived. Other student publications in Leningrad in 1956 included: *Litfront Litfaka* (*Literary Front of the Literary Faculty*), published by students of Leningrad Pedagogical Institute; *Svezhie golosa* (*Fresh Voices*), by students of the Institute of Railroad Transport Engineers; and *Eres’* (*Heresy*), by students of the Library Institute. At the Forestry Institute, the school press put out a collection entitled *Stikhi studentov* (*Students’ Poems*). Non-institution-based publications included A. Domashov’s literary almanac *Belye nochi* (*White Nights*) and an alternative newspaper called simply *Informatsia* (*Information*).

*Kul’tura* (*Culture*), the wall newspaper of the Leningrad Technological Institute (hereafter abbreviated as LTI), thrived briefly in the fall of 1956. The paper was comprised of several articles on contemporary cultural phenomena. The articles were written by Bobyshev, Naiman, Rein and other students of LTI. After the “Hungarian events” (as the student-led Hungarian revolution crushed by the Soviet army in the fall of 1956 was euphemistically termed in the USSR), *Kul’tura* and its writers came under criticism. The paper was shut down and its writers suffered consequences ranging from unpleasant meetings with officials to (in Rein’s case) expulsion from LTI.

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139 Severiukhin, *Samizdat Leningrada: Literaturnaia entsiklopediia*, 472-474; see also Viacheslav Dolinin, ed., *Samizdat* (Pavlovsk: Nauchno-informatsionnyi tsentr (NITs) “Memorial,” 1993), 7. The most comprehensive record of publications by various literary groups of the era in Leningrad that I have found can be perused in two formats in *Samizdat Leningrada. Literaturnaia Entsiklopediia*: in a time-line of events (471ff); and as an alphabetical listing of publications (619ff).
In the first part of this chapter I examine the Avvakumite contributions to *Kul’tura*, with a dual purpose: gaining insight into the variety of sources outside of Soviet literary journals that provided inspiration for the rhythms and themes of their poetry; and discovering to what extent the language used in the articles conformed to the norms of mainstream publications. I will also study the events that led to the demise of *Kul’tura*, in order to trace the process that ultimately led the Avvakumites to reject the path of official publication.

The tensions between the demands of poetry and the demands of publication will be further explicated in this chapter’s second section. Here, I analyze three poems written in 1957 about the scientific triumph for the Soviet Union that was the launch of the Sputnik satellite into orbit. The three poems exemplify three possible fates for a Thaw-era poem whose author hoped to publish it: official publication, illegal publication, and no publication. Examination of these three poems helps explicate how the Avvakumites were pushed away from official publication, necessitating the further decision of whether or not to publish illegally.

The final section of this chapter focuses on the ways the Avvakumites found to share their poetry when they turned away from the possibility of official publication. This section demonstrates that even without the support of the official press there was a strong structure of friendship groups and more formal venues in which the Avvakumites could both give voice to their poetry and be exposed to that of their contemporaries.

The stories of *Kul’tura*, the Sputnik poems, and the social venues for poetry that grew up along with the poets of the Thaw generation together illustrate how the Avvakumites were discouraged from official publication and simultaneously made
decisions that closed that path to them. As early as 1957, the Avvakumites had already
come to terms with the unlikelihood that their poems—as they felt poems needed to be
written—would be published in the Soviet press. By 1960, the full complement of
Avvakumites that included the quartet of Bobyshev, Brodsky, Naiman, and Rein had
come together via Leningrad’s network of poetic circles. Interaction among these circles
satisfied their desire to share their poetry to the extent that publishing in Soviet journals
no longer seemed important. They were ready to become full-fledged Avvakumites.

The Wall Newspaper Kul’tura at the Leningrad Technological Institute

That the future Avvakumites were energetic, enterprising, and eager to write and
publish is clear from the appearance of the LTI wall newspaper, Kul’tura, in 1956.
Kul’tura featured critical articles on various cultural subjects. Like all Russian wall
newspapers, Kul’tura was a print paper posted in a prominent public area—in this case,
the main staircase of the Institute.

According to Yury Dimitrin (formerly Mikhelson):

The idea of the newspaper Kul’tura was born on the many kilometers of
paths of industrial territory of the Okhtinsky Chemical Plant, where
Boris Zelikson and I did practical training the summer between our
fourth and fifth years of study. While shirking our techno-industrial
obligations, we walked and talked a lot. It was during these
conversations that the idea for the newspaper Kul’tura was born. It
materialized in the beginning of the semester in September of that same
year.140

Boris Zelikson was the newly elected Secretary of LTI’s Komsomol (Young Communist)
Committee. Zelikson, a Jewish non-Party member, had been miraculously elected

140 Dolinin, Samizdat, 37.
Secretary in the spring of 1956, in the wake of Khrushchev’s Secret Speech. Zelikson assigned various of his colleagues to head the different sections of the journal (art, literature, music, film, theater). For the first—and what would turn out to be the only—issue, Bobyshev, Naiman, and Rein each contributed articles. Bobyshev, the poetry editor, wrote about beginning poet Vladimir Uflyand. Naiman, in charge of the film section, wrote about a Belgian film that had quite an impact on his generation and is now all but forgotten by most, *Seagulls Are Dying in the Harbor* [*Meeuwen sterven in de Haven*] (1955). Rein, perhaps inspired by his trips to the newly opened third floor Impressionist rooms of the Hermitage State Museum, wrote about artist Paul Cezanne.

*Kul’tura’s* status as a publication was *samochinnyi* (unauthorized, or literally “self-ranked”)—meaning that no authority pre-approved the publication and that the articles themselves were not vetted by censors. According to Bobyshev, its appearance on the wall occasioned a great deal of interest on the part of its student readers. However, *Kul’tura’s* independent and critical articles attracted unwanted attention from the authorities as well, as will be described below.

Part of *Kul’tura’s* appeal must surely have been its “homemade” look: it was typed by volunteers and its headlines were hand-drawn in a simple script:

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141 Dolinin, *Samizdat*, 37.


143 Dmitrii Bobyshev, *Ia zdes’* (*Chelovekotekst*) (Moskva: Vagrius, 2003), 147.
One unfortunate consequence of the “homemade” aspect, however, was the paper’s array of easily mocked, hand-corrected typos. In Rein’s article on Paul Cezanne, the artist’s name was misspelled so as to read “Susanne” [Siuzann], and in the genitive plural looked like “Susanna” [Siuzanna]. Because of this, the content—an approach to Cezanne’s work that implicitly sought to counterbalance the Soviet focus on Socialist Realism in art by claiming Impressionism to be “one of the greatest revolutions in art”—tended to be overlooked by its student readers. Rein soon tore down the article in order to make revisions, but apparently never managed to post a corrected version. The few excerpts in the newspaper articles criticizing Kul’tura are apparently the only surviving fragments. Cultural historians are more fortunate in the case of Bobyshev’s and Naiman’s articles, copies of which survived along with other personal papers that Bobyshev was able to bring with him when he emigrated to the United States.

144 Scanned facsimile provided by Dmitrii Bobyshev, from his personal archive.


146 Bobyshev, Ja zdes’, 108; see also Naiman, Slavnyi konets besslavnykh pokolenii, 373-4.
Writing on the poetry of Vladimir Uflyand, Bobyshev, like Rein, made bold claims. And like Rein with his conclusions on the revolutionary impact of Impressionism, Bobyshev is in implicit dialogue with the Socialist Realist arbiters of art. Bobyshev’s writing on Uflyand highlights and promotes the direction Bobyshev was trying to take with his own poetry.

In his memoir, *Ia zdes’* (Here I Am), Bobyshev recalls that he was given charge of the literature section of *Kul’tura* and carte blanche to write about whatever he liked.¹⁴⁷ That he chose to write about Uflyand—a contemporary, unpublished fellow Leningrader—is indicative of his own desire to explore the present moment and the personally known, as opposed to the self-sacrificial construction of utopia promoted by Soviet Socialist Realism. Moreover, the odd title, “Good [*Dobryi*] Uflyand,” accurately reflects Bobyshev’s aim in the article: to promote Uflyand and his poetry alike for their humane qualities.

Bobyshev begins his article by sharing his impressions of a recent event at which Uflyand recited his poetry. He notes, “One could feel that [Ulfyand] loves life, loves it confusedly and tenderly. He relates with warmth and gentleness to things, even if the thing is a prewar photograph or a bachelor’s empty, dark home; and to people, even if that person is a dusty drunk or a Brazilian emigrant.” In this quote Bobyshev lauds Uflyand for his tender focus on the everyday, the passed-over and the forgotten. Old family photos, a drunk, a non-Russian immigrant with (implicitly, in Bobyshev’s lines) lower social status—these could hardly be the subjects of a Socialist Realist poem.

¹⁴⁷ Bobyshev, *Ia zdes’*, 147.
Bobyshev goes out of his way to situate his article as much as possible within the current mainstream of Soviet criticism. His choice of quotes and discussion thereof have much in common with Runin’s critical article on Leonid Martynov’s poetry that we analyzed in Chapter 1. In stating that Uflyand’s poems comprise the substance of Uflyand’s life, Bobyshev elaborates: “[His poems] are in fact the good, kind Uflyand and how he relates to things, children and Communists.” He continues:

Uflyand has a poem about children whose father forgot their names, but they still didn’t end up being alone:

A woman named Russia
Fed them, told them to go to bed,
And not to ponder the question
Of whether the sun would shine in the morning.

If children trust adults,
That is called family.

And to be precise, it is our big family Uflyand lives and sleeps in peacefully and trustingly, like a child.148

In this passage Bobyshev places both himself and Uflyand securely in the center of an abstract Russian family community, via his use of the inclusive first person plural possessive “our.” He makes his point with a quote from Uflyand that amounts to nothing more than a sentimental cliché, completely consonant with the “Stalin-is-your-father, Russia-is-your-mother” ideology spoon-fed to Soviet children for generations.149 At this first moment in Bobyshev’s career, he is clearly engaging with the conventions of Soviet

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148 “Khoroshi Ufliand,” in Kul’tura, no page number, provided by Dmitrii Bobyshev from his personal archive.

149 Bobyshev omits this excerpt from the article he quotes in his memoir. It is worth noting that Bobyshev’s own father died in the blockade of Leningrad during WWII.
writing: the use of the abstract “we” and the bolstering of opinion points by the means of reference to children and Communism.

Bobyshev continues to weave Soviet-style themes and language into his own main points, to which he returns again and again: Uflyand is “kind,” his poetry “good-hearted.” In discussing a stanza of Uflyand’s about a stepfather whose instinct towards his stepchild is like that of a biological parent, Bobyshev writes, “And once again the reader succumbs to [Uflyand’s] good-hearted and kind poetic word.” Uflyand’s poetry says something essential about life: “But now Uflyand is coming right up close to the world’s big truth,” Bobyshev writes. “He is starting on a path of penetrating to the depth of a fact and finding the primeval essence of phenomena. This path is the simplification of form, deepening of content and convergence with daily life.” “And this,” Bobyshev adds, once again bolstering his point with the language of Socialist Realism, “is the path of Soviet poetry today.” Bobyshev closes his article by characterizing Uflyand as an ideal Soviet citizen: “this former student and worker, future soldier, and present [nastoiashchii—literally also “real”] poet.”

In sum, Bobyshev’s article highlights the connections in Uflyand’s poetry with day-to-day concerns, the small and neglected, and the touching humanity of life, while at the same time he couches his points in language common to the Soviet publications and concerns of the day. He is clearly trying to solve the problem posed to his generation of poets—that published poetry had largely come to lack a real connection to human

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150 All quotes from “Khoroshii Ufliand,” Kul’tura, no date, no page numbers, personal archive of Dmitrii Bobyshev.
experience—within the framework offered by the literary mainstream of his society. Like many writers of the day, Bobyshev’s effort is to reform or reshape rather than annihilate the prevailing literary norms. His own effort here could be characterized as “good-hearted” and “kind.” In the ensuing months, however, Bobyshev would find his article attacked and criticized in the Soviet press.

Naiman, too, was singled out for criticism in the official press after the publication of his article. Before turning to the reaction against all three Avvakumites’ articles and the paper in general, let us examine Naiman’s contribution, a review of a Belgian film, *Seagulls Are Dying in the Harbor*, which for some unfathomable reason played in Leningrad in 1956 long enough for viewers to see it multiple times.

Like Bobyshev, Naiman chose a contemporary subject, and like Rein, gravitated to a cultural event from outside the Soviet Union. But where both Bobyshev and Rein chose subjects remarkable for their attractiveness, Naiman did not. He begins his article, “An oppressive feeling—that’s what haunts one after watching ‘Seagulls Are Dying in the Harbor.’ This film is the first of its type, new to us.” Naiman has prepared his readers to expect something both unpleasant and novel. He goes on to disagree with and criticize both lazy audiences (who either like or dislike the film for unclear reasons) and the

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151 Famous and groundbreaking in that regard is the article by Vladimir Pomerantsev, “On Sincerity in Literature” [Ob iskrennosti v literature] (*Novyi mir* 12 [1953]: 218), and contemporaneous articles in various publications by Olga Berggolts.

152 In his memoir, Bobyshev comments, “The appearance in theaters of this film in the midst of all the Indian melodramas and Chinese propaganda pieces was like a liberal miracle” (*Ia zdes ’*, 148). The film gets mentioned as influential by a number of artists of the Thaw generation, including Aleksei Kozlov, (in *Kozel na sakse* [Moskva: Vagrius, 1998], 72) and film-maker Iraklii Kvirikadze, in this published interview: http://www.kinoart.ru/file/people/01-03-20/, 26 May 2010.

sentimental clichés in the plot before discussing what seems to have motivated him to write: the exciting and complex way both visual and aural rhythms were conveyed in the film.

As he develops his critique, Naiman continues to employ the first-person plural “we,” implicitly including himself within the broader stratum of reader he is writing for: “The film is made very rhythmically. Moreover, the rhythm is also unusual for us. The music doesn’t coincide in rhythm with the steps of the tired Fugitive [the protagonist of the film] and thus throws his fatigue into relief.” After noting the communicative effect of the contrasting rhythms of the music and the Fugitive’s steps, Naiman discusses an even more complex configuration of visual and aural rhythms in a tension-filled sequence of the film, involving a revolving LP record, the beat of boogie-woogie, a dancing couple, a ball being kicked, a burst of light, a mouth slowing chewing, and the Fugitive’s hands tearing a piece of paper. Naiman adds to this rhythmic collection the purely visual rhythms of architectural structures highlighted in the black-and-white film by the panning camera lens. He expresses these rhythms as if they were sound: “tak, tak-tak-tak, tak, tak-tak-tak.”

Naiman’s fascination is with the way all these rhythms, with very few words to aid them, are employed throughout the film to convey the Fugitive’s inner state and the desperation of his flight from the authorities. Naiman is especially moved by the image of a tiny-looking Fugitive exhaustedly running “among cylindrical and sphere-shaped storage tanks. And you feel immediately that he’ll never get out of this gargantuan country, that he will get lost, [the country] won’t let him out, it will crush him.”

154 Naiman, “Chaiki umiraiut v gavani.”
image of the human figure lost among the visual patterns of the huge storage tanks epitomizes the plight of modern man in an industrial world. There seems to be no place for the human, and the film emphasizes this, as it concludes with the Fugitive, in a more or less forced suicide, hanging by the neck by a rope off a bridge. The dead seagull floating in the water below him is to remind the reader, Naiman does not fail to inform us, of the Belgian legend that “with the death of a good man, a seagull dies.”

The dangers posed by increasing industrialization to the human soul might seem as hackneyed a theme by the 1950s as the sentimental clichés Naiman criticizes at the outset of his article. Think of Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* or Chaplin’s *Modern Times* for much earlier examples of this theme worked out in film. For Naiman, however, the man-dwarfed-by-industry theme came across as fresh. This may have been partly due to the fact that *Seagulls* was filmed in the very real industrial wasteland of Antwerp, Belgium, rather than a constructed movie set. It may also have had to do with the Expressionist style Naiman analyzes: although he did not use (or even perhaps know) the term for it, the emotionally evocative style has undergone waves of recurring popularity in film since *Metropolis*. In the Soviet context of the Thaw and its re-assessment of Socialist Realism, the stark film’s theme of Man Devoured by Machine was ripe for such a renewal. Naiman dwells on the film’s humane aspects, speaking of the “courage” of the protagonist and the “dignity” of the film. Like Bobyshev’s promotion of “Good Uflyand,” Naiman’s concluding support of this Belgian film as “a real work of art” is motivated as much by the human complexity of the plot (the socially isolated Fugitive, who murders his

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155 Naiman, “Chaiki umiraiut v gavani.”
unfaithful wife, is also an artist and kind to children) as by the rhythmic techniques the film employs.

In comparison to the article by Bobyshev and what we can reconstruct of Rein’s article on Cézanne, Naiman is not as bold in his claims. His first-person plural (“a film of a type new to us”; “the rhythm is also unusual for us”), while placing the writer within the society he addresses, is more consonant with the “we” used in scholarly papers than the “we” that for Bobyshev implied “our family (of Russians).” Naiman drops the “we” in the opening gambit to voice his own opinion via the first person singular: “I can agree neither with the first group nor the second.” This individualistic stance is rather marked for the time, going beyond the usual binary approach in the official press (of, for example, “dogmatists” versus “reformers”). And in the final paragraph, he sticks with the first person singular: “Going over my opinion one more time for accuracy, I again come to the conclusion that ‘Seagulls are Dying in the Harbor’ is a real work of art.”

Naiman’s final word is modest compared to the claims of Rein and Bobyshev in their articles. He writes that the modern style in which the film was shot “has once again shown how various are the paths of development of world art.” Such a conclusion, while not as earth-shaking as (I paraphrase here) “Uflyand is pioneering the new path of Soviet Poetry” or “Impressionism was a revolutionary event in art,” nonetheless articulates the effect of Kul’tura as a whole: its writers worked to bring to the attention of readers what they found new and exciting in the world—not just the Soviet world—of the arts. Taken together, the articles that made up Kul’tura really did illuminate a number of the “paths
of development of world art,” from Cezanne to Uflyand. On the whole, Rein, Bobyshev, and Naiman were finding in the works they wrote on the same things they were trying to find in their own poetry—in Rein’s case, an impressionistic narrative style that loved objects and tinted everyday scenes with unspoken emotion; in Bobyshev’s, a poetry that expressed pity to the small and forgotten; and in Naiman’s case, a way to harness rhythm to convey narrative, visual, aural and emotional content.

Participating writers of Kul’tura remember the publication as a single event, but with articles gradually added and taken down over the course of the paper’s existence until the entire paper was closed down. Concerning the official response to Kul’tura, Naiman, Bobyshev, and the authors of Preodolenie nemoty (Overcoming Muteness), a published collection of scholarly contributions on the origins of samizdat in Leningrad, all agree that the Hungarian Revolution of late 1956 led to a reaction against this student journal with its bold call to “try to understand on one’s own about art, not being afraid that your opinion comes into conflict with some kind of authorities.” It appears, then, that in light of the “Hungarian events,” Soviet policy-makers became wary of the poetic license they had been encouraging and/or tolerating at home. Beginning in late 1956, the writers of Kul’tura were publicly censured in the press—first in the LTI paper, Tekhnolog (Technologist), and subsequently in the party newspaper, Komsomol’skaia

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156 Other articles in Kul’tura not discussed here included one by Galina Rubinstein on two plays produced in Leningrad by Nikolai Akimov, and an article [on Shostakovich?] by Mikhelson. There may have been other articles as well.


159 See Lygo, Leningrad Poetry 1953-75, for the interplay between cultural institutions and young poets.
pravda (Young Communists’ League Truth). Kul’tura, like Goluboi buton before it and Eres’ and many other literary publications subsequently, was shut down. Rein was expelled from LTI, while Bobyshev took a leave of absence for health reasons. Naiman and others were interviewed, but not disciplined (and ultimately both Naiman and Bobyshev graduated, while Rein graduated from the Leningrad Technological Institute of Industrial Refrigeration). Rein, Bobyshev, and Naiman were all singled out in the Soviet press for criticism. As a contributing factor to their decision to turn away from the hope of publishing, this criticism deserves examination.

The Soviet Press Reacts to Kul’tura

In his first article for Tekhnolog of October 26, 1956, Yakov Lerner laments that the writers of Kul’tura “are falling into deep errors that interfere with the proper education of our students, and the development of their understanding of culture, art, and literature.” Lerner’s chief point, to which he returns again and again, is that the writers of Kul’tura ignore the role of the Party and disregard their responsibilities as builders of Communism. Even worse, Lerner detects a certain pleasure derived in the authors’ minds concerning the shortcomings of the Party’s work so far: “the editorial board […] in certain articles simply slanders our present, coming to hasty generalizations about a number of facts and delivering these with a feeling of relish, clearly misleading students about today’s events.”

Lerner is zeroing in here on a quality that really did set the Avvakumites apart from other critical writers of the era—their criticism seemed too independent of the socialist context they were supposed to be a part of. It is a

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characteristic so difficult to pin down textually in these early writings (where is the “feeling of relish” in these articles?), that it seems almost as if Lerner is able to sniff it out intuitively.

Lerner names a number of writers he considers harmful (there are thirteen of them), but he singles out the articles by Rein and Naiman for “the attempt to impose their views on our youth in regard to a number of questions connected with foreign film, art and music.” Lerner implies that the newspaper was produced by a small and unrepresentative group of students, including those remarkable for their poor academic records (here mentioning Mikhelson). Zelikson is also taken to task for failing to exercise editorial control and for even sharing the writers’ views. Finally, Lerner suggests that Kul’tura be decisively restructured.\(^\text{161}\)

That first newspaper article was published under the rather neutral headline, “About the Newspaper ‘Kul’tura’ (Organ of the VLKSM [Komsomol] Committee and the Festival Orgkomitet [Organizational Committee for the upcoming Moscow Youth Festival].”\(^\text{162}\) One of Lerner’s fundamental contentions with the paper was that it was nominally a product of the Komsomol Committee and therefore should have reflected that organization’s teaching and social mission. Lerner’s second article’s headline was more aggressive: “On the Errors of the Newspaper ‘Kul’tura’.” This article was published in Tekhnolog on November 16, 1956.

\(^{161}\) Lerner, “Po povodu gazety ‘Kul’tura’,” 2.

\(^{162}\) The entry for Kul’tura in Samizdat Leningrada: Literaturnaia entsiklopediia notes that at least nominally, the paper was supposed to have served some function in the organization of the festival (416). Naiman does not recall a connection between Kul’tura and any festival, including the International Festival of Youth and Students held in Moscow in 1957, but notes parenthetically that the 1957 festival was not as influential for him in Leningrad as it was for Moscow residents, probably because the individual groups sent to Leningrad were obviously and thoroughly tracked by KGB agents and informers, and therefore contact with them was not natural or easy. Private email, 30 May 2010.
In this second article Lerner is more focused in his argument that a newspaper published by the Komsomol Committee of the Technological Institute “must serve the business of Communist development of the students.” Kul’tura, Lerner says, fails to live up to that mission to such a degree that, reading the first issue, “it is difficult to tell that the paper is the organ of the [Komsomol] Committee of the Institute.” Lerner goes on to repeat and reinforce his previous argument that the writers of Kul’tura present their own taste and judgments as if they were shared by a majority of their peers. He then singles out the three main organizers of Kul’tura and Naiman for individual criticism. Lerner writes, “Can Naiman be involved in the development of students, when in one of his speeches at a Komsomol meeting he cynically announced that he doesn’t have any ideology?” On the whole, Lerner’s second article seeks to put great distance between a positive young Party member like himself and possibly anti-Communist writers like Naiman.163

Since the Stalin era, critical articles in the press, including but not limited to the “feuilleton” (in Russian, the word фельетон [fel’eton] has come to signify a satirical piece), were a typical prelude to a campaign against a particular person or group of people. Such a campaign inevitably resulted in the suppression of the artist’s work and often led to the arrest, trial, conviction of crimes against the Soviet Union, and subsequent sentencing (to prison, hard labor, exile, or death) of the artist or a close relative.164 The fact that, following the articles in the LTI paper, the matter was taken up

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164 Famous newspaper articles signaling a political campaign against artists include “Muddle instead of Music” (Pravda, 28 Jan 1936), targeting Dmitry Shostakovich, and the publication in Pravda (21 Sept 1946) of Andrei Zhdanov’s speech against the journal Zvezda and particularly its publication of Akhmatova and Mikhail Zoshchenko.
by the Party organ of Leningrad, *Komsomol’skaia pravda*, is indicative of the seriousness with which authorities were treating the appearance of *Kul’tura*. This development would have been deeply disturbing not only to the writers criticized, but also to their families, friends, and the groups and institutions with which they were associated; they, too, could expect to feel repercussions.

The writers of the critical articles, on the other hand, could expect significant career and privilege enhancement from such work. Their task was usually simple: to hold that their subject’s behavior was out of line with and damaging to the goals prescribed by the Party. It is not surprising, therefore, that *Komsomol’skaia pravda* writers A. Grebenshchikov and Yu. Ivashchenko chose to follow Lerner’s lead in distancing their own views from those of *Kul’tura*’s writers. They continued to develop the position that the views expressed in *Kul’tura* were in the minority at LTI and among the “youth” in general. Neither is it surprising that Lerner, along with one of the writers of an article against another student journal, *Eres’,* should reappear later as authors of the now famous feuilleton, “*Okololiteraturnyi truten’*” (Quasi-literary Loafer), that began the campaign against Brodsky.165

The article by Grebenshchikov and Ivashchenko, published in *Komsomol’skaia pravda* on December 4, 1956, is entitled “What Do the Comrades of the Technological Institute Maintain?” The writers focus on what they see as an excess of enthusiasm backed by less than profound thought and unwarranted attention to aesthetic aspects in certain articles published in *Kul’tura*. The article takes Bobyshev in particular to task:

“One of the editorial board of the paper, D. Bobyshev, in a voluminous, unbridledly enthusiastic article about the beginning poet Uflyand, compares his work with all of Soviet poetry—and not to the advantage of the latter.” Here the writers quote a phrase of Bobyshev’s that would haunt him throughout the Kul’tura affair: “[Uflyand, in his poetry] does not seize his reader by the collar and drag him, exhausted after a day’s work, into the fray of battle.” The problem with this sentence is, of course, that Socialist Realist literature is supposed to do exactly that—lead the reader forward and upward towards the New Utopia, through battle or whatever else it takes. Quoting another of Bobyshev’s enthusiastic sentences, “This [poetry] is good, kind Uflyand himself and his warm attitude toward things, children and Communists,” the article’s writer complains that “Bobyshev loses all sense of measure.”

Rein is similarly reprimanded for his view that Impressionism was “one of the greatest revolutions in art.” The Komsomol’skaia pravda article fumes, “And from there the method of Impressionism is recommended to Soviet art as the only correct one. One could hardly suggest anything more inept!” In the context of the “excesses” of Stalin recently revealed with much fanfare to the public, the accusation that the writers of Kul’tura had “lost all sense of measure” is charged with the potential conclusion that their excessive stances, too, are criminally harmful to society.

Was it despite or, on the contrary, because of the care Bobyshev took to include positive references to Communism and to present Uflyand as a good Soviet citizen (student, soldier, and poet) that the critics came down so hard on Bobyshev in particular?

166 Komsomol’skaia pravda, “Chto zhe otstaiivaiut tovarishchi iz Tekhnologicheskogo instituta?” December 4, 1956, page number unknown. Scanned facsimile provided by Dmitrii Bobyshev from his personal archive.

167 Komsomol’skaia pravda, “Chto zhe otstaiivaiut tovarishchi iz Tekhnologicheskogo instituta?”
Certainly there was a tension between the compliant language Bobyshev made use of and his immodest attempt to reshape the discourse as he saw fit. However, *Kul’tura* was just one of a number of unauthorized student journals filled with bold statements, some of which took even greater liberties with Soviet-style language, and it is not entirely clear why *Kul’tura*, and Bobyshev in particular, caught the attention of the critics.

The content of *Kul’tura* was, in fact, considerably less revolutionary in tone than some other publications of its type. The editors of *Goluboi buton* (late 1955) subtitled their journal, “Monthly literary-artistic and anti-artistic journal. Organ of a free group of creators.” They declared the journal’s mission as follows: “We will fight against grayness in form and banality [*poshlost’*] in content. This is the only limitation for creativity, which in everything else must be free.” Likewise, the journal *Eres’* (1956) declared, “Regarding the content and form of their works, complete freedom of opinion is given to the authors.” It was natural for articulate, inventive, and so far untried members of the generation coming of age during Khrushchev’s Thaw to test the limits of what was permissible, and the unauthorized student journals, including *Kul’tura*, are good evidence of such a trend. The “Hungarian Events” and the newspaper attacks, therefore, came as a strong and memorable corrective to their vision of reform. Perhaps the most severe corrective message of all for the future Avvakumites and their Leningrad contemporaries, though, was the arrest and imprisonment of Mikhail Krasilnikov.

168 *Samizdat Leningrada: Literaturnaia entsiklopediia*, 399.

169 *Samizdat Leningrada: Literaturnaia entsiklopediia*, 403.
Krasilnikov’s Arrest in the Context of Leningrad’s Friendly Society

Leningrad, although it served for more than 200 years as the capital city of Russia, is essentially a small town with one main street, Nevsky Prospekt. Nevsky Prospekt, the embankments and bridges on the canals, the Philharmonic, and the Summer Garden were all places one would have been bound to run into someone one knew during the Thaw years, as now. Since during those years there were a limited number of cafes and entertainments for young people, social groups met and mixed with abandon in the streets, in parks, and in private apartments during the Thaw.

Lygo has described in some detail Leningrad’s variety of Thaw-era literary groups, clubs and friendships.¹⁷⁰ Juliane Fürst has related how these groups coalesced and intermixed.¹⁷¹ The degree and (often alcohol-fueled) intensity with which these groups mingled with one another in a variety of venues during the mid-1950s is chronicled in numerous memoirs, and the influence and productivity of these contacts cannot be overstated (in fact I will return to it in the final section of this chapter to analyze its literary impact on the Avvakumites). Mikhail Krasilnikov was a colorful and well-known figure even against this highly expressive and socially active background.

Krasilnikov was a few years older than Naiman, Bobyshev, and Rein, but only a couple of classes ahead of them at the Philological Faculty of Leningrad State University when they were studying at LTI. He was somewhat legendary even before his arrest in November of 1956, in part because in 1952—that is to say, well before the death of Stalin—he had been expelled on account of a “Futurist [budetliane] Happening” that he

¹⁷⁰ See Lygo, Leningrad Poetry 1953-75.

and some friends staged at the University.\footnote{In his affectionate memoir of Krasilnikov, Lev Loseff quotes Komsomol’skaia pravda’s take of Dec. 11, 1952 on the “happening”: “Three young men enter the room. They are wearing long tunics that reach to their knees, hempen pants, in their hands are peasant baskets. In an attempt to get everyone’s attention, they sit down and get out...goose quills. [...] The mummers, trying to keep everyone’s eyes on them, move closer to the rostrum, take out from their baskets wooden saucers, pour out a bottle of kvas and start drinking it, singing the folk song “My Dear Little Torch” all the while (Quoted in Lev Loseff, “Mikhail Krasil’nikov: A Memoir,” Ulbandus: The Slavic Review of Columbia University: The 60s, 9 [2005/6], 74).}

He was re-admitted to the university in 1953 (the same year the three Avvakumites entered the Technological Institute), and by 1956 was well known in student literary circles for his futurist-style poems and extroverted behavior. Lev Loseff writes in his memoir of Krasilnikov about how his own group of younger friends admired and tried to emulate the older Krasilnikov and his group. It came to many young writers and artists, including the Avvakumites-to-be, as a shock and a signal that the era of loosened restrictions was at an end when Krasilnikov was arrested while drunkenly shouting anti-Soviet slogans during the annual public demonstration in celebration of the October Revolution. Loseff recalls:

What it was precisely that he was screaming as he crossed Dvortsovy Square is not known in detail. He himself during the investigation and later in court would say: “I was drunk, don’t remember anything.” From the conversations of the time I remember in particular “Freedom for Hungary!” and “Let’s drown Nasser the Crocodile in the Suez Canal!” [...] The incident took place in the middle of the suppression of the Hungarian uprising and soon after the Suez crisis, so everything that he had recently heard on “Voice of America” or read in Soviet papers easily came to Misha’s mind. Others remember the opposite: “Let’s drown Ben-Gurion in the Suez Canal!” It seems possible also that Misha yelled both one and the other, just like he yelled “Assholes!” regardless of who was awarded the foul by the soccer referee. It seems he also yelled: “Down with the bloody gang of Bulganin and Khrushchev!” Probably, it’s this that was hinted at in his sentencing: “Krasilnikov screamed out anti-Soviet epithets directed against the Soviet system [so, tautologically, states the ruling] and against one of the leaders of the Soviet government.”\footnote{Loseff, “Mikhail Krasilnikov: A Memoir,” 79.}

Naiman’s semi-fictionalized account of the events captures much the same spirit:
Misha Krasilnikov and a few other university students drank vodka the whole night of November 6-7, and in the morning made their way over to the Twelve Colleges building, where the first activists were already gathering for the demonstration. Cheerfully yelling out horrifying anti-Soviet slogans, they set off […] and, precisely when the military parade ended and the city’s population collected in their proper lineup to the right and left of the entrance to Palace Square, appeared on the steps of the Stock Exchange, now the Naval Museum. They chose the same place once picked by Stalin with the same goals in mind. Standing beneath the memorial plaque with his name, they unfolded a paper poster with six demands—from freedom of the press to freedom of enrollment at places of higher education—plus “We’ll drown Ben-Gurion in the Nile!” which if not in form, at least in content was consonant with official policy. In a moment they were surrounded and taken away.¹⁷⁴

Naiman’s account is the only one of the handful I have perused that claims Krasilnikov presented a list of written demands. It is possible that here Naiman is conflating the Krasilnikov events with the 1968 protest by poets and intellectuals on Red Square against the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, during which written demands were presented. However, Krasilnikov’s drunken state, the symbolic location he chose for his outburst, and the parodic and paradoxical nature of the slogans he shouted are stable elements across all accounts. His arrest and imprisonment is uniformly viewed as a shocking imposition of authority on a playful (if drunken and immoderate) act of free speech of a member of the general kompaniia, or collection of friends.¹⁷⁵

Bobyshev, like other memoirists, links Krasilnikov’s arrest to a general crackdown on student speech and writing after the Hungarian events.¹⁷⁶ This crackdown led to the

¹⁷⁴ Naiman, Slavnyi konets besslavnykh pokolenii, 375. For still another account of the event, see Lygo, 44.

¹⁷⁵ See Fürst, “Friends in Private, Friends in Public,” in Siegelbaum, ed., Borders of Socialism for an analysis of the structure and impact of groups of friends, or kompanii (Fürst uses this word in a restricted, technical sense), on the social and political lives of youth in the Soviet Union. Fürst only touches on the literary implications of such group networks, which we will expand on later in this chapter.

¹⁷⁶ Bobyshev, Ja zdes’, 154-8.
closing of student publications in Moscow and Leningrad and the expulsions and arrests of other students as well, including the demise of Kul’tura and the expulsion of Rein from LTI.

Evidence of the impact of Krasilnikov’s misfortune among the Avvakumites is this poem, written by Rein after Krasilnikov was sentenced to four years at hard labor:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{М. Красильникову} & \\
\text{За четыре года умирают люди,} & \text{In four years people die,} \\
\text{Умирают кони, выживают люди, ставятся законы.} & \text{Steeds die, people survive, laws are made.} \\
\text{За четыре года пишутся романы,} & \text{In four years novels are written,} \\
\text{Иногда романы пишут за неделю;} & \text{Sometimes novels are written in a week;} \\
\text{За четыре года переменят рамы,} & \text{In four years frames will be changed,} \\
\text{Передвинут печи, перебьют посуду.} & \text{Stoves will be moved, dishes broken.} \\
\text{А по сути что же? За четыре года} & \text{But in essence, so what? In four years} \\
\text{В современных играх} & \text{In modern games} \\
\text{На моих рубашках до конца не выгорит} & \text{The orange symbol of a checkered square} \\
\text{Клетки знак оранжевый,} & \text{On my blouses won’t completely fade,} \\
\text{Что-нибудь останется совсем как раньше.} & \text{Something will stay just like before.} \\
\text{Будемте опрятны, сохраним рубахи} & \text{We’ll be neat, we’ll save our blouses} \\
\text{Сократим расходы} & \text{We’ll save our blouses and cut expenses} \\
\text{Приезжай обратно за четыре года.} & \text{Come back again in four years.}
\end{align*}
\]

Rein’s poem displays what would become classic Avvakumite characteristics: the addressee is a known entity (here, as more often than not, one with whom the speaker of the poem uses the familiar “you” rather than the formal); the poem focuses on aspects of the everyday; the poem is free of the typical markers of “Soviet” poetry; the core impetus of the poem is humane—in this case a message of enduring friendship. Also typical for the Avvakumites, the poem is informed by sources not commonly available—that is to say, it is erudite (for its time). The phrase “Steeds die” recalls Velemir Khlebnikov’s four-line poem, “When steeds die, they breathe / When grasses die, the dry up, / When

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suns die, they are extinguished, / When people die, they sing songs.” Although Khlebnikov’s poetry and this poem in particular are now well known, from his death in 1922 on his oeuvre had been seriously neglected by Soviet scholars and publishers. By quoting him, Rein signals the elite knowledge about the history of early twentieth century poetry that he and presumably Krasilnikov and others in his friendship circle share. Rein is already working to bridge the gap in the Russian poetic tradition caused by the intervention of Soviet policies. Always inclined to talk about ordinary objects, food, drink and money in his poetry, Rein puts all these tendencies to work in a projection of how time will pass during the four years Krasilnikov will be away from Leningrad. The poem is a kind of promise that when he returns, the personal relations between him and Rein will remain, regardless of the other changes the passage of time will have wreaked on their lives. In the meantime, the orange square [kletka] on shirts will serve as an iconic, daily reminder of Krasilnikov in his prison cell [kletka].

With the rise and fall of the Hungarian Revolution, the closing down of Kul’tura and similar experiments, and the arrest and deportation of a known contemporary for what amounted to no more than a young person’s drunken foolishness, the limits to reform and freedom of speech were clearly drawn for the new generation. Moreover, the rejection by authorities of the good-faith attempts of Bobyshev, Naiman, and Rein to write within the accepted socialist framework came as a perhaps unanticipated and stinging rebuke with serious consequences. The problem was now set before the Avvakumites-to-be: to what extent could or would they modify their written expression

in order to see it published? They were to develop their full turn away from the prospect of publishing in 1957, the year of the launching of Sputnik.

**Parting with the Officially Publishable: Sputnik**

The parting of ways with the Soviet project continued for the Avvakumites in 1957. A unique insight into this moment can be had by examining three Sputnik-themed poems that exemplified the possible “career paths” of poems written with hopes of publication during the Thaw. A poem by Soviet poet Yaroslav Smelyakov ended up in the pages of *Poetry Day 1957*; a poem by Naiman remained “in the drawer”; and a poem by Bobyshev was published in the illegal journal *Sintaksis*.

The successful Soviet launch of its unmanned Sputnik satellite into space in 1957 sent a shock around the world and was celebrated in the USSR as a scientific and political victory. Sputnik, which was seen to have ushered in a new “Space Age,” was the subject of much celebration and rumination in print, among which were a number of poems. Smelyakov, a “repressed” and subsequently “rehabilitated” member of the older generation, was a regular contributor at that time to Soviet literary journals. An examination of Smelyakov’s Sputnik poem reveals important features that rendered the poem “publishable” in a major venue, *Poetry Day 1957*.

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179 The terms “repressed” [*repressirovannyi*] and “rehabilitated” [*reabilitirovannyi*] were applied to Soviet people who, having been convicted of crimes and imprisoned or sent to labor camps, were subsequently cleared of the charges and allowed to return to public life. Smelyakov was imprisoned and released during the 1930s, captured while a soldier in World War II, and re-imprisoned in the USSR after the war. He was rehabilitated in 1956, while serving his second term.
Мы утром, пока еще смутно,
Увидеть сегодня могли,
Как движется маленький спутник—
Товарищ огромной Земли.
Хоть он и действительно малый,
Но нашею жизнью живет,
Он нам посылает сигналы,
И их принимает народ.

Эпоха свершений и странствий,
Ты стала сильнее с тех пор,
Когда в межпланетном пространстве
Душевный пошел разговор.
Победа советского строя.
Путь в дальнее небо открыт.
Об этом звезда со звездою
По-русски сейчас говорит.180

Все, в тихом утреннем часу,
Мы могли смотреть сегодня,
Как маленький спутник движен,
Товарищ огромной Земли.
Хоть он и мал, нашею жизнью,
Он нам посылает сигналы,
Их принимает народ.

Эпоха свершений и странствий,
Ты более сильна с тех пор,
Когда в космосе созвучно
Душевный разговор понесся.
Победа советского строя.
Путь к далеким звездам открыт.
Об этом звезда говорит,
Сейчас в речи русской.

The poem’s content is straightforward: in the morning people could see the launched Sputnik as it orbited, sending its signals back to earth, where people apprehend them.

This is a victory for Soviet people, and the beginning of a new era of exploration, led by Russians. The poem’s vocabulary and syntax are simple—anyone with a seventh-grade education would be comfortable reading it. The very first word of the poem, “we,” sets the tone. The end of the first stanza identifies “we” with that nebulous, generalized concept, “the people.” The amphibrachic lines of three feet each lend a simple kind of singsong rhythm to the conversationally toned celebration of the small “comrade of enormous Earth.” Smelyakov paraphrases Lermontov’s famous lines from “Vyhozhu odin ia na dorogu…” (I’m going out alone upon the road) in the last couplet, modifying Lermontov’s metaphysical “star speaks with star” with the qualifier, “in Russian.”

Lermontov’s cosmic vision is thus co-opted by a nationalist conquest of space. However, the human scale is carefully highlighted, as Sputnik is pointedly characterized as small, and as a companion to people, in service of people, and even holding a “heart-to-heart

180 Den’ poezii, 1957, 104.
conversation” with each of “us” who receive its signals (in contrast to Lermontov’s detached “Star speaks with star”). Such features make this poem a great example of the new humanist Constructivism the editors of the first Poetry Day were aiming for. The poem belongs to the category of verse rather than poetry—it is a rhymed and rhythmical programmatic statement. It fits in well with other officially published post-Stalin poetry because it is both “sincere” and civic, retaining the human scale while glorifying the Soviet project.

Compare Smelyakov’s published poem with Naiman’s work on the same subject:

Все совершается. Всему
внезапно приспевает время:
работе, бодрствованию, сну,
и слову, и стихотворенью.

Приходит на дабливы ясно
когда на дальнем рубеже
по небесам проходит спутник.

Грохочет пустота. Несет
мирёв бесчисленных телами,
и в стенки бьют, меняя лёг,
молекулы колоколами.

И формируются в кристалл
звёзд полночных мирлады,
и намечается порядок
угла иль шара иль креста.

И продолжающийся путь
всё длится в солнечную бездну –
и возникает где-то песня,
и внятно слышится – и пусть!

Да будет славен человек,
работающий по три смены.
И да вершится постепенно
его затей полет и бег. ¹⁸¹

All is being finished. Suddenly
the time for everything is coming ripe:
for work, and wakefulness, and sleep,
and for a word, and for a poem.

For us there are no holidays now,
only festive workdays,
when at the distant boundary line
Sputnik is crossing the skies.

The aggregate ignited, straining
to be thrust up above the earth,
and look: horned now with antennas,
it’s sending intelligent signals.

Emptiness roars. Wafts
among bodies of countless worlds,
and molecules beat, as bells,
into the sides, changing flight.

And myriads of midnight stars
are forming into a crystal,
and an order is taking shape
of a corner or a ball or cross.

And the continuing path
keeps stretching into the solar abyss—
and somewhere a song arises,
“and let it be” is clearly heard.

Praise be to the human being,
who works three shifts.
And let the flight and race of his ventures
gradually be run.

¹⁸¹ Unpublished poem and editorial commentary provided by Anatolii Naiman from his personal archive.
Naiman’s poem has much in common with Smelyakov’s. Naiman also envisions a certain ordinary “we” (“for us there are no more holidays, / but only festive workdays”) who are touched by this event. Sputnik “sends intelligent signals” from space (compare to Smelyakov’s “It sends us signals / and the people receive them”). Despite these striking similarities, however, Naiman’s poem was rejected for publication—or to be more precise, the editor suggested changes Naiman chose not to make. What was wrong with the poem?

First of all, this is a metaphysical poem. It begins not with “We, in the still-dusky morning…” but with the philosophical or possibly even religious thesis (Christ on the cross uses the same verb in the Russian text of John 19:30), “All is being finished.” In fact, throughout the entire first stanza there is no “we” nor the Soviet project nor even Sputnik itself. The human being is alluded to in the third line, “work, and wakefulness, and sleep,” but this first stanza culminates at “and for the word, and for the poem.” So Naiman’s first stanza sets a very different program for the poem—it will be about time, about a process, and about the role of human beings in daily life—working, waking, sleeping—within it, and about a poem coming into existence. Compared to Smelyakov’s poem, Naiman’s makes the human being just a tiny part of a gigantic cosmos—the human agency in this poem is more akin to that of Pasternak’s “Winter Night.” Smelyakov’s poem, conversely, chauvinistically tames the cosmos—Sputnik is a small companion in the large human enterprise that seeks to have the stars speaking to each other in Russian.
What about the language of the two poems? Smelyakov’s language was direct and simple enough, we said, for a seventh grader to take in without difficulty. Naiman, on the other hand, employs old-fashioned forms: the word for “or” is the archaic “и́ль” [il’] instead of “или” [ili]; and he uses the suffix “-ье” [-’e] where modern spelling calls for “-ие” [-ie] (this outmoded ending is now a classic mark of a Naiman poem). He uses inversions, complex syntax and grammar, impersonal and reflexive constructions, inventive rhymes, and even a mysterious, unidentified speaker. There is a suggestion of the formation of religious belief, as stars take on the shape of something that may be a corner (icon corner?), or a sphere (earthly? heavenly?), or a cross (remember here similar allusions in Pasternak’s “Winter Night”). Naiman uses a typical Soviet exhortatory trope, “Praise be to…” to focus on the human side of this event. But he says not “Praise be to the great leaders…” or “Praise be to the Socialist workforce…” but “Praise be to the human being / who works three shifts…” The detail of “three shifts” alters the focus from some kind of abstract laborer to a more realistic and sympathetic view of a real human body working literally around the clock. Perhaps Naiman is re-casting “work, and wakefulness, and sleep” as three equally valid periods of labor in the human being’s daily life: one works for wages, writes poems during wakefulness, and recovers strength during sleep. Whether or not that is the case, Naiman’s focus on the physical cost of labor to an individual is in distinct contrast to typical Soviet literary practice (think of Valentin Kataev’s *Time Forward!* in which the fact that characters rarely have time to eat or use the bathroom is cast as part of their general enthusiasm for setting an industrial record). An odd feature of the poem is the image of myriads of invisible molecules that beat so persistently on the much bigger Sputnik that they actually “change flight”—whether their
own or Sputnik’s, or (most likely) both is not explicit. Without making too much of a


topical piece, written by its young author in the hope of being published, it can still be


said that the poem has a complexity and mystery that was lacking in Smelyakov’s tribute.

This very mystery, bordering on the Christological, made the poem too different—too

“non-belonging”—to be palatable for publication without significant alteration. Marginal

editorial notes on Naiman’s manuscript indicate that the poem was selected for

publication, provided that two places were corrected. The corrections did not take place,

and the piece was never published.

The early Bobyshev is the most programmatic of the Avvakumites. One feels the

influence of the times, the civic stance in the project to return individuality to everyone

who was not Stalin in his tribute to Sputnik:
On the Launch of a Space Rocket

So little time to live!
But the earth still stands.
And all the workers crowd around the papers. 183
Postal clerks get themselves
Bigger calluses from handling letters.

And behind the delivered wood
Yardmen are playing billiards.
Grub’s still not just handed out, you know,
And clean laundry doesn’t come for free.

But no—emptiness keeps filling people,
And speeds are purposely harnessed
Against foreign planets
To flatten out living bones.

Here’s the human being!
Such a short time
is allowed him for love and bread.
But the suckling pushes away the breast
and pokes his finger at the sky!

And where, tell me, does the yardman reside?
Where does he accrue his hump and calluses?
Where are the brooms and brushes,
his shovels and scrapers?
The cigarette butts and boxes
give him a hell of a lot of work.

But the human being!
Such a short time
is given you for insanity and disease.
You’re the unlucky son of time,
Wandering on a broken staircase.

So fix up the rails on earth
And renovate the yardman’s living space.
He, too, resides on earth
And honestly washes and scrubs it.

Bobyshev calls for change, using the imperative form (“So fix up the rails…and renovate…”) in his closing quatrain to bid for the improvement of the human condition right here on earth before the colonization of the galaxies. One can feel Boris Slutsky’s


183 As was the case with Kul’tura, even regular newspapers were posted publicly so that those who could not afford buying or subscribing could still read them.
influence in particular—the emphasis on the honest menial labor performed by all-but-
nameless individuals while great deeds are being performed in their name. “Here’s the
human being!” and “But the human being!” mark the emotional center of Bobyshev’s
poem.

The poem seems to have the necessary characteristics of the publishable poetry of
its era: the project of dismantling the “cult of the individual” of Stalin, the celebration of
the worker, the themes of cleanliness and honesty, and the imperative to improve the
lives of the common man, all couched in a form that is only modestly innovative in a
technical way. Why, then, was this poem published “underground” and not in a
mainstream journal of the time?

Perhaps one answer lies in the main thrust of Bobyshev’s poem. His emphasis is
not so much on building a future for these modest individuals à la Yevtushenko (“you
think about revolution / you want a great love”) as it is on seizing life in the present
moment, a life described as “such a short span / given to him for love and bread…such a
short span / given to him for insanity and illness…” Love and bread might be permissible
in the post-Stalin march in the newly humanistic environment to true brotherly happiness,
but illness and insanity are hardly to be vaunted. Moreover, Bobyshev goes on to speak
directly to this modest individual: “You are the unlucky son of time / wandering on a
broken staircase.” Here, Bobyshev can’t possibly be addressing a good Soviet citizen, or
be one himself—what good Soviet could characterize his fellow citizen as “unlucky”?-
Moreover, his summons to fix things on earth before we start gallivanting all over space
is a clear reproach to the Soviet government for their priorities. To characterize life in the
Soviet Union in such a negative way—and so off-handedly, in such an informal, even
disrespectful register—was surely to signal Bobyshev’s own non-belonging to the project, which would in turn guarantee that the poem not be officially published. Finally, his “Here’s the human being,” like Naiman’s “All is being finished,” may well be a nod towards the New Testament’s John 19—the account of the crucifixion of Jesus: “So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, “Here is the man!” Such a religious parallel would have caused Soviet editors great discomfort. Bobyshev seems to have understood that to change the poem to the extent that it could be acceptable for Soviet publication would mean dismantling its spirit completely. Instead, he chose to include it in a selection that was published in 1960 in the second issue of the illegal journal, Sintaksis.

We have examined three poems on one subject, each of which met a different fate. Smelyakov’s simple, rhythmic, vaguely humanistic, and programmatic verse was perfect for and published in a mainstream journal. Both Naiman and Bobyshev, unwilling or unable to modify their too-independent—too non-belonging—Sputnik poems in order to make them palatable for a Soviet journal, faced two alternatives: to leave the poem “in the drawer”—that is, to cease efforts to have it published, which was the fate of Naiman’s poem; or to publish illegally, which Bobyshev chose. The decision to turn away from official venues was, judging both by the editorial suggestions that Naiman declined to take and by the generous selection (five poems) Bobyshev submitted to Sintaksis, partly forced on the young writers and partly embraced by them.


185 That issue of Sintaksis, a literary journal run by Alexander Ginzburg (three issues, 1959-1960), was devoted to upcoming Leningrad poets, and included poems by Rein and Brodsky as well as poets from other circles. See Samizdat: Literaturnaia entsiklopedia, 451.
Alternatives to Publication: The Social Network

Turning away from the prospect of publication meant also turning toward some other form of gratification of the impulse to share newly created poems. The primary venues for such sharing in Thaw-era Leningrad were meetings—in both official and unofficial circumstances—of circles of friends. Juliane Fürst has sketched out how circles of friendship arose via the sharing of poetry.

In order to discuss the form and function of friendship units, Fürst assigns a formal meaning to the word *kompaniia* (plural: *kompanii*), which might ordinarily be used somewhat loosely to denote a “group of friends” or “circle of friends.” By *kompaniia*, Fürst refers more technically to the smallest discrete units of friendships. The Avvakumites would comprise under this definition a *kompaniia*, as would, for example, the group of Uflyand, Leonid Vinogradov, Mikhail Eremin, and Sergei Kulle. Fürst notes:

> Without doubt the most powerful and widespread mechanism of integration [into a friendship circle, or *kompaniia*] was the sharing of poetry. One contemporary wrote that only laziness prevented some young people of his generation from composing poems. Young people’s obsession with fresh and new poetry was by no means a phenomenon restricted to *kompanii*—even though it helped to establish a great many of them—nor was it a feature of solely literary circles. Many contemporary witnesses refer to the importance of poetry in giving themselves personally and the Thaw generation collectively an identity. Evgenii Rein remembers that “in reality I was preoccupied only by poetry…mine, others’, any, of all people and all times, and this vivid half-literary, half-bohemian life, which bubbled in Leningrad at the end of the 1950s.”

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In this poetry-saturated atmosphere, Fürst writes, and with the government clampdown that came with the Hungarian events, each group came to be “bound together by a lyrical style and shared persecution. Evgenii Rein, Dmitrii Bobyshev, and Anatolii Naiman at the Polytechnical Institute [sic] experienced a similar transformation from public activists (or at least participants) to private victims of official pressure after their radical wall newspaper Kul’tura came to the attention of the KGB.”187

While I would not characterize Kul’tura as a “radical” paper (“high-spirited” would be my word of choice), nor would I say that the Avvakumites shared a lyrical style (rather, they shared what could be termed a lyrical philosophy or poetics—their styles, while sometimes coming close in imitation of one another, are essentially very different), Fürst is justified in concluding that the combination of a shared approach to poetry and the experience of Kul’tura were instrumental in binding these poets together, just as the Mining Institute poets’ tutelage under writer Gleb Semenov and their burned second anthology shaped their identity as a group.188

The LITOs [Literaturnye ob”edinienia], or Literary Societies, played an instrumental role in bringing budding poets together in friendships. LITOs were literary interest groups organized by institutions. They were often attached to educational institutions, like the LITOs of LTI, the Mining Institute, and the Pedagogical Institute, but one could also attend LITOs that were under the umbrella of a factory, newspaper, or other non-educational institution. During the Thaw, both long-running and newly-established LITOs enjoyed popularity. Some LITOs had leaders, like Gleb Semenov and

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David Dar, who were considered to be especially good at nurturing young talent. Both writers and lovers of literature came to LITO meetings, where their own works or that of others was read and discussed, and LITOs sponsored readings and poetry competitions that were attended also by non-members. The structure did not tend to be very formal, so that it was possible to move from one LITO to another, or to attend more than one.\textsuperscript{189} Bobyshev, Naiman, and Rein attended two LITOs fairly regularly: the LITO of LTI and that of the Dom Kul’tury Promkooperatsii (House of Culture of the Industrial Cooperative). Brodsky began showing up at various LITOs, private homes, and artists’ studios around 1958 or 1959 (more about this below).

Emily Lygo gives a well-rounded overall picture of the development of poetry circles in Leningrad, particularly the rise of LITOs, which sprang up like mushrooms during the Thaw and to which young people flocked. Through the interactions among LITOs, such as poetry readings and competitions, writers were able to share their poetry with audiences beyond their immediate kompaniia.\textsuperscript{190} It was partly through the activities of the LITOs, Lygo writes, that Joseph Brodsky came into the circle of already acknowledged (among their peers) poets Bobyshev, Naiman, and Rein:

\begin{quote}
It appears that Brodsky began to attend LITOs in [Leningrad] in 1958, although at this stage he was not well acquainted with his future friends who became known as ‘Akhmatova’s orphans,’ nor with theProto-Futurists. He took part in many different aspects of the literary culture of the time, including, from 1957 onwards, the geological expeditions that were very popular with poets. 

Brodsky attended translation classes run by Vladimir Admoni (1909-93) at the Herzen Pedagogical Institute, and tried to join the ‘Narvskaya zastava’ LITO […] He never became an official member of any group, but visited various LITOs from 1958: they included for certain the LITO at the
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{189} Lygo, \textit{Leningrad Poetry 1953-75}, 36-38.

\textsuperscript{190} Lygo, \textit{Leningrad Poetry 1953-75}, 31ff.
Polytechnic Institute, and the group at the First Five Year Plan House of Culture, which was said to have had a particularly serious and literary atmosphere. Leningrad’s literary scene was so active by the late 1950s that in fact it is now difficult to ascertain with any certainty exactly where and when Brodsky fell in with Rein, Naiman, and Bobyshev. Rein remembers meeting him, when Brodsky was nineteen, at a friend’s apartment. Naiman more vaguely recalls that “there were the poetry readings in small groups which, at certain times of the year, took place almost every evening, but apart from all that there was also this craving to read our poetry to each other.” Several of Brodsky’s other contemporaries recall that, seemingly all of a sudden, he was simply showing up everywhere. It would have been difficult not to run across him by late 1958 or 1959. Brodsky himself recalls hanging out at artist friends’ studios, and vaguely remembers a literary group connected with the journal Smena (Shift). Bobyshev is similarly unsure of the exact or even approximate date: “Naiman dates his (and, therefore, our mutual) acquaintance with Brodsky to 1958, but allows that he may be off by a half year, and my own estimations put it in 1959, definitely not earlier and perhaps even later.” Bobyshev remembers seeing Brodsky for the first time at the House of Culture LITO [Dom Kul’tury Promkooperatsii], at a reading by Naiman.

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191 Lygo, Leningrad Poetry 1953-75, 49. I am not certain that Lygo means “Polytechnic” Institute here. It may be that, like Fürst, she has in mind the Lito of LTI, where Bobyshev remembered Brodsky coming to Naiman’s recitation (see below). (Punctuation adapted to US standards.)


193 Valentina Polukhina, Brodsky through the Eyes of his Contemporaries, v. 1, 16.

194 Solomon Volkov, Conversations with Joseph Brodsky, 33-34.

195 Ia zdes’, 262-3.

196 Ia zdes’, 265.
Thus all we can say for certain is that Brodsky got to know Bobyshev, Naiman, and Rein some time between 1958 and the end of 1959.197 Certainly by 1959 their poems could sound strikingly similar to one another, despite their inherently different poetic styles. Konstantin Kuzminsky demonstrates one such instance under the heading, “Khu iz kto” (roughly, “Who is who?”) in his Blue Lagoon Anthology. There he simply juxtaposes Rein’s poem addressed to Krasilnikov (which was discussed in the previous section of this chapter) with a poem written in 1959 by Brodsky. I reproduce the entire Brodsky poem here:

Через два года
высохнут акации,
упадут акции,
поднимутся налоги.
Через два года
увеличится радиация.
Через два года.
Через два года.
Через два года
истреплются костюмы,
перемелем истины,
переменим моды.
Через два года
износятся юноши.
Через два года.
Через два года.
Через два года
поломаю шею,
поломаю руки,
разобью морду.
Через два года
мы с тобой поженимся.
Через два года.
Через два года. 198

In two years
acacias will dry out,
stocks will fall,
taxes will rise.
In two years
radiation will increase.
In two years.
In two years.
In two years
suits will get frayed,
we’ll get to the gist of things
we’ll change fashions.
In two years
young men will get worn out.
In two years.
In two years.
In two years
I’ll break my neck,
I’ll break my arms,
I’ll smash my face.
In two years
You and I will marry.
In two years.
In two years.

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197 See Lygo, Leningrad Poetry 1953-75, 50 for a summary of accounts by Rein, Bobyshev, and others. Rein has said that he met Brodsky in 1960 and introduced him to his friends. Naiman believes he and Brodsky met around 1958 or 1959.

Brodsky’s poem reads as a brilliant parody of Rein’s earlier “In four years people die...”
The parallels are obvious: the refrains “In four years” and “In two years”; the list of
everyday things that will change over that period of time, including the common images
of worn clothing and broken objects; the use of the familiar “you” (in Rein’s poem, to a
close friend, and here to a lover); even the sound play—compare Rein’s line “Sokhranim
rubakhi, sokratim raskhody” (We’ll save our blouses and cut expenses) with Brodsky’s
“peremelem istiny / peremenim mody.” But where Rein was elegiac and tender, Brodsky
is ironic and even slapstick. Stocks will fall, taxes will rise, radiation will increase—these
are the views of a realist and pessimist, hardly the subjects for a young man’s love poem!
Likewise “I’ll break my neck, I’ll break my arms, I’ll smash my face”—and you and I
will get married. What enamored young man throws himself down the stairs so that his
beloved can pick him up and carry him off to the altar? It would seem likely, therefore,
that Brodsky knew Rein well enough by this time to amuse them both with a good-
natured parody of Rein’s earlier poem. Such a self-ironic literary friendship is
reminiscent of earlier poetic friendship groups in Russia, notably in Pushkin’s circle and
among the Acmeists of the early twentieth century.

Given the approach to poetry they clearly shared, it is not surprising that Brodsky
fell in quickly with Rein and his friends when they did meet. It would only take their
separate and collective friendships with Anna Akhmatova to “seal” their group as a force
in their own minds and those of their contemporaries. (We will turn to Akhmatova’s
influence in the final chapter.)

That Brodsky, like the other Avvakumites, thought of poetry as a venue for
humanist values is clear from poems he wrote even before meeting them. In the previous
chapter we discussed how Brodsky channeled works of Mayakovsky and Slutsky into his poem “Everyone is naked before God” (1958). We noted at that time that with this poem Brodsky is already setting out his metaphysical preoccupation with the difficult relations between the powerful and the powerless. Likewise, his poem “A Jewish Cemetery near Leningrad” was noted for its sympathy with Jews who are forced to the periphery of society. In 1959 Brodsky wrote on Miguel Servetus (1511-1553), the independent-minded theologian, physician, cartographer, and humanist who was burned at the stake on Calvin’s orders. Brodsky’s “Stikhi ob ispantse miguele servete, eretike, sozhzhennom kal’vinistami” (Verses on the Spaniard Miguel Servetus, a Heretic Burned by Calvinists), contains lines quite programmatic for the humanistic project that was at the core of the Avvakumite friendship:

Он, изучавший потребность и возможность человека, Человек, изучавший Человека для Человека.

He, having studied the wants and possibility of man, A Man, having studied Man for Man.

Brodsky’s early focus on humanism resonates with Naiman’s “Praise to the human being / working three shifts,” and Bobyshev’s “But the human being!” (in all three cases the word I have translated variously as “man” and “human being” is chelovek, the most general term for “human being”). It is akin as well to Rein’s poetic affirmation of friendship with Krasnilnikov, “Something will stay just like before […] Come back again in four years,” and with his sympathetic catalogs of human activity in general. The determination to articulate in poetry what it means to be human bound the Avvakumites more closely than any shared literary influence or stylistic expression. These four poets’

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199 Brodskii, Sochineniia Iosifa Brodskogo, v. 1, 25.
humanistic approach also distinguished them from some of their peer groups, whose
experiments in freeing the word aligned them more with the avant-garde, futurist
tradition of free sound- and word-play than with the Acmeist trend that the Avvakumites
were drawn to—returning to the word its concrete meaning.

The establishment and intermingling of the various poetic circles was good for
more than bringing Bobyshev, Naiman, and Rein together and bringing Brodsky into the
Avvakumite fold. It also provided opportunities for the Avvakumites to recite their poetry
to a broader audience, thus lessening the internal pressure to get their poems to audiences
through publication. Via the same mechanism, they were exposed to other poets of their
generation. We have already seen, for instance, how Bobyshev drew the attention of
students at LTI to the poetry of Vladimir Uflyand, a student at Leningrad State University
and a member of a different kompaniia. The opening lines of Bobyshev’s article about
Uflyand (“In the fall there was a group discussion of Uflyand’s poetry at the university”)
may indicate that Bobyshev first heard Uflyand’s poetry at a LITO event.

Through the various poetic circles of friends, the Avvakumites had access to an
inspiring array of new poetry written by their peers. In Leningrad alone, aside from
Uflyand and his kompaniia, the Avvakumites were exposed to the attractive neo-classical
poems of Alexander Kushner, the early poems of Gleb Gorbovsky—including “Kogda
kachaiutsia fonariki nochnye” (When the Streetlights Sway at Night), a hugely popular
poem soon set to music and performed so widely that many people thought it was an old
song of unknown origin—and a gamut of others. Some of these Leningraders’ poems did
make it into publication, but the vast majority were circulated among the groups in manuscript form and/or recited at various gatherings.200

The Thaw generation was busy rediscovering Russian poetry, from Lomonosov and Derzhavin to Futurism to Akhmatova and Pasternak. They revived suppressed and distorted poetic traditions by rendering them in their own poetry. The significance of published poetry must have gradually paled in comparison to the richness, freedom, and living presence of poetic creation within and among the literary circles of upcoming poets.201 With so much to embrace or reject in the unofficial world of poetic friendships, enmities, recitations, competitions, and circulating manuscripts, the Avvakumites came more and more to define themselves not in terms of the Socialist Realist script for official publication, but against their own peers and Russia’s interrupted poetic traditions.

As the Avvakumites found themselves half-pushed, half-choosing to abandon their hopes of publishing in literary journals and papers, they turned for subject matter to the smaller world of their close friends and social networks, with whom they shared their poems both orally and in written form. As their group drew together, their poems grew increasingly divested of the markers of “Soviet” poetry, most notably the trumpeting

200 The mingling of poetic groups was by no means confined to the Leningrad city limits. Similar social structures in Moscow, combined with ease and low cost of travel between the two cities, allowed Leningraders and Muscovites to share poetry as well. The most important Moscow poet for the Avvakumites may have been Stanislav Krasovitsky. See Viktor Kulle’s dissertation, Poeticheskaia evoliutsiia Iosifa Brodskogo v Rossii (1957-1972), http://www.liter.net/=Kulle/evolution.htm (chapter 1, part II); also Naiman, “Vera i otchuzhdennost’,” in Slavnyi konets beslavnykh pokolenii, 251-86, in which the poet called K.S. can be identified as Krasovitsky. Krasovitsky’s poetry and his impact on his generation could be the subject of a separate work of scholarship.

201 Viktor Krivulin quotes Akhmatova on the talent of the Thaw generation: “I can name—these are her actual words—‘at least ten poets of the new generation who are a match for the great test of the Silver Age. Here are their names: Stanislav Krasovitsky, Valentin Khromov, Genrikh Sapgir, and Igor Kholin in Moscow, and in Leningrad Mikhail Eremin, Vladimir Uflyand, Aleksandr Kushner, Gleb Gorbovsky, Evgeny Rein, and Anatoly Naiman...’” (Viktor Krivulin, “U istokov nezavisimoi kul’tury,” Zvezda 1[1990], 187).

address, the vague “we,” the abstractions about progress in building Communism, and clichéd language in general. Such markers were replaced by increasing specificity in the use of pronouns—“we,” for instance, would refer to a known (to the author) group of individuals rather than an amorphous mass concept—and a richer reading of more circumscribed terrain. Naiman addresses his rejection of the generalized ‘we’ directly in an interview with Valentina Polukhina: “What is this ‘we’? Who’s this ‘we’? I understand Akhmatova when she writes ‘we’—it’s Mandelstam, Gumilyov, Narbut, Zenkevich. But when ‘we’ means, ‘Come on lads! We think alike,’ well, first of all it gives rise to unnecessary speculation as to who this ‘we’ refers to: on the one hand you’re convincing people that you are in the right, sort of taking them by the shoulder and saying ‘we want the same thing,’ and on the other hand, there they all are happily joining the band. And it turns out ‘we’ refers to people who have no place in poetry.”

Essentially, what was occurring was that the scope of these young men’s poetry was narrowing, squeezing out the epic tone favored in Soviet journals. Evidence of the increasingly personal, private, or “chamber” nature of Avvakumite poetry is the high proportion of poems dedicated and/or addressed to a particular person. Moreover, the abstraction that is still present in the Kul’tura articles and the Sputnik poems has disappeared entirely from Avvakumite poetry by the late 1950s. What appears in its stead are poems that increasingly dwell on the human-scale picture: everyday life; the known present and the past rather than the future; individuals and small groups; domestic objects and places; epiphanies; emotions; landscapes and nature; music; art; and poetry itself. Generally speaking, the Avvakumites shared a devotion to the lyric appreciation of the

\[202\] Polukhina, Brodsky through the Eyes of His Contemporaries, 19-20. Punctuation amended to conform to United States standards.
tangible joys and sorrows of living, as opposed to the Soviet-style construction of an abstract future at the expense of a minimally imagined present. Their move from breadth to depth in their poems marked a significant moment in the renaissance of Russian lyric poetry.

The way the Avvakumites gravitated toward one another and wrote to and about one another has precedent in the Russian poetic tradition. Pushkin’s circle and the Acmeists of the early twentieth century were friendship groups that wrote poetry to and about one another and had a shared vision of their poetry’s place and function in the Russian tradition. However, unlike these earlier literary friendships, the Avvakumites never came up with a program or an official “face” or name for their group (Bobyshev’s “Akhmatova’s Orphans” names them only in retrospect, and says nothing about their poetics except that it is somehow connected with Akhmatova’s). In fact, the lack of official mission statement or theoretical articles can be taken as indicative of their mission. That is, they were against any abstraction that would distance the words in their poems from as close as possible a relationship to some kind of truth they were trying to express. That is why Akhmatova’s suggestion that they be known as the Avvakumites has resonance: as mentioned in the introduction, Avvakum spent his entire difficult life trying to adhere to worship in its ancient form. Avvakum rejected changes imposed by modern authorities, viewing such changes as a distortion of authentic rituals originated by a higher authority. In the same way, the Avvakumites came to dismiss and disregard the strictures imposed by the Writer’s Union and the Communist Party on the use of language for the creation of poetry. They took as their authorities only the masters of prior times and the creative impulse of language itself. The Avvakumites came to their
group position very early—by the time Brodsky joined the group, its members had decisively rejected any attempt at compromising their artistic vision for the purposes of official acceptance or publication. Although there would be waves of liberalization throughout the years of Khrushchev’s leadership (resulting most notably in the publication of Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* in November, 1962), the Avvakumites continued to orient themselves to their own group’s core values, untempted by the perks and recognition that could result from negotiating with the requirements of Soviet publication. In this sense, the Avvakumites were exemplary in Leningrad and significant for the history of Russian letters in the twentieth century.

What resources, then, did this quartet of poets turn to in building their Avvakumite stance? Where did they find examples of the strength of character and reserves of talent it would take to so decisively reject the enormous pressure to conform to society’s demands? It is no accident that precisely Akhmatova came up with the term “Avvakumites.” In the final chapter, I will treat her role as a model of independent and humane artistry as the crucial formative one for the Avvakumites as a group. Before turning to Akhmatova, though, I will first examine an earlier, perhaps surprising, model of independent artistry that was shared by virtually the entire Thaw generation, a model conveyed via a radio program called *Music USA*, broadcast by the Voice of America.
Chapter 3

The Model of an Artist: Willis Conover’s *Jazz Hour* and the Avvakumites

In a society that exerts an enormous amount of pressure to shape you into a certain kind of artist—a Soviet Socialist Realist—where do you find a compelling model for taking an independent stance? In this chapter I will discuss an extraordinary contemporary source from which the Avvakumites drew lessons in independent artistry: Voice of America radio host Willis Conover’s *Music USA* show, which was broadcast behind the Iron Curtain.

Of course I am not claiming that Conover channeled the only models of independent artistry for the Avvakumites. In terms of the impact of popular culture, Joseph Brodsky has claimed that the *Tarzan* movies were tremendously influential in imagining a stance independent of social norms, and when I re-watched the films, I saw that Tarzan really does reclaim language and life from tired, bureaucratic forms in ways Jane finds highly persuasive. But of course, Tarzan is fictional, and however

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203 In a published interview, Brodsky comments on the Tarzan movies:

*Brodsky.* [...] I give the enthusiasm and energy Tvardovsky manifested in publishing *Ivan Denisovich* their due, as I do the effect that the appearance of *Ivan Denisovich* produced. However, I do not think that the rise of free thinking in the Soviet Union, the emancipation of consciousness in general, dates from *Ivan Denisovich*.

*Volkov.* What do you think it all does begin with then?

*Brodsky.* For my generation, *Tarzan*. This was the first movie in which we saw natural life. And long hair. And that marvelous cry of Tarzan, which, as you remember, hung over every Russian city. We were so eager to imitate Tarzan. That’s what started it all. And the state fought this much harder than it did Solzhenitsyn later (Volkov, *Conversations with Joseph Brodsky*, 99).

Elsewhere Brodsky writes, “The Tarzan series alone, I daresay, did more for de-Stalinization than all Khrushchev’s speeches at the Twentieth Party Congress and after.

One should take into account our latitudes, our buttoned-up, rigid, inhibited, winter-minded standards of public and private conduct, in order to appreciate the impact of a long-haired naked loner pursuing a blonde through the thick of a tropical rain forest with his chimpanzee version of Sancho Panza and lianas as means of transportation. Add to that the view of New York (in the last bit of the series that was played in Russia), with Tarzan jumping off the Brooklyn Bridge—and almost an entire generation’s
compelling he was for little boys imaginatively swinging their way through the back
courtyards of Leningrad, an artist coming of age needs a more substantial role model.
Tarzan aside, recall that Boris Pasternak’s novel Doctor Zhivago helped the younger
generation—including the Avvakumites—shape an independent view of the Russian
Revolution and subsequent history of the Soviet Union, when the novel finally became
available behind the Iron Curtain in the late 1950s. However, the role of Doctor Zhivago
is one of the most researched and discussed subjects of that period, and Pasternak’s
influence as a living presence is more important for certain Moscow poets (Andrei
Voznesensky comes to mind) than it was for the Avvakumites, in comparison with the
role of Akhmatova, so I will not discuss it in more detail here.

Conover’s radio work is especially important to highlight in view of its Cold War
context: it was a surprisingly effective medium for reaching young people and
introducing them to especially alluring aspects of western culture. Conover’s program,
while popularly acknowledged to have had a tremendous influence on the entire Thaw
generation, has received little scholarly attention in terms of precisely how and why the
broadcasts were so influential, apart from the case of musicians who strove to master the
sounds they heard on their short wave radios. For the Avvakumites, Conover’s show
introduced exciting new jazz rhythms that found their way into their poetry. Perhaps most
importantly, Conover’s regular interviews with jazz artists, often touching on the
difficulties of pursuing their art in the face of mainstream disregard, disdain or rejection,
conveyed a narrative of independence and human dignity, as well as a healthy dose of

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opting out will become understandable” (“The Spoils of War,” in On Grief and Reason [New York: Farrar,
Straus and Giroux, 1995], 8-9).
plain old fun—but through a screen of barely understood English language and poor reception that rendered Conover’s narrative open to the most fantastic construal by his listeners. Conover’s program thus became the foundation of an extraordinary alternative universe of freedom and fun, conveyed almost more by intonation and the music itself than by words and meaning, but underlaid by Conover’s persistent message of respect and admiration for jazz artists.

**The Voice of America’s Jazz Hour with Willis Conover**

Willis Conover’s radio jazz show fell under the rubric of a larger set of programs called *Music USA*, but was better known to its listeners by other names—the two most popular probably being *Jazz Hour* and *Time for Jazz* (the phrase with which Conover opened his show). The history of Conover’s program has been well sketched by Penny M. von Eschen in her exhaustively researched *Satchmo Blows Up The World: Jazz Ambassadors Play The Cold War*:

Conover’s jazz show, *Music USA*, began in 1955 and continued for more than three decades. It is tempting—and not altogether inaccurate—to claim that Conover was a figure of unparalleled importance in the spread of jazz and in its relationship to Cold War foreign policy. Indeed, when Conover died in 1996, his New York Times obituary not only proclaimed him the most widely known and loved American in the world; it further suggested that Conover had played a major role in bringing about the collapse of Communism—a claim that Conover himself had proudly embraced. When the thirty-five year old Buffalo-born disc jockey was selected in a Voice of America audition, his qualifications included mellifluous, precise speech readily “understood by foreigners with little English,” and an intimate knowledge of jazz. The show was launched over short-wave radio on January 6, 1955. [...] In 1955 it reached an estimated 30 million people in eighty countries—a number that would more than triple, to 100 million, over the next decade. Drawing on Conover’s own collection of 40,000 records, the shows were recorded on tape in Washington and broadcast from VOA stations a month later. [...] The show’s opening theme was the Duke Ellington Orchestra’s signature
How the Voice of America came to broadcast jazz behind the Iron Curtain using American tax dollars is a story von Eschen tells in some detail. For the purposes of this monograph, suffice it to say that Louis Armstrong’s world tours proved so successful, and Adam Clayton Powell’s lobbying so persuasive, that by the mid-1950s the State Department concluded American jazz could be a powerful tool in countering both America’s reputation in the world as a racially divided country and the undeniable achievements in the arts—particularly classical music and ballet—that the Soviets claimed demonstrated the superiority of their own system. Thus it was that from 1955 on, the Avvakumites were able to tune in late almost any night to American jazz as presented by Willis Conover.

The anecdotal evidence for the influence of jazz in general and Conover’s program in particular on the Avvakumites and their generation is overwhelming. In retrospect, Brodsky dates his experience with jazz over radio rather definitively by his father’s acquisition of a shortwave radio receiver:

> When I was twelve, my father suddenly produced to my great delight a shortwave-radio set. Philips was the name, and it could pick up stations from all over the world, from Copenhagen to Surabaja. At least that was what the names on its yellow dial suggested.

> This Philips radio was rather portable—by the standards of the time—a 10-by-14-inch brown Bakelite affair, with said yellow dial and a catlike, absolutely mesmerizing green eye indicating the quality of reception. [...] I couldn’t get Radio Bratislava or, moreover, Delhi. But then I knew neither Czech nor Hindi. And as for the BBC, the Voice of

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America, or Radio Free Europe broadcasts in Russian, they were jammed anyway. Still, one could get programs in English, German, Polish, Hungarian, French, Swedish. I knew none of those languages; but then there was the VOA’s *Time for Jazz*, with the richest-in-the-world bass-baritone of Willis Conover, its disc jockey!

To this brown, shining-like-an-old-shoe Philips set, I owe my first bits of English and my introduction to the Jazz Pantheon. When we were twelve, the German names on our lips gradually began to be replaced by those of Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Clifford Brown, Sidney Bechet, Django Reinhardt, and Charlie Parker. Something began to happen, I remember, even to our walk: the joints of our highly inhibited Russian frames harkened to “swing.”

Brodsky dates his love for jazz very early. He would have been twelve in 1952, and the Voice of America did not introduce Conover’s show until 1955. However, Conover’s show was preceded by a jazz program hosted by Leonard Feather, called “Jazz Club USA,” that began broadcasting in 1952, and Brodsky could have picked up jazz on Feather’s show, on other shortwave stations, and from recordings that found their way into the Soviet Union. That Brodsky associates jazz with Conover and not Feather is evidence of the overwhelming impression Conover’s velvet voice made on his listeners over the years of his show. As for jamming, it was very expensive, so the Soviet government focused on Russian-language and news programming and for the most part did not dedicate resources to jamming cultural programs.

David MacFadyen, in his *Joseph Brodsky and the Soviet Muse*, devotes a few pages to the influence of jazz on Brodsky in particular, bringing interviews with Naiman and Rein to bear on the jazz question in regard not only to Brodsky’s poetry, but also their own. To MacFadyen’s query about the formal impact of jazz on their poetry, Naiman responded:

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As far as jazz is concerned... what you take in at eighteen, nineteen, and twenty—that’s yours. If you take in rock and roll, then for your whole life something of that will stay in your soul...for us it was jazz. An enormous number of us would listen to Jazz Hour on the Voice of America. It was hosted by Willis Conover...Until then there was only so-called classical music, then suddenly jazz came along. Despite the fact that it’s both amazingly pleasant and sugary to listen to—you just like it—it does at the same time teach you a thing or two. It teaches you improvisation within a system; it teaches you the clarity of sound, the purity of melody, multivoicedness [...] It all taught us a kind of rhythm.

Naiman remarks more specifically on the formal impact of jazz than Rein, who,

MacFadyen writes, “deferred to Najman when knowledge of the music was required,” but

Rein did conclude, “Jazz truly did have a great significance at that time...We never missed a single broadcast.”

The lessons of Conover’s show, thematic and rhythmical alike, show clearly in a retrospective poem by Naiman, entitled “Voice of America”:

“На площади Мэдисон в сквере играет джаз”.
Славно сказано, складно, как кукареку.
Губы щекочет звук и дрожит у глаз –
a почему б и не спеть и не всплакнуть человеку!

“Ат Мэдисон Сквер, в парке, играет джаз.”
Приятные, гладкие слова, как “cock-a-doodle-doo.”
Голосная звучит в уши, трепещет в глазах—
почему бы не спеть и не вылить слезу или две?!?

Когда тебе 9 лет, из них 4 война –
и вдруг она кончилась, и переходя поминки
по-быстрому в танцы, шкатулка заведена,
и, черным маслом лоснясь, качается бок пластинки,

fanfare рыдает холодно и горячо,
шеллак поблескивает на скорости 78,
и сквозь него словно мерцают пламя,
мускусное, чернотой, уходящей в просинь.

fanfare sobs hot and cold,
the shellac gleams at 78 rotations per minute,
and through it, somehow, a shimmering shoulder,
musky, showing black with blue-ish in it.

Потом тебе 19: колониальных вакс
аромат источают другая шкатулка; надраен
хром радиоламп; саксофон называется сакс;
и как внушительен диакор под треск с мировых
окраин!

And then you’re 19: a whiff of colonial wax
comes from another box; the radio receiver’s chrome
is all shined up; the saxophone is called a sax;
and how convincing the host, through static from the
world’s furthest reaches!

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The Voice of America, buzzing, flies into the gloom:
There, in Madison Square—life’s free and easy!
And in Carnegie Hall, too. And who cares
which Madison it is—James or Dolly?

The trombone wails; its case lies on the ground,
full of green leaves and rain; whites of eyes gleam
in ecstasy. And I want to be in that number
of black saints, when the saints go marching in.

At Madison Square, in the park, jazz is playing.
It’s the end, and the start, it’s all of one piece,
there’s nothing to add—not even the sobbing
each time the lilac vibraphone player touches the keys.

In this poem Naiman directly associates jazz with the legendary atmosphere of America’s openness: “There, in Madison Square—life’s free and easy!” The association is tinted with light irony: who knows what glorious perspectives the young Naiman, listening to the VOA, imagined? The Naiman who wrote this poem in the mid-1990s, however, had precise knowledge (gained from his semesters teaching at New York University) of the small, foreshortened rectangle of a park in lower Manhattan that is Madison Square.

The fact that jazz developed as an expression of freedom from the culture of enslaved African Americans is very important for Naiman. Even the postwar 78 rpm records evoke a vague image of the black performer: “a shimmying shoulder, / musky, showing black with blue-ish in it...” The “colonial wax” that in the following stanza wafts from the radio as the motor warms up the case is vaksa, a black substance that was used in the USSR to clean and shine shoes. Naiman remembers that when he was young, such waxing was done professionally by an ethnic minority group, Assyrians—known then as Aisory.\(^\text{210}\) The aroma of vaksa in the poem, then, becomes associated with both Soviet minority shoe-shiners and the parallel workers in the USA—African Americans. So the “colonial” smell that is associated with menial or slave work by ethnic minorities

\(^{210}\) Communicated by phone, 11 Sept 2010.
accompanies the rhythms and sounds that convey a sense of freedom, making the image as a whole a kind of shorthand not only for African American history, but for a possible parallel history in the USSR. Naiman’s paraphrase of “When the Saints Go Marching In” (“I want to be in that number / of black saints...”) emphatically states an identification between the poem’s speaker and downtrodden but ecstatically inspired African Americans via the performance of what Duke Ellington insisted on calling “American music” (Ellington considered the music that grew from its roots in African American culture to transcend the boundaries of more limiting terms).

The copious use of exclamation points in Naiman’s poem is as uncharacteristic of his work in general as is the exclamation point Brodsky used in his essay when describing Conover’s voice. Both sets of exclamation points are indicative of the emotional intensity and high spirits with which the Avvakumites (and their generation) greeted the jazz broadcasts. In the space of the four quatrains devoted to the jazz broadcasts, Naiman creates a whole world, with odors, sights, sounds, language, geography, architecture, weather, emotions, and religion. And it is Conover’s “convincing” [vnushitelen] voice that conveys all this—whether Naiman understood his specific words or not.

Perhaps the most important aspect of Conover’s voice was the music of his phrasing, so different from Soviet radio broadcasting, so full of color, intelligence, warmth, consideration, thoughtful pauses, and shared laughter. These intonations were rendered all the more powerful precisely by the lack of context and comprehension with which they were met in the Soviet Union. Imaginative listeners like Naiman scooped up these hints of life in the west and painted for themselves fantasies of freedom, self-
expression, and artistic rapture. Indeed, Naiman says it best in his retrospective poem: the
words “In Madison Square, in the park, jazz is playing” might as well have been “Cock-
a-doodle-doo” as far as the Avvakumites were concerned. The message they got—
freedom, self-expression, individual artistry—would have been the same.

Naiman’s “Voice of America” carries the meaning and feeling of jazz not only thematically, but within its very rhythm. Naiman, a poet Brodsky described as “extraordinarily technically gifted,”\(^\text{211}\) ordinarily writes within a clearly defined meter. But “Voice of America” had me baffled when I tried to sketch its metrical pattern. The first quatrain scans like this:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Na} & \text{- } \text{-} & \text{-} & \text{-} & \text{-} & \text{-} & \text{-} & \text{-} \\
\text{Slav} & \text{-} & \text{-} & \text{-} & \text{-} & \text{-} & \text{-} & \text{-} \\
\text{Gu} & \text{-} & \text{-} & \text{-} & \text{-} & \text{-} & \text{-} & \text{-} \\
\text{a po} & \text{-} & \text{-} & \text{-} & \text{-} & \text{-} & \text{-} & \text{-} & \text{-} & \text{-} & \text{-} & \text{-} & \text{-} & \text{-} & \text{-}
\end{align*}
\]

If a poet declares the meter in the first two beats (a rule of thumb that works for the vast majority of Naiman’s poems), this poem should be in amphibrachs. But by the last two beats of the first line the expectation has already been frustrated, as a dual meter surfaces. The mixture of dual- and triple-syllable feet continues in lines 2 and 3, which overall have a dactylic feel. Should we go back to line 1 and treat the first, unstressed syllable as what in musical terms is called a pickup note to the first beat? Or is this dol’nik? Dol’nik would seem be a great solution, as it allows for either one or two unstressed beats between stresses. Naiman has written other poems in dol’nik rhythm, including one we

will look at in Chapter 4. But by line 4 we already have as many as three beats between
ictuses, and in line 3 of the second quatrain there are four unstressed syllables between
beats 3 and 4. However, neither can the rhythm be rightly called accentual, as not only is
there a strong tendency toward the dactyl, but there are expanded lines of 6 beats here
and there throughout the poem. How to describe the structure of this poem, then?

An understanding of swing rhythm can help. The *Harvard Dictionary of Music*
gives a cautious definition:

> [Swing is a] term for characteristic rhythmic momentum in jazz. Specifically manifested in a variety of uneven (2:1 or 3:2) durational
relationships between eighth notes within a single beat and/or differing
relationships between a song’s pulse and the attacks of instruments or
vocal sounds (e.g., slightly before or after the beat), swing is sometimes
difficult to quantify. But it is meaningful as a general stylistic concept: in,
e.g., swing and *bebop*, ‘swinging’ uneven subdivisions of quarter notes (or
of eighths at slow tempos, halves at fast tempos) contrast with even
subdivisions of pulses.²¹²

Other authorities, such as the Oxford Dictionary of Music, essentially say that no one
can agree on any point of the definition of swing:

> [Swing is] a quality attributed to jazz performance. Though basic to the
perception and performance of jazz, swing has resisted concise definition
or description. Most attempts at such refer to it as primarily a rhythmic
phenomenon, resulting from the conflict between a fixed pulse and the
wide variety of accent and rubato that a jazz performer plays against it.
However, such a conflict alone does not necessarily produce swing, and a
rhythm section may even play a simple fixed pulse with varied amounts or
types of swing. Clearly other properties are also involved, of which one is
probably the forward propulsion imparted to each note by a jazz player
through manipulation of timbre, attack, vibrato, intonation or other means;
this combines with the proper rhythmic placement of each note to produce
swing in a great variety of ways.²¹³


With the rhythmical qualities of swing—whatever they are—in mind, then, let’s turn back to “Voice of America.” Naiman’s poem, for the most part, scans at five feet per line. The lines are inhabited with what in musical terms are called polyrhythms—in this case a three-beat dactylic foot shares the line with a two-beat trochaic foot. The interplay of the 3:2 rhythms—especially in oral performance—allows Naiman’s poem, then, to swing. Disregarding pitch, we can notate the rhythms musically thus:

Like a jazz piece, the first statement (here, the first quatrain) sets the form: all the lines have five beats, and the free combination of duplets and triplets is established as the norm. The second quatrain, then, is where variation and improvisation begin. Thus line 1 and 4 of the second stanza are expanded to six beats, and line 4 has an extra-rhythmical stress in the first triplet:

In line three of the second stanza, the stress that ought to fall on the first beat of the fourth foot is suppressed—in Russian, only one syllable of a word can receive stress, and in this case it falls on the last syllable: the na of the fifth foot or bar. This also contributes to a “swing” feel in recitation, as the speaker can use the skipped stress to give a sense of speeding-up velocity that goes with the sense of the record player getting cranked up to spin the record.

In line 2 of the third quatrain, Naiman increases that feel of velocity, both of the 78-rpm record and of the quickening of pulses in response to the lively beat of jazz, with a line that has an increased number of syllables compared to the average line of this poem (syllable range is from 11-16 syllables, with most lines 13 or 14 syllables long). Line 2 of quatrain 3, “shellAk poblEskivaet na skOrosti sEm’diasiat vOsem’,” (the shellac gleams at 78 rotations per minute) fits four fast-paced, unstressed syllables between the second and third ictuses. The effect is a patter of syllables flying off the line, like spatters of light reflecting off the shining record as it turns, anchored only lightly by the stress on the word “speed” [skOrost’]:
In short, this poem is a bravura demonstration of form (polyrhythms, form extension, and flexibility) as content (a poem about jazz), or in other words, what Naiman referred to in the above quoted interview as “improvisation within a system.” The poem as a whole conveys how the jazz broadcasts became a kind of aural “window on the west” for the Avvakumites, and how much the Avvakumites learned from those broadcasts, rhythmically speaking.

That this swinging poem was written decades after Naiman and his friends listened to the Jazz Hour is a testament to the profound influence of Conover’s show, and the influence of jazz altogether. Jazz-related themes have proved fertile ground for Naiman even into the 1990s and 2000s, during which time he wrote poems with titles such as: “Dzhaz: Jazil Brazz” (about Herbie Mann, undated but between 1993 and 1998); “Dzhaz na Radio Svoboda” (Jazz on Radio Liberty, 18 June 2002); “Prezhde vozdelyaniiia zemli” (Before the cultivation of the earth, undated, but between 1993 and 1998)—this one full of retrospective associations with Ellington’s “Caravan”; and “Exterritorial’nost” (Exterritoriality, 25 Oct 2004)—associating motifs from classical Russian poetry with jazz.214 Brodsky also revisited the jazz theme throughout his life. Apart from the poems in “Iiul’skoe intermezzo” (July Intermezzo, 1961?) (more about this below), Elena Petrushanskaia singles out in particular: “Cafe Trieste: San Francisco” (1980); “Vid s kholma” (View from a hill, 1992): “Tomas Tranströmer za roialem” (Tomas Tranströmer at the piano, 1993): “Pamiati Klifforda Brauna” (In memory of

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214 Dates verified by Anatoly Naiman via email, 2 March 2011.
Clifford Brown, 1993); and parts of the long poem “Zof’ia” (early, no date). To this list we could add the “Albert Frolov” poems (1966-69) from Brodsky’s School Anthology cycle, and no doubt other poems as well.

In Chapter 2 we examined the use of living idiom in early Avvakumite poetry, along with the commensurate avoidance of clichés and frozen forms (compared to published Soviet poetry of the time), the dialogic nature of the lyrics, and even motifs that get passed around (we noted “in four years” and “in two years...” in poems by Rein and Brodsky, for instance). An attraction to inexact and original rhyme and sound association is also characteristic of the Avvakumites. These are features that naturally resonate in the idiom of jazz as well. And the Avvakumites were exposed to jazz not only through Conover’s show, but also via film and the growing jazz performance scene in Leningrad. Saxophonist Alexei Kozlov remembers learning something about jazz from the same film Naiman wrote about for Kul’tura. Kozlov recalls, “The first time I saw something close to the ‘atomic’ style was [...] in the Dutch [sic] film Seagulls are Dying in the Harbor, where there was an episode in which young American soldiers and Dutch [sic] girls were dancing in a postwar cafe. But by then the dancing itself no longer interested me—I’d started to play music at dances by then.” Valery Mysovsky, a drummer, likewise recalls learning from films:

I managed to grasp at least some elements of jazz performance—for instance, in the film “Muzykal’naia istoriia” there is an incredible drummer who gets bored in rehearsal, and suddenly he does a loose and hooliganish “break” complete with tossing up the sticks and virtuosic

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216 Kozlov, Kozel na sakse, 72.

217 Lenfilm, 1940, starring Sergei Lemeshev.
lifting of the kettle drum. I went to the film five or so times, and at home in front of the mirror tried to repeat it... In my mind the image of a jazz player began to form—elegant, good-humored, living in a special world of bandits, beauties, and circus people. Circus artists, all those trumpeters, saxophonists, trombonists—and foremost was, of course, the drummer, but it was him that they hardly ever showed...218

Mysovsky goes on to say that he visited local orchestras, gleaned information even from negative articles in the press, and “never missed a single film that contained even the tiniest scrap of jazz, to say nothing of Sun Valley Serenade, The Roaring Twenties (‘Melancholy Baby,’ ‘It had to be you’), watched Czech films as well [...], and Polish, Hungarian, and ‘trophy’ films.”219 He still owns an LP record of Charlie Parker performances, from which “a lot of our jazzmen learned.” He remembers having two short wave radio receivers during the course of the 1950s, and when he bought the second, more powerful one, he was “able to listen to jazz every day.”220

I’ve related so much about Mysovsky’s learning process because the Avvakumites put together their understanding of jazz and America using the same sources and in the same piecemeal way, filling in the gaps with their own imagination. While Conover’s program excited its listeners and attracted them to jazz music and the culture associated with it, they put the semi-information they were able to glean together with other sources like film, articles, records, jazz musicians and jazz lovers who were their friends, and local performances.

One of those local performances gave rise to a poem by Bobyshev. Bobyshev dedicated the poem (dated February, 1960) to Nonna Sukhanova, a popular Leningrad...

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219 Mysovskii, 8.
220 Mysovskii, 14-15.
singer heavily influenced by American singers such as Ella Fitzgerald and June Christy, whom she heard on shortwave radio.\footnote{Kino-teatr.ru carries a short biography of Sukhanova in which she is described as a pioneering “jazz singer, who started singing in Leningrad in English just a year after Stalin’s death.” She is quoted as having learned her style from jazz broadcasts on short-wave radio: ’At work, by the way, they always yelled at me for singing songs in English. But I’d been listening to foreign compositions since I was 18! My dad worked as an electrical engineer before the war. Once he brought home a shortwave radio receiver and one time when I was turning the tuning dial I heard some songs I didn’t know, in a foreign language. That’s how it all started with me.” (http://www.kino-teatr.ru/kino/acter/w/star/15233/bio/, 17 Sep. 2010). Sukhanova can be heard on the soundtrack of the Soviet hit sci-fi film Chelovek-Amfibiia (Amphibian Man), and a few sound and/or video clips can be found on internet sites, e.g.: “Ia ot schast’ ya khochu tantsevat’” (I want to dance from happiness) (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TE6NK4eg8g); “Ei, moriak...” (Hey, sailor) from Amphibian Man: (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ATJlb7oCu0&feature=related); “Kaplet dozhdik” (Raindrops drip): (http://kkre-5.narod.ru/kolker/doz.mp3).}

**Нонна С.**

Исполненный любви и восхищения
Представив вас мгновенно среди колонн,
Вам, Нонна, я преподношу стихотворенье.
Я исполняю свой полупоклон.

Итак. Я верный Ваш полупоклонник.
Пardon. Полупардон — полуприказ:
Хотите стать звездой кинохроники?
Так спойте же тихонечко для нас.

Сравните, Нонна, наши музы, Нонна.
Сравните души и спасите их.
Они представляются так обнаженно, Нонна,
Что и грешно, и стыдно видеть их.

Они представляются так обнаженно, Нонна,
Придя в поликлинику ужасный мой скелет,
И скушно мне, и помогите, Нонна,
Достать мне помогите пистолет.

Ах, мне довольно в жизни уж нотаций,
И я не жил, я вами только бредил.
Билет оставив в урне, плас — в передней,
Я в зал вхожу, я к Вам иду на танцы.

И сразу — девочка и девочка,
Две девочки танцуют.
А что поделаешь, никто не приглашает.

**To Nonna S.**

Filled up with love and admiration,
Having imagined you momentarily amidst columns,
to You, Nonna, I present a poem.
I execute my half-bow.

And so. I am your devoted half-fan.
Pardon. Half-pardon—half-command:
Do you want to become a film star?
Then sing softly for us now.

Compare, Nonna, our muses, Nonna.
Compare souls and save them.
They present themselves in such a modern way, Nonna,
That it’s sinful and embarrassing to see them.

They present themselves so nakedly, Nonna,
That it is sinful and embarrassing to see them.

They present themselves so nakedly,
Like—at the polyclinic—my horrible skeleton,
And I’m bored, and help me, Nonna,
Help me get hold of a pistol.

Ah, I’ve heard plenty of homilies in life,
And I didn’t live, I only saw you in a delirium.
Leaving my ticket in the urn, my coat in the foyer,
I enter the hall, I come to you to dance.

And right away—a girl with a girl,
Two girls are dancing.
And what to do, nobody is inviting me.

\footnote{Bobyshev, Partita, 13.}
Здесь так естественно известка позлащена,  
Любовь так натурально растопьна.  
Так почему же пиво пьет сластена,  
Употребляет бриолин растрепа?

А эта девочка-сластена,  
Похожая фигурой на диван,  
Танцует, танцует  
А с нею мальчик, наверно, хулиган.

А рядом девочка-растрепа,  
Похожа на стиральную доску,  
Танцует тоже,  
И с нею мальчик, тоже, наверно, хулиган.

А Нонна головою всем качает  
И стройными ногами для всех перебирает.

Потом исчезла за фанеркой  
Теперь опрятно пишет в стакан.  
И ждет ее, и ждет он перед дверкой  
Все тот же мальчик, тот же хулиган.

А Нонна головою всем качает,  
Сама не зна, как она меня спасает.

Настройте, Нонна, и меня на этот лад,  
Чтоб жить и лгать, плести о жизни сказки,  
И раздавать бы скромный свой талант,  
Как раздаете Вы мотив американский:

Словно консервную даеете Вы тушонку,  
дешевую — на бедность,  
Как бы Евгений Евтюшенко  
Столь поразивший современность.222

Here whitewash is so naturally gilded,  
Love so naturally nimble.  
So why does the sweets-lover drink beer,  
Why does the slovenly girl use brilliantine?

And this sweets-loving girl,  
Looking like a figure on a sofa,  
Dances, dances  
And with her a boy, probably a hooligan.

And next to them the slovenly girl,  
Looking like a chalk board,  
Dances, too.  
And with her a boy, also, probably, a hooligan.

Meanwhile Nonna nods her head to everyone  
And shimmies her shapely legs for everyone.

And next to me a peepee-girl  
Looking like a penny-whistle,  
Dances, flirts,  
And flips a guy the finger.

Then she disappeared behind a plywood wall,  
Now she’s pissing neatly into a glass.  
And waiting, waiting for her by the door  
Is that same boy, that same hooligan.

Meanwhile Nonna nods her head to everyone,  
Herself not knowing how she is saving me.

Tune me, too, Nonna, to this mode,  
So I can live and lie, weave tales about life,  
And give out my modest talent,  
Like you give out an American motif:

As if you are giving a tin of meat,  
the cheap kind—for the poor,  
As if you were Yevgeny Yevtushenko  
Who has so amazed modernity.

Formally, the poem begins in quatrains of iambic pentameter, but Bobyshev leaves the  
door open for variation and experimentation. Already in the first stanza of “To Nonna,”  
line 3 has an extra foot, and lines of six feet appear in the third and fourth stanzas as well.  
The formal structure all but breaks down after the final line of the fifth stanza, which  
announces the hero’s arrival at the dance, where Nonna is singing. The following stanza
has only three—unrhymed—lines, of five, three, and six feet, respectively. Subsequent stanza length ranges anywhere from two to four lines, and line length from two to six feet, some of which are not iambic. Throughout the poem, while the rhyme scheme tends towards ABAB, we also see ABBA, lone rhyming couplets, and free alternation of masculine and feminine rhymes within a stanza, along with occasional nonrhyming lines.

The above outlined breakdown of iambic pentameter quatrain form reflects or performs the sense of the poem. A classically inclined Petersburg poet begins composing his formal tribute to his muse, whom he takes to be Nonna. It will be precisely that foreign-sounding, oh-so-singable name that will infiltrate and undo the constrained formality. The word “Nonna,” with its repeating ‘n’ sounds, the middle one long, sounds like a pair of syllables Ella Fitzgerald herself would find useful in scatting.\textsuperscript{223} The clash of classical rhythm with that of jazz is foreshadowed in that first extra foot in line 3: the extra foot is taken up by Nonna’s name: “To you, Nonna, I present a poem.” It is the same case in the second instance of an extra foot, in line 3 of quatrain 3, “They present themselves in such a modern way, Nonna.” Bobyshev could easily have kept the lines in both cases at five feet by simply eliminating the word “Nonna,” but Nonna’s is the element that sets this poem in motion: by taking her as his muse, the poet-narrator opens up new horizons for his rhythms.

In the sixth stanza—the one that completely breaks with the form of the previous quatrains with its three lines of varying length and lack of rhyme—the poet-hero has come on a scene that totally destroys his expectations. At the end of stanza 5 he had concluded, “I’m entering the hall, I’m coming to you to dance.” But in stanza 6, it turns

\textsuperscript{223} A wonderful example of Ella Fitzgerald scat singing can be found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PbL9vr4Q2LU>.
out girls are dancing with girls and no one pays attention to him. He is not needed.

Literally recovering his form in the next stanza (except for an extra foot in the first line), he tries to puzzle out the situation. The form breaks down again in stanzas 8 and 9, as the hero, who probably dressed up in a suit and tie to go meet Nonna, observes that, while there are indeed girls and boys dancing together, the girls are slovenly and the boys look like hooligans. The sight of Nonna nodding her head approvingly to everyone in the rhyming couplet that makes up stanza 10 perhaps allows him to begin reconciling his iambic pentameter with the rhythms he finds in the dance hall. The next two four-line stanzas revert almost exclusively to iambics (the exception is line 3 of stanza 11: “Dances, flirts”), although line length varies from two to five feet. That the poet-hero, by the mysterious help of his muse, is managing to reconcile his rhythm to that of jazz is confirmed by the next couplet: “And Nonna nods her head to everyone, / Herself not knowing how she is saving me.”

By stanza 14, the speaker is ready to invoke his muse: “Tune me, too, Nonna, to this mode / So I can live and lie, weave tales about life, / and give out my modest talent, / Like you give out an American motif...” The speaker has recovered his four-line stanza form, and line lengths balance each other at 6, 5, 5, 6 feet. Has the poet-hero arrived at something like Ovid’s “lamed” erotic elegaic couplet? Not quite, as the last stanza shows. Line lengths in this final statement are 6, 3, 4, and 4 feet respectively. Rhyme is inexact: tushOnku/EvtushEnko and bednost/sovremennost. The stanza is the poet’s description of how Nonna “gives out” her American motif: as if she is giving out cheap American canned meat to poor and hungry Russians. Bobyshev nods here to the World War II Lend-Lease program’s deliveries of pork, which survivors of the Siege of Leningrad
remember with gratitude:

![Image of canned pork](image)

*Cincinnati, Ohio. Preparing canned pork (Russian: "svinaia tushonka") for lend-lease shipment to the USSR at the Kroger grocery and baking company. One pound of pork, lard, onions, and spice go into each can.*

Alternatively, he casts her as a Yevgeny Yevtushenko, who has “so amazed modernity.” It is difficult not to conclude that the spell Nonna weaves is not a lasting one, maybe something like the sweet beer the hooligan boys and slovenly girls were drinking in stanza 7—you feel good while you’re drinking it, but sorry a few hours later. The gift she gives is something like Spam rather than, say, prime rib or Ella Fitzgerald; thus the parallel to Yevtushenko is, to say the very least, ambiguous. Is what Yevtushenko is “giving out” to his massive audiences no tastier than tinned meat? Something that can keep you from starving, but gives little gustatory pleasure? In the case of music, Bobyshev himself turns more to classical for sustenance (the title of the *samizdat* collection in which “To Nonna” was published is *Partita*), a biographical fact that would seem to lend support to the reading of Nonna’s brand of music as ultimately insubstantial. But the fun Bobyshev had bringing classical poetry into contact with “swing” jazz resulted in a poem that showcases a great deal of formal freedom and contains a number of witty and transgressive lines that still read brilliantly today.²²⁵

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²²⁴ Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection, [LC-USW3-031561-C DLC].

²²⁵ In fact, some of Bobyshev’s lines are so strikingly decadent (from the Soviet point of view) that the writers of the article that signaled the beginning of the campaign against Brodsky (“Semi-literate drone”
We are lucky to already have some good scholarship that connects the formal innovations in jazz to analogous phenomena in Brodsky’s early poetry. Rebecca Pyatkevich, in her 2010 dissertation on Joseph Brodsky, finds the presence of jazz in a poem dated 1960, “These days I feel tiredness more often...” [{Teper’ vse chashche chuvstvuui ustalost’}].

“...Now, I feel the tiredness more often, and I speak of it less and less, Oh, my soul’s self-made designs the warm and joyful crew.

What birds do you invent yourself, who do you gift or sell them to, and live in a modern nest, and sing with a contemporary voice?

Come back, soul, and give me a feather! Let’s have the radio sing to us about fame. Tell me, soul, how life looked, how it looked from the flying bird’s vantage point?

While the snow, falling as if from nonexistence whirls around the simple eaves, Draw about death, my street, While you, o bird, exclaim about life.

And so I walk, while you somewhere are soaring already out of earshot of our complaints, And so I live, while you somewhere scream, and flap your agitated wings."

“The poem does more than talk about jazz,” Pyatkevich writes:

[I]t attempts to incorporate jazz rhythms into its texture. The poem is in iambic pentameter, with an alternating masculine/feminine rhyme scheme. Within that scheme, however, the variation Brodsky employs is significant. [...] In effect, Brodsky here takes one of the more common meters of Soviet poetry, the iambic pentameter, and modifies it so that it resembles the movement of jazz. The first and third ictuses are fulfilled, [Okololiteraturnyi truten ] attributed them to Brodsky, perhaps because his poetry wasn’t provocative enough for their case, or because of the writers’ incompetence. One such couplet was the above-quoted, “Tune me, too, Nonna, to your mode, / so I can live and lie, weave tales of life...”

I have modified Pyatkevich’s translation slightly in the direction of literal translation for clarity, as well as formatting the translation differently.
here, at almost 90% (the numbers for Soviet poetry is 82.8% and 84.6%, respectively), while the second and fourth are dropped at a greater rate (the fifth ictus is always fulfilled). According to David MacFadyen, the same pattern of higher stressing holds for the years 1958 to 1965. In comparison to poems written by canonical Soviet writers, therefore, Brodsky emphasizes the first and third ictus and deemphasizes the second and fourth, thus creating a noticeable “rhythm” which creates a musical “background” to other poetic effects. Further, the metrical “surprises” of the poem – the break in rhyme in the fifth stanza, and the switch from a masculine to a feminine meter between stanzas two and three – can be likened to jazz improvisation.\footnote{Rebecca Pyatkevich, \textit{How to Do Things with Poems: Metaphors of the Poet’s Power in Joseph Brodsky’s Work}, PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 2010, 147-8.}

The “talk about jazz” Pyatkevich refers to might be passed over by a reader not looking for it, but an oral delivery of the poem (and Pyatkevich emphasizes that this generation’s early poetry was conceived for recitation more than silent reading) would bring out the poem’s unusual, syncopated rhythm. Interestingly, the oblique references to jazz include “let’s have the radio sing to us about fame” and a bird-soul who, flying, sees life and can sing about it in a way that brings life to the poem’s speaker’s wintry, dead landscape. Is it too farfetched to identify the bird-soul as that of Charlie “Bird” Parker? Known for being able to play incredibly fast and accurately syncopated notes (flapping his “agitated wings”) and for inventing improvisation on the 7th, 9th, 11th, and 13th chord extensions, Parker pioneered vast new territory for jazz. Parker died in 1955 at the age of 34 from hard living and drug abuse. Thus, he might come through the radio as a “bird-soul” who had seen a lot in life and sang about it now “already out of earshot of our complaints.” If “Bird” can convey something to the living lyrical hero of the poem, literally engendering inspiration in him as a kind of muse (the hero asks for a feather—a quill with which the poet can write and at the same time some piece of the bird’s living experience), the hero can overcome the deadness of his own landscape and perhaps himself open up new
artistic territory with the poem, since he, unlike the bird-soul, is still physically alive. Such an interpretation bespeaks a profound influence on Brodsky not only of the music of jazz, but of the personalities and life stories of the musicians who invented it. The Charlie Parker association elevates this poem from a rhythmically adventurous early elegy to a kind of manifesto: a determination to shake off the deadness of the Soviet poetic landscape and invent new language for Russian poetry, as Parker did for jazz.

It was through Conover’s Jazz Hour—via a rudimentary understanding of English and the squawks of radio interference—that the Thaw generation began to learn about the lives, struggles, and contributions of musicians such as Charlie Parker. Mysovsky describes exactly how this transpired with him: “I heard Parker for the first time in 54. It was like a flash of magnesium. A cascade of sounds, the bad radio receiver and the voice of the host announcing in English I did not then understand, ‘Played Charlie Bird Parker.’ Applause. The name burned itself into my memory immediately, and the hunt for records began.”

So from radio programs, record jackets, the music, and each other, young jazz fans would piece together what they could of Charlie Parker’s life.

Such productive fascination with what was heard over radio waves is indicative of what I argue is the overarching, primary impact of Conover’s program on all four Avvakumites, in fact influencing their love of jazz itself: its extra-musical aspects. In particular, Conover modeled and communicated a certain artistic independence, inventive freedom, and human dignity that were exactly the qualities the Avvakumites needed in order themselves to become artists unconstrained by the prescriptions of Soviet society. Although the Avvakumites could only have apprehended these aspects of Conover’s

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228 Mysovskii, 12. If Mysovskii is correct about the year, it was not Conover he heard, but most likely Leonard Feather’s program, or another western broadcast.
program in a somewhat primitive fashion, due to their less than stellar English skills and the imperfect medium of radio waves, nonetheless Conover’s message was so consistent and persistent that certain basic values and premises were bound to come through.

Conover thought deeply about what he wanted to do with his show. To begin with, his own independence was paramount: he insisted on receiving his paychecks as an independent contractor rather than a salaried employee, so that he would have full artistic control over what he aired. 229 Secondly, Conover was convinced that, although American tax dollars were supporting his show in its capacity of promoting western values, jazz could speak for itself in selling the “American way.” In other words, he himself did not have to devote any airtime to arguing for western democracy. All he had to do was play the music and talk with the artists, and his listeners would come to their own conclusions. Not averse to penning an occasional poetic line himself, Conover once expressed this conviction with a ditty making fun of western Marxists, entitled “Marxochists”:

Though they claim they’re exceedingly triste
At the way our streets are policed
And they’re somewhat abrupt
Since they feel we’re corrupt
Still, they seldom defect to the East. 230

Thirdly, Conover brought to the show his profound understanding of jazz and his deep connections to its world. He had an enormous personal collection of recordings and made it his business to meet, get to know, and air talented artists. Finally, Conover brought a


230 Ripmaster, *Willis Conover: Broadcasting Jazz to the World*, 30. Ripmaster has “exceeding” rather than “exceedingly,” the latter of which would be correct not only grammatically but also metrically. It is likely that the mistake is Ripmaster’s rather than Conover’s—there are a number of such errors throughout the biography, and Conover was known for his precise use of the English language. Therefore I have rendered the line with “exceedingly” here.
great deal of intelligence and care to the design of each broadcast. James Lester, in a
posthumous profile of Conover, describes how Conover worked:

> With a sense of design rare in music programming, he devoted an
> inordinate amount of attention to the sequence of recorded tracks he
> offered in each program. Every selection on each recording he acquired
> was analyzed for track length, tempo, mood, sequence of soloists, name of
> arranger and other details. He then processed all this through an aesthetic
> that he describes as built on a sense of fairness to all that is good in jazz,
> not privileging his own favorites, to arrive at the design of each program
> and even whole sequences of programs. [...] Conover likened his
> preparation for taping a program to the writing of a sonnet: “You do the
> last two lines first and then try to find twelve good ones to lead up to that.”
> Or to musical composition: “It’s the same process a composer follows in
developing a symphony. There has to be a theme, variations, movement
> toward a climax.” Or to the culinary arts: “Maybe it’s more like a recipe -
> if the cook knows what he’s doing, what comes out of the stove should
taste better than any single ingredient.”

The above description highlights not only the care Conover took over each program, but
also how good he was with an analogy. Surely Conover’s skill with language and
metaphor helped him convey the jazz world over radio waves and endeared him to the
young poets listening. In sum, the independence, personal integrity, artistry, and
discipline Conover brought to his work showed through in his programs and made them
especially attractive to artists of the Thaw generation.

Conover was very conscious of the difficulties of broadcasting music over short
wave radio. What Naiman described in his poem as “static from the world’s furthest
reaches”—the extraneous hisses, hums, and whines that get picked up along with what is
being broadcast on the frequency—presented a real challenge to both broadcaster and
listeners. Conover was acutely aware not only of this drawback to his medium, but also
of the fact that many, perhaps even most of his listeners did not understand English well

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or at all. He therefore trained himself to speak even more slowly and clearly than an announcer normally would, and tried to stick to a fairly limited, simple vocabulary. All this was a mark of his respect for his listeners and his desire to communicate with them. Like J. D. Salinger’s fictional Zooey, who visualized a fat lady at the back of the theater as a sort of ideal audience, Conover developed a vision of his ideal listener. He said, “I see myself as a kind of messenger. I want to transcend any barriers between you and the music. I visualize just one listener, an intelligent person listening carefully, not some crowd out in ‘radio land.’” And just as he did his best to reach each and every one of his listeners, Conover wanted to behave equitably towards the jazz artists he featured: “I’m not playing music for my own pleasure. I need to feel that everyone who has contributed something of value to music should be heard, and certainly those composers or performers who have contributed music of greater value should be heard more often.” The sense of fair play built into the very substance of Conover’s show must certainly have been congenial to the show’s listeners, among them the Avvakumites, who, as we saw in the previous chapter, had learned by 1957 that the playing field in Soviet literature was more level for some than for others.

In listening to dozens of hours of Music USA and Newport Jazz Festival (emcee-ed by Conover and broadcast over VOA) tapes, and reading the summaries and transcripts of shows gathered in Ripmaster’s biography of Conover, I was able to isolate three salient features of the broadcasts that I argue sent a very compelling and alluring

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232 Conover and others have speculated that the VOA’s later introduction of “Simple English” was inspired by his technique.


message to the Avvakumites about what artistic independence could mean. The atmosphere cultivated by Conover in the course of each broadcast was striking for its communication of intimacy, individual artistry, and collective fun.

**Intimacy**

Typically, a *Jazz Hour* broadcast was structured around an interview of an artist in Conover’s studio. The interviews were conceived and conducted as rather intimate conversations. Conover would set the stage, first of all, with the relaxed, velvet voice for which he is so justly famous. He consciously pitched his broadcast as a conversation that included the unknown friend, that single intelligent listener by his radio. Conover created the atmosphere of considerate friendship by clueing his listener in to the context of an interview. He would refer to past meetings he and the artist had had, often giving a brief background on the artist, and hinting at familiarity by saying things like “I think you and I are good enough friends that I can mention….” or “Ella, you’ve known for a long time that you’re my favorite singer.” You can often hear the breathing of the speakers, and even when they swallow. These last are features that could be understood even by listeners whose English was nonexistent. Most famously, Conover speaks slowly and clearly, using simple syntax, thus conveying to the listener he knows may be straining to hear through the jamming that that specific listener is deserving of respect and consideration. The effect on the listener (at 11pm-1am in Leningrad) is that of being a third person in an almost domestic conversation with Conover and a jazz superstar.

The sense of shared experience is captured in the music as well. Conover hosted and broadcasted live concerts (notably the Newport Jazz Festival) during which one hears
audience participation and response and band members’ laughter and comments.

Conover’s trusting relationship to the listener extended even as far as airing interviews that hadn’t gone so well. As Ripmaster relates, “One example is Bud Powell, the pianist. It is obvious that Powell was sedated, and as Willis asked questions, Powell would either give no answer or mumble something that Willis had to explain to the audience.”

These interviews were broadcast along with the rest, presumably due to Conover’s view that his listener deserved to know the whole story, not just the pretty part. It must have been striking to hear publicly aired interviews in which both artist and interviewer were so comfortable with an informal, unscripted atmosphere, and even with failure. The contrast with the carefully orchestrated, formal Soviet approach would have been immediately attractive to the Avvakumites, already straining against a highly prescriptive social structure.

In the Soviet Union, the Avvakumites would be turning in at 11pm or later.

Brodsky paints a picture of a moment like that in “Piece with Two Pauses for Baritone Sax” [P’esa s dvumia pauzami dlia saks-baritona], a 1961 poem in which scholar Elena Petrushanskaia, based on her own earlier work and that of Victor Kulle and Boris Roginskii, has compellingly demonstrated thematic relations and formal connections to jazz.

Металлический зов в полночь
слетает с Петропавловского собора,
из распахнутых окон в переулках
мелодически звяжет деревянные часы комнат,
в радиоприемниках звучат гимны.
Все стихает.
Ровный шепот девушек в подворотнях
стихает.

A metallic call at midnight
flies down from the Petropavlovsk cathedral,
from wide-open windows in the alleys
the wooden clocks of rooms melodically tinkle,
from radio receivers hymns sound.
All quiets down.
The even whisper of girls in entryways quiets down.


236 Iosif Brodskii, Sochineniia Iosifa Brodskogo, v. 1, 71-2.
and lovers in July are calm.
Every once in awhile a car goes by.
You stand on the bridge and hear
how the whole city quiets down
and grows dark, and goes out.
Night brings
from the warm dark-blue murk
little yellow squares of windows
and the glimmer of the canal.

Play, play Dizzy Gillespie,
Gerry Mulligan and Shearing, Shearing,
in white dresses, all of you there in white dresses
and white blouses
on forty-second and seventy-second streets,
there, beyond the dark ocean, amidst trees,
above which, their airborne lights ablaze,
airplanes are flying,
beyond the ocean.
A good style, a good style
this evening,
My God, my God, my God, my God,
what is Gerry doing there,
the baritone and boredom and so alone,
My God, my God, my God, my God,
the sound draws an ellipsoid so far beyond the ocean,
and if black Garner now
hammers his hands on the black-and-white row,
Everything becomes clear.

Erroll!
My God, my God, my God, my God,
what a drummer old Monk has
and how far,
beyond the ocean,
my God, my God, my God,
it’s some kind of hunt for love,
everything is snatched up, but the hunt goes on,
my God, my God,
it’s some kind of pursuit of us, pursuit of us,
my God,
who is that chatting with death, going outside,
this morning.

Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God,
you’re running in the street, so deserted, no sound at all,
only in entryways, in driveways, at intersections,
at front doors,
in entryways they’re talking with each other,
and on locked facades already-read newspapers snarl their
headlines.
All the lovers in July are so calm,
calm, calm.

Petrushanskaia’s in-depth analysis of this poem highlights not only the obvious thematic connections with jazz—from the title to the naming of some of Brodsky’s favorite jazz musicians (“Play, play, Dizzy Gillespie, / Gerry Mulligan, and Shearing, Shearing”) and
allusions to favorite pieces—but also interprets the poem’s improvisational form with its accentual meter as a response to jazz. Indeed, Petrushanskaia attributes such characteristics as “swing” and “drive” to the pulse of this and other Brodsky poems, and finds parallels to jazz performance even on the phonetic level.\(^{237}\)

Petrushanskaia characterizes the poem as conveying “how the transformation of the map of the world happens—at midnight, virtually in an enchanted sleep, when reality yields beneath the splashing outrush from the unconscious of ‘the spawn of jazz,’ at the moment of transition from official time and the sounds of the country’s radio station to the forbidden broadcast from ‘over there.’”\(^{238}\) This somewhat florid passage astutely pinpoints the mysticism of the transition between “worlds”—from the daytime Soviet world to the all but opaque night of the west, transmitted by the thin stream of radio waves carrying Conover’s voice and snatches of jazz, which listeners like Brodsky would have to fill out with their own imaginations. Petrushanskaia, however, passes over some crucial elements of Brodsky’s poem that we will analyze.

The introductory lines of Brodsky’s poem are remarkable for their rendering of the transition from the public sphere to the private: the metallic public chime of midnight in the open air is answered by the melodic sound of the wooden clocks in private apartments. The contrast of outdoor metal time with the indoor wooden clocks subtly separates the public, artificially created, official side of human life from the private, organic, living aspect.\(^{239}\) Through the still-open windows of the nearby apartments the


\(^{238}\) Petrushanskaia, *Muzykal’nyi mir Iosifa Brodskogo*, 239.

\(^{239}\) With the metal/wood dichotomy, Brodsky may be following Osip Mandelstam (see, for example, how Mandelstam glorifies wood in “The flame destroys...” [*Unichtozhaet plamen* ]\(^{1}\), 1915, and the role of metal in his epigram on Stalin, “We live without feeling the country beneath us...” [*My zhivem, pod soboiu ne*}
poem’s speaker hears the anthem that signaled the close of each day of radio broadcasting in the Soviet Union. As the city, now “turned off” by the end of broadcasting, settles into sleep, the speaker remains “on a bridge”—poised between what is now the official Soviet night and the beginning of an alternative, unsanctioned life. That life, which the “night brings,” is characterized by the “yellow squares of windows / and the glimmering of the canal.” Note that in Russian there is a single word, kanal, for both “canal” and (radio) “channel.” The word that I have rendered “glimmering” can also be translated as “scintillation” or even “oscillation.” In other words, this moment of transition can be seen to be marked not only by the switching off of the official radio broadcasting service, but also by the tuning in to Conover’s show—by zeroing in on the oscillating channel, and by watching the flickering “green eye” of the receiver reflect the increasing strength of reception. It is an interpretation made more plausible by the stated “warmth” of the “dark-blue murk” [temno-sinego mraka] that the night brings—perhaps the warmth and skin tones of the jazz musicians themselves, given that a few lines down Brodsky writes “…black [Erroll] Garner / hammers his hands on the black-and-white row…”—and by the sudden transition from the quieted official life to the excited cry, “Play, play, Dizzy Gillespie!”

That the “baritone sax” of the title of the poem alludes in part to Conover’s voice is so evident to Petrushanskaia that she claims this to be the case without justifying her assumption with any reference to the text of the poem: “The choice of timbre of ‘Piece’ addresses both [Brodsky’s] preferred jazz instrumentalists and the voice, from the radio receiver, of the host of the Jazz Hour, Willis Conover with his ‘most luxurious in the

[1933]. For metal and time, see also Gavriila Derzhavin’s “On the Death of Prince Meshchersky” [Na smert’ Kniazia Meshcherskogo], 1779 and Semyon Bobrov, e.g. “The Century’s Foreseen Response” [Predchuvstvennyi otzyv veka], 1802 or 1803.
world bass-baritone’ [E.P. quotes Brodsky]. The familiar timbre transported one into the world of jazz sounds, which seemed to those listening behind the ‘Iron Curtain’ to be a magical kingdom of improvised existence in free space.” In other words, Petrushanksaia takes Brodsky’s title to refer not only to Gerry Mulligan’s baritone sax playing, but to Willis Conover’s sax-like voice as well. Although Brodsky never explicitly states in the poem that Gillespie’s and Mulligan’s music is streaming from the radio waves of Conover’s show, it makes sense in light of how we have read the poem so far to agree with Petrushanskaia here.

Petrushanskaia locates the second of the two pauses Brodsky emphasizes in the title of his poem before the final line, a reprise of “All the lovers in July are so calm, calm, calm.” The reprise is picked up from the introductory section, where the line reads simply, “and the lovers in July are calm.” Despite Petrushanskaia’s reasoned justification for locating the second pause there (one pauses before a reprise), it makes more sense to use the same criteria by which she found the first pause: a graphic break (white space) between sections. Such a break occurs after the line, “Who is that chatting with death, going outside, this morning.” If the first break introduced the strains of Conover’s show, it makes sense that the second break marks the end of it. Breaking up the sections like this feels right not only because of the graphic white space on the page, but because with this final section, the perspective returns from the rather ecstatic experience of the jazz performance to the figure we had last seen on a bridge, now running in the deserted streets. In the introductory section, all sound, even of lovers, had gradually ceased upon the tolling of midnight. But now, post-Conover (as we are positing) in the early morning,

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240 Petrushanskaia, Muzykal’nyi mir Iosifa Brodskogo, 240-41.
although the streets are still empty, “in entryways, in driveways, at crossroads, / at front
doors, / in entryways they’re talking with each other, / and on locked facades already-
read newspapers snarl their headlines. / All lovers in July are so calm, calm, calm.” There
seems to be a qualitative change in peoples’ ability to have intimate conversations, a
change that can be attributed to the effect of the jazz broadcast. Somehow, Conover’s
show created an informal, unscripted space, an alternative to official life that enabled
lovers to find liminal places in which to have some moments of private life. In this
reading, the “even whisper” of the lovers in the introductory section is static and falters
with the tolling of the bell, but the calmness of the lovers in the aftermath of the show has
a vibrancy: where in the introduction the short phrase “and lovers in July are calm” was
alone on a line and followed by a period, in the poem’s final line, it echoes, the last two
iterations falling on a second line: “All lovers in July are so calm, / so calm, so calm.”

As a whole, Brodsky’s poem vividly conveys the special atmosphere Conover
worked so hard to create. Partly due to the lateness of the broadcast and the necessarily
private environment in which it was possible to listen (while it was not illegal to listen to
foreign broadcasts, one could be prosecuted for communicating what one had heard to
others241), and partly because of the music—inseparable from the personalities of the
artists—the Jazz Hour program actually created an alternative, intimate world in which a

241 “If one was caught listening to Western broadcasts, particularly RFE/RL [Radio Free Europe/Radio
Liberty], officials placed that person’s name on a list, but no other punishment was meted out as,
surprisingly, it was not illegal to listen under Soviet Penal Law. A Soviet citizen would be punished,
however, if he or she were caught passing this information, as it was illegal to ‘disseminate false and
fabricated information about the Soviet life’ and ‘anti-Soviet propaganda.’” (“COLD WAR
BROADCASTING IMPACT: Report on a Conference organized by the Hoover Institution and the Cold
War International History Project of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars at Stanford
University, October 13-16, 2004,” 30 [session 6, par. 10], 11 Aug 2010
<http://www.wilsoncenter.org/news/docs/Broadcastingconfreport052105.doc>.)
young would-be artist in Leningrad could be friends—at least in his own imagination—with Willis Conover, Dizzy Gillespie, Gerry Mulligan, and Erroll Garner.

**Individual Artistry**

Conover weaves the concepts of individualism and artistry closely together in his commentaries and interviews. He consistently spotlights for his listeners artists who have had a huge impact on the jazz world by boldly creating something new, unique and often controversial in the world of jazz. Conover takes care to explicitly discuss how difficult these artists’ paths have been, and how rewarding.

In an interview with Gerry Mulligan at the Newport Jazz Festival in 1955, Conover asks about the difference between American and European jazz. Mulligan answers, “Jazz is pretty much an individual thing. [It is a vehicle of] the individual taste of the individuals involved.” Conover rephrases: “Each person has his own message to say,” and follows up with, “Are you...the man who freed the jazz band from the tyranny of the piano?” Mulligan deflects the question with a laugh, but both he and Conover knew that Mulligan (with Chet Baker, Bob Whitlock, and Chico Hamilton) was one of the pioneers of the piano-less quartet in the early 1950s. The interchange could not have lasted more than a minute or two, but in that time Conover and Mulligan managed to reiterate the connection between jazz and individualism—and individualism and democracy—four or five times. There were enough repetitions of the word “individual” that even a listener with only rudimentary English would be able to catch that much—and this is typical for Conover’s show. Moreover, that particular word, “individual,” had very different—and negative—connotations in the Soviet context: the collective was good and
desirable, the individual bad and divisive. With his careful definitions and rephrasings (“Each person has his own message to say”), Conover was actually creating potential for his many listeners to rethink for themselves what the word “individual” could mean.

The lesson of individuality was dramatically underscored a year later, when Mulligan again appeared on Conover’s show, this time as one of several panelists listening to music by Hungarian musicians. The musicians had recorded their own jazz compositions during the independence movement of 1956. The recordings had made their way into Conover’s hands, but by the time the program was aired in late 1956, the Soviets had already invaded Hungary and crushed the revolution. Conover opened his broadcast with this introduction: “Ladies and gentlemen, you are about to hear some jazz recordings never before broadcast. Jazz by Hungarians recorded a few weeks ago just before the freedom fighting broke out in Hungary…” Conover goes on to say that the musicians were mostly amateurs, inspired by what they had heard on Music USA. “We don’t know whether the musicians who made this music are listening today,” Conover says, “But here is their living testimonial in the universal language of music.” The panelists then go on to discern certain influences (George Shearing, Mulligan, Modern Jazz Quartet, Stan Getz, Buddy Rich, and others) in the pieces as they are aired. They comment more than once that the performances are impressive in their grasp of jazz, “considering that we know they’ve only been listening to [American music] for the past two years.” The implication of these sorts of comments is that the young Hungarian jazz musicians are brave individual artists deserving of admiration and respect not only for their quick learning of the jazz idiom, but for their determination to compose and play

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242 Gerry Mulligan Collection of the Library of Congress, RWD 7609, Side A.
it even in the face of disapproval and real repression. The airing of the recordings after the crushing of the revolution was an implicit act of solidarity, although Conover always steered away from direct political commentary. With this program, Conover implicitly invited his listeners to link jazz with individual, free artistry. Again, this approach is typical for Conover, and if the Avvakumites didn’t catch this particular program (although it was an important one and shows were also repeated), they would have gotten the same message from other programs. With revered master Count Basie, Conover reiterated his message of individual artistry, introducing him as “another great musician, representing his style of jazz [italics mine].”

Stan Getz tells Conover, “What distinguishes me is my tone.” Dave Brubeck says that he wants to “just try to keep learning and keep playing what I’ve always wanted to play and not let anyone change me.” Routinely, Conover worked to highlight the individuality of his guests.

The Jazz Hour prepared the Avvakumites for the difficulties they would have to endure—and the possible rewards way down the line—if they were to turn their backs on the Soviet project. Conover regularly drew out the artists he interviewed about the obstacles they overcame. Such obstacles often had to do with racism, something three of the four Avvakumites, with “Jew” on their passports, came up against from very early in their lives. Like dark-skinned Americans of African extraction, Jews in the Soviet Union were routinely deterred from getting a good education, desirable employment, and recognition. Pushed to the margins of society themselves, Brodsky, Naiman, and Rein must have found it natural to admire artists like Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker, and Dizzy Gillespie, to name just a few Americans who came “from the margins towards the

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243 Newport Jazz Festival Interviews, July 15-17, 1955, Library of Congress sound recording RWB 1687, Side B.
center,” to quote the title of another of Brodsky’s jazz-related poems (“*Ot okrainy k tsentru*”). And Conover does not neglect to mention the rewards as well. In addition to crediting Duke Ellington, for instance, with the creation of the American art form of jazz, he remarks that “three of your most fervent admirers [are] Presidents Eisenhower, Roosevelt, and Truman.”244

Conover repeatedly highlights the difficulty of sticking to one’s own artistic path—resisting the profit motive245—in order to produce something vital and new. He takes the opportunity to do so, for example, in talking with Eartha Kitt. In his introduction, Conover notes that Kitt is “not known as a jazz artist but draws from musical influences all over the world into something ‘new and living’ as jazz does.” He concludes his introduction with, “She reaches our heart, [with] satire, consummate artistry, honesty.” As he interviews Kitt, Conover observes, “As an artist you have a difficult road ahead of you, don’t you?” Eartha agrees. Conover adds that it is “difficult to resist advice to do the safe, easy thing.” Conover reminds Billy Eckstine about a groundbreaking album he did with Sarah Vaughan: “When you and Sarah first [did that] there was considerable criticism… you and Sarah have helped put across the idea of singing with musicianship, not just with sales appeal.” Eckstine responds that if you’re just singing to fatten your pocket, you might as well keep quiet. These are just a few moments in which Conover consciously highlights the artists’ principled and independent

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244 Sound recording, Library of Congress, RWB 3069, Side A.

245 In Soviet times, “profit” came in the form of privileges: stipends from the Writers’ Union, weeks or months spent at “Houses of Creativity,” access to special stores and restaurants, traveling abroad, and the like.
approach to their art, by repeating words like “difficult,” “individual,” “artistry,” and “jazz.”

Conover invites the artists to be critical of themselves. Billie Holiday remembers being afraid of the mike during her first recording session. Gene Krupa had difficulty playing after he saw on film what he looked like when he played. Art Tatum would like to have more technical facility (!). Peggy Lee admits that she gets into slumps and sometimes thinks she ought to quit. Conover does what he can to show how human the process of being an artist is, and how individual is each artist’s challenge.

U.S. officials in charge of propaganda could not have hoped for a stronger weapon than Conover. With his insistent focus on artists who went their own way, broke from convention, overcame challenges, mesmerized audiences with a unique voice, and in this process reshaped the world of music, he provided a virtual road map to the young Leningrad poets who had to choose between writing what publishers wanted and pursuing their own way, speaking in their own individual voices. The Avvakumites were exposed via Conover’s carefully designed program to a significant number of fascinating, living, very human artists whose principled pursuit of their own ideals had, in the end, elevated them far beyond the mortal fame of poet-contemporaries such as Yevtushenko.

**Collective fun now**

Conover explicitly states more than once—for example, when he emcees the Newport Festival—that people gather to listen to jazz because it’s fun. At the 1957 Newport Jazz Festival, Conover states, “perhaps more than any other music, jazz is fun.

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246 Sounds recordings, Library of Congress, RWB 3057, RWB 3058, RWB 3059.
Fun to listen to, fun to play. [That may be how jazz arose.] just for the fun of it.” He picks up on the theme a little later when introducing Louis Armstrong: “Well, remember we said earlier that jazz is fun? Perhaps no one has more fun with it than Louis Armstrong.” And Armstrong launches into a kind of song/poem about “how jazz is made”: “You take some skin, take a bass, take a box, the one that rocks, New Orleans trombones; take a stick, one little lick, take a bone or a phone, take a spot, the one that’s hot, now you have jazz [...] everybody swingin’ everybody singin’, east to the west out to the coast, jazz is the thing that folks—dig—most! Now that’s jazz.”

Armstrong’s fun with words adds to the fun he brings as a trumpet player, composer, and performer. His short lines and extreme rhyming with simple vocabulary would have been easy and fun to understand.

Dizzy Gillespie, who, Conover informs us, likes to dress eccentrically, is similarly playful onstage. He introduces the sax player who will get the spotlight in the next piece: “Next we’ll feature the star of the band. No, not you. Nope. No, not you. Without any more ado. Pee Wee Moore.”

Even the names of the players, heard every night on the radio, are fun: Pee Wee, Dizzy, Duke, Count. Conover tells his listeners, “The originators of jazz used to meet whenever and wherever they could to play around with new sounds…then jazz was considered more of a plaything for out-of-work musicians than a serious art. Now kings and queens [listen to it].” It is a subtle reminder to Conover’s young listeners that the fun they are having right now might be considered serious art down the line.

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247 Sound recording, Library of Congress, LWO 12827, reel 21, side A.
248 Sound recording, Library of Congress, LWO 12827, reel 21, side A.
249 Sound recording, Library of Congress, LWO 12827, reel 21, side A.
Almost all the artists Conover interviews come off as modest, lively, spontaneous, and creatively involved with other musicians. They all seem to sincerely admire and be inspired by one another, and they freely admit their influences. The degree to which they find their friends and colleagues inspiring, combined with the spontaneity of jazz as a musical form (i.e. the incorporation of improvisation and dialogue into the structure), adds up to a sense of collective fun, a spontaneous give-and-take, that is expressed both in the music and in the interviews. The dialogic spirit and sense of fun are things that could be easily conveyed despite the language barrier.

The man whom Conover introduced as “the Count of Swing” is stunningly modest. Each time Conover tries to evoke some kind of response from Count Basie about his achievements, Basie demurs. “Have you tried to evaluate your own playing in [your] group?” Basie replies, “I don’t do any actual playing. Just working with Freddie the guitarist and the bass.” Conover teases him about “believing in the power of understatement, rhythmically and also verbally.” Basie sticks to his guns: “Oh, no, I’m just trying to be truthful.” When Conover asks him to name his most significant contribution to music, he playfully accuses Conover of going “below the belt” again, and adds, “If I have it, I don’t know what it could be.” When asked if he was proud of great young artists he uncovered, he says he thinks they uncovered themselves, but that he is proud of them. “One of the most modest men I’ve met,” comments Conover, to which Basie, not missing a beat (as it were), responds, “You’re very nice.” But the listener gets a sense of how important Basie’s music is to him when Conover says at the close of

250 Sound recording, Library of Congress, RWB 1687, side B.
the interview that hundreds of thousands of his listeners hear Basie’s music, which
Conover programs “almost every day.” Basie responds, “Please don’t stop.”

Basie attributes what Conover calls his band’s “buoyant simplicity” to the group’s being “happy.” And Paul Desmond answers Conover’s question about what state of being he achieves when he is playing as a group with, “It’s a very happy thing. It’s the happiest thing I’ve known musically, and music is the happiest thing I’ve known.”

George Shearing playfully announces, “I have a guest with me in the studio today, one Willis Conover.” No one poses as an authority, not even the regular radio host. And everyone seems to be having fun. You can hear it in the music when one musician takes up a figure offered by a colleague and plays with it before sending it on to the next artist. There are countless such examples in Conover’s shows of how these artists’ serious work gets lightheartedly conveyed, and these nonverbal signals and intonations would have been easily picked up and treasured by eager young listeners in the Soviet Union.

**Jazz Culture and the Avvakumites**

The parallels between American jazz musicians and young Russian poets should not be overstated. To begin with, a poet’s literary tastes and influences certainly have more direct impact on his poetry than any other single factor. Moreover, one of the mechanisms by which both poets and jazz artists often chart new territory is by “quoting” other works or by basing their own new piece on the structure of an older work (the term

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251 Sound recording, Library of Congress, RWB 1687, side B.

252 Sound recording, Library of Congress, RWB 1687, side B.
for this in jazz is “contrafact”)—thus, while one can point to such quotes or foundations, who is to say whether the new work is inspired by jazz or poetic tradition? Thirdly, other extra-literary media—in particular film—sent their own persuasive messages (as we saw in the Chapter 2 discussion of *Seagulls Are Dying in the Harbor*), some of which were quite similar to those conveyed over the radio, making it more or less impossible to isolate sources of influence. Finally, the jazz-influenced collectivity and collaboration among poets would be on a very different footing than that among band members. A poet works and performs essentially in solitude, and the Avvakumites show no signs of, for example, collectively writing poems.

That said, the lively collectivity of the Avvakumites does have much in common with the mutual give-and-take of jazz artists. “Oh, these little streets, / the fake-looking houses, / so old and like in France...” [Akh, eti ulochki, doma poddel’anye, takie starye i kak vo Frantsii]; “Oh, my Nevsky, / my little Nevsky, / leetl Nevsky, pti Nevsky, nestling...” [Akh, moi Nevskii, / moi malen’kii Nevskii, / littl Nevskii, pti Nevskii, ptenets]: could anyone tell whose lines were whose if we didn’t know that the former were Rein’s and the latter Bobyshev’s?

Naiman recalls how the friends bonded over shared excitement about poetry:

As everyone does when young, we recited poems to each other, and met up during the breaks and when we were cutting lectures. On the sunny spring evening when Bobyshev and I first got talking we walked [...] reciting poetry nonstop and stamped up and down outside the gates for another hour, finishing Bagritsky’s ‘February’ and selections from Tikhonov’s *The Horde* and *Mead*. Another time Brodsky, who had been told over the phone by my family that I was queuing for a railway ticket at the booking office, then in the Duma building, came and half-shouted half-sang his newly completed ‘Elegy for John Donne’: the public went into shock.²⁵³

The joint reading and sharing of fresh lines of poetry—each poet delivering or imagining each line with his own inflection—has much in common with the lively immediacy of jazz performance. The story of Brodsky reciting his ‘Elegy’ especially resonates with some of the qualities of jazz performance we have discussed. The moment captures not only the intimate, immediate, creative, dialogical, and fun aspects of the friendship (Brodsky needed precisely Naiman to hear the poem right then; hearing it at full volume in such an unexpected venue surely added to the piquancy of its reception), but also how the performance could be shared with an audience without necessarily being directed towards it (in contradistinction to popular Soviet-style poetry of the time that was in significant part written with declamation to large audiences in mind). Like a jazz performer, Brodsky delivered his latest riff to Naiman, but in a way that anyone present could also enjoy it.

In interviews with Valentina Polukhina about Brodsky, both Naiman and Rein comment on the give-and-take that prevailed in their group’s writing. Rein says, “There came a time when, somehow or other, we had a whole lot of things in common, our melodic line, our vocabulary, our images and possibly even our way of looking at the world. [...] The poem ‘Ten years later’ [in relation to Brodsky’s ‘To leave love on a clear sunny day, irrevocably’ and ‘All the same you cannot hear, all the same you wouldn’t hear a word’] is an example of the way in which our two poetries came close to one another—not deliberately—but because they both grew from common fields of interest.”  

And Naiman recalls similar convergences both within and outside of poetry:

There was a period at the beginning of the 1960s when I did try and write in the style [Brodsky] was telling us we ought to be writing in. At that

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254 Polukhina, Brodsky through the Eyes of His Contemporaries, 60.
time he was telling scores of people, ‘Write stories in verse.’ And I wrote them. There’s a poem of mine, called ‘Verses on a private occasion’, which I wrote following a visit to see him in his northern exile. Later I discovered it was Brodsky’s syntax I’d used in that poem. That didn’t last long. But talking of coincidences, last September [the interview took place in 1989] in New York we were talking and, suddenly, he read some lines to me and said, ‘Yours or mine, A.G.?’ And, of course, those coincidences are there. A mutual friend of ours said to us, ‘Listen, in one of your [Naiman’s] poems there’s this line, ‘Sometime when we will no longer be’, and there’s this line of Joseph’s ‘Sometime when we will no longer be’.’ Joseph said, I wrote that in such-and-such a year.’ I was taken aback and I said, ‘That means I wrote my poem later.’ You know, that’s how it is...I asserted, though Joseph denied it (his denials were rather luke-warm), that in his essay ‘Less than One’, when he tells the story of the boy who crawled under the desks to see the colour of his teacher’s panties, the boy was in my class and his name was Oleg Knyazev. It’s one of those banal stories you hear when you hang around with the same crowd and you end up telling the story, not thinking about who first told it and, generally, you come to think of it as your own. It’s as if we’d taken two gherkins from the same pickle jar. I repeat, it only lasted a short time and it wasn’t so much his influence as an attempt to do something in the same spirit.”

Naiman and Rein both succeed in capturing the somewhat involuntary nature of the way material was shared in their closely-knit creative group.

Perhaps even more importantly, the Avvakumites absorbed the extra-poetical aspects of Conover’s narrative about jazz. As Stan Getz says about working with his band, “it’s a collective thing, that’s what brings the joy, a community at work.” This kind of truly “collective” work was certainly a great contrast to the Soviet use—and abuse—of the concept. As was true in the case of the word “individual,” Conover’s interviews subtly redefined the meaning of “collective” for his east bloc listeners. Conover’s show gradually and persistently sketched out a model the Avvakumites could follow in shifting their perspective from a distorted use of language to something that felt more “true,” more genuinely alive. They craved and tried to create the sense of freedom and life of the

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255 Polukhina, Brodsky through the Eyes of His Contemporaries, 33.
“flight” Brodsky writes about in “These days I feel tiredness more often...” and the
ecstatic feeling of open space Naiman evokes in “Voice of America.”

Evgeny Rein formulated the meaning of American jazz for his group most
succinctly with his couplet about jazz musicians “who blow into our ears and our souls, / who in the cold save us from freezing” in a poem immortalizing the appearance of Duke Ellington’s band in Kiev in 1971.

Izbrannye stikhotvoreniia i poemy, 408-9.
The form and rhythm of Rein’s poem is less flexible than some of the poems analyzed in this chapter (with only one unrealized stress, no extra-metrical stress, and one shortened foot in the entire thirty-six lines) but its amphibrachic tetrameter is nonetheless a “swinging” meter with its rocking triplet rhythm and feminine endings. The most prominent of the features shared with Brodsky’s and Naiman’s poems is the blackness motif, in Rein’s poem set out in the title, “Black Music.” Rein refers to the blackness of the musicians no less than seven times throughout the course of the poem. The high spirits and feelings of freedom and space are evoked here as well. The opening lines, “They were met somewhere at the Polish border / and ecstatic Ukrainians brought them to Kiev,” echo World War II accounts of citizens’ joy at being liberated. “To a faraway land on the Mississippi River / We will all soon go in a jeep, / by Boeing, train, and scooter [...] And the day will be sunny, long and pure...” evoke wide-open expanses, ease of movement, and a fairy-tale like image of the American south. Rein states what appears to be a collective impulse (he says not “I” but “we”) towards American jazz artists in the lines, “We will bow at the black feet of the artists, / Who blow into our ears and souls, / who in the cold save us from freezing”—recall here Bobyshev’s “And Nonna nods her head at everyone, / Herself not knowing, how she is saving me.” Rein loves how the musicians animated the world around them, and what they did with form: “How they

257 Until the 1960s and 70s, when the Soviet government began to invite students from African “brother nations” to study in the USSR, it was not all that common to see black faces there. Perhaps the mythological nature of blackness as it was portrayed in various media contributed to the deep impression it obviously made on Rein when he saw Ellington’s band in person. See, for example, the final scene of the 1936 Soviet film, “Circus” [Tsirk]; and the press given in the USSR to singer Paul Robeson, including an autobiography published in Russian, Na tom ia stoiu (On This I Stand) (Moskva: Molodaia gvardiia, 1958).
blew, how they breathed the air, / How they bent the music, and then let it go!” He finishes the poem on a warm note of gratitude for the artists’ “kindness” which they somehow manage to infuse at least “a little” into a “hostile palace.” The “liberation” of Ukraine by black jazz artists of great artistry, energy, and humanity has much in common with the spirit of especially Brodsky’s and Naiman’s jazz poems. Like Naiman’s much later poem, by 1971 Rein has gained enough critical distance from his initial encounter with jazz to inject some rather poignant irony into his lines. His characterization of the scoundrel who is also a jazz-lover brings out the complexity of the time—liking jazz, by 1971, was no longer the stamp of an independent mind. Rein’s play on the Stalin-era concept of “shock work” [udarnaia rabota]—what I have translated more literally here as “drumming work”—also complicates what otherwise looks like a fairly straightforward worship of what Naiman referred to as the “black saints” of jazz music. But the closing lines underscore the humanist impulse that bound the Avvakumites together back in the late 1950s: the musicians instill a little kindness in a harsh world.

All four Avvakumites’ poems about jazz seem very much influenced by their many hours of listening to Willis Conover’s carefully designed program as well as their exposure to burgeoning Soviet jazz that drew from the same source. Over a period from 1960 through the 1990s these poems share motifs of jazz performers’ blackness, a happy, friendly, and often erotically charged energy, a certain spiritual purity (in Bobyshev’s “To Nonna,” perhaps a false or lesser spirituality), and a feel for freedom and space associated with jazz and America in general, couched in a form that displays “swing” and even improvisatory characteristics. Brodsky’s 1960 “Piece with Two Pauses for Baritone Sax” captures the mood as it was then best—the static void of Soviet surroundings giving
way to the dynamic jazz world as the poem’s speaker symbolically stands poised on a bridge, babbling rather senselessly, “My God, my God.” The feeling of revelation is toned down and somewhat ironized in the other three poets’ jazz poems, but the ecstatic feel and gratitude to the musicians nonetheless remain crucial elements. Conover’s jazz program did not take long to permeate a certain layer of young Soviet society, partly via the music itself, partly through the verbal message, and partly by the listeners’ imaginative leaps connecting that gap between what was communicated and what was understood. By the beginning of the 1960s the Avvakumites had shaped their own values of intimacy, individual artistry, and collective fun, to the detriment of their ability to write Soviet poetry.

In this chapter I discussed an early phenomenon shared to a lesser or greater extent by the Avvakumites with their generation, whereas in Chapter 4 I will treat a later influence they shared as a group. First Conover and then Anna Akhmatova—one via radio waves from the west, the other in face-to-face conversation—were instrumental in helping these young men become artists capable of withstanding intense societal and governmental pressure to remain within the artistic bounds of Socialist Realism. Akhmatova was a living Russian poet whose life and work created a bridge to the traditions of Russian poetry seemingly decimated by Stalin’s repressive policies. Hers was the final shaping force in the development of the Avvakumites before they set out on their mature, individual paths.
Chapter 4

Anna Akhmatova: The Model of an Independent Poet

In the years since Anna Akhmatova’s death in 1966, many writers, scholars, and critics, including the Avvakumites themselves, have shown great interest in articulating the place and effects of her friendship with the four poets. Brodsky, while gratefully acknowledging the importance of the friendship personally and artistically, made a point of insisting that in poetic aesthetics he was closer to Marina Tsvetaeva than to Akhmatova.\footnote{See, for instance, Volkov, Conversations with Joseph Brodsky, 209.} Rein, on the other hand, has stated that he is the most Acmeist of the four poets and therefore Akhmatova’s direct literary heir.\footnote{See \url{http://magazines.russ.ru/voplit/2002/5/rein.html} for the claim made in passing, 38 paragraphs from the bottom, 17 Aug 2010.} Naiman based an entire book as well as a handful of poems and articles on what he learned from Akhmatova as a poet, colleague, and friend, and Bobyshev, too, has written both poetry and prose on the subject.\footnote{See, e.g., Naiman, Remembering Anna Akhmatova (entire), and Bobyshev, \emph{Ia zdes’}, 307-11.} Outside the group, Konstantin Kuzminsky—who has devoted a number of years to reconstituting and commenting on the poetry scene(s) from the Khrushchev era on—takes the extreme view on the other end of the spectrum, expressing a great deal of disdain for the whole concept of this special group of four poets who were close to Akhmatova. Kuzminsky claims that an “Akhmatova school” is nothing more than a self-mythologizing effort by the four poets, which was taken up eagerly by western literary scholars and critics because they love that sort of thing.\footnote{Kuzminskii, \emph{Antologiia noveishei russkoi poezii u goluboi laguny}, 2B, 180ff.} Yet at the same time, that is

\footnote{258 See, for instance, Volkov, \emph{Conversations with Joseph Brodsky}, 209.}
\footnote{259 See \url{http://magazines.russ.ru/voplit/2002/5/rein.html} for the claim made in passing, 38 paragraphs from the bottom, 17 Aug 2010.}
\footnote{260 See, e.g., Naiman, \emph{Remembering Anna Akhmatova} (entire), and Bobyshev, \emph{Ia zdes’}, 307-11.}
\footnote{261 Kuzminskii, \emph{Antologiia noveishei russkoi poezii u goluboi laguny}, 2B, 180ff.}
how Kuzminsky groups them. And between the extremes plenty of other poets, critics, and readers who write have weighed in.

The purpose of the following chapter is not to sort out conflicting claims. Rather, I will argue here that the quartet of Avvakumites, at one time as close to one another as the friends we now refer to as Pushkin’s Pleiad and the Acmeists, will in retrospect be understood to have done something important and distinct enough in Russian poetry that it is worthwhile to analyze the culminating role Akhmatova played in their maturation as poets. To that end, I have isolated features of the Akhmatova these men knew that, I argue, were crucial for the important thing they did—the independent turn the Avvakumites ultimately managed to make from Soviet Socialist poetry to a poetry that put responsibility to language in the humane tradition at the center.

Judging by Avvakumite poems dedicated to and about Akhmatova, her human qualities—inextricable as they were from her poetry—may have been paramount for the Avvakumites-to-be. Like the artists interviewed by Conover, Akhmatova was a living human being who had worked out at great personal cost how to maintain her fidelity to her art, and in the most discouraging of circumstances. But unlike the rather theoretical connection the Avvakumites were able to feel with those artists, in Akhmatova they found an embodied and responding voice—moreover, that of a poet whose language was their own. Secondly, her experience of the twentieth century was a vast repository of history that the Avvakumites could not find in books: she was a living bridge to the broken-off traditions of Russian poetry, and the Acmeist strand in particular. Lastly, the warmth of her personal relations with these young poets marked an intense era of collective growth and sharing that ended with her death. Khrushchev’s Thaw had taught
the Avvakumites what they wanted to turn away from, but it was through Akhmatova that
they found the articulation of what they wanted to turn towards, and she was a living and
accessible model of how to do it. The virtual reality of serious, life-loving, and
independent artistry transmitted so attractively in Willis Conover’s broadcasts was
transmuted by the person of Akhmatova into the very real circumstances of Russian
poetry in the Soviet Union.

As the decade of the 1950s drew to an end, it became increasingly clear that
sources of authority alternative to the State could be, to a certain degree, tolerated. While
yelling crazy slogans in public places would surely get one arrested, as we saw in the
case of Krasilnikov, pursuing a private life and private tastes while showing up for work
or school on a regular basis was acceptable. An outgrowth of this unspoken policy was
that young people found themselves increasingly drawn, in their private lives, to
figures—both peers and older persons, and in both cases particularly writers—whom they
saw as uncorrupted by the criminal system partially revealed in Khrushchev’s Secret
Speech. Vasily Grossman writes about this phenomenon in his novel Life and Fate,
which he was finishing in the late 1950s. Here is a passage about a lieutenant whom
Nadya, the daughter of one of the chief protagonists, is dating:

Lomov was obviously sharp-witted and difficult; his attitude towards
everything generally accepted was one of cynicism. He wrote poetry
himself; it was from him that Nadya had learnt her indifference towards
Sholokhov and Nikolay Ostrovsky and her contempt for Demyan Byedniy
and Tvardovskiy. And Nadya was obviously parroting him when she said
with a shrug of the shoulders: ‘Revolutionaries are either stupid or
dishonest—how can one sacrifice the life of a whole generation for some
imaginary future happiness?’

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262 Vasily Grossman, Life and Fate (New York: NYRB, 1985), 750. Although the quoted passage is set in
the later phase of World War II, Grossman is generally believed to have compressed several of the
important issues of the decade that followed World War II into this time period. Notably, this compression
includes the passages about Stalin’s post-war campaign of hatred towards Jews, in which Viktor Shtrum
Grossman has here touched on the nerves of an entire generation. After the devastation and sacrifice their parents, families, and communities underwent in previous decades, the new generation simply didn’t believe that more sacrifice would produce the theoretically desired results. Consequently, for writers of the Thaw generation, authors who had maintained independence from the State system acquired a certain moral and literary authority that countered that of the Soviet Writers’ Union. Anna Akhmatova was such an alternative figure.

For the quartet of 20-something-year-old poets looking to “name things by their real names” and put precise meaning back into language, the visible evidence of Akhmatova’s independence from the system of state rewards for state poetry—her poverty—was striking. Naiman recalls being impressed by this when he first met Akhmatova: “Homelessness, being unsettled, a nomadic way of life. Being prepared for deprivations, disregard of deprivations, memories of them. Poverty, which was taken for granted, which arrested the attention, and was not merely for show. Not cultivated poverty, not tousled hair, not intentionally wearing a dress until it fell into shreds. Not feigned lack of well-being. [...] Insecurity as a norm of life.” Akhmatova’s very real poverty was a kind of unmistakable insignia of her also very real independence from Soviet authority. But beyond the impressive authenticity of Akhmatova’s poverty, Naiman was taken with her sound. In Akhmatova’s spoken words (Naiman writes), “there was a sound which, as I then thought, could not conceivably be captured in poetry.

263 Naiman, Remembering Anna Akhmatova, 4.
This voice apparently plucked from the chorus of mourners lamenting someone who had fallen silent, could not sing in any choir of poets.”

That individuality, combined with the distance from everything that comprised Soviet society, made a huge impression, which Naiman took away from his first visit: “I was expecting to meet a great, mysterious, legendary woman who had not surrendered, to meet Dante, poetry, truth and beauty. [...] I was not disappointed. [...] I left, stunned by the fact that I had spent an hour in the presence of a person not with whom I had no ideas in common (we had after all been talking about something for that hour), but with whom no one on earth could have anything in common.”

Like Louis Armstrong or Billie Holiday, Akhmatova had acquired her unmistakable and independent sound in part despite and in part because of years of extremely difficult circumstances. And as in the case those jazz greats, it was this very experience, independence, and individuality that, by the end of the 1950s, made Akhmatova appear to be a legitimate alternative source of moral and literary authority (compared to the increasingly discredited Soviet government and Writers’ Union) in the eyes of the Thaw generation. What proved crucial for the development of the Avvakumites was that Akhmatova had mastered and maintained her voice in the Soviet Union, working in the same material—the Russian language—as the four young poets who sought her out.

But why did the Avvakumites gravitate to Akhmatova, rather than to one of the several other alternative authorities of the Leningrad literary scene? Why didn’t they gather around Gleb Semenov along with the Mining Institute poets, or around David Dar,

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or Lydia Ginzburg? My research leads me to conclude that it was the Acmeist impulse shared by the quartet of young poets—the desire to reclaim the Russian language and make it as descriptive as possible of present, human life as they perceived it—that ultimately bound them to Akhmatova.

By various routes, all four Avvakumites had met Akhmatova between 1959 and 1961. Until her death in 1966, they saw her more or less frequently, Naiman and Brodsky more than Bobyshev and Rein. Naiman was both literary secretary for and co-translator with Akhmatova, and simply one of her most trusted friends. Brodsky at one point rented a dacha in Komarovo to be able to see her regularly. Both the frequency and the relative intensity of the four men’s contact with Akhmatova can be superficially assessed by simply glancing at the name index of Akhmatova’s now published personal journals from 1958 to 1966: Rein, nine entries; Bobyshev, twelve entries; Brodsky forty-eight entries, two of which cover more than one page; Naiman, seventy-eight entries, twenty-three of which cover more than one page. More interesting, of course, is to examine the content of the entries, where one can see how the Avvakumites’ lives—especially Brodsky’s and Naiman’s—are woven into Akhmatova’s texts. In among her own poetry, drafts of memoirs and letters, phone numbers, and to-do lists, one finds notes such as “Sunday at 11—Tolya,” and Brodsky’s and Naiman’s own poems. Based on the obviously greater intensity of Brodsky and Naiman’s relations with Akhmatova than Bobyshev’s and Rein’s, I will devote more space in this chapter to the formers’ ideas about Akhmatova.

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267 E.g., Akhmatova, Zapisnye knizhki Anny Akhmatovoi, 311, 399. “Tolya” is the diminutive for Anatoly.
than the latters’. All four men, however, fixed their conceptions of Akhmatova into their poetry during her life and returned to the theme after her death, and it is via all these poems that I propose to analyze the expression of the features of Akhmatova elucidated above. I begin with poems written for Akhmatova during her life.

**Brodsky’s and Naiman’s Early Akhmatova Poems**

In 1962 (reportedly in a hurry, en route by commuter train to Anna Akhmatova’s dacha in Komarovo to celebrate her birthday), Joseph Brodsky penned the ten-stanza “Roosters will start calling and bustling about…” [Zakrichat i zakhlopochut petukhi], dedicated and addressed to Akhmatova. In this poem Brodsky highlights the personal nature of the creative process, even in the context of earthshaking historical events. The poem works along a number of trajectories: the first approaches the figure of Akhmatova through space in increasingly personal terms, like a film that begins with a panorama and steadily homes in on a close-up; a second consciously follows the timeline of Akhmatova’s life, moving toward the moment when it intersects with the lives of the new poets; a third trajectory, largely associative and sound-driven, traces the process that leads to the inception of a poem.

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268 Brodsky remembers that it was a “poem I wrote for Akhmatova on her birthday…The only thing I remember about this poem is that I wrapped it up rather hastily. Nayman and I, we were on our way from Leningrad to see Akhmatova in Komarovo, and we had to race to the station to make our train. I remember the rush…The beginning of the poem is feeble—well, maybe not feeble but there’s too much unnecessary expressionism there. But the ending is good. More or less genuine metaphysics”(Volkov, *Conversations with Joseph Brodsky*, 233). Naiman also remembers the occasion: “We were late, and got there only towards evening. The whole way from Leningrad to Komarovo in the commuter train, Joseph was writing the poem ‘A.A.A.’ […] I always thought of the line Akhmatova took for the epigraph to ‘The Last Rose’— ‘You’ll write about us on a slant’—as ‘and in a hurry’ as well.”(“A.A.A. cherez tridtsat’ tri goda,” in *Rasskazy o Anne Akhmatovoi* [Moskva: Vagrius, 1999], 429).
Закричат и захлопочут петухи, 
загрохочут по проспекту сапоги, 
завершит лошадьный изумруд, 
в одночасье современники умрут.

Запоет над переулком флажолет, 
захохочут над каналом пистолет, 
загремит на подоконнике стекло, 
станет в комнате особенно светло.

И помчатся, задевая за кусты, 
невредимые солдаты духоты 
вдоль подстриженных по-новому аллей, 
сложно тени яйцевидных кораблей.

Так начнется двадцать первый, золотой, 
в тонкое лето, красным светом залитой, 
на вопросы и проклятия в ответ, 
обволакивая паром этот свет.

Но на Марсовое поле дотемна 
Вы придете одинешенька – одна, 
в синем платье, как бывало уже раз, 
но навечно без поклонников, без нас.

Только трубочка бумажная в руке, 
лишь такси за Вами едет вдалеке, 
рядом плещется блестящая вода, 
до асфальта провисают провода.

Вы поднимете прекрасное лицо – 
громкий смех, как поминальное словцо, 
звук неясный на нагревшемся мосту – 
на мгновенье взбудоражит пустоту.

Я не видел, не увижу Ваших слез, 
не услышу я шуршания колес, 
уносящих Вас к заливу, к деревам, 
по отечеству без памятника Вам.

В теплой комнате, как помнится, без книг, 
без поклонников, но также и для них, 
опирая на ладонь свою высок, 
Вы напишете о нас наносюсок.

Вы промолвите тогда: “О, мой Господь! 
этот воздух загустевший – только плоть 
души, оставивших признание свое, 
а не новое творение Твое!”

The opening sounds of “Roosters…” lend credence to the tale of its origins in a commuter train. Loaded at the start with bulky, consonant-packed inceptive verbs of sounding (zakrichat, zakhlopochut, zagrokhochut in the first two lines alone, and a total of seven future tense inceptive “za-” verbs in the first two stanzas), the poem, train-like, gains fluidity and motion as it progresses from the general impressions it opens with to its dual destination, the figure of Akhmatova and the completion of a poem. The first two stanzas comprise a kaleidoscope of sound and light, which resolves as the poem progresses into increasingly close-up views of Akhmatova, and eventually coalesces into poetry—both the poem we are reading and the poem Akhmatova will write about the new generation “on a slant.” The overarching trajectory of this poem is like a train going over a metaphysical bridge across the twentieth century, connecting Akhmatova’s life and work to the new poets, and continuing on into the twenty-first.

How is it done? Brodsky saturates his poem with allusions to Akhmatova’s life and poetry, from the roosters’ cries that bring to mind Akhmatova’s work on Pushkin’s *Tale of the Golden Cockerel* (in which she shows, in a parallel to her own life, that in his creative work Pushkin is taking issue with the Tsar’s continuing interference in personal and professional matters\(^\text{270}\)) to the many references to *Requiem* and *Poem without a Hero* (the menacing rumble of boots; the sudden death of contemporary poets by suicide or firing squad; the red sunset of the Symbolists; the “unscathed soldiers of stifling air” that brush against bushes; and the thickened air—these last two images, especially important

\(^{270}\) Akhmatova, “Pushkin’s Last Tale,” in *My Half-Century* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1992), 149-170. For more compelling evidence that Pushkin is processing his anger with the Tsar’s incursions on his personal and creative freedoms—and a new take on who, precisely, was the target of Pushkin’s satire, see Gasparov, “Pushkin’s Year of Frustration,” *Ulbandus* 12(2009/10): 41-62.
for Brodsky’s poem, will be explicated below). These references are evidence of how Brodsky was developing his strong connections with the history and poetry of the Silver Age through his friendship with Akhmatova. He weaves the ominous associations into the parallel plot of a simple series of sounds and impressions, like those one might experience while traveling by commuter train—the unidentified flute sound, the shot, the rattle of glass, and birds disturbed as the train rumbles past. The sounds and images of the present moment of Brodsky’s poetic “I” thus become intertwined with events in the past via the figure of Akhmatova, as Brodsky incorporates her history into his poetic world.

Brodsky’s third stanza contains a key allusion to Poem without a Hero and the Stalin years of repression:

And, brushing against bushes, they’ll tear along—
the unscathed soldiers of stifling air,
along boulevards with new haircuts,
like shades of egg-shaped ships.

Here lines from Klyuev’s poem about Akhmatova are relevant:

Ахматова — жасминный куст,
Обожженный асфальтом серым,
Тропу утратила ль к пещерам,
Где Дантэ шел, и воздух густ...⁷⁷¹

Ахматова is a jasmine bush
burnt by grey asphalt.
Did she lose her way to the caves
where Dante walked and the air was thick...

Akhmatova dipped into these lines for an epigraph to the middle section of her Poem without a Hero, altering the word “thick” to “empty,” so that the epigraph reads, “…a jasmine bush, / Where Dante walked and the air was empty.”⁷⁷² Reading “bushes” in Brodsky’s poem as poets—and the Akhmatova-jasmine bush in particular—we get an


image of Akhmatova’s lonely, but rooted stance through the years of being grazed by Soviet “soldiers of stifling air.” These soldiers “emptied the air” by slaughtering so many of Akhmatova’s contemporaries, who had filled it with poems. Brodsky, like Klyuev, imagines the bush as persevering in spite of being “burnt by grey asphalt” and a suffocating atmosphere. Further, in the last stanza, Brodsky reverses Akhmatova’s rendering of Klyuev’s air, changing it back to “thickened”—and we will therefore need to pay special attention to the “vapour” (i.e. “thickened air”) Brodsky mentions in the fourth stanza.

In the fourth stanza, Brodsky announces that in the first three he painted the background for the entrance on the stage of the “twenty-first,” i.e., “century.” Akhmatova, as is well known, felt that the new generation of poets, with Brodsky as its most extraordinary representative, would usher in a new Golden Age of Russian poetry to follow her own Silver Age. Brodsky responds by trying to imagine how that will happen:

Thus the twenty-first will start, the golden one,
on a path drenched in red light,
in answer to the questions and curses enveloping that light in vapour.

It seems unclear whether the “light” Brodsky mentions in the last line above refers to the red light (perhaps a reference to Soviet Communism, perhaps to the “sunset” of the Silver Age) that drenches the new, golden generation, or to the light that ends the second stanza—that electric glow of the lone poet (Akhmatova) in a room. In the first instance, the golden brightness of the new generation effectively obscures the dreadful red light produced by the Soviet sun. In the Silver Age sunset reading, the image reads as a tender, protective and less substantial gold vapour of young poets gathering around the bright glow of their beloved and inspiring friend—and beginning the project of filling the
“empty” air. In my view, the latter reading has more substance, but one reading does not necessarily exclude the other. Most importantly, Brodsky has extended the arched bridge of his time trajectory into the twenty-first century.

Brodsky’s poem traverses a series of associations with Akhmatova’s life, focusing ever more closely on the personal, physical presence of Akhmatova. Arriving at the present, Brodsky doesn’t halt—rather, he extends her vector further. By the ninth stanza, he predicts how she will lift her “splendid face” and give a “loud laugh” that both addresses and counterbalances the “guffaw” of the killing pistol in stanza two:

You will lift your splendid face—
loud laughter, like words of eulogy,
an unclear sound on a warmed bridge—
will momentarily agitate the emptiness.

Akhmatova’s laugh produces an “agitation” that counters the rattle of windows in the second stanza and creates a “bridge” of human warmth between the “emptiness” of that time and the time she and the speaker will soon share. The laugh begins the process of filling the air—even if only momentarily. Effectively, Brodsky’s account of the twentieth century effaces the Soviet literary narrative, over-spanning it with the living Akhmatova-bridge that connects the pre-Soviet Silver Age with Brodsky’s own era.

The last two stanzas project a future somewhat more distant: what the addressee will write and say.

In the warm room, with, as I recall, no books,
with no admirers, but also not with them in mind,
leaning your temple on your palm,
You will write about us on a slant.

Then you will pronounce, “O my Lord!
This thickened air is only the flesh
of souls that left their confession,
and is not Your new creation!”
Brodsky reverts here to Klyuev’s “thick” air that Akhmatova had rendered “empty.” With that change, as we noted above, Akhmatova had underscored the disappearance of her coterie of poets and artists in the camps (among them, Klyuev himself) and to emigration. Brodsky’s “thickened” seems a clear indication that he saw the new generation as a renaissance in Russian poetry. He envisions the new poetry as a productive continuation of the poetic tradition Akhmatova participated in. However, the air fills with more besides the new poets’ poems. One might think of Akhmatova’s unpublished poems, including the Poem without a Hero, as well as entire suppressed poetic oeuvres, such as Tsvetaeva’s (as we discussed in Chapter 2) or Mandelstam’s (also “rediscovered” in the late 1950s and early 1960s). Such poems as these, having turned out not to have been “erased” after all, now provided an atmosphere rich in poetic oxygen for the proposed new “Golden Age.” Brodsky’s time trajectory and that of Akhmatova’s generation can thus meet and intermingle at the intersection of their respective poems.

Brodsky’s imagined Akhmatova directly invokes God. Part of Akhmatova’s survival as an intact human being and uncrushed poet can be attributed to her faith in God, as epitomized by her fondness for the motto on Fountain House (where she lived in Leningrad for many years), “Deus conservat omnia.” In his final stanza, Brodsky affirms the continuity of faith despite Communism’s apparent victory. It turns out that the poetry Stalin’s purges had tried to efface still clings in the air around Akhmatova as the “flesh of

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273 Interestingly, I’ve seen internet versions of Brodsky’s poem that have the non-existent word (that is to say, a misprint) “emptied” [zapustevshii] where the collected works (1998-2002) prints “thickened” [zagustevshii], replaying the same ambiguity Akhmatova exploited in Klyuev’s poem for her epigraph in the Poem without a Hero.

274 Akhmatova, My Half Century, 99 and 374.
souls”—and Brodsky’s generation will find it and continue that seemingly broken-off tradition—partly by inserting the poetry and references to poets and poetry in their own poems, as Brodsky does with Akhmatova’s history here. Akhmatova’s warm laugh is the crucial living element that allows the reconstitution of the “flesh of souls” to begin.

By the last lines of this poem, the trajectories I outlined above have been traced. Brodsky has incorporated into his sound-driven text the two currents of time, Akhmatova’s and his own, and intertwined them in the present and future. He focuses on very personal connections—human warmth creates that bridge between times. Of special interest is the line expressing the collective nature of the new group of poets, “You’ll write about us on a slant.” The line highlights Brodsky’s conception of himself as just one member of a tight-knit group: you’ll write about us. Further, by predicting that Akhmatova will write about them, Brodsky theoretically inscribes that group into the trajectory of her own literary work. “On a slant” most directly refers to the tendency of Akhmatova’s written lines to slope upward across the page, but perhaps also to the upward trajectory she imagines for the new generation of poets. Akhmatova—making Brodsky’s prediction come true—ended up writing several poems, each with “Rose” in the title, and each connected by various means to one or another of the Avvakumites. I will return to the “Rose” poems in the final section of this chapter.

In his poem, Brodsky also traced the birth of a new poem, from the sounds and electricity that form it to the moment when it gets written out “on a slant.” In addition to reminding the reader that Akhmatova’s creative life is continuing, the process he outlines applies to Brodsky’s own poem, conceived in a commuter train. By aligning his own creative process—born out of specific sounds and experiences of human life—with
Akhmatova’s, Brodsky has staked a claim as a participant in her Acmeist tradition.

Moreover, he will extend the practice to or into the twenty-first century.

In 1963, occasion unknown, Anatoly Naiman wrote “I’m parting with this time for all time...” [Ia proshchayus’ s etim vremenem navek]:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A.A.A.</th>
<th>To A.A.A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Я прощаюсь с этим временем навек,</td>
<td>I’m parting with this time for all time,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>и на прежнее нисколько не похоже,</td>
<td>and not a bit like what has ever been before,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>повторяется вдали одно и то же—</td>
<td>the same thing is repeating in the distance—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>белый снег летает, белый снег.</td>
<td>pure white snow is flying, pure white snow.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Я прощаюсь с этим временем, и вот,</td>
<td>I’m parting with this time, and there it is:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ваше имя, произнесенное глухо,</td>
<td>Your name, hollowly pronounced,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>больше годное для вздоха, не для слуха,</td>
<td>more fit for inhalation than for hearing,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>речкой дымною затянуто под лед.</td>
<td>is pulled by a smoky river beneath the ice.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Еще вздрогнет комаровская сосна, и мелькнет ослепший призрак Ленинграда, и меж листвьев Александровского сада еще вспыхнет темно-красная стена— но по-новому во время этих встреч Вы кивнете неподвижной головою, и по-новому задышит над Москвою Ваша горькая божественная речь.  

And the Komarovo pine will give a shudder, And the blinded ghost of Leningrad flash past, and among the leaves of Alexander’s garden the dark-red wall has yet to flare— you will nod your still head in a new way in the time of these meetings— in a new way, over Moscow, will start to breathe the divine and bitter sound of your speech.

Where Brodsky wrote out Akhmatova’s full last name in the dedication to “Roosters...” Naiman pens a succinct, yet evocative long vowel sound: “A.A.A.” (for Anna Andreevna Akhmatova). Formally, the poems are written in the same meter. “Roosters...” was ten quatrains of regular trochaic hexameter with masculine rhyming couplets, while Naiman’s trochaic hexameter forms two octaves rhymed aBBacDDc. (Naiman’s poem also contains an imperfection that feels right in the poem: line 4 [“pure white snow is flying, pure white snow”] is missing a foot. The different rhyme


276 I ran across an internet version in which the fourth line reads “pure white snow is flying in the distance, pure white snow” [Belyi sneg v dal’ letaet, belyi sneg]. The removal of the “extra” foot may be an example of a lesson Naiman, in Remembering Anna Akhmatova (206), recalls learning from Akhmatova about the poetic craft.
schemes, and most of all the presence in Naiman’s poem of feminine as well as masculine line endings, gives his poem a rocking rhythm very distinct from Brodsky’s poem, with its clipped line endings.

Brodsky’s poem followed the chronological vector of Akhmatova’s past, present, and future. He couched this line in language that projected all of it, by the means of future perfective verbs, into a more general future. Naiman, in contrast, structures time on the pattern of the cyclical inhalation and exhalation of breath. He builds the poem on doublings: in the first five lines alone Naiman makes use of anaphora, repetitions even within a single line, and specific mention that the scene is repeating itself:

I’m parting with this time for all time, and not a bit like what has ever been before, the same thing is repeating in the distance—pure white snow is flying, pure white snow. I’m parting with this time—and there it is…

Time itself endlessly repeats in this stanza, and the locus of that repetition is two people, one breathing out a name as the other breathes it in, as if it is a physical thing. When the “I” of Naiman’s poem parts with chronological time, he is left with Akhmatova’s name, spoken aloud, as the primary reality. Her name seems to be the focal point of space as well. The second stanza begins by mentioning Komarovo (near Leningrad, where Akhmatova was allotted a summer cottage), but ends with Akhmatova’s name breathing over Moscow. It seems possible that Naiman wrote the poem on the occasion of leaving (or perhaps Akhmatova leaving) Leningrad for Moscow. The poem thus would assert that for the speaker (in this poem closely associated with Naiman himself), her spoken name would continue to sound even there. Rather than evoking a line of distance between the cities, Naiman subjects them to the same reverberation, as if the kilometers that lie
between Leningrad and Moscow are inconsequential. In Moscow, though, since it has other features associated with Akhmatova’s poems (we will analyze this below), her voice will sound somewhat different. Thus, whereas Brodsky views Akhmatova’s experience across the length of a century, Naiman concentrates both time and space in the focal point of her spoken name. Both share, however, the association of Akhmatova and her poetry with life and movement, as opposed to stifling air (in Brodsky’s poem) or a frozen river (in Naiman’s). And both, by writing her history and her living presence into their poems, claim her lineage for their own.

In the second stanza, from which Akhmatova took the final line for an epigraph to a “Rose” poem,²⁷⁷ Naiman continues naming as he evokes places that are associated for him with Akhmatova:

And the Komarovo pine will give a shudder,
And the blinded ghost of Leningrad flash past,
and among the leaves of Alexander’s garden
the dark-red wall has yet to flare—
you will nod your still head in a new way
in the time of these meetings—
in a new way, over Moscow, will start to breathe
the divine and bitter sound of your speech.

We saw in Brodsky’s poem how the events of Akhmatova’s life sparked her poetry, as in the guffaw of the gunshot that somehow translated into light inside Akhmatova’s room. Here, the moment of the birth of a poem is also pinpointed, the place and time in which the pine in Komarovo gives a shudder. It is as if the pine (= Komarovo) staggers under the impact of being the location where times merge, past events repeat, and a poem is born.

²⁷⁷ “Forbidden Rose” (<http://www.akhmatova.org/verses/verses/208.htm>). As stated earlier, I will return to the “Rose” poems in the last section of this chapter.
Naiman’s poem, like Brodsky’s, incorporates references to Akhmatova’s poems, particularly *Requiem*. Naiman’s “blinded ghost of Leningrad” and the “dark-red wall” viewed from the Alexander Garden (i.e. the Kremlin wall) both evoke lines from Akhmatova’s *Requiem*: in “Prologue” [*Prolog*], where she wrote that “like a useless appendage, Leningrad / Swung from its prisons” [*i nenuzhnym priveskom boltalsia / vozle tiurem svoikh Leningrad*]; and in the poem immediately following in the cycle, where her speaker says, “I will be like the wives of the Streltsy, / Howling under the Kremlin towers” [*Budu ia, kak streletskie zhenki, / pod Kremlevskimi bashniami vyt*]. Both epithets “blind” and “red” come together in the last line of “Epilogue I” in *Requiem*:

Узнала я, как опадают лица,
Как из-под век выглядывает страх,
Как клинописи жесткие страницы
Страдание выводит на щеках,
[...]
И я молюсь не о себе одной,
А обо всех, кто там стоял со мною,
И в лютый холод, и в июльский зной,
Под красною ослепшею стеною.  

I learned how faces fall,
How terror darts from under eyelids,
How suffering traces lines
Of stiff cuneiform on cheeks
[...]
And I pray not for myself alone,
But for all those who stood there with me
In cruel cold, and in July’s heat,
At that blind, red wall.

Here, the wall is that of the “Crosses” prison in Leningrad, where the women, blinded by tears, stood waiting in line for information about their loved ones. In Naiman’s poem, the epithet “blind” continues to describe Leningrad, while “red” is assigned to the walls of the Kremlin. Naiman thereby associates the bloodshed of that period directly with its source, Stalin’s edicts from the Kremlin.

Brodsky and Naiman both present Akhmatova as a locus of past, present, and future, and as a connecting link (bridge, laugh in Brodsky; voice, breath in Naiman) between Russian poetry’s achievement and its potential. As if they were working within

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278 Akhmatova, *The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova*, v. 2, 110-11. The units of military guardsmen known as *streltsy* rebelled against Peter I in 1698. Peter crushed the rebellion with brutal tortures and executions of hundreds of *streltsy* on Red Square, and sent hundreds more into exile.

the Acmeist tradition, they both weave references to Akhmatova’s own poetry in their tributes to her. They are similar in their intensely musical approach to poetry—their poems are predicated as much on the way the sounds are attracted to each other in oral performance as by anything else that goes into a poem (something that can’t be shown all that effectively in translation). For both poets, the physical sound and shape of the pronounced word and the living act of speaking the poem itself exert an inspiring and powerful force. And Brodsky and Naiman are in dialogue with one another, as we see from the word “us” in Brodsky’s poem and the meter chosen by Naiman for his poem a year after Brodsky’s. Dialogue, the past and present, and the private, as opposed to pronunciation, the future, and the public, as well as attention to sound and the consciously physical bridging to neglected poetic traditions feature strongly in the new poetry.

But Brodsky and Naiman differ strikingly in their respective metaphysics. Brodsky’s poem forges an often quite painterly link between past and future that is very lonely (Akhmatova is repeatedly pictured as isolated and alone, even with the new generation around her in a vapour) and predicated on a straightforward chronology, over which is superimposed a more universal time. Naiman’s approach is what we might call, after Boris Gasparov’s article on the metaphysics of aspect in Russian, an “imperfective” one: events do not appear in a line one after another, but are eternally in the process of happening or cyclically repeating.280 The two poems are “grounded” in very different ways. Presaging Brodsky’s later poetry, “Roosters…” subordinates space to time. Brodsky probably gestures at Komarovo with his “bays” and “woods,” but mentions only

one specific geographic location, the Field of Mars [Marsovo pole]—and even here the place may be more important in its abstract conception than as a concrete entity.281 For Naiman, in contrast, time is everywhere and always, anchored only by the place where it occurs. In a poem less than half the length of Brodsky’s, Naiman names and describes in some detail three separate physical locations where Akhmatova lived: Komarovo, Leningrad, and Moscow. Literally exchanging “this time” for “all time,” Naiman brings the different times into contact and sets them echoing against one another—he parts with chronology in favor of eternity. This is his sense of what it meant to have contact with Akhmatova—not what Brodsky expressed as “You will write about us on a slant”—not one time passing into another, from lonely figure to lonely figure, but a physically located, eternally recurring dialogue of interpenetrated moments. For both poets, however, Akhmatova’s personal warmth, living speech, and connections to Russia’s literary and historical past are paramount. Such priorities simply exclude the possibility of writing the future-centered, politically guided poetry demanded by Socialist Realism, and it was this shift in perspective by talented poets of such very different metaphysical approaches that began to add up to a significant new chapter in the history of Russian poetry.

**Bobyshev’s and Rein’s Early Akhmatova Poems**

Rein tells us that he presented Akhmatova with only a single poem dedicated to her during her life, and Bobyshev has suppressed such a poem, which he apparently

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281 Brodsky might have had in mind the fact that “martyrs of the Revolution” are buried at the Field of Mars, or perhaps he pictures Akhmatova as a lone general of her own invisible army (before the revolution the site was used as a drilling and parade ground for the military). Akhmatova herself recalled in her memoirs that during the Leningrad Blockade the entire field was converted to vegetable gardens. Why Brodsky used the long-form adjective *marsovoe* rather than the usual appellation *marsovo* is unclear.
considered failed, from his oeuvre. These two poems (Bobyshev’s mostly rescued from
extinction by Konstantin Kuzminsky in his <em>Blue Lagoon</em> anthology) display remarkably
similar features to the poems of Brodsky and Naiman discussed above and merit
explication. Bobyshev’s is chronologically the earlier of the two:

<i>Anne Aхматовой</i>

Еще подышим трёх, и всемером,
диспетчера выщелкивая в прорезь,
угоним в Вашу честь электропоезд,
нагруженный печатным серебром.
О, как Вы губы стронете в ответ,
приложившись, будто для свирели—
такой от них исходит мирный свет,
что делаются мальчики смирены.
И хочется тогда корзиной роз,<sup>282</sup>
роскошно отягчая мотороллер,
у Вашего крыльца закончить кросс
и вскрикнуть дивным голосом Тироля: "Бог — это Бах, а царь под ним — Моцарт,
а Вам ульбой ангельской мерцать!"
Вы, смыла это дерзкое "vous aime",
семь раз благопротивное — "love you",
ответите: "О, да!", чтобы затем
сказать: "Я всех вас, милые, люблю."

<i>To Anna Akhmatova</i>

We’ll hunt up three more, and the seven of us,
after dispatching the dispatcher to the ditch,
will shanghai an electric train in your honor
filled with imprinted silver.
O, how you will part your lips in answer,
as if fitting them to a reed pipe—
such a peaceful light emanates from them,
that the boys become subdued.
And then we’d like, with a basket of roses
luxuriously aggravating a motor scooter,
to complete a cross at Your front steps
and cry out in the divine voice of Tyrol:
“God is Bach, and the emperor below him—Mozart,
while Yours is but to gleam with an angelic smile!”
You, hearing this impudent “vous aim,”
the seven times pleasantly unpleasant “love you,”
will answer, “O, yes!” in order afterwards
to say, “I love, my dears, all of you.”

And listening to the youthful thunder of motors
and seeing the septupling of roses,
does not a poem then seem in order
with a kind word for each?

Bobyshev seems to have evaluated his 1963 poem soberly (there are obvious
flaws, from French spelling and the ungrammaticality and/or improper register of the
English “love you” instead of “I love you” to more serious compositional concerns [how
can the boys, having just become subdued, nonetheless “cry out in the divine voice of
Tyrol” in the subsequent quatrain?]), as not only has he suppressed it from his own

<sup>282</sup> Missing words in this line generously supplied by Bobyshev via personal email, 20 Jan 2011.

<sup>283</sup> Kuzminskii, <i>Antologiia noveishei russkoi poezii u goluboi laguny</i>, v. 2B, 180. The text is inaccurate and
has been checked and corrected according to this interview:<a href="http://www.adetech.org/kuchkina/bobishev/bobish.htm">4 Sept 2010</a>, in which Bobyshev himself quotes
the first and last four lines. Bobyshev later struck the French and English lines (email, 20 May 2011).
publications, but he also rejected the idea of offering Akhmatova an epigraph from it for her poem dedicated to him, “Fifth Rose.” Nonetheless, we can still recognize features that resonate with the other Avvakumites’ Akhmatova poems.

Bobyshev opens with a high-spirited reference to The Magnificent Seven, a film that was popular and controversial in the Soviet Union at the time.

We’ll hunt up three more, and the seven of us, after dispatching the dispatcher to the ditch, will shanghai an electric train in your honor filled with imprinted silver.

The playful image portrays Akhmatova as a link to the literary traditions of the past, since it is inspired by her that this new magnificent seven will hijack the cargo of imprinted silver, i.e., poetry of the Silver Age. The resultant delivery of the burden of Silver Age poetry directly into the hands of the renegade poets, is portrayed as both rooted in devotion to Akhmatova and contrary to the intent of the literary railroad’s government overseers. The inceptive moment of her own speech (the ‘parting’ [stronut] of Akhmatova’s lips) further links Akhmatova associatively with the train, since in Russian a train is said to ‘move out’ [stronut’sia] at the moment it begins to roll. Compounding the Silver Age connection, the image of Akhmatova’s lips seemingly poised to play a reed-pipe depicts Akhmatova as her own muse, as she described her in a famous poem (“The Muse” [Muza]) written in 1924. In that poem, the speaker’s life “hangs by a hair” as she waits for inspiration in the dead of night, whereupon the Muse enters “with rustic

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284 Bobyshev confirmed in a personal email of 5 Sept 2010 that “We’ll hunt up three more, and the seven of us...” was written in 1963. “Fifth Rose” will be discussed in the final section of this chapter.

285 Kristin Roth-Ey, Mass Media and the Remaking of Soviet Culture, 1950s-1960s, Dissertation, Princeton University, 2003, 1: “And in 1962, rivaling Soviet cinema’s amphibious man, Vladimir Korenev, for the affection of Soviet audiences were Yul Brynner, Steve McQueen, and the other stars of an American western, The Magnificent Seven.” See also 11 and 193ff. for interesting discussions of the reception of this film in the Soviet Union. Bobyshev mentions the connection in the above-cited interview.
Like Brodsky and Naiman, Bobyshev makes his poem work to link his own time with the Silver Age via Akhmatova.

Other features in common with Brodsky’s and Naiman’s poems are the connection with natural phenomena (the roses, the thunder in the sound of the motorbikes) and the strong emotional bond, here quite frankly stated: “You, upon hearing this impudent ‘vous aim’ [...] will answer, ‘Oh, yes!’ in order to then say, ‘I love all of you, my dears.’” Finally, there is the suggestion and hope that Akhmatova herself will even (as was also suggested in Brodsky’s “Roosters...”) write a poem—in this case one with “a kind word for each.” In the Russian, the instrumentally declined noun translated idiomatically here as “kind word” [dobrom] is a homophone of the “riches” [dobro] of silver (or Silver Age poetry) the theoretical train would be carrying. Thus Bobyshev neatly closes by reiterating the connection between the poetry of the Silver Age with his own generation, since the request that Akhmatova would write about them “kindly” carries a hint via sound identification that she might, in a way, write them into the Silver Age.

In a short memoiristic piece about Akhmatova written in 1989, the centenary of her birth, Rein tells a bit about the 1965 poem he gave to her. Rein writes that the poem was written “kind of suddenly, in a few minutes. It came from the Christmas-time snowflakes flying slantwise in a cone of light from a streetlamp. It may be that the news about Anna Akhmatova’s illness got mixed in. Just at that time she was in critical condition in the hospital in Moscow. The poem was written in Leningrad, but my life at that time was such that I traveled two or three times a month from the old capital to the

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new and vice versa.”

Rein’s description of the genesis of his poem is very much in the style of Brodsky’s description of how “Roosters...” was generated. Rein, like Brodsky, cites natural phenomena and a date that was special to Akhmatova (snow flakes at Christmas), and driving motion as the source material from which the poem “suddenly” came into being. There is even the suggestion of train travel in his remark that at the time he frequently made trips between Leningrad and Moscow. Compare to Brodsky, who was in a hurry, on a train to visit Akhmatova for her birthday, as “Roosters...” came into being.

Rein’s three-quatrains, iambic pentameter poem has much in common with the other Avvakumite poems, forging a personal connection between himself and Akhmatova and envisioning her as a bridge between the lost traditions of the Silver Age and the present:

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287 Evgenii Rein, “Hundredth Mirror” [Sotoe zerkalo], <http://www.akhmatova.org/articles/rein.htm>, par. 59ff (all indented prose sections, including direct speech quotations, are counted as paragraph indents), 3 March 2011.
У зимней тьмы печали полон рот,
Но прежде, чем она его откроет,
Огонь небесный вдруг произойдет,
Метеорит, ракета, астероид.

Огонь летит над грязной белизной,
Зима глядит на казни и на козни,
Как человек глядит в стакан порожний –
Уже живой, еще полубольной.

Тут смысла нет. И вымысла тут нет.
И сути нет, хотя конец рассказу.
Когда я вижу освещенный снег,
Я Ваше имя вспоминаю сразу. 288

Winter darkness’ mouth is full of sorrow,
But before she will open it,
Heavenly fire will suddenly happen,
A meteorite, rocket, asteroid.

The fire is flying over dirty whiteness,
Winter gazes at executions and at intrigues,
As a person gazes into an empty glass—
Feeling better, still somewhat ill.

There’s no sense here. And no fiction.
And no gist, although this is the story’s end.
When I see illuminated snow,
Your name springs immediately to mind.

The focus on snow along with the rhyme scheme of Rein’s poem evokes Naiman’s “I am parting with this time...” Indeed the poem, with its alliterative meditative feel, would seem more typical of any of the other three Avvakumites than of Rein, for whom narrative and elegy are more characteristic. This look-alike phenomenon was not, however, uncommon among the four Avvakumites, as we saw in the previous chapter; rather it is a tribute to how close their poetic friendship became. The aBBa-rhymed quatrains are the most similar feature to Naiman’s poem, making the sound-shape strikingly alike, although the meter and line length are those of Bobyshev’s poem (Rein and Bobyshev: iambic pentameter; Naiman and Brodsky: trochaic hexameter). Like Naiman’s tribute, the environment in Rein’s poem is a wintry one. Like both Brodsky’s and Naiman’s the cosmic and the intimate connect, and all three poems connect Akhmatova with a change in the physical environment.

Rein seems a bit discomfited in the last four lines that his poem to Akhmatova has turned out so unlike his usual style: “There’s no sense here, and no fiction. / And no gist,

although this is the story’s end.” The discontented aside makes the subsequent and final couplet more powerful, as if the poet has marshaled all his discipline to speak outside of his normal medium. These last two lines—the only lines directly addressed to Akhmatova—pinpoint the common moment shared with the Brodsky and Naiman poems of the connection between Akhmatova’s presence and a dramatic shift in the physical environment: “When I see illuminated snow” (the focus of the first two quatrains was the dirty snow illuminated by some kind of cosmic event) “Your name springs immediately to mind.”

The poem as a whole echoes both Brodsky’s and Naiman’s central image: Akhmatova’s voice sounds, and something in the world warms, moves and changes. In Brodsky’s poem:

You will lift your splendid face—
loud laughter, like words of eulogy,
an unclear sound on a warmed bridge—
will momentarily agitate the emptiness.

In Naiman’s, the moment of Akhmatova’s speech exhibits the same warming, animating trend:

but your heavy head will nod in some new way
in the time of our encounters, of these meetings—
somehow newly, over Moscow, will be breathing
the divine and bitter sound of your speech.

Even Bobyshev’s poem, which is not so climatically transformative, highlights the moment Akhmatova will begin to speak. Rein’s poem is, as we noted above, less direct in its expression of that moment—but the entire poem is predicated upon it. The poem’s first lines, “Winter darkness’ mouth is full of sorrow, / but before she opens it…” construct that same moment of anticipation that a sound will emerge. A cosmic event
(something like the passing of a meteor) prevents that sound from emerging in the sorrowful way expected. If we connect the last line of the poem, “Your name springs immediately to mind” with the anticipation of what the winter darkness will say, it seems logical to suppose that with the meteor’s illumination of the scene, whatever was going to be said is transformed and what is spoken is the name Anna Akhmatova. One could project an analogy of the gloomy winter landscape with the uninspiring Soviet poetic scene, suddenly illuminated (for Rein) upon his meeting and reading Akhmatova, as an event of cosmic proportions casting life in a new perspective. For the young Brodsky, Akhmatova’s voice is a “sound agitating emptiness”; for Naiman her pronounced name is a physical phenomenon that gets “pulled beneath the ice”; for Bobyshev the parting of her lips in speech is associated with the inceptive sounds of a reed-pipe and words of love; and for Rein her name is associated with the flame of something like a shooting star. For all four poets she is associated with movement in a static landscape and the source of a changed, emotionally warmed atmosphere.

Rein’s 1965 poem resonates especially with Osip Mandelstam’s 1914 poem, “Akhmatova”:

Вполоборота, о печаль,  
На равнодушных поглядела.  
Спадая с плеч, окаменела  
Ложноклассическая шаль.  
Зловещий голос — горький хмель —  
Души расковывает недра:  
Так — негодующая Федра —  
Стояла некогда Рашель.

Half-turned, o sorrow,  
She glanced at indifferent ones.  
Slipping from shoulders,  
A faux-classical shawl turned to stone.  
The ominous voice, bitter hops—  
Unchains a soul’s deepest depths:  
Thus, an indignant Phaedra,  
Rachel once stood.

Rein’s take on the moment Akhmatova will speak leans thematically and phonetically on Mandelstam’s identification of Akhmatova with a figure called “Sorrow”: Rein’s
“pechal’iu polon rot” (mouth full of sorrow) picks up the repeated o’s of Mandelstam’s “vpoloborota, o pechal’” (half-turned, o sorrow). Likewise, Naiman’s earlier characterization of Akhmatova’s speech as “bitter and divine” may have been indebted to Mandelstam’s poem, in which her voice is the “ominous” voice of the earth itself and at the same time “bitter hops.” Perhaps the crucial importance for Rein in evoking Mandelstam’s poem was the building of that “bridge” to the Silver Age, incorporating and reintegrating Mandelstam’s vision of Akhmatova—down to the very phonetics—into Rein’s own, and thus continuing the broken-off literary tradition. Like the other Avvakumites, a central part of Rein’s poetic program seems to be the integration of Silver Age language, tropes, and history—and specifically that connected with Akhmatova—into his own work.

**Akhmatova as an Extra-literary Influence on the Avvakumites**

In Chapter 3, I argued that although the impact of the rhythms and themes of jazz found their way into Avvakumite poetry, it may have been the extra-musical aspects of Conover’s radio show that had the most profound impact on the Avvakumites. The same might be said of Akhmatova: as in the case of Conover and his jazz artist guests, the impact of her character, her view of life, her history, and her way of sharing all this was at least as important for the Avvakumites’ turn to artistic independence as her poetry.

In the case of Rein, later poems, essays, and interviews mostly underscore his connection with Akhmatova as a touchpoint for Russian literary history. In 1974, for example, Rein turned to his narrative strengths for a long blank verse poem, “Chronicle. 1966” [*Khronika. 1966*], about the time of her death and funeral. As it happens, the first
lines of this poem declare that he was listening to Conover’s radio show when the news broke:

Я не любитель Би-би-си и прочих радиостанций этого уклона;  
по мне уж лучше “Мюзик Юэсэй”.  
В тот вечер ускользал он в глубь эфира,  
я шевелил настройку, и внезапно среди разрядов диктор произнес:  
“Сегодня — треск — в Москве — разряд — скончалась Ахматова — ворчанье и разряд”.”

I’m not a fan of the BBC and other radio stations of that ilk;  
*Music USA* suits me better.  
That evening it slipped off deep into the ether,  
I jiggled the tuner, and suddenly among the electrical discharges the announcer said:  
“Today—discharge—in Moscow—sputter—Akhmatova passed away—rumble and discharge.”

What follows is a chronology of events, from the arrival of Akhmatova’s coffin at the airport in Leningrad and efforts by some of Rein’s colleagues to film what was happening to Rein’s own participation (successfully coming up with a suitable wooden cross for the grave, helping to carry the coffin), the funeral, burial, and a small gathering at Akhmatova’s summer house in Komarovo afterwards. Rein fills his lines with names and descriptions of people and places involved and little vignettes that characterize the atmosphere. The result is that one feels the funeral as a kind of concentration point of Russian literary culture, down to the presence at the funeral of an old woman whom someone says is the Symbolist poet Balmont’s daughter. For Rein, the importance of his connection with Akhmatova remains above all that she is the bridge, the tie to the traditions of Russian poetry of which he is an outgrowth.

Bobyshev’s *Mourning Octaves* [*Traurnye oktavy*], dated 1971 and dedicated to Akhmatova’s memory, expand on his earlier Akhmatova poem to focus on, most notably, her voice and their personal relationship:

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Голос
Забылось, но не все перемололось...
Огромно-голубинный и грудной
в разлуке с собственной горлостью голос
от новой муки стонет под иглой.
Не горло, но безжизненная полость
сейчас, теперь вот ловит миг былой,
из звуковой бороздки рвется волос,
но только тень от голоса со мной.
1971

Воспоминание
Здесь время так и валит даровое...
Куда его прикажете девать,
сегодняшнее? Как добыть опыт
из памяти мгновение живое?
Тогдашний и теперешний — нас двое,
и — горькая, двойная благодать —
я вижу Вас, и я иду в вспять сквозь эти слезы в рыдание бывшее.
1971

Портрет
Затекла рука сердечной болью...
Как Вы посмотрели навсегда
из того мгновения на поле
в этот вот текущий миг, сюда!
В памяти я этот облик сдвою
с тем, что знал в позднейшие годы.
Видеть Вас посмертно вдовцем,
Вас не видеть — вот моя беда.
1971

Взгляд
С мольбой на лбу, в кладбищенском леску
в день грузный и сырой, зимне-весенний
она ушла от нас к корням растений,
туда, в подпочву, к мерзлому песку.
"Кто сподличать решит, — сказал Арсений, —
pускай представит глаз ее тоску".
Да, этот взгляд приставит бы к виску,
когда в разладе жизнь, и нет спасенья.
1971

Перемены
Холмик песчаный заснежила крупка,
два деревянных скрестились обрубка;
их заменили — железо прочней.
На перекладину села голубка,
но упорхнула куда-то... Бог с ней!

Voice
Forgotten, but not everything was ground away...
A voice, hugely dovelike, from the chest,
separated from its own larynx
moans beneath the needle at the latest torture.
Not a throat, but a lifeless cavity
now, here it catches a past moment,
and the hair of the sound track breaks,
but only a shadow of the voice with me.
1971

Reminiscence
Here loads of free time just heap up...
Where do you tell it to go,
today’s time? How to again obtain
from memory the living instant?
Then and now—there are two of us,
and—bitter, dual mercy—
I see You, and I swim in back
through these tears into bygone laments.
1971

Portrait
The arm has gone numb from heart pain...
How You looked forever
from that captured instant to freedom
into this very flowing moment, towards here!
In my memory I double that countenance
with what I knew in later years.
To see You as a posthumous widow,
Not to see you—this is my grief.
1971

Glance
With a prayer upon her forehead, in the cemetery copse,
on a heavy, damp day, wintry-springish,
she went from us toward the roots of plants,
there, to the subsoil, to the frozen sand.
“Whoever is thinking of acting base,” Arseny said,
“Let him imagine her look of sorrow.”
Yes, to put this glance to one’s temple,
when life is a mess, and there is no salvation.
1971

Changes
Corn snow whitened the sandy mound,
Two cut boards made a cross;
they got replaced—iron is more long-lasting.
A dove perched on the crossbeam,
but flew off right away...Forget about her!
Bobyshev gives us a very formally polished octet of octaves, the first and last of which are predicated on Akhmatova’s voice. The first, however, renders that voice as it is reproduced by the needle tracing the grooves of a phonograph record. Bobyshev gives us a very Acmeist image: it evokes Akhmatova in her last days in the hospital (her voice moaning “beneath the needle of the latest torture”) at the same time as that needle is the very specific one of the phonograph, torturing her by forcing her voice to sound even after her death. This first octave sets the tone well for the subsequent verses, as each mulls over a different aspect of the lyric hero’s problem (very close or even identical
throughout the cycle with Bobyshev’s own): how to reconcile his experience of the living Akhmatova and her place in his life with the irrevocable physical separation caused by her death. With the last octave, in which the lyric hero re-experiences Akhmatova’s warmly greeting voice as it lives in his memory (“Hannah! The young people are here...”), Bobyshev comes as close as he can to bridging the gap her physical demise has made.291

The thrust of Bobyshev’s Octaves is the assertion of his personal relationship with Akhmatova apart from the other Avvakumites, as he focuses in turn on different interactions with her. In “Voice” he reminds the reader that her voice could be heard in conversation with his own when she was alive. He portrays that connection as attenuated, but not severed, after her death when he states that her voice is now “only a shadow of the voice with me.” In the second octave, “Reminiscence” [Vospominanie], the speaker describes a rift between times that has happened because of her death, and he has trouble connecting the “I” of the present with that of the past—as if he has lost a piece of himself. In “Portrait” he further documents the loss while simultaneously beginning to portray her within a family framework (as a bereaved wife): “To see You as a posthumous widow, / not to see You –this is my grief.” In “Glance” [Vzgliad], the poet describes his craving for the living Akhmatova’s telling glance: “Yes, if one could press this [Akhmatova’s] glance to ones temple, / when life is a mess, and there is no salvation.” The inference is that her look was a help to him in the past, that she was a comforting support, and that such help, still needed, is not forthcoming from elsewhere. In contrast to the high-spirited “We’ll hunt up three more...” it is only in the octave “All

291 Hannah here is Hannah Gorenko, Akhmatova’s sister-in-law who often stayed with her, helping her to look after household affairs.
four” that Bobyshev speaks about himself in the context of his quartet of poets, coining the now well known label “Akhmatova’s orphans”: “in the procession of losses / Osya, Tolya, Zhenya, Dima file by, / Akhmatova’s orphans in a row.” The bond of intimacy with Akhmatova is now portrayed as that of mother and child, as emphasized by the use of diminutives for the names Joseph, Anatoly, Evgeny, and Dmitry, and of course the word “orphans.” Bobyshev depicts all four poets as thus bereaved collectively, even though (due to certain events that took place near the end of Akhmatova’s life) they are no longer a friendship group. The seventh octave treats the matter of Bobyshev’s epigraph for Akhmatova’s poem, “Fifth Rose,” bringing in another level their relationship: that of poet with poet. I will return to this in the last section of this chapter. And finally, the eighth completes the cycle by returning to Akhmatova’s voice and the friendships of the past in the form of her words of pleasure: “Hannah! The young people are here to visit, look…” The final octave ends with the statement that poems don’t sound anymore without her, which is belied by the fact of the existence of the eight poems of the cycle. Where Rein focused on the connection to Russian literary life in his chronicle of the events surrounding Akhmatova’s death, for Bobyshev the importance lies mostly in the assertion of his multifaceted relationship with Akhmatova—as communicated in her voice and in her physical presence and warmth, which exist now only in his memory.

Both Brodsky and Naiman continued to re-imagine and reassess the meaning of Akhmatova in the decades following her death. To a greater degree than either Rein or Bobyshev, Brodsky and Naiman focus on Akhmatova, rather than the relationship between them. For both poets, the connection between Akhmatova and life itself—the
flesh and blood existence that above all allows for the possibility of human creativity predicated on love—becomes paramount.

Brodsky, in contrast to Naiman, has written that he was not immediately taken with Akhmatova upon meeting her, having judged her poetic style somewhat alien to his own. “What is most interesting is that I don’t remember those first few meetings very clearly,” Brodsky tells interviewer Solomon Volkov. “Somehow I just didn’t realize whom I was dealing with [...] And then one fine day, coming back from Akhmatova’s in a jam-packed commuter train, I suddenly realized—you know, suddenly, it’s like a curtain falling—whom, or rather what, I was dealing with. I remembered a phrase of hers, or a turn of her head, and suddenly all the pieces fell into place. [...] After that [...] we saw each other fairly regularly. [...] It was scarcely a matter of literature but of a purely human and—I dare say—mutual attachment.”

By 1962 he was writing poems to Akhmatova containing personally devoted lines such as “I’m bringing You my enduring love, / recognizing its lack of necessity,” and “when the bay and Komarovo / are illuminated by a gorgeous dawn, / shaded by careless greenery, / by Your love—hourly / and Your kindness—eternally.” In an essay (dated 1982) about her poetry, Brodsky writes, “At certain periods of history it is only poetry that is capable of dealing with reality by condensing it into something graspable, something that otherwise couldn’t be retained by the mind. [...] She was, essentially, a poet of human ties: cherished, strained, severed [...] [Her verses] will survive because language is older than state and because


293 From “Behind churches, gardens, theaters...” [Za tserkvami, sadami, teatrami] and “Morning post for A. A. Akhmatova from the Town of Sestroretsk” [Utrenniaia pochta dlia A. A. Akhmatovoi iz goroda Sestroretska] respectively.
prosody always survives history.” Brodsky paints a picture in his poems, interviews, and essay of a great poet of the humane letters, whose achievement in rendering both the personal and the historic in poetry—and to no less a degree whose personal warmth and kindness—were understood by him as a kind of living miracle, given what Akhmatova had seen and endured throughout her life.

Brodsky sums up his view of Akhmatova most concisely in a poem marking the centenary of her birth, in which he addresses her as “Great soul”:

### На столетие Анны Ахматовой

Страницу и огонь, зерно и жернова,  
секиры острье и усеченный волос —  
Бог сохраняет все; особенно — слова  
прощенья и любви, как собственный свой голос.

В них бьется рваный пульс, в них слышен костный хруст,  
и заступ в них стучит; ровны и глуховаты,  
затем, что жизнь — одна, они из смертных уст  
звучат отчетливей, чем из надмирной ваты.

Великая душа, поклон через моря  
за то, что их нашла, — тебе и части тленной,  
что спит в родной земле, тебе благодаря,  
обретшей речь дар в глухонемой вселенной.

июль 1989

### On the Centenary of Anna Akhmatova’s Birth

Page and flame, grain and millstones,  
axe blade and a cut-short hair—  
God preserves all; especially words  
of forgiveness and love, like His own voice.

A ragged pulse beats in them, the crunch of bones is heard,  
and a spade’s blows knock. Even and somewhat muffled,  
they sound more distinct—because there’s only one life—  
from mortal lips, than from the cotton wool above earth.

Great soul, a bow from overseas,  
for finding them—to you and your mortal remains  
that sleep in native earth, which thanks to you  
found the gift of speech in a deaf-and-dumb universe.

July 1989

The features of Brodsky’s “Roosters...” from the early 1960s receive striking amplification in this poem written a quarter century later. After half a lifetime, Brodsky continues to link the figure of Akhmatova with physical life, movement, the sound of her voice, and the bridge between times. Yet the change is equally arresting: Brodsky has found the resources to express the metaphysical meaning of Akhmatova even more compellingly.

For this summing up, Brodsky chooses a symbolically laden meter: not just iambic hexameter, this is Alexandrine verse, complete with mid-line caesura. Brodsky is

constructing a classical sculpture of Akhmatova in the tradition of Pushkin’s “Monument” poem. In comparison with the early birthday poem analyzed above, Brodsky has increased the concentration of thought in this poem while reducing the length by more than two thirds.295

The poem begins with a catalogue of beginnings and violent endings—the page and the flame (that burns it); the seed and the millstones (that grind it); hair that could be the sharply cut look of the young Akhmatova’s bangs or the hair on the head that lies on the executioner’s block and the sharp axe that is indifferent to the material it cuts—in order to claim that “God preserves all,” which is, as we noted earlier, the motto inscribed on the gates of Fountain House in Leningrad, where Akhmatova lived for many years. But above all God preserves the same qualities we saw in Brodsky’s earlier Akhmatova poem: her words, her voice, a pulse, the events. Brodsky writes that her words are still alive, they remain spoken and speaking after her death, and that fact evokes a huge gratitude on the part of the narrative “I” of the poem, from across the seas of time and space (Brodsky wrote this in England, far removed from Akhmatova’s mortal remains).

Brodsky casts three time trajectories in this poem: the span of a mortal life; the immortal life of words on earth (they are somehow independent and can only be “found”); and the eternal life of the soul—all contained within an impenetrable and unresponsive universe. Here, the beginnings and ends seem bound up in each other—the grain finds its full expression—its biography, one might say—in being ground to

nutritious dust by the millstone; the axe that indifferently cuts is capable of creating the sharp lines that initially characterized the young Akhmatova’s appearance and poems, but it can also cut off all possibility of speech—an end which “sets” a poet’s work as a body; the paper is destined for the flame, but the memorized words of the poem thereby become immortal. The metaphysics of the earlier poem have been refined. One feels various possible eternities vying for first place, but oddly, even privileged eternities are not superior to a “ragged pulse”—earthly and fleshly life itself, for which Brodsky is grateful—nor is earthly life privileged over communion with a “great soul.” Somehow, they just can’t be separated—as much as the beginnings lead to the endings, the endings have equally participated, by fulfilling what the beginnings promised.

For Brodsky, the meaning of Akhmatova has become ever more concentrated in the speech act—the oral art of poetry—with only glancing references to place (the oblique reference to Fountain House, and “overseas” referring to physical space as well as time). Naiman, on the other hand, actually expands on his previous list of physical locations associated with Akhmatova to include pre-Leningrad Petersburg. Naiman’s later poem (1995?) remains approximately the same length (longer by four lines than his 1963 poem), but he has shifted his focus on Akhmatova significantly, beyond the old lady he knew as the survivor of the Purges and the author of Requiem and the Poem without a Hero. For this poem, Naiman chose a dol’nik rhythm, similar to, but not identical with either Akhmatova’s famous early dol’niks or the one she used later for the Poem without a Hero. Here, compared to Naiman’s 1963 tribute, we see an even sharper focus on place—the location is emphasized by the title, to begin with—and the emergence of a young Akhmatova:
Городской пейзаж век спустя

Синий, холодный, резкий над водой мускулистый ветер, окончен розыск! Трепетную вакханку ты потерял навеки, угоняясь, не риская здесь, где цирк Чинизелли торсом теснит Фонтанку.

Нет больше грешной, ветер, нет бежавшей за угол в шале скользкого шелка, в шляпе черного фетра, не в стороне от сверстниц, ни одной, ни с подругой—в жгучих твоих объятиях, в майских объятиях ветра.

Нет покаянной, горькой, нет прихожанки верной Симеона-и-Анны, кротко, покорно, гордо сжавшей и растянувшейся, как трехпролетной фермой, мост между Нет и Было вонзён мук и восторга.

Нет хрупкой ветки, нет больше гибкой змеи, раковины, поющей чем-то звучней, тем спокойней,—есть этот мост в синие майские слепящей смерти между площадью людной и пустой колокольней.

Плакать не надо, ветер, время ее минуло. Стать не на человека, став на моря и земли—или на полдень, полный свежести, блеска, гула, когда львы и гимнасты входят в цирк Чинизелли.

Cityscape after a Century

You blue, you cold wind, sharp over muscular water, call off your search! You’ve lost the trembling Bacchante once and for all—calm down, stop ransacking this spot where the Chinizelli Circus bellies against the Fontanka.

Gone the sinner, wind, who vanished round the corner in her black felt hat, in her slippery silk shawl, not apart from her age mates, or alone, or with a friend—in your searing embraces, in your May wind thrill.

Gone that delicate branch, gone the sinuous snake, the shell singing the more resonantly, the more calmly—only the bridge exists in the May-like glare of blinding death between a bustling square and an empty cathedral tower.

Quiet your crying, wind, her time’s gone by. Lay your stake not on man, but on bodies of earth and water, or stake on a noon full of freshness, buzzing, glaring bright, as the doors of the Circus open, and lions and acrobats enter.

Naiman has virtually mapped out the geography of Akhmatova’s years at Fountain House in this poem, with the Church of Saints Simeon and Anna to the north and the Chinizelli Circus (now the St. Petersburg Circus on the Fontanka) just across the Simeonovsky (now Belinsky) Bridge. A personified wind-breath animates this familiar topography, searching Leningrad for the Petersburg Akhmatova, so that once again she can, as she used to, breathe it in and exhale it in the form of poems. The breath that gives life to poetry thus continues to play a crucial role in this poem, but here the breath “ransacks the spot” for its missing body—the abstract seeks the concrete.

The narrator of the poem, even as he insists, in his conversation with that same wind, that the young Akhmatova is no more, actually recreates her in a series of

incarnations. She is the “carefree sinner” with her shawl, as well as the attendee of services at the Church of Simeon and Anna just down the street from Fountain House, the flexible contortionist of Gumilev’s home circus, the reciting poet as a “singing shell”—but most of all she is and remains the “bridge between Not and Was”—perhaps the bridge over the gulf between the Silver Age and the post-Stalin era, perhaps something like the physical, thrice-arched Simeonovsky Bridge that connects the Circus (representative of earthly life) and the church.297 By associating Akhmatova with the link between circus and church, Naiman retrieves and elevates Kornei Chukovsky’s apt but unfortunate phrase, “Half nun, half whore,” which was so eagerly taken up by Zhdanov in the course of his 1946 attack on Akhmatova in the journals Zvezda and Leningrad.298

While the nature of the “bridge between Not and Was” is more implicit than explicit in this poem, Naiman certainly knew Brodsky’s “Nunc Dimittis” (“When Mary first came to present the Christ child…”) [Kogda ona v tserkov’ vpervye nesla] about Anna the Prophetess and Simeon, and also dedicated to Akhmatova. That poem of Brodsky’s evokes both Akhmatova and Mandelstam, and here Naiman implicitly reiterates the linkages among all four poets, once again by anchoring his times in a specific location, the Church of Simeon and Anna. But Naiman is focusing here less on recalling his own personal relationship with Akhmatova than on explicating who she was.

297 In 1911 or 1912, Gumilev apparently put together a circus of sorts with friends, for their own entertainment. Akhmatova was known for being very lithe, and apparently agreed to demonstrate her flexibility. See Akhmatova, My Half Century, 114.

by returning the young Akhmatova to her Petersburg origins. While this is impossible to achieve in “real” time and space, it can be done within the boundaries of the poem itself.

Interestingly, the Russian word for “lion” [lev] resonates with both the last name of Akhmatova’s first husband, Nikolai Gumilev, and the name of his and Akhmatova’s son, Lev. So we can read this poem (as we read “I am parting with this time...”) as affirming a kind of eternal return that is enacted by the poem itself—the lions, like a Gumilev, and the acrobats, like the contortionist Akhmatova, always just entering life’s arena. The premium placed on physicality strikingly contrasts with Brodsky’s brief mention of Akhmatova’s mortal remains. The wind desperately desires to embrace Akhmatova’s bodily form; the clothing that lends shape to the body is listed; a series of metaphors then envisions that body in other forms; and finally the circus is evoked—a metaphor for a life that is dangerous, disciplined, exciting, beautiful, and inarguably physical.

The sense of a collective group of new poets inscribed by the young Brodsky’s “you will write about us” was not present in Naiman’s early poem, which was predicated overwhelmingly on the “you” in the poem. In the two later poems, both Brodsky and Naiman move to more daring metaphysical conceptions of Akhmatova, based on their respective personal relationships with her. These relationships, judging by the poetry, were quite different from one another, but both seem to have continued to develop even after her death. Both poets move from the figure of the old Akhmatova to a broader view. Brodsky contemplates her beginnings and endings as interchangeable poles of a single phenomenon and concentrates her essence into the transcendent speech act of a more abstract “great soul,” while Naiman finds that same “great soul” by recreating the
young Akhmatova he could never have met. Brodsky, in both of his Akhmatova poems, starts with the specific and opens up into the overwhelmingly general—the “empty air” or the “deaf-and-dumb universe”—and he asserts the continuing presence and specificity of the beloved voice within it. His tendency here is to see where things ultimately lead, merging with the abstract even while they remain themselves. Naiman looks through the same telescope—call it eternity—but through the “wrong end,” as it were, so that he can trace abstractions back to their concrete origins, and name them as they emerge. In this sense, Naiman is an Acmeist (or even Adamist), and has offered a fitting tribute to the most Acmeist of poets—his “Cityscape” bristles with highly specific places and things, and in fact the city, the bridge, the street, the church, and the circus all continue to exist, although today many of the names are different.

All four poets retained in their poems and their memories of Akhmatova the strong impressions of her physical and spiritual presence and her essential and continuing role as a living, personal bridge between times, as well as their individual conceptions of poetry as a life-affirming act. The features I have noted in both the early and later poems—the diametrically opposed, but equally compelling perspectives on time and space of Brodsky and Naiman, the focus of all four poets on the personal and dialogic, and on the physically living sound-form of poetry, the rebuilt connection with literary traditions that had been suppressed, the value placed on the present and the past rather than the future—surely constitute some of what made this new poetry strong and desirable when it emerged.
Akhmatova’s Response to the Avvakumites

Akhmatova, for her part, saw the bridge from the other side, as it were.

“Akhmatova felt,” says Brodsky, “that Russian poetry was undergoing a renaissance. Actually, she was not far from the truth. [...] Akhmatova believed that a kind of second Silver Age was under way.” Naiman finds evidence of this in a note Akhmatova made at that time: “And the children turned out not to have been part of a promised sale to the pockmarked devil like their fathers were. It turns out that promises of sale cannot be made three generations in advance. And now the time has come when these children have come, found Osip Mandelstam’s poems, and said, ‘This is our poet.’” In calling the quartet the “Magic Choir” or “The Golden Cupola,” Akhmatova was making a judgment about the special place of that group within a greater renaissance. Her suggestion, remembered by Naiman, that their group needed a poetess (“What about [Natalya] Gorbanevskaya?” she asked) points up the parallels she saw between her group of Acmeists in the 1910s and theirs. Her own term “Avvakumites,” Naiman recalls, she judged apt for the quartet “because of our unwillingness to make any concessions at all for the sake of getting our poetry published and being recognised by the Union of Soviet

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299 Volkov, Conversations with Joseph Brodsky, 210-11.

300 Akhmatova is referring here to Stalin, whose face was indeed pock-marked.

301 Naiman, Remembering Anna Akhmatova, 75.

302 Naiman, Remembering Anna Akhmatova, 67. Gorbanevskaya, a talented Moscow poet and contemporary of the Avvakumites, later became well known as a dissident human rights activist. She now lives in Paris and continues to write and publish poetry. Akhmatova’s effect on Gorbanevskaya is essentially the same as that experienced by the Avvakumites. Gorbanevskaya writes, “The main thing is that with her I began to become a human being” [Samoe glavnoe—chto ja s nej nachala stanovit’sia chelovekom] <http://ng68.livejournal.com/835351.html#cutid1>, 10 March 2011.
Writers.”

It is possible that Akhmatova also had in mind Archpriest Avvakum’s unique and literarily invaluable writings that were one product of his long struggle against Patriarch Nikon’s reforms of Orthodoxy. Avvakum’s audacious decision to pen his own hagiography resulted in a document that was “unprecedented for its evocation of the protagonist’s humanness, for its historical concreteness, and for its introduction of the vernacular as a literary language on a par with Church Slavonic.”

Akhmatova’s Avvakumites were drawn to a similar project, claiming that Russian poetry belonged not to the Soviet state, but to language itself, a far more ancient master. They, too, turned to the riches of the vernacular and the events of their own lives as more human and vigorous for reclaiming language from its distorters. And they, like Avvakum, and like the coterie of poets of Akhmatova’s youth, the Acmeists, took the moral high ground as they did their best to return human meaning to words, or as they said, to call things by their real names.

It was apparently important for Akhmatova to incorporate her relationship with the Avvakumites into her literary biography. In 1962, seemingly in response to the bold prophecy Brodsky made in “Roosters...” (“You’ll write about us on a slant”) Akhmatova wrote “Last Rose” [Posledniaia roza]. Dated August 9, 1962, the poem carries the above-referenced line by Brodsky as an epigraph:

Мне с Морозовою кланять поклоны,
С дымом улететь с костра Дидоны,
Чтобы с Жанной на костер опять.

You’ll write about us on a slant
It is for me to make bows with Morozova,
To fly up with the smoke from Dido’s fire,
And then onto the fire again with Joan.

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303 Naiman, Remembering Anna Akhmatova, 67.
Господи! Ты видишь, я устала
Воскресать, и умирать, и жить.
Все возьми, но этой розы алоей
Дай мне свежесть снова ощутить.

Lord! You see I’m tired
Of resurrecting, and dying, and living.
Take everything, but let me one more time
feel the freshness of this crimson rose.

Akhmatova may have been thinking of the new poets as “Avvakumites” even while composing “Last Rose.” While avoiding what may be the most famously clichéd rhyme in Russian, morozy / rozy (frosts / roses), Akhmatova nonetheless sets up a resonance between the name of Archpriest Avvakum’s martyred penitent, Feodosia Morozova (in the first line), and the “crimson rose” of the penultimate line. Morozova was a highly placed late seventeenth-century aristocrat who fiercely supported Avvakum, to the great displeasure of Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich. He had her arrested, punished, and eventually imprisoned in a monastery, where she subsequently died of starvation. In some Old Believer communities she is now venerated as a saint. Painter Vasily Surikov immortalized her arrest in a painting first exhibited in 1887 and now held at the Tretryakov Gallery in Moscow, “Boyarina Morozova”:


305 Pushkin, in the early 1800s, most famously ironized the morozy / rozy (frosts / roses) cliché with these lines in Eugene Onegin (Chapter 4, stanza LXII):

И вот уже трещат морозы,
И серебрятся средь полей...
(Читатель ждет уж рифмы розы;
На, вот возьми ее скорей!)

And now already crackling are the frosts,
and showing silver amidst the fields...
(The reader here expects the rhyme roses;
So here you go, take it right away!)

Nadezhda Mandelstam, opens her memoir *Hope against Hope* with a vignette about Akhmatova and this painting:

After slapping Alexei Tolstoi in the face, M[andelstam] immediately returned to Moscow. From here he rang Akhmatova every day, begging her to come. She was hesitant and he was angry. When she had packed and bought her ticket, her brilliant, irritable husband Punin asked her, as she stood in thought by a window: “Are you praying that this cup should pass from you?” It was he who had once said to her when they were walking through the Tretyakov Gallery: “Now let’s go and see how they’ll take you to your execution.” This is the origin of her lines:

> And later as the hearse sinks in the snow at dusk...
> What mad Surikov will describe my last journey?

So Akhmatova had long precedent for her identification with Morozova. And the sympathetic vibration between that name and the Russian *roza* (rose) in the seventh line of this short poem suggests a similar identification of Akhmatova’s young “followers” with an “Avvakumite” tradition in literature. The word “rose” has even more import in this poem, however.

If a rose is the most clichéd image of poetry, it is because it is the most perfect metaphor for poetry, with its luxurious, living beauty among dangerous thorns, the cultivation it requires in order to blossom, even its folds of carefully arranged petals like lines of its self-poem or the pages of a rolled-up student notebook full of poems. For an Acmeist like Akhmatova, the choice of the rose image to represent whatever she’s representing here—whether it is Brodsky’s poems, a single poem, the poetry of the Avvakumites in general (after all, Brodsky predicted she would write about “us”), or them in general as poets and people of a fresh generation—is a very powerful one. Surely she remembered Mandelstam’s oft-quoted passage about the weakness of Symbolism:

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Anything transient is but a likeness. Let’s take for example a rose and the sun, a dove and a girl. To the Symbolists, none of these images is interesting in itself: the rose is a likeness of the sun, the sun is a likeness of a rose, a dove—of a girl, and a girl—of a dove. Images are gutted like scarecrows and packed with foreign content. In place of the Symbolist forest, we are left with a workshop producing scarecrows.

This is where professional Symbolism leads. Perception is demoralized. Nothing is real, genuine. Nothing is left but a terrifying quadrille of “correspondences,” all nodding to one another. Eternal winking. Never a clear word, nothing but hints and reticent whispers. The rose nods to the girl, the girl to the rose. No one wants to be himself.308

Mandelstam goes on to say, “Acmeism arose out of a sense of repulsion: ‘Down with Symbolism! Long live the living rose!’ Such was its original slogan.”309 In light of these words, and in light of the even more extreme crisis of language in the post-Stalin era, Akhmatova’s tribute to Brodsky and/or the Avvakumites does more than highlight the generic difference between Avvakumite poetry and that of the “garden” in general (of Soviet poetry). It pronounces them neo-Acmeists and sees them as waging the campaign against “the terrifying quadrille of correspondences.” That it is the “Last Rose”—and that it is such an aesthetic relief to the lyric heroine (“Take everything, but let me one more time / feel the freshness...”)—is indicative of how Akhmatova saw this group as a late blooming of her own Silver Age even as they brought back welcome memories of her own youth and a renewed sensation of joy in living.

Despite the title, however, “Last Rose” was not the last “Rose” poem Akhmatova wrote. In 1963 she again seems to have answered an Avvakumite hint that she write about them. Perhaps in response to Bobyshev’s request at the end of his “Magnificent


Seven” poem that she remember them “with a kind word,” Akhmatova wrote a poem called “Fifth Rose” [*Piataia roza*]. As Naiman recalls,

‘Fifth Rose’ was written about a bouquet of roses given her by Bobyshev: four of them dropped straightaway, but the fifth, she said, ‘glowed and perfumed the air, and all but flew.’ Shortly before, Bobyshev had dedicated his poem ‘The Magnificent Seven’ to Akhmatova. It contained such lines as ‘O to hijack in your honour an electric train full of dictionary silver’ but he thought it was insufficiently ‘elevated’ and offered her as the epigraph a quatrain about a rose which he had initially addressed to someone else. A.A. allowed him to write the quatrain down in her notebook, but deviousness immediately won through—’Fifth Rose’ remained devoid of an epigraph.  

Bobyshev, in the seventh octave of his *Mourning Octaves*, remembers it more or less the same way, except where Naiman has “a quatrain about a rose,” Bobyshev remembers something about an albatross. “Fifth Rose,” dedicated to Bobyshev and dated 1963, was joined in that year by “Rosa moretur” (the Latin means “Dallying Rose” and comes from Horace), carrying no dedication but associated with Naiman. The last of the “Rose” poems, “Forbidden Rose” [*Zapretnaia roza*] carries an epigraph from Naiman’s poetry (“Your bitter, divine speech” [*Vasha gor’kaia, bozhestvennaia rech’*] from “I am parting with this time for all time”) and was written in 1964.  

For the aims of this dissertation, the most important thing about these poems is not their content, but their existence as a literary fact—that the Avvakumites’ lives (and lines of poetry in the case of Brodsky and Naiman) are directly connected by Akhmatova to her own poems, written for that purpose. Just as the Avvakumites were weaving Akhmatova’s life and poetry into their poems, Akhmatova wrote them into her own oeuvre, thus connecting them to herself, to

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310 Naiman, *Remembering Anna Akhmatova*, 103.

311 For more on the history of the “Rose” poems and their epigraphs, see Naiman, *Remembering Anna Akhmatova*, 103-4.
Acmeism, and to the Silver Age and—given her “alternative” authority during Soviet times—marking them as special “roses” deserving of protection in literary circles and notice in the annals of the humane letters.

Akhmatova was not only the source for the “Avvakumite” designation for this group of poets, she was the culminating force that bound the four young men together as a group—in their own eyes and in the eyes of the society they lived in. Her independence as a creative artist from the Soviet project, her living connections with a neglected tradition and her personal warmth combined in a way the Avvakumites admired and strove to measure up to. Akhmatova’s death marked the end of an era for the Avvakumites—already at odds with one another by the last years of her life, at that point they went their separate ways. But their connection with her has continued to have profound impact on their subsequent lives and writing, as each worked to extend the trajectory of the Silver Age they recovered, in part, through knowing her.
Conclusions: An Emerging Picture of Continuity and Development in the Russian Tradition of Humane Letters

To be a poet in any era means to be in intense rapport with one’s living language—not just with a poetic tradition, and not alone in reaction to social norms. By the time of the Thaw, it was not so difficult to become disenchanted with the Soviet project, and many people turned away from it in one way or another. But to take upon oneself at this time the task of re-invigorating a crippled language and re-inventing it in poetry—especially given the place of poets and poetry in Russian culture—this was the tremendous challenge taken up by the Avvakumites. Thus, from the start of my research, the driving question has been “How and where did the Avvakumites manage to find the material they needed to return to language its human function?” Part and parcel of this question has been the problem of how to characterize the poetry of the quartet I have called the Avvakumites in a way that illuminates the essential features or shared ideas that bound them so closely as a group. The temptation to label their poetry as “neo-Acmeist” has been very strong, as such a designation would seem to work so well: the impulse to return concrete—human—meaning to worn-out, hyper-abstracted language is the essential foundation of both Acmeism and the early poetry of the Avvakumites. That the “concrete meaning” for both Acmeists and Avvakumites was humanist at core also delineates the Avvakumites from other groups of their contemporaries (who might have been more closely aligned with, for example, Futurist, Constructivist, or Archaist impulses). Finally, the way the group coalesced around the figure of Anna Akhmatova
(and disintegrated around the time of her death) constitutes another compelling argument in favor of deeming the group “neo-Acemist.”

I have resisted doing this, however, for several reasons, the most paramount being the very different social circumstances in which the Avvakumites embarked upon their language project, compared to the situation of the Acmeists. Where the abstraction of language had produced a dead end in literary language from the Acmeist perspective, the problem had penetrated deep into language use in all but the most private spheres by the time of Krushchev’s Thaw. The very fact that these young poets did not themselves come up with a name for their group despite its coherence based on creative and philosophical principles is evidence of their profound rejection of the abstract: to give their group a name that would reflect its principles would in fact be to make an abstraction. Their fidelity to the concrete now was so profound that the very act of coming up with a group name by which history could know them was antithetical—too much in the style of Socialist Realism, in which present circumstances were characterized by future-directed abstract obfuscations that masked their human cost.

There are other good reasons for rejecting the label “neo-Acmeist”—perhaps the most persuasive being that while it does separate the quartet of poets under discussion from many of their contemporaries, the Acmeist impulse as defined by Mandelstam—a longing for world culture—was one shared by virtually the entire Thaw generation. This explains the profound influence of jazz across that generation, the intense interest in foreign literature, music, and film, the rising enthusiasm for religious philosophy and Eastern traditions, and the powerful desire to travel as evidenced by the popularity of geological expeditions and travel writing assignments. This was a generation not just
longing, but starving for world culture. Moreover, there were other talented individuals and groups who were as neo-Acmeist in their poetic practice as anybody. Bella Akhmadulina’s poetry owes much to Akhmatova, for example, and Alexander Kushner’s work substantially takes up and continues the threads of Acmeism. And while these poets were in friendly contact with the Avvakumites, neither Akhmadulina nor Kushner could be considered part of the Avvakumites’ “guild.”

That the quartet did indeed constitute a kind of guild, formed with both the continuation of and “overcoming” of Acmeism in mind, is patently clear from the analysis in Chapter 4 of poems dedicated to Akhmatova, in which the four poets incorporate Acmeist language and references to events from the perspective of the Acmeists into their own poetic oeuvre, while simultaneously developing their own metaphysics beyond what Acmeism could give them. While striving to mend the break in Russian literary lineage—and self-identifying as the successor generation to Acmeism—each Avvakumite worked to develop a metaphysics adequate to its time.

It was this very time that shaped Bobyshev, Brodsky, Naiman, and Rein into what I have concluded is best termed “Avvakumites.” The Acmeists, with their language reforms in 1910-14, risked no more than rejection by the reigning literati of Petersburg. Acmeism, however, followed over the course of many years under the historical conditions of Stalinism to its logical conclusions, could result in an extreme ethical stance and even more extreme outcomes, as Mandelstam’s exemplary fate demonstrates. It is, then, as if the Avvakumites took the ultimate ethical position of Acmeism—that it is a poet’s responsibility, even at considerable personal risk, to express the human experience in unfettered language (to name things by their real names)—as their foundation and
developed their individual poetics from there. From the outset, the Avvakumites risked harassment, imprisonment, and exile, as Brodsky’s history proves. Their absolute rejection of the artificially introduced norms of language and behavior in favor of material they considered untainted—the work of certain contemporary poets, American jazz, and the Acmeist legacy have been my focus in this dissertation—is indicative of a defense of expression for their time that goes far beyond the original literary problem of the Acmeist Guild of Poets. In short, by adopting the extreme humanitarian position to which Acmeism ultimately led, the four poets became literary Avvakumites—in actual fact ready to stake their lives and livelihoods on their obligation to serve language responsibly. Consequently—and as was the case of Avvakum—their lives and writings became an alternative and unpublished source of (in their case, literary and moral) authority for their generation and its successors. Brodsky, in addition to being extraordinarily literarily gifted, was the most extreme, outspoken, and judicially persecuted representative of the literary Avvakumite position, with the result that his fate and poetry have taken primary place in Russian literary history as we currently know it.

In broadening the scope of my dissertation from a potential focus on this most notable and exemplary figure of his generation, I have tried to introduce a corrective trend to the state of literary scholarship and appreciation of poetry of the post-Stalin period in Russia. In combination with the perspective on post-Stalin literature westerners took almost unquestioningly from Soviet sources (so that we now most easily recognize the names of Yevtushenko, Voznesensky, Akhmadulina, and Solzhenitsyn), Brodsky’s fame and accessibility since his emigration to the west in 1972 temporarily—and somewhat ironically—obscured our picture of the literary landscape of the late 1950s and
early 1960s. With the fall of the Soviet Union and the emergence of so much exciting material from the late Soviet period, the immediate post-Stalin era fell into further obscurity. Only now, with the perspective of time and the artifacts of the era that have gradually made their way into print and onto the worldwide web, has it really become possible to re-evaluate that period.

The result, for me, has been the surprising emergence of a number of poets I had barely or never known. It seems to me now that history will bring to the fore figures like Bagritsky, Selvinsky, Martynov, and Slutsky as influential practitioners of the Soviet period. Perhaps even more essentially, poets of the Thaw generation, unknown or barely noticed heretofore in the west, have yet to assume their rightful place. Gleb Gorbovsky is a good example. And Stanislav Krasovitsky is possibly the most obscure and destined to be recognized as the most talented—and influential—of his generation. These are poets to whom I could pay little or no attention in this dissertation, which indicates most persuasively what a gigantic overhaul our knowledge of the Thaw period in literature needs.

Part of the corrective that I hope I have managed to introduce here, however, is the attention I have paid to the other three poets of what we in the west are inclined to think of as Brodsky’s circle. Dmitry Bobyshev, since he lives and teaches in the US, has had relatively better success than Rein or Naiman in entering the literary and scholarly annals of the west—more in regard to his later poetry, however, than to his beginnings. Evgeny Rein has yet to emerge as what Brodsky actually tirelessly promoted him for being: the consummate singer of Leningrad. Anatoly Naiman has developed profoundly in philosophical scope, technical range, and poetic achievement, and his is a presence on
the Russian literary scene, the cultural importance of which will only emerge fully in retrospect.

The dissertation was an attempt to map out the rhythms of the early Thaw era as they were caught by the Avvakumites. The work I have done shows that some of the most explosive material—in terms of provoking an alternative “authoritative discourse” to Soviet propaganda and socialist realism—was close to hand all along: the Avvakumites were able to find inspiring work in Soviet journals and in each other’s poems; and like many of their generation were able to turn to living artists to guide them in their attempts to recover the broken-off trends of the past. The chapter on jazz from the Voice of America demonstrates that this “soft” method of promoting western culture and ideals was in fact stunningly effective, perhaps largely due to the way Willis Conover conceived and executed the program. The implications for those who would reach populations in closed countries today are two-fold: that cultural exports like jazz via radio waves can be a most effective—and cost-effective—arena through which to provoke overall change; but that the most profound potential for developing an alternative cultural discourse may lie in the society’s own historical resources. Those who labored to get works like Doctor Zhivago and collections of Gumilev and Mandelstam into the hands of readers in the Soviet Union have been justified by history.

Finally, as a result of the research, a vast world of potential exploration has been opened to me. The Avvakumites were just a few of a plethora of talented new literary voices. With the perspective I have gained, I can now begin to absorb—without becoming overwhelmed—the other groups and individuals, most of which have by now been gathered up willy-nilly in Konstantin Kuzminsky’s Blue Lagoon volumes, the
Russian press, and various websites. The question of the interaction of Moscow and Leningrad poets presses: did Leningrad’s provincial status have something to do with the ability of the Avvakumites to develop as independent, rather than political poets? Does the case of Krasovitsky, a completely independent Muscovite who refuted his own poetry and became a priest, strengthen or weaken such a proposition? And far away on the hazy horizon, all that lies outside of the self-absorbed centers of Moscow and Petersburg beckons. What kind of poetry was being written everywhere in Russia besides these centers? And what voices have yet to emerge, as Andrei Platonov’s did decades after he wrote his most amazing works? These are the questions that work on the dissertation has provoked. My hope is to live and work long enough to begin to shape some answers, and to persuade those who think this kind of thing is important and worthwhile to do the same.
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