

PASSA PORTA LECTURE 2013

by Mikhail Shishkin

A Declaration of Love

I was fifteen when I ventured to declare my love for the first time. I couldn't get a single word out; I was paralysed. Suddenly I came into an acute awareness of the mendacity, the treachery of words. Words, inane and bloodless, were absolutely incapable of encompassing what I felt. It was then that I first realised: all words are dead, and language is a means of incomprehension.

This revelation—that words can express nothing—is doubtless what conjures a writer into being. Anything of import takes place beyond words—and must be translated into the language of language. For there is no path but that through words. Nothing remains for the writer but to perform a miracle: to resurrect the dead words, to return them to life. Then, and then only, does it become possible to speak of love.

All true writing is a declaration of love to the world of God.

The writer, even one yet to write a word, makes a pact with destiny, accepting whatever she might throw at him as a gift, as a treasure. Familial joy and sorrow, humiliation and delectation, death and birth—all becomes the lifeblood for the words to come. War, prison, pain, blood—all that brings suffering to body and soul is fecund ground for writing. Great books are little concerned with the human happiness or unhappiness of their authors.

“If you but knew the trash whence, shameless, stanzas spring...”

The trash of the everyday? The stanzas care not. Yet the verse of Anna Akhmatova was born not of everyday trivialities, but of the ordeals that fate so generously bestowed upon her: the execution of her husband, the arrest of her son, opprobrium and obloquy, the ban on the publication of her poems, fear for those close to her, sorrow for killed innocents. Akhmatova’s verse is unimaginable without the context of her destiny.

Had she lived another, unmangled life, what poetry would Marina Tsvetaeva have written?

Had its author not endured the horrors of the Gulag, one of the greatest Russian books of the twentieth century, Varlam Shalamov’s *Kolyma Tales*, simply would have never seen the light of day.

The lives and deaths of proscribed and persecuted writers are inseparable from their oeuvres. If Andrei Platonov, Issac Babel, Mikhail Bulgakov, Osip Mandelshtam and hundreds of other long-suffering poets and writers had enjoyed an easier, happier fate, they would, of course, still have written *something*. But their books would have been completely different. And humanity would be deprived of the great works which form part of the world’s literary heritage. It is precisely those works, born of pain and blood, humiliation and torment, which make humanity what it is.

From the point of view of literary history, all writers and poets, even those still alive, have long since died. In a choice between an author's words and his human happiness, history will always choose the former. For history, it is the words that matter. Sooner or later the author shall disappear regardless, but his words shall endure.

That words count for more than personal happiness is gamely recognised by true writers and poets, for they are ever mindful of the pact they've made with destiny: to accept whatever may be thrown at them as a gift. In the words of Brodsky, "until clay's been rammed down my mouth, it shall resound only with gratitude."

All great books are words of gratitude.

But the writer, the poet has loved ones. And their point of view is entirely different from that of literary history. Their own flesh and blood is dearer to them than words.

My brother penned the best of his poems in prison.

His letters back home were voluminous, arriving in envelopes stuffed with pages from school exercise books. "I myself can feel," he wrote, "that my texts are different now. That they speak of different things. And I'm grateful."

He was allowed two visits a year. Mum paid big money to have him interned in the nearest *zona*, in Lgov, just a night's train ride away, so she could go and visit him, but she never did once make the journey. Cancer struck; she underwent a string of operations. So I had to go alone.

I remember the first of these visits very well.

Room no. 7—two beds, table, chair, small cabinet. Inside this last: pot, pan, kettle. In the table drawer: bent forks, blackened aluminium spoons. Roaches. The smell of prison is... a particular one. I had read much about it.

In his letters he assured Mum that the food was bearable, that working the stamping press was tiring but not punishing—so everything was all right. I thought all this was just for Mum: to give her a boost, to comfort her. And that's no doubt how it really was. He'd grown gaunt, his skin had become darker and more wrinkled. And the index finger of his left hand had disappeared.

Sasha smiled:

“It's nothing! I was working a night shift and lost focus for a second.”

It was strange to see him in his prison garb: a black jacket inscribed with his identification number, plus leather sandals.

Zeks (inmates) were allowed out only to go to the toilet, and while I jostled among the women in the kitchen, Sasha lay on his bed, eating cake and waiting for the chicken to arrive. Visits lasted two days, and this whole time frying and stewing went on relentlessly in the kitchen, as did the gobbling in inmates' rooms. Their stomachs, long accustomed to rations and meagre pickings from the prison kiosk, naturally refused to digest such quantities, and Sasha would often be running off down to the end of the corridor.

At night neither of us could fall asleep. Sasha kept tossing and turning, getting up, sitting himself at the table to write.

We spent the next day lolling in bed. He recited his poetry to me incessantly.

The grille on the window left little to see, just strips of grey sky, and my brother asked me questions about what there was on the outside.

Then came a shout:

“Shishkin!”

Growing very small and stony-faced, Sasha folded his arms behind his back and moved off hastily, sandals slapping on the floor.

Later he was transferred from Lgov to Ivdel, in the northern Urals. He asked for warm clothes in every letter. And he insisted that Mum absolutely must hold out until his return.

She waited four years. He returned in August, and Mum died two days later. Had he returned in, say, December, I'm convinced Mum would have held out till then, too.

Every extra day lived by a loved one is more precious than all the words in the universe. Love has its own pact with destiny.

It was only a good while after my move from Pushka to the canton of Zurich that the peculiar sensation I'd been experiencing—a sensation of unreality, of the carnivalesque—metamorphosed imperceptibly into a tentative, amazed confidence. This, truly, was no chimera: the trains were not playthings, the landscape no *trompe l'oeil* backcloth, the people not planted.

Immediately upon this change of scenery I set about finishing the novel I'd begun in Moscow, but to no avail. The letters I'd traced out over there had an entirely different consistency here. The novel was veering down a different course. Every word proved a stumbling block.

Borders, distance and air work wonders with words. Combinations of Russian sounds that seemed so self-evident and natural on Malaya Dmitrovka, with the Chekhov Casino roaring outside my window, won't be allowed through customs here. Words devoid of any independent existence there obtain residence permits here, becoming not a means but a subject of verbal law. Here, any Russian word sounds completely off and means something completely different. So too in the theatre: the meaning of any onstage utterance is transformed by a change of scenery.

It's as if a more powerful gravity reigns on the banks of the Limmat: any word sprung from a Russian inkwell weighs far more here than it would in its country

of origin. What in Russia is diffused in the atmosphere, what lives in every drop of snow and rain, in “Grushnitsky is a cadet”, in the Chechen war, in “Christ is risen from the dead”, is concentrated here in every word of Cyrillic script, stuffed, rammed into every last *bl*.

Retreating further and further from reality with each passing day, the nation seeks out new carriers and finds them in the squiggles of an exotic alphabet. Russia, together with all its belongings, has moved into the Cyrillic script. Letters, like apartments in earlier times, have been consolidated for new tenants.

My departure from language, the loss of Russian babbling in my ears, forced me to stop, to fall silent. My rare encounters with writers from Russia elicit the same surprised reaction: “How can you write in this boring Switzerland? Without the language, without the tension?”

They’re right—there is indeed a heightened pressure in Russian letters. What’s more, the language is changing rapidly.

My withdrawal from Russian speech forced me turn around and confront it. Work on the text stopped. As pauses play a part in music, so silences play a part in text. Perhaps theirs is the most important part of all.

What language did I leave behind? What did I take with me? Where next for words? A labour of silence.

To proceed any further, I had to understand what, in essence, it actually meant to write in Russian.

At once creator and creature of the country’s reality, the Russian language represents a mode of existence, a body for totalitarian consciousness.

Everyday life has always managed to get by without words, making do with bellowings and interjections, with anecdotes and quotes from films. It is the state and literature that require verbal coherence.

Russian literature is not merely a mode of existence for language, but a means for non-totalitarian consciousness to survive in Russia. Totalitarian consciousness has been served, most amply indeed, by directives and prayers. Directives from above, prayers from below. The latter, by and large, more original than the former. Profanity (*mat*) is the living, breathing prayer of the prison nation.

Edicts and *mat* are Russia's *yin* and *yang*, its rain and field, its phallus and vagina—the verbal underpinning of Russian civilisation. Over the generations, prison reality gave rise to a prison consciousness governed by the principle that “the choicest cuts go to the strongest”. This consciousness manifested itself in a language called upon to serve Russian life, maintaining it in a state of permanent, everlasting civil war. When life is lived by the law of the prison camp, the object of language is to instigate a cold war between each and every individual. If the strong must inevitably beat the weak, the object of language is to accomplish this verbally. To debase, to insult, to rob; language as a form of disrespect for the individual.

Russian reality produced a language of unbridled power and debasement. The language of the Kremlin and the prison-camp slang of the street share a single nature. In a country that lives by an unwritten yet unambiguous law—that the place of the weakest is by the slop bucket—the dialect is consistent with the reality. Words rape. Words degrade.

Had the borders remained locked down, no Russian literature would ever have come to be...

Literary language arrived in the eighteenth century together with the idea of human dignity. We had no words for that language. The first century of Russian literature consists, in essence, of translations and imitations. There was no verbal

apparatus for the articulation of individual consciousness. It first had to be created. Russian was taught as a foreign language, and thus far absent notions were introduced: sociality, enamourment, humanity, literature.

The Russian literary language—a body, a mode of existence for human dignity in Russia—squeezed through a crack between the bark of menace and the moan of pain. Russian literature wedged itself into an alien embrace. From words it constructed the great Russian wall between regime and people.

It was a foreign body. A colony of European culture on the Russian plain—if European colonisation is taken to mean a softening of manners and a defence of the rights of the weak before the strong, rather than the importation of German artillerymen.

As has happened on other continents as well, the colony overtook the parent states in its development. Turgenev, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky are all colonists whose works relocated literature's capital from the Old World to Russia. They took the best elements from a thousand-year legacy and—*Go east!*

But something is rotten in the Russian Tsardom, and from time to time state and people break through to one another, which spells bad news for foreign bodies. Writers' bones crack in these embraces. To die or slip away is all they can do.

Upon the familiar events of the twentieth century, the indigenous population returned once again to its former “literary process”: directives from above, prayers from below. Some “colonists” returned to their historical homeland; the tongues of those who remained were cut out by the savages.

The invented language of the Soviet utopia was also its very incarnation. Socialism's invented, lifeless reality existed only in the suitably lifeless language of newspapers, television and political assemblies. In the 1990s, when the regime disappeared together with the language that served it, the lingo of the prison camps scaled the heights—and filled the vacuum.

State and people are once again speaking the same dialect and “clockin’ Chechens in the toilet.”

Today, totalitarian consciousness lives on in the language of television, where shouting people down is the principal mode of dialogue. It is the language of the press, nauseatingly yellow. It is the language of the street, where *mat* has become the norm.

The language of Russian literature is an ark. An attempt at salvation. A perimeter defence. An islet of words upon which human dignity must be safeguarded.

Having left Russia, I lost the language I wanted to lose. The changes in contemporary Russian are a molting. The fur feels different, but the colouration—painfully recognisable—remains the same. This language, instrument of debasement, reproduces itself with each generation of Russian boys and girls. Literary language, conversely, has no independent existence of its own, and must be recreated again and again in solitary toil.

In order to build a Russian literary ark, you must become an exile. Withdraw. It matters little where—into the Alps or into yourself. Withdraw, taking nothing but your experience of love and loss, and ten centuries of the Cyrillic alphabet.

In order to know the direction of words, you need to have two points between which the line of movement may be drawn. The first represents everything written in Russian before you, starting from Slavonic translations of Scripture. The second is you yourself, lock, stock and barrel, together with all your loved ones.

In order to say something new, you must feel centuries of tradition within you. Press a button at a power station and lights will start blinking in city windows. So too in literature: write a word down and it’ll find an echo in all books already written, regardless of whether or not you’ve read them.

Literary tradition is a living creature. A tree.

Sap flows up the trunk and into the branches. The nineteenth century is the trunk of Russian literature. Embranchments follow. Some branches are absolute genius, the abovementioned Platonov a case in point, but his branch has been cut, never to grow again. It's vital to find the master branch that reaches ever higher, propelling the tree into the sky.

Chekhov. Bunin. Nabokov. Sasha Sokolov.

For me, the only way of creating my own language is to write incorrectly. I give each phrase a good sniff, and cross it out at the merest whiff of usage manual. To say something correctly is to say nothing at all. For post-Babelian language is a means of incomprehension. Words used correctly are words snuffed out; signifying anything save what was actually meant, they inspire squeamishness, like someone else's grotty toothbrush or a woman of the streets.

After arriving in "boring" Switzerland, where, it would seem, there's nothing to write about, I immersed myself in Russia. I worked as translator in a migration bureau, interpreting for refugees from ex-USSR republics. I translated words into destiny. No stories are told there but stories of terror. The hero of my novel *Maidenhair*, in his capacity of interpreter for the refugee office of the Defence Ministry of Paradise, translates between two worlds. He is an interface between two incompatible systems.

The Swiss official Peter Fischer doesn't believe the stories he hears and the gates of Paradise shall remain forever bolted.

No one will ever know what "really" happened. But stories told and words uttered create their own reality. It's the details that count. Words create reality and decide destinies.

Under their evangelists' pseudonyms, four obscure scribes wrote a book which made the world what it is. Their words created the reality in which we have dwelled for the last two thousand years—it's just that words must be worthy of faith.

Had their writings failed to detail the broiled fish Christ ate, famished after his death on the cross, or the finger inserted into his wound, the world would not have become Christian and would be awaiting no resurrection. The word becomes reality. A reality of which we ourselves are but a part.

To write is to bridge two worlds: the unreal world of this life, where everything is transient, ephemeral, mortal, doomed to disappear without trace—like this last, fleeting second, like thousands of fleeting generations—and the world of faith-worthy words which confer the elixir of immortality upon the broiled fish, the honeycomb, the finger in the wound—and upon that man, alive in spite of death, whose feet the two Maries rushed to embrace.

If life is not transfigured into words, nothing shall come to be.

Authors are interfaces between earth and heaven. Between life and text. Authors are those who can convey us out of time and into eternity.

On one side of the interface is our world, transient, ephemeral, living in which is impossible and which everyone flees—and not because money's running dry somewhere, or because of pain or ill-treatment, or because someone's been imprisoned, but simply because it is a world full of death. Absorbing this world into himself, the author must counteract it with a creation of equivalent power: a world where death shall have no dominion.

Language is a means of resurrection. The novel is about the non-existence of death. Everyone knows this, but everyone has to find a proof of their own. And so I'm looking for mine. As one of the Apocrypha states, "By the Word was the world created, and by the Word shall we be resurrected."

There's a legend about a prisoner sentenced to a lifetime of solitary confinement. He spent years scratching out a boat on the wall with the handle of a prison spoon. One day they brought him his water, bread and gruel, as usual, but the cell was empty, the wall blank. He'd climbed into his boat and sailed away.

The novel is a boat. Words must be galvanised into life in order to make the boat real, so we can board it and sail out of this solitary cell of a life to a place where we're all loved and awaited. So we can save ourselves, taking all of our characters with us. And the reader, too.

Translated from the Russian by Leo Shtutin