

The Poetry of Displacement, and the Poetry of Alexandra Petrova

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Poets experienced displacement all too often in the twentieth century, and they made different things of it. Tomas Venclova is among these poets who moved fatefully across national borders, as were his friends Czesław Miłosz and Joseph Brodsky. How poets and other artists respond to a new culture depends in part on what elements of their past experience continue to inspire their work; the deeply intellectual poetry of Venclova, Miłosz, and Brodsky may be the readiest for transfer. The density of ideas, the brilliant perceptions of historical change and metaphysical constancy, and the unforgettable comparisons come through when poems change languages. These poets write compelling prose as well, further establishing them in a new environment as critics and thinkers. Such poets continue to command audiences in their native languages, but in the West they have also often thrived in the academy. Most excel as translators, and translation itself becomes a theme in their work.

As the twenty-first century opens before us, such habits and patterns do not entirely fit the lives of younger poets from Russia and Central Europe.¹ One would in fact imagine that the poetry of displacement that so marked the twentieth century should soon become a thing of the past, an increasingly distant sign of political times when exile and flight shaped the lives of so many.² Poetic traditions create their legacies out of such political history, however, and as poets move across geographical and cultural borders they often write about their experiences in ways that echo the lives of their predecessors.³ Poets have traveled out of willing curiosity but also compelled rootlessness. The places where poets alight have shifted, and Russian poets have found themselves in California, Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Munich, Vienna, and Rome as often as they have in the more familiar destinations of Paris or New York. Often enough, poets have moved from one place to another, or split their time among several cities, and the mix of sites and the passages of identification that have resulted

are striking. The peregrinations that produce these itineraries and the many fates of the Russian poet as traveler can be traced most easily in the remarkable volume assembled by Dmitrii Kuzmin, *Osvobozhdennyi Uliss* (2004).⁴ The poets of that book show vividly how poetry after the fall of Communism continues to flourish across many different locales.⁵

My purpose is less to survey that tremendous, heartening variety than to concentrate on a single poet, Aleksandra Petrova, and her paradigmatic journey from Petersburg to Tartu, from Russia to Jerusalem, and from Israel to Rome. Among the reasons for my turn to Petrova is the opportunity to examine the fate of a poet who both fits and resists the patterns of other contemporary poets who have left Russia. Petrova (born in 1964) is typical of her generation of Russian poets in living more precariously and in not having departed Russia for a single destination and thus not having established a quick and hyphenated identity for herself. Some other younger poets have imprinted their work with the several stopping points of their lives, perhaps most notably Marina Georgadze (1966-2006), who was born in Moscow, lived in Tbilisi in the 1980s, and moved to New York in 1992; her first book of poems and prose is entitled *Marshrut*, with arrows multiply connecting these three cities in the cover's telling illustration.⁶ Georgadze made the locations of her life explicit in her poems, but this is not an inevitable choice for a poet who has been on the move. At the opposite extreme is Leonid Shvab (1961-), who was born in Bobruisk, studied and worked in Moscow, but moved to Jerusalem in 1990 and has remained there. His short, metrically regular poems rarely refer to any named sites or national cultures, but they nonetheless create an extraordinarily unsettling relationship to place and identity.⁷

Petrova chooses a middle route here, writing of places and sites with great precision but also able to record, at one remove, the more general experience of dislocation. Her poems can convey an encounter with a strange place steeped in its own culture and history, and the poet lets it be known that she understands herself to be caught in a longer, deeper, and more mysterious encounter than could be captured by the experience we call travel.⁸ Amid these encounters, these forms of arrival, we need as well to notice the opposite in Petrova's work: she has been described as a poet of departure, one who powerfully writes the moment of leaving into her poems.⁹ To see her in this light is to see her first as an elegist. Her first volume of poetry, *Linia otryva* (1994) is especially rich in intense, innovative elegies for a self making its way through a city absorbed in its past. The poems speak of St. Petersburg, with glimpses of

the poet's future destinations, particularly Jerusalem. The volume also offers laments for the dead and, indeed, for death itself.

I begin with a short early poem, "V poiskakh nuzhnogo imeni," which brings together many of these themes. Notice its cemetery setting and contrasting descriptions of what is alive with what is dead, of what is present with what is about to disappear.

В поисках нужного имени

День желтоват, апрель студеный
(мы — тень белеющих крестов)
и влагой густонаселенный
след от ботинка, дым костров
(жгут листья). Кто бы нас заметил,
окликнул (знали б — живы мы),
но все бредем вот к тем и к этим ...
А день так светел, светел, светел.
Оглянешься: он вовсе смыл.¹⁰

This poem is followed by a designation of place, like many of the earlier poems, in this case "Peterburg. Smolenskoe kladbishche." The implied narrative, of a frustrating search through a cemetery for a particular gravestone, has the aura of both a Proustian search, as suggested by the poem's title, and a Gogolian paradox, where the place is thick with moisture and smoke, and yet triply bright. The brightness of the day disappears when one turns around to inspect it, as if the sought-after name itself had vanished as well. Many of Petrova's poems have this calm mixture of the vanishing with the real, the dreamed with the blindingly seen. The setting is defined as Petersburg by the final reference to one of its best-known cemeteries (the site of Sologub's and Blok's burials, although Blok's gravesite was later moved), and the poem signals Petrova's later fascination with two other highly symbolic cities.

It takes a certain kind of courage for a young poet to take on these already entirely fetishized places, fetishized for their cultural myths and for their powerful auras of loss and decay. And it takes some confidence as well to write in simple iambic tetrameter, to vary the traditional forms ever so slightly by the presence of 9, rather than 8 lines, with the rhyming word least like its opposites pushing ll. 5-9 beyond our expectations and making the rhymes less exact as well (*zametil / svetel, my/ smyt; etim* joins *zametil / svetel* as a slant rhyme). The contrast of more exact rhymes in ll. 1-4 with the near irregularity

in ll. 5-9 is a satisfying formal complement to the poem's other strong binary opposition, between sameness and difference (and the rhyme pattern is of course a variation on that theme as well). The repetition of "svetel" three times in l. 8 similarly follows the repeating sounds and syllables in l. 7, "k tem i k etim," and calls attention to it.

In its implied narrative, the poem searches for that one distinct name that will differ from all the others, for the name that means something extraordinary to the poet lost in a fruitless search. A young poet in search of ways to make her own name is allegorized by that quest, even though that act of self-creation involves a relationship with those who have died. It is typical of Petrova's delicacy and subtlety that her poem on such a self-defining topic would be short, and that the quest would be carried out by the poet among others. The "we" of the poem diminishes the poet's own pathos, makes her part of the living who seek connections to the dead. If she is set apart at all, it is in that last line, when she alone seems to see that the brightness of the day has been wiped away, as a name on a stone might be effaced.

Petrova might be expected to recall this moment of collective experience with some nostalgia.¹¹ Instead, the poet can find memory to be a burden, an empty container in which all that evokes love or tenderness is replaced by the grainy substances of sand and ash.¹² These images come from another early poem, one which alludes to a fairy tale by the Brothers Grimm, "The Brave Tailor," but transforms the plight of its hero into a tale of loss and displacement.

Молчанье дерева поет:

«Лес занялся огнем».

Я с ним запеть не мог от слез
неречием своим.

Я, как портняжка братьев Grimm,

к его стволу прирос

(а чтобы ветер не унес —
утюг держал в руке).

«Казалось, память тяжелой
литого чугуна.

Но память — слепок, мерка, вещь,
а ты уже не тот.

Огонь и ветер взял сполна,

что было всех милей.

Песок и пепел дал взамен.¹³

Так дерево поет.

The displacements in this poem are multiple, beginning with the ventriloquism of the first line, which has the poem's words intoned by a tree. Subsequently we may surmise that the tree itself has absorbed the poet's blocked access to language, for it is the silence of the tree that sings, a transposed attribute taken from the poet, whose inability to sing (caused by grief) is described as a form of "nerechie."¹⁴ That neologism paradoxically affirms the poet's linguistic inventiveness by its very originality, and we have the sense that the poet holds firm to language just as she holds on to the tree so that the wind cannot blow her in unwished-for directions. To be held fast to the tree is in some sense to become that tree, and the poet and the tree become one in the passing back and forth of voice as well. Rather than the giving of voice acting as a mode of animating the tree, the poet seeks to take on the tree's own woodenness, the fixity and heaviness of its trunk metonymically related to the iron bar she holds in order to weigh herself down.

I say "she" here reflexively, knowing that the author of these lines is a woman, but in the poem she speaks as a man, perhaps mimicking the masculine tailor from Grimms' fairy tale (that tailor is also slightly transformed, not "portnoi" but "portniashka" – not strictly speaking feminized as "portnikha"). For herself, the poet selects a clearly masculine guise, with two past-tense verbs to mark her gender. Is this nothing more than the double displacement that Gayatri Spivak long ago described as the mark of gender?¹⁵ Spivak had in mind the discourse of Western philosophy, although her resonant phrase, double displacement, has seemed to describe the self-description of the very women whom the philosophical (and, we might add, poetical) tradition had never quite known how to handle. Petrova has other poems that disguise the femininity of the poetic speaker behind a masculine mask,¹⁶ and in her later poems elements of her name can be transformed into masculine alter-egos (the sailors Sania and Petrov, for example).¹⁷ As Elena Fanailova, another contemporary poet whose work shows an equal freedom to ignore the conventions of gender, has observed, Petrova's adoption of a masculine speaking voice can permit a drier, less emotional point of view than would be assumed of a markedly feminine speaker.¹⁸ Yet the poems undermine the presumably disciplined masculine perspective through their many forms of resistance to excessive constraint. Notice in this poem how freely Petrova uses rhyme, sometimes to organize the line ends, sometimes not. Stanzaic patterns can work in the same way, here visually breaking up asymmetrically what are essentially two eight-line stanzas.

The contrast of what is alive with what is dead is another illuminating opposition in Petrova's work, and, like that of gender, it can open out toward

larger philosophical discourse. Petrova shows an interest in what is alive to the mind, in what is recoverable by memory although it seems to be impossibly distant. An impressive example of this interest is an untitled, two-part poem, "Dead can dance – beschuvstvennyi vstanet," which bears a December 1993, dateline and a dedication to an unnamed person who died in October of that year. The poem is longer than the two just discussed, and I cite it here only in part. It begins with a direct statement of the fantasy that the dead can come back to life:

Dead can dance — бесчувственный встанет.
В зазубринах света,
сквозь тяжёлую дрему припомнит,
как земля была им согрета.¹⁹

Petrova opens the poem with three words in English, which she will repeat two stanzas later. "Dead can dance" names a popular rock duo, which signals Petrova's knowledge and consumption of Western popular culture.²⁰ The two singers who formed this group took the name as an affirmation that the dead are not inert, lifeless objects.²¹ The music of the group also enacts the belief that no musical tradition dies in its extraordinary mix of styles, traditions, and rhythms; the group's incorporation of many different kinds of music (from Gregorian chants to Irish folk melodies to hard-driving percussive rock and roll) feels quite appropriate to Petrova's poetry. As the poet says in the poem's first line, the dead will arise even if they seem insensate, and will remember how their bodies gave warmth to the earth. In that earthy image, Petrova may be recalling the work of Nikolai Zabolotskii. His poem "Proshchanie s druž'iami" is an especially pertinent poem for its own mourning of dead poets Oleinikov, Kharms, and Vvedenskii among them.²²

Zabolotskii has his poets clutching their notebooks of poems even as their bodies turn to dust, but Petrova returns the letters of poetry themselves to life. Thus, in a later stanza of "Dead can dance," she writes:

Угадал. Я хочу спрятаться в тени слова.
В «о» колодез. За «ц» кузнечик
зацепиться — и был таков(а).²³
Смерть, скорее чем звуки, конечна.

Here again we notice the play of gender, with the "a" parenthetically added to "takov" to produce the rhyme with "slova," but the addition also becomes a

play with the visual signs of language: the letter “a” joins with “o” and “ts” as hiding places for the cricket (and the poet), and as sounds with a potential for life everlasting. Notice how far the poet has come in the short journey of this poem: from an allusion to rock and roll in the phrase “Dead can dance,” to a reference to the Russian poetic tradition as practiced by one of its (now) canonical poets, pausing in this stanza (the fourth of eight) to create the illusion of a game of hide and seek between the poet and the very words she creates. Her poem praises the imagination, a quality that will be celebrated openly in stanza 5 (“Tot zazor mezh steklom i ramo i / pust’ prodolzhit voobrazhen’e”).²⁴

In Petrova’s more recent work, some changes are afoot. An attitude of openness in the later work was apparent from the start: it has become more pronounced in the last few years – which is to say that to the extent that we can describe the development of this still-changing poet, her changes are gradual rather than sudden, and they bring to prominence elements that initially play a smaller role in the poetry. But the openness has a different feel in the recent work. As much as she is a poet of departure, Petrova is increasingly a poet of presence, one who creates a world of flowing and immediate experience, even giving the illusion of improvisation. That last trend emerges from a venerable Russian tradition most readily associated with *Evgenii Onegin*, and in general, Petrova keeps herself in excellent aesthetic company, indeed “cult Petersburg” company. She has written eloquently of Leonid Dobychin’s last words, for example, and her writing nearly always has the perfect mix of restraint and wackiness one associates with Konstantin Vaginov.²⁵ He, along with others in the *Oberiuty*, has also clearly shaped Petrova’s poetics, providing that balancing lightness of irony. And so it is unsurprising that bursts of freedom within the poems take highly varied forms, sometimes appearing in the poem’s apparent narrative, sometimes affecting the shape and rhythm of a poem. Never is it simply a contrast of limitation with excess, of tight structure with a loosening of form. Petrova instead creates a sharp logic in which freedom and confinement engage in a kind of dialogue. The rush toward movement, for example, can feel involuntary, with a strange sense of stillness pervading the poem despite the poet’s physical and chronological surge forward.

In one recent poem, for example, the poet plants herself on an enchanted island, a place she has ended up as if accidentally, but the efforts she makes to understand that fate cross back and forth between notions of space and time. Naming the magical island seems a gesture toward understanding, if not resisting, its enchantment. The poet seeks to translate years into words, which is to

say, time into language. She is grappling with ways to comprehend an experience, a place, and a language that eludes her grasp:

По колдовскому острову брожу.
Случайно вынесло сюда четыре,
пять, шесть, я не помню, лет.

Я их перевожу со словарем,
но кости букв ссыпаются в песок,
дробясь в сатурновый неувимый слог.

Чужое солнце проведет резином морщины,
ты не узнаешь, кто это в воде,
где темное лицо женомужчины
рябит, рассеиваясь в нигде.

Я заблудилась в середине лет,
среди древних слов чешуйчато-крылатых
среди лингво-клонов и химер.

Лишь дальний голос словобрата
в лесу косых лучей
мне приоткроет дверь.

Запутываясь в ветвях, так медленно, по звуко-карте,
— косяк свободных птиц — ко мне пробьются первые слова,
и те, что мальчик вырезал на парте²⁶
и заключил в ушербленный овал.

The words are at first leaden and ungraspable as they slip through the poet’s hands like grains of sand, and they become the word-clones and chimeras of a later stanza. The poet who has gotten lost in her middle years, like Dante at the start of the *Inferno*, still feels utterly certain that she is on a journey toward essential truths – less the spiritual truth sought by Dante than an encounter with the moment when language will inscribe its origins before her eyes. Language is tied in its specificity and code not to geography or place, but to time, as if the poet took the word but not the concept of the chronotope in Bakhtin, subjecting it to a kind of dazed “ostranenie.” The distances produced by this estrangement are multiple: the poet seems, for example, to stand apart from her own lived experience, regarding it with the shock of seeing linguistic clones and chimeras.

And yet she has access to her past, to a different and more familiar kind of language, that of childhood – a child's words scratched into a school desk top in the final stanza. What she hears are distant words but spoken so intimately that they seem to be siblings; what is seen reflected in water is a face darkly androgynous, a neologistic or split being whose status is like the "slovobrat" or "lingvo-klon" or "zvuko-karta" that fill this poem. The words of the poem themselves are thickened. The past is crusted over on these words, they are coated in prehistoric trappings, mixing the scales of fish and the wings of birds, like some invention from the paintings of Hieronymous Bosch. And, like Bosch, Petrova offers us imagined animals and implausible images – birds rising up out of the sound maps of tree branches – as gestures that affirm the freedom of the imagination, indeed freedom itself, even in a poem that begins by placing the poet as if shipwrecked on an exceedingly strange island.

Petrova embeds an argument about freedom of the imagination in the formal choices of her poems. I have noted several instances of her freedom in diction and lexical choices, particularly a phrase like "dead can dance." Other such quoted phrases in English appear in the poems, and often the foreign words seem chosen for their sounds – they create puns and moments of cross-linguistic paronomasia, as we find in the work of someone like Nabokov. Petrova makes this gesture her own by the huge leaps in logic that can surround the quotations: she can move from roller blades to Dostoevsky's hero Smerdiakov, from the life-saving injection straight into the heart of a Quentin Tarantino heroine to a nocturnal army of cockroaches.²⁷ These shifts of reference feel utterly unforced, and Petrova refuses to use the other images or references of a poem as obvious means of connection between incongruous opposites (do the drainpipes of the splendid poem "Tarantino's dremy i dream'y" in fact make a joke about the draining function of such linking devices?). This insistent presentation of slightly illogical connections is another of her tributes to the *Oberiuty*, and it is a quality that if anything has deepened as her poetry has matured.²⁸

The variety of form is also important in this poetry, less instantly discernible to visual inspection and yet in some ways more impressive than that of other poets who may look to be more radical on the page. Any number of poems scan in traditional meters, or they use *vers libre* in a manner that we have come to expect from contemporary poets who use it well (and there are beginning to be a number of such poets in Russia, writing against considerable odds). Petrova's poems, whether strictly metered, rhymed, and shaped into stanzas, or

spread across the page in idiosyncratic patterns, will still strike us with their singularity, as in the instances cited earlier where stanzaic patterns are suggested but not consistently fulfilled. There is also great formal freedom in Petrova's second and most significant collection, *Vid na zhitel'stvo* (2000) in the poet's decision to include long passages of prose.²⁹ The prose offers readers unusual insights into the poet's modes of self-fashioning and her intonational range. It also marks quite vividly the itinerary of her own geographical journey: the first essay, "Nebesnaia koloniia," is about Jerusalem; the second, "Vid na zhitel'stvo," is about Rome.

Throughout her work, Petrova creates highly visual landscapes of the cities in which she has lived, and she represents to us as well the mind that absorbs these sights. Can Petrova feel at home in the places she finds herself inhabiting? There are two answers to this question, and one has to do with urban spaces, indeed with such mythologized cities as Petersburg, Jerusalem, and Rome. Petrova's first poem written about Jerusalem begins with the revealing line "Ne dlia menia eti kholmy raskroiut ob'iat'ia."³⁰ The poet presents herself as anything but an "inhabitant" of these extraordinary places, and yet they speak their languages to her with a power that the barriers of language difference cannot diminish (here, as elsewhere, are those originary words sought in the later poem on the magic island). Jerusalem is made up of the letters she has received there, of the wood of its floors and its trees, of the memory of places the poet has been before, all subject to conflagration.³¹ What cannot go up in smoke, though, is the memory Jerusalem has of itself, the missives its wooded and stone sites continually send out into the world, and so it is that the city speaks to the poet in the Biblical words of Ruth, saying to her that it, too, will go with her wherever she goes. It is not only this city, however, nor simply the eternal Rome, that stays in the poet's mind if she has occasion to leave it, but also Petersburg, and thus Jerusalem is seen through the prism of Peter's phantasmic creation, becoming the place of ancient sacred rites but also Gogolian deadness at every step.³² With its rich mix of languages, Jerusalem is the site that creates a sense of poetic identity; Petrova tellingly wonders in "Nebesnaia koloniia" whether Russian has become the new Aramaic in Jerusalem, the language of lament and loss. That comment returns us to an appreciation of Petrova's development as a practitioner of the elegy, of her ways of exploring its ties to a poetics of place and to a poetics of memory.

The elegy will remain important as I turn to a second and perhaps unexpected venue for considering Petrova's relationship to the spaces around her. It

is a final measure of the degree of dislocation in her poetics that here we turn away from urban spaces and the cultural mythologies associated with them and toward the seemingly unmarked spaces of nature itself. One of her favorite markers of such spaces is, strangely, grass. Ordinary, unadorned and utterly unpoetic blades of grass turn up in a number of the poems, perhaps most remarkably in a recent poem where the grass is spoken to directly.³³ The grass plays a lesser role in the poem with which I would like to conclude, chosen in part because it returns us to the cemetery setting of the Petersburg poem “V poiskakh nuzhnogo imeni,” but now with an admitted turn to Italy. This new poem, like most of Petrova’s work, is untitled:

Зимовище мое, токовище,
стойбище, стрельбище,
трава высокая, никогда не кошенная,
тьнь лесов, как крути под глазами, —
неучтенная, не опрошенная.

занесло сюда, выплеснуло, подтибрило,
выбросило на булыжник,
синяками да ссадинами растигрило.

Не урок теперь отвечать, прежней речью течь, а — урочище.
Трубачи впереди, поднимайся, вставай в безымянное полчище,
чтоб рассыпаться гипсом потом, устлая дороги и пастбища.
Лежище ты мое, Италия, кладбище.

The degree of phonetic and phonemic repetition here, with a mix of existing Russian words with the *-ishche* suffix and those that are invented, is more intense than has been seen in earlier poems. In addition to the repetitions, there is another important rhetorical trope in this poem, apostrophe. The poet speaks directly to the place she is conjuring, and she does so in a way that recalls both the magic on the island described in “Po koldovskomu ostrovu brozhu” and a further kind of magic, that of incantation. The repetitions of the poem suggest those found in incantatory spells, and in fact the poet probably alludes to a famous incantation in the Russian poetic tradition, Anna Akhmatova’s 1935 poem “Zaklinanie.” The tall grasses of Petrova’s poem recall Akhmatova’s “Lugom nekoshenym,” and, while the intent of this poem is not the invitation to a returning ghost that Akhmatova has in mind, the sense of movement across grassy pathways feels uncannily similar.³⁴ But there is no invitation in this

poem, no imperative that speaks to a desired other. We could in fact hear the poet’s turn away from such speech as a turn away from the possibility of sounding like Akhmatova (something from which any number of women poets have felt the need to swerve away).³⁵ And certainly the grasses of this poem, and of others, are more directly in dialogue with the grassy island landscape of Vaginov’s poetry, particularly in *Puteshestvie v Khaos* and *Ostrova* (1921).

In what kind of place does the poet find herself in “Zimovishche moe, tokovishche”? It seems at once a lost native land and an entirely new site, one that is new to language itself. When she calls forth trumpeters, which is her one gesture in the imperative, it is into an area with no name, as if she were extending the boundaries of the place itself. Her efforts are not those of mapping, as seemed important in the acts of naming that structure “Po koldovskomu ostrovu brozhu”; instead, she uses the series of nouns that end in *-ishche* as if she were making a list of synonyms — and the choice of words with this suffix is itself revealing, since the suffix in most of these words connotes a place or a site. More than just searching for the word to name the place around her, the poet is also fantasizing alternative places, alternative sites which might be in some proper way hers. The words could not be more different semantically. The poet calls out to a nomad camp, a shooting range, and a grassy wooded area that leaves her bruised with stripes like a tiger; it is place for mating calls and breeding, a place for animals to be pastured. The activity of shepherding is one that occurs often in the later poems,³⁶ and it gives a name to Petrova’s short “philosophical” play *Pastukhi Dolli*. This poem has some elements in common with the conventions of pastoral poetry, including the easy move toward eroticism, but not in a way one would expect. The eroticism is deflected onto the level of diction in the poem: we get words that could refer to the reproductive activity of animals (lezhbishche, tokovishche), rather than any kind of poetic account of erotic desire, as would be found in tales from the lives of idle shepherds in Arcadia.

If this is Arcadia, though, it is also a place to die, a place to see the end of one’s days. We hear the word “kladbishche” anew, especially coming after “lezhbishche,” a place not where one lies down willingly but a place where one is put. And with no sense of ceremony or ritual, we note. Unlike the Petersburg cemetery poem, “V poiskakh nuzhnogo imeni,” this is a lonely piece of writing, an unmediated and unprotected encounter between poet and place. That is, perhaps, the last point to emphasize in this essay, which has followed Aleksandra Petrova from one place to another and from one poem to another. All these sites

tell the same stories we would expect from a poet of her philosophical and aesthetic temperament: tales of death and loss, tales of cultural flux, and tales of the pleasure to be found in making poems nonetheless. Nowhere is Petrova safely at home, which is to place her squarely within a poetics of displacement. She stands among the poets who have written about even as they have resisted taking on the categories of exile or emigration. She, too, has stood at once within and on the borders of more than one culture. In straddling those boundaries of geography and of identity, she writes under the direction of the muse "of the point lost in space," the muse of things seen only at a distance, the muse "of forgotten outlines."³⁷

Notes

¹ Yet not entirely out of reach, simply attainable by other means. American Ph.D. programs in Slavic Languages and Literatures have attracted more than one excellent young Russian poet, routing, for example, Mikhail Gronas and Polina Barskova through California degree programs to have them find academic jobs at Dartmouth and Hampshire Colleges, respectively. Aleksei Parshchikov went part way through the same trajectory more than a decade ago, having studied in the graduate program at Stanford; he now lives in Germany. Another example is Ilya Kutik, a contemporary of Parshchikov's, now a tenured professor at Northwestern University.

² For a lucid formulation of exile not as "a misfortune but a destiny and a problem," see Tomas Venclova, "Czeslaw Milosz: Despair and Grace," *World Literature Today*, vol. 73, no. 4 (Autumn, 1999), pp. 677-680. I cite that phrase because it also seems to me to describe the way in which displacement, even when it is not the politically forced condition of exile, also can become an experience of destiny as well as an intellectual problem to be confronted. It is in that context that I discuss Petrova below. That point of view is also well expressed in Joseph Brodsky, "The Condition We Call Exile," *On Grief and Reason: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1995), pp. 22-34.

³ This discussion of artists moving across national borders has been reformulated as a species of trans-nationalism, as Gerald Smith kindly reminded me on reading an earlier draft of this essay. See Jahan Ramazani, "A Transnational Poetics," *American Literary History*, Vol. 18, no. 2 (2006), pp. 332-359, for a clear-headed view of the complicated politics in changing terminologies and conceptualizations of national cultural borders; his assessments of widely different modern poets is, for me, illuminating. I have also found the work of Wai-Chee Dimock stimulating and clarifying. See her *Through Other*

Continents: American Literature across Deep Time (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

⁴ *Osvobozhdennyi Uliss: sovremennaiia russkaia poeziia za predelami Rossii*, ed. Dmitrii Kuzmin (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2004). The volume is nearly 1000 pages long, with hundreds of poets from 26 countries, including those once found within the borders of the Soviet Union.

⁵ The audience for that poetry remains difficult to define, and critics who have ceased lamenting the lack of good poets have begun instead to ask for whom the poets now write. For an interestingly conflicted version of the lament, see Aleksei Alekhin, "Poet bez chitatelia," *Arion*, 2006, no. 3.

⁶ See Georgadze, *Marshrut* (New York: Slovo, 1997), as well as the second collection of her work, *Chernym po belomu* (Moscow: Zhurnal Itaka, 2002). An expressive New York poem is "Golova neboskreba v tumane," *Chernym po belomu*, p. 64, also in *Osvobozhdennyi Uliss*, p. 519. Georgadze experimented with writing poems in English as well, so deeply did she take in the experience of living in the United States, and some of these poems confront the complexities of that encounter directly. See, for example, the untitled poem that begins "On a highway across America," with its lines "If I could die in America, I would rise and play baseball in the shampooed fields of America": Georgadze, *Chernym po belomu*, p. 69. One of the best things written about Georgadze is the memoir by the great editor and scholar of modern Russian poetry, Aleksandr Sumerkin, who himself was to die before the year's end: "Vol'nyi dukh," *Slovo*, no. 52 (2006). That issue contains other memorial notes about Georgadze.

⁷ See the excellent poetry of Shvab's first and only book, *Poverit' v botaniku* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2005), which appeared in the Premiia Andreia Belogo series. The selection of poems in *Osvobozhdennyi Uliss*, pp. 340-346, is generous and vividly revealing of Shvab's poetic practice.

⁸ Where along this spectrum the poetic experiences of Joseph Brodsky should properly fall has been the topic of some fruitful debate. See in particular Sanna Turoma, "Poet kak odinokii turist: Brodskii, Venetsiia, i putevyie zametki," *Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie* 67 (2004), pp. 164-180; and Bozena Shallcross, *Through the Poet's Eye: The Travels of Zagajewski, Herbert, and Brodsky* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002). See also the new biography of the poet: Lev Losev, *Iosif Brodskii: opyt literaturnoi biografii* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 2006).

⁹ The emphasis on departure is found, for example, in Aleksandr Ulanov, "Iashcheritsa izdaleka," *Russkii zhurnal*, February 20, 2001. See also the perceptive formulations about the theme of movement in Elena Fanailova, "Za chertoi gorizonta," *Znamia*, 1998, no. 1, pp. 216-218 and in Galina Ermoshina, "Vnutri chuzhogo narech'ia," *Znamia*, 2001, no. 5, pp. 218-220.

¹⁰ Aleksandra Petrova. *Liniia otrvya* (St. Petersburg: Mitin Zhurnal/Severo-Zapad, 1994), p. 11. This volume was Petrova's first book of poems.

¹¹ Petrova rejects nostalgia in the opening paragraph of her prose work "Nebesnaia koloniia": Начало должно быть по-набоковски выпуклым и грустно подводящим к свершившемуся: дел-бабка, отец-мать, я-детство и т. д. — Израиль. "Как я стал таким." — Petrova, *Vid na zhitel'stvo* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2000), p. 41. But it would be a mistake to conclude that nostalgia has no place in this work: most apparent is a sense of longing for Petersburg, perhaps for a place that never was but that nonetheless lives in the poet's imagination. See, for example, "Pust' khotia by vo sne uvidet' tot ostrov gde fontany i reki," *Liniia otrvya*, p. 28; *Vid na zhitel'stvo*, p. 22.

¹² Compare a poem that seems to be have been written only slightly later, where the disappearance of memory becomes a disappearance of identity: the pertinent line is "Net teper' togo, chto ia. Oblich'e sterto" in the poem that begins "Kto lezhal so mnoi v grobu fanernom," Petrova, *Liniia otrvya*, p. 31. This poem also appears in Petrova's second and more easily available collection, *Vid na zhitel'stvo*, p. 25; the first section of that book is entitled "Liniia otrvya," and contains a selection from the first book. *Vid na zhitel'stvo* appeared in the series "Premiia Andreia Belogo," the prize for which Petrova was nominated in 1999.

¹³ Petrova, *Liniia otrvya*, p. 25. This poem also appears in *Vid na zhitel'stvo*, p. 20, and it is the poem chosen as emblematic on the *Vavilon* web site: <http://www.vavilon.ru/texts/prim/petrova0.html>.

¹⁴ Petrova creates entirely comprehensible neologisms often semantically grouped around the idea of obstacles to speech. Compare the strikingly metaphorical short poem that seems to pick up where Mandel'shtam's "Lamark" leaves off (and note the neologisms, "kostno-iazykii," "prozrakii").

Рыбы-щуки, гады и змеи,
заберите меня к себе.
Я теперь говорить не смею.
Вот мой костно-языкий обет.
Я заперт в пенал прозракий.
Аптечный дрожу пузырек.
И все неизменные знаки:
бездарен и одинок.

Petrova, *Liniia otrvya*, p. 16; *Vid na zhitel'stvo*, p. 16.

¹⁵ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Displacement and the Discourse of Women," *Displacement: Derrida and After*, ed. Mark Krupnick (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), pp. 169-195.

¹⁶ The masculine speaker appears in other poems, too, for example "U strany chto pokinul noch'iu." Petrova, *Liniia otrvya*, p. 38. Compare the feminine speaker in "Ne dlia togo li ia pustilas' v put'," the poem that closes the volume (p. 40), and one in which the six-winged seraph from Pushkin's "Prorok" appears to the poet.

¹⁷ See "Sneg padaet na plechik matrosu" and "Temneet. Smerdiakov natiagivaet lopnushuii / strunu," in Petrova, *Vid na zhitel'stvo*, pp. 88-89, 105-108. When a rich selection of Petrova's poetry appeared in *Znamia*, the title chosen for the grouping was "Matrosik Sania": *Znamia*, 2001, no. 2, pp. 3-8, and both poems mentioned here appear there as well.

¹⁸ Fanailova, "Za chertoi gorizonta."

¹⁹ Petrova, *Liniia otrvya*, p. 37.

²⁰ Another text that shows vividly Petrova's engagement with popular culture and with the kind of ideas that can take hold of the public imagination is her play "Pastukhi Dolli," which involves, among other things, Dolly, the cloned sheep. I am grateful to the poet for sharing with me the text of the play in Russian; the only published version is an Italian translation: Alexandra Petrova. *I pastori di Dolly: Operetta filosofica in dieci scene*, tr. Valentina Parisi (Rome: Onyx, 2004).

²¹ The earliest album by this group has their name as its title, *Dead Can Dance* (1984); later albums include *Spleen and Ideal* (1985) and *Within the Realm of the Dying Sun* (1987), titles which show the group's literary affinities and its preoccupation with themes of death and beauty. The title *Dead Can Dance*, in fact, puns on the sounds of "decadence," as Robert Bird kindly pointed out to me. The musical range of the group is quite interesting, and this is also something that likely got Petrova's attention. The two members of the group, Lisa Gerrard and Brendan Perry, no longer record together.

²² For "Proshchanie s druž'iami," see N.A. Zabolotskii. *Polnoe sobranie stikhotvorenii i poem*, ed. Nikita Zabolotskii (St. Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 2002), pp. 245-246. Petrova's poem may have as a further intertext a poem by Elena Shvarts that also had "Proshchanie s druž'iami" as a subtext, "Zemlia, zemlia, ty esh' liudei." For Shvarts's poem, which was written in 1981, see Shvarts, *Sochineniia*, 2 vols. (St. Petersburg: Pushkinskii fond, 2002), vol. 1, p. 155.

²³ Petrova, *Liniia otrvya*, p. 37.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ For the poem about Dobychin, see "Stikhotvorenii 'L. Dobychin,'" *Liniia otrvya*, p. 17; *Vid na zhitel'stvo*, p. 17. I comment on the connections with Vaginov's poetry below.

²⁶ I cite from a typescript of poems kindly provided to me by the poet, with her permission. Subsequently quoted poems in this essay that are otherwise unattributed come from this typescript.

²⁷ The poems in question here are "Tarantino's dremy i dream'y" and "Temneet."

Smerdiakov natiagivaet lopnuvshuiu/ strunu," *Vid na zhitel'stvo*, pp. 61, 105-108. The reference to the Quentin Tarantino film *Pulp Fiction* in the first poem is very much like the use of the rock group Dead Can Dance in the poem cited earlier: a signal to Petrova's readers of her familiarity with the world of cinema, rock music, and the various pleasures of Western popular culture. Cinema in particular is important to Petrova and often structures the montage-like effect of her poems.

²⁸ And any number of images compact into a single visual snapshot these disjunctive leaps, as in the "baryshnia v shortakh Levi's" (*Vid na zhitel'stvo*, p. 75), who presents an image that reminds us of nothing so much as the polystylistics associated with the poetry of Nina Iskrenko.

²⁹ There are occasional precedents for this rare mix of poetry and prose in Silver Age volumes, for example Andrei Belyi's first collection, *Zoloto v lazuri* (1904), as John Malmstad kindly pointed out to me. In contemporary poetry, the practice remains unusual. See, for example, Elena Fanailova's *Russkaia versiia* (Moscow: Vnutrennii golos, 2005); Aleksei Parshchikov, *Angary* (Moscow: Nauka, 2006).

³⁰ Petrova. *Liniia otryva*, p. 26.

³¹ Some of this imagery comes from the excellent short poem "Belye zrachki Ierusalima," in *Liniia otryva*, p. 24.

³² Petrova, "Nebesnaia koloniia," in *Vid na zhitel'stvo*; see especially pp. 47-53 for the Gogol connection, which begins with the epithets "obnazhennyi i mertvyi."

³³ As the poem is unpublished as of this writing, I give it in full here:

за горизонтом того моста,
где все устроено неспроста,
трава, дай мне силу травы,
и я скажу себе: я иду на вы.
Пора, я скажу себе,
разве это не так?
Вот и ветер подхватит листьев потраченный флаг.
Встань, я скажу себе, отчайся и, если хочешь, умри.
Только, пожалуйста, не молчи теперь, говори.
Это новая,
это будет новая жизнь,
там, за мостом,
через мост,
мы не вернемся больше сюда,
я обещаю тебе,
трава,
никогда,
ни

Note that spectacularly broken-off ending, which is occasionally found in other poems and seems an extension of the habit of the early poems to omit a final mark of punctuation.

³⁴ For Akhmatova's poem, see Anna Akhmatova. *Ia – golos vash* (Moscow: Knizhnaia palata, 1989), p. 146. There is a great reading of this poem that sees it as spoken to Nikolai Gumilev in Mikhail Meilakh, "Anna Akhmatova's Poem 'Zaklinanie,'" *The Speech of Unknown Eyes: Anna Akhmatova's Readers on Her Poetry*, 2 vols., ed. Wendy Rosslyn (Nottingham, England: Astra, 1989), vol. 2, pp. 173-182.

³⁵ This may be an instance when the formulations of Harold Bloom in *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973) have pertinence to patterns of interaction among women poets, and I use his word "swerve" advisedly. There is probably a large topic hiding in the small observation I am making about Petrova – the lengths to which modern women poets have gone not to sound like Akhmatova.

³⁶ See in particular the poem that opens the new sequence, "Pastukh veshchei."

³⁷ Joseph Brodsky, "Lithuanian Nocturne," *Collected Poems in English* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2002), p. 222. For the Russian original, see Brodskii, "Litovskii noktiurn: Tomasu Ventslova," *Sochineniia Iosifa Brodskogo*, 6 vols. to date (St. Petersburg: Pushkinskii fond, 1998), vol. 3, p. 55: "Muza tochki v prostranstve! Veshchei, razlichaemykh lish'v teleskop! Vychitan'ia bez ostatka! Nulia!"