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Pushkin among Contemporary Poets: Self and Song in Sedakova

by

STEPHANIE SANDLER

Has Pushkin's poetry remained a relevant model for Russian poets in the late twentieth century? Some avant-garde poets have long said no, as they complete the task begun by the Futurists, throwing Pushkin overboard from the ship of modern culture. For them, he represents official, dead culture. At their boldest they even deride myths of Pushkin's death. Dmitrii Aleksandrovich Prigov, for example, gives us a Pushkin as empty as a Soviet leader in *The Captivating Star of Russian Poetry* (*Звезда пленительная русской поэзии*), where he rewrites Pushkin's duel as a parable about enemies of the people.¹ He dismantles the Soviet cult of the hero, and, in the process, takes aim at the holy myth of Pushkin's martyrdom.²

When others make mock of the national poet they often separate the myth of the poet from the virtues of his legacy (in this they follow the example not of the Futurists but of Marina Tsvetaeva in her *Poems to Pushkin* (*Стихи к Пушкину*, 1931)).³ A vivid image for this more subtle form of *épatage* appeared on the cover of the early 1990s almanac *Latin Quarter* (*Латинский квартал*): a photograph of the Moscow Pushkin monument encased in scaffolding (Illustration 1). It was a splendid self-image for a culture that saw itself as under repair, and the editors used it to suggest that one might want to improve homage to Pushkin, not tear down monuments to him. In that spirit, Timur Kibirov has successfully used motifs from Pushkin's life and writings in his long poem *To Serezha Gandelevskii* (the full Russian title is *Сереже Ганделевскому. О некоторых аспектах нынешней социокультурной ситуации*, 1990).⁴ Kibirov's poem associates Pushkin with official Soviet culture, yet it reaffirms the pleasure and high spirits of Pushkin's own poetry. It is an excellent example of late Soviet poetic responses to Pushkin (the poem well describes the world of late Soviet Russia), and poses the question for us about how, in a period of social and cultural decline, poets made use of Pushkin's legacy. Kibirov's answer is intriguing for its unusual mix of irreverence with imitation. The most extraordinary poems of irreverence are surely those of Joseph Brodsky, written slightly earlier, for example *At the Pushkin Monument in Odessa* (*Перед памятником А. С. Пушкину в Одессе*, 1969 or 1970), 'I loved you' ('Я вас любил', 1974).⁵ Brodsky was an important model for Kibirov, as for the poet to whom I now turn.



Latinskii kvartal cover illustration, early 1990s

Olga Sedakova is one of the most interesting poets writing in Russian today.⁶ Her poems are an excellent point of departure for a discussion of Pushkin's presence in post-Soviet culture because she has meditated on this theme over a number of years, with essays and self-commentary published as recently as 1999. Sedakova's work bears the impact of many poets and thinkers: Heraclitus, the Bible, Dante, Rilke, Pound, Russian spiritual rhymes (духовные песни), the Bible, eighteenth-century odes, and the poetry of Blok, Mandelshtam, Khlebnikov, and many others. She has written tellingly about the different status accorded to Pushkin. 'Russian thought,' she has observed, 'tries to find itself and its future in its love for Pushkin, as if standing before a fortune-teller's mirror'.⁷ Sedakova contrasts this to Pushkin's actual impact as a poet - less, she says, than that of Zhukovskii, Nekrasov, or Blok, which leads her to note the mysterious aspect of Pushkin's fame. Despite attempts to distort or overtake his image, he has remained a 'barrier of protection, often the last such genius-caretaker of a free creative culture ... He unites the "faithful"; hand in hand with him, the encroaching darkness is not frightening'.⁸

All of Sedakova's poetry seeks to stand as a beacon against such 'encroaching darkness', but I want to concentrate here on poems that pick up where Pushkin's poetry has left off. *Ballad of Continuation* (Баллада продолжения) and *Old Songs* (Старые песни) date to the late Soviet period: the former is from *The Wild Rose* (Дикий шиповник, 1978) and the latter appeared in 1990 but is dated 1980-82. Each bears an epigraph from Pushkin's poetry, which marks them strongly because Sedakova rarely uses epigraphs. They are only the top-most layer of Pushkinian thinking in the two poems, which are otherwise quite different. I begin with the earlier poem, *Ballad of Continuation*.

Ballad of Continuation concludes a triptych entitled *Selva selvaggia*, one of Sedakova's early experiments in creating lyric sequences. The title of the triptych, from the opening of Dante's *Inferno*, places the ballad in a dense thicket of repetitions and refrains, all of them musical in origin, as the subtitles of ballad, canzone, ballad suggests. (Music will connect this ballad to *Old Songs*, and to other Sedakova poems as well.)⁹ In *Selva selvaggia*, *Ballad of Continuation* is the third and final poem, after *Leavetaking* (Проводы) and *Return of the Prodigal Son* (Возвращение блудного сына).¹⁰ All three poems describe movement and escape, wandering and return, error and confession. The physical experience of movement through space in search of a discovery rather than in search of a place, and the ethical experience of acknowledging a wrong judgment, combine in what we might call *errancy*, drawing less on the Spenserian and Renaissance tradition of narratives about knights-errant than on biblical tales of wandering in search of God's truth.

Pushkin's inspiration is evident from the first lines of the ballad that opens *Selva selvaggia*, when a crystal sphere reprises Pushkin's 'magic crystal' ('магический кристалл') from the conclusion of *Evgenii Onegin*.¹¹ Across the entirety of *Selva selvaggia*, Sedakova follows moments of self-contemplation in

reflective surfaces made of glass or water, real or imagined, and in this gesture she enacts the divination through mirroring that she has said the entire culture does when it looks at Pushkin. The image returned to the self always includes a remarkable transformation - the Prodigal Son sees himself as Jesus, for example. Self-examination is represented as a form of movement (Sedakova writes, in the canzone, *Return of the Prodigal Son*, that we walk 'like vision, transformed into substance' ['как зренье, сделанное веществом']).¹²

Wandering is pre-eminently important in *Ballad of Continuation*, and in many ways it repeats themes associated with the parable of the Prodigal Son. It ends in a time of celebration, much like the joy that marks the Prodigal Son's return. Paternal or divine reward seems incomprehensible, indeed the Biblical parable (from Luke 15) insists on the value of what is nearly lost (two shorter tales about recovering lost property come before it, and the second brother's angry exchange with his incomprehensibly forgiving and happy father come after it). A more secular and psychological rendition of this tale of loss and recovery (and one equally invested in the music and repetitions of song) would give us a poem like Elizabeth Bishop's fine villanelle *The Art of Losing*, but Sedakova holds fast to the divine meanings of loss and recovery, of celebration and return. These are among her overriding themes across the years of her work, perhaps most beautifully expressed in *Fifth Stanzas* (*Пятые стансы*, 1992), where images of monastic seclusion and ancient pilgrimage emphasize the religious dimensions of her theme.¹³

In *Ballad of Continuation*, however, another narrative of wandering and revelation is evoked, particularly by the three epigraphs (from Pushkin, *Imitations of the Koran* [*Подражания Корану*, 1824], Lermontov, *Three Palms* [*Три пальмы*, 1839], and Pasternak, *The Miracle* [*Чудо*, 1947]). Some commentary on these epigraphs is in order since, against her usual practice, the poet has prefaced a poem with several signposts that create expectations about theme, form, and aesthetic project. Sedakova herself has written an essay that fleshes out these expectations. It treats the Pasternak poem *The Miracle*, the source of her third epigraph, in the context of both Pushkin and Lermontov, presenting a poetic context for Pasternak's parable of the miraculous fig tree. She follows the practice of M. L. Gasparov in describing the semantic aureole attaching to Pushkin's, Lermontov's, and Pasternak's use of amphibraic tetrameter in stanzaic form; the source poem for this sequence, Zhukovskii's *Song of an Arab at the Grave of his Steed* (*Песнь араба над могилою коня*, 1809-10), features motifs which create the semantic aureole used in the later poems: an Arabian desert landscape with its images of heat/thirst and shade/water; the contrast between dynamic motion and stillness; futile attempts at resurrection; and, finally, the theme of immortality and miraculous resurrection.¹⁴ Pushkin, who shortens Zhukovskii's stanzas from eight lines to six, repeats nearly all these motifs; he emphasized the moment when immortality is revealed and the dead are resurrected, which proves crucial for Sedakova.

Only in Pasternak's *The Miracle* do we find a narrative clearly based on the miracle of Jesus causing a fig tree to wither.¹⁵ He adverts to the Bible's importance in the poem's first line, with its movement from Bethany to Jerusalem, and of course in the poem's context among the Biblical poems of the Zhivago cycle. But for Lermontov and Pushkin, as for Zhukovskii, the Bible would seem less important: Pushkin's poem recounts the miracle of a dead palm tree brought back to the beauty of being alive;¹⁶ Lermontov shares this orientation to the East, even titling his poem 'An Eastern Tale'; his version is more pessimistic, and it extends Pushkin's theme of human complaint against God.¹⁷ Lermontov's dissonant conclusion to a poem about divine retribution also seems a rebuke to Pushkin's tale of old age transformed to vibrant youth, as Boris Eikhenbaum once observed.¹⁸

Sedakova's variant on this tale is distinctive in several ways, perhaps best seen, first, by quoting the poem in full.

И путник усталый на бога роптал.

А.С.П.

В пустынных степях аравийской земли ...

М.Ю.Л.

Он шел из Вифании в Иерусалим ...

Б.Л.П.

И страшно и холодно стало в лесу.

Куда он зашел? И зачем на весу
судьбу его держат, короткую воду
в стакане безумном, в стекле из природы,
из слабости: вдруг раскатится, как ртуть.
И шел он, и слезы боялся смахнуть.

И некогда было: еще за ольху -
и вырастет ветер, как город вверху,
и дрогнет душа от собачьего лая.
И слабая жизнь, у стола засыпая,
бренча в угольках, завывая в трубе,
опять, как к ребенку, нагнется к тебе.

Но прежде проснется, кто в доме уснул,
услышит, что голосом сделался гул,
и в окна посмотрит, и встретит у входа
с лицом, говорящим: Я ум и свобода,
я все, чего нет у тебя впереди.
Но хлеба не жалко, и ты заходи.

И долго, пока он еще исчезал,
и знал, что упал, и стакан расплескал,
как этого просит старик, пораженный
худым долголетьем, как хочет влюбленный
его расплескать, оставаясь вдвоем, -
а он не просил, и не помнил о том. -

И долго, пока он еще исчезал,
и мимо него этот сброд проползал,
который и взгляда людского стыдится,
и в дуплях, и в норах, и в щелях плодится -
а здесь проползал, не стыдясь его глаз,
как будто он не жил и не был у нас. -

Так долго, пока он еще исчезал,
твердил он: Ты все, чего я не узнал,
ты ум и свобода, ты полное зренье,
я - обликом ставшее кровотечение,

И тут раздалось, обрывая его:
- Я ум и свобода, но ты - торжество.¹⁹

(And the weary traveller grumbled at God ...
A. S. P.
In the desert steppes of the lands of Arabia ...
M. Iu. L.
He went forth from Bethany to Jerusalem ...
B. L. P.

In the forest, all grew frightening and cold.
Where was he? And why, in mid-air,
was his fate held up, like shallow water
in a cup of madness, in the glass of nature,
out of weakness, then suddenly roll off like a ball of mercury?
And he walked on, and feared to wipe away his tears.

And there was no time: just past the alder tree -
and the wind will rise up, like a town up above,
and the soul will shudder at the barking dog,
And weakened life, falling asleep at the table,
strumming in the embers, howling in the chimney,
will bend over you again as if you were a child.

But first, someone asleep in the house will awake,
 will hear the rumble turn into voice,
 and will look out the windows, and meet at the entrance
 with someone, a face, saying, 'I am wisdom and freedom,
 I am everything that you will not have.
 But there is plenty of bread, so yes, come in.'

And for a long time, while he was still disappearing
 and knew he had fallen, had spilled out the cup,
 knew how this would be asked by an old man wasted to
 thinness by his long years of life, knew how a lover wants
 to spill it when left, just the two of them, -
 yet he did not ask, and he did not remember it. -

But for a long time, while he was still disappearing,
 and this tattered crowd crawled past him,
 a crowd ashamed even of the gaze of human eyes,
 it multiplies in hollows, in holes, and in little crannies -
 even here did it crawl, not ashamed of his glance,
 as if he were not alive and was not here with us. -

So, for such a long time, while he was still disappearing,
 he said, 'You are everything that I did not come to know,
 you are wisdom and freedom, you are vision complete,
 and I - have taken on the appearance of flowing blood.'

Then a voice was heard, cutting him off:
 'I am wisdom and freedom, but you - are solemn celebration.')

²⁰

Sedakova's poem would at first seem neither to reinstate the Biblical tale of Pasternak's poem nor the Eastern desert landscape of Pushkin's and Lermontov's poems. Her landscape is a forest, predicted by the title of the cycle (*Selva selvaggia*) and the Dantean forest it suggests. The lexical repetitions of her lines bring an element of song back into the form (recall Pushkin's elimination of Zhukovskii's refrain: Sedakova conveys some of the effects of the lost refrain with her intoned repetitions). Indeed her concluding note of praise well exemplifies the musical celebration heard throughout *Ballad of Continuation*.

What, we might ask, is celebrated here? The implicit narrative across all three parts of *Selva selvaggia* tells of wandering and return, of a spiritual quest that leads back to the discovery of what had seemed abandoned. In the first of the three stanzas in *Ballad of Continuation* that begin 'for such a long time, while he was still disappearing', Sedakova offers us a series of metaphors that

link that quest to death and renewal. The cup that spills over is the cup of life itself, but for every old man who will not ask for it to be picked up there is an enthusiastic lover whose passion for time alone with his beloved beautifully models a wish to return to life. Sedakova here introduces the idea of resurrection she had associated with the poems denoted by her epigraphs, one she particularly connected to Pushkin's poem. One might say that, in *Ballad of Continuation*, she effectively returns this kind of poem to one of its Pushkinian premises, this despite her having reversed many of the other motifs, like the desert landscape or the thirst it would engender.

Sedakova also reprises Pushkin's essentially and broadly Biblical language, without relying on the retelling of a specific parable found in Pasternak's *The Miracle*. But Pasternak's poem has a strong presence here, too, for he had repeated Pushkin's celebration of divine power in his own way: 'But a miracle is a miracle, a miracle is God. / When we are confused, in the midst of our straggling, / It overtakes us, and instantly confounds us' ('Но чудо есть чудо, и чудо есть бог. / Когда мы в смятении, тогда средь разброда, / Оно настигает мгновенно, врасплох').²¹ Pasternak's last stanza seeks a minute of freedom among the images of miracle, which in turn grounds the emphasis on freedom ('ум и свобода') in Sedakova's poem.²²

To comprehend her use of the idea of freedom, however, we need one more subtext: it might well have appeared among the epigraphs to *Ballad of Continuation* since it bears the semantic aureole described in the essay on Pasternak's *The Miracle*; indeed, it is discussed there. The poem is Zabolotskii's 1938 *A Lake in the Forest* (*Лесное озеро*), important not least for its forest setting, which motivates Sedakova's transfer of scene from the Biblical desert (as does the reference to Dante). The lake in Zabolotskii's title is also significant: Sedakova's watery and reflective surfaces owe much to his example, as does her imagery of a cup that spills over with water, including the sexual connotations of that entire passage (Zabolotskii's lake is rightly described by Darra Goldstein as 'the image of a young and beautiful virgin, full of life').²³ In that same passage with the overflowing cup in *Ballad of Continuation*, we encounter the image of an old and ailing man, also found in *A Lake in the Forest*.

Zabolotskii's earthiness grounds Sedakova's descriptions, then, and like him she uses these elements of landscape to create a scene for spiritual quest and possible transcendence. Sedakova has commented on Zabolotskii's pantheistic descriptions of the natural world with this corrective: 'his Muse perhaps also inherited Slavic beliefs that were obscure for the nineteenth century', by which she means 'the prosaic experience of peasants communing with the world'. The dead live on in the clouds, creatures, and foliage of the visible world, she writes, praising Zabolotskii's intense compassion for all living creatures and inanimate objects.²⁴ In one line of his poem, where the lake is described as 'thinking its own separate thought' ('мыслила мыслью

отдельной'),²⁵ he animates a natural object with powers for thought and imagination in a way we often find in Sedakova's poetry.²⁶

Zabolotskii composed *A Lake in the Forest* in a closed freight car while being transported to a forced labour camp in Siberia. That scene of creation inevitably shapes one's reading of his poem, including its first line, 'Once again, there flashed across my mind, fettered with sleep' ('Опять мне блеснула, окована сном'), where the fetters of sleep take on an additional and terribly literal meaning. Sedakova, in a short essay on Zabolotskii, tersely notes that it was written during transport to the camps, without drawing any conclusion from that fact, and certainly one finds in his poem a calmly beautiful scene that seems an escape from closed captivity. But once we realize that the poem is an important source for her images and aspirations in *Ballad of Continuation*, we must consider, too, the possibility that Zabolotskii's experience in creating the poem is also meaningful for her text. One might read the male figure mentioned from the poem's first stanza as Zabolotskii himself, asking as if aloud where he has ended up, feeling the cold fear of a journey that holds his fate in the air before him, and, as the poem continues, hearing the comforting voice of God or nature itself in the forest scene around him. Zabolotskii also becomes the one who disappears, indeed who keeps disappearing for such a long time; he seems a part of a 'tattered crowd' that cannot be looked at directly and that is an emblem of shame; all the time that he is disappearing (that is, that he is hidden away in the camp), he firmly says (by his refusal to mentally collapse at the weight of these experiences) to the natural world that comforts him that he believes in it, and the voice he hears answering him back insists that he is cause for solemn celebration. The title and project of an earlier and very famous Zabolotskii poem, *The Celebration of Agriculture* (*Торжество земледелия*, 1929-1930), further link the celebration that ends this poem back to the fate and poetic achievement of Zabolotskii.

The potency of this biographical allegory does not weaken other philosophical, aesthetic, or religious meanings in the poem; it is characteristic of Sedakova's poetry that meanings exist on many planes, criss-crossing beautifully and distinctively before a reader's eyes, just as the poems draw on a wide multitude of literary and other subtexts that are woven into idiosyncratic and harmonious patterns. But the aspect of the poem that points toward one poet's experience of suffering at the hands of a cruel state, and of surviving to compose poems that celebrate the beauty and imagination of the natural world, is more than one theme or device among many. It shows us that Sedakova also strives to emulate Zabolotskii's insistence on celebration, his firm will to praise beauty even when there is so much ugliness around him. And it shows us that she believes that one task of poems in the present is to include true tales about poems and poets of the past.

We may seem to have strayed far from Pushkin, in a sense exemplifying the dangers of *errancy* Sedakova writes about so often, but in fact

we have simply come back to the poem's theme of continuation, affirming Sedakova's success in continuing Zabolotskii's poetic and spiritual quest. She also continues the themes from the first two poems in *Selva selvaggia*, writing of a Dantesque journey that continues. (Sedakova will also, of course, have Pushkin's *Wanderer* [Странник, 1836] in mind as well.)²⁷ By emphasizing continuity, she tells us that the ballad, despite its coming last in a sequence, represents no moment of closure or conclusion. The point is important, given her focus on the *return* of the Prodigal Son in the second poem in *Selva selvaggia*, for she shows us an equal interest in the enduring process of wandering, in the discoveries and self-discoveries of such a quest. In a poem whose epigraphs mix Eastern and Western religious traditions, including an invocation of Eastern quietism, Sedakova's wanderer comes upon a discovery of his own sanctity; the triumphant celebration ('торжество') of the last lines echoes the Prodigal Son's return and the mortal man's revelation of the divine spark he carries in his soul.

Sedakova's poem is a formal continuation as well, particularly of Pushkin's use of ballad form. In drawing her epigraph from the last of his *Imitations of the Koran*, Sedakova points us toward a poem in that cycle that stands out for its use of the ballad tradition within a context that emphasizes religious and philosophical themes.²⁸ Her own turn to ballad form is thus modeled on Pushkin's, and, like him, she effectively reminds her readers that the ballad form comes down to us (from oral traditions) in several variants, not just the famous romantic form (as in Pushkin's *Black Shawl* [Черная шаль, 1820]).²⁹ Pushkin's imitation from the Koran uses the ballad form associated with hymns and spiritual verse, best documented for the English-speaking world in F. J. Child's monumental *English and Scottish Ballads* (1857-58). The title *Ballad of Continuation*, then, suggests a formal act of continuation as much as a philosophical, spiritual, psychological one: Sedakova continues Pushkin's form, just as she will in her *Old Songs*, to which I am about to turn.

Here our readings must be more cursory, for *Old Songs* fill three large notebooks, 39 poems in all. The second and third notebooks bear dedications to Sedakova's grandmother,³⁰ but the first notebook has an epigraph, 'What is that turning white on the green hill?' ('Что белеется на горе зеленой?'), from Pushkin's unfinished translation of a Serbian song which is not included in his *Songs of the Western Slavs* (Песни западных славян, 1834), but usually printed just after it.³¹ Sedakova repeats this formal feature of establishing poems that are connected to, but not a part of, a cycle (his unfinished 'Menko Vuich is writing a letter' ['Менко Вуйч грамоту пишет'] also stands just outside his *Songs*): she offers us a deliberate progression through three notebooks in *Old Songs*, each ending with poems that are not included.³² In *Old Songs*, Sedakova also draws on Pushkin's *Songs* thematically; some of her images can be traced to his songs, and to common sources in the folk tradition.

In one poem, *Consolation* (Утешенье), she asks his question, 'What is that turning white on the green hill?', very slightly changing his verb, but she

gives a strikingly different answer. In Pushkin's poem, the white motion on the green hill is no natural object (neither snow nor swan), but the tent of Asan-Aga, and the poem ends with the lament of his wife, Asan-Aginita. Here is Sedakova's poem:

Утешенье

Не гадай о собственной смерти
и не радуйся, что все пропало,
не задумывай, как тебя оплачут,
как замучит их поздняя жалость.

Это все плохое утешенье,
для земли обидная забава.

Лучше скажи и подумай:
что белеет на горе зеленой?

На горе зеленой сады играют
и до самой воды доходят,
как ягнята с золотыми бубенцами -
белые ягнята на горе зеленой.

А смерть придет, никого не спросит.³³

(Consolation

Do not make guesses about your own death
and do not feel glad that all is lost,
do not think that you will be mourned
or that a belated feeling of pity will trouble them.

All of this is poor consolation,
for the earth it is an offending amusement.

Better, think and say this:
what is that turning white on the green hill?

On the green hill gardens sparkle
and go right up to the water's edge,
like lambs wearing golden bells -
white lambs on the green hill.

And death will come, it will ask no one.)

Sedakova reconfigures Pushkin's imagery: the flickers of light on the hill are signs of natural growth and movement ('garden' ['сад'], 'water' ['вода'] frequent words in Sedakova's lexicon) that look like little white lambs. In the word for lambs, 'ягнята/iagniata', she rearranges the sounds of the exotic name found in Pushkin's poem: 'iagniata' is conjured paranomastically from the name Asan-aginita. Sedakova also frames Pushkin's natural and domestic scene with gentle if stern imperatives. It is typical of her work, particularly of these songs, for abstract language that invokes spiritual laws to wrap around a narrative or scenic description.

As with *Ballad of Continuation*, questions of formal repetition and embellishment are also important in Sedakova's engagement with Pushkin's poetic legacy in *Old Songs*: she revives his form of the song, a literary imitation of Slavic folk poetry in accentual verse.³⁴ Pushkin was drawn to this form for its ability to enrich the poetic lexicon of his age; his preface to *Songs of the Western Slavs* quotes a letter from Prosper Mérimée that defends the enterprise for its examples of local colour.³⁵ He would have appreciated the political value of recreating Slavic folk songs for élite Russian readers, part of the age's larger project of creating a Russian national literature. Can Sedakova, at the end of the Soviet period, be said to be doing anything remotely similar?

A cursory reading of *Old Songs* makes such an argument seem implausible, for the poems' realm is that of the spirit, not of the nation. The actions of the poems involve love, pity, deceit, desire, loss, lament, servitude, divination, and rejoicing. A few include flights of heroic action, although the hero is more likely to be a saint than a soldier (one song from the second notebook, *Marching Song* [Походная песня], is about two soldiers). The poems tell of spiritual and psychological quests, and the nouns of these songs tend to be experiences, actions, or concepts (injury, sin, consolation, miracle, mystery), rather than concrete objects or persons. Because the actions of the poems are often performed by abstractions, these deceptively simple songs can be as difficult to interpret as the earlier work in *The Wild Rose* or the later *Iambs* (Ямбы), *Elegies* (Элегии), or *Poems in the Manner of Alexander Pope* (Стихи в манере Александра Попа).³⁶ Persons do appear: we hear of a wife tested for her unfaithfulness, a fortune-teller urged to announce that she can see nothing, an old woman arguing with a prisoner. All of these figures are symbolic of the values tested in *Old Songs*, for the poet is fascinated by the moments when faith is questioned, truth is divined, argument pursued, and captivity transcended. If the songs lack necessarily the concentration on what I have called errancy in *Selva selvaggia*, still they reprise its themes of error and wandering, for example in the song about the Prodigal Son entitled *A Dream* (Сон). The poet broadens the meanings of error by travelling repeatedly down the pathways it traces out: 'In every word there is a road / a mournful and ardent path' ('В каждом слове есть / путь унылый и страстный').³⁷

Certainly her poems - all her poems, not just *Old Songs* - are meant as exemplary aesthetic artifacts in a world (the late Soviet world) where poetry was increasingly devalued and where the spiritual revelations and aesthetic pleasures of poetry seemed distant to most Russians. Her project has fewer nationalist overtones than Pushkin's in *Songs of the Western Slavs*, perhaps because the more unsavoury political meanings of nationalism repel her, perhaps because her spiritual motivations usually keep her poems far from politics.³⁸ Sedakova's idea of genuine poetry makes her doubt the public positions a poet might take,³⁹ yet as we have seen in *Ballad of Continuation*, she finds ways in even her profoundly spiritual poems to include observations about the fate of the poet in times of political danger. Her allusions to the experience of Nikolai Zabolotskii, encoded in her use of subtexts and of the ballad's semantic aureole, insist that we note this aspect of the poem, even as other subtexts urge us to see the poem's underlying narrative about an errant soul.

Such contextualizing perhaps urges us to interpret the poem's political principles as ethical rather than political in any narrow sense. Sedakova has only rarely undertaken to make the poet's voice more loudly heard in the public realm, and in every instance her statements resound with intonations of modesty and great subtlety.⁴⁰ In that quietness of voice, she might seem to differ from Pushkin, whose wish for public esteem has been explored by several scholars and thinkers, most recently David Bethea in *Realizing Metaphors*.⁴¹ But the difference is deceiving. Without seeking any equivalent to Pushkin's position, for example, as a budding historian, Sedakova emulates the fine balance in his work between engagement with contemporary cultural politics and commitment to transcendent aesthetic values. Her Pushkin is very far from the quasi-Decembrist invented during the Soviet period, yet she does not move in the opposite direction advanced in the post-Soviet period by Valentin Nepomniashchii and others who recreate Pushkin as a representative of Orthodoxy.⁴² This tangential question, Sedakova's views on religious readings of Pushkin, is complex, and brings us into the more turbulent period of the 1990s: we can say, though, that she has distanced herself from narrowly religious readings, for example in a sly paper she presented before the Moscow Biblical-Theological Institute in 1999 on Pushkin's *gluposti* ('stupidities'). That paper includes the claim that turning to 'the topic of Christianity and "religiosity" in general in Pushkin threatens more than others to cause its proponents to fall into precisely the *gluposti* Pushkin had in mind: immodesty, simplemindedness, and moralizing'.⁴³ In deftly repudiating the inflated rhetoric of nationalistic religious interpretations of Pushkin, Sedakova comes close to a political stand, of course, but she is motivated, I believe, by aesthetic impulses - by a wish to create for the reading public a Pushkin truer to his full vision of human experience, which is also a wish to preserve historically truer accounts of his work.

Sedakova's sense of that truer Pushkin (she would likely reject the epithet) depends on fresh interpretations of well-canonized, anthology pieces as

well as new attention to his little-known jottings and poems. One feels the latter especially in her choice of epigraphs (from *Imitations of The Koran* and *Songs of the Western Slavs*),⁴⁴ for these are translations and adaptations, rather than the central achievements of his work. Both are projects in which Pushkin introduced a different point of view or form or intonation into Russian poetry, which means that we hear another voice (including the voice of another culture) in the poems as much as we hear Pushkin's. Sedakova wrote an essay on *The Bronze Horseman*, a structuralist reading of its compositional and plot features,⁴⁵ and there are moments when she turns to major and more characteristic works, for example in her essays.⁴⁶ Still, it is significant that Sedakova would look to relatively less well-known poems by Pushkin for inspiration; in that impulse she resembles, oddly, Kibirov, who drew on the unfinished prose fragment 'Maria Schoning' for his verse epistle mentioned at the start of this chapter. Such an impulse to look at Pushkin's less famous writings shows us the scholarly side of Sedakova, and it is also her way of circumnavigating the massive myth of Pushkin, indeed of finding her way through the myth back toward the poetic legacy of language, rhythms, and meanings.

If this is a conservative move, then it is so only in a narrow and very specific sense. The poet wishes to keep hold of an idea of poetry from the past, particularly to ensure that less well-known or less well absorbed aspects of the poetry are not forgotten. Sedakova has praised the wish to preserve the past in modernist poetry, and her attention to Pushkin can be read as one instance of preservation in her own work.⁴⁷ But the conservatism of this attention should not blind us to its elements of fresh, new thinking: her turn to Pushkin may inspire us toward a more innovative reading of his work, and of her own as well.

I shall make this last point in a cursory way. The most distinctive thing about Sedakova's poetry, I believe, is the way she disperses selfhood in her poems across the objects, ideas, and persons. As she wrote in an afterword to the English edition of *The Wild Rose*:

If one uses the rather schematic division, proposed by Brodsky, of poetry being either *song* or *confession* (confession of course in the popular sense), then poetry as *song* has always attracted me. In song a person does not engage in self-expression (except unwittingly), rather he wills himself to unite with something essentially other.⁴⁸

A large topic hides here, for Sedakova's songs unquestionably also express a self; to understand the topic, one would need to address the little explored question of how she, like Pasternak and Brodsky, writes poetry that is dense with the logic of philosophy even as it is infused by the beauty of song. But Pushkin's example is also relevant, and in ways that may yield new perspectives on his poetry of self-creation. Monika Greenleaf has provided the best account of Pushkin's elegant patterns of self-description,⁴⁹ but Sedakova's songs of the self

also lead us toward poems where he seems most absent. Writing of Pushkin, she has exclaimed that no other lyric poet had his capacity to imagine the world without himself in it: 'Pushkin leaves the world free of himself'.⁵⁰ New attention to works like *Songs of the Western Slavs* and *Imitations of the Koran* can teach us how poems with few self-referential flourishes also participate in the myths of the poet we inherit from Pushkin. And that topic, in turn, could well circle us back to the contemporary period, when models of poetic self-creation seem to have taken so many new forms.

NOTES

My thanks to Olga Sedakova for illuminating conversations and for providing me with copies of her published and unpublished writings, and to John Malmstad for very helpful comments on this chapter.

1. Dmitrii Aleksandrovich Prigov, *Napisannoe s 1975 po 1989, Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, Moscow, 1997, pp. 239-44; Prigov's early poems about Pushkin appear in this volume as well (including pp. 88-91, 96, 107).
2. Also his target in a poem that begins 'Kto vydet skazhet chestno: / Ia Pushkina ubil!' Ibid., p. 88.
3. Prigov daringly suggests that Pushkin's poetry is as tainted as is the myth, as in his poem 'Vnimatel'no kol' prigliadet'sia segodnia', which ends 'A vot by stikhi ia ego unichtozhil - / Ved' obraz oni prinizhaiut ego' (Ibid., p. 90).
4. An excellent discussion of this poem appears in Kevin M. F. Platt, *History in a Grotesque Key: Russian Literature and the Idea of Revolution*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1997, pp. 171-82. For the poem, see Timur Kibirov, *Santimenty: Vosem' knig*, Izdatel'stvo 'Risk,' Belgorod, 1994, pp. 297-304; or Platt, pp. 272-85, which includes facing translation into English.
5. The topic of Brodsky and Pushkin is interestingly treated in Valentina Polukhina's contribution to this volume; see also her extensive bibliographical references there. For an instance of pure reverence, see the many Pushkin-inspired poems of Bella Akhmadulina: *Zimniaia zamknutost'*, Pushkinskii fond, St Petersburg, 1999, collects her poems and criticism that refer to Pushkin. Another intriguing expression of admiration for Pushkin are the poems that finish his incomplete fragments. For a striking instance, see Genrikh Sapgir, 'Chernoviki Pushkina', *Druzhba narodov*, IV, 1999, pp. 110-15 (the poems were first published in 1992).
6. Even her detractors, like Vladimir Slavetskii, writing in a disdainful *Novyi mir* review essay, praised *Starye pesni*, a focus for the present chapter; see Vladimir Slavetskii, 'Dorogi i tropinka', *Novyi mir*, IV, 1995, pp. 233-7. Similarly hostile is Vladimir Slavianskii, 'Iz polnogo do dna v glubokoe do kraev: O stikhakh Ol'gi Sedakovoi', *Novyi mir*, X, 1995, pp. 224-31. Admiration for *Starye pesni* and some discerning comments about the poetry appear in Mikhail Kopeliovich, 'Iavlennie Sedakovoi', *Znamia*, VIII, 1996, pp. 205-13.
For admiring responses to *Dikii shipovnik*, see Viacheslav Vs. Ivanov, introduction to Sedakova, 'Solovei, filomela, sud'ba ...', *Druzhba narodov*, X, 1988, pp. 121-5; introduction on p. 121; Sergei Averintsev, 'Gore, polnoe do dna', in Sedakova, *Stikhi*, Gnozis, Moscow, 1994, pp. 358-63; D. S. (= V. A. Saitanov), 'Ol'ga Sedakova: Novyi put', in Sedakova, *Vrata, okna, arki*, YMCA Press, Paris, 1986, pp. 113-28, which also includes enthusiastic comments about *Starye pesni*.
7. Ol'ga Sedakova, 'Pushkin Akhmatovoi i Tsvetaevoi' (paper presented at the Moscow Tsvetaeva museum, May, 1996).
8. Ibid., p. 2. The 'encroaching darkness' recalls a description in Vladislav Khodasevich's 'Koleblemyi trenozhnik' (1921), in Khodasevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, Soglasie, Moscow, 1996-97, II, pp. 77-85.
9. Pertinent poems include *Predpesnia*, *Penie* (both in *Dikii shipovnik*, where two musical interludes also punctuate the volume), and, through its indirect relationship to Wagner's opera, the cycle *Tristan i Izol'da*. See Sedakova, *Stikhi*, op. cit., pp. 30, 43, 100-128.
10. The Prodigal Son tale is extremely important to Sedakova: it is retold in *Pobeg bludnogo syna* (in *Dikii shipovnik*) and invoked in *Stansy pervye*; see Sedakova, *Stikhi*, op. cit., pp. 32-3, 225-8. It is also the subject of one of the *Starye pesni*, mentioned below.
11. Sedakova's *Leavetaking* begins: 'Из тайных слез, из их копилки тайной / как будто шар нам вынули хрустальный - // и человек в одежде поминальной / несет последнюю свечу': see Sedakova, *Stikhi*, op. cit., p. 18.

12. Sedakova, *Stikhi*, op. cit., p. 23.
13. Like *Ballad of Continuation*, *Fifth Stanzas* sustains an aesthetic and self-consciously poetic reading as well. For the text of the poem, see Sedakova, *Stikhi*, pp. 255-8.
14. Sedakova, 'Chudo Borisa Pasternaka v russkoi poeticheskoi traditsii' in *Pasternakovskie chteniia* 2, Nasledie, Moscow, 1998, pp. 204-14; see pp. 206-7 on Zhukovskii. A slightly different version (with a computer-related garble in the ending) is available on the web at www.rema.ru:8101/komment/vadvad/sedakova/paster.htm.
15. For the Biblical antecedent, see Matthew 21:18-22 and Mark 11:12-14.
16. Yet one should not conclude that Pushkin's poem is in no sense Biblical: as Boris Tomashevskii observed, he drew on a translation of the Koran (by M. Verevkin, 1790) that used the language and style of Church Slavonic. See Tomashevskii, *Pushkin. Kniga vtoraiia*, Izdatel'stvo AN SSSR, Moscow-Leningrad, 1961, p. 19.
17. Sedakova notes both these points in 'Chudo Borisa Pasternaka'.
18. B. M. Eikhenbaum, *Stat'ia o Lermontove*, Izdatel'stvo AN SSSR, Moscow-Leningrad, 1961, p. 112, quoted in M. Ju. Lermontov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, Khudozhestvennaia literatura, Moscow, 1975, I, pp. 527-8. The commentary for this poem concentrates on its role in a polemic among Granovskii, Belinskii, and later Chernyshevskii; this aspect of the poem's history little interests Sedakova; in fact her realignment of it in a sequence from Pushkin to Pasternak emerges as a corrective to readings that stress political allegory.
19. Sedakova, *Stikhi*, op. cit., pp. 25-6.
20. The translation, as throughout this chapter, is my own, but I have consulted the version in Sedakova, *The Wild Rose*, translated by Richard McKane, Approach, London, 1998, pp. 27-9, and used several of its locutions.
21. Pasternak, *Chudo*, in Pasternak, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, Sovetskii pisatel', Leningrad, 1990, II, pp. 78-80, quotation on p. 80. For a translation of the poem into English, see Pasternak, *Doctor Zhivago*, translated by Max Hayward and Manya Harari, poems translated by Bernard Guilbert Guerney, Ballantine, New York, 1981, pp. 554-5. I have used some locutions from this translation in my more literal version here.
22. I suspect that his poem also provided a stimulus to her *Elegiia smokovnitsy*, in Sedakova, *Stikhi*, op. cit., pp. 306-8.
23. Darra Goldstein, *Nikolai Zabolotsky: Play for Mortal Stakes*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993, p. 215.
24. Ol'ga Sedakova, 'O Zabolotskom', *Krug chteniia*, V, 1995, pp. 83-4. Sedakova appended to this brief essay a few of his poems, *Lesnoe ozero* among them.
25. N. A. Zabolotskii, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, Sovetskii pisatel', Moscow-Leningrad, 1965, p. 84. For a good translation of the entire poem, see Goldstein, op. cit., pp. 213-14.
26. This aspect of Zabolotskii's work is well illuminated in Nikita Zabolotskii, "'Prirody ochistitel'naia sila": Sotsial'no-eticheskie elementy naturfilosofskoi poezii Zabolotskogo', *Voprosy literatury*, July-August, 1999, pp. 17-36; *Lesnoe ozero* is briefly discussed in the essay, pp. 26-7. My thanks to Tatiana Babyonysheva for bringing this essay to my attention, and for wonderful conversations about Zabolotskii and Sedakova.
27. For a splendid reading of Pushkin's poem, see Andrew Kahn, 'Pushkin's Wanderer Fantasies', in Stephanie Sandler, ed., *Rereading Russian Poetry*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1999, pp. 225-47.
28. Other poems in the *Podrazhaniia Koranu* rely more on eighteenth-century Russian philosophical ode, translations of the psalms, or *dukhovnye stikhi*. See Tomashevskii, *Pushkin. Kniga vtoraiia*, pp. 25-7, for a concise description of the formal features of *Podrazhaniia Koranu*.
29. In another reading that follows Gasparov's idea of the poem's semantic aureole, Michael Wachtel has written on the many poems shaped by *Chernaia shal'*: see Wachtel, *The Development of Russian Verse: Meter and its Meanings*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998, pp. 20-58. Note that the romantic ballad discussed here has the same amphibiaic tetrameter found in the poems Sedakova discusses in 'Chudo Borisa Pasternaka' but with couplet, not stanzaic, form.

30. On Sedakova's dedication of the cycle to her grandmother, see her comments in Sedakova, *The Wild Rose*, op. cit., p. 228.
31. A. S. Pushkin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, Nauka, Leningrad, 1977-79, III, p. 295, for the entirety of *Pesni zapadnykh slavian*, see vol. III, pp. 263-93.
32. Compare *Dikii Shipovnik*, where musical interludes are placed as pauses in the sequence of poems.
33. Sedakova, *Stikhi*, op. cit., p. 138.
34. Sedakova's reliance on the Pushkinian metrical model has been noted in D. S., op. cit., p. 124. On the metrical features of strict accentual verse, or *taktovik*, see Gasparov, 'Russkii narodnyi stikh i ego literaturnye imitatsii', in Gasparov, *Izbrannye trudy, lazyki russkoi kul'tury*, Moscow, 1997, III, pp. 54-131; Gasparov, 'Taktovik v poezii XX veka', in Gasparov, *Sovremennyi russkii stikh: Metrika i ritmika*, Nauka, Moscow, 1974, pp. 294-351; and Barry P. Scherr, *Russian Poetry: Rhythm, Meter, and Rhyme*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1986, pp. 160-9.
35. For a discussion of Pushkin and Mérimée, see, David Baguley's 'Pushkin and Mérimée, the French Connection: On Hoaxes and Imposters' in Joe Andrew and Robert Reid, eds, *Pushkin's Legacy*, Rodopi, Amsterdam and Atlanta, 2002.
36. One of the most lucid songs, *Nevernaia zhena*, defied the comprehension of Mikhail Kopeliovich in 'Iavlennie Sedakovoi', p. 211 (he calls the poem utterly confusing).
37. Sedakova, *Stikhi*, op. cit., p. 153.
38. Valentina Polukhina, however, rightly notes political impulses in the poem *Elegiia, perekhodiaschaia v rekviev* and in the essay 'Puteshestvie v Briansk': Polukhina, 'Ol'ga Sedakova', in Christine D. Tomei, ed. *Russian Women Writers*, Garland Press, New York, 1999, II, pp. 1445-8; see p. 1446. For the poem and the elegy, respectively, see Sedakova, *Stikhi*, op. cit., pp. 259-68 and *Volga*, V-VI, 1992, pp. 138-57. Sedakova's observations about Soviet commemorations of the Second World War are also pertinent: for these reflections on politically motivated artistic expressions, see her contribution to "'Voiny u nikh v pamiati netu, voina u nikh tol'ko v krovi'", *Znamia*, V, 1995, pp. 183-99; see p. 196.
39. See Sedakova, "'Vakantsiia poeta': k poetologii Pasternaka", *Byt' znamenitym nekrasivo': Pasternakovskie chteniia*, I, Nasledie, Moscow, 1992, pp. 24-30; translated into English by Vitaly Chernetsky as 'The Vacancy of a Poet: Toward a Poetology of Pasternak', in Sandler, ed., *Rereading Russian Poetry*, op. cit., pp. 71-7.
40. Perhaps the best instance is her work, beginning in 1998-99, on a radio show about poetry. It includes an opportunity for her listeners to call in their questions.
41. Bethea, *Realizing Metaphors: Alexander Pushkin and the Life of the Poet*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1998. Bethea (in my view) exaggerates Pushkin's wish for public esteem and the role of ambition in his poetic development, but his opinion is shared by others and rightly calls attention to important and complicated aspects of Pushkin's creative psyche.
42. On the creation of an Orthodox Pushkin in the contemporary period, see Brian Horowitz's review of the first four issues of *Moskovskii Pushkinist* and Wendy Slater, 'The Patriots' Pushkin', *Slavic Review*, LVIII, 2, June, 1999, pp. 407-27, 434-9.
43. Sedakova, "'Nesmertnye tainstvennye chuvstva" (o khristianstve A. S. Pushkina)' (presented at the Andreevskie chteniia, Bibleisko-bogoslovskii institut Sv. Apostola Andreiia, December 12-13, 1999, Tsvetaeva museum, Moscow); quotation from p. 3, typescript; an English translation of this paper, in a slightly different version, appears as "'Non-Mortal and Mysterious Feelings": On Pushkin's Christianity' in *Pushkin's Legacy*.
44. There is also a third Pushkin epigraph, used in a journal publication of several poems from *Dikii Shipovnik* but not included in the book: it is a line from Pushkin's translation from André Chénier, 'Bliz mest, gde tsarstvuet Venetsiia zlataia'. The quoted line is the last, 'I tainye stikhi obdumyvat' liubliu...': see Sedakova, 'Iz knigi "Dikii shipovnik": Legendy i fantazii', *Znamia*, VIII, 1992, pp. 103-10, epigraph on p. 103. That publication includes *Ballada prodolzheniia*, but with no epigraphs.
45. 'Mednyi vsadnik: Kompozitsiia konflikta', *Rossiiia-Russia*, VII, 1991, pp. 39-55.

46. For example, she quotes a landscape description from *Derevnia* (1819) as an instance of something that feels fated in 'Zametki i vospominaniia o raznykh stikhotvorenniakh, a takzhe POKHVALA POEZII', in Sedakova, *Stikhi*, op. cit., p. 318.
47. Sedakova, 'Uzel zhizni, v kotorom my uznany: Russkaia poeziia 30-40 godov kak dukhovnyi opyt' (unpublished paper, 1999).
48. Sedakova, *The Wild Rose*, op. cit., p. 231. I give my own translation of the Russian original.
49. Monika Greenleaf, *Pushkin and Romantic Fashion: Fragment, Elegy, Orient, Irony*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1994.
50. Sedakova, "'Nesmertnye tainstvennye chuvstva'", p. 12 (typescript).