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A Life of Reading Dangerously

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> "A *raznochinets* needs no memory—it is enough for him to tell of the books he has read, and his biography is done."[1]
>
> —Osip Mandelstam

There are many ways to tell a person's story. You can focus on genetics, which is to say what has been inherited from parents, or on education—where, what, and for how long one studied—or on personal contacts, whom one frequented, had friendships with, or were one's neighbors. One can also draw up an account of one's reading list, and the sequence in which books were discovered. Here, I will attempt to do just that. My childhood and adolescence coincided with an era when much literature was forbidden. In those years, even Dostoevsky was not published. He was considered suspect.

No one among my friends ever saw a concrete list of forbidden books. If such lists existed, they were carefully hidden away in the desk drawers of the KGB bosses. Only years later, there came the realization of the boundary between prohibited and permitted literature. This, however, is a well-worn Russian

story. We were not the first generation to deal with it. Pushkin's epigrams, circulated in handwritten copies in the early nineteenth century: weren't they also prohibited? Which is to say his bawdy verses, those innocent school pranks from his Lyceum years? And what about his irreverent mock-heroic epic *Gavrialiada*? None of these poetic works were ever allowed to appear in print. Russian censorship has always been very efficient. It also suffices to recall Chaadaev and his *Philosophical Letters*. The price he paid for publishing them was to be declared insane long before the term "punitive psychiatry" had ever entered into circulation. Then there is the story of Alexander Radishchev who published his *Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow* in 1790 and was condemned to death for it. Catherine II bestowed "clemency" and the death-sentence —typical for such offenses—was commuted to ten years of banishment in a monastery. But the book was not published until 1905, i.e., only after the first Russian revolution and over a century after it was written. Up until that point Radishchev's book circulated in handwritten manuscripts. Specialists believe that in the nineteenth century there were about a hundred of them in circulation. Alexander Sergeevich Pushkin read and left marginalia in one such copy bought for his private library, which had previously been kept in a Secret Chancery. Today, examples of Radishchev's book—twenty copies of which he published with his own printing press, as well as the manuscripts of Pushkin's epigrams, witty and "politically incorrect," as we would say today, and which in their own day were passed around hand to hand—are now on display in museums. Ladies and Gentlemen, this was "samizdat"! It seems Russia is not only the homeland of the elephant,[2] but also of samizdat . . .

It might now seem ridiculous, but even my first children's books had long been removed from libraries, although they probably weren't even on the list of forbidden books. They were kept in restricted-access collections and could only be borrowed from libraries with special permission. At any rate, there wasn't any question of them being reprinted. I'm speaking here of books from my grandmother Elena Markovna's bookcase. She had managed to graduate from gymnasium in 1917 and in this way had preserved coming-of-age novels for girls by Charskaya, as well as Louisa May Alcott's fabulous book *Little*

Women and its sequel *Little Women Grown Up*. There was also a book about young Japanese and young Dutch boys and issues of the pre-revolutionary children magazine *Zadushevnoe slovo* [The sincere word.] In the same bookcase I also found a scholarly edition of a book entitled *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha* by an author yet unknown to me, Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra. This was my first book "for grownups," which I read on my own even before starting the school.

The second bookcase that supplemented my education a bit later on belonged to my second grandmother, Maria Petrovna. It was quite a bit more interesting—and also more dangerous—but I had some growing up to do first to get there. It featured Mandelstam's collection *Stone*, Akhmatova's *Rosary*, Andrei Bely's novel *Kotik Letaev*, Muratov's *Images of Italy*, Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and even, God forbid, Lenin's volume *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* with facetious comments in the margins in my late grandfather's hand. By the way, in the same bookcase I found a book which I still have today, *The Revolt of the Angels,* by Anatole France. I have donated certain of my grandparents' papers and memorabilia to archives, but I decided to keep this one. It is one of my family treasures, with a rather peculiar appearance. Handmade, its improvised biding is much shorter than the book's pages themselves, so that the pages protrude by almost two inches. On the last page one finds the inscription: "I made this biding from a stolen cardboard folder, old socks, and breadcrumbs during the most difficult days of my term in Stalingrad prison's cell number 3." This is followed by the date, March 1934, and my grandfather's signature.

The same bookcase of my grandmother Marusia [Maria] also contained a Russian edition of the Bible, which started to interest me a bit later. This family edition had been well-read, even heavily used, and contained many underlinings. There was also another Bible in Hebrew with a parallel Russian translation that belonged to a great grandfather on my mother's side. There was, however, no New Testament—only the Torah. Another family gem.

When I was a child, a copy of the Bible was a rarity. After the revolution copies were only published by the Patriarchate publishing house—pretty much strictly for official use, like some sort of internal memo of the Central Committee or the KGB. They were not available for purchase. The same went for the New Testament. And I distinctly remember reading the Gospels in a handwritten copy produced by some devout old lady, as in pre-Gutenberg times. Samizdat in a nutshell!

One of the defining features of an intellectual, as I understand it, is his or her critical need for reading. What sort of reading depends on one's era, location, and personal preferences. Several years ago, I read my grandfather's letters and diaries written between 1911 and 1933. They contained many notes on the books he had read, as well as lists of books he considered it imperative to read at once in a particular month or year. I have also kept such lists of books to read, beginning in my school years—and I still keep them today.

Every generation has its own distinctive features. I belong to the generation that, with hindsight, was dubbed the "baby-boomers." This term was coined in 1991 when researchers began paying attention to generational differences. Up until then, and since remotest antiquity—including the time of Socrates, who it appears was among the first to lament the ignorance of youth—old folks have complained about the young. They have vented their grievances on papyrus, paper, even clay tablets. In other words, in the eyes of an older generation the merits of newcomers always seem second best in comparison with those who preceded them. Such generalizations are as convenient as they are approximate. Usually the following characteristics are attributed to "baby-boomers": a high degree of concern for personal development, community, team spirit, and so forth. This definition, however, was invented by Western researchers to describe Western youth. The core value of the Russian youth of my time—at least the marginal segment of it to which I belonged—was reading. Precisely that: not books, but reading itself. Passionate, intense, intelligent, and arduous reading.

Further, reading was also dangerous: engaging in it meant one could be kicked out of university, lose one's job, or even go to jail. Reading involved taking risks: it demanded courage or, to say the least, overcoming one's fears. This was because we lived in a world where a large number of books were prohibited and reading them was punishable by law. For this crime there existed an article in the Soviet Penal Code: number 190—later article 70. According to the letter of this law, one could be punished with imprisonment for three to seven years for "having in one's posession, or distributing, anti-Soviet literature." One still reads that with horror.

There is an article by Averitsev in a scholarly volume dedicated to Osip Mandelstam entitled "Fear as initiation—one thematic continuum in the poetry of Mandelstam." In it is a quote from Mandelstam's "The Egyptian Stamp":

"Terror takes me by the hand and leads me. . . . I love terror, I respect it. I almost said, 'With it, I'm not terrified!' Mathematicians should have built a tent for terror, for it is the coordinate of time and space: they participate in it like the rolled-up felt in the nomad tent of the Kirgiz. Terror unharnesses the horses when one has to drive and sends us dreams with unnecessarily low ceilings."[3]

I gasped when I read this passage. We had never realized that for Mandelstam, fear was so intimately connected to his art. And the shadow of this fear also lay on us, readers during the Soviet epoch. But to tell you the truth, our reading was also a form of self-expression.

I bought my first copy of the Gospels as a present for a girlfriend around the year 1960 from a customs officer, who confiscated these editions at the airport when foreign missionaries tried to smuggle them into our poorly evangelized country. Those missionaries, however, ended up fulfilling their charitable mission—and the customs officers contributed to this process. I was introduced to a particular customs officer by a high-class beauty who lived in our courtyard. She was a hard-currency prostitute, but back then we didn't know

such expressions. The copy of the Gospels was new. It was printed in Russian by the Belgian publishing house Life with God and it cost twenty-five rubles. My university stipend was thirty-five rubles. This is just to give you an idea: this Evangelical copy of the Gospels was an expensive book. The customs officer was paid handsomely, but buyers didn't complain.

As I said, my main educators were the two bookcases that belonged to my grandmothers, and a third in the apartment of my classmate Lara. A family of Russian-Jewish intelligentsia from Tbilisi, they had a large bookcase. The books were all displayed with their spines facing outwards. A certain number of them, however, were hidden behind, and from there, Lara and I once fished out two books. One of them was an illustrated copy of Boccaccio's *Decameron*. This is how I learned what a codpiece was. Probably also about this time, I first began to become interested in this part of the body. The book was very exciting, and we spent a lot of time perusing the illustrations. We read it through but didn't find it particularly funny. Perhaps only the author's contemporaries could find those rather trivial stories funny. The second book was a collection of poetry by Boris Pasternak entitled *Collected* (1934). There was one poem in it that I cannot help but quote because it was so important for me. I believe it is perhaps relevant for everyone, as it contains an important formula about a person's relationship to poetry:

So they begin. With two years gone
From nurse to countless tunes they scuttle.
They chirp and whistle. Then comes on
The third year, and they start to prattle.
So they begin to see and know.
In din of started turbines roaring
Mother seems not their mother now.
And you not you, and home is foreign.
What meaning has the menacing
Beauty beneath the lilac seated,
If to steal children is not the thing?

So first they fear that they are cheated.
So ripen fears. Can he endure
A start to bear him in successes,
When he's a Faust, a sorcerer?
So first his gypsy life progresses.
So from the fence where home should lie
In flight above are found to hover
Seas unexpected as a sigh.
So first iambics they discover.
So summer nights fall down and pray
"Thy will be done" where oats are sprouting,
And menace with your eyes the day.
So with the sun they start disputing.
So verses start them on their way.[4]

The text was rather opaque for a girl of twelve or thirteen years old. Still, from that moment on, or during that period, my journey with poetry began. By that time, at school, we had already "studied" Pushkin's verses about the triumphal peasant, and Lermontov's poem with the white sail. It may seem strange that for me the magic of reading began with poetry. Or perhaps it isn't so odd after all, as the human drive to create rhythm and rhyme in a text is connected to a deeply rooted human trait: the ongoing struggle in the soul between chaos and cosmos, formlessness and order. Human beings' needs for the poetic word has existed since time immemorial. Its advent is lost to time. But the proof of this need for poetry is very ancient—as magic spells, shamanistic rituals, prayers, and folk songs show.

The paths my reading took were quite convoluted, and there was a lot of chance involved. Yet, such coincidences were somehow also a matter of choice. My relationships with writers followed the logic of a romance: our first encounter was fire and flame, followed either by a cooling down period or a life-long love affair with all the usual ups and downs. In fifth or sixth grade—after my first poetic initiation with Pasternak—I had a romance with O. Henry.

I was moved by the conciseness of his short stories and the elegance with which they drew to a close. On every page of the tiny, ragged, brownish volume (it endures!) there are dried specks of soup and sauce. Everything memorized by heart. Him, but not Chekhov. Not Chekhov at all! And then came Tolstoy with his *Hadji Murat*. Came and stayed there for my whole life. But not Dostoevsky. Not in the least Dostoevsky. Later Pasternak picks up again and Mandelstam appears.

In 1960—the year I finished school—this landscape changed. I made a new friend, Natalya Gorbanevskaya. A real, living poet. In those days Natasha self-published her poems. Back in the 1940s the poet Nikolai Glazkov had coined the term "*samsebiaizdat*" [self-publishing], but by the time we appeared on the scene we already knew that it was called "samizdat." Natasha produced tiny collections typed out on onionskin. That is probably why she managed to make seven copies at a time. She stitched up those thinnest of books very beautifully and elegantly. About fifteen years ago, I placed all those tiny books in the "Memorial" museum's archive, which takes them around the world as part of exhibitions dedicated to that period.

Thus the first, real, "living" samizdat I encountered were poems by Natalya Gorbanevskaya. Three years ago, I was on a local train on my way home from Sheremetievo airport. Having returned from some place abroad, I cast a glance out the train window. The landscape was enchanting: freshly fallen snow, birches bent to the earth—whereas I was arriving from some tropical place where there was not a flake of snow in sight. It was a delight to behold. Each time my eyes take in nature's beauty, I remember, as a kind of mantra, a certain poem by Gorbanevskaya:

I'll add a little oil to the lamp.
You're so beautiful, my native land,
there's a basket I wove myself
hung up in the flickering heavens,
a basket with all of creation in it.

You are so beautiful, my land,
standing in the bay,
giving all the branches up,
almost as the thoughtless widow,
of a thousand years of love.
My land, my light and force,
my fate, how beautiful you are,
so dark my star,
Russia, your shrouded name
I was born to bear.[5]

When I arrived home, still murmuring this poem to myself, I received a phone call informing me that Natasha had died. This is how this poem, and the news of her death, became inseparably fused together, and express, I believe, the sheer beauty of her life: "my fate, how beautiful you are." Thanks to Natasha, I discovered the St. Petersburg poetry of the early 1960s. Back then it was still unclear which of the four young St. Petersburg poets would be responsible for a poetic revolution of sorts: Rein, Naiman, Bobyshev, or Brodsky. The first to divine the outcome, however, was Anna Andreevna Akhmatova. Although it must be said that the other three are also extremely gifted, only one had the scope! It was Natasha who showed me the first poems by Brodsky.

Here is a relatively early Brodsky poem, written around 1969. It seems only appropriate to quote it today—the day I am composing this text—as it is January 2, and a Tuesday . . . Yet, the millennium is no longer the same as the one mentioned by Pasternak:

So long had life together been that now
the second of January fell again
on Tuesday, making her astonished brow
lift like a windshield-wiper in the rain,
so that her misty sadness cleared, and showed
    a cloudless distance waiting up the road.

So long had life together been that once
the snow began to fall, it seemed unending;
that, lest the flakes should make her eyelids wince,
I'd shield them with my hand, and they, pretending
not to believe that cherishing of eyes
would beat against my palm like butterflies.

So alien had all novelty become
that sleep's entanglements would put to shame
whatever depths the analysts might plumb;
that when my lips blew out the candle-flame,
her lips, fluttering from my shoulder, sought
to join my own, without another thought.

So long had life together been, that all
that tattered brood of papered roses went,
and a whole birch-grove grew upon the wall,
and we had money, by some accident,
and tonguelike on the sea, for thirty days,
the sunset threatened Turkey with its blaze.

So long had life together been without
books, chairs, utensils—only that ancient bed,
that the triangle, before it came about,
had been a perpendicular, the head
of some acquaintance hovering above
two points which had been coalesced by love.

So long had life together been that she
and I, with our joint shadows, had composed
a double door, a door which even if we
were lost in work or sleep, was always closed:
somehow its halves were split and we went right
through them into the future, into night.[6]

About sixty years have passed since I set out on the path of dangerous reading. Beginning in 1960s there certainly existed an entire industry of underground reading. This was principally derived from three different sources:

• Pre-WWI and pre-revolutionary books, which became prohibited. This was mostly "*religiozka*"—Russian religious thought: Shestov, Rozanov, Berdyaev, Florenskii, Vladimir Soloviev. The Russian literary avant-garde came later.

• Works written in Russia that either could not officially appear in print, or were destroyed after publication. These were handmade copies retyped on a typewriter, reproduced through photography or, very rarely (and in later cases), copied on a Xerox machine. Among them were works by Vasily Grossman, Solzhenitsyn, Shalamov, Evgenia Ginzburg, Nadezhda Mandelstam, and Venedikt Erofeev.

• Editions imported—brought in or sent in—from abroad. Apart from the previously mentioned publisher Life with God, there were also books in Russian published by the Paris-based YMCA Press and *Le Messager* of the Russian Christian Movement, as well as the US-based Ardis publishers. This was the first "tamizdat" to reach us.

For me, samizdat began with poetry. In addition to retyped poems by Tsvetaeva, Gumilev, Akhmatova, and Mandelstam, there also existed samizdat poetry journals—such as *Sintaksis* edited by Alexander Ginsburg—and other Leningrad journals. But the most important thing to remember is that samizdat was extremely varied and not limited to poetry. Besides poetic

samizdat, or the already mentioned religious type, there also existed the most dangerous category of all: political samizdat. Its impact was mind-blowing. First of all there were Orwell's *1984* and *Animal Farm*. There were works of strict political theory which also had a huge impact, even if they were not comparable to Orwell in terms of artistic quality —Avtorkhanov's *The Technology of Power*, Robert Conquest's *The Great Terror*, Milovan Djilas's *The New Class* . . . There also existed artistic, translated, scientific, nationalist, neo-Marxist, and even musicological samizdat.

We were reading incessantly day and night, reading for years, and growing up with the reading. The punishments for producing samizdat became harsher. Scarcely any samizdat periodical survived for more than three issues. Their editors, compilers, and (mostly female) typists were rounded up and imprisoned. Nineteen sixty-five was the year of Sinyavsky–Daniel trial—the trial of two writers who had published their books abroad. Dozens of people were arrested in connection with the trial as well as in its wake. Not to mention that Alexander Ginsburg, who compiled and edited *The White Book* covering their trial, was himself imprisoned. A couple of years later, in 1968, a couple dozen very brave people compiled materials about repressions connected with those political trials and published them in *A Chronicle of Current Events*. This periodical broke the record for longevity, as previously mentioned. This was exclusively due to the heroism of Natasha Gorbanevskaya.

Let me return to my own reading. Nineteen sixty-five was the year I discovered two new great Russian writers at once, authors who became the two guarding pillars of Russian literature in the twentieth century, Platonov and Nabokov. This is how it occurred: both their books came my way at approximately the same time. I have to admit, this was a challenging experience as Platonov and Nabokov are two writers who almost cancel each other out, due to the way in which they are not exactly mirror opposites, but at least two forces which cause a chemical reaction if they come into contact with each other. Platonov's first posthumous edition had just come out. With Nabokov it was a more interesting story.

A student from another department—a Canadian of Russian descent—lent me his copy of the novel *Invitation to a Beheading*. This book had a revolutionizing, revelatory impact on me. After reading it I understood there existed a different Russian literature beyond the classical Russian canon and Russian Soviet literature, in which I had singled out only one writer—Platonov. I refused to read Soviet literature out of inner protest. What kind of Pashka Korchagin, Pavlik Morozov, and Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya can we be talking about, if Goethe's "Werther has already been written"!

I did not read even good "Soviet literature"; it was my personal form of snobbery. I sneered at it. I'd have none of those Trifonovs and Nagibins. I read them belatedly, when it was no longer as interesting. Similarly, I did not need to read Granin's novel *The Bison*, as I took classes with Timofeev-Resovskii, the man the novel's main character is based on. So, I continued reading books from bookcases—no longer just those that belonged to my two grandmothers—but to other people's as well. One such person was Anatoly Vasilievich Vedernikov, back then an assistant editor for the magazine *JMP*: *The Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate*. He possessed an excellent library, which counted in its collection books from Rozanov to Merezhkovsky. The second most well-furnished library of the time belonged to Father Alexander Men. To this day I am most appreciative to them both. Soviet life was pretty dreary and rather suffocating, and to establish some sort of hierarchy was a vital necessity of the epoch. In those years I set off on some rather fanciful reading excursions to all kinds of esoteric destinations—from Blavatsky to Steiner, from Swedenborg to Kabbalah. Such was my religious-philosophical reading.

Yet, when I laid my hands on that novel by the still unknown-to-me writer Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading*, my world turned upside down. It was a veritable earthquake. The novel's final pages represented an artistic breakthrough that no philosophy was capable of. Then the direction of my reading took the following turn: because during my university years I was interested not only in philosophy and biology but also in "textiles" (which were in the same short supply as books), I once visited Block "L". This was a high-rise

university building on Sparrow Hills, and I went there to buy a piece of clothing from a female black-marketeer I knew. She had everything from shoes to skirts, blouses to stockings. Books, on the other hand, were not exactly her specialty. When I arrived, all the items for sale were spread out on a bed, and on the armchair—a book. It was entitled *The Gift*, and its author was the already-known-to-me Nabokov. My eyes lit up with such a spark that, being the experienced vendor she was, she told me the book was not for sale. This was a powerful statement. But my response was even more powerful. I took off my grandmother's diamond ring, put it on the table, and took the book. I must say I have never, not even for one minute, regretted parting with that ring. The book turned out to be an authentic diamond. It was read—and reread countless times—not only by myself, but by all my friends. Even after reading *Invitation to a Beheading,* it was still mind-blowing. *The Gift* is another precious book in my library.

In 1968 I graduated from university and landed a job at the Institute of General Genetics of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, which was the best graduate placement ever. The time of great reading continued. Books were brought in, came running towards me, or hopped in by accident. At the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s there emerged a movement among Soviet Jews for emigration from the USSR and repatriation in Israel. The Iron Curtain's tight gates periodically opened a tiny bit, then slammed closed again. And so, two new samizdat periodicals, *Jews in the USSR* and *Targut*, started to appear. I did not wish to leave for Israel, but everything connected with the movement greatly interested me: we knew nothing or very little about the founding of the state of Israel. Back in the day I was not even aware of one rather important family fact, namely that in 1948 my grandfather Yakov was sentenced to ten years in Stalin's camps because he worked in the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAC). Most of its members were killed by a firing squad. My granddad was arrested because he knew several foreign languages and compiled digests from the foreign press for Solomon Mikhoels, JAC's chairman. These concerned the situation in Israel, Arab opinion on the country, and the country's political parties and how they were seen in England,

Germany, and France.

Around this time the book *Exodus*, by Leon Uris, came my way. Needless to say the novel was prohibited as being Zionist. To be honest the novel was rather mediocre, but the book's story begins in the shtetls—Russian Jewish villages—then shifts to Palestine during the building of the Jewish State, and abounds in factual material. I gave the novel a very cursory reading—I had only been lent it for a brief time—but nevertheless I wished to have a copy of it. I had a typewriter "Erika— it was a graduation present from my mother. I was not a very good typist—to this day I type very slowly. So we found a professional typist, I lent her my typewriter—she did not have one of her own—and she set out to copy out Leon Uris's *Exodus*. We waited and waited and then it turned out that the typewriter, along with the book, had been confiscated by the KGB. Someone had been tipped off. I am not going to go into the story's details, but this is how my career as a biologist ended, as well as the careers of several of my colleagues; in fact, they shut down the entire laboratory. Uris's *Exodus* led to my exodus from genetics and pushed me towards an entirely different career.

My talk might end right there. In 1990 a law was passed in Russia making censorship illegal. In the course of the next two years almost all of those books that had previously constituted dangerous reading could now be bought over the counter. It seems, however, that the books did not go on to generate much profit for their publishers. I even had the impression that those who were interested in this type dangerous reading had already read them long ago. Perhaps the most striking example that confirms my hypothesis concerns Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*. An uncountable number of people had been persecuted and jailed for possession, reading, copying, or distributing this book. In the early 1990s not only was it was available for purchase every bookstore but it was also peddled in each subway concourse, yet no-one hurried to grab a copy. Paradoxically, this heroic book turned out to be much more important and influential in the West than back at home. The communist movements in France and Italy saw a decline after Western communists learned about the Great Terror and the role of Cheka-NKVD-KGB and turned

away from the communist regime and Stalinism. Yet, in Russia, of all places, this did not occur. It seems that Solzhenitsyn's book is still unread here because, only a few years following the collapse of the Soviet system, people voted in droves for a man who had been brought up in the old traditions of the KGB. This is also the reason why Stalinism is once again rearing its ugly head.

The era of reading began for humanity about 6-5 millennia BCE, when writing systems were established and information started to be passed from person to person with the help of different alphabets developed by the geniuses of humanity. The first inscriptions are of a financial nature—mostly debt books recording transactions, as we would say today. It seems that sacred texts are more recent than the financial ones.

At the beginning of the fifteenth century another event took place that changed the course of civilization—the invention of the printing press. This heralded the dawn of a new era: the age of Gutenberg. Today we find ourselves on the brink of yet another phase in the life of humanity. The information revolution is already making books obsolete, while scientific breakthroughs and modern technologies are most likely going to change human beings themselves, so that information is going to be scanned directly by the brain, sidestepping the usual mechanism of reading. To receive information, one won't have to perform heroic feats, just click. Perhaps this is just my overheated imagination. But the fact remains that today people are no longer arrested for books.

Instead of the very expensive books I spoke about, we now receive information practically free of charge. The heroic feat of reading is no longer necessary. Reading itself has mutated as it were from life's most important activity to being dispensable entertainment. Each time I am on public transport I see people reading: nine out of ten of them are on their phones or e-readers. The tenth has a "real" book. It hard to know what each person is reading: everyone reads something different. But there is a mystery here: if reading is no longer a heroic feat, why are we still afraid? Why and how does the terror endure?

Had a deceased friend asked me today the same question she did on her deathbed—"What is the intelligentsia?"—I would probably give her a different answer: they are educated people endowed with intellectual fearlessness whose actions are not motivated by self-interest. Unfortunately, today this type of "secret order" of individuals no longer exists.

Today a representative of the intelligentsia—whatever your definition of this—is viewed with derision by most of his or her fellow citizens. I would even venture to say that the Russian intelligentsia ended its existence by committing suicide. This happened in the twenties and thirties of the last century. Under the state's unceasing assault, the intelligentsia chose to "dematerialize," and some of the most outstanding writers of the time contributed to this process by creating an entire portrait gallery of characters whose purpose was precisely to discredit and dishonor the very phenomenon of the "Russian intelligentsia." This can be seen in works such as Ilya Ehrenburg's novel *Julio Jurenito* or *The Twelve Chairs* and *The Golden Calf* by Ilya Ilf and Yevgeny Petrov, to name just a few of these questionable literary types. To conclude, I would like to quote one very desperate, albeit rather convincing, statement from 1930 by the writer Yuri Olesha, who also drove his nail into the coffin of the "Russian intelligentia":

"We, writers of the intelligentsia, have to write about ourselves, have to expose ourselves and our heritage, which reveals that we belong to the "intelligentsia" . . . My outlook on the situation of intelligentsia is gloomy. One has to declare once and for all: the proletariat has no use for what one might call the sensibility of an intellectual . . . I would like to reform myself. Of course, I am repulsed by being an intellectual—very much repulsed by it, in fact. You might not believe how ill it makes me. It is a weakness, which I would like to be rid of."

Today, we, the descendants of those who used to be called "the intelligentsia," have inherited from our ancestors one common weakness—a love of reading. I cherish this weakness and absolutely do not want to follow in Olesha's footsteps—who was so eager to reform himself in line with the "spirit of the

epoch."

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[1] Osip Mandelstam, "The Noise of Time," in: *The Prose of Osip Mandelstam*, Trans. & ed. Clarence Brown, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1965), 122; Note 39: "*raznočinec*: An intellectual associated with none of the principal social classes, such as the nobility, priesthood, merchants, etc," ibid, 197.

[2] An old Soviet joke satirized the USSR's penchant for declaring itself the leading force in various fields: during an essay contest, a Soviet child pens the essay "Russia: The Homeland of the Elephant." Russia's inhospitable climate for this mammal makes the claim absurd: the child was merely parroting the nationalistic jargon expected of him.

[3] Osip Mandelstam, "The Egyptian Stamp," in: *The prose of Osip Mandelstam*, Trans. & ed. Clarence Brown, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1965), 188.

[4] Boris Pasternak, "So they begin. With two years gone," Trans. C.M. Bowra, in: Cecil Maurice Bowra, *The creative experiment* (London Macmillan, 1949), 156-157.

[5] Natalya Gorbanevskaya, "I'll add a little oil to the lamp," Trans. from the Russian by James Stotts. Interlinear translation by Zakhar Ishov, Julie Hansen, and Ellen Hinsey.

[6] Joseph Brodsky, "Six Years Later," Trans. by Richard Wilbur, in: Joseph Brodsky, *Selected Poems, 1968–1996*, Ann Kjellberg, ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020).

Lyudmila Ulitskaya (author) was born in the Urals in 1943. Her family had been evacuated there from Moscow during the war. She has lived in Moscow her entire life and considers it home. In 1967 she received a degree in genetics from Moscow State University. For two years she worked at the Research Institute for General Genetics. After this, her life took a different turn. She tried her hand at writing screenplays and acquired a taste for it. She wrote several

screenplays for feature films as well as several works for the theater. Beginning in the late 1980s, she began writing short stories. Her first collection came out in French with the publishing house Gallimard. After this, her books also began appearing in Russian. Since then, she has published ten collections of short stories and eleven novels, and she hopes there will be more.

Her husband, the painter Andrey Krasulin, is her creative companion. They have two sons, Alexey and Peter, and five grandchildren. “Unexpected things happen all the time,” say says. “And although not all of them are pleasant, life is nevertheless very interesting. I am now the oldest among my girlfriends and this is a position of great responsibility.”

Zakhar Ishov (translator) was born in Leningrad (St. Petersburg) and later moved to Berlin. He is an affiliate post-doctoral researcher at Uppsala University, Sweden. His work focuses on poetry translation, literature of exile, global influence of Italian culture, multilingualism, and the connection between poetry and politics. He holds two doctorates: one in Russian literature (a minor in Italian) from Yale University, for the dissertation “Joseph Brodsky & Italy” (2015), and one in English literature and Translation Studies from FU Berlin (summa cum laude, 2008) for his thesis “Brodsky Translating Brodsky.” His monograph titled *Joseph Brodsky in English: A Continuation of Space* is currently in review by the Northwestern University Press.

(Edit)

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“If I connect with that poem, it’s usually not because it’s telling me something I didn’t know; it’s because the poem has somehow taken an anxiety I already felt, and it then made that anxiety more visible, perceptible, or understandable.”

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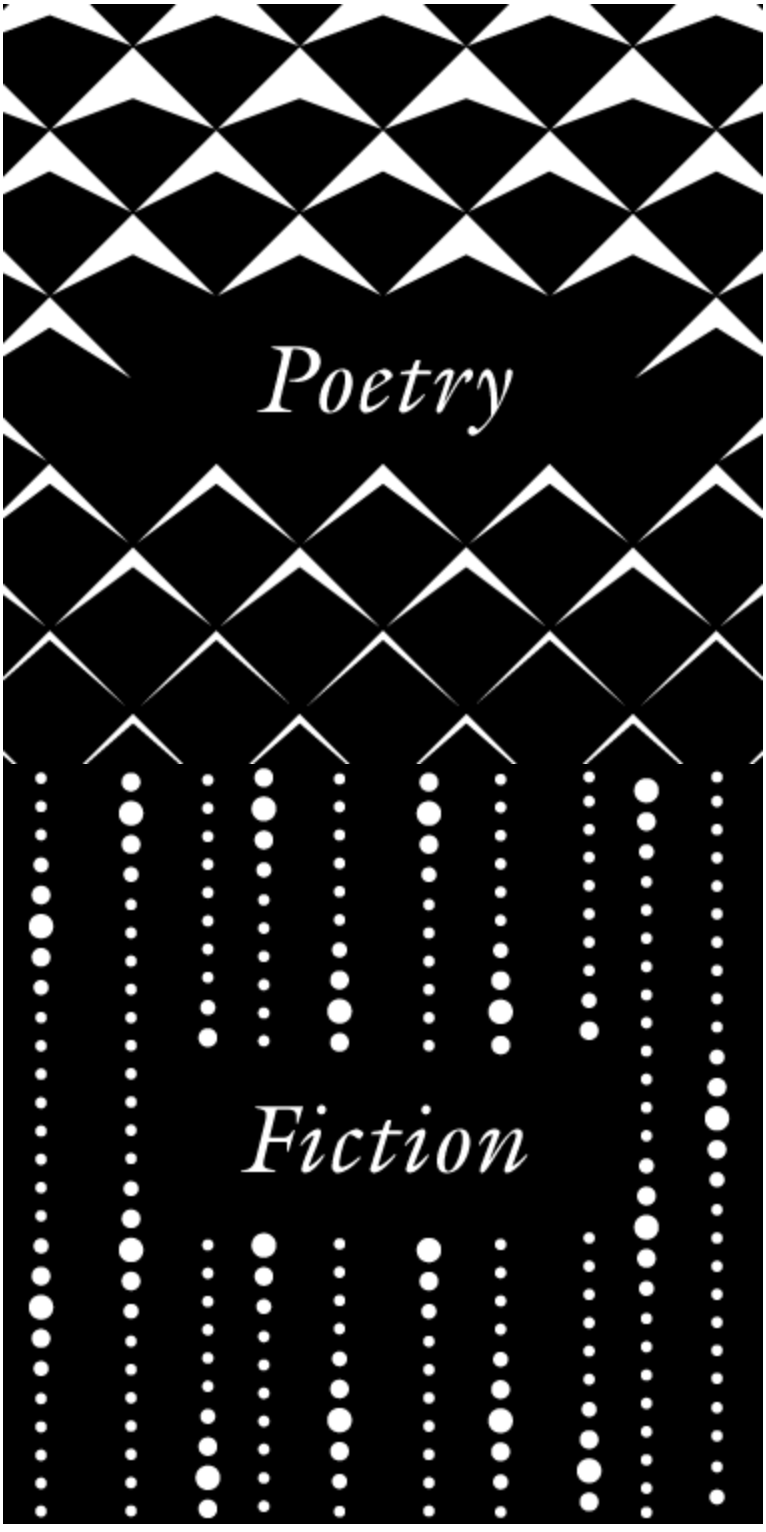
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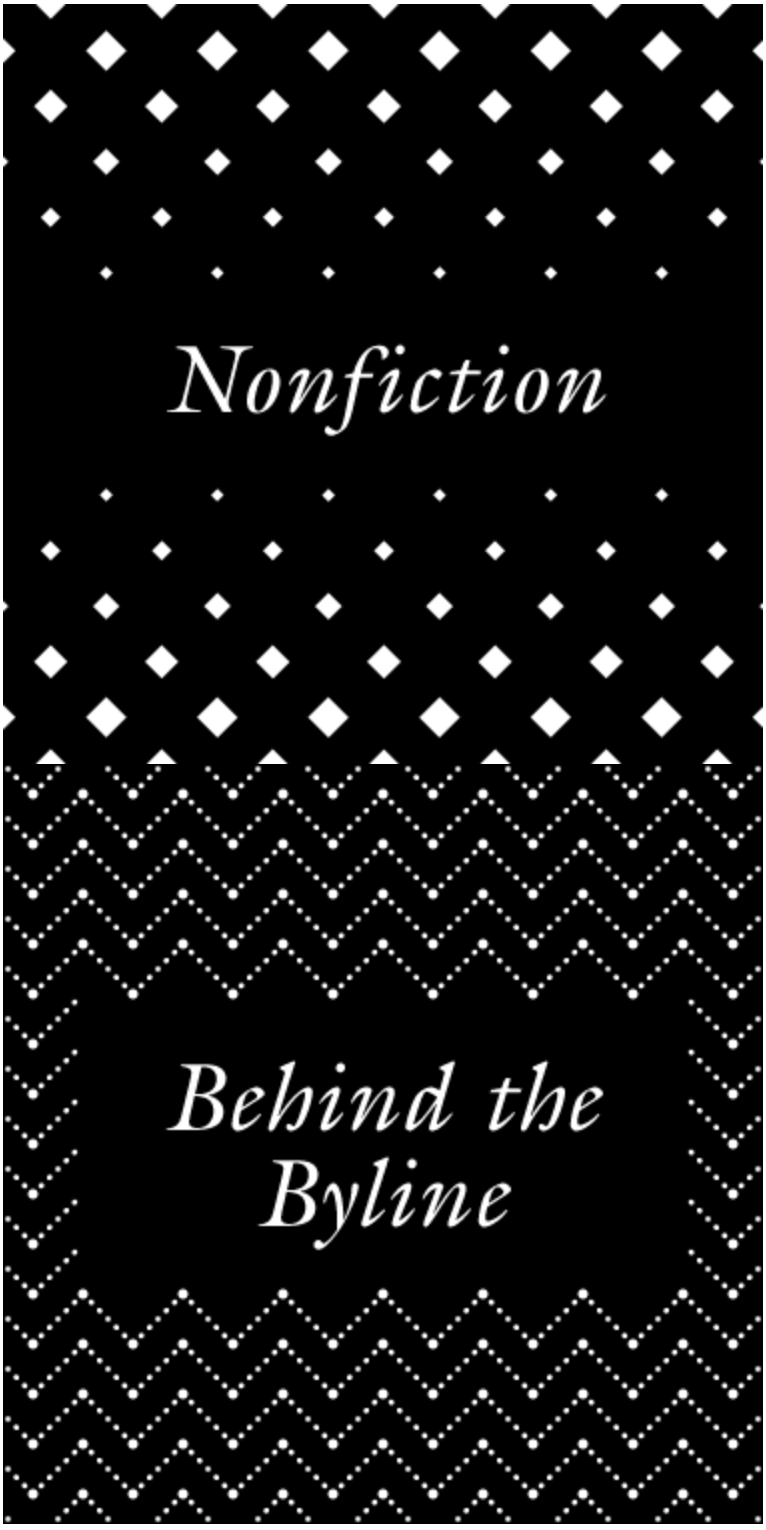
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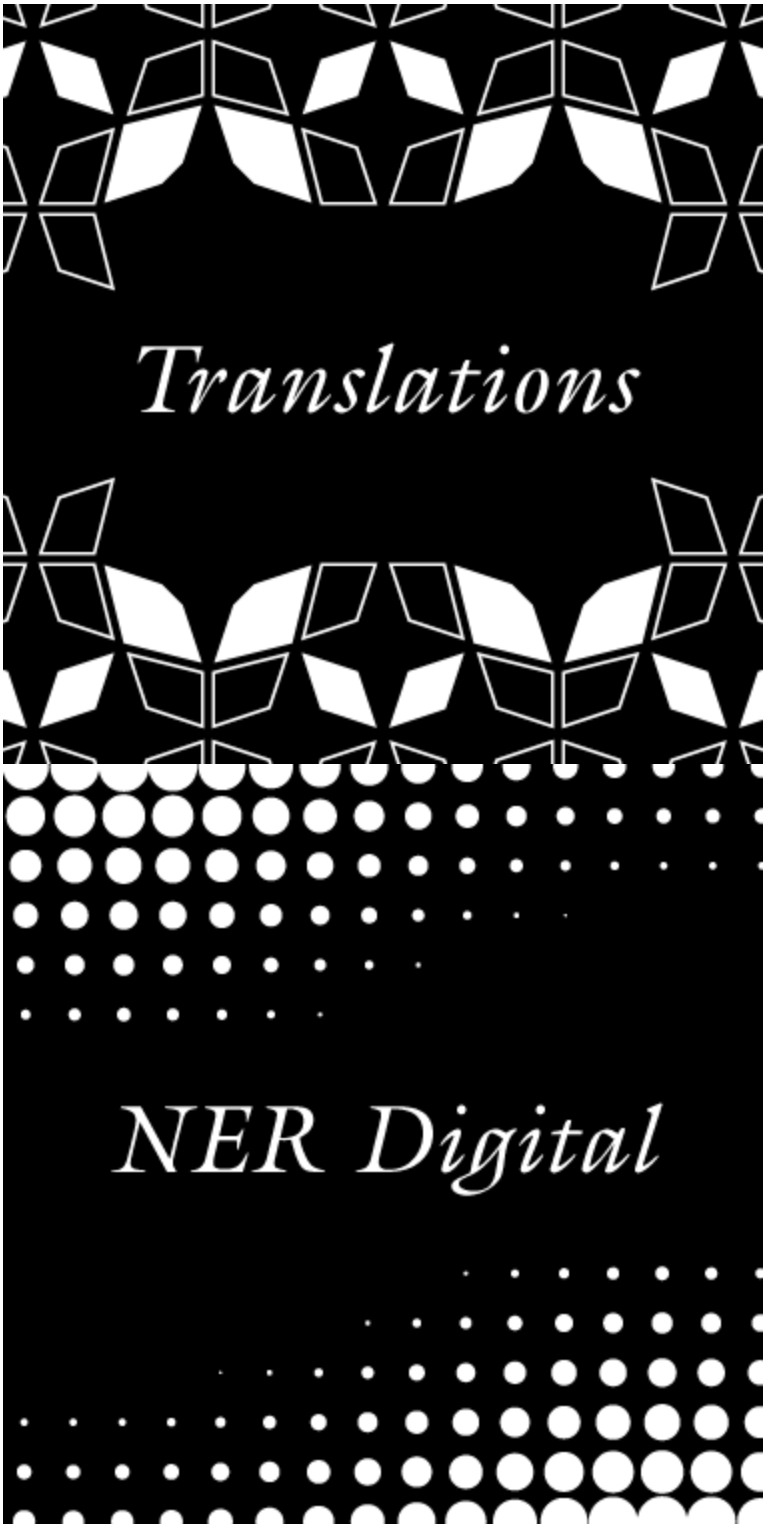

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