This 2023 translation
is dedicated to
Ekaterina Drobyazko,
Alexei Parshchikov's
widow, with thanks
for her efforts to keep
his writing alive and
available for readers.

Содержание

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From the Translator

Alexei Parshchikov (b. 1954 in Olga in the Russian Far East) was a writer in the Russian language, but lived his early years and many later years in Ukraine. He studied agriculture in college. In the 1980s he was member of several avant-garde groups in Moscow, associated for instance with the fantastical dissident Dmitri Prigov, and he worked with Arkadii Dragomoshchenko and Club 81 in what was then Leningrad. In the 1990s he left Russia for good and spent two years earning a degree at Stanford University, where his thesis was on Prigov. During this stint in California, he visited me in San Diego and we drove inland from the coast to the Anza Borrego desert, along with my UC San Diego class of writers. At the desert he loved the non-human scale, the entire want of vegetation. After his return to Europe, I lost touch with him, but here in my note are precious late-life facts.[1]

I first knew Parshchikov in Moscow and Kyiv in the late 1980s. In Moscow he introduced me to Dmitri Prigov, Ilya Kutik, and Mikhail Epshtein. He was my guide in Kyiv for a week in autumn 1988, where he introduced me to writers, journalists, singers, and architectural and religious sites. He was in

1 Ekaterina Drobyazko, the poet's widow, wrote to me in March 2023: "After Stanford, Parshchikov lived for a short time with his wife Martina Hügli. They separated, and in 1996 he joined his parents in exile in Germany. Since the late 90s, Parshchikov continued to travel to poetry festivals: for example, to Rotterdam, and to readings in Moscow. He translated from English the book *Sun* by Michael Palmer (2000), and participated in Vyborg, a project by Finnish-American artist Lisa Roberts (2001) . . . We got married in 2002 . . . [Also in] 2002 there appeared under one cover *Metarealist Poets*, with poems by AP, Alexander Eremenko, and Ivan Zhdanov. In subsequent years, Alyosha published books in Moscow: *Soprikosnovenie pauz* (2004), the poems and essays in *Angary* (2006), *Rai medlennogo ognia* (2006), and *Zemletriasenie v bukhte Ze* (2008). The latest initiative of Alyosha was the translation, together with Patrick Henry and Mark Shatunovsky, of American poet Charles Bernstein's *Artifice of Absorption* (2008). [I should add that] in 2005 he met [the] German poet/translator Hendrik Jackson and began translating his poetry and essays. He was the initiator [of bringing] modern German poets to the Moscow Biennale of Poets in 2005, where he himself won the award in the category 'Literary Legend.' Our son Matthäus was born in 2006. In the same year, Alyosha had his first operation. The second was in 2008. Alyosha died in Cologne on April 3, 2009. He was buried in the ancient city cemetery [called] Melaten."

Leningrad at the time of the 1988 reading by Robert Creeley in a palace on Nevsky Prospekt, and took part in hosting the American writer. The cover of this book is a photo I took at the time. It is placed here as a record of Alexei at a moment just before the 1989 publication of his wonderful book *Figures of Intuition*, which contains the *poema*, or long poem, titled *I Lived on the Battlefield of Poltava*. In the 1989 volume, most of the poem is printed sideways to accommodate the long lines.[2]

Official publishing houses in Russia before the fall of communism in 1989 were publishing books that seem, in retrospect, astonishingly innovative, complex in theme and treatment, avant-garde, and personal. What we may have missed about the period was that new work coexisted with official and socially approved writing by Writers' Union members; the new poets were not Union members, but had lunch privileges (and could run lectures and readings) in the grand sanctuaries of the official writers with their ten-foot statues of Mayakovsky. The actual published volumes of the new poets were pamphlet-like, small in size and with tiny print fonts, and sold for a few rubles, but their contents pushed against every boundary except the one involving the viability of the Russian political system: there, there only, did censorship draw the line. Writers were exquisitely sensitive to that line and so able to test it. Since then, of course, almost everything has changed.

This is a poem historical-geographical-ecological. It plays upon/against a name that readers in the West may not fully appreciate, though in our time, after the very recent Russian invasion of Crimea, the Donbas, and now the whole independent country of Ukraine, the question about the name is a terrible thing to those living in the region. Ukraine, U-Kraina, literally means "On the Border," and so the historical issue is sedimented in the term for the nation. (Parshchikov in his long poem alludes to this issue by speaking more than once of "the country called U.") Ukrainians cannot escape their anguish-of-relation to Russia because it is deep-buried in the consciousness of their language, and because it has existential force in their history. Russian autocrats who owned them as a Russian republic until 1989 still feel Ukraine is within their sphere because it is on their immediate margin and was theirs

2 *Figures of Intuition*, Russian title *Figury intuitsii*, was published by Moskovskii rabochii in Moscow in 1989. The poem can be found there on pages 31–69. It is of some interest that the book is a quarter inch thick, five by six inches in flat dimensions, and cost thirty-five kopecks. The title page of my copy of this book has this inscription: "for Donald / even in the desert we feel ourselves together with the poetry, and the desert appreciates it / Alexei Parshchikov / Ca. 1991." The more recent edition of the Poltava poem, which became the basis of this translation, is to be found in Alexei Parshchikov, *Dirizhabli* [Dirigibles], with an introduction by Ilya Kukulin (Moscow: Vremia, 2014), 68–94.

until recently. Historically, they won Ukraine at the Battle of Poltava in 1709 even though the name of the territory came later. For Russians, the flashpoint is that Ukraine in its new status, and with its own language and political system, could be drawn westward through membership in NATO.

In the poem, the players are Charles XII of Sweden, who was far from home with his regiments when he was defeated (and shot in the foot!) at the Battle of Poltava, though this did not stop his dynastic ambitions for new territory; Peter the Great in St. Petersburg, whose generals brought up troops and cannon to defeat the invader of lands that he claimed as his own; and Ivan Mazepa, the treacherous Hetman of the Zaporozhtsy Cossacks on both banks of the Dnipro. As traitor to Peter and Russia, Mazepa aligned with the Swedish king in order to rule the territory that his ethnic minority already occupied. The historical ambiguity, still an issue in Ukraine and in this poem, is that Mazepa is by one reading a Ukrainian patriot, and by another the betrayer who sent his forces to fight for Russia. After all, Russia is forever the victor in that battle. (Four times more Swedes died in the battle than Russians, and Russia's rule was solidified until the undoing of communism centuries later, just a few years after the time of writing of this poem, which ironically is not in the Ukrainian but in the Russian language.) There is also Mariya Kochubey, nicknamed Marfa, the hetman's goddaughter: is she a sex-object and a punchingbag for Mazepa, or is that the author's invention? (Being a godfather was, and still is, a serious religious obligation in the Orthodox Church, so what is happening in chapter two may be blasphemy as well as sexual violence.)

The other actors are the soldiers on both sides, whose lives were lost, blood soaked into the black Ukrainian soil just where the writer is tending his garden. For the dynasts the writer has ironic scorn; for the soldiers nothing but fellow-feeling, respect, pity. Chapter one concerns the origins of cannon and knives, a deep dive into the human need to harm enemy others. These are fantasy-origins, but the energies of disgust are real in the poem's language.

A poem, then, that contains history, and that interrogates it. History: overlay and interpenetration of eras. Eras widely separated in time, but their location is the same, a stretch of ground where men of different nations, under different flags, fight and die. The ground is sacred, even though now it is covered with train-tracks and a psychiatric hospital, and the writer's plot of earth where he observes plants and animals, tends his garden, relaxes in his hammock, drinks the local grog, works in a nearby bar, meets a young woman who is a modern girl but sometimes fades into the imaginary image of historical Marfa.

Ecology, too. Parshchikov's training as agronomist is evident everywhere in the poem. It can be traced in his frequent use of names of animals and plants, in the practical notice of work on the land, and in concern for the lives and deaths of non-human beings including an ant and beetles of several species. He also loves and uses place names, including those of the local river and forest, as well as nearby towns. In one section, Parshchikov speaks as a little lamb, entering the consciousness of the animal other, an animal as a potential victim of our weapons. He saves for his last action, and the near-to-last use of personal pronouns for himself, an account of spraying his territory with blue vitriol. He is himself poisoning the living beings in the surroundings, but also by extension making dead once again the historical and geographical actors of the previous sections. The garden is what has obliterated the battlefield by action of time and growth.

Chapter two, part seven is the most famous section in the poem, rightly so for its picture of devastation of everything including the narrator and the human as a war-making species. Whisk it all away! This long-line section is the culmination of the long poem, the best thing in the *poema*, and one of the great examples of garden poetry in world literature (the best since Andrew Marvell's "The Garden" in the seventeenth century, and more capacious than Marvell because of the historical contempt it carries). The author's point: Now we're killers even of the gardens where we once found solace and recreation and pleasure, so gardens are no longer the classic opposite, to play off against battlefields. Blue vitriol is the indissoluble evil in our blood and bones. The agronomist/ecologist is also a thinker because he is also a killer.[3]

The previous translations from this long poem are in flexible free verse, which is entirely appropriate for this writer.[4] These do well to capture the interruptive logic of the original, the line of broken-

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3 An early recognition of Parshchikov's long poem for the English-speaking world, and the best interpretation I know, is in Alexandra Smith's *Montaging Pushkin: Pushkin and Visions of Modernity in Russian Twentieth-Century Poetry* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi Editions, 2006). Alexandra Smith calls this long poem "perhaps the most important achievement of Russian post-perestroika poetry" (ibid., 318). She notes that the poem was the winner of the Andrei Bely Prize in 1985. Ilya Kukulin also remarks on the poem in his introduction to *Dirigibles.*

4 There are translations of single sections of the whole poem in John High et al., eds., *Crossing Centuries: The New Generation in Russian Poetry* (Jersey City, NJ: Talisman House, 2000); and in Alexei Parshchikov, *Blue Vitriol*, a selection of the major poems including part of the Poltava, with translations by John High, Michael Molnar, and Michael Palmer, and an introduction by Marjorie Perloff (Pengrove, CA: Avec Books, 1994). Not from this long poem, but with

off speech and of quick-change images that makes Parshchikov's Russian so vivid as personal style. Because this has already been achieved for the introduction and for the blue vitriol section of the text, and already valid, I have chosen instead to *follow the original* in its decision that most of the poem, in the first two chapters (before the quirky prose of chapter three), should be in traditional rhyme and meter. The poem is wildly various and imaginative in its thinking and its welling-up of images in sequences, but it is carefully Pushkinian in its outer forms. That disjunction is intentional and artistic, and cannot be achieved, at least in a similar way, in American free verse. Also, as a matter of scale, here we have the whole poem in its clever turnings. I have tried to give the equivalents for that complex feeling-tone in English, and it has involved imitating the way the rhyming is very often opportunistic and an occasion for humor through sound effects. Also, I have sometimes added elements in part-lines so as to be more explicit than the original: this to help the reader better understand the allusions and meanings of the original Russian. The notes at the end also aim at unobtrusive clarification. I will add that there are many leaping forms of logic and unexpected metaphors, in the Russian and therefore in the translation, that should not be clarified. These are to be respected and interrogated, as Alexei Parshchikov's signature innovations in style. In the introduction he himself says it all: "this jumping method of movement."

Briefly, to focus the interpretation of the poem's structures of meaning, large and small, I would double back to its late-Soviet origin in the mid-1980s; the time when Mikhail Epshtein invented for this writer and two others the name "metarealists." After 1989, Alexei Parshchikov would say that his grouping in a school of metarealism with Ivan Zhdanov and Aleksandr Eremenko was inexact, even mythical. However, without doubt, his friend Epshtein's brilliant campaign helped the visibility of all three unofficial writers as somewhat similar, especially in their attitudes toward pre-1989 Soviet conventional thinking, and toward metaphors in poems. Here, bringing to the Poltava poem a topic of some contention, I would pull out a couple of strands from existing definitions of 1980s metarealism. (Note, for context, that before 1989, in the death-throes of communism, these writers hovered in discomfort between an unofficial and an official existence, but at least they had an audience. After 1989, most of them lost an audience and a mission along with a national identity, as the door they were kick-

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fine versions of stand-alone poems, the other translations known to me are in Kent Johnson and Stephen M. Ashby, eds., *Third Wave: The New Russian Poetry* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992); and in Alexei Parshchikov, *Selected Poems*, trans. Michael Palmer and Wayne Chambliss (New York: KRik Publishing House, 2016).

ing was suddenly flung open. What they then had left was the Russian language, and the assignment of what to do with new freedoms.)

The poetics of metarealism involved questioning culturally established meanings. They foregrounded the fluidity of meaning, the perception of a world where one reality hides another, the values of incongruity and unexpectedness. In poetic practice, this meant reacting to a disturbed existence, a stubbornly thing-like reality that opens up beyond the metaphor, with yet a heavy emphasis on this device as both literal and figurative. For metaphor as both a local device and a larger structure, these poetics took the prefix "co-" of ideological *comparison* as more urgent than any "meta-" of *likening*. If I relate this 1980s social poetics to Poltava as a historical poem of the late-Soviet underground, I find these multi-planar associations-in-contrast: a heroic official battleground *with* a vegetable garden on the same site in present-day Ukraine; a gardener who kills every living thing in his plot with blue vitriol; a dolphin who drives a car in the landlocked middle of a continent; a speaking lamb; and an introduction and two chapters in strict traditional verse, skillfully handled, *with* a third and final chapter in sentences-equal-to-line, stabbing free verse.[5]

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Since a college course with Hugh McLean on Russian fiction, I have worked to learn the Russian language through native-speaker tutors, two summer-long workshops, computer courses through Rosetta Stone, and three months in then-Leningrad on a fellowship at Leningrad State University to confer on poetry with German Vasilievich Filippov. I managed to require glasses for the first time, in my forties, working with Russian dictionaries. I met with scholars at conferences on Russian thinker

5 Books and articles exist that pursue the history of the metarealist school, and that try defining key terms. The main articles and books by Mikhail Epshtein, the 1980s inventor of metarealism as a style, are listed in the bibliography of Aleksandr Zhitenev, whose recent article on "The Circle of Metarealist Poets" appears in *The Oxford Book of Soviet Underground Culture*, ed. Mark Lipovetsky et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021). I also recommend Zhitenev's clever and comprehensive article, and the book by Ol'ga Severskaia, *Iazyk poeticheskoi shkoly: idiolekt, idiostil', sotsiolekt* (Moscow: Rossiskaia akademiia nauk, Institut russkogo iazyka im. V. V. Vinogradova, 2007). I will mention that I devote a few close-reading pages to Parshchikov's metarealist lyric, "Minus-Korabl" [Minus Ship] (1980s), in my book *Animal Perception and Literary Language* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019). I will mention that I devote a few close-reading pages to Parshchikov's metarealist lyric, "Minus-Korabl" [Minus Ship] (1980s), in my book *Animal Perception and Literary Language* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

Mikhail Bakhtin and wrote a book on *Bakhtin and the Social Moorings of Poetry* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2004). At that time, I was one of many persons who received the immense intellectual generosity of the famous Russianist Caryl Emerson. With that as preparation, I have found extremely helpful an English prose version by Slav Tsarynnyk, who set the poem up in lines and in strict Russian word-order. When, here, the syntax in English seems peculiar, most often that is the Russian syntax shining through the sentence. When the notes are factual they are by Slav Tsarynnyk; when the notes are interpretive they are by me. The author's brief footnotes appear at the end of the Russian text of the poem, and all five of these are further explained in my notes at the end of the translation.

Donald Wesling
Pacific Beach, California

Я жил на поле Полтавской Битвы

п о э м а

Алексей Парщиков

I Lived on the Battlefield of Poltava

Alexei Parshchikov

Translated from the Russian by
Donald Wesling

Вступление

Беги, моя строчка, мой пёс — лови! — и возвращайся к ноге
с веткой в сходящихся челюстях, и снова служи дуге, —

улетает посылка глазу на радость, а мышцам твоим на работу,
море беру и метаю — куда? — и море приспосабливается к полёту,

уменьшаясь, как тень от очков в жгучий день, когда их на пробу
приближают к лицу, и твердея, как эта же тень, только чтобы

лечь меж бумагой и шрифтом и волниться во рту языком; наконец,
вспышка! — и расширяется прежнее море, но за срезом страниц.

Буквы, вы — армия, ослепшая вдруг и бредущая краем времён,
мы вас видим вплотную — рис ресниц, и сверху — риски колонн, —

брошена техника, люди, как на кукане, связаны температурой тел,
но очнутся войска, доберись хоть один до двенадцатислойных стен

Идеального Города, и выспись на чистом, и стань — херувим,
новым зреньем обводит нас текст и от лиц наших не отделим.

Всё, что я вижу, вилку даёт от хрусталика — в сердце и мозг,
и, скрестившись на кончиках пальцев, ссыпается в лязг

Introduction

Run out, my line, my dog—and catch!—run back to my foot,[1]
Branch in your closing jaws, complete the arc of throw, then out

Away again it sails, work for your muscles, joy for your eyes,
Then I scoop the sea and toss it—where?—sea entire flies,

Reduces in size to a sunglass lens, bright day, lift
These frames to face, the lens light hardens, the shadow will shift

To lay sense between paper and print, make waves with the tongue; last,
Return that previous sea but now with the pages surpassed,

Flash! Letters, you—you alphabet army now blind,
Eye-lash brush-stroke—you columns drawn along the edge of time,

Abandoned equipment, packs of men like fish strung
Blood-cold on a line,[2] but these troops wake, attack along

The Perfect City's walls, sleep on clean floors, each then
Is!—clear-eye cherub of my text, their faces mine.

All things I see will fractal-in from eye to heart, around
The brain, then exit tips of fingers, now the sound

машинописи; вот машинка — амфитеатр, спиной развёрнутый к хору,
лист идёт, как лавина бы — вспять! вбок — поправка — и в гору.

Выиграй, мой инструмент, кинь на пальцах — очко! — а под углом
иным — те же буквы летят, словно комья земли, и лепится холм,

чуть станина дрожит, и блестят рычажки в капельках масла,
а над ними — не раскрытые видом гребешки душистые смысла,

сам не лёгок я на подъём, больше сил против лени затрачу,
а в машинку заложены кипы полётов и способ движенья прыгучий!

Правь на юг, с изворотом, чтоб цокнули мы языком над Стокгольмом,
уцепившись за клавишу — Ъ — мы оставим первопрестольный

снег. Я обольщён жарой. Север спокоен, как на ботинке узел, —
тем глубже он занят собой, чем резче ты дёрнешь морозный усик.

Не в благоденствии дело, но чтоб дух прокормить, соберём травы,
на хуторах плодоносных петляя в окрестностях тёплой Полтавы,

вот я, Господи, весь, вот мой пёс, он бежит моей властью
васильками — Велеса внук — и возвращается — св. Власий.

Of my typewriter: here, machine, the chorus of keys can mount
Where the white sheet comes avalanching down the cirque, up then in front.

Play it, my instrument, splay fingers—point!—new view—
Same letters bounce, earth clods build up into a queue.

It slightly trembles on its base, oil droplets glitter
On moving levers, while on top there's scent of subject matter,

I myself not always ready for anything, use too much force versus
My laziness, pull reams of flights through my machine, make verses

From this jumping method of movement! So! switch south to Stockholm,
Keep typing Russian's hard-sign key,[3] tongue-clicks unspoken,

Snow's left behind. I love this heat. Back north: calm; like a knot
In a boot-lace, you pull its tendril, it gets obstinate.

My topic isn't wealth but health, to feed our spirits rather,
By gathering herbs from villages surrounding warm Poltava.

And here I am, my God, all here—my dog, runs by my powers,
A god of earth and saint of church[4]—runs back through the cornflowers.

Глава первая,
в которой повествуется о происхождении оружия

1.1

Где точка опоры? Не по учебнику помню: галактики контур остист,
где точка опоры? Ушедший в воронку, чем кончится гаснущий свист?

Или перед собой её держит к забору теснящийся пыльный бурунчик,
или на донце сознания носит её трясогузка — прыткий стаканчик?

Но уронится заверть в расцепе с небесной зубчаткой, а птичка
вдоль отмели прыг-скок и ушла… Надо мной ли висит эта точка?

В сравнении с ней элементы восьмого периода — пух, дирижабли,
так тяжела эта точка и неустойчива — лишь время её окружает,

лишь ошмётки вселенной и палочки-души (две-три), прежде чем
утратиться вовсе, край иглы озирают, и — нет глубже ям.

Словно газета, заглавьем читая концовку, вращаясь и рея,
ближе к точке кривляются все, — кто же мог быть смешон перед нею?