INTRODUCTION

“Speaking in Voices”: On Maria Stepanova’s Literary Creation

BY IRINA SHEVELENKO

“Occupying oneself with poetry presumes a chain of greater and lesser deaths, each putting in doubt the possibility of continued existence. Poems move forward in gigantic leaps, rip themselves loose from familiar and fertile soil, rejecting (shaking off) the very soil they were only just clinging to. Poetry seems to preserve itself by way of disruptions, renouncing what only a moment ago comprised an inalienable part of it, and sometimes its very essence.”

► *Maria Stepanova, “Displaced Person”*

“**S**tepanova’s début was distinguished by brilliant poetic technique and a purity of style,” Dmitry Kuzmin, poet and publisher, wrote fifteen years ago. “Progress along this route would virtually have assured Stepanova of success with the reading public and with the critics, but she chose another and far riskier strategy,” he remarked. It was the ever expanding vocal range that became a hallmark of Stepanova’s development: “At times she

engaged in a dialogue with the Russian tradition, with the archaic language and poetry of the eighteenth century; at others she introduced casual contemporary diction, close to slang, into a classical stanza reminiscent of Catullus. At one time, in a lyric miniature, she reached the heights of estrangement, observing the sufferings of the spirit and the body from some point of passionless elevation; at another, a sonnet cycle looked like total parody.”¹

Over the years since, new turns and transformations in Stepanova’s work have continued to surprise, irritate, and stir admiration in her readers, yet the stable core of this evolving system has also become more tangible. Russian Formalist literary critics once coined the term *estrangement* (also translated as *defamiliarization*) to describe the presentation of the familiar as unfamiliar through the use of an unusual trope or through the gaze of a speaker who does not understand the scene or object that he describes. In Stepanova’s poetry, it is not the external reality but the voice that is perpetually estranged, defamiliarized. That voice relocates, finding new bodies. These bodies—traditions and styles—are familiar, but the moment they acquire voice in Stepanova’s text, they aren’t what they used to be: neither sonnets, nor ballads, nor war songs. Or rather, they are all of the above but transposed in a new key, infused with foreign strains, sharing space with unlikely neighbors, and living unfamiliar lives.

Stepanova’s seminal long poem *Spolia* (2014) opens with the speaker reciting from a would-be digest of confused responses to her work:

she simply isn’t able to speak for herself
and so she always uses rhyme in her poems

ersatz and out of date poetic forms

her material
offers no resistance
its kiss is loveless, it lies motionless

she's the sort you'd lift onto a chair
read us the poem about wandering lonely

she's the sort who once made a good soviet translator
careful unadventurous

where is her *I* place it in the dish
why on earth does she speak in voices

(voices "she has adopted," in quote marks:
obvs anyone-without-an-I cannot adopt anything
for anyone-without-an-I will wander, begging alms
pretending to be a corner, a jar of mayonnaise, a cat
although no one believes him quite)

[...]

let her come out herself and say something
(and we'll listen to you)

she won't come out
it won't come right*

The motif of a lacking *I*, whose place is taken by a multiplicity
of voices, gradually gives way in this poem to an elaborate display

* This and subsequent quotations come from the present edition.

of these voices gathered together from across time and space and transformed by this displacement; the voices coalesce and bounce off one another, and, interspersed with them, there appear glimpses of human images, whose voices are still waiting to be transposed and impersonated. Closer to the end of the poem the reading from the familiar digest seems to resume, but it turns out to be dedicated to a *different* one-without-an-I:

she simply isn't able to speak for herself
so she is always ruled by others

because her history repeats and repeats itself
takes on ersatz and out of date forms

and there is no knowing where her quotes are from
nineteen thirty or nineteen seventy
they're all in there pell-mell all at once

[...]

her raw material
her diamonds her dust tracks her dirt-colored trailers
ancient forests mountain ranges
snow leopards desert roses gas flow
needed for global trade arrangements

her raw material doesn't want to do business with her
gives itself up without love will do as she wants

unclear what she needs

where's your *I*, where is it hidden?
why do strangers speak for you
or are you speaking
in the voices of scolds and cowards
get out of yourself
put that dictionary back on the shelf

she won't come out
it won't come right

Russia appears here as a double of the poet, a country-without-an-I, whose possessions, carefully accounted for, along with events and voices of her past, seem to be stored in a giant repository and available for ad hoc repurposing in ever new combinations—as spolia, as building blocks of obsolete structures. The Russia of *Spolia* is a country waging war in Ukraine, a war that flooded the public discourse with antiquated, seemingly long-forgotten propaganda clichés, a downpour of “quotes” oblivious of their birth time and place. What could aligning oneself as a poet with such a country possibly mean? The grotesque overtones of this juxtaposition are evident: Stepanova’s poet, with her professed belief in “speaking in voices,” confronts a caricature or a reflection in a (possibly distorting) mirror. Yet the effect of this juxtaposition is more complex. Both the poet and the country may be speaking in voices, and their shared history may be an explanation for that, but only the poet possesses a selfhood independent of these voices and knows where her voices and quotes come from, and why. In *Spolia*, Stepanova tackles the boundaries of poetic self-expression by synthesizing voices hitherto nonexistent in experimental poetry and by bringing voices of various provenances in contact with one another. Looking back at her creative career, we can now trace its milestones.

Like many members of her literary generation, Stepanova started publishing in the late 1980s, when she was still in high school. A few of her poems appeared in the first half of the 1990s, but it was not until the later part of that decade that she was published consistently. This dynamic testifies as much to the conditions of the time as it reflects Stepanova's own choices. In an interview she gave in 2017 to Cynthia Haven, Stepanova spoke about the atmosphere of the early 1990s—the time following the collapse of the Soviet Union, when she studied at the Literary Institute in Moscow and contemplated “how to be a poet”:

When I was a teenager, a student, I saw how the people who belonged to the previous generation were traumatized by the crash of the Soviet system of literary education and literary work. The Soviet Writers' Union had been able to give writers enough to live on after publishing a book or a collection of poems in some literary magazine—for the official writers, of course, not to the authors of *samizdat*. You could live for three years after publishing a book, but it had to be a bad book, because it was the result of an inner compromise. Nevertheless, lots of people had the feeling that they could stay themselves and still, somehow, occupy some cozy step on the enormous staircase of the official Soviet literary establishment. When the system crashed, people were disappointed and disorientated. By 1992 or 1993, it became evident that the utopia wasn't working anymore, especially for poets. It became evident that a book of poetry would never have a press run of more than 2,000 copies. It would never bring you money or even fame. I saw people crushed, melted, changed because of that. They had relied on a system that had suddenly vanished into thin air. They were still willing to make compromises, but there was no longer anyone to make a compromise with.²

The early 1990s, along with political freedoms and a deep economic crisis, brought about new conditions for writing, both economic and existential. At the end of that decade, one of the most prominent prose writers of the time, Victor Pelevin, made the fate of a poet in post-Soviet Russia a theme of his novel *Homo Zapiens* (1999). The Soviet-era tradition provided Pelevin with a rich selection of narratives about “a writer’s fate,” from Konstantin Vaginov’s *Works and Days of Svistonov* to Mikhail Bulgakov’s *Master and Margarita* to Boris Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago* to Andrei Bitov’s *Pushkin House*. In Pelevin’s post-Soviet revision of this plot, a young poet, Vavilen Tatarsky, abandons his creative aspirations because of the “disappearance of eternity,” for the sake of which alone he felt it would be possible to write. Put in less lofty terms, it was the alleged disappearance of a particular condition for writing—of the context that endowed writing with a mission of supreme importance, whether thanks to state support or state oppression. Tatarsky transforms himself from a writer into a copywriter, embarking on a career in advertising, then moving on to TV. In a parodic twist, Pelevin still allows his protagonist to become a “creator”—a mastermind behind the TV screen who supplants reality with the virtual reality of (mis) information.

We can acknowledge today that there were brighter alternatives to Tatarsky’s fate. And yet Stepanova could have easily crossed paths with him: “I started in the mid-1990s as a copywriter in a French advertising agency, and then I switched to TV.” This choice, Stepanova explained, was a way for her to sever links with the vanishing Soviet-era support system for literature and with the kind of literary community that system cultivated: “I was quite young and opinionated, so my attitude was rather harsh. I didn’t want to have anything in common with them. I refused to rely on poetry to make a living, to attain a position in the world. I would find some other professional occupation and would be as free as I could be in terms of

poetry. It was the easiest way for me to stay independent. I split my world into halves.”³

In one way or another, all poets of that generation had to find their “second professions”—in editing and the publishing industry, in media and journalism, and in teaching and research. Individual choices aside, the pressing issue was the viability of a new type of literary community. The experience of “unofficial” culture of the late Soviet period provided some models for that, but the situation was quite different already, and no one in Russia had a clear sense of how exactly not just poets but experimental poetry itself would exist in a market economy. That knowledge was yet to be acquired, while the larger context seemed unfavorable for young authors in the 1990s: it was a time when the country was avidly reading all the books, Russian and foreign, that had been banned or barely accessible during the Soviet period. It is therefore noteworthy how quickly this generation of poets reinvented itself as a literary community, establishing venues for readings, publication, and intellectual exchange. It was in the mid-1990s, as Stepanova herself recalled later, that the sense of belonging to a remarkable poetic community became a shared feeling: “Everything changed then, just as if you had discovered a new room no one had noticed in an old communal apartment, and it could be settled in and filled up to suit one’s own preference. It seemed like an incredible stroke of luck—that possibility of the simultaneous existence of not three, not five, but fifteen or twenty major authorial practices” (“In Unheard-of Simplicity”).

In 2001, Stepanova published, one after another, three books of poetry: *Songs of the Northern Southerners*, *On Twins*, and *The Here-World*. They were followed by the collections *Happiness* (2003) and *Physiology and Private History* (2005). A selection of translations from these books and from the cycle *O* (2006) form part I of this volume. The transformations of Stepanova’s poetics in this period do not allow for linear description, but the pattern of “speaking in

voices,” which she would later assert as quintessential for her practice, may be observed in these works as well, albeit in a different guise—as the transposition of “voices” of particular literary traditions. Indeed, “ersatz and out of date poetic forms” nod to us from many poems, and modulations of the speaker’s voice intermittently conform to and sharply contradict these forms. Metric regularity with pointed rhythmic shifts and the predominantly rhymed verse may seem particularly “out of date” to an Anglophone reader, but it is the very regularity of the verse and its archaic flavor that looms as a contrasting backdrop, once the reader begins to stumble over vocabulary, images, syntactic structures, and plot collisions strikingly at odds with tradition. Thus, in the ballad “The Pilot,” a female narrator describes a meeting of the title character with his family in the following fashion:

So when he came back here forever to stay,
An empty descendant from the freedomless sky,
Mysterious like a suitcase,
We went out by the staff door, the night chill and clear,
The boy in my arms and the girl hanging near,
And he gave me a whack on the face.

But that was OK by and large.

Like the flowing blush when we hear the word “love,”
All over my face his sky-blue glance roved,
While he hurt me, time and again.
And we plopped on the lawn, all the pedigree, staring
At the horizon where the sky was flaring
And no one put out the flame.

And life continued itself.

Besides the mismatch between the archaic genre frame of a ballad and the register and subject of the narration, the peculiarity of this and other ballads from *Songs of the Northern Southerners* rests on a bizarre amalgam of familiar patterns of everyday life and of fantastic elements, such as the Pilot's celestial and earthly encounters with The Heavenly Daughter, "dressed every time as a Young Pioneer" (that is, as a member of the Soviet mass youth organization). His wife's attempt at bridging these two worlds results in her killing a twelve-year-old girl wearing that uniform on a local bus.

The title of the book, *Songs of the Northern Southerners*, alludes to Alexander Pushkin's cycle *Songs of the Western Slavs* (1834) and to the literary hoax that inspired it—Prosper Mérimée's *La Guzla* (1827), a collection of pseudo-folk songs from South Slavic lands that Mérimée wrote as a mockery of the Romantic fascination with *couleur locale*. Unlike these works of her predecessors, Stepanova's book locates "singers," with their voices and stories, in a geographical limbo ("northern southerners"), emblematic of their fluid identity; their songs, however, are utterly "authentic" in conveying the singers' insecurity about who they are and what space they inhabit. One may posit that the horror ballad is a form of cultural production in this space because of the experience of mental dislocation that unites its dwellers as they are trying to cope with the aftermath of trauma. It is thus the fantastic plane of the ballads that makes them, as Stepanova once said about a work of contemporary Russian fantasy, "an accurate 'physiological sketch' of Russian life, drawn from nature" ("Intending to Live").

Stepanova's poems from *On Twins* and *The Here-World*, in contrast to *Songs*, in most cases use a more conventional lyric voice, and their poetic utterance is centered on private space, in which love, death, creativity, and solitude are landmarks of experience. If anything, many of these poems echo the Romantic fragment, but their distinguishing poetic feature is intense experimentation with language,

and their verbal and syntactic density, coupled with the regularity of meter and rhyme, make them particularly difficult to translate. Of the few poems translated for this volume, one stands out in its use of tradition: “For you, but the voice of the straitened Muse,” which is the final poem in *The Here-World*. Its opening line is almost identical to the first line of the “Dedication” that opens Pushkin’s historical narrative poem *Poltava* (1828), which lends Stepanova’s poem an aura of nineteenth-century Romantic verse. Her vocabulary, tone, and subject, however, progressively depart from her source. Stepanova’s poem is a dedication-turned-elegy, and, appearing at the end of the book, it renders the entire collection an epistle. This epistle cannot be read or heard by the deceased addressee, Stepanova’s mother, but it owes its *hereworldly* shape to the speaker’s impulse of seeing beyond and including *there* between its covers:

Recognize, if nothing else, the seeing
That is stitching together the book’s cover,
Leaping in lilacs like a swing
Into here-world—and there-.

While a few poems in this early corpus are programmatic at some level, “A Gypski, a Polsk I, a Jewski, a Russki” from *On Twins* touches on a theme that runs through Stepanova’s work (poetry and prose) including her novel *In Memory of Memory*: that of a bond with one’s kin—ancestry as predicated and informing her poetic gift. A grotesque image of ancestors that “crash, like multi-stories, on the saucer,” fighting over the poet, is juxtaposed with a contest of a different order, in which the poet’s fitness for her task is perpetually evaluated:

Our Lyubka, led to market, gets stripped down:
There, sizing up her muscles, gropes the muse,

Assessing us, deciding which to ride.
And every single birthday is a duel.

The grotesque here becomes a voice for the sublime, and it is a variation on a pattern that has been one of the hallmarks of Stepanova's poetic diction: a mismatch between the tone, the image, and the actual subject, allowing the reader to contemplate the peculiar effect of a simultaneity of transpositions into various keys that such poems produce.

A semantic shift in the transposition of a borrowed image in a poem may work similarly, both emphasizing and blurring the line between two distinct meanings that collide in the reader's imagination. Such is the use of Horace's "swan" ode (II, 20) in the poem "The morning sun arises in the morning" from *Happiness*. In Horace, the motifs of the poet's transformation into a swan and his flight above the earth are emblematic of poetic might. In Stepanova's poem, a female speaker, addressing herself with an ironic grace, appropriates these motifs to express her erotic aspirations:

Whatcha want, my dovey little swan?
Turn back around, take off the last rag,
Feast your eyes on the golden mirror,
Moving this and that part forward.

And hey! I hear a muffled beating.
Your sides feel warm and neck's stretched longer.
The legs don't please you, but your white feathers
Are the envy of many girlfriends.⁴

The flight of Stepanova's swan culminates in a declaration of immortality ("—Immortal, forever immortal am I, / The Styx itself will not arrest my flight!") that paraphrases Horace's ("Nor will I [...] die or

be / confined by the waters of Styx”²⁵). The erotic emotion, with an air of naïve nonchalance, transcribes itself as a creative act, giving an inaugural tune to a book of love lyrics.

In the poetic construction of *Happiness*, emulation of the tradition of Russian twentieth-century translations of ancient Greek and Roman lyric poetry becomes central. Stepanova uses metric and strophic forms and unrhymed verse, characteristic of Russian renditions of classical verse. Allusions to and images from Sappho and Catullus, Horace and Ovid are intertwined here with modern realia, lending a sense of temporal limbo to the poems. The classical disguise of the voice meanwhile both shields and amplifies personal emotion. Toward the end of the book, the verse departs from borrowed metrical forms, retaining just the aura of imitation. This loosening of formal restrictions anticipates the finale: at the closure of the last poem, “(half an hour on foot),” the speaker’s voice, having reached the peak of its tense meditation, abruptly merges with the tune of a popular Russian song from the earlier part of the twentieth century, an ad hoc placeholder for the unspoken, whose simple-minded playfulness reads here as an incantation.

Physiology and Private History showcases Stepanova’s work in a form that is novel for her poetic practice—that of a longer poem, often consisting of two or three parts, which can also be interpreted as a short cycle. Engagement with poetic tradition and contemporary context and history, along with renegotiation of the boundaries between public and private as poetic subjects, are intermittently present and sometimes tightly intertwined here; morphological and syntactic irregularities, stylistic shifts, and lexical inventions make for a distinct poetic idiolect; verses largely retain regular metric organization and are predominantly rhymed. For her epigraphs to the book, Stepanova took an old encyclopedia entry for *physiology* and a line from Viktor Shklovsky’s preface to his novel *Zoo, or Letters Not About Love* (1923): “It is a common device in erotic

things: they deny the real plane and affirm the metaphoric one.” However, Stepanova’s poems included in this book often pointedly depart from Shklovsky’s dictum: instead of denying the real (physiological) plane, they affirm it, while developing other planes now as metaphoric extensions of the physiological, now as its discordant counterparts. “The Desire to Be a Rib” is a good illustration of the former: as if undoing the creation of a woman from a man’s rib, the female speaker imagines herself penetrating the male body in the guise of a rib searching for its place—an image that simultaneously conveys the sublime idea of the “oneness” of two and radically reassigns the roles in an erotic encounter. In other poems, however, particularly those that engage with historical subjects, physiology and history often form contrapuntal relationships. Thus, in the first poem of the diptych “Sarah on the Barricades,” set in 1905, the year of the first Russian revolution, the physiological plane offers a relatable, ahistorical background for the imminent historical catastrophes of the twentieth century. New lives “Come spilling from grandfathers’ loins, / And peer into the eyes of needles, / That lead far into unknown wombs,” yet for the speaker’s retrospective gaze this feast of physiology is but a brief prelude to historical calamities:

I know (it would be better not to know)
 That these universal birthing pains,
 Rhythmic as a cannonade, are
 The coming of a whole new strain.
 That into sleepless bassinets
 Yawn these gaping hatches.
 That this demo-graphic tide
 Boils and bubbles with every type.

Despite “private history” appearing in the title of the book, it is “history writ large,” with which Stepanova often engages, viewed

through the lens of family history. The core tension of “Sarah on the Barricades” emerges precisely from the dual perspective available to the speaker: one that engages both with the grand scheme of twentieth-century Russian and European history and with a family member’s position at one of its early critical junctures. Over a decade later, her great-grandmother Sarah Ginzburg, the title character of this poem, becomes one of the protagonists in the novel *In Memory of Memory*. In the poem as well as later in the novel, the figure of her great-grandmother foregrounds Stepanova’s sense of the feminine as the backbone of her “private,” that is, family history: “This feminist firmament—its swallow, its stormcloud. / The Noah of a female ark.”

The same prominence is given to the feminine in recounting history in “The Women’s Locker Room at Planet Fitness.” The opening sketch of a locker room in a modern gym gradually morphs into a vision of a catastrophe that would forever “classify” some as perpetrators (marching in raids on Kristallnacht) and others as victims:

This pillar of water might turn to ice,
Reason to a poison, air to gas,
Sweetie-pies will march and stride
In closed ranks through shops and shacks.
And the door that led out to the swimming cube
Will open just a tad, like a zipper on a boot.
And we’ll step out of slippers, nails and crowns,
From watches, juxtaposed rags, our voices’ sounds.

And into nostrils, ears and mouths, like out a kettle spout,
En masse they’ll surge and spill, souls
Who broke the lock.

The haunting horrors of the historical past that break through the contours of contemporary life is a motif that repeats in Stepanova’s

work, becoming later a subject of reflection in her essays and the novel *In Memory of Memory*. The unwarranted intrusion of such visions is exemplified in the witty and meditative “Zoo, Woman, Monkey” from the cycle *O*, where the anxieties of pregnancy and imminent childbirth suddenly take on the form of wartime fears—fixed images from narratives of the Russian Civil War and the Second World War, deeply ingrained in collective memory:

You open your eyes: time to file in the ark:
 Spring comes and swallows you up,
 The Czechs are close, Kolchak advances from the east
 And under Moscow undressed Germans stand like
 sharpened pales.
 And flayed forest partisans like flanks.
 And dead pilots without their holsters or their watches.

Death and birth are two motifs that run through *Physiology and Private History*—common denominators for both counterparts of the title. Two poems that have cemeteries as their central locus offer a frame for this motif structure: “July 3rd, 2004,” a reflection on visiting Joseph Brodsky’s grave in Venice, culminates in an affirmation of poetry’s eternal rebirth, and “Bus Stop: Israelitischer Friedhof,” the last poem in the collection, ends with a eulogy to “the eternal act of bringing forth.”

“Journalism happened rather late in my life,” Stepanova remarked in her conversation with Cynthia Haven. “I cannot say it doesn’t affect my poetry, because it does. Of course it does. The things I deal with as a journalist get mixed up with the problems that make me tick as a poet. That space I was hoping to make—you

know, the enclosed garden—is not secluded enough. It’s not enclosed now—the doors are wide open, and the beasts of the current moment are free to enter. Because I’m changing, too. You have to open the doorways to let the world in—to make the words come in, in fact.”⁶ In 2007, Stepanova became editor-in-chief of the online media resource OpenSpace.ru, which endeavored to set new standards of cultural journalism in Russia. In 2012, as a consequence of the government crackdown on independent media projects, following a series of anti-government rallies in Moscow in 2011–2012, OpenSpace was discontinued by its owners, and its team soon founded another cultural journalism portal, Colta.ru, the first media resource in Russia that has no owners and operates on the model of crowdfunding, and of which Stepanova remains editor-in-chief today.

Stepanova’s engagement with journalism and changes in her poetic practice were not causally related, however: the two coincided, rather than one being predicated on the other. In the poem “And a vo-vo-voice arose” from *The Lyric, the Voice* (2010), which opens part II of this volume, transformations in poetic practice are explicitly linked to a new sense of self:

At thirty years old
I was not very old.

At thirty-three
’Twere a babe inside me.

At thirty-five
Time came back alive.

Now I am thirty-six
Time to eat myself up quick.

Scoop out my head
 With a big pewter spoon,

 So new beer can be poured in
 And topped off after settling,
 So that she not, like the olive tree,
 Spend the winter blue and empty

Proverbially famous Soviet-period “announcements” that instructed customers to demand “topping off one’s beer glass after the foam settles” serve here to frame a statement about creative renewal. The pointedly low stylistic register masks the sublime subject matter: scooping out one’s head with a pewter spoon makes room for the world and words that are new, alien, and unfamiliar.

The poems of *The Lyric, the Voice* were written in 2008, following Stepanova’s work on two long narrative poems, both carrying the designation “prose” in their titles: *The Prose of Ivan Sidorov* (2006) and *Second Prose* (2008). Against the backdrop of that experiment, the title of the new book of poems pointed to an increased level of reflection on the properties of lyric utterance. Several strains of such utterances run through the book, three of which are represented in this volume: meditative (“Saturday and Sunday burn like stars”), politically engaged (“In every little park, in every little square”), and metapoetic (“In the festive sky, impassivable, tinfurled” and “And a vo-vo-voice arose”). It is within the metapoetic strain that a new presentation of the speaker’s subjectivity emerges: it becomes diffuse, now including “everyone” and “anyone,” now split between two “I”s.⁷ Testing the limits of the “vocal range” accessible to the contemporary poet becomes central to Stepanova’s work in the first half of the 2010s.

In 2008, Stepanova translated into Russian e. e. cummings’s famous poem “anyone lived in a pretty how town,” which seemed

to respond to her new sensibilities. In her volume of collected poems, *Protiv liriki* (Against lyric), published in 2017, that translation opens a section of the book that includes poems from Kireevsky (2012) and two long poems, *Spolia* and *War of the Beasts and the Animals* (2015). Cummings's poem is often interpreted as a poem about contemporary man's lack of individuality. For Stepanova, it seems important rather as a starting point for turning "anyone," cummings's hero, from an object of description into a subject of poetic utterance. If transformations of Stepanova's voice before drew on age-old literary traditions, in Kireevsky she turns to modern and archaic folk idioms, compiling an anthology of trauma as reflected in songs sung in labor camps, at war fronts, and then over entire Russia, reaching every household and train car:

I walk in a state-owned throw
Through train cars full of people
And sing as earnestly
As a saved soul in paradise

It's a dirty job, even dirtier
Than the bossman-conductor might deem
For a quality song in our business
Always rises up to a scream

[...]

My voice makes a hole in the comfort
Of the car like an out-of-nowhere shiv
Everyone starts feeling downcast
And takes turns beating me by the toilet
(*"A train is riding over Russia"*)

In part, the turn in poetics that *Kireevsky* demonstrates is related to Stepanova's concern expressed in her essay "In Unheard-of Simplicity" (2010), also included in part II. Reflecting on the successful integration of experimental poetry in the consumer-driven culture of the prosperous 2000s in Russia, she suggests that distancing oneself from it becomes a matter of sustaining one's integrity and creative independence: "The chill of having no place [. . .] is the only thing that gives poetry a chance not to participate in the parade of general achievements, not to wind up as a passkey that opens the doors for a third-party, external meaning. In this situation opacity seems like the only choice: a murky, closed, unpopular, unentertaining, unsuccessful existence in the catacombs, one that remains aloof."

Kireevsky is at once opaque in its relation to the present and to tradition: mastering the languages of twentieth-century historical traumas, languages of loss, misery, and excludedness, might have seemed an exotic endeavor in 2010–2011, when Stepanova wrote most of these poems, and it is striking, of course, how less and less exotic, by the year, it has been looking since. Her other essay included in this part of the volume, "Displaced Person," reads as an extended commentary on her work on *Kireevsky*, although its implications are broader. Its title is a pun: "person" in this case is a grammatical category (as in a "first-person pronoun"), and the displacement refers to the conscious transfer of the "I" of lyric utterance to a voice—or indeed to a self—that is not the author's. Stepanova calls such selves, subjects of poetic utterances, "*fictive figures of authorship*," whose existence is limited to the "space-time of one cycle or one book of poems," a territory that "exists according to laws that are not entirely identical to those the author recognizes over himself." This affords new freedom to the poet:

"I" turns out to be not an actor now, but a camera; suddenly several cameras appear—a lot of them—and they aren't pointed at

you. [. . .] But if we suppose that all the cameras are working, all the voices are speaking (singing, coughing, whistling, stuttering; one of them, obviously, belongs to the author himself, but we can't say with any certainty which)—and if this sheaf or whiskbroom of diverging intonations exists as a text, as a *unity*, we can consider the experiment a success. In that case a poet's oeuvre appears as a kind of gigantic installation with a displaced center—and what happiness to know that you aren't the center, but the radius.

Kireevsky was an experiment in new vision and new hearing. For the title of the book, Stepanova took the last name of Pyotr Kireevsky (1808–1856), a nineteenth-century collector of folk songs, whose voluminous collection (1860–1874) was published only after his death. It was the first comprehensive collection of Russian folk songs, and Kireevsky's name became emblematic of the enterprise of Russian folklore collection in general. An amateur collector, he relied on many submissions from his contemporaries, also amateurs, who would often edit and correct the texts they recorded or even submit their own imitations of folklore alongside original folk songs, as Pushkin claimed to have done. Stepanova had this premise in mind when calling her book *Kireevsky*: as an author, she writes her texts *over* the tradition, infusing it with a strain of experimental poetry and thus ensuring its transition into a new age.

The three cycles comprised by *Kireevsky* are distinct in their pragmatics. The first, from which the already quoted poem comes, is *Young Women Are Singing*, translated in this volume as *Young Maids Sing* (see translator's note on the reason for that); it consists of balladlike songs predicated on the experience of trauma—wars, purges, prison camps, and post-Soviet havoc. They evoke a variety of sources, from the medieval vita of Alexis the Man of God (“Mama, what janitor”) to the song “Katyusha,” a love song, whose

heroine's name became a nickname for a Russian rocket launcher in the Second World War ("Ordnance was weeping in the open"). The title of the cycle, however, adds a layer of complexity to the text: young women who are singing these songs aren't the subjects or voices of these ballads. These songs are seemingly not about them, and yet they actually are. The singers are vested in the experience these songs relate—they appropriate and reenact it in their singing. The second cycle, which shares its name with the title of the book, *Kireevsky*, features a different "voice-over," that of a sophisticated author-reader, who mixes archaic and more modern folk idioms with literary sources of various provenances, to the effect of capturing the transhistorical cyclicity of trauma, conveyed here by evoking the cyclicity of calendric songs. Finally, the third cycle, *Underground Pathephone*, gives voice to the deceased, to their vision of life and death from the point of ultimate awareness:

There he lies in his new bed, a band of paper round his head,
 Such a mustachioed gentilhomme, now in the coffin
 all alone,
 So here he lies, all numb and quiet, and the collar of his face
 Is growing yellow from inside, but you would best avert
 your gaze,
 For deep within, just like a clock that's scratching
 its tick-tock-tick-tock,
 He still produces, dull and low, his never-ceased I loveyouso,
 But all the people at his side, they wouldn't hear him
 if they tried,
 Just us, we look from the plafond, invisible, but not for long,
 Each one of us, so well we know:
 I too had squadrons to command,
 Wore in my mouth I loveyouso,
 Wore round my head a paper band.

This succinct outline of a life, in which the catharsis is born from the grotesque, is but one of the reflexes of the vision from beyond. Voices in *Underground Pathephone* are often captured in the moments of their dialog with the songs they once sang. Thus, in the concluding poem of the cycle, “Don’t strain your sight,” one such song is “Dark Is the Night” (“*Temnaia noch*”), one of the most famous Russian songs from the Second World War era, and at the same time an archetypal wartime song about love safeguarding a soldier in combat. Picking up a familiar tune, a voice from under the ground quotes (these phrases are in italics) and contests the song’s promise:

However *I love*
The depth of your tender gaze,
 Still sparrows will arrive,
 And peck at our remains.

I am earth, march-’n’-marsh, muck-’n’-mold,
 Collarbone, flowers in season.
Naught will happen to me, I know,
 For a whole ’nother reason.

The cycle *Four Operas*, included in *Kireevsky* as an “addendum,” offers an additional perspective on Stepanova’s mode of working with sources. As Ilya Kukulin noted in his analysis of that cycle, “The narratives in its poems are ‘pointillistic,’ outlined in general features, written for those who know the operas’ plots, but, for all that, the stories told in *Four Operas* markedly diverge from the plots specified in the librettos.”⁸ Indeed, a similar principle is at work here as in Stepanova’s treatment of her Russian sources in *Kireevsky*: opera settings—of *Carmen*, *Aida*, *Fidelio*, and *Iphigenia in Aulis*—are transferred to a different context (the first three of them to

contemporary Russia) and their narrative structures are distorted to the point that readers recognize in them neither Russian nor foreign but “universal social conflicts that lie at the heart of the plots of classic operas.”⁹ This helps to highlight an important aspect of the three cycles of *Kireevsky*. Their groundedness in Russian sources and Russian experience is at once an important gesture and a synecdoche that points at the rich twentieth-century legacy of violence and trauma across the world—a theme that will be at the heart of Stepanova’s novel seven years later, and that is brought forward in the concluding poem of *Four Operas*—“Iphigenia in Aulis,” a poem about war par excellence:

The action continues by the water,
A fatal war, trenches, swords, cuirasses,
The yids occupy the war’s left bank,
The faggots stand in formation on the right.

This battle takes place on foot, it will never end,
Will grind through and chew up five hundred generations,
Will have its way, like a nuclear winter,
Because cavalry attacks them from the heavens,
While darkness comes on from under the ground,
Piercing the heel and poking the knees apart.

[...]

With a sword in my chest I sing and do not die
In the war waged on the foothills of paradise.

The derogatory vocabulary of Stepanova’s poem, Kukulin remarks, is “a ‘smutty’ parody of the style of social media hate speech,”¹⁰ but it also exposes hate speech as a structural element of war as such. No

one could have guessed that a new war was just around the corner in 2010. When it came, Stepanova called her long poem about it *War of the Beasts and the Animals*, a title pointedly mocking hate speech.

“National traitors, *Chekists*, *Banderites*, fascist goons—this lexical collage is glued together from elements that the last century had already discarded,” Stepanova wrote in her essay “Today Before Yesterday” in August 2014, about half a year after the Russian annexation of Crimea and a few months into the Russian covert intervention in eastern Ukraine that sparked an armed conflict in that territory and caused its breakaway from Ukraine. Stepanova’s poems and essays from 2014 to 2016, included in part III of this volume, mark a high point in her work as a poet and essayist, and they are all in one way or another commentaries on the power of language to shape imagination—that is, to shape the vision of today, yesterday, and tomorrow. The proliferation of hate speech is but a symptom of a large-scale backslide, Stepanova argues:

Interviews with warlords of the Donetsk and Lugansk “People’s Republics” bubble with the excitement of people who have finally found themselves in the right place, feeling useful and important, taking their position, attacking, rising up off their knees—in a new kind of sense, for which a mere year ago they would have had to reach back to the ’20s, to Babel’s *Red Cavalry* with its splendid murderers. This sense of history as laughing gas, a wild carousel of possibilities, where any volunteer will receive an automatic weapon and a live target as part of the bargain, was until recently untranslatable to the language of the present.

(“*After the Dead Water*”)

In both *Spolia* and *War* the stage is turned into a linguistic battlefield. The poetic method of *Kireevsky* meets with social catastrophe, which gives it a dramatic boost. Each poem becomes that “gigantic installation with a displaced center” of which *Stepanova* wrote in “Displaced Person.” In *Spolia*, as we already saw, the juxtaposition of the poet and the country as they engage in the enterprise of literary and historical allusions is central. The opening of *War* evokes the opening of *The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot, and the high degree of allusiveness is a pattern both texts share. However, in *War*, one of the strongest effects produced by this allusiveness is that of the discord of voice-quotes that get tangled up in impossible combinations—a chorus-turned-chaos. Yet it is precisely this chaos—the fragmentation of reality and the failure of channels of communication, clogged by competing arsenals of (un)fitting quotes—that *Stepanova* means to portray and to demystify. At the end of *War*, the graves of Russian soldiers killed in the “unacknowledged” war in Ukraine bear witness to reality, which those looking at them deny, and it takes the author’s voice—in the very last line of the poem—to put an end to the delirium of this denial:

like a mound
under a snowdrift
means nothing
writing on a tomb
sees no one
writing on a stone
nothing, we read
it not

but it is

Commenting in her interview on the two “digests” that frame *Spolia*, which were quoted in the beginning of this article, Stepanova noted, “I was, in fact, identifying with the country. Not with the awful thing that was happening—the invasion of Donbass, the annexation of Crimea; there is no explanation or excuse for acts of evil, pure and simple, and these are among them. But to oppose the evil you have to learn the language of love. And to love Russia at that moment was a hard job. One had to become Russia, with its wastelands, faded glory, and the horrifying innocence of its everyday life—to speak with its voices and see with its multiple eyes. That’s what I was trying to do: to change my optical system, to dress my hate in a robe of light.”¹¹ *Spolia* ends with a striking quasi-erotic invitation: “place your hand on my *I* and I will give way to desire.” It is addressed to all those “who speak as I can’t yet speak,” to contemporaries, to whom the poet is ready to lend her “*I*,” whom she is willing to impersonate. In one of the middle sections of *Spolia*, long lists of other characters appear: we understand that they are no longer alive, and the speaker lists them as if drafting some outline: “twenty-year-old lyodik killed in action / his father, a volunteer, bombed troop train / his mother who lived right up until death / a little girl who will remember all this.” Side by side with the theme of “speaking in voices,” with the theme of love as a mode of relating to those caught in the turmoil of the present, another theme appears—of remembering those in whose voices the poet would never be able to speak, a tribute to whom requires different means. The reader of Stepanova’s *In Memory of Memory* would easily identify characters in this outline: the work on *Spolia* immediately precedes or even overlaps with the beginning of Stepanova’s work on her novel.

■ □ ■

The essays included in the last part of this volume were written in the period 2010–2013, and they present Stepanova as an interpreter of the work, personalities, and life strategies of other authors. Three of them—Marina Tsvetaeva, W. G. Sebald, and Susan Sontag—are among the authors with whose work Stepanova has been deeply engaged. Her pieces on Lyubov Shaporina and Alisa Poret, on the other hand, anticipate some of the documentary novellas in her *In Memory of Memory*, which explore individual stories of coping with changing frameworks of historical existence.

It is striking how the authorial perspective in these essays connects authors as different as Shaporina (a member of the Soviet cultural establishment, whose voluminous diary demonstrates remarkable independence and freedom from self-censorship) and Sebald. Shaporina's diary is "obviously, flagrantly overabundant," Stepanova writes, "as if it lacks a filter to distinguish the important things from the unimportant, the superfluous from the essential, the verisimilar from the fantastic. Rumors, gossip, dreams, jokes, conversations in lines and worldly salons, news of banishments, executions and hungry deaths come billowing in a thick, blind wave. The index of names at the end of the second volume takes up twenty-seven pages; the book, issued by NLO Press, is a Noah's Ark where everything that breathes and talks swims out of nonbeing: peasants, Red Army soldiers, literary functionaries." Stepanova emphasizes this same pattern—"everything is so important"—in Sebald's texts, where the same "rescue of the drowning" takes place, rescue "of all those displaced and forgotten persons of world history, of everything that disappears, from people and peoples to obsolete crafts and gas lamps." For Stepanova, this is an essential trait of authors who bear witness to epochs of destruction and obliteration, and it is Sebald, as far as Stepanova's literary sensibilities are concerned, whose sense of purpose is exemplary, including ways his ethical impulse transforms the aesthetic:

In the realm of literature, Sebald steps up against the tyranny of the engaging—on behalf of everything *uninteresting*, which is invariably deprived of the right to a reader. [. . .] What Sebald does is a kind of soft, almost speechless revolution: we see the floors collapse and the snowy dust pour down. He doesn't try to persuade you that *uninteresting is the new interesting*. He doesn't insist that *you ought to feel bored*, as his guild colleagues often will.

Sebald simply removes the “boring/not-boring” gauge from the dashboard and honestly recollects everyone he is capable of reaching—in the mode of a *common cause*. His grief and his passion reside in the fact that all the component parts of the created world deserve recollection and re-understanding—and he works himself off his feet, attempting to utter a word (a picture, a quote, a hint) for each one of those who have lived.

This is one of the framing motifs in Stepanova's *In Memory of Memory*, and Sebald's example looms large in her novel. But perhaps the most succinct and important early introduction to the novel is her essay “Over Venerable Graves.” Its title alludes to a line from Pushkin's poem “When lost in thought I wander beyond the town.” The “venerable graves” of that poem are ancestral graves in a village, which lack pompous decorations and inscriptions. What such graves evoke in our minds is a sense of private, inconspicuous existence as the foundation of the world:

Our natural inclination to look at history as an exhibit of accomplishments (or a sequence of traumas) is suddenly pushed out by other kinds of histories. Cooking pots, bedsheets, irons, porcelain, faience, diapers, baby powder, hollow gold rings, underskirts, postcards from the city of Gorky, a Niva edition of Chekhov, sleds, a Napoleon cake, union fees, ring four times, theater clutch bags, two-kopeck coins, quarter-kopeck coins,

a monthly pass (September), a vocabulary notebook, a butter dish, a mimosa, a ticket to the Moscow Art Theater. Over each grave, like a post, like a beam, there is an invisible (maybe glowing, maybe devoid of any color or weight) mass of *what has been*. It reaches as high, it seems to me, as the sky, and indeed the sky rests on it.

It is remarkable how Stepanova's vision in "Over Venerable Graves" resonates with her early poem "A Gypski, a Polsk I, a Jewski, a Russki," that opens this volume. In it, "unforeseen ancestors" come to invade the poet's space (or mind), demanding recognition and acceptance. Ancestors or not, these people seek the poet out because they want to be remembered, and a "plaintive bead" made of crystal that hangs around the speaker's neck (evoking a "crystal voice") explains the choice of this unruly crowd. Over the span of two decades and across dramatic transformations of poetics, one aspect of the pragmatics of Stepanova's speech keeps coming back like a pendulum. It has to do with an archaic notion of poetry as speaking on behalf of multitudes—yet it appears ever more modern with every return.

NOTES

1. Dmitry Kuzmin, "The Vavilon Project and Women's Voices Among the Young Literary Generation," in *An Anthology of Contemporary Russian Women Poets*, ed. Valentina Polukhina and Daniel Weissbort (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005), 211.
2. Cynthia Haven, "Mad Russia Hurt Me Into Poetry: An Interview with Maria Stepanova," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, June 15, 2017, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/mad-russia-hurt-me-into-poetry-an-interview-with-maria-stepanova/>.
3. Haven, "Mad Russia Hurt Me Into Poetry."
4. Cf. in Horace: "The transformation begins: rough skin forms / on my legs, and I am turning into a white bird / above, smooth feathers growing / through my arms

- and fingertips." *Latin Lyric and Elegiac Poetry: An Anthology of New Translations*, ed. Diane J. Rayor and William W. Batstone (New York: Garland, 1995), 149.
5. *Latin Lyric and Elegiac Poetry*, 149.
 6. Haven, "Mad Russia Hurt Me Into Poetry."
 7. The two poems I specifically mean here have not been translated (and they would present significant difficulty for translation): "Zhenskoe. Babskoe. Iz-pod-sarafannoe" and "Bylo, ne ostalosia nichego podobnogo."
 8. Ilya Kukulin, "Narrative Poetry," in *Russian Literature Since 1991*, ed. Evgeny Dobrenko and Mark Lipovetsky (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 252.
 9. Kukulin, "Narrative Poetry," 253.
 10. Kukulin, "Narrative Poetry," 251.
 11. Haven, "Mad Russia Hurt Me Into Poetry."

THE VOICE OVER