PREFACE

BY IRINA SHEVELENKO

Maria Stepanova (b. 1972) is one of the most original and complex poets on the literary scene in Russia today. She has published ten books of poetry, the last of which came out in Moscow at the end of 2019. Two volumes of her collected poems, which together represent the corpus of her work from 1995 to 2015, appeared in 2010 and 2017. She is the recipient of a number of Russian and international poetry awards. During the 2010s, Stepanova also earned recognition for her work in a genre that does not have a stable tradition in Russian literature—that of the essay. She is virtually the only Russian author of comparable caliber in her generation who has worked consistently to reestablish the essay as an important form of creative discourse—a work of art and an intellectual statement—that addresses topics ranging from the contemporary political climate to the work of famous and lesser-known authors of the past, from current literary politics to metapoetical reflections. Three collections of her essays came out between 2014 and 2019. In 2017, Stepanova published a novel entitled *In Memory of Memory* (*Pamiati pamiati*), which received

three Russian literary awards, including the first prize of the highly prestigious Bolshaya Kniga (Great Book) award. This novel blends memoir, letters from Stepanova's family archive, essays, and documentary novellas centered on various figures of the past to create an epic narrative in which the task of recounting a "private history" of the author's family over the course of the twentieth century coalesces with a critical inquiry into practices of remembrance and of narrating memory. An extraordinary achievement in a new form, this novel is at the same time deeply grounded in Stepanova's work as a poet and essayist. Translations of this novel into several languages have already appeared and more are expected, including the English translation forthcoming from New Directions in the United States and Fitzcarraldo in the UK in early 2021. At this juncture, bringing a broader array of Stepanova's writings to an international audience is all the more important.

STRUCTURE OF THE VOLUME

This volume offers a systematic introduction to Stepanova's work for the Anglophone reader: it includes a representative selection of poems and essays from a period of twenty years, 1996–2016. A bibliographic note on Stepanova's Russian publications from which this volume draws follows the preface.

The first three parts of this volume are organized chronologically, giving the reader an opportunity to follow the principal transformations in Stepanova's poetic practice. Small selections from several early poetry collections that comprise part I provide insight into the author's engagement with a series of lyric idioms. More recent collections are represented by substantially broader selections, with about half of the poems from *Kirevsky* (2012) included in part II, and with complete translations, in part III, of two longer works, *Spolia* and *War of the Beasts and the Animals*, which compose

Stepanova's book *Spolia* (2015). Parts II and III also include essays that share common themes with poetry—the author's reflections on the politics of writing and on the situation of a writer confronting the political atmosphere of the 2010s in and outside Russia. Part IV consists of essays in which Stepanova's engagement with other authors' works and ideas intertwines with reflections on the ethics and pragmatics of writing in general.

The introduction to the volume offers an interpretative survey of Stepanova's work set against the background of cultural and political conditions of the post-Soviet period. Drawing on translations included in this volume, it situates them within the body of the author's work and connects them, where appropriate, to other works by Stepanova, particularly to her novel *In Memory of Memory*.

The author provided significant input on the composition and structure of this volume. Poetry translators chose individual poems from a list compiled by the editor or made their own selections from suggested collections and cycles. Both the editor and the author reviewed drafts of poetry translations, most of which went through several rounds of revisions. The editor read drafts of essay translations, suggested revisions, and closely collaborated with translators throughout the revision process. Near-final versions of essay translations were then reviewed by the author.

Unless stated otherwise, notes to poems and essays were added by the editor, including bibliographic citations for passages quoted in essays; these citations are not part of the original Russian text.

NOTE ON POETRY TRANSLATIONS

Translators of Stepanova's poetry face many challenges, some of which are common for translations of Russian experimental poetry into English in general. Metric organization, rhythmic expressiveness, and rhyme remain key elements of poetic form in much of

contemporary Russian poetry, particularly in Stepanova's poetry. Some of these prosodic patterns are not necessarily associated with contemporary poetic idioms for an Anglophone reader, yet their complete obliteration in translation would change the essence of many poems. Stepanova's complex syntax, lexical and morphological inventions, and disjointed diction complement prosodic challenges, as does the high degree of allusiveness of her works.

Among the short poems included in parts I and II, only a small number are not rhymed in the original: all the poems from *Happiness*, the first part of "July 3rd, 2004" from *Physiology and Private History*, poems from the second cycle in *Kireevsky*, and the first three poems from the *Four Operas* cycle (the second of them is partially rhymed, however). Whether rhymed or not, the vast majority of poems are metric (syllabotonic or accentual), though often consisting of polymetric segments; only a few clearly gravitate toward free verse, such as the last two poems from *Happiness* and the third poem in *Four Operas*. In part III, *Spolia* and *War of the Beasts and the Animals* combine free verse and polymetric sections, both rhymed and unrhymed.

One aspect of prosody that most translators tried to retain was the rhythmic contour of poems. In some cases, the meter of the original was reproduced with a great degree of precision; in others it was relaxed or slightly modified. Rhymes were preserved with substantial accuracy in some translations, but in the majority of them rhyming is less systematic to allow for greater semantic proximity to the original and to avoid an impression of forced rhymes. Among translations of metric rhymed poems, prosodic qualities of the original are most closely conveyed in "The Pilot," the second part of "July 3rd, 2004," in poems from *The Lyric, the Voice* and from the cycle *Underground Pathephone* in *Kireevsky*.

Eugene Ostashevsky's translations from the first cycle of *Kireevsky* constitute an exception to this general approach of rhythmic faithfulness; thus, a note addressing his choices as translator

opens the cycle. Sasha Dugdale's note to her translation of *War of the Beasts and the Animals* explains in particular how she handled the high degree of allusiveness of this text; this note could apply equally well to her translation of *Spolia*.

CREDITS AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Several translations included in this volume have been previously published. Among them are three translations by Sibelan Forrester. The poem "The morning sun arises in the morning" originally appeared in *Contemporary Russian Poetry: An Anthology*, edited by E. Bunimovich and J. Kates (Dalkey Archive Press, 2008); that translation was revised for publication in this volume. The poem "As Danaë, prone in the incarce-chamber" was included in an anthology, *Twenty-first Century Russian Poetry*, edited by Larissa Shmailo, which appeared in issue 17 (2013) of an online magazine *Big Bridge* (<https://bigbridge.org/BB17/toc.html>). The essay "Conversations in the Realm of the Dead" was first published in *The Massachusetts Review*, vol. LVI, no. 3 (2015); that translation also appears in this volume in a revised version.

Two other translations, the poems "Saturday and Sunday burn like stars" (trans. Dmitry Manin) and "The Women's Locker Room at Planet Fitness" (trans. Zachary Murphy King), earned first and second prizes respectively in the 2017 Compass Translation Award competition dedicated to the poetry of Maria Stepanova; they originally appeared in vol. 8 (2018) of *Cardinal Points Literary Journal*, a project of the Slavic Studies Department of Brown University and StoSvet (www.stosvet.org), edited by Boris Dralyuk and Irina Mashinski. The translation of "The Women's Locker Room" was substantially revised for publication in this volume.

Finally, by permission of Bloodaxe Books, as specified on the copyright page, we have included eight translations by Sasha

Dugdale from her forthcoming book of translations of Maria Stepanova's poetry, *War of the Beasts and the Animals*. The translation of the title poem from this book, along with the translator's note, was first published in *Modern Poetry in Translation*, no. 3 (2017), and it was revised for the book. The poem "Bus Stop: Israelitischer Friedhof" appeared in *Other Countries: Contemporary Poets Rewiring History* (2014). *Spolia* was published in *PN Review*, vol. 46, no. 4 (2020).

As the editor of this volume, I would like to thank, first and foremost, the extraordinary team of translators whose dedicated work made this project come true: Alexandra Berlina, Sasha Dugdale, Sibelan Forrester, Amelia Glaser, Zachary Murphy King, Dmitry Manin, Ainsley Morse, Eugene Ostashevsky, Andrew Reynolds, and Maria Vassileva. I am particularly indebted to Ainsley Morse and Eugene Ostashevsky for their help at the early stages of planning for this volume and for their advice on several occasions in the course of my work. My spouse and colleague, Karen Evans-Romaine, provided invaluable editorial advice on poetry translations, as did Megan Kennedy, who also copyedited a draft of my introduction. Commentaries by three anonymous reviewers solicited by Columbia University Press were very helpful at the final stage of my work. I am grateful to these reviewers as well as to the members of the editorial board of the Russian Library series for their support of this project. The editorial staff at Columbia University Press, especially Christine Dunbar and Christian Winting, offered unfailing support throughout the process. This process would be entirely impossible without Maria Stepanova's involvement at all stages of preparation of this volume.

TRANSLITERATION AND STYLE

This volume uses the Library of Congress (LC) system of transliteration of the Cyrillic alphabet (without diacritics) in bibliographic

references as well as in transliterations of titles of Russian sources. A modified LC system is used in the text for personal names and some proper nouns to ensure easier readability.

All omissions in quoted sources are designated with ellipses in square brackets to distinguish them from suspension points as a punctuation mark used by authors of quoted sources.