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CHAPTER 16

Thinking self in the poetry of Ol'ga Sedakova

Stephanie Sandler

Among Russia's contemporary poets, two young women have drawn the attention of critics: Ol'ga Sedakova and Elena Shvarts. This essay, while it will draw some comparisons between the two, will concentrate on Sedakova, whose work has been somewhat less accessible.¹ Sedakova's poetry, admirable for its beautiful formal complexity and for its intricate thought patterns, often resists other characterizations: she is not a poet for whom closure, or certainty, has much appeal. She has disparaged those 'who would like a guaranteed and perfect organization of everything on earth', preferring 'the eternal freedom of the most important things in the world (which extends even to their names)'.² When she views naming as an act that liberates meaning, rather than pinning it down, Sedakova is exemplifying for us one verbal process that produces endless chains of signification in her poetry rather than fixable entities with which to build. The same structure emerges in her work at the level of ideas. Sedakova writes about processes of thought, about the emotions that surge when one turns an idea over in the mind, rather than the discoveries that thinking can yield. She is a meditative poet whose lyrics circle the eddying currents of mental change.

Even in her shorter poems, Sedakova does little to ease our entry into her ways of thinking about the world. Her poems frequently omit the familiarizing first moves that teach readers how to proceed, which is to say that for those who come for the first time to Sedakova's poetry, the experience can be frustrating and unsettling. Though her images and ideas give enormous pleasure, the poems themselves are splendidly

difficult. Her poems are nearly always hard to figure out: densely and multiply allusive, they rarely tell anything resembling a story or present speakers more than fleetingly. Sedakova's syntax can turn even simple declarative sentences into incomprehensible sequences of apparently unrelated words. Not for nothing does she admire Khlebnikov. And Mandel'shtam. In Anna Akhmatova's work, she has been most drawn to the riddles of *Poema bez geroia* (*Poem Without a Hero*, 1940-1962), rather than to the early love lyrics, or even *Requiem* (1936-1940). Sedakova uses textual difficulty to slow down the reader's work of sense-making. Her poems take apart and play with the constituent elements of thought and of poetry; she also playfully rethinks the elements of self, the topic to which I turn in the second part of this paper.

New readers, among whom I would count myself, rehearse crucial aspects of Sedakova's poetic. The slow steps in coming to comprehend an idea - her richest subject - can be viewed as a miniature version of what happens to a reader in the presence of one of Sedakova's poems. These poems also reflect in remarkable ways on the idea of beginnings, not just the sources for a specific poem, but also the starting moment for poetry's ideas. One point of departure for this essay will be an investigation of how beginnings work in Sedakova's poetry, including consideration of how, in her view, thoughts begin. This is not precisely the same question as asking how her poems begin, though we shall look at the beginnings of some of her long poems. Sedakova fixes her concern on how thoughts begin, and in that way she makes herself into a specific kind of meditative poet. It is perhaps too early to pin down precisely what kind of poetry results, but one can already see that it exists in a tense relationship to the elegy.³ Where elegy defines the present in terms of the past, her poems nearly always envision the present and imagine a future. Where elegy mourns what is lost, Sedakova celebrates what is, even in the face of loss. Where elegy often equates thinking with having memories, these poems reveal an interplay between fresh stimulus and reverberating associations. In her emphasis on processes of thinking, and in the mental work required to discern her patterns of

imagery, Sedakova does not differ from many better known twentieth-century poets, some of whom have clearly influenced her (Rilke, Eliot, Mallarmé, Mandel'shtam). There are many others, including her near contemporaries, with whom future scholars will want to compare her (among American poets, John Ashbery and Jorie Graham come to mind, especially in terms of how they represent thought). But my own focus will be on Sedakova herself, with some comparisons to poets in the Russian tradition (Anna Akhmatova and Elena Shvarts): my goal is to describe how thinking works in Sedakova's poetry, particularly thinking about the self.

Sedakova's shorter lyrics present a good point of departure. They offer vivid details of atmosphere and mood; where they are less than transparent is in their images for ignorance and incompleteness, as in this brief poem, 'Zhenskaia figura' ('The Figure of a Woman', 1982):

Отвернувшись,
В широком большом покрывале
стоит она. Кажется, тополь
рядом с ней.
Это кажется. Тополя нет.
Да она бы сама охотно в него превратилась
по примеру преданья —
лишь бы не слушать:
— Что ты там видишь?
— Что я вижу, безумные люди?
Я вижу открытое море. Легко догадаться.
Море — и все. Или этого мало,
чтобы мне вечно скорбеть, а вам — досаждать
любопытством?⁴

As translated by Andrew Wachtel, the poem reads:

Having turned away,
She stands in a large
and voluminous shawl. It seems there's a poplar
next to her. It seems that way. There's no poplar.
But she would be willing to turn into one
Just like in the legend
If only not to hear:
— What do you see there?

– What do I see, you lunatic people?
I see the wide open sea – That's easy to guess . . .
The sea and that's all.

Or is that too little,
for me to eternally grieve, while your curiosity's piqued?⁵

This poem is one of seven in a cycle called *Stely i nadpisi* (*Stellae and Inscriptions*, 1982); each lyric seeks the story behind nearly rubbed out figures and words on ancient stones. These poems never descend into lament of what has been lost (they are not, then, elegies). Instead, they contemplate the inscrutability of an emblem, of a simulacrum or near resemblance that, as in this example, looks like a poplar tree, but is not.

Compare the uncertainties of another poem from this cycle, 'Mal'chik, starik i sobaka' ('Little Boy, Old Man, and Dog'). I quote only a few lines:

Мальчик, старик и собака. Может быть, это надгробье
женщины или старухи.

Откуда нам знать,
кем человек отразится, глядя в глубокую воду,
гладкую, как алебастр?⁶

(Little boy, old man, and dog. Perhaps this is the gravestone | of a woman or an old woman. | How can we know | how a person will be reflected back, when looking into deep water | that is smooth as alabaster?)

Sedakova stresses that we cannot know what we see here, nor can we know what someone else sees. Her poems often include these quick observations about ignorance and limited knowledge; for example, in a longer verse to be discussed in a moment, there is the line 'But *what* he sees, only he can know' ('No *chto* on vidit – znaet tol'ko on').⁷

In 'Mal'chik, starik i sobaka', a person looks into deep water, and similarly the woman described in 'Zhenskaia figura' stares out into the open sea. Liquids often course through Sedakova's poetry; one of her philosophical lyrics is entitled 'Vino i plavanie' ('Wine and Swimming'). Water in her poems can lie stilly as reflective surface and enigmatic depth; water also often rolls past a motionless viewer, which is an important thing to note in a body of poetry where objects are often motionless,

where there is little physical action. In 'Zhenskaia figura', the action consists of a visual perception and its attendant emotion. The reader's task is to figure out how they connect. We are given one clue, a passing reference to a legend. The legend can in fact be recovered, from Greek and Latin sources: the daughters of the Sun weep beside a river into which their brother, Phaeton, has fallen. Out of pity for their tears, the gods turn the daughters into black poplars, and their tears now flow as amber coming out of the tree bark.⁸ 'Zhenskaia figura' does not actually tell this story. Sedakova typically elides the moment of relevant narrative and, in 'Zhenskaia figura', she turns her poem away from us, just as the woman described has turned away.⁹ The most interesting rhythmic pattern in this poem (it plays with three-footed rhythms throughout) is the echo of the first and final lines – 'otvernushis' | 'liubopytstvom' – anapaests that link the sight of someone who has turned away to curiosity. We are left conscious about our own aroused interest in someone who explains nothing of herself to us.

Is the figure of the woman a figure for the poet? Certainly the posture of looking away connects them. But the emotions differ: a querulous claim to be eternally grieving contrasts sharply with Sedakova's typical celebrations. Yet we cannot but be curious about the similarity, it is as if we are offered the spectacle of something starting to resemble something else. The poem adds to our curiosity when the figured woman imagines transforming herself. Compare Sedakova's assertion that metamorphosis is the central activity of poetry (she calls it transformativeness, an activity that should affect feelings of both poet and reader).¹⁰ Has she turned herself into this grieving woman, for the few lines of the poem? Has she produced a partial self, a simulacrum of self, a speaking subject whose words that directly address a reader include an element of ventriloquism? Alternatively, does the figured woman have such an intense presence in her own right as to make her an independent subject? The frequency of bits of conversation in Sedakova's poetry might alert us to the presence of polyphony; a reading that used Bakhtin's theories about voice and discourse would suggest that

such poems make space for multiple subject positions. Let me leave these alternatives hanging for the moment, raising as they do issues of subjectivity and impersonation to which I shall return.

What we need to do in the mean time is to look at some of the longer poems, for it is here that difficulties of meaning become more intense and, I believe, more intriguing. I will be discussing three long poems, too long for full citation here, but let us at least look at the opening stanza of each one. First, 'Gornaia oda' ('Mountain Ode'), a poem published in Sedakova's 1986 Paris volume *Vrata, okna, arki* (*Gateways, Windows, Arches*):

Где высота сама себя играет
на маленьком органе деревенском
и на глазах лазурь изображает,
но голосом не взрослым и не женским —
а где-нибудь в долине удивленной
водой, перебегающей повсюду,
Моравии, Баварии зеленой
перемывая чистую посуду,
там в каменный кувшин с колоколами
упрятано готическое пламя.¹¹

(Where sublimity plays its own tune | on a small village organ | and draws out azure before the eyes | in the voice of no adult or woman — | somewhere in the surprised vale | in water, overflowing everywhere, | from Moravia, green Bavaria, | washing once again the pure vessel, | there into the stone jug with bells | has been hidden the Gothic flame.)

Next, the first stanza of a poem entitled 'Pervye stansy' ('First Stanzas'), part of a cycle entitled 'Stansy v manere Aleksandra Popa' ('Stanzas in the Manner of Alexander Pope', 1980). These lines are then the beginning of a poem that itself initiates a cycle, and they interest us as well because the poem is dedicated to Elena Shvarts.¹²

Поэт есть тот, кто хочет то, что все
хотят хотеть: допустим, на шоссе
винтообразный вихрь и черный щит —
и все распалось, как метеорит
Есть времени цветок, он так цветет,

что мозг, как хризопраз, передает
в одну ладонь, в один глубокий крах.
И это правда. Остальное — прах.¹³

(A poet is one who wants what everyone else | wants to want: on a roadway, say, | a screw-shaped whirlwind and a black screen | all disintegrated, like a meteorite. | Time has a bloom, it flowers in a way | that the brain, like chrysoprase, can transmit | flat, in one handful, in one profound crash. | And this is the truth, all else is dust.)

One more opening stanza, this from a poem called 'Piatye stansy' ('Fifth Stanzas'). Originally, it was to have been part of the same cycle as 'Pervye stansy', but it now initiates a sequence of five poems with the title 'Iamby' ('Iambs', 1984-5).¹⁴ Thus it, too, is the beginning of a beginning.

Большая вещь — сама себе приют.
Глубокий скит или широкий пруд,
таинственная рыба в глубине
и праведник, о не вечернем дне
читающий урочные Часы.
Она сама — сосуд своей красоты.¹⁵

(A great thing is a refuge for herself, | a deeply secluded monastery or a broad pond, | a mysterious fish in the depths | and a righteous man, reading about the never-ending day | in his Book of Hours. | She is herself a vessel for her own beauty.)

These three openings may share little beyond the inscrutability I have been discussing; certainly they illustrate it better than what must now seem the simpler poem, 'Zhenskaia figura'. I have made them seem even more obscure by juxtaposing three openings without giving an account of what follows, though readers who know each poem in its entirety will recognize how the poems continue in ways that perplex, rather than elucidate. Among other things, there is a confusing range of reference. In 'Gornaia oda', for example, mixed into the imagery of height and mountain views are repeated references to flowing water, and the first three stanzas cascade through evasive syntactic twists and turns. We do not know who the speaker is, we cannot be sure of the world of reference, rippling as it does through myth (the Holy Grail), geography (in

references to Moravia and Bavaria), cultural history (the Gothic), decidedly biblical tones (especially later in the poem), images that refer to writing and to poetry (including voice, sound, game, language, and dream) and specific poetic allusions (starting with the title, a revision of Mandel'shtam's 'Grifel'naia oda' ('Slate Ode', 1923)). Catriona Kelly has rightly called Sedakova's poetry syncretic.¹⁶ The dominant image in 'Gornaia oda', height, soon includes its opposite, for example when it refers to the Orpheus-Eurydice myth, and through words like ravine, falling, descent, lying down. By the poem's end, ascent has turned horizontal, vertical movement has grown round: the last stanza begins by predicting that all will vanish like a road, an unwilling path along which we depart lying down ('Vse, chto ischeznet – budet kak doroga. I lezha my ukhodim v put' nevol'nyi').¹⁷

Our first instinct, to follow the thematic and literary clues in an initial stanza, is thus only partly helpful, and it opens as many questions as it answers, surely. Let us return to the beginning, now with a closer focus on syntax, lexicon and image. The first line of 'Gornaia oda', 'Gde vysota sama sebia igraet', has a grammatical structure of subject doubling as object. My English version conceals the mirroring effect, which in Russian is doubly strong here – the Russian words literally mean 'Where sublimity itself plays itself'. This syntax appears in the other two long poems as well. Repeated words and images generally slow thought down and let it look at itself, and this mirroring effect of grammatical subject and object intensifies the repetition and the slow glance back. The first sentence of 'Piatye stansy' is another good example of these reflexive sentences, all the more so because it is a refrain. We hear those words, 'Bol'shaia veshch' – sama sebe priiut', three times in the course of the poem, and then hear a final version, 'Bol'shaia veshch' – utrata iz utrat' ('A great thing is a loss to end all loss'). The fourth hearing has a dramatic change in imagery, from the inviting enclosure of a refuge to the evocation of a loss beyond measure, but it preserves the reflexivity of the idea, transforming a haven that surrounds itself into a verbal repetition that makes loss seem to come out of itself.

Earlier comments in this essay about Sedakova's rejection of the elegy may provoke readers to want to stop me now, to say that here, indeed, is an eruption of elegy. I agree, though one should specify that this joyous poem *contains* elegy. Containment is the great theme of 'Piatye stansy': the first strophe ends with an instance of grammatical and imagistic enfolding that is telling.¹⁸ In the line 'Ona sama – sosud svoei kras'y', we hear both the grammar of reflexivity discussed above, and a syntax of containing or placing one thing inside another. This sentence structure merits closer inspection, both as a grammatical construction and as philosophical precept.

Sedakova herself shows us the importance of this phenomenon of containing in poetry. In an essay on Anna Akhmatova's *Poema bez geroia*, Sedakova emphasizes what she calls *vnutripolozhnost'*, the placing of one thing inside another, as the deep motif that appears at all levels of *Poema bez geroia*.¹⁹ It is quite obvious that the same thing is true of Sedakova's poems – that is, several levels of meaning and structure are often governed by a single, often metonymic association. This particular structure, something inside something else, can be found in the syntax, diction and imagery of several of Sedakova's poems. 'Piatye stansy' offers us images like these: vessel, home, seashell, parentheses, a cup, a scoop, a cellar, mouth, a door, a garden, a cistern – all as containers, as things that surround and enclose. Other poems, though less extensively, use the same pattern. In 'Gornaia oda', a Gothic flame is concealed in a stone jug, a bell hides deep in a ravine and then sways back and forth in a crevice, wine fills a gaping cavity, and one longs to sleep inside the deep roots of trees as anxiety rolls around in a bell-shaped sack and language itself descends into the grave. These structures do not dominate 'Gornaia oda' (where they are modified by equally powerful transits of height and verticality, and where things are as likely to be over and under one another as they are to be inside them).

By comparison, in 'Piatye stansy', the stronger focus on forms of containment permits a curiosity about how containment begins. We see repeatedly the moment of insertion, the process of something being placed into something else. In 'Piatye

stansy', the most important scenario of containing is a mind containing a thought, vividly imaged when the 'thing' enters into the creaking house of the poet's mind, its way lit by a magic lantern ('tak v razum moi, v ego skripuchii dom | ona idet s volshebnyim fonarem ...'). Here the thought is a wondrous thing, its light magical. The mind takes on the luminous qualities of the thought it contains. Thought imaged as light is a traditional philosophical topos, but for Sedakova thought is not just the result of direct sense experience, as it would be for Locke, nor is it entirely produced by the mind's own work, as in Heidegger.²⁰ Thought happens both ways, it responds to the sensory stimulations that penetrate the mind, and it has secret vessels of its own in which thoughts take on different shapes. Thus the poem ends:

и будущее катится с трудом
в огромный дом, секретный водоем ...²¹

(and the future rolls laboriously
into the gigantic house, the secret cistern ...)

These lines describe thought entering the poet's mind, but what Sedakova particularly wants us to note is that the mind has its own 'secret cistern', the mind is an enormous, but not an empty house.

She gives us an image that helps describe both the mind and the thought that enters it. In her essay about *Poema bez gerovia*, Sedakova uses the image of the Russian *matreshka* doll to describe Akhmatova's repeatedly putting one thing inside another. In her verse, too, Sedakova reveals each doll as containing another similar and only slightly smaller doll within. There is something inside thought itself, we are being taught. Sedakova's capacious images serve her well here: thought is a large thing, a seashell large enough to contain the ocean, a vessel for scampering beasts, chirping birds, growing stars.²² As she writes in 'Pervye stansy',

жизнь просторна, жизнь живет при нас,
любезна слуху, сладостна для глаз,
И славно жить как будто на холмах
с любимым другом ехать на санях ...²³

(life is spacious, life lives around us, | wonderful to the ear, sweet to the eye, | And it is splendid to live, like being in the hills | riding on a sled with a dear friend . . .)

Is this concept of thought large enough to contain the concept of self? That would be a more substantial requirement than in, say, the straightforward self-fascination of the Romantic poets, since (at least in my view) Sedakova takes the problem of subjectivity as a site of diversionary tactics, obstacle courses and play. She assumes many masks and poses, and her voice as a poet moves through multiple forms of ventriloquism. For Sedakova, the self is not a stable, knowable entity; it is, like the nearly effaced inscriptions of 'Stely i nadpisi', something that one must work to establish; it is a constantly changing shape, metamorphosing through a flux of identities that are themselves unstable. Because she is concerned with how thought works, Sedakova is also always asking what we do when we think about the self, where our ideas of self start, how our very processes of thinking keep a 'self' in constant play. In Sedakova's poems, thinking always includes the self-conscious moment when the thought, as it were, looks back at itself; but I want to suggest as well that in her view thinking becomes most urgent and most troubled when the *thinker* must reflect back on herself.

This claim might seem suspect. Sedakova's poems appear utterly uninterested in subjectivity, that is, in the presentation of a private world of emotion and introspection. Her poems do not begin with the word 'I', to use the standard Nadezhda Mandel'shtam made famous in her criticism of the early Akhmatova, though one might note that this is mostly because none of Sedakova's poems takes for granted that we know which self it is that 'I' refers to: there is no knowable coherent self that pre-exists the writing of a poem.

My passing reference to Akhmatova is quite deliberate, not only because the use I have made of Sedakova's essay on *Poema bez geroia* shows that Akhmatova has especial meaning for her poetry, but also because Akhmatova's treatment of the lyrical subject is so much a touchstone for twentieth-century Russian poets, especially women poets. One usually thinks of Akhmatova's early short lyrics of emotional intensity in this regard,

but for Sedakova (as for other contemporary Russian women poets), Akhmatova's middle and later poems that use cultural masks are more important.²⁴ Akhmatova concealed references to her own tragic fate in familiar stories about Cleopatra, Lot's wife and Dido, among others. The idea of the self, the identity of self with story, is not called into question in such Akhmatova poems as 'Lotova zhena' ('Lot's Wife', 1922-4) or 'Shipovnik tsvetet' ('The Sweetbriar Blooms', 1946-64),²⁵ rather it becomes a challenge to Stalin's Russia, where integrity and individual identity were routinely denied to nearly all citizens.

Sedakova would define her own generation quite differently: rather than danger, lethargy seems to be the threat to her world.²⁶ The sleepy dream from which 'we' have awakened in 'Gornaia oda' can be read as such a generational reference. The lines refer to 'airy water', where

говорят, мы жили, как другие,
как снег в горах, как реки в летаргии²⁷

(we lived, they say, like the others, | like snow in the mountains, like lethargic rivers).

There is only one poet of her generation for whom Sedakova has unqualified praise, and that is Elena Shvarts.²⁸ Given my claim about the relationship between historical location and the form of subjectivity in Akhmatova, we might expect to find a presentation of self in Shvarts that has more in common with Sedakova – that is, I am implicitly arguing that forms of subjectivity change as history changes. Shvarts and Sedakova are quite precisely of the same generation, only a year apart in age (Sedakova was born in 1949, Shvarts in 1948). And we find in their work quite a different sense of subject and self-identity from what Akhmatova so famously deployed. Shvarts, I would argue, has pushed Akhmatova's narratives of impersonation to their limit. In addition to a poetic sequence of several lyrics (in her Cynthia poems), Shvarts has written an entire novel in verse, all in the voice of a slightly crazed nun, Lavinia.²⁹ As Sedakova will do, Shvarts introduces the possibility of play with these personae, and, also like Sedakova, her masks can involve religious figures.³⁰ Shvarts gives us poems as if they were

written by these invented personae. Rather than poems *about* Cynthia or Lavinia, we read the poems they are imagined to have written. A kind of layering of the self results; Shvarts revels in a structure of impersonation that repeatedly unmasks the self to reveal still further forms of masking.

Sedakova is equally capable of building up such a storeyed edifice, as we have seen: it is the way in which she imagines thought itself. A layered presentation of subjectivity emerges especially vividly in her poem to Shvarts. She commences with this conceit: 'Poet est' tot, kto khochet to, chto vse | khotiat khotet' ('The poet is someone who wants what everyone | wants to want').³¹ We recognize the circularity, the repetition of word and sound to create the impression of reflexivity. But what is also quite striking is her definitional stance. We feel how impossible it would be for her to begin the poem with a claim about her own wants or wishes. Desire belongs to someone else. The syntax distances, and the gesture of self-definition here is profoundly relational.

The circle of syntax and verbal structure is thus not finally confining. In the very impositions of limits and definitions, a certain liberation into a radically different kind of subjectivity happens here. As Sedakova says a few lines later in the poem, speaking produces sounds that seem to describe arcs of enclosed meaning, but the poet can break out of that enclosure:

Какой же друг? я говорю, мой друг —
и вижу: звук описывает круг,
потом другой, и крутит эту нить,
отвыкнув плакать, перестав просить.
Мой друг! я не поверю никому,
что жизнь есть сон и снится одному —
И я свободно размыкаю круг.³²

(But which friend? I say: my friend, | and I see: the sound describes a circle, | then another, and it turns this thread | unused to crying, having ceased to ask. | My friend! I believe no one | who says that life is a dream dreamed by one alone — | And I freely break open the circle:)

Notice the heavily accentuated word 'drug' (and recall the pleasures of a sleigh ride with a friend in lines from this poem

cited earlier). These words are spoken to someone repeatedly called 'moi drug', and Sedakova defines herself in terms of this friendship with Shvarts.³³

The emotional content of this word 'drug' is crucial here. It spins a web where crying, begging have ceased. Why? Perhaps because these emotions of sadness, desperation, regret – the stuff of elegy and lament – are to be allowed into this poem under the aegis of Shvarts's own intensely, even violently emotional verse. As in the poem 'Zhenskaia figura', Sedakova makes suffering her theme momentarily. In 'Pervye stansy' we see the face of a beggar walking through a train, and glimpse the face of the returning prodigal son.³⁴ Thus the poem ends:

Желанье — тайна. О, желанье — пасть
и не поднять несчастного лица,
не так, как сын перед лицом отца:

как пред болящим — внутренняя боль.
И это соль, и осолится соль.³⁵

(Desire is a secret. O, the desire to fall down | and not to raise an unfortunate face, | not like the son before the father's face: || like an interior pain before one who hurts. | It is salt, and salt pours on to salt.)

Desire asserts itself, but again only in a syntax of definition. And then, the undiminished language of longing (signalled in poetry as 'O!'), a desire to fall, to suffer, but to look up to a comforter who is equally in pain. We have stumbled one more time on the syntactical reflexivities discussed above (in that final line, 'I eto sol', i osolitsia sol'), but now coupled with an emotional self-containment that can change our reading of Sedakova. Faced with pain, she acknowledges it, states simply that it is. But it confers no distinctiveness on its sufferer.

Before I looked at this poem, I would have said that her poems are not psychological in the way that Shvarts's are. I would have thought that Sedakova starts from a place where subjectivity seems not to exist,³⁶ where there is no coherent psyche to explore as if it were the territory of desire and belief. Instead, I would now argue that Sedakova disperses bits of psychic information across richly seen landscapes, as in 'Gornaia oda'. Pieces of the self look out from the crevices of a

cave or are perched on mountain tops (and in this respect she most resembles Jorie Graham).³⁷ It is the lesson of 'Pervye stansy' that Sedakova can find bits of self reflected in the world around her, but also in the psyche of the poet to whom her words are addressed. She is deeply empathetic, a self-transforming poet in more ways than I once thought.

This dispersed psyche conceals a deeper insight into Sedakova's poetry of the self, one that emerges when we juxtapose her fascination with acts of enclosure with the sentiments about desire expressed in her poem to Shvarts. The self of her poetry, I would argue, is always concealed within something or someone else. It is contained by an invented persona, an addressee, a figure of the landscape, a grammatical structure. And the layers that hide that self produce a kind of distancing that is felt most keenly in Sedakova's reluctant expressions of desire. It is as if the clay or leaves or skin or fabric that shield the self from exposure also protect its desires. And desire is then projected outward, on to all of us except the poet, who then look back at her with our own versions of distanced desire (we want to want the poet, she says). What I have also implicitly argued by beginning with statements about the difficulty of Sedakova's work is that our desire is for meaning, for a surer sense of any individual poem's range of reference, for some organizing trope or image to help us figure out what the poet so intensely wishes us to hear.

In keeping us from instant or even eventually full gratification of these desires, Sedakova maintains aspects of her inner world as inaccessible and protected from even the most searching gaze of the reader. Who, after all, are the readers of these poems? In her earlier poems, when Sedakova was virtually unpublished, we can perhaps sense the imagination of an intimate audience, a circle of like-minded intellectuals (she was part of the Tartu/Moscow intellectually (rather than politically) dissident movement, where lengthy apartment gatherings were the scene of heated discussion and enormous creative and scholarly ferment); but in the more recent work, as her audience widens toward those who do not share the familiar frame of reference, we may begin to sense a new self-consciousness about

the readership. It is not that new layers of self-protection are added, but rather that Sedakova seems almost to sense that her habitual ways of writing have a newly useful potential for concealment, for a 'haven' in an all-too curious world. A poem like 'Zhenskaia figura' thus thematizes this will to keep some stories of the self buried: the *matreshka* dolls that mark Sedakova's reading of Akhmatova are an inexact figure for her own work, in this sense, because there is no final, innermost doll, no core of self-revelation that we can come upon if we keep prying the toys apart. Moreover, the sequence of revealed identities is much more surprising and more variegated than in conventionally identical *matreshka* dolls.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the 1994 volume of Sedakova's poetry, a thick collection of hundreds of poems where she shows herself to have enormous diversity in both poetic styles and poetic selves. My own early difficulties in assembling material and trying to imagine a sequence for composition can now be put aside, as readers delve into a book of poems verified by the poet herself. It is sequenced in a rough chronology that shows her development as a poet, and divided according to the 'books' of poetry that ought to have appeared every few years. New approaches to her work can now be considered: for example, the dense repetition of images and locations (home, garden, mirror) and sources (the Bible, saints' lives, medieval romance, Dante, Pushkin, Baudelaire, Mandel'shtam, Rilke) invites a structuralist analysis of Sedakova's 'poetic world'. The appearance of a cycle of elegies as the concluding group of poems in the 1994 collection demands a refinement and reconsideration of my conviction that Sedakova writes against the elegiac tradition, if only to make sense of why she would move now to write so differently of death and loss (themes that were present in earlier work, but variously contained and framed). Reassessment of the elegiac aspect of her work will also afford a clearer sense of Sedakova's place in Russia's tradition of poets who write about thinking. Evgenii Baratynskii (1800-44) defines this lineage for most twentieth-century poets (like Mandel'shtam and Brodskii, who so greatly admire him), but his elegies focus almost oppressively on

psychic pain and the inevitability of death. Sedakova adroitly draws on Baratynskii's work, as in her references to pain and disease in passages discussed in this essay, but she rejects his apparent assumption that genuine thinking can only happen in the presence of grave dangers to mind, spirit, and body.³⁸ Countering Baratynskii's weighty example, Sedakova has happy recourse to the eighteenth-century metaphysical traditions that enliven the odes of Mikhail Lomonosov (1711-65) and especially Gavrila Derzhavin (1743-1816), as Andrew Wachtel has recently argued.³⁹ In so doing, she partakes in their joyous celebration of the capacities of language, exulting in her own intellectual agility and creativity all the while.

As in other national traditions (one thinks of the pre-eminence of Donne and Eliot in English metaphysical poetry, for example), Russian poetry of thought has principally featured male practitioners; among many of these, it can be argued that thought itself has been associated with masculinity. In Baratynskii's poetry, for example, the virility and toughness of incisive thinking almost requires a repudiation of the feminine (and thus his early love lyrics, which justify the abandonment of once-loved women by recounting the poet's disillusion and despair, have rightly been shown to set the stage for his mature philosophical meditations). Sedakova had a feminine predecessor in the Russian tradition, however, the intrepid Karolina Pavlova (1807-93). Like her, Pavlova was richly educated in foreign languages and cultures, but her poetry was not nearly so cloaked in protective allusion and inscrutable emblems. But Pavlova, in her more limpid and musical verse, just as surely as has Sedakova in her more conversationally inflected lines, made Russia's nascent metaphysical tradition her own. Like Sedakova, she records the emotions that surge as thoughts enter the poet's mind, and, like Sedakova, she explores the paths by which thoughts define a self, even a self who dares to claim the identity of 'the poet'. Silver Age poets, led by Valerii Briusov, rediscovered Pavlova at the start of this century, but they also domesticated and softened her image in the process (to be fair, one might note that they also respected her skill in versification and indeed were drawn to her technical innovations). Perhaps

now, with the example of a late twentieth-century meditative poet equally undaunted by her masculine predecessors, we can also begin to reassess Pavlova's contribution to Russia's poetry of thought. That would be yet another benefit of knowing Sedakova's work – admittedly secondary to the pleasures that come of reading her for her own sake.

With the arrival of her carefully edited collection of poetry, Sedakova makes her claim on our attention even more irresistible. The textual inaccessibility that characterized the first decade of efforts to read her work recedes from view, and we come to recognize personal inaccessibility as one of several poetic personae that inform her verse. We begin to encounter in Sedakova a major poet, one whose work will repay our attention with the immense joy that great poetry contains.

NOTES

Travel to the Bath conference where this paper was first presented was supported by an Amherst College faculty research award. My colleagues in the Department of Women's and Gender Studies responded to a later version, and their comments were extremely helpful for this final revision. I am grateful as well to friends and colleagues who helped in the research for this essay and offered useful criticisms, including Joan Dayan, Ol'ga Demidova, Catriona Kelly, Elena Rabinovich, Dale Sinos and Rebecca Sinos.

- 1 It might appear that Sedakova has collaborated in this unavailability: she used to say she was not involved in the publication of her work, but even now, when Russian journals are more open to her, portions of larger cycles keep appearing, as if to tantalize with their gaps. Examples of fragmentary publication include 'Iz knigi "Dikii shipovnik": legendy i fantazii', *Znamia*, 8 (1992), pp. 103–10, where we get the second and sixth legends, but no others; 'Iz Stansov v manere Aleksandra Popa', *Druzhba narodov*, 9 (1992), pp. 114–20, where we get poems 1, 3 and 4. I have learned, however, that these publications were shaped by editors who made cuts against which Sedakova herself protested (from a conversation with Ol'ga Sedakova, London, May 1994).
- 2 Kent Johnson and Stephen M. Ashby, eds., *Third Wave: The New Russian Poetry* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1992), p. 130.

- 3 Nowhere would this seem to emerge more vividly than when Sedakova names a poem an elegy. See the witty poem 'Elegiia smokovnitsy', included in Sedakova, 'Potomu chto vse my byli', *Novyi mir*, 5 (1990), pp. 161-4. In her recent work Sedakova has turned more often to poems titled elegies (she had completed a volume called *Elegii* by 1990), though with results that meditate on the possibility of the elegy, as in 'Stansy na smert' kotenka', especially its third stanza, where death is named a disease of the mind ('bolezn' uma'), a sharp challenge to the mind's dullness. See Ol'ga Sedakova, *Stikhi* (Moscow: Gnozis/Carte Blanche, 1994), pp. 229-32, 259-68, 274-6, 299-316. In general, I use this more reliable, recent text for citations in this essay, but I also mention journals or earlier collections in these notes, since the 1994 collection was (at least at the time of this writing) not easily available.
- 4 Sedakova, *Stikhi*, p. 47; see also Ol'ga Sedakova, *Kitaiskoe puteshestvie. Stely i nadpisi. Starye pesni* (Moscow: 'Carte Blanche', 1990), p. 28.
- 5 Johnson and Ashby, *Third Wave*, p. 133.
- 6 Sedakova, *Stikhi*, p. 245; *Kitaiskoe puteshestvie*, p. 27. For the English, I give in this case my own, literal translation (the whole poem is also translated by Andrew Wachtel in *Third Wave*, pp. 132-3). Other good translations of Sedakova appear in Gerald S. Smith, ed., *Contemporary Russian Poetry*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), pp. 268-79; and in *Glas*, 4 (1993), pp. 221-7. A slim volume of her verse has appeared with Russian originals and English translations: Olga Sedakova, *The Silk of Time: Shelk vremeni*, ed. Valentina Polukhina (Keele: Ryburn Publishing, Keele University Press, 1994). Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Sedakova's originals will be my own.
- 7 Sedakova, *Stikhi*, p. 228; Sedakova, 'Iz Stansov v manere Aleksandra Popa', p. 115.
- 8 J. G. Frazer, ed. and tr., *Pausanias's Description of Greece*, 6 vols., II (London: Macmillan, 1913), p. 72. The particular image here, of the way that amber is produced from tears, is itself a striking example of the contrasts between fixity and movement that the poem elsewhere takes up.
- 9 The enigma here might be related to that of femininity itself, as described in Sigmund Freud, 'Femininity', in Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1965), pp. 99-119.
- 10 O. Sedakova, 'Zametki i vospominaniia o raznykh stikhotvorenniakh, a takzhe POKHVALA POEZII', *Volga*, 6 (1991),

pp. 135-64; cited material is on p. 159. A condensed version of this essay appears in Sedakova, *Stikhi*, pp. 317-57. I refer below to this essay as 'Pokhvala poezii' in its journal version.

- 11 Sedakova, *Stikhi*, p. 182; see also Sedakova, *Irata, okna, arki* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1986), p. 8.
- 12 In the first publication of the poem (in Sedakova, 'Iz Stansov v manere Aleksandra Popa', p. 114), it was entitled 'To Elena Shvarts'. Not so in the version that appeared in Sedakova's book, and thus which she herself supervised much more closely. See Sedakova, *Stikhi*, p. 225.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 Because 'Piatye stansy' first appeared on its own (in *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 15 February 1992, p. 7), my first efforts to make sense of it might be of interest. I also had at the time poems 1, 3, and 4 of 'Stansy v manere Aleksandra Popa' also published in 1992, and they seemed the apparent context. Each poem, or set of 'stanzas', is composed of 8-12 strophes 8 lines long, all rhymed couplets in 5-footed iambs, with one of the strophes a single couplet. 'Piatye stansy' seemed to me to be the fifth poem in the cycle - thus its title. It has the same stylistic features, except that the strophes are six lines in length rather than eight; it has the closing couplet. What seemed to refute this conclusion was that when 'Piatye stansy' appeared in *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, it had two titles: 'Muzykal'nyi korm' and a subtitle, 'Iz tsikla "Iamby"'. Presumably, the former was the newspaper's title, the latter Sedakova's, though I wondered if it might not refer to a larger book of which the Pope stanzas were a part. I resolved these questions in the usual two ways: I asked Sedakova, who confirmed that 'Piatye stansy' was first conceived as part of the Pope cycle, but took on a life of its own. It was to be part of a new cycle called 'Iamby', dedicated to Aleksandr Blok. (Conversation with Sedakova, London, May 1994.) And I awaited the appearance of her thick volume of poetry, *Stikhi*, which confirms Sedakova's explanation to me; the dedication to Blok is not present, though the very title, of course, echoes his own cycle *Iamby* (which appeared as a separate book in 1919).

The naming of the five 'stansy' by a number also has resonances with the poetic practice of both Mandel'shtam and Akhmatova; it recalls his 'Chetvertaia proza' ('Fourth prose'), so named because it was his fourth major piece of prose; and Akhmatova's *Sed'maia kniga* (*Seventh Book*), her ill-fated volume of verse that never appeared in the 1940s. Susan Amert has also observed that the 'seventh' referred to in Akhmatova's *Poema bez geroia* (*Poem Without a Hero*) is the seventh elegy in the *Severnye elegii* (*Northern Elegies*). See

- Susan Amert, *In a Shattered Mirror: The Later Poetry of Anna Akhmatova* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), p. 112.
- 15 Sedakova, *Stikhi*, p. 255. Though I give my own literal translation, there is a splendid rhymed version, from which I have borrowed some locutions, by Catriona Kelly: see *Glas*, 4 (1993), pp. 221-3. Kelly's translation is also available in Sedakova, *The Silk of Time*, pp. 57-61 and in Kelly, *An Anthology of Russian Women's Writing, 1777-1992* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 390-3.
 - 16 Catriona Kelly, *A History of Russian Women's Writing, 1820-1992* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 424. Kelly's chapter on Sedakova (pp. 423-32) is certainly the best introduction to her work available in English (or in Russian, for that matter). The first real discussion of Sedakova, while not an overview, appeared in the important essay by Mikhail Epstein, 'Metamorfoza (o novykh techeniiax v poezii 80-kh godov)', in Epstein, *Paradoksy novizny: O literaturnom razvitii XIX-XX vekov* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1988), pp. 139-76. Another important early, brief discussion of her work was the statement by Viacheslav V. Ivanov that prefaced the first Soviet publication of Sedakova: see Ol'ga Sedakova, 'Solovei, filomela, sud'ba', *Druzhba narodov*, 10 (1988), pp. 120-5. Sergei Averintsev's short, resonant essay, 'Gore, polnoe do dna', appears in Sedakova, *Stikhi*, pp. 358-63.
 - 17 Sedakova, *Stikhi*, p. 186; *Vrata, okna, arki*, p. 12.
 - 18 In the poem to Elena Shvarts, we find a more circular syntax: 'Poet est' tot, kto khochet to, chto vse khotiat khotet' ('A poet is one who wants what everyone else wants to want').
 - 19 Sedakova, 'Shkatulka s zerkalom, ob odnom glubinnom motive A. A. Akhmatovoi', *Trudy po znakovym sistemam*, 17, *Uchenye zapiski Tartuskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta*, 641 (1984), pp. 93-108; see p. 94. Sedakova also notes that the idea of containment enfolds different spans of time. This observation is quite useful in describing *Poema bez geroia* with its shifting time frames and narrative planes. By comparison, Sedakova's poetry makes little use of temporal contrast. This is part of her larger pattern of rejecting narrative, rejecting a temporal sequence of beginning, middle and end. As I suggest here, she more typically uses the structure of repeatedly starting over again.
 - 20 I mention Heidegger because his name occurs with suspicious frequency in Sedakova's interviews and prose writings as the example of 'the philosopher'. A more immediate source for 'Piatye stansy', however, is St Augustine, thus the poem's reference to 'mediolanskii sad' (Mediolanus is the ancient name for Milan), where one of St Augustine's epiphanies occurs.

- 21 These images are also notable for their contrasts. This recalls one of Sedakova's observations about Akhmatova's *vnutripolozhnost'*: the things that are put one inside the other in *Poem Without a Hero* are often sharply contrasting. Sedakova, in 'Piatye stansy,' likewise places a treasure in a sleeping powder, fiery constellations deep in the mountains, and the future rolls into an enormous house.
- 22 This is a poet who takes pleasure in the observed world, and it is not for nothing that Keats figures prominently among poets whose images she repeats (as in 'Fifth Stanzas,' where the 'night-time door of midnight beauty just slightly ajar' ['poludennoi krazy nochnaia dver' | raskryta nastezh'] recalls Keats's 'case-ment ope at night, | To let the warm Love in!' from 'Ode to Psyche'; the choice of this Keats poem is surely no accident, given its concluding paean to the pleasures of thought in a world where material realities cannot be so joyous). See *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 366. Among other quotations from Keats, the line 'Neslyshimaia muzyka zvuchnei' translates from the 'Ode on a Grecian Urn': 'Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard | Are sweeter' (*The Poems of John Keats*, p. 372). Sedakova's most explicit use of Keats is in 'Kuznechik i sverchok', with its epigraph 'The poetry of Earth is never dead' (see *Vrata, okna, arki*, p. 64), a line from Keats's sonnet 'On the Grasshopper and the Cricket' (no capital letter on Earth, according to *The Poems of John Keats*, p. 88). On this poem, with a reading that contrasts Sedakova's poetics with Keats's, see Kelly, *A History of Russian Women's Writing*, pp. 426-7.
- 23 Sedakova, *Stikhi*, p. 225; 'Iz Stansov v manere Aleksandra Popa', p. 114.
- 24 See Amert, *In a Shattered Mirror*, pp. 10-13 (for a discussion of Akhmatova's use of literary masks) and pp. 131-64 (for a richly detailed analysis of Akhmatova's Dido); and T. V. Tsiv'ian, 'Antichnye geroini - zerkala Akhmatovoi', *Russian Literature*, 7/8 (1974), pp. 103-19. I have discussed the importance of this aspect of Akhmatova's work for subsequent women poets in 'The canon and the backward glance: Akhmatova, Nikolaeva, Lisnianskaia, Petrovykh', in Helena Goscilo, ed., *Fruits of Her Plume: Russian Women's Writing* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1993), pp. 113-34.
- 25 Clearly 'Shipovnik tsvetet' is a crucial poem for Sedakova. See the cycle 'Dikii shipovnik' (in *Stikhi*, pp. 13-98); a few of these poems appeared in 'Iz knigi "Dikii shipovnik"' and in other journal publications. In the journal variant, though not in *Stikhi*,

the cycle has an epigraph from Pushkin, 'I tainye stikhi obdu-myvai' liubliu . . .' and we might read the emphasis on *secret* verse as another link to Akhmatova, who called her poetry writing *tainyis*; Akhmatova's life-long interest in Pushkin is also relevant. For an excellent essay on the volume 'Dikii shipovnik', see D. S. [V. A. Shaitanov], 'Ol'ga Sedakova: Novyi put', in Sedakova, *Irata, okna, arki*, pp. 113-28.

- 26 See Sedakova, 'O "Bronzovom veke"', *Grani*, 130 (1983), pp. 274-8; 'Pokhvala poezii'; also relevant are characterizations of other Russian poets in her interview with Valentina Polukhina, 'A rare independence', in *Brodsky Through the Eyes of his Contemporaries* (New York: St Martin's, 1992), pp. 237-60.
- 27 Sedakova, *Stikhi*, p. 183; *Irata, okna, arki*, p. 9.
- 28 See 'A rare independence', p. 251; 'Zametki i vospominaniia', p. 141; and 'O "Bronzovom veke"', pp. 276-7. That last has the most specific comments about Shvarts. It refers to her 'inspired, solitary lyrics', continuing: 'Only in her work do we come close to glimpsing the true spirit speaking a clear language.'
- 29 Both cycles are discussed briefly in Barbara Heldt, 'The poetry of Elena Shvarts', *World Literature Today*, 63, 3 (Summer, 1989), pp. 381-3. Appended to that essay are translations of two poems from the Lavinia cycle, expertly rendered by Michael Molnar (p. 384), but the entire cycle is available only in Russian: Elena Shvarts, *Trudy i dni Lavinii, Monakhini iz ordena Obrezaniia serdtsa* (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1987). Molnar has translated some of the Cynthia poems as well: see Michael March, ed., *Child of Europe: a New Anthology of East European Poetry* (London: Penguin, 1990), pp. 197-202. For the full cycle, see Shvarts, *Tantsuiushchii David* (New York: Russica, 1984), pp. 54-68. Additional very good translations of poems by Shvarts, including two poems from the Lavinia cycle, are available in *Contemporary Russian Poetry*, pp. 246-57. A separate collection of Shvarts's verse has now appeared in English, with some of the above translations reprinted and many more besides: Elena Shvarts, *'Paradise': Selected Poems*, tr. Michael Molnar with Catriona Kelly (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1993).
- 30 Both Sedakova and Shvarts use religious themes (without, in my view, actually 'being' religious - by which I mean that the world-view of the poetry taken as a whole subverts rather than reinforces a stable religious order of being). See Sedakova's comments criticizing the way she has been labelled a religious poet in 'A rare independence', p. 240.
- 31 Sedakova, *Stikhi*, p. 225; 'Iz Stanov v manere Aleksandra Popa',

- p. 114; the sentence is precisely repeated in the cycle's coda, p. 242 ('*Iz Stansov*', p. 120. The coda had been published separately in Sedakova, *Vrata, okna, arki*, p. 7, and translated in Smith, *Contemporary Russian Poetry*, p. 278.
- 32 Sedakova, *Stikhi*, p. 226.
- 33 Sedakova has commented on the importance of a familiar addressee in her poems, and 'moi drug' appears as an appellation in other lyrics (to Ivan Zhdanov, for example).
- 34 The latter also brings to mind Sedakova's fantasia on the theme of the prodigal son, thus it is a reference that points back to herself as a poet; see 'Vozvrashchenie bludnogo syna', in Sedakova, *Stikhi*, pp. 20-4, partly published as 'Kantsona-fantaziia na temu: vozvrashchenie bludnogo syna', in '*Iz knigi "Dikii shipovnik"*', pp. 105-6. That poem also addresses the prodigal son as 'drug moi' (p. 21; '*Iz knigi*', p. 105).
- 35 *Stikhi*, p. 228.
- 36 I am making this difference starker than it actually is, I should say: Sedakova *does* have poems that involve dramatic impersonations, both on small scale, e.g. 'David poet Saulu' ('David Sings to Saul'), and large, as in the Tristan and Isolde cycle; but we would be hard pressed to find a coherent speaking subject in those poems, or even to find sufficient references to familiar myth to retell the story. This is especially true in the Tristan and Isolde cycle, which Sedakova herself described as 'improvisations' and a 'suite'. See Sedakova, *Stikhi*, pp. 101-28; for the characterizations of the cycle, see the brief note that precedes the version in Sedakova, *Vrata, okna arki*, p. 23 (this note is absent in *Stikhi*).
- 37 Among Graham's poems, those in her most recent volumes especially exemplify this idea of a scattered self. See Graham, *Region of Unlikeness* (Hopewell, NJ: Ecco Press, 1991) and *Materialism* (Hopewell, NJ: Ecco Press, 1993).
- 38 For excellent accounts of Baratynskii's particular form of metaphysical poetry, see I. Semenko, *Poety pushkinskoi pory* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1970), pp. 221-91; L. Ia. Ginzburg, *O lirike*, second edition (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel', 1974) pp. 51-126; and Sarah Pratt, *Russian Metaphysical Romanticism: the Poetry of Tjutchev and Baratynskii* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1984), esp. pp. 1-37.
- 39 Andrew Wachtel, 'The youngest archaists: Kutik, Sedakova, Kibirov, Parshchikov', forthcoming in Stephanie Sandler, ed., *Rereading Russian Poetry*.