

REVIEW ARTICLE

TO WRITE OF MANY THINGS: THREE RECENT
VOLUMES BY ALEXANDER ZHOLKOVSKY

Barry P. Scherr, Dartmouth College

Alexander Zholkovsky [Aleksandr Zholkovskii]. *Poetika Pasternaka: Invarianty, struktury, interteksty*. Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2011. 600 pp. Cloth.

Alexander Zholkovsky. *Ochnye stavki s vlastitelem. Stat'i po russkoi literature*. Moscow: Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi gumanitarnyi universitet, 2011. 636 pp. Cloth.

Alexander Zholkovsky. *Poetika za chainym stolom i drugie razbory*. Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2014. 821 pp. Cloth.

Containing more than 90 articles and somewhat over 2000 pages, these three volumes offer convincing proof not just of Alexander Zholkovsky's estimable productivity as a scholar, but also of his erudition, his critical acumen, and his strikingly broad interests. Although he apparently has a special affinity for Russian writers who came of age during the first third of the twentieth century—evidenced not just by his entire book on Pasternak, but also by earlier books on Babel and Zoshchenko, to say nothing of the articles in the collections under review dealing with Mandelshtam, Khodasevich, Akhmatova, Il'f and Petrov, and Platonov, among others—he appears quite comfortable roaming throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There are pieces on Pushkin and Lermontov; on Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Chekhov; and also on such more recent figures as Iskander, Aksenov and Kushner. And Zholkovsky does not limit himself to Russian prose and poetry; the first section in *Ochnye stavki s vlastitelem* (*Eye-to-eye Encounters with Power Figures*) ranges particularly broadly, with Plato, Corneille, and Bertrand Russell all serving as the main subjects of individual studies. Even the volume devoted to Pasternak covers wide ground in terms of subject matter and approach: some articles are devoted to the analysis of individual poems, while others offer detailed stud-

ies of specific motifs, theoretical examinations of stylistic features, or explorations of links between Pasternak's writing and that of other authors.

Despite the apparent heterogeneity, a certain unity of purpose and of method emerges upon reading a significant number of the separate studies, whether in the order published here or at random. Zholkovsky and his late colleague, Yuri Shcheglov, developed what they termed a "poetics of expressiveness" as a way of modeling how a literary text functions. In simplified terms, the technique involves defining the "poetic world" of a writer by describing its invariant motifs (understood not just as themes in the usual sense, but also embracing situations, linguistic structures, etc.) and ultimately defining a central invariant theme that pervades the author's works. I think it is fair to say that many of the earlier articles on this topic, dating from the 1960s into the 1980s, tended to be quite densely written, with extensive use of abbreviations, formulas, and diagrams (see for instance the two scholars' *Poetika vyrazitel'nosti* (*The Poetics of Expressiveness*; *Wiener Slawistischer Almanach*, Sonderband 2, 1980). The more technical pieces, some of which called for at least a basic familiarity with linguistics, were not easy or necessarily inviting reading for many literary scholars. Over the years, however, Zholkovsky has come to write in a less demanding manner, even while not abandoning the basic concerns of that approach. In the preface to a 1994 collection of his articles in English he saw the volume as evidencing his "gradual shift from hard-core generativism to a moderate version of poststructuralism" (*Text Counter Text: Rereadings in Russian Literary History*, v).

That evolution has continued over the years, culminating in the title of his most recent collection, *Poetika za chainym stolom* (*Poetics over Tea*). In 2013 his essay of that title, devoted to Aleksandr Kushner's poem "Sakharnitsa" ("The Sugar Bowl") and included in this volume, received one of the Italo-Russian "Bella" awards (a set of prizes established in memory of Akhmadulina). Zholkovsky, though, had another reason to adopt the title for the entire volume, seeing it as evoking an "entertaining poetics" (*zanimatel'naiia poetika*) that could take place at afternoon tea (5). If Zholkovsky continues to examine invariants and stylistic features of writers, he has come to do so in a less abstract and more limpid way, occasionally even stepping well beyond the field of literature to consider, for instance, well-known paintings that in one way or another relate to or help explain the rationale for the imagery in an advertising poster ("Tsifrovoi kaif" ("A Digital High") 731–44). At the core of this volume and *Ochnye stavki s vlastitelem* are essays written during the several years leading up to each book's publication; while both also contain a selection of older items, Zholkovsky largely avoids including his more theoretical works. Although still addressed to readers with a serious interest in literature and culture, the poetics here is certainly more "entertaining" than in much of his earlier writing.

Poetika Pasternaka (*Pasternak's Poetics*) stands somewhat apart from the

other two volumes. Not only do the nearly two dozen items focus on a single figure, but they also include a significantly larger portion of essays from earlier periods, when Zholkovsky's manner of writing was primarily intended for a narrower circle of specialists. The later Zholkovsky seems almost apologetic about these more difficult writings, stating that he tried to edit or move to footnotes the more "boring" passages, and singling out other articles that he regards as the most "readable" (7). Helpfully, the volume opens with "Poeticheskii mir Pasternaka" ("The Poetic World of Pasternak"), the Russian translation of a 1990 article that appeared in French. Although the work was not initially written for this purpose, it serves as a fine introduction to the book as a whole, providing an overview of Pasternak's career and just as importantly explaining some of the terms that will reappear in subsequent items.

The bulk of the work consists of four sections, each of similar length in terms of pages but with varying numbers of articles. The first section, concerned with invariants in Pasternak, opens with "Mesto okna v mire Pasternaka" ("The Place of the Window in Pasternak's World"), which in its first incarnation goes back to 1978. (Many of the pieces in these volumes have appeared more than once before; as in this case, sometimes in revised form and sometimes not just in Russian.) Here Zholkovsky elucidates in detail the themes, and combinations of themes, connected with the appearance of windows in Pasternak's oeuvre, building to a generalized picture of the image's meaning and structural functions. Beyond his specific findings, he suggests that the conventional brief definitions of a poet's key words are not adequate to convey their full meaning. Dictionaries of the sort hinted at here may not be practical, but, as he notes, efforts to describe a poet's usage in this way could conceivably serve as a methodology for exploring various aspects of the writer's work (61–62). Two other articles in this section deal with sets of motifs in Pasternak, and a third discusses the title *My Sister—Life*. On the one hand, this last piece points to possible or likely sources for the title: the Biblical Song of Songs, St. Francis of Assisi (via Verlaine), and Pasternak's older contemporary, Aleksandr Dobroliubov. On the other, Zholkovsky discusses the title as embodying Pasternak's chief themes both in his writing and in his very approach to life and creativity. The second section includes penetrating analyses of certain stylistic features in Pasternak's writing. Not surprisingly, the articles that demand the most from the reader are also among those that go back furthest in Zholkovsky's career: a close study of the syntactic structure he calls "distributive contact" (from 1982), as well as a piece on the grammatical category of voice—more precisely, on "figurative voices" in Pasternak. A third early work, "Obstoiatel'stva velikolepii" ("Circumstances of Magnificence," 1980), on a class of adverbs in Pasternak, focuses closely on defining the relationship of these words to Pasternak's poetic world and is less theoretical. The other, later pieces in this section would be among those that Zholkovsky calls more "readable." They include a cluster of seven

brief analyses, including one devoted to Gumilev, in “Eros, logos i poeziia grammatiki” (“Eros, Logos, and the Poetry of Grammar”)—where the title pretty much describes the nature of the studies—and an excerpt of Pasternakian examples from a forthcoming anthology of works by Russian poets who employ “infinitive writing” (which occurs either as independent sentences of the type “Byt' znamenitym nekrasivo” (“It is unbecoming to be famous”) or as a series of dependent infinitive clauses).

One of the poems discussed in connection with infinitive writing, “Raskovannyi golos” (“The Unshackled Voice”), also turns up in the next section, consisting of four lengthy studies devoted to individual poems. The other works receiving close readings are “Mne khochetsia domoi, v ogromnost'...” (“I Want to go Home, into the Vastness,” the third segment of *Volny (Waves)*), “Ballada” (“Drozhat garazhi avtobazy...” (“The Garages of the Auto Depot Tremble”))—both from *Vtoroe rozhdenie (Second Birth)*—and “Veter” (“Wind”) from *Doctor Zhivago*. Zholkovsky brings a large repertoire of tools to the task at hand, picking out whatever seems most suitable or important in analyzing the particular poem. Thus in looking at the very early and little-studied “Raskovannyi golos” he remarks briefly but precisely on the formal features of the poem and the role they play, probes its intertextual links with the Book of Genesis and a poem by Rilke, and shows how infinitive writing affects the work’s composition. Zholkovsky does not shy away from considering the real-life context of poems, especially in regard to the two poems from *Vtoroe rozhdenie*. He points to the way in which “Mne khochetsia domoi, v ogromnost'...” expresses a profoundly ambiguous and complex attitude toward the Soviet reality of its day, at the same time that it engages in a poetic dialogue with several of Pasternak’s contemporaries as well as with earlier poets. The interpretation of “Ballada” rests in part on delving into the Pasternak-Genrikh Neigauz relationship at the time of the poem’s writing, though much of the piece is concerned with the ballad form itself, the relationship of music to verse, and a stanza-by-stanza analysis of the work’s structure.

The fourth essay in this section, “Veter,” is also the subject of an article in the final section, which is devoted to the topic of “intertexts.” In the case of that poem the intertexts are translations, specifically seven translations of “Veter” into English. Zholkovsky reaches the provocative conclusion that the translators are able to provide an adequate sense of the poem’s deep structure but are weaker at conveying the richness of the surface features. The article may be of greatest significance for its comprehensive approach to evaluating the English texts; the methodology used here could profitably be applied to the study of other poetic translations. Other pieces treating “intertexts” include remarks on how differences in the poetic worlds of Pasternak and Okudzhava affect their treatment of the same general theme, an incisive formal analysis of Pasternak’s “Leto” (“Summer”) (preceded by evidence for the

possible influence of Friedrich Hölderlin), and a demonstration of how awareness of the references to other works in “Roial' drozhashchii penu s gub oblizhet...” (“The Trembling Grand Piano Will Lick the Foam from its Lips”) allows for a richer interpretation of the poem. The collection concludes with an appendix containing an early article, “Invarianty i struktura poeticheskogo teksta: Pasternak” (“Invariants and Structure of the Poetic Text: Pasternak”), which raised many of the issues that Zholkovsky eventually explored in greater depth.

Poetika Pasternaka thus comprises a rather motley collection. Those with a more serious interest in this poet will find here a compilation of material written over several decades that, from a variety of angles, shines a penetrating light on his career; others are more likely to turn to individual articles, many of which, as has been suggested, are of theoretical or methodological interest beyond what they say specifically about Pasternak. Strikingly, Zholkovsky's own evolution as a scholar seems to have mirrored that of Pasternak as a poet: both went from an earlier abstruse manner that required a highly sophisticated audience to later writing that is more direct and accessible.

The other two books are of a very different sort, not only for the most part written in that later style but also dealing with disparate works and figures. The initial impression resembles that of a *Kunstkammer*, where miscellaneous items of high art can mingle with oddities, reflecting the enthusiasms, the curiosity, and the personality of the collector. Here the effect is created not by objects, but by the subjects, which range from major writers and famous works of Russian (and occasionally world) literature to the rigorous formal analysis of an off-color proverb or etymological observations on the words for camel and elephant. The latter kinds of topic are understandably less well represented, but little, if anything, is out of bounds for Zholkovsky's inquisitiveness. And yet throughout the concern is ultimately similar: to probe beneath the surface of phenomena, to explain how they function and how certain effects are created, and, at least in his essays on literary works, to understand how sense and structure form a unified whole.

The two collections are structured in a roughly inverse way. *Ochnye stavki s vlastitelem* begins with the more unusual items: here, Plato's cave, a Pushkin miniature, and an aphorism by Bertrand Russell are among the matters considered. The next section deals with topics in nineteenth-century Russian prose (a scene in Pushkin that influenced later writers, the semiotics of “Taman,” the authorial presence in novels by Dostoevsky, stories by Leskov, examples of Tolstoy's influence, considerations inspired by passages in Chekhov's “Dama s sobachkoi” (“The Lady with the Little Dog”) and Bunin's late sketch “Akhmat”) and is followed by a section on twentieth-century Russian prose (Zoshchenko in comparison to Chekhov, Bulgakov's “Heart of a Dog,” Nabokov's “Spring in Fialta,” Siniavsky's “Pkhents,” parallels between a section of Solzhenitsyn's *Lenin in Zurich* and a chapter in

The Twelve Chairs, Platonov's "Fro," and two of Zholkovsky's favorite recent writers, Iskander and Aksenov). The final and briefest section contains several studies on twentieth-century Russian poets, ranging from Mandelstam to Brodsky.

In *Poetika za chainym stolom* the pieces that comprise something of a miscellany are placed at the end, in the fifth section, rather than the beginning and include a rumination on how a house in Zholkovsky's Santa Monica exhibits a structural unity and variety that in a way recalls Pushkin's poetic technique, the analysis of a political joke, and a combined personal and literary memoir of Aksenov, which includes the amusing tale of how two stories by Zholkovsky appeared in an online issue of *Znamia (The Banner)*, where they were identified in a note as among "the masterpieces of the mature Aksenov." (Interestingly, as I write this, the two stories are still ascribed to Aksenov in an online database for that journal, though they were removed from the print version). In this book poetry, rather than prose, receives the bulk of attention. The first section contains eight new essays on Pasternak (all written since the publication of *Poetika Pasternaka*); while most treat individual poems, one contains remarks on how three passages in *Doctor Zhivago* relate to notions found in verse that Pasternak had written earlier. Poetry similarly is at the fore of the second section, which has articles on figures extending from Pushkin to Kushner (in the article that provides the title for the collection), but primarily looks at poets active during the first half of the twentieth century: Mandelstam, Akhmatova, Khodasevich, and Kharms. The middle section shifts to prose and to many of the same writers discussed in *Ochnye stavki...: Dostoevsky, Tolstoy* (whose works are central to three articles), Iskander, and Aksenov. One article focuses on a story by Guy de Maupassant, and another, one of the oldest pieces in the volume, on Sasha Sokolov's *Palisandriia*, a work that Zholkovsky clearly admires. In the penultimate section he looks at clusters of motifs. In one study *The Golden Calf* (Ilf and Petrov come up frequently in this volume) serves as a touchstone for examining a type of dream found specifically in anti-utopian literature, and he probes the sources of this motif. In another he begins by analyzing a scene in Solzhenitsyn's "Incident at Kochetovka Station" and finds analogous moments in *The Golden Calf*, Pilnyak's *Mahogany*, and Orwell's *1984*, among other works, in each case involving the appearance of an old man who serves as a witness to the values of the prerevolutionary era. The longest article both in this section and in the entire volume, "Il catalogo è questo," explores the "poetics of lists," with examples of their differing uses going back to Homer and Dante and ranging through Russian literature up to Vysotsky and Evtushenko.

Zholkovsky brings to his writings a wealth of knowledge, investigative zeal, and critical discernment. His precision and thoroughness in defining and exploring his topics result in very few errors or significant omissions. One instance of the former occurs in *Poetika Pasternaka*, where a transcription

oversight leads to listing the E-rhyme rather than the D-rhyme as appearing in stanzas 5 and 6 of “Leto,” thereby affecting his account of the structure (483–84). As for the latter, in pondering the original title—“Sonet”—of Brodsky’s blank verse “Postscriptum” (*Ochnye stavki...* 454) it would have been good to refer to the appearance of unrhymed sonnets in English poetry. These foreign examples may well have influenced Brodsky, the more so because W. H. Auden, whom he greatly admired, is credited with writing one of the first English unrhymed sonnets. However, such lapses are rare, given the complexity and diversity of topics on which he writes; on the whole, he is a most meticulous scholar.

Meticulous, yes, but also curious and fearless. The curiosity evinces itself in part through his delving into whatever matters come into view—as a result issues that might at first seem marginal often become the basis for informative forays into matters of cultural history that are of broader significance for the study of literature. Take, for instance, his article “Grivennik serebrianyi v karmane” (“A Silver Dime in My Pocket,” *Ochnye stavki...* 78–93), the title of which comes from a line of poetry in Mandelshtam. Zholkovsky explores the “semantic aura” of this word in Mandelshtam’s day, using examples from numerous literary sources to note that for a grivennik one could visit a bathhouse, ride on a tram, or make a phone call. From there he goes on to describe the history of the coin, usages of the word in the nineteenth century, and some vaguely negative implications associated with it. The result of his curiosity provides the reader with both a thorough grasp of the coin’s semantic “aura” and a multi-layered understanding of what lies behind that one line in Mandelshtam.

Curiosity also inspires his efforts to arrive at a holistic understanding of the texts that he analyzes. To get there he tends to employ not so much a single approach as a varying cluster of considerations: thematic, structural (which in the case of poems may involve such matters as the phonetic properties of a poem, its stanzaic structure, etc.), stylistic, semantic, intertextual, biographical, cultural, etc. Deciding which of these to bring to the fore in a given instance is a matter of asking good questions—with “good” here understood as meaning the most significant or most interesting—and at that Zholkovsky excels. Pretty much all these approaches are on display in one or another of the articles on Pasternak in the first section of *Poetika za chainym stolom*: elucidating a key intertextual connection for “Matros v Moskve” (“A Sailor in Moscow”), employing a “slow reading” to trace the thematic structure and comment on the poetry of grammar in “Vo vsem mne khochetsia doiti...” (“In Everything I Wish to Reach”), analyzing formal features in “Liubit' inykh—tiazhelyi krest...” (“To Love Some Is a Heavy Cross”), noting key themes (but also describing rhythm and syntax) in the last part of “Vakkhanaliia” (“Bacchanalia”), or invoking the intellectual biography of the author in an article entitled “O temnykh mestakh” (“On Obscure Passages”).

That curiosity is also evident in his fascination with the connections among texts. Often he is uncovering direct relationships between works, but his fearlessness also comes to the fore as he ventures to trace what might be termed wandering motifs and thematic parallels, to say nothing of suggesting possible but at least somewhat speculative influences. In these explorations he reveals not just an impressive familiarity with a huge swath of world literature, but also a discerning eye that perceives links most would overlook. Thus he takes Russian folktale no. 421 (in Afanasev's numbering) and finds, among other things, a similar mixture of truth and invention in *1001 Nights* and in a quasi-autobiographical story by Babel. In another essay, Siniavsky's interest in Swift is described as a possible influence on "Pkhents," but Zholkovsky also finds motifs analogous to those of "Pkhents" in works ranging from a novel by Cyrano de Bergerac to a story by Roald Dahl to the poetry of Baudelaire. In "Fazil'—amerikanets" ("Fazil—the American") he describes interesting parallels between "Piry Valtasara" ("Belshazzar's Feasts") and three stories by Nathaniel Hawthorne—and proposes how Iskander could possibly have become acquainted with Hawthorne's works. Zholkovsky is well aware that some of the associations he discerns may only be coincidences, but even in those instances he is at least demonstrating correspondences and providing an understanding of the ways that different authors utilize similar motifs.

His boldness also means that he does not shy away from confrontation, and he can be almost relentless in exposing what he sees as falsity. If he admires some of Brodsky's poems, in the concluding piece of *Poetika za chainym stolom* he is less taken with the persona of the poet that emerges in a large collection of interviews that Brodsky gave. This verse essay takes the form of a *cento*—a poem made up of lines from various sources. The genre in modern times is usually associated with humor or whimsy, and there is some of that in this wide-ranging piece, but the attitude toward Brodsky is not benign. Similarly, but on more occasions, Zholkovsky has worked to "demythologize" Akhmatova's biography (again, as opposed to the poetry, about which he has written quite favorably). His 1996 article, "Anna Akhmatova—piat'desiat let spustia" ("Anna Akhmatova—Fifty Years Later"), attracted wide attention within Russia and was anthologized in an earlier collection of his works (*Izbrannye stat'i o russkoi poezii; Selected Articles on Russian Poetry* 2005). In *Poetika za chainym stolom* he republishes a lesser-known piece that first appeared in 1995. The article covers similar ground, though the title, "Strakh, tiazhest', mramor (iz materialov k zhiznetvorcheskoi biografii Akhmatovoi)" ("Fear, Gravity, Marble (Materials for a Life-as-Art Biography of Akhmatova)"), indicates that whereas in the other piece Zholkovsky began with the efforts of others to create a cult of personality around Akhmatova, here the focus from the start is on the devices—an appropriate word, given that *zhiznetvorchestvo* implies the aestheticizing of a person's biography—employed by Akhmatova to exert her control over others and to ensure her own stature. Tak-

ing a somewhat different angle, the more recent “Mezhdu mogiloi i pamiatnikom” (“Between the Grave and the Monument”) in *Ochnye stavki...* interprets the conclusion of *Rekviem* as in its way expressing an attempt at self-memorialization. In *Poetika za chainym stolom* Zholkovsky also includes an essay co-authored with Lada Panova, “PESNI ZHESTY MUZHSKOE ZHENSКОЕ: O poeticheskoi pragmatike Anny Akhmatovoi” (“SONGS GESTURES MALE FEMALE: On the Poetic Pragmatics of Anna Akhmatova”), which includes remarks on Akhmatova’s possible bisexuality. The most direct references to that topic were censored in the collection where the article originally appeared, causing Zholkovsky to write a sharp rejoinder, printed here (232–34).

However, such items are very much the exception, and the predominant tone is one of admiration for the writers and the works that he discusses as well as of delight in discovery. His fearlessness primarily expresses itself in the willingness to make bold conjectures, to engage with unconventional topics, and to embrace a very different style of writing than that which characterized his earlier scholarship. Indeed, he frequently adopts an informal manner that dispenses with certain strictures of much academic writing by integrating personal asides or brief memoirs into his analyses, adroitly jumping from one consideration to another within the confines of a single article, or allowing his quotations of literary texts to run on and convey the full flavor of the works. Those turning to these volumes will find a cornucopia of riches: sharp insights regarding the specific works he examines, approaches that have broad applicability beyond the article in which they appear, and informative excursions on authors, writings, and cultural phenomena. Anyone interested in Russian literature and culture of the past two centuries will find much in these pages to savor.