

SIGNIFYING NON-SOLUTION IN TIME OF WAR:
ALEXEI PARSHCHIKOV @ THE BATTLE OF POLTAVA

His question: “How do the dead change us? With what signs?” is now aimed directly at us. The way he changes us after death becomes an artistic myth, like a dome setting over the transparent forests of his unfinished literature.

—Mikhail Epstein, “Cosmism and Privacy: In Memory of Alexei”

If it is to be a finished text, its non-solution must signify.

—Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology*

This essay reads the futural non-solution of Alexei Parshchikov’s “epic ode” *I Lived on the Battlefield of Poltava* (1985) at a present poetic and historical intersection. The poets who emerged in the late Soviet period witnessed the transition to post-Soviet realities such as the dismantling of the state; consolidation of the oligarch class and its absorption into global capitalism; corruption and wealth disparity; worldview fragmentation and the proliferation of distorted ideology; erosion of the legal system; a media landscape of disinformation and denial; military provocation and the Ukraine war; the incarceration and assassination of oppositional leaders. Counter to this history, an oppositional community of poets formed, was recognized, exploded, fragmented. One alternative for many who survived was emigration, establishing a new intellectual and creative community whose *resilience*—the word is justified only here—is unequalled for what “this time we are both” facing now. Two generations of poetic innovation and opposition have emerged and are connected: the historical groupings of Parshchikov, Dragomoshchenko, Zhdanov, Prigov, Rubinshtein, Aristov, Eremenko, Iskrenko, and others, whose works were translated and circulated in the West during the extensive exchange at the end of the Soviet period; and a self-aware collectivity of innovative and oppositional writers remaining in Russia or in emigration, whose work is being enthusiastically received and translated. This generational sequence, like most, is open to misreading: while the continuity with the previous generation is strongly upheld by later poets—given the import of the Dragomoshchenko Prize, for

example—there is also a suggestion that the transition between the two involves a move from aesthetic and formal concerns to a “left” perspective that is more social than formalist, historical than literary, gendered than hermetic. This distinction may only show the need for a better critical framework, one that could show how the historical and ideological motives in the so-called hermeticism and formalism of the earlier writers persists in a deep continuity with those who coming later, even with a turn to more explicitly political or documentary content. Aleksandr Skidan’s affirmation of Arkadii Dragomoshchenko’s influence points to how the “formalist” demolition of the conventional lyric and/or the “realism” of official verse culture opened the way for the new poetics. The later generational narrative also questions to an extent the Language/late Soviet exchange, but without accounting for the deep motivations in the critique of dominant ideologies common to both, regardless of differences of method. As one critic puts it, “As practitioners of what Foucault called fearless speech, unofficial Soviet poets have remained vital in the post-Soviet period. In search of ways to continue their practices of fearless speech, contemporary poets have built their legacy, particularly since 2000” (Sandler 38), locating their “turn to language” in a complex, unfolding historical series.

Parshchikov’s Meta Epic

Reading *I Lived on the Battlefield of Poltava* on this side of a forty-year history bears directly on the oppositional Soviet/post-Soviet transition, given that Parshchikov’s work represents the two moments as united in nearly polar opposition. His emergence as a poet likewise reflects a spatial discontinuity in the Soviet/Russian dialectic of metropolis and outland: born in the Far East (1954); educated in Donetsk, Ukraine, and the Kiev Agricultural Academy, Parshchikov moved to Moscow in 1975 and graduated from Gorky Literary Institute (1981). His first literary grouping was with the journal *Yunost* (1980) alongside poets such as Zhdanov, Eremenko, Iskrenko, and Arabov—later recognized as the tendency of “metarealism.” His first published poem, “New Year’s Lines,” was notable for its quirky occasion (the poet had taken a job as a Santa’s helper, distributing toys to children in workers’ quarters) and its transfiguration of the commonplace with the gifts and depressing conditions they revealed.

Spatial form and the metaphoric transposition of objects into unfixed horizons of meaning, one directly at odds with the sclerotic utopia of the Soviet state in the Era of Stagnation, are conjoined in the poem. Its “turn to language” is not in the referential framework of the poem or its literal occasion but in the use of unregulated metaphor to connect unthinkable materiality with its imaginary potential as a poetic act. This lack of regulation is key to the politics of the oppositional period, where the failure of dominant ideology along with very low cost of living and the prevalence of subsistence employment (famously, as a boiler room attendant), created a space of relative freedom enacted in the groupings of poets—a form of privilege rivaling that of the official literary establishment, but in the absence of apartments or perks.

Also important for spatial form is the circulation of poetry in *samizdat*, the original form of publication of Parshchikov’s epic ode, which physically connected readers and their experience through the distressed material form of the typewritten manuscript—conveying a radical expansion of meaning that asked to be reactivated in the continuing act of poetry by the next reader. (Note that, in the same period, certain San Francisco Language writers tried to circulate their work in material form, which failed due to the privative desire of certain readers to “hold on” to and possess the object, keeping it from others, a symptom that could be theoretically addressed.) Given the low costs of living and transportation, and the literary tradition of maintaining a *dacha* for its distance from the metropolis and copious amounts of time, it seems that Parshchikov was able to spend his summers during the *Stagnatsiya* period in a small house and garden in the suburbs of modern Poltava—a spatial/temporal removal that would connect his family background and early education as an agronomist with his literary work, and develop the alterity of Ukraine within Soviet oppositional poetics. The poem that resulted from this spatial/temporal perspective produced a breakthrough moment for innovative writing with the award of the Andrei Bely Prize in 1985, and book publication the year later. Digging into its conditions of reception, one may begin with the language of the award: that the poem “returns the reader’s imagination and thought to the field of genuine reading,” but not that it directly revises the political meaning of the Battle of Poltava or its

period commemoration during the Soviet era, implicitly claiming a continuity with Tsarist imperialism and its subordination of Ukraine (or with romanticist fantasies of Ukraine itself). The revisionist goal of “genuine reading” is enough to place the poem in the official/unofficial framework of emerging *Perestroika* as the sign of things unrealized and yet to come.

As Parshchikov himself noted, the “turn to language” in the West involved a poetics of metonymy rather than metaphor. Even so, no less than Roman Jakobson has claimed that the more conventional poetic trope of metaphor, seen as the hallmark of poetic imagination since Aristotle, requires an underpinning of metonymy—a differential contiguity of language as the precondition for the disordering of similarity on which metaphor depends (i.e., similarity is established by metonymic difference, which is then sublated in the comparative act; imagine “bread and roses” as a metaphor for “revolution,” a primary difference between terms raised to a secondary, vertical level of meaning). The radical foregrounding of metaphor in Parshchikov’s work, then, is as much “language-centered” as the indexical poetics of Dmitrii Prigov or Ron Silliman, both of whom depend on the formal accumulation of language in its differential relations. What remains is to solve the expressive or referential architecture of Parshchikov’s poetics with their “dominant” (in Jakobson’s sense) use of metaphor: the solution is that both the poet’s “I” and the spatial form of the poem as referential operate across the metaphorical gap within the total form, as a poetics. In other words, the “poet” is suspended in “spatial form” as a metaphor as the same that myriad unsublated metaphors proliferate—such that to read the larger poetics of displacement is made possible by the persistent of metaphorical structures that *do not arrive at a higher form of subordination* but force interpretation to remain open. The “field of genuine reading” is thus an intensely political act if its terms have to do with reversing common understanding as it is being put to the test of exploded metaphors, where habituated concepts and everyday life (or *byt*, after Shklovsky) are separated from their congealed likenesses/differences (“bread and roses” are *not* “revolution”). The language of *Stagnatsya* inverts to its own critique, a perspective (as I claimed in “Post-Soviet Subjectivity”) that was shared by poets such as Dragomoshchenko and Parshchikov as

much as visual artists such as Ilya Kabakov and Erik Bulatov—with the verbal/visual indexicality of Moscow conceptualists Prigov and Lev Rubinshtein as halfway between them. At the same time we may recall the strong distinction critic Mikhail Epshtein has made between the schools of “metarealism” and “conceptualism” within a metaphysical account of genres (as tending toward a universal essence that absorbs their particularity). In this account Parshchikov becomes a “cosmic poet of microcosms,” making new poetic language that absorbs as it foregrounds differences between aspects of reality, nature and culture, language and world. Metaphor is the metaphysics of an expanding universe, a realism of the incommensurate.

The turn to metaphor as an open hermeneutics depends on a form of *literaturnost* (“literariness”) in its divergent immanence that, paradoxically, seeks an exterior or transcendental perspective that it can only infer as *yet to come*. This agony of externality and transcendence was, I argue, *the* common motive and destiny for Soviet oppositional poets as they sought out their future, and one reason for the terrifying temporal and spatial discontinuity that occurred after 1991 with the break-up of the Soviet Union and the rise of emigration as alternative life. Parshchikov’s biography parallels this displacement exactly: with the moment of “porno-evangelism” that occurred with the penetration of Soviet art by capital with the Sotheby’s auction (1988) and the Western literary recognition conferred on oppositional poets instanced by our Leningrad Summer School (1989), dramatic opportunities arose, even as the low-cost oppositional lifestyle of the Brezhnev Era evaporated. (It is important to credit this moment not merely to contact with the West; it depended on complex histories of the unofficial/official dialectic only now coming to light; it was due to negotiations among late-Soviet actors that led to that opening, not just the seductions of Western capital or recognition.) Parshchikov’s move to California, to earn a graduate degree at Stanford, turned out to be a low point in his career—but crucial to understand for the transformation work that came after. When I knew him in the Bay Area in 1992–94, the grand fantasies of literary recognition that depended on heroic negation of the ideological or everyday lifeworlds of the Soviet

state simply were not functioning. This lack of spatial/temporal fixity, however, was anticipated in the form of Parshchikov's poetics, and would be redistributed in the next decades.

To extend Parshchikov's disjunct metaphoricity across three moments of his career—historical emergence, geographical displacement, and émigré community—creates an overarching structure that continues his micropoetics at a level that still refuses transcendence. As Epshtein put it, his *oeuvre* attained a mythic status “like a dome setting over the transparent forests of his unfinished literature.” Rejecting the universal hermeneutics of a “turn to myth,” we may consider the way Parshchikov's forms of meaning making are reproduced in the form of his reception. Here the three moments of his career are all activated: to begin with, the initial community of like-minded poets, a contrary community within vacuous ideology; at the end of his career trajectory, in the multiform engagements of his late work while thriving in an internet-connected expatriate “bubble” in Cologne (where he studied basic German but favored global English); and their separation by the caesura of California and its misrecognition of his literary significance (as the distressed “middle”). Two halves of a grand metaphor—contrary community mapped onto expatriate network as nonidentical—are separated by a gap that motivates their relation as much as any positive terms. Parallel to the manifold topoi, vocabularies, formal modes, or temporal occasions of his poems, Parshchikov's publications, in Russian or translation, convey a discontinuity that demands being raised to a next level of interpretive horizon. This can be seen in the exemplary author's online site edited by Ekaterina Drobyazko and Vladimir Petrushin, a comprehensive assemblage of biography, primary texts, critical comments, memoirs and testimony by fellow writers. The selection of literary and critical assessments extends their original source in poetics as a form of reading and being on to existing in the after-time of the dissolved Soviet state. The spatial form of Parshchikov's “author-as-site” precisely leads to Epshtein's metaphor of “the dome” as open horizon of meaning. It is my reading to see this spatial form, in its key elements, as configured in his epic ode to the Battle of Poltava, a nonsite that reproduces itself in futurity.

Parshchikov's Epic Globality

As a student at the Gorki Institute in Moscow, Parshchikov would have studied the typology of genres, likely in a philological framework only partly modified by Russian formalism. One imagines a discontinuity of essential genres—epic, romance, ode, lyric—rather than any literary evolution, either stepwise or continuous. While it has been termed an “epic,” *I Lived on the Battlefield of Poltava* has features of the literary ode as public invocation, and of the epic romance Bakhtin theorized, while channeling orientalist narratives via Pushkin and Hugo. As poem, it is built “on top of” previously existing genres and their conventions of meaning and temporality in an “unfolding” of new verbal material, both condensed and discontinuous. Likewise, the spatial form of the poem is built “on top of” the geography of the battle site—mapped over centuries, marked with memorial structures, accessible on day trips by bicycle—as well as the political geography of Soviet Ukraine. Modern Poltava, we learn online, is a city of about 280,000 in population; it is a palimpsestic site, like Ukraine itself, dating back 1100 years of settlement with archaeological remains from the Paleolithic period. Current linguistic research takes us even further back, speculating that proto-Indo-European languages emerged from Ukraine millennia earlier—evidence of the “linguistic universum” imagined in Futurism, Prague structuralism, and the late Soviet period. The Battle of Poltava took place in 1709, with Peter the Great defeating Charles XII of Sweden, consolidating the Russian Empire with the acquisition of a Baltic outlet (the future St. Petersburg) and greater subordination of Ukraine, as he cast out the traitorous Hetman Mazepa. Twentieth-century Poltava was occupied by Nazis, who exterminated the 10% of the population who were Jews; it was liberated in the Battle of Dnieper in 1943, then used as an air base for Allied bombing raids. In the current war, it has been attacked several times by Russian missiles, most recently on February 14, 2025 (14 killed) and more severely on September 3, 2024 (74 killed). Detailing the memorial culture for each of these events would be as complex a task as a formal description of Parshchikov's epic, while their complexities are mutually informing. As well, in

the presentist aspect of the poem, figured in his everyday tasks, the poet suspends historical overlays and focuses on the local and regional, figured in the concerns of his garden and invasive species, evidencing his training in agronomics, and his place in the sun on black earth.

I Lived on the Battlefield of Poltava establishes an epic ode that imitates a distant event in the form of its temporal unfolding and spatial mapping. If the battlefield is a site, in Robert Smithson's sense, the poem itself is a nonsite, importing material fragments and "mirror displacements" organized in a sequence of non/narrative episodes. In its larger form, the poem creates a chronotope, in Bakhtin's sense, that incorporates multiple spaces and times, circling around a geography that suspends all historical knowledge of the Battle of Poltava in layers of language, reference, perception, and memory. The poem is Bakhtinian as well in its mode of writing: at the level of "major" form, it departs from fixed genres as it cannibalizes multiple genres, in radically discrepant metrical and sonic patterns (from rhymed couplets to free verse and everything in between) and forms of lineation (from very long to very short). At the local level of argument and association in each section, the poem "jumps" from referential anchoring to wild metaphoricity, not only in visual images or comparative figures but in the wheelhouse of the verb itself, which often connotes actions and states of being that are figurally impossible in the referential setting. Parshchikov's style has been referred to as "baroque" (as with Ukrainian Orthodox iconography and decoration), but the period framework for its elaborate build-ups of meaning dissolves into myriad presentist styles and vocabulary, including technical descriptions (weapons and machines); precise reference to biological species (rats, ants, mosquitoes) and domestic animals (dogs, cats, sheep) in an emerging ecopoetics; practical knowledge of the chemistry of pesticides and their application; observations of the natural landscape and weather. The heteroglossia that results exceeds Bakhtin's stylistic merging of literary forms and opens to the horizon of multiple and overlapping "languages." The poem has been elegantly, even baroquely translated by poet/scholar Donald Wesling, who works to retain metaphoric discontinuity while reproducing metrical and sonic patterns. The result is a poetry of "immersive foregrounding" and continual readerly surprise, where at

any moment diverging elements of language or image jump to the foreground only to recede into a buzz of harmonious or dissonant associations. Any such thing as the whole form of the poem depends, then, on the conflict and confluence of metaphor and metonym between each of its component parts, without final closure, articulated at the local and regional levels. Both local and regional here are overdetermined as well, as a critique of the suspended Soviet horizon of meaning, pointing to its deferred comprehension to come at global scale.

Without being able to map my reading of the poem further, either in terms of its formal architecture or local composition, I want to address the poem's palimpsestic construction at the time and space of writing—in the late Soviet period; from the bucolic remove of a *dacha*—to the present political horizon of Parshchikov's work, moving from retrospective to prospective. The poem's formal strategies, while they do not explicitly diverge from either Soviet or Russian narratives of Empire, undo them entirely in figural terms, resulting in a space of negativity that evokes no less than the disaster of Chernobyl, on Ukrainian soil, about the time of the poem's award of the Bely Prize (1986). Further research will establish the exact sequence, but I speculate here that its positive reception was a parallel to the early dismantling of state narratives during *Perestroika*, on the way to the collapse of the state. The Battle of Poltava becomes a historical void that cannot be absorbed into a continuous political or aesthetic narrative. As a result, the status of Ukraine as a region of the Soviet Union, as well as writing in Russian on the territory of Ukraine, cannot be finally determined. Given the necessity of an open and unfixed horizon of meaning, emigration results. Parshchikov's relocation as expatriate in Germany, following the misrecognitions of American academia, preserve the negative space of "the Battle of Poltava" as a metaphor for "the event" as such—from 1709 to the Battle of the Dnieper to Chernobyl to the fall of the Soviet Union. The poem, and the poet's entire *oeuvre*, reconfigures "being Ukrainian" while "writing in Russian" around the negative space of a serial disaster, which initiates each next moment in the series and which continues into the present and likely will for some time. The politics that result are most realized in Parshchikov's present reception by poets working along similar lines,

informed by similar aporias and displacements, communicated online to networks of readers in Russia, Ukraine, in emigration, and in other languages. In Parshchikov's poem, we now see a prescient model for global opposition to the horizon of *oligarchic corruption* we severally and collectively face. Translating the "Battle of Poltava" onto the present aporia allows us to comprehend the disaster as a voided horizon of meaning, *not* the final destiny of Russia or Ukraine within the fraud of global opportunism, that we may keep open in futural terms.