To Robert, Debra,
Patrick and Thomas, with love.

Contents

A Note on Transliteration

For most Russian names in the text I use common Anglicized spellings based on the BGN/PCGN system of Romanization. Therefore *-iy* and *-yy* endings are simplified to *-y*, (as in Gennady), jotization is indicated by *y* (as in Yevgeny Yevtushenko and Aygi), interconsontal *-sh* is simplified to *–s* (as in Mandelstam and Epstein), *-ks* is rendered *–x* (as in Alexander and Maxim), and apostrophes are omitted for ъ and ь. However, bibliographical references preserve the Library of Congress transliteration of names to aid those who wish to consult the published sources cited.

Other Russian words are rendered according to the Library of Congress system, as are words from other languages, including German, French, and Czech.

Transliteration of Chuvash in the text follows the same pattern as Russian; names are generally Anglicized while other words are rendered using the Library of Congress system.

Acknowledgements

This project is the result of many years' work and is based on my doctoral dissertation from Princeton University. It all started in a graduate course on Contemporary Russian Poetry, taught by Michael Wachtel, when he came into class with a few copies of strange-looking poems and said to the three of us students, "See what you can make of these." Immediately I was hooked on the unique and mysterious poetry of Gennady Aygi. I realized there was something special and different about his work, unlike any Russian poetry I had studied or read, and the paucity of critical voices surrounding him reinforced my desire to characterize and articulate the importance of his poetics. This book is the result that desire.

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A version of the book's third chapter appeared in *Slavic and East European Journal* 51 (2008) as "Music, Silence and Spirituality in the Poetry of Gennady Aygi" and was reprinted in *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism* 282 (2013).

Though many university presses expressed interest in *Witness and Transformation*'s subject matter and recognized its scholarly merit, not many were willing to take on the risk of publishing a monograph on a Russophone Chuvash poet little known in the United States. Academic Studies Press believed in the project from the moment it surfaced in their inbox. The Press's anonymous reviewers offered useful and insightful suggestions. The two acquisitions editors I have worked with, Sharona Vedol and Meghan Vicks, have been tremendously cheerful, helpful, and patient as they ferried this first-time author through the publication process. I cannot thank Elizabeth Geballe enough for her thoroughly detailed and perceptive copyedits of both English and

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Finally, I would like to thank Gennady Aygi, to whom this volume is dedicated. It is my hope this book will spark more interest and conversation around his work, the beauty and significance of which we have only begun to discover.

Introduction

That is why language, the most dangerous of goods, has been given to man . . . so that he may bear witness to what he is . . .

—Friedrich Hölderlin

What are poets for in a time of need?

—Friedrich Hölderlin

In "Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry," Martin Heidegger uses key lines and phrases from the poet's oeuvre to locate that which is most essential in poetry. Because of the potentially broad nature of the project he takes pains to clarify why he chose the work of a single poet, and Hölderlin in particular, for this task. For Heidegger the goal is not to bring together the best or most representative poets, analyze their work, and by identifying common features or themes arrive at a universal truth. It is not to find a concept that holds true for all types

of poetry for all times, for in Heidegger's words, "an essence of that kind always misses what is most essential."[1]

Instead he sees his goal as something much more specific and urgent: to discover the quality of poetry that will determine its necessity or superfluity in the twentieth century. Therefore he chooses to consider Hölderlin's work because the poet takes as his subject and obsession the philosophical, aesthetic, and ethical nature of poetry. To Heidegger, "he writes solely about the essence of poetry. . . . He is the poet's poet."[2]

Heidegger's description of Hölderlin's work, its subject matter and its larger significance, readily apply to the work of Gennady Aygi. His constant return to the subject of poetry, his repeated reflections on the creative process, and the *raison d'être* of every word in every line he writes marks his work as primarily concerned with the essence, or Dasein, of poetry. Considering Heidegger's discussion further helps to put Aygi's work, which is often considered "unlike anything else"[3] in the Russian canon, in perspective.

The first notion Heidegger examines is that, in Hölderlin's words, poetry is "the most innocent of occupations."[4] This leads Hölderlin to the idea of play, and the possibility that the poet's primary concerns are invention and imagination, the fruits of which have little effect on reality. Indeed the European syllabo-tonic forms of the nineteenth century create a puzzle-like challenge for the poet to overcome in order to achieve maximum freedom of expression within the limits of a predetermined matrix of meter and rhyme. Seen only as sophisticated semantic play or an intellectual exercise, it constituted a grand and subtle game with the potential to impress and transport but not to effect any real change or action. The danger with confining poetry to the domain of this type of play for Heidegger, however, is the perceived association of play with a lack of seriousness, a lack of sustained viability. Play understood in this

1 Martin Heidegger, *Elucidations of Hölderlin's Poetry*, trans. Keith Hoeller (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2000), 52.

2 See note on pg. 22. Heidegger, *Elucidations of Hölderlin's Poetry*, 52.

3 Vladimir Bondarenko and Vladimir Novikov, "Dialog Nedeli: Slovo—zhivoe i mertvoe," *Literaturnaia gazeta* (November 15, 1989).

4 See note on pg. 22. Heidegger, *Elucidations of Hölderlin's Poetry*, 53.

reductive sense is childish, ephemeral, and reduces poetry to the "most innocent of occupations." In the world of literary criticism the kind of poetry that is most often associated with play is that which is labeled "experimental," work that deviates from canonical norms and deforms familiar linguistic and poetic structures. In many ways the equation of so-called experimental poetry with frivolous play is ironic, as it is mainly from such "experiments" at various points in history that language, poetry, and tradition have been transformed. Leaving the realm of safe, established language for the unknown also resurrects the danger that Hölderlin sees as a fundamental part of language. Aygi's work been labeled as "experimental," a subheading to the common description "avant-garde." Heidegger notes that play is also associated with a lack of responsibility. Play does not engage in real-world decision-making; it allows the "imaginary" to play itself out in a realm devoid of consequences, a realm in which images, words, and sentiments cannot bring about any change outside the limits of the game. While the discussion concerns poetry as a whole, poetry criticism often characterizes work as accessible or inaccessible based on its perceived level of engagement with the reader and canon, that is, the "real world." Work such as Aygi's that creates its own space of engagement is perceived as abstract and difficult. Thus play is seen as at once unserious and abstruse, and the implication is that poets who "play" with language, meaning, and form do so at the risk of distancing and even isolating themselves and their work, like a child in a quiet corner playing with his imaginary friends.

Heidegger does not affirm that poetry is not play, rather poetry is not play in the sense that the term is commonly understood, being associated with childishness, lack of seriousness, lack of responsibility, and ephemerality. This metonymic line of reasoning fails to take into account the material of which poetry is made: language. The dream-like reality of poetry obscures the fact that a poem is not made of ideas or images, or at least that these are not its fundamental constituents. Every facet of a poem, from its sound orchestration to its ability to conjure worlds of nostalgia and desire, is a consequence of its language. It is language that makes a poem breathe and live and it is a preoccupation with language that moves Heidegger toward insight into the essence of poetry.

Epstein's article "Methods of Madness and Madness as Method" makes the connection between Pushkin's fear of madness and Hölderlin's and Batyushkov's actual (clinical) madness. It also makes connections between "poetic madness" and the need for the poet (or artist) to retain a relationship to reason; the absence of reason—the giving of oneself to the totality of the imagination that has severed dialogic ties to reality—cannot sustain or create (or understand) poetry. It is important that other critics situate Hölderlin, his work and philosophy, as influential in the Russian tradition and we can link Epstein's posited "madness as method" to the idea of philosophical play seen in Aygi's work, both as a means of creating poetry and escaping the limitations of reason.

Pushkin approaches the *subject* of madness through strictly rhymed and metered verse, which mirrors his fear of madness taking over, a fear that was possibly influenced by his own visit to the mad Batyushkov in 1830, according to Epstein. In "God grant that I not lose my mind . . ." he enumerates the forms his madness would take: "And I would hark my fill of waves / And I would gaze with gladness filled . . . / And strong were I, and free were I . . ." On the surface these seem like states of rapture and joy: freedom, strength, gladness—all positive things. All things one would associate with the free poetic imagination able to soar beyond the bounds of reason into the realm of madness necessary for creativity. But the dark side of total madness is that all of these rapturous states lead nowhere, or worse—to destruction. Thus, Pushkin's poetic self fears gazing "with gladness . . . / Into the empty skies." And being free and strong "Like to the whirlwind gashing fields, / [And] breaking forests down." Instead of madness bringing the poet into harmony with nature it leads him to destroy it.[5]

Aygi's verse expresses madness even as the poet himself maintains lucidity. His ecstatically fragmented, syntactically complex, and at times syntactically null phrasing recalls the exclamations of Batyushkov deep in his "Italomania": "O homeland of Dante, homeland of Ariosto,

5 Mikhail Epstein, "Methods of Madness and Madness as Method," in *Madness and the Mad in Russian Culture*, eds. Angela Brintlinger and Ilya Vinitsky (Toronto; Buffalo; London: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 268-270.

homeland of Tasso! O my beloved homeland!" Aygi often uses this kind of passionate address in poems about his putative homeland, Russia, as in this excerpt from his 1967 poem "And: Awakening: Forest" ("И: ЗАСЫПАЯ: ЛЕС"):

и загораживая —
рукою
губами!.. —
о тайная
(где-то в тумане) —
с зевами
дышащими:
слегка — драгоценность:
. . .

and sparking sunrise —
with hand
lips!.. —
o mysterious
(somewhere in the fog)
yawning
breathing
lightly – a treasure:
. . .

Unlike Batyushkov and Hölderlin, who we may consider Aygi's poetic predecessors and who wrote in structured and rhymed iambs but succumbed to clinical madness later in life, Aygi, who wrote in sprawling free verse that approximates madness, never lost his connection with reason and continued to write compelling verse until his death. Epstein seems to apply ex post facto causality to Batyushkov's and Holderlin's illnesses based on their creative poetic imaginations. His argument for method as madness is perhaps more compelling—and more relevant here—than his formulation of madness as method. He hypothesizes that these poets, who were punished for forsaking

their homelands, Russia and Germany respectively, and casting their gazes to the far shores of Italian and Hellenic antiquity, were trapped in the rapturous hell of their own imaginations and, ultimately, doomed to live out their years and "deteriorate in the same dark spot where they had been born!"[6]

While he acknowledges that it is unlikely that Hölderlin's and Batyushkov's descents into mental illness were karmic revenge for their *Weltschmerz*, the notion reveals the complex relationship between the poet's dual nature as a citizen of a nation and a citizen of the world. Where should one's allegiances lie? Can one's identity as a poet conflict with one's allegiance to one's native language, citizenship, and sense of patriotism? Aygi navigated a similar duality, or multiplicity, in his role as a Chuvash subject of the Soviet Union who came to live in Moscow and its outlying areas, write in Russian, and place himself within the Russian poetic tradition. As a young man he talks about feeling tied to the Soviet cause and believing in communism, but early in his career his work becomes critical of the regime. However, while his work acknowledges the political ills and evils of the Soviet government he waxes ecstatic over the fields and forests of his Russian homeland. Aygi does not express his discontent with the political situation as a desire to be in another time or place, a common trope in the poetry of Hölderlin, Batyushkov, Mandelstam, and Brodsky. He does not romanticize antiquity or any other era, and this gives his criticism a clear-eyed realism. The only time-space he acknowledges as politically pure is the spiritual beyond, to which poetry is a portal. Through poetry he transforms the Russian landscape of fields, forests, and urban decay into realms of pure, reverent silence, distilling them to a Suprematist geometry that reveals their spiritual essence. Thus, the Russian landscape simultaneously encompasses the political evil of the Gulag and the spiritual purity of the fields and snow. His poetry is not apologist or escapist; it draws attention to the constant paradox of beauty coexisting with destruction, humanity with inhumanity. If we can link Aygi's poetics to madness at all, it is madness in the Platonic sense, specifically god-given madness. In her essay "Plato on Madness and

6 Epstein, "Methods of Madness and Madness as Method," 265.

the Good Life," Katja Maria Vogt provides a working description of this second type of Platonic madness:

> God-given madness is, like motivational love as discussed in the Symposium, a good phenomenon. Divine inspiration figures in the greatest achievements: creation of poems, healing of diseases, rescue from disaster, philosophical insight. In the phrase that is the ancestor of 'enthusiastic,' Plato says that in such conditions, a god is in the agent—the agent is *enthousiazôn* (*Phaedrus* 241e, 249e, 253a, 263d).[7]

"Enthusiastic" is certainly an apt description of the rapturous voice found in many of Aygi's poems. Take, for instance, a line from "Later that Day" ("Тогда тот день," 1991):

> И был – огромною молитвой: День! –
> *And it was – immense with prayer – Day! –*

A sense of divine inspiration is central to Aygi's poetic voice. Though he does not describe his own creative process as a visitation from the Muses, God, or gods, he does acknowledge the need for a quiet, dreamlike space in which to enter a state of poetic meditation or prayer.

Even if the types of madness we see displayed in the poetic work (and lives) of Hölderlin and Aygi differ in form and consequence, they share a desire to approach an ur-state of spiritual unity Hölderlin called Absolute Being.

In "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," Derrida posits play as an organizing principle of history and language. For Derrida, play is what lays the groundwork for presence. He returns to Nietzsche's critique of metaphysics, which reframes the concepts of being and truth as play, interpretation, and the sign (without the logos).[8]

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7 There are generally considered to be three types of madness that Plato describes in the *Symposium*, *Republic*, *Phaedrus*, and other works: 1) rational madness, 2) god-given madness and 3) a disordered cognitive state equivalent to mental illness. The first two types are seen as producing positive results, while the third is considered destructive (Vogt 177). Katja Maria Vogt, "Plato on Madness and the Good Life," in *Mental Illness in Antiquity*, ed. William Harris (Brill: Leiden, 2013), 183.

8 Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 280.

Play in this sense is the disruption of presence, an interplay between absence and presence and even perhaps an *alternative to* absence and presence. What this means is that play—free play in Derrida's terms—offers itself as an alternative to mythopoeia and history-making based on absolute origins, a stable center, nostalgia for origins, the preservation of purity and natural innocence, and (ultimately) historical guilt. In this traditional framework play is viewed as a lack. The Nietzschean conception of play, however, is an affirmation. It affirms and celebrates the world without center, without origins. It celebrates the non-center rather than grieving the loss or absence of a center that may have never existed. In this framework play is an active worldview, an ethical response to the logocentric discourse of history. Derrida sums up the contrasting views of play and their interpretations of history:

> There are thus two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of freeplay. The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering, a truth or an origin, which is free from freeplay and from the order of the sign, and lives like an exile the necessity of interpretation. The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms freeplay and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name man being the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or of ontotheology—in other words, through the history of all of his history—has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of the game. The second interpretation of interpretation, to which Nietzsche showed us the way, does not seek in ethnography, as Levi-Strauss wished, the "inspiration of a new humanism."[9]

The tension between the two approaches to interpretive discourse that Derrida outlines is the same tension that exists between the conflicting attitudes toward the methods and goals of poetry. Aygi's work is freeplay in that it celebrates the non-center, the lack of a stable, identifiable origin and in doing so affirms human life and suffering without moralizing or rationalizing the existence of one to support the other. It is this play-centered conceptual approach to history, poetry, and the creative process that sets Aygi apart from his Russian contemporaries and from the Russian canon in general. Aygi was an avid reader of Nietzsche

9 Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," 293.

throughout his life and no doubt encountered the ideas that Derrida brings forward here in his own reading. It is also quite possible that, as a student of Western philosophy, Aygi had read Derrida and other deconstructionists whose work was contemporaneous with his. It is less important, however, to establish a direct link between Aygi and these thinkers than it is to recognize the ways in which their conceptual approaches to poetry, history, and interpretive discourse resonate with one another.

Heidegger's goal is not to establish that the essence of poetry is play but rather to set the notion of play and innocence against another observation about the nature of poetry found in Hölderlin's writings, that the essential function of language is its ability to allow the poet—"man"—to bear witness "to what he is."[10] In an excerpt from a draft of a poem in which Hölderlin sets about distinguishing man from other living creatures, Heidegger notes that man is presented as not only he who can bear witness to what he is through language, but he who *must* bear witness. Witnessing is the condition in which man most fully expresses his humanity. In testifying and signifying, but also in being answerable for his testimony, man fulfills his existence. Witnessing is not merely an addition to or commentary on man's existence, but rather an integral part of being, an affirmation of belonging to the world and all that is in it. It establishes what Hölderlin calls "intimacy": the force that allows things to exist in opposition to one another and yet at the same time be joined together. As Heidegger notes, "man's being a witness to his belonging among beings as a whole occurs as history."[11] The creation of history, then, is a sustained act of the witnessing of man's—or in more contemporary terms, humanity's—role in both the creation and destruction of the world he inhabits, and his intimacy and identity with both processes.

A line of reasoning that Heidegger does not take up in his argument, even though his statements about witnessing as part of human existence seem to imply it, is that if the act of witness is not merely an addendum to man's existence but an integral part of it, each act

10 Heidegger, *Elucidations of Hölderlin's Poetry*, 54.
11 Ibid.

constitutes a transformation of the experience that is being witnessed, and ultimately changes how the witness witnesses. As the observer effect states, observing an event changes that event by nature of the necessarily interruptive quality of the tools of observation. In this case the "tool" is the poet, whose framing of the experience in language ultimately shapes and defines that experience and in turn, changes the act of witnessing—the poem. It is the quantum entanglement in which every poet finds him or herself: that language is always already saturated with history and it is not possible to stand outside of history or language. The task, then, becomes a simultaneous transformation of existence and its language. The trouble, however, is that, unlike in a laboratory, one's being and the events of human history are not controlled or discrete. Thus the line between being and witnessing is never clear, and the act of witness, then, is not only a part of existence but its essence. The essence of poetry is the essence of existence and vice versa.

Heidegger uses the words "man" and "poet" interchangeably to refer to the wielder of language, the creator of poetry, and the witness of human existence on a historical scale. But not every man, woman, or poet has the desire or capacity to use language in this way for these particular ends. This anticipates the conclusion Heidegger makes in his essay, which returns to his original specific aim: to discover an essential poetics in Hölderlin's work. Precisely owing to this distinction—of who can and must bear witness—Heidegger establishes the poet as a category apart and between. Between the gods, who can see the full unfolding of history before and after our part in it is played, and the people, who are the actors in this history.

> Thus the essence of poetry is joined to the laws which [sic] strive to separate and unite the hints of the gods and the voice of the people. . . . [The poet] is the one who has been cast out—out into that *between*, between gods and men. But first and only in this between is it decided who man is and where his existence is settled.[12]

Hölderlin establishes his world as that of the between, which is why for Heidegger he is the quintessential poet's poet. This is also the poetic

12 Ibid., 56 (Heidegger's emphasis).