

The Encompassing of Opposites
 in Poems by Kruglov and Averintsev :
 Becoming the Dark, Becoming the Light,
 But Most of All, Becoming the Words

Lee Scheingold
 For REECAS Conference
 April 27, 2013

First, I'd like to say a bit about how I am coming to see the *reality* of poetry. Of interest to me is how the poem addresses us, how we and the poem accompany each other at each moment, from line to line, how we two collaborate to make meaning together. For me, the poem does not exist apart from the reader and the experience of reading. We readers are *meant* by the poem, as Mandel'shtam's poem in a bottle is *meant* for the specific one who finds it on the beach. William Waters, in his book, *Poetry's Touch: On Lyric Address* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), discusses Mandel'shtam's "overwhelming feeling of intendedness" as the ocean helps the poem fulfill its destiny, to arrive in *these particular hands*. The reader, in fact, is central to the poem. As Auden has said, "That is one of the wonderful things about the written word: it cannot speak until it is spoken to." This way of our being *read* by the poem is deeply consequential to our lives. In the words of political theorist Thomas Dumm, "So much of our way forward has to do with the reading and writing of words. ...it is through this process of discovery, available to us through the use of our language, that it becomes possible to imagine a way forward, toward a continuous becoming, another turn." (T. Dumm, *Loneliness as a Way of Life*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

Two contemporary Russian poets whose work has caught my eye recently are men of the cloth, the philologist and Orthodox mystic Sergei Averintsev (1937-2004) and the Orthodox priest Sergei Kruglov, still alive and serving in the Siberian city of Minusinsk. I will look at a single poem by each poet. Averintsev's poem Благовещение ("The Annunciation") is in part about the Virgin Mary gradually becoming a soft light, a hope which beckons to her, while Kruglov's poem Природные воззрения славян на поэзию ("The Natural Views of the Slavs On Poetry") rushes headlong to become an evil darkness in the writing, the actualizing, of it. Both poems describe an inner state of mind, that is, a psychological and spiritual reality; and an outer environment, the poem's surroundings. Inner (mental) worlds and outer worlds are separated at the beginnings of the poems, but become fully fused and inhabited both by us and by the poem in their final lines. The tones of these two poems are very different from each other: Averintsev's is quiet and meditative; Kruglov's is full of movement, much of it blind, in fearful darkness. Hope and fear are thus juxtaposed in these poems, but both areas are rich with meaning to be gleaned: *the dark is not empty, nor is the light*.

As I said, these poets are/were both priests. The Jesuit priest William Noon wrote in 1967: "People turn to poetry more than to prayer these days. Both may help us organize experience to overcome chaos. ... Each is in its own way an illumination of life." (*Poetry and Prayer*, 1967) The illumination of

life is transcendent and *is that which holds*, encompasses, and thus reveals the light and the dark by giving words to them both, by taking what Zen calls “the backward step,” to approaching that which holds everything. Kruglov attempts to come to terms with an evil blackness, and Averintsev is trying to understand the light, that which is seen as good. If everything is held by the words, then it is also necessary to look at what is *not* written about, as each poem carries the seeds of its opposites, however absent or implied they are.

The two poems are too long to fully discuss here: Averintsev’s is three hundred and ten lines, and Kruglov’s poem is fifty-six lines. I will look at the beginning and the end of each poem in order to see how these two poets accomplish what seem to be their expressive goals. In glossing Nabokov’s poem “Pale Fire”, Alvin Kernan describes this 999-line poem’s movement as “a mixture of everyday trivia with sudden terrors lying below the surface, and a search for metaphysical meaning in the ordinary.” (in Harold Bloom, ed., Vladimir Nabokov: Modern Critical Views, pp. 101-125) Let us look at these two poems with this dual reality in mind: the ordinary, and the terrible (perhaps also the thrilling joy) beneath the surface. The hidden reality can show the poem’s fluctuating point of view, which can surprise us at times.

“Blagoveshchenie” (“The Annunciation”) begins with a detailed description in everyday language of the plain physical surroundings in which the Angel Gabriel will find and approach Mary. She is indoors. A few simple elements, starting with clear water in a pail (вода в бадье), bare washed walls (дочиста отмытых стен), a (safe, perhaps?) indoor room (меж четырёх углов), rocks (камень), the fire in the fireplace (огонь в очаге), the clay floor and the low arches (где глинян пол и низок свод) —and then something less concrete: the silence (такая тишина). This is a deep silence in which each thing is only itself (воистину), in its essence, pure, not anything else. The fire, the water, and the silence. Nothing is added by the mind: the poet’s, Mary’s, or ours. The interior elements of the space in which Mary is sitting are described with just a few words, but these simple phrases are repeated throughout the poem. This use of repetition is reassuring, almost like a mantra. The poem moves quickly, by line 14 to describe Mary herself, the Virgin (Дева), as she stands unmoving. Now we are introduced to the simplicity and one-pointed concentration of *Mary’s state of mind* as she prays. The external space thus mirrors Mary’s remarkable, calm presence. By the next line the narrator provides us a description of her mind:

Отказ всему, что -- плоть и кровь;
Предел теченью помыслов.

Renunciation of everything which is flesh and blood;
Blocking the flow of every intent.

Mary’s current state of mind is alien to everything of this world, and stops at the boundaries of her every intent. Though I don’t intend to approach these lines from the point of view of the poet’s biography, I cannot resist noting that here we see Averintsev’s mystical leanings. The Oxford English Dictionary describes a mystic as: “a person who seeks by contemplation and self-surrender to obtain unity with or

absorption into the Deity or the absolute, or who believes in the spiritual apprehension of truths that are beyond the intellect.” Averintsev follows the spiritual tenet of *becoming* something in order to fully understand it. It is beyond the intellect: at the same time, as the space between us and the words close up, we are experiencing Mary’s calm as well. We, the readers, are looking at the spaces which are holding it all: Mary’s cell and Mary’s mind. She is very much alone and sheltered:

сокрыв от мира—взор, и мир--от взора;
 вся сила жизни собрана в уме,
 и собран целый ум в едином слове
 МОЛИТВЫ.

She shields her gaze from the world--and the world--from her gaze;
 All of the power of life is gathered into her mind,
 And her whole mind is gathered into a single word
 (of) prayer.

The setting is ordinary, nothing special, and the same is true of Mary’s interior space. She seems to have attained this meditative state through devotion to silence. The words “Меж голых, дочиста отмытых стен,” or “меж голых стен, меж четырех углов” (“between bare cleanly washed walls,” and “between the bare walls, between the four corners”) are repeated throughout the lyric, creating a calming continuity.

The silence brings clarity of mind, so that, together with Mary, we view the space which is holding everything: that is, the *awareness itself*, rather than what is held within it. In an interesting parallel process, the way in which Mary keeps her mind still is also the task of the poet: to condense many feelings, thoughts, and ideas into single words. So the way of creating density in the lyric itself is described. (I owe this observation to Prof. James West.)

Let us compare these lines with the beginning of the Kruglov poem, which provides a dark contrast to the Averintsev. Its title is a reference to Afasan’ev’s “Поэтические Воззрения Славян на Природу”, a comparative analysis of folklore, language, motifs, in Slavic and Indo-European folklore written 1865-1869.

Поэтическое творчество - это чёрная тьма.

Глухой переулок, тупик, коридор, лаз.

Poetic activity is a bottomless, black gloom.

A blind alley, a dead end, a narrow corridor, a trap door.

The palpable sense of hopelessness implies no-way-forward. But one is compelled to write poetry *despite* one's sense of it as a dark art, or maybe *because* of this. After a further listing of lonely, dead-end places and scary happenings: “колодец на окраине, мешок на голове (и удар)”, (“a well on the outskirts, a sack over the head, and a blow”) the poet goes on to find himself subjected to the sights and sounds of neglected, abandoned, and deformed children, those who are damned by childhood itself, damned to the darkness of growing up without mothering:

Дети, выросшие без матери
 Дети, проклятые детством, солнцем, светом,
 ... Бегом, смехом, -- на тьму.
 Children who have grown up without mothers
 Children damned by childhood, by the sun, light,
 ...by running, by laughing, -- damned to the dark.

Somehow, without using first person or second person singular, we begin to feel threatened that this story is coming too close, belonging to the narrator, or even to us. Thus the poem and we are reading each other, and it is not fun. The sense of menace grows as we are in a black space with nothing ahead, nothing behind. We are pushed to move along, to feel the walls around us. It feels claustrophobic.

And then the poem takes a surprising turn, moving to the possibility that in rare cases the child/young person might find some sort of contrast in his life to this torturous exile—maybe he would have his own children, even following that, grandchildren, and maybe they and by extension he (or is it we?), would be cared for and happy. It reminds me of a comment I once heard from a psychotherapist, to wit, that the orphan, if and when his own child is born, for better or for worse, gazes for the first time upon someone who is biologically related to him. The good news in this poem is the same as in the Annunciation, and it is the birth of a child. We observe the children happily playing—but they are soon enough interrupted: a black needle, that is, the memories, suddenly puncture the bright bubble:

...чёрная игла делает внезапный
 Прокол в светлом пузыре...
 The black needle makes a sudden
 Puncture in the bright bubble...

And with this awful vulnerability all the fear returns, because anything we gain can also be lost: something awful can happen to those whom we love:

“Господи, бедный мой, маленький! не дай
 Ему упасть в колодец, обними его, не отпускай!”
 “Lord, my poor little one! Don't let

him fall down the well, hold him in your embrace, don't let him go!"

This fear, heightened by the enjambment between "let" and "him", then brings up all the childhood experiences to the old man, and he is wandering inside his mind now, desperately trying to defend himself against the overwhelming fear of the old ghosts:

Взгляд

Каменеет, становится незряч. Он видит и не видит:

Призраки чьих-то голосов - не родных, не тех,

Чужих, - но надо идти вперед, ловить призраки;

His gaze

turns to stone, becomes blind. He sees and doesn't see:

the ghosts of voices, not of his own dear ones, not those, but

strange ones—but one must move forward, to catch the ghosts;

Another jarring enjambment: one cannot see and has turned to stone--and still the terrible need to move forward to catch the ghosts. The poem streams forward now with a powerful impetus, one reads it almost at breakneck speed. We wonder, where is it going, where is he going, where are *we* going, will the child or the father be saved, *is there any saving?* And as we grope in the darkness, he stretches out his hand, to try feel, to grasp (уцепиться), to see the unseen road (чтобы увидеть невидимую дорогу). Now the space between us and the poem feels tight, truncated, after the previous opening out into the lawn where the children play.

And the final, powerful lines:

Он пытается удлинить себя до тьмы. *Это есть*

написание текста: победить тьму самому став ею.

И ничего белого - бабочки, призрачной лошади, полутона,

луны, фосфорического ветра, - в черной, окаянной

реке поэзии,

устремленной к неизвестному, несуществующему свету.

He stretches himself out to the darkness. *This is*

the writing of the text: the poem conquers the darkness by becoming it.

And there is nothing light or white – not the butterflies, not the ghostly horse, not the half light,

nor the moon, not the phosphorescent wind, - in the dark, damned

river of poetry,

striving toward the unknown, the nonexistent light.

The poem rushes toward its end, toward the written word, toward another turn, *toward itself*. The conquering can only be *in the reading*, as well as *in the writing*. This reminds me of a poem I recently met, by Hungarian/English poet George Szirtes, called “The Wolf Reader.” It begins:

“There were the books, and wolves were in the books.
 They roamed between words. ...she read them because she knew
 the pleasures of reading, the page being rapt
 with the magic of the fierce ...
 The fierceness was the wood where grey wolves roam.

And it ends with a little girl reading the words:

... It was as if the wolf were hers to comb,
 like those bedraggled creatures in the zoo
 that, trapped behind the bars, would snarl and stride
 as you’d expect a page or wolf to do.”

Just as Kruglov did, Szirtes brings the poem back to the word, to the language, even to the page with the words on it—thereby implicitly referencing the space between us and the wolf, us and the writer, and between us and the page. *Poetry is real*. In commenting on his own poem, Szirtes has said, “The outside world, the inner world, and other people’s inner worlds constitute a continuum like a river in which any imagination may fish. Rivers are not to be owned. This river brought up a wolf and a book.” (Poem a Day, The Academy of American Poets, March 9, 2013)

In contrast to Kruglov’s poem, Averintsev’s “Annunciation” moves to a quiet, lovely, soft end:

... Чудо – о, но чудо
 Житейское; для слуха Девы -- весть
 семейная, как искони ведётся
 между людьми, в стесненной теплоте
 плотского, родового бытия,
 где жены в участи замужней ждут
 рождения дитяти ...
 It’s a miracle, oh, but a miracle
 which is everyday; to the ears of the Virgin – the news

which is family news, conveyed from time immemorial
among people, in the tight warmth
of the flesh, of the clan,
where women in their married lot await
The birth of a child ...

And so Mary will bear the child of God the Father, and it will all play out, as it has from time immemorial, within the shy confines of family life, an everyday miracle, the impending birth of a child is awaited. This is the most hopeful time.

At the end, Mary says:

“Се, Раба Господня;
да будет Мне по слову Твоему.”
“I am Your servant, Lord;
May it happen to me according to Your word.”

И Ангел от Марии отошёл.

And Angel Gabriel took his leave of Mary.

The poem ends as it started, in the shy, silent, personal happiness of the news which has been conveyed in the story, which was predictable in its understated power.

These two poems move and stay still according to their needs, which vary. Whether it is the dark or the light side of life or the story which is being told, the other side is always an absent presence: the Light, for Kruglov’s orphaned poet; the Dark, for Averintsev’s faithful Mary, for though it is not explicitly stated, we know she will have great sorrow to come as well as great joy (see, e.g., Colm Toibin’s recently published *The Testament of Mary*: New York: Scribner, 2012).

In Proust’s words, “even when the bird walks, one still knows him winged.”

This is the *reality* of poetry.

(I am very grateful to Veronica Muskheli for her help with translations and meaning.)