The Poetry of Grammar and Ungrammaticality

Alexander Zholkovsky
Interviewed by the editors of *Pushkin Review*

Igor Pilshchikov. I guess this is our second time speaking English with each other.

Alexander Zholkovsky. When was the first time?

IP. When I delivered a lecture at USC…

AZ. … on Pushkin, right?

IP. Yes. Somehow in our conversations, English is linked with Pushkin—a good sign. I'll be asking questions compiled by **Joe Peschio** and me.

Question 1. You came to *Pushkinistika* from another discipline. What were the social-political circumstances that shaped the cohort of "officially-sanctioned" Pushkinists in the '60s and '70s? Did you ever want to be part of it?

AZ. For me, the "main" Pushkinist at that time was Lotman. And then there appeared Jakobson's notable analysis of "Ia vas liubil..."[1] I was excited by it—and I thought I could outdo Jakobson, whom I had always admired. I tried to do that in my piece on "Ia vas liubil…"[2]

Like Jakobson, I was a linguist and thus, too, came from the outside. But let me stress, linguistics is not all that much outside poetics, to which it is inherently relevant in at least two basic ways. Firstly, literature is written in a language, language is the material of literature, and a mastery of that material is essential for poetics. Secondly, literature is itself a kind

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[1] Roman Jakobson, "Poetry of Grammar and Grammar of Poetry," in his *Language in Literature*, ed. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), 128–32. First published in Russian in 1961.

[2] See the "Selected Bibliography of Alexander Zholkovsky's Works on Pushkin" (169–79; henceforth "Sel. Bib."), items 2 and 5.

of language—a semiotic system; therefore, linguistics has lessons to offer about how you describe it.

In addition to this general framework, I proceeded from the model of literary competence I was developing together with Yuri Shcheglov: a poetics of expressiveness, or the "Theme ➔ Text" model, which is based on three major principles:

1. Themes should be formulated explicitly, rather than cautiously danced around in an impressionistic discourse that avoids itemizing the relevant findings (of motifs, devices, etc.). To this day, some colleagues abhor explicitness.
2. The (postulated) themes and the (actual literary) texts are to be correlated by a transformation history, or derivation, describing the structure of a literary text as legitimately evolved from a theme. Without claiming that the text was actually generated from the theme in a chronological step-by-step procedure, such a derivation is intended to identify all the elementary operations (we call these *expressive devices*) in terms of which the text can be shown to be a successful, "artistic" embodiment of a purely semantic, "unartistic" theme. All this is, in fact, inherent in traditional poetics, going all the way back to Aristotle; the point was making this explicit and formalizable. The heuristic motto was: "Theme equals Text minus Expressive Devices." And vice versa: "Text equals Theme plus Expressive Devices."
3. The "poetic world" of an author is the system of invariant motifs and patterns systematically recurrent in his/her works.[3]

The upshot is that looking at "Ia vas liubil…" one should keep the three principles in mind. What is the theme of the text and what devices are used, and how invariant are those themes and devices in Pushkin? These are, of course, heuristic tools. It's not that I have a complete set of Pushkin invariants—but I did develop a blueprint.[4] The point is, in analyzing a text, to consistently correlate it with the poet's invariants. The more of those you recognize in the text, the more convincing your analysis.

As long as scholars ignore invariants, the field of literary studies remains a *terra incognita*—one can easily walk into most any corner of it and pick up from the ground a discovery nobody cared to make. Studying literary texts without recourse to the author's invariants is like parsing sentences without recourse to grammar.

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[3] See Sel. Bib.: 1.

[4] Sel. Bib.: 2, 8, 9, 13, 20, 22, and 29–30.

IP. Your definition of the poetic world partly coincides with Jakobson's definition of poetic mythology in his famous "Statue" article, written in Czech in 1937 and translated into English only in 1975.[5]

AZ. … and into French in 1973. I remember making sure I got a hold of that text, and a French colleague sent me the entire collection, *Questions de poétique*.[6] I have proudly used a quote from that article as an epigraph to some of my essays. Shcheglov and I had developed the idea of invariants independently and were grateful for Jakobson's unexpected—and predated!—support and declared ourselves his followers.

But I don't fancy the term *mythology*. If you use it, you tend to think of mythological figures, of life, love, death, and so on, whereas the actual poetic invariants are much more elementary, as they pervade our entire perception of the world. In describing Pushkin's invariants, I tried going further than Jakobson—to more concrete levels of the human condition and physical reality. Inspired by the formalists and Jakobson's poetry of grammar, Shcheglov and I insisted that invariant motifs obtain also in the "code" sphere—that of style, linguistic structures, and so on.

Having lunch at Jakobson's place in Cambridge, Massachuesets (as I remember, 8 Scott Street), was a historic moment in my life. I made bold and asked him: "In your statue article, you developed the idea of a poet's mythology, and in your poetry of grammar article, you made a point of counting the nouns and adjectives and stuff like that. Why didn't you combine the two approaches?" He looked at me—it was 1980 and he was eighty-four—and said: "Well, why should I do it all myself? Why not leave something for others to do."[7] And I took this as a testament—and decided to try and accomplish this in his footsteps, in particular by looking for the "code" invariants.

IP. That's precisely what Jakobson did not do in his "poetry of grammar" essays, and there was a bridge that you could build between the two Jakobsonian approaches.

AZ. Indeed. The idea that thematic invariants are projected into the sphere of language, meter, et cetera, amounts to the principle of iconicity in semiotics: for a referential seme an icon is found in the code sphere. To express

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[5] Roman Jakobson, "Socha v symbolice Puškinově," *Slovo a slovesnost* 3, no. 1 (1937): 2–24; Jakobson, "The Statue in Puškin's Poetic Mythology," in his *Puškin and His Sculptural Myth*, trans. and ed. John Burbank (The Hague: Mouton, 1975), 1–44.

[6] Roman Jakobson, "La statue dans la symbolique de Pouchkine," trans. Marguerite Derrida, in Jakobson's *Questions de poétique*, ed. Tzvetan Todorov (Paris: Seuil, 1973), 152–89.

[7] Sel. Bib.: 34.

the theme of "many" you use an enumerative structure, a list of objects. To iconize "contradiction" you create ungrammatical structures…

IP. "Iconicity" Jakobson borrowed from Peirce, but the threesome—poetic mythology, poetry of grammar, and the types of signs (icons being one of them)—belong to different periods of his research: he just never got around to combining them.

AZ. Describing Pushkin's grammar is not the same thing as studying iconicity. You could describe the kind of structures Pushkin uses, doesn't use, uses more often, less often, but that's a different task from establishing what his favorite icons are, i.e., describing the ways he projects thematic elements into formal patterns. My article on the subject uses examples from Pushkin, among other instances, the way the urn, in "Urnu c vodoi uroniv…" (1830), is literally—iconically—shown to fall and break.[8] We need to compile a dictionary of such iconic rules. When identified in an individual text, they seem obvious. The task is to consistently trace them everywhere in poetry.

IP. I remember you once mentioned the story of some complications with publishing your analysis of "Ia vas liubil…"—in the Soviet period of your career.

AZ. I began by writing a lengthy preprint, putting together what I knew about Pushkin's poetic world and applying it to the poem.[9] I then submitted an abridged version to the *Bulletin of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR*. At the time, it was run by a nice—Party-member but liberal—deputy editor, Georgy Stepanov. My piece was heavily structuralist, but not politically risky, nothing anti-Soviet about it. But there was a long wait… And at some point, I was invited to the dacha of the editor-in-chief, academician Dmitry Blagoy. I went—and it was a farce. I would say: "The structure here [in *Eugene Onegin*] is an ambivalent opposition," and he would go: "Right, right, she loves him!"[10] It led nowhere, but eventually Blagoy retired, and Stepanov had the article published.[11]

IP. Ironically, you mention Blagoy's early work as one of your inspirations.

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[8] Sel. Bib.: 6, 9.

[9] Sel. Bib.: 2.

[10] See Sel. Bib.: 35.

[11] Sel. Bib.: 5.

AZ. Yes, that's funny. In 1929, Blagoy wrote an essentially structuralist *Sociology of Pushkin's Oeuvre*, with a focus on invariants.[12] I learned a lot from that book and never hesitated mentioning it as an important influence on my work, along with Gershenzon's Pushkinist essays, also focused on invariants, and Jakobson's later *Statue* piece, which systematized it all. Which was an absolute "no-no" for the semiotic establishment—the free-thinking scholars didn't want to hear about Blagoy, the official academician, the butt of even Mandelshtam's jokes…

IP. "Mit′ka Blagoy, a piece of trash from the lycée, authorized by the Bolsheviks for the benefit of learning."[13]

AZ. Right. But I have always been a staunch dissident—wouldn't toe the party line. But, of course, meeting a senile Blagoy, totally deaf to arguments, was a shock.

Q2. What scholars were your role models in your formative years? Besides Jakobson, Gershenzon, and the early Blagoy?

AZ. A brief footnote on Gershenzon. OK, I frequently quote him because I find his ideas about Pushkin's invariants productive. And what is the reaction of the semiotic establishment, starting with Lotman? "Oh, Gershenzon! He mistook a Zhukovsky poem for a Pushkin poem just because it was in Pushkin's handwriting!"[14] Yeah, right, funny. But it is no less funny to cherry-pick isolated errors as a pretext for ignoring a scholar's work.

To move on, there was some parallel work by Khodasevich…

IP. "Поэтическое хозяйство Пушкина"?[15]

AZ. Yes. As far as methodology is concerned, I was inspired by the Russian formalists. Vladimir Propp showed—in a brilliant demonstration of the idea of invariants—that all fairy tales were essentially one.[16] Shklovsky did much the same in analyzing Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories as

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[12] D. D. Blagoi, *Sotsiologiia tvorchestva Pushkina: Etiudy* (Moscow: Federatsiia, 1929).

[13] Osip Mandelstam, "Fourth Prose," trans. Clarence Brown, *The Hudson Review* 23, no. 1 (1970): 59.

[14] See M. Gershenzon, "Skrizhal′ Pushkina," in his *Mudrost′ Pushkina* (Moscow: Knigoizdatel′stvo pisatelei v Moskve, 1919), 5–6.

[15] Vladislav Khodasevich, *Poeticheskoe khoziaistvo Pushkina* (Moscow: Mysl′, 1924).

[16] Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. Laurence Scott, 2nd rev. ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009).

manifestation of one deep structure.[17] The inspiring inference for me was that all Pushkin poems were one. To be sure, there are many ways to question this idea, as there is the early Pushkin, the later Pushkin, and so on. But, the principle is what is important. I tried to analyze "Ia vas liubil…" as one possible poem out of a whole set of possible poems produced by this one poetic world.

IP. At that time, Jakobson's and Shklovsky's approaches turned into opposites, leading to a quarrel between the two scholars.

AZ. Unfortunately, Shklovsky was not as great a scholar of poetry as of prose. But the quarrel was not so much about specifics—it was a long-running feud between the two great formalists. There is a good documentary film about it.

IP. Vladimir Nepevny's *Life as a Novel* (2009).

AZ. Shklovsky lived in the Soviet Union and had abdicated his formalist legacy. He was a survivor—and a broken scholar by that time. When I showed—through Taranovsky—my analysis to Jakobson, he both liked and hated it. As we were going to the lunch at Jakobson's place, Taranovsky said: "He must have forgiven you."—"What for? I always admired him."—"He was incensed when he saw Shklovsky's name next to his in your manuscript." Formalism was being finally recognized, and they competed for the title of the founding father.

IP. You also mention Eikhenbaum and Eisenstein among your influences.

AZ. Eikhenbaum was one of the general inspirations, especially two of his works. The "Overcoat" article focuses on the formal features of the story as its basic theme.[18] Turns out, the story is not so much about the sufferings of the underdog Akaky as about combining the various stylistic registers: the ironic, the comic, the "pathetically humane," and so on. *Melodika stikha*[19] shows how versification and syntactic patterns convey meanings.

    Eisenstein is important for a different part of the "Theme → Expressive Devices → Text" project: formulating the theme and deriving the text via

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[17] Viktor Shklovsky, "Sherlock Holmes and the Mystery Story," in his *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher (Elmwood Park, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990), 101–16.

[18] Boris Eikhenbaum, "How Gogol's 'Overcoat' Is Made," in *Gogol from the Twentieth Century: Eleven Essays*, comp., ed., and trans. Robert A. Maguire (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), 269–91.

[19] Boris Eikhenbaum, *Melodika russkogo liricheskogo stikha* (Petersburg: OPOIaZ, 1922).

expressive devices. Some of the devices he had already isolated; Shcheglov and I tried to "scientifically" systematize them and add the missing ones. Eisenstein was the first to champion—on Russian soil, albeit outside the academy—the idea of "expressive devices" as the bridge between "declarative themes" and "artistic texts." I wrote an article about his "generative poetics" and formalized his derivation of a scene for a virtual film—a transcript of a class he taught at the Institute of Cinematography.[20]

IP. Can you add anything about Eisenstein as applied to Pushkin?

AZ. In his works I also found striking analyses of Pushkin's expressive designs, in particular, in "Poltava" and "Skupoi rytsar´."[21]

    To go on with role models, a great influence was my stepfather, the musicologist Leo Mazel. Shcheglov and I cited his work focused on themes and expressive devices.[22]

IP. And also the development and combination of themes?

AZ. Yes. A major characteristic of derivation is that *variation* is followed by the *combination* of its products—in a "diamond" format. *Variation* multiplies the manifestations of the theme; then comes the turn of *combination*, which compresses entire clusters of variants into "ready-made objects," so that the resulting structure looks natural—naturalized.

    The main assumption underlying the theory is that nothing is natural, or, in Eikhenbaum's formulation, everything "is always a construct and play (всегда есть построение и игра),"[23] and thus you have to discover exactly how the "construct and play" are designed. In our analyses, we tried very hard to observe the principle: "If it works right off the bat, then you're doing something wrong" ("Нельзя, чтобы сразу получалось хорошо"). In a derivation, no step should be skipped: the artistic effect should never be pulled out of the hat in one big trick but rather shown to consist of many elementary steps (triggered by Expressive Devices). You are to unpack the ready-made object: the Pasternakian "window," the Pushkinian "position

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[20] Sel. Bib.: A, pp. 35–52.

[21] S. M. Eisenstein, "Pushkin the Montageur," in his *Selected Works, Volume 2: Towards a Theory of Montage*, trans. Michael Glenny (London: BFI, 1991), 203–23; Eisenstein, "Montage 1938," in ibid., 316–21; S. M. Eizenshtein, "Pafos," in his *Izbrannye proizvedeniia v 6 tomakh*, vol. 3 (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1964), 122–25; Sel. Bib.: A, 88.

[22] L. A. Mazel´, "O sisteme muzykal´nykh sredstv i nekotorykh printsipakh khudozhestvennogo vozdeistviia muzyki," in *Intonatsiia i muzykal´nyi obraz*, ed. B. M. Iarustovskii (Moscow: Muzyka, 1965), 225–63; Mazel´, *Voprosy analiza muzyki* (Moscow: Sovetskii kompozitor, 1978).

[23] See Eikhenbaum, "How Gogol's 'Overcoat' Is Made," 286.

on horseback," or "the frozen river with movement visible through the ice." The analysis is broken into elementary steps that account for the sum-total effect in a standard way—the same as in other similar cases.

A basic concept in formalism was *motivirovka* (*priyoma*), which corresponds to the English-language *naturalization*. Eisenstein demonstrated how an expressive construction is first generated schematically (by applying an Expressive Device to a thematic element) and then embodied in a real, pre-existing physical object or a social custom or whatever other ready-made entity. Thus, it becomes natural and the reader is properly tricked. But the scholar should not be taken in. The scholar should always uncover the secret of the trick.

Shcheglov himself was a great influence on me. Already in college, he started his work on the structure of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, where he formulated many of the invariants and the corresponding structural patterns.[24] And I kept asking: "How do you do it?" and eventually started imitating/emulating him by analyzing the poetry of Pasternak, then Mandelshtam, then Pushkin. And at some point, we proceeded to generalize these practices into a coherent theory.

Next, Igor Mel´chuk, of course. He was my senior co-author on the "Meaning → Text" theory of language, where texts are produced from semantic representations. Mel´chuk was for us a role model in understanding how a cybernetic system is conceived.

Another influential figure was the French structural folklorist Claude Bremond, who perfected and formalized Propp's model of the folktale by introducing a set of specific syntactic relationships—in lieu of the simple sequence of 31 functions.[25]

Then, of course, Michael Riffaterre, remarkable for his reformulation of the Tynianovian model of literary evolution. According to him, a new poetic text results from the expansion of the traditional paradigm and the conversion of the results into their opposites. Riffaterre, like other Western intertextualists and unlike most Russian philologists, deals not with subtexts but with intertexts. For Russians, the most important questions are things like: "When did Lermontov read this line of Pushkin and when did he first think of how to rewrite it?" Indeed, there often is evidence to that effect, and I use one such testimony in my analysis of "Ia vas liubil…" But these are, after all, anecdotal cases of direct interaction between a new poet and a previous one. Whereas for Riffaterre, the new poet enters the

world of, let's say, French poetry, whose entire seven centuries are already there—as a database of *hypograms*, or idealized proto-texts.[26] And he reacts to them by regurgitating, twisting, and remaking them. For us this means that the relevant relationship is not between this line of this poet and such and such lines by other poets, but rather between the structure of the new poem and the existing network of poetic structures. Which, for Pushkin, includes Russian, French, some Latin, and some English poetic legacies. That is an important theoretical shift. It was hard to swallow at first, but eventually I embraced it.

IP. You also often mention another Riffaterrean concept: ungrammaticality.

AZ. A great idea, which he somewhat absolutizes. In our profession, nothing should be absolutized. Every tool works as long as it works, and when it doesn't, we should feel free to discard it. The productive idea here is that the new poet does something unexpected, and that puts the structure under tension as the expanded traditional structure undergoes conversion. And this produces in the structure of the poem a kind of rupture, an ungrammaticality—linguistic, metrical, or narrative. And, heuristically speaking, in analyzing a text, you should locate that scar of ungrammaticality.[27]

In Pushkin's "Ia vas liubil…" we find it in the last line: "Как дай вам бог *любимой* быть другим." Alexander Slonimsky was the first to notice this anacoluthon, the impermissible insertion of an imperative ("дай бог") in a subordinate clause ("как…").[28] And ungrammaticality calls for naturalization—covering up rupture and smoothing out the text. As I have said, one Pushkin invariant is "one item being visible through another" (as in Прозрачный лес один чернеет, / И ель сквозь иней зеленеет, / И речка подо льдом блестит). This is a variation on the recurrent Pushkinian combination of opposites (such as life and death, movement and immobility, passion and impassivity). That's what happens in this anacoluthon: on one hand, the line is grammatically incorrect, while on the other, "дай вам бог" is not really an imperative but a proverbial set phrase, which the reader swallows as a ready-made object without pausing to parse it. As a result, it's a case of "now you see it, now you don't." Just like the speaker's jealousy, which is there and not there, because he is somehow jealous and forgiving at the same time. The anacoluthon is an iconic projection of that thematic ambiguity.

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[24] Iu. K. Shcheglov, "Nekotorye cherty struktury 'Metamorfoz' Ovidiia," in *Strukturno-tipologicheskie issledovaniia*, ed. T. N. Moloshnaia (Moscow: Izdatel´stvo AN SSSR, 1962), 155–66; Shcheglov, *Opyt o "Metamorfozakh"* (Moscow: Giperion, 2002).

[25] Claude Bremond, "Les bons récompensés et les méchants punis, morphologie du conte merveilleux français," in *Sémiotique narrative et textuelle*, ed. Claude Chabrol (Paris: Larousse, 1973), 96–121.

[26] Michael Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978).

[27] On the effect of ungrammaticality in several authors, see Sel. Bib.: 28.

[28] A. L. Slonimsky, *Masterstvo Pushkina* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1959), 120.

A problem with Riffaterre seems to be that his model is strictly binary: expansion into a traditional structure and conversion into an opposite. Well, in actual poetry the final step is not a mere conversion into just any opposite but into a very special kind of opposite—one that this particular poet cherishes in accordance with his/her poetic world. I showed how this works in my analysis of Brodsky's quasi-Pushkinian Sonnet Six ("Я вас любил. Любовь еще, возможно…") from his "Twenty Sonnets to Mary Queen of Scots."[29] Brodsky expands Pushkin's structure and then converts it—into a typically Brodskian one.

I then went on to explore the entire field of texts influenced by "Ia vas liubil…."[30] Each new poet both imitated and converted it, and in doing so changed it in his/her own way, not just in one generically negative way. Thus, a third operation needs to be added to Riffaterre's two: the deployment of the new poet's invariants.

Among the influences I should also mention is J. L. Austin, the founder of Speech Act Theory, which I came to know rather late in my career and eventually started introducing into my analyses.

And of course, Mikhail Gasparov, an esteemed older colleague from whom I learned a lot. Most important for me was, I'd say, his completion of the semantic halo theory, initiated by Kiril Taranovsky.[31]

IP. … who borrowed the idea from Jakobson's article on Mácha.[32]

AZ. Taranovsky developed a single paragraph from there into an influential article—indeed, a whole theory—and Gasparov took it further. Where for Taranovsky it was one simple seme associated with a rhythmical pattern, Gasparov would establish a cluster of sub-semes—based on processing massive evidence from poetic texts.[33] It's similar to dictionaries, which usually list a set of meanings for a given word. One issue here is the cor-

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[29] Sel. Bib.: 10. On the way similar motifs are treated differently by different poets depending on their systems of invariants, see Sel. Bib.: 3 (Pushkin and Pasternak) and 18 (Pushkin and Lev Losev).

[30] Sel. Bib.: 17.

[31] Kiril Taranovsky, "O vzaimootnoshenii stikhotvornogo ritma i tematiki," in *American Contributions to the Fifth International Congress of Slavists: Sofia, September 1963, Volume 1: Literary Contributions* (The Hague: Mouton, 1963), 287–32.

[32] Roman Jakobson, "Toward a Description of Mácha's Verse," in Roman Jakobson, *Selected Writings, Volume 5: On Verse, Its Masters and Explorers*, trans. Peter and Wendy Steiner (The Hague: Mouton, 1979), 464–66. See Maksim I. Shapir, "'Semanticheskij oreol metra': Termin i poniatie (Istoriko-stikhovedcheskaia retrospektsiia)," *Literaturnoe obozrenie*, no. 12 (1991): 36–40.

[33] M. L. Gasparov, "The Semantic Halo of the Russian Trochaic Pentameter: 30 Years of the Problem," *Elementa* 2, nos. 3–4 (1996): 191–214; Gasparov, *Metr i smysl: Ob odnom iz mekhanizmov kul´turnoi pamiati* (Moscow: RGGU, 1999).

relation of the iconic and symbolic principles: the patterns carrying semantic haloes rely both on convention (established by a successful proto-text) and on similarity (to the seme)—the two basic ways they are naturalized.

In this connection let me mention one additional element of our theory of expressiveness. In every poetic text we distinguish between two subtypes of themes: first, that particular text's very specific—"local"—theme; and second, themes dictated by the author's poetic world. In each individual case, the two components of the theme combine—in the same way that in natural language, there is a part of the message that the speaker wants to convey and a part that is imposed by the grammar of his language (e.g., such semes as number, tense, etc.). Applied to semantic haloes, this would mean that for every rhythmical pattern, there is an invariant component of the halo (true across all poetry) and a "local" component—what the particular poem wants from and does about it (i.e., that pattern).

IP. Sounds like a program for further research.

AZ. Strategically speaking, there should be scores, hundreds of thorough textual analyses before we know enough about the poetics of Pushkin, his poetic world, and so on. In today's scholarship, such analyses are not fashionable. Now, the point of doing these is not merely to understand one more text and then embrace or reject its message. The goal is, so to speak, to sequence the genome of a poem, then another, then a third. Only after we have done that many times in an explicit, consistent and sometimes unexpected way will we know enough about the actual structures of poetic worlds, motifs, and expressive derivations.

Q3. "Pushkin as priyom." Did you proceed from Pushkin to *приём* or vice versa?

AZ. I was not a Pushkinist by education, but then, "Pushkin is our everything." So I more or less knew my Pushkin by the time I developed an interest in analyzing texts by applying our nascent theory. But the specific inspiration was Jakobson's "Poetry of Grammar and Grammar of Poetry," which was so heavily focused on the form, grammar, structure, rather than just the platitudes about the goodness of the poem's speaker.

Q4. How careful did you have to be in your early scholarship to avoid political problems?

AZ. The problem was not political, as far Pushkin is concerned, but rather that the literary-critical establishment was anti-structuralist, and, moreover, our relationship with the Tartu anti-establishment was strained. The

Tartu semiotics was, of course, a new approach in the humanities. It was covertly unofficial, anti-traditional, anti-Marxist. But within that semiotic (anti-)establishment, Shcheglov and I were kind of extreme radicals. And because we insisted so much on the explicit description of themes and derivation of texts, the Tartuans accused us of ignoring semantics.

I remember talking with one of them, a friend, actually. She said: "Why don't you pay any attention to meanings?" I said, "How can you say that? We formulate themes, we trace their embodiment at every level of the text… You should probably read some of our stuff."

Somehow that was the myth, and we were seen as these dumb formalists—probably because we tried to be strictly semantic rather than sociological, historical, biographical, Christological, et cetera, unlike the Tartuans. For instance, first Lotman was talking about the structure of a text, and then all of a sudden, he is telling anecdotal stories from the life of the Russian gentry. Absolutely enchanting, but hardly structuralist.

IP. Lotman did not believe a comprehensive theory was possible.

AZ. My way of looking at the issue is like this. Let's say that if I'm about to analyze a poem written in Mikhailovskoe in 1825 or in Boldino in 1830, while having conversations with the Osipovs or whoever. Well, I should be less focused on those conversations than the ones he is likely to have been having with Horace, Dante, Shakespeare, Voltaire, Parny, maybe Wordsworth. That's where the major part of the structure is—not in those specific biographical circumstances, which may or may not be relevant and perhaps shed some light on the poem's local theme. But basically, it is written in the idiom of Poetry—of Riffaterrean matrices and hypograms.

IP. We are dealing with a complicated interaction here between the poetics of text and the poetics of behavior.

AZ. Of course, we should take into account the poet's social-political position and MO. Sometimes the poetics of behavior is quite pronounced, as in the Romantics, the avant-garde, the Oberiu. But once you know what they are trying to do and act out, then your next task is to show what exactly happens to the meter, grammar, narrative, point of view, et cetera, of the actual literary product.

Q5. On one hand, poetry is untranslatable, on the other, we read most of world literature in translation. Is Pushkin translatable?

AZ. In an essay titled "Pushkin under Our Skin," written for the 1999 Pushkin anniversary, I discuss not just Pushkin's being untranslatable, but the untranslatability of those texts by later poets, like Akhmatova,

Mandelshtam, and Pasternak, that abound in references to Pushkin hidden in plain view.[34] For the Russian reader, these references are implicitly there, but they virtually disappear in the translations, say, into English. When Akhmatova writes: "Теперь ты понял, отчего мое / Не бьется сердце под твоей рукою"—in an echo, as I claim, of Pushkin's "И сердце вновь горит и любит, оттого / Что не любить оно не может"—the Russian reader feels a whiff of Pushkin there.[35] But it will most likely be lost on an English reader who is familiar with both texts only in translation—unless the translations of both texts preserve the remarkable—almost ungrammatical—enjambments of оттого / отчего мое.

IP. And enjambments, or run-ons, are, of course, the first to be lost in translation.

AZ. Speaking of Pushkin and translation, there is another phenomenon that has always fascinated me. Pushkin was to a great extent a transplantation onto Russian literary soil from the West. Basically, he is our Horace, Ovid, Parny, Voltaire, and Shakespeare—wrapped in one. He does that for us Russians and does it perfectly. As a result, he is already a translation, a concise accumulation of the Western legacy.

IP. "Конспект западной культуры," as Mikhail Gasparov put it.

AZ. Yes—he said it about *The Captain's Daughter*, which he called an abstract, or summary, of Walter Scott's novels. And there's the rub: who needs Pushkin translated back into English or French if he is only a summary of what already exists there. When I teach my freshman students Russian lit. in translation, we talk about why Pushkin is not the number one Russian name in Western humanities, but a distant fourth after Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Chekhov. Why? Well, for one thing, because he wrote poetry, which is, according to Robert Frost, lost in translation. And for another, because of that "summary" phenomenon. I like citing a funny historical parallel, perhaps apocryphal, but instructive. When Americans occupied Japan in 1945, General Douglas MacArthur allegedly said that they would teach the Japanese all the right things—democracy and the like. And above all, give them something to do, like, say, making cars? Nobody expects them to make cars you'd want to actually drive. Let them make Model-T Ford cars—just to keep them off the streets. Well, then Pushkin is a Model-T Ford produced by the Russians, while Tolstoy and Dostoevsky are Toyotas and Hondas, worthy of being exported to the West.

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[34] Sel. Bib.: 14. About explicit play with Pushkin motifs in later poetry, see Sel. Bib.: 18.

[35] Sel. Bib.: 12.

Another major reason Pushkin is hard to translate is his poetry of grammar—even in his prose. My favorite example is from *The Captain's Daughter*, where Grinev "присутствовал при казни Пугачева, который узнал его в толпе и кивнул ему головою, которая через минуту, мертвая и окровавленная, показана была народу." This is the denouement. The historical Pugachev recognizes Grinev and nods to him "with his head, which a minute later, cut off and gory, was shown to the public." As befits a Walter-Scottian narrative, the head, cut off and displayed, is historical, the nod, fictional. The two are brought together and only separated by a comma. But one translation goes: "He recognized Grinev […] nodded to him. In the next moment, his head […] was shown to the public." Now, this comma, rather than a period, is an artistic effect on the verge of ungrammaticality, but the translation "corrects" it—makes it smooth and thus wrong. This poetry of punctuation is a tough act to follow in translation.

IP. In Paul Debreczeny's and some other translations, the comma is preserved. But some effects like this are utterly untranslatable.

AZ. … and ought to be compensated for in some other way. But in this case adequate translation is feasible. The question always is: Is it the language barrier that is the problem or a particular translator? I have some articles—including one about Pushkin and Khodasevich—where I discuss the problem.[36]

I wrote my *Text Counter Text* while on a fellowship at the North Carolina Humanities Center in 1991.[37] They had an enviable inter-library loan service: within a couple of days you could get any book from wherever in the States. It came in very handy when I looked for proper translations of the great lines in the Russian texts I was analyzing. But more often than not, the effect I wanted to showcase was not there—because either English or the translator are not up to it. As a result, the English-language reader is often treated not to Lermontov, Gogol, and Chekhov, but something closer to Marlinsky, Narezhny, and Potapenko.

Now, back to Pushkin—for an example of what you should notice as a scholar, translate as a translator, and perceive, implicitly or explicitly, as a reader—a detail in "Ia vas liubil…" that I was the first to notice.

The correlation of the forms *любил/томим* in two key positions of the second quatrain seems to foreshadow the crowning last word to be their combination: *любим*. But Pushkin surprises us: *любим* is not the punchword. And yet, it does appear in the last line: любимой быть другим (to be loved by another man)—displaced from the expected final position in a stunningly iconic way, as its place is taken over by another word: *другим*,

that reifies the theme of "another."[38]

In my analysis of Brodsky's remake of the poem, I show that Brodsky imitates this gesture: коснуться—бюст зачеркиваю—уст; he replaces the anticipated last word *бюст* with the high-style *уст* but keeps the *бюст* as a "repressed option," just like Pushkin did with *любим*.[39]

We like stories about great maestros changing just one little thing in the work of their disciples, thus turning it into a masterpiece. The play with *любим/другим* and *бюст/уст* is that kind of brush stroke, making the poems truly masterful.

IP. Therefore, translators should rely on structural analysis—a practical application of poetics. And we are always told that, alas, our work is of no real importance.

AZ. I was studying the translations of a Pasternak poem when I noticed that a thematically crucial rhyming pattern was lost in all the English versions—all except the one translation that a poet and a scholar did as a team.[40] Thanks to this scholar, Professor Vladimir Markov—one of us!—not all the poetry was lost in that translation.

Q6. This provides a good segue to another question: Is there any point in writing about Pushkin in English?

AZ. Yes, if only for the benefit of the translators. When Professor Efim Etkind had to emigrate to France in 1974, he organized a group of Paris literati that undertook a systematic translation of Pushkin's oeuvre into French. Etkind was eminently attuned to poetry's linguistic patterns, and the project produced a valuable body of translations. By the way, he should be included in the list of my early inspirations—as the author of a short but impressive book, *Разговор о стихах* (1970). It's all about the little details of how poetry works. One chapter, titled "Медленное слово «медленно»," was about iconic expressions of "slowness."

There is yet another kind of reason why writing about Pushkin in English makes sense: the fundamental science angle. We want to know and formulate "the state of things" in this area of human behavior—and English is a desirable international medium.

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36 Sel. Bib.: 25, 26.

37 Sel. Bib.: B.

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38 Sel. Bib.: 7. For a historic perspective on the motif of "the other," see Sel. Bib.: 21.

39 Sel. Bib.: 10.

40 Alexander Zholkovsky, "Seven 'Winds': Translations of Pasternak's 'Veter,'" in *Language and Literary Theory: In Honor of Ladislav Matejka*, ed. Benjamin A. Stolz, Irwin R. Titunik, and Lubomir Doležel (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984), 623–43.

IP. *A koiné.* The example of Jakobson is quite telling here: many of his ideas expressed in Czech in the 1930s came to the attention of scholars much later. Any other reasons?

AZ. English is the language of science. When I say fundamental science, I basically mean that if we succeed in developing scientific analyses of Pushkin and others, that will eventually lead to sequencing the genome of literature—as part of the digital modeling of the humanities. Structuralism was an early attempt at computational poetics. In Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* the computer HAL controls everything—but it doesn't write poetry. Once we're done with Pushkin, it will. In one of my short stories, there is a character who imagines a computer writing Pushkin's poetry.[41]

Q7. What are Pushkin's most interesting works—in your opinion? Why?

AZ. Oh, God… From my theoretical position, with its emphasis on invariant themes, the major, most recognized works are the most relevant. In modeling a language, you start with its most normal, regular manifestations and only later on, once you have perfected your methods, should you proceed to its various strata, registers, sub-codes, and so on. The same applies to studying Pushkin. Please make sure first of all that you can "model" *Eugene Onegin*, the famous lyrical poems, and *The Bronze Horseman.* Pushkin's unfinished, unwritten, et cetera projects can be considered at a later stage.

I have no special angle on Pushkin's works, but I have analyzed some of his texts, and that's been incredibly interesting. I focused on his thematic invariants and the way they operate in specific texts—usually the masterpieces—including the subtle structural effects, especially the iconic ones.[42]

IP. According to Eikhenbaum, Pushkin had no direct followers, but many of his individual works became important for some authors.[43]

AZ. One part of my "Ia vas liubil…" project was tracing its "progeny," which I defined as including not necessarily the later poems in the same meter, but rather those that feature the same cluster of themes, motifs, structural

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[41] Sel. Bib.: 32.

[42] Sel. Bib.: 2, 4–9, 13, 15, 16, 20, and 23–30.

[43] Boris Eikhenbaum, "Problems of Pushkin's Poetics," in *Russian Views of Pushkin*, ed. and trans. D. J. Richards and C. R. S. Cockrell (Oxford: Willem A. Meeuws, 1976), 135–47.

patterns, and lexical and grammatical features;[44] the article evoked some response.[45] I believe this is a promising format: you start by analyzing the poem—establishing its core cluster of motifs and devices, and then look at whether and how that was inherited, reproduced, and reshaped in the later tradition.

And certainly "Ia vas liubil…" is a very "strong" text, although scholars agree that on the whole Lermontov had more influence than Pushkin on the poetry that came later. Perhaps because Pushkin was less an innovator than someone who successfully brought together classicism, Romanticism, and early realism—a fortunate combination, possible only once in an epoch.

Q8. What are Pushkin's most notable devices? Why?

AZ. Pushkin stands out in Russian letters as a remarkably evenhanded author who manages to see both sides of every coin. Biographically, he is a young libertine, almost a revolutionary, and later on becomes a conservative, a *государственник* close to the throne. The central invariant of his poetic world is "an objective view of the ambivalence of the human condition."[46] Accordingly, his central Expressive Device is *combination*, which helps juxtapose, superimpose, mix, or fuse opposites in various ways and in different proportions.

I noted a characteristic motif in Pushkin, present both in his lyrical poetry and narrative prose, which I termed *превосходительный покой* (superior rest/peace).[47] It features a balanced interaction of two opposite forces where one dominates the other without crushing or suppressing it—by kind of calmly reigning over it or detachedly contemplating the situation. Here are three telling examples.

In *The Covetous Knight*, the old Baron views the mount of gold he accumulated from the various victims of his shady dealings: "Мне всё послушно, я же — ничему; / Я выше всех желаний; я спокоен; / Я знаю мощь мою: с меня довольно / Сего сознанья…" He is at the top, but quiet, not aggressive, not suppressive, calmly enjoying his triumph.

In the poem "Caucasus," superiority is even more peacefully contemplative: "Кавказ подо мною. Один в вышине / Стою над снегами у края стремнины. […] Здесь тучи смиренно идут подо мной."

A telling example in prose is the scene in *The Captain's Daughter*, where Shvabrin is kneeling before Pugachev in the presence of Grinev, in a sense

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[44] Sel. Bib.: 17.

[45] Sel. Bib.: 17a.

[46] Sel. Bib.: 4; particularly 4⁴, pp. 159–63.

[47] Sel. Bib.: 13.

his double, who comments: "В эту минуту презрение заглушило во мне все чувства ненависти и гнева. С омерзением глядел я на дворянина, валяющегося в ногах беглого казака." Grinev has, as it were, risen to a high position alongside Pugachev and above Shvabrin, but all he does is look down on his foe—with disgust, but without anger.

To make a general point, once we have formulated the central invariant, we should look for all its various manifestations—for instance, those of Pushkin's "objective/ambivalent view of reality"—by inspecting the various spheres of life/discourse. In my description of Pushkin's poetic world, I make a point of systematically going through the four major spheres—physical (hard, soft, hot, cold, fast, immobile), biological (life, death, strength, weakness, health, disease), social (power, weakness, captivity, freedom), and psychological (passion, impassivity)—identifying the ways the central invariants are manifested in each of them.[48]

IP. What about the invariants that characterize literary genres and trends—how do they work?

AZ. Yes, there exist invariants of genres and they, too, are, at least in part, thematic. A telling example is Mikhail Gasparov's analysis of the genre of the fable, in his work on Aesop's fables.[49] He discovered that the genre is a pronouncedly conservative one. The point of a fable is always that one should not try to ameliorate one's situation, because it will only end up worse or, at best, the same. Thus, in creating a fable, the author has to somehow incorporate—develop, subvert, parody—this grammatical "pro-status-quo" theme.

The same goes for literary trends: there are romantic, realistic, and avant-garde invariants. Every major genre and every trend imposes its own invariant meanings on the author, who can then play with them however he or she wants, but can't avoid them altogether.

The idea that genres and trends have their specific themes is more readily accepted by literary scholars than the claim about an author's poetic world. One reason they cite is that it limits the freedom of the poet—reducing it to a rigid scheme. In fact, the invariants are not all that rigid, just as the grammatical categories of the Russian language allow for a very flexible usage.

Q9. Is Pushkin's prose as exciting as his poetry? Even Lev Tolstoy once said about Pushkin's prose: "гола как-то."

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[48] See items listed in n. 42 above, especially item 4.

[49] M. L. Gasparov, "Basni Ezopa," in *Basni Ezopa*, trans. M. L. Gasparov (Moscow: Nauka, 1968), 241–69.

AZ. His prose—the Belkin tales, *The Queen of Spades*, *The Captain's Daughter*—is definitely very important. Tolstoy was right about *Captain's Daughter* being "somewhat naked"—some Western critics (Richard Gregg among them) have pointed out that it's as if Pushkin's prose was coming from the eighteenth century. The Belkin tales are an ironic remake of Karamzin's sentimentalist prose.

IP. What about *The Captain's Daughter*? You said it was a version of the Walter-Scottian historical novel?

AZ. Yes, but rewritten in a very Russian and extremely condensed way. In a sense, it was a jealous reaction to Bulgarin's and Zagoskin's earlier successes in commercial appropriation of Walter Scott's formula. Pushkin tried to outdo them—and he did, but, ironically, a little too late, because the vogue had already passed. And we read *Captain's Daughter* today as a Pushkin masterpiece rather than a successful Walter-Scottian novel of the 1830s.

In one of my articles, I consider three successive attempts at reworking the genre: *The Captain's Daughter* (1836), Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1863–69), and Fazil Iskander's *Belshazzar's Feasts* (1966–73).[50] In Pushkin, the Everyman is Grinev, and the historical figure he interacts with is Pugachev. In Tolstoy, there are several "average" characters, but it's mostly Nicholas and Prince Andrei interacting with Napoleon and Alexander I. And in Iskander, you have Uncle Sandro and Stalin. The treatment of these encounters is different in each case.

Pushkin, following Walter-Scott, favors a constructive interaction between the Everyman and the historical events and leaders. The reader views history through the eyes of an average character with whom s/he can identify. And the idea is that the historical figure helps the average protagonist in his domestic pursuits—for instance, helps him marry the woman he wants to.

For Tolstoy, however, there's no such thing as a great historical figure; they are all just actors, buffoons. Predictably, then, there can be no meaningful encounters with historical greats, nor could the average protagonist benefit from them. The interactions either fail to transpire or end up completely futile, as in the epiphanic scene where Napoleon visits the wounded Prince Andrei after the battle of Austerlitz, and Andrei just looks past him into the sky. This—after he had dreamed, in a Walter-Scottian way, of meeting Napoleon.

In Iskander's novella, the protagonist is not just an Everyman but an Artist, as is typical of twentieth-century literature. Uncle Sandro meets Stalin at a banquet in Abkhazia, and Stalin almost recognizes him. But this time around the goal of the Everyman character is *not* to be recognized

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[50] Sel. Bib.: 15.

by the historical great, a task Sandro somehow manages to pull off. The point now is that it's best to avoid meeting History—in an ironic third version of the paradigm.

I wanted to establish whether Iskander had actually read and liked *The Captain's Daughter*. Luckily, on a visit to Moscow, I got to go and see Iskander at his apartment. He was extremely busy: I found there two other people, editors, working with him on his selected works. Eventually, he found a couple minutes for me. But by then, I had had the time to look at his desk, and *Captain's Daughter* was sitting there, open. Later on, reading his memoiristic prose, I discovered that when he was a schoolboy, a teacher of literature he admired used to read *Captain's Daughter* out loud to the class. It was one of those rare cases when you have an intertextual hypothesis and suddenly get a definitive confirmation. And when I finally had my two minutes of his attention, he confirmed his love of Pushkin's novel.

IP. Back to the Belkin tales, you have written about "Станционный смотритель" (The Stationmaster).

AZ. Or, rather, about the route from Karamzin's "Poor Liza" (1792) to "The Stationmaster" (1830)—in the footsteps of Gershenzon.[51] One of my little discoveries was that the little boy who showed the stationmaster's grave to Dunya was "one-eyed." Pushkin's word there is *кривой*. When you see it in the original, you don't realize, unless you consult a dictionary, that it means "blind in one eye." But on reading Debreczeny's translation, I had to come to terms with this—with the upshot that this part of the story is told through the one eye of the boy. Not strictly unreliable, but, with Pushkin's characteristically light touch, perhaps somewhat so.

I also noted the way Pushkin ironically remakes the sentimental graveyard ending of "Poor Liza." In "The Stationmaster," the entire final scene is pointedly framed with monetary motifs: the *пятачок* ("five-kopek piece") that Dunya gave to the boy and to the priest, plus the *пятачок* the narrator gave to the boy, plus, finally, the seven rubles that the narrator did not regret paying for the detour.

IP. So it's all about paying for information?

AZ. Precisely. While Karamzin's contract with the reader was, approximately, "I'll tell you a sad story and you will enjoy weeping together with me," Pushkin's was: "I'll sell you a story whose meaning you are welcome to try and figure out. I have purchased parts of the story from the characters, including the little boy, the cab driver, and the stationmaster, for whom I

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[51] Sel. Bib.: 11. See M. Gershenzon, "'Stantsionnyi smotritel′,'" in his *Mudrost′ Pushkina*, 122–27.

bought a glass of punch in exchange for his part of the plot."

IP. An interesting correspondence with Pushkin's ideology at that time.

AZ. "Но можно рукопись продать"—the ideology of commercial professionalism. Other characters also engage in financial transactions; for instance, Minsky, in order to stay with Dunya longer, bribes the physician for a false doctor's note. And it's fine—because it leads to a happy ending. Money is okay in Pushkin, while in Karamzin it is a corrupting force.

Q10. Would you like to summarize your principal findings in Pushkin's poetics?

AZ. I can summarize those I already mentioned and add some. First off, I made a point of following a certain format of description. The author's invariants have to be discovered, listed, systematized, and then factored into an integral analysis of the text, *целостный анализ*. It should comprise the local and invariant parts of the theme, the deep structure (what we call composition), the relevant intertexts, archetypal motifs, and the poetry of grammar and versification with special focus on iconic patterns. In this latter connection let me refer to my analysis of "<Из Пиндемонти>," a poem that doesn't really hold water as an ideological statement.[52] Because in the beginning, the speaker claims he doesn't care about all those "rights," but ends up saying that he loves traveling, apparently to Italy, to admire the works of art. But how can you travel to Italy if you don't have the rights/liberties?

IP. Indeed, he did not travel there.

AZ. Nor anywhere abroad, period. There is a poignant moment in *The Journey to Arzerum* when he imagines he has crossed the border into Turkey only to find out that the territory is already conquered so that he is still within the boundaries of the Russian Empire. Another relevant episode is when Pushkin started attacking the West in the presence of Alexander Turgenev, who then suggested he should stop talking nonsense and maybe go at least as far as Lubeck, the very first stop outside Russia—which Pushkin couldn't do because he wasn't permitted to. Once he even applied for a permission to get medical treatment abroad but the emperor said no.

Yet all this does not diminish the greatness of the poem, which is all about freedom—the right to travel. And in my analysis I focus on its climax, which is a five-line sequence of infinitive phrases. And of course, the theme of "virtual freedom" is an invariant motif of infinitive poetry.[53] So

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[52] Sel. Bib.: 16.

[53] Sel. Bib.: H, pp. 15–18.

the high point of the poem is this free—or rather, virtually free—escape into the desirable romantic land of the arts, while the rest is a well-designed preparation of that final flight, with several early infinitives foreshadowing the final sequence.

Another foreshadowing technique is the syntactic organization of the preceding text. The poem is written in couplets featuring strophic enjambments: the sentences end in the middle of couplets. As a result, the poem keeps moving on falteringly, stumbling at syntactic and verse boundaries, then starting to tentatively overstep them—until it eventually breaks free in the concluding infinitive passage. That's what poetry of grammar does for the poem's overall theme of "will for freedom."

Speaking of my Pushkinistic achievements, there is one that I can't ascribe to my theoretical approach.[54] It did not result from a systematic search for Pushkin's invariants or poetry of grammar. It was an unexpected, lucky discovery of a subtext of Triquet's famous lines: "И смело вместо belle Nina / Поставил belle Tatiana"—it just fell into my lap. Great Pushkin scholars spent much effort on this problem and came close to solving it, among them Tomashevsky and Nabokov. But no one had identified the obvious pre-text: a scene in Beaumarchais's/Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*.

IP. A most famous opera—and a Pushkin favorite!

AZ. Yes, he refers to it many times, beginning with his Lyceum poems. Tomashevsky actually got halfway there by pinpointing a similar borrowing from another Rossini opera, *La gazza ladra*, in Boris Godunov.[55] It is the scene in which the police description of the suspect is read out loud, but altered by the suspect's daughter (in Pushkin's version, it's the criminal Otrep´ev himself who alters it), so that he is not recognized and escapes. Moreover, the very same Tomashevsky wrote about the Triquet problem but stopped short of noticing a similar device at work there.[56] In *The Barber of Seville*, Rosina's old guardian and would-be husband reminisces how he performed for Rosina a song replacing the heroine's name with hers: "Instead of GianNINA, I sang Rosina—to please her."

I discovered this by chance. One day I walked into the room where my wife, Lada, was watching/listening to a video of *The Barber of Seville*. She loves opera in general and this one in particular—like Pushkin. I happened to walk in at the precise moment when that scene was on. So I went, Okay, isn't that like Triquet? And Lada said, it is, indeed, so go ahead and

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[54] Sel. Bib.: 22.

[55] B. Tomashevsky, "Pushkin i ital´ianskaia opera," *Pushkin i ego sovremenniki* 31/32 (1927): 49–58.

[56] B. Tomashevsky, "Zametki o Pushkine," *Pushkin i ego sovremenniki* 28 (1917): 67–70.

write about it. Ah, I said, I'm sure Pushkinists have known that for ages. I started asking my Pushkinist friends and it turned out it was news to them—that is, a discovery. The discovery was sheer luck but writing it up meant going to work, as I had to familiarize myself with all the scholarship on the subject—to make sure I was the first.

If there is any heuristic lesson in this—besides the desirability of being in the right place at the right time—it is probably that to benefit from lucky breaks, you have to be always ready for them. You always have to keep the right questions in the back of your mind, always be implicitly wondering why Triquet replaced Nina with Tatiana. This might seem to be the opposite of what I have been preaching all along in this interview—looking for systems, invariants, clusters, rules, expressive devices. Just get lucky and the discovery is yours.

But of course that's only part of the story. Once I delved into the intertextual background of the Triquet motif, I realized that one of Pushkin's invariants was his projection of himself into his texts, and not only as his serious poetic ego but also, self-ironically, into figures like Lensky and in this case, Triquet. I also realized how habitual this was for Pushkin: rewriting, remaking, borrowing from European (in particular, French) poetry, including light and comic verses, as for instance, in his famous epigram on the Archaists *Шихматов, Шаховской, Шишков*, which was actually a copycat remake of Beamarchais's epigram contra *Merlin, Basire et Chabot*, where the French surnames were replaced with Russian ones. So that he had Triquet do more or less what he himself had done in that epigram—in fact, what he had done in remaking the Bartolo performance as Triquet's. I'm proud it fell to me to catch both of them at this "plagiarism"!

Q11. What are other aspects of *Pushkinistika* (besides poetics) you are interested in? Pushkin's biography?

AZ. Not really. And in some of my non-scholarly texts I make fun of people fixated on Pushkin's biography—the short stories "Гипсовая десничка" and also "НРЗБ," where Pushkin is placed at the center of the Strugatsky-like Perestroika process.[57]

Q12. In what ways did you have more scholarly freedom after emigrating, and in what ways less?

AZ. Of course, there was more freedom here, especially in writing about such "problematic" figures as Pasternak or Mandelshtam—until Perestroika. On the other hand, there was less opportunity for writing about

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[57] Sel. Bib.: 33 and 32.

linguistic and philological subtleties because, basically, colleagues here would be less interested in them. Later on, I also discovered how hard it was to please American editors and reviewers who hold very rigid opinions. I would not call it censorship, but they clearly depended on two dogmatic points of view. One is a rather uncritical version of the literary scholarship coming from Russia, be it regarding Pushkin, Khlebnikov, or Akhmatova. The other involves dogmas borrowed from the post-structuralist fashions reigning in CompLit departments: Foucault, Derrida, Said…

Recently in this country there has been a growing tendency toward ideological censorship. And as we speak today, in July 2020, it is getting harsher. But even earlier there was a feminist and other ideological pressure, which basically is very similar to the ideological censorship in the good old Soviet times—where ideologues, who are not specialists or experts in the field, would impose their rigid categories on what you are allowed to write and even think about the literary texts at hand. I'm not sure if there's still any ideological censorship regarding Pushkin in Russia, unless you count the attempts of the Russian Orthodox Church to control the publication of the "Сказка о попе и работнике его Балде" (The Tale of the Priest and of His Workman Balda, 1830).

IP. Yes, recently Zhukovsky's censored version of the tale was published instead of the original text.

AZ. And I'm afraid here, too, we may soon be in for something like that. How much of Pushkin the womanizer can pass "Me Too" standards?!

IP. Also "Gavriiliada" and other atheistic poems full of religious blasphemy.

AZ. It's a double game (*двойная игра*). Some things I can print in Russia, others here, and thus smuggle politically incorrect statements back and forth past the ideologues of various persuasions.

Did my approach change and how? It changed in several ways. After a while, I stopped emphasizing the hard-core theoretical—structuralist—aspects of my research, making it more narratively interesting, acceptable to students, even to undergraduates taking Russian literature in translation. Because in American academia you are supposed to write an entertaining piece rather than one with statement of facts, tables, graphs, equations, and the like. To be—in an undergraduate class—a professor-cum-stand-up-comedian. I learned how to do all that.

IP. To hide theory?

AZ. Yes, while actually still relying on it. And later on, as I started writing a lot in Russian, both in the academic press and for general public mag-

azines, like *Zvezda* and *Noyyi Mir*, I also ceased stressing the theoretical points. But theory always underlies my work. I don't let myself ignore the requirements that I internally keep in mind, but I do try to write it all up in an entertaining, discursive manner.

I remember vividly how I first encountered the problem. While at Cornell (that was 1980–83, before moving to California), I was writing an article in English about the poetry of grammar in Pasternak, namely a syntactic pattern I labeled "distributive contact."[58] It featured a full list of variations on the basic pattern, with types, subtypes, variants, combinations, inversions—a hard-core linguistic analysis applied to poetics. To vet my English, I showed a draft to a Cornell colleague. Her comment was that my English was fine, but the text as a whole was no good as an English-language essay. Ah, I said, I know what you mean. That there should be a couple of examples, then an interesting question, then "let's try answering it," and so on, with a beginning, a middle, and a striking end. Well, she said, If you know how to do that, why don't you? And I, the stubborn structuralist I still was, pooh-poohed her and published the article without changing a word. But pretty soon I turned around mentally and said to myself, Well, I sure do know how to do it—and I will. And gradually I started doing that. Later still, thanks to my experience writing vignettes, I developed a more enjoyable scholarly prose style.

Contributing regularly to the magazine *Zvezda* was a great help. Since 1996, I've been submitting several pieces a year, which amounts to around a hundred articles. My rubric is *Уроки изящной словесности* (Lessons of Belles Lettres). It has been a great stimulus, because the magazine (and personally Andrei Ar´ev, one of the two co-editors in chief) insists on both the freedom of opinion and high academic standards.

IP. Which of your recent articles do you consider the most important in terms of your theorizing?

AZ. Perhaps the "Разбор трех разборов" (An Analysis of Three Analyses).[59] It's my first attempt at reflecting on the heuristics of my research. I looked there at three recent analyses—of Bunin's "Визитные карточки" (Visiting Cards, 1940–43), Kaverin's *Два капитана* (Two Captains, 1938–45), and Zoshchenko's "Личная жизнь" (Love Life, 1933–35).

I suddenly realized that those three analyses have something unexpected in common. Namely, they all focus on a motif that is hard to identify as one and the same because its manifestations differ so widely. In all three cases, the characters act as the text's co-authors. Such characters

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[58] Alexander Zholkovsky, "'Distributive Contact': A Syntactic Invariant in Pasternak," *Wiener Slawistischer Almanach* 9 (1982): 119–49.

[59] Alexander Zholkovsky, "Razbor trekh razborov: Avtoevristicheskie zametki," *Letniaia shkola po russkoi literature* 15, nos. 2–3 (2019): 312–34.

can be writers, actors, stage directors, editors—creative producers of textual structures, in a sense, helping the author to create the narrative.

Now what kind of motif is that? Basically, something Bakhtin was interested in: a sort of equality between the author and the character(s)—independent agencies the author refuses to control. I had long resisted Bakhtin's theories and influence. So this is one more example of how slowly you come to grips with something that has been there all along. Our intuition works in mysterious ways.

I must also confess that I had been rather slow in including intertextuality in my theoretical approach. It was in part a skeptical reaction to the snobbish Russian subtextualists, their way of showing off, as in: "I can think of more subtexts to this poem than you." But then I discovered Riffaterre's theory of intertextuality, which prompted me to add a third sphere to our model of literary competence. Before that, it included the referential, "real-life" motifs and the formal, stylistic ones. And now, based on the lessons of "Разбор трех разборов," I feel I need to add a fourth: the sphere of the characters' co-authorial activity.

On second thought, there is nothing so unexpected about the "co-authorial" motif, given that literature is, to a great extent, meta-literary, meta-artistic. And what can be more meta-artistic than featuring characters who behave artistically?

IP. Kristeva told us that Bakhtin invented intertextuality, although he did not. And now you say that Bakhtin helped you discover meta-textuality.

AZ. Meta-creativity. Once you know about it, you can't help finding it everywhere. In my AATSEEL keynote address, I list a number of "creative" characters.[60] In Pushkin's "The Shot" (1830), Silvio arranges the entire plot, planning the second duel, preparing for it, staging it, and so on. In Lermontov's "Taman" (1839), Pechorin, in order to make the undine romantically interested in him, tells her he might inform on her smuggling activities. In response, she gives him what he believes is a tryst. Each of the two characters invents a scenario and acts according to it while at the same time playing along with the opponent's: Pechorin tries to enact his Byronic scenario while the mermaid tries to enact her crime-and-detection one. Their relationship is that of two directors, two authors of plots, both of which flop.

IP. The same happens in "Princess Mary," when Grushnitsky and Pechorin are trying to stage two different versions of the play…

AZ. And actually the entire plot, where Pechorin stages Princess Mary's falling in love with him.

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[60] Sel. Bib.: 31.

In Kaverin's *Two Captains*, the socialist-realist hero, the military pilot Sanya Grigoriev, is also a writer—the author of the novel we are reading. More interestingly, as he goes about finding the remains of the lost expedition of Captain Tatarinov, the "first" of the two captains, he needs to read the log notes of his navigator. And he deciphers his murky handwritten lines more or less the way the protagonist of Kaverin's previous, openly meta-literary novel, *Исполнение желаний* (Wish Fulfillment, 1935–36), the philology student Trubachevskii, went about decoding the Tenth Chapter of *Eugene Onegin*. Thus Kaverin's Soviet, "real-life" hero is also a Pushkinist-like literary scholar type.

Q13. What is your opinion of contemporary Russian literary scholarship?

AZ. One big problem in Russia is that the students and faculty don't have enough money for books. As a result, their circulation is very low. And this has a depressing influence on the entire market, not just commercial, but the marketplace of ideas as well. Fortunately now, especially because of the pandemic, some new electronic platforms have emerged where you can speak, lecture, and meet distantly via Zoom. Maybe these forums will make our professional work more available.

Another major professional risk/problem is that now that Russia is a free country, everybody is a critic, a specialist on Pushkin or Mandelshtam, you name it. On one hand, this expands the field: there are more people reading, responding, discussing. On the other, this lowers the level of professionalism, eliminating the difference between a licensed professor and a voluble journalist or reader. But then, as we look at the faculty of this or that university, can we claim that they are any better than those bloggers?

IP. These are the signs of democratization of education and of communication.

AZ. Anyway, I hope literary scholarship will survive. After all, since Aristotle, people have always wanted to know and talk about literature.

Q14. How much access did you have in the Soviet Union to cutting-edge Western publications on linguistics, etc.?

AZ. One of the beacons of contact with Western humanities was my mentor Vyacheslav Vsevolodovich Ivanov. In general, books did gradually trickle in—books in the libraries, books smuggled in, brought by somebody, sent by mail… I got acquainted with Michael Riffaterre's *Semiotics of Poetry* while still in Russia thanks to Jonathan Culler, who sent me a copy

through a visiting American colleague. I remember reading it and taking notes during long rides on the Moscow subway.

There were also scholars visiting from the West. Some of them attended my bi-weekly home Seminar on Poetics (1976–79), including Taranovsky, who spent his sabbatical semester in Moscow. He turned sixty-five in 1976 and chose to celebrate it by staying in Moscow, where he also participated in the seminar at the Pasternaks' place; I was also in attendance.

One other impression I would like to share—without naming names—is about a renowned Stanford professor who came to Moscow and attended my seminar. And after the meeting, he showed me a paper he was working on, something about Shklovsky. I diligently read and critiqued his manuscript. He was amazed by how many critical comments I made. He said: "Look, I have presented this paper many times in the States and nobody ever said anything like that to me." He was not offended—just surprised. I was surprised even more. He actually acknowledged that the rules of engagement in American academia practically excluded any serious criticism like that. The only venue for that is a review. An internal blind review, which can stop the publication of the article, or a printed one—after the publication. Otherwise, there is no really independent, open-ended discussion—which shocked me because I was going to emigrate to the United States, the land of the free, and enjoy productive professional exchanges. Moreover, in the sphere of linguistics, including Chomskyan linguistics, such robust practices were apparently the case. But not in Slavic studies. And I remember talking later on, already in the States, with one of the radicals in our field, Daniel Rancour-Laferriere, an early Freudian among us. He said: "Slavists don't understand anything about anything—they only treasure politeness."

Q15. What was a meeting of the seminar on poetics that you hosted in 1976–79 like?

AZ. To begin with, there are several publications where these issues are discussed. A special "Seminar about the Seminars of the Seventies" was organized at RGGU by the late Elena Shumilova; I spoke, as did Nina Braginaskaia, Sergei Nekliudov, and many others… Everybody referred to Mikhail Gasparov's article, so it's not completely unknown territory.[61] In the case of our seminar, the inspiration was of course Opoiaz. Another

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[61] See M. L. Gasparov, "Seminar A. K. Zholkovskogo – E. M. Meletinskogo: Iz istorii filologii v Moskve 1970–1980-kh gg.," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 77 (2006): 113–25; N. V. Braginaskaia, "Domashnie seminary 1970-kh," http://ivgi.rsuh.ru/article.html?id=54014 and http://www.russ.ru/Kniga-nedeli/Domashnie-seminary-1970-h; A. K. Zholkovsky, "Domashnii seminar A. K. Zholkovskogo," June 23, 2006, http://ivgi.rsuh.ru/article.html?id=54028.

stimulus—in a sort of mimetic/competitive desire—was that we felt excluded from the Tartu Summer School meetings, and at some point, I said, Okay, that's it.[62] I'll found my own seminar and I will invite and disinvite whom I choose and thus make it the toast of the town.

As you may know, the paramount thing is to be able to disinvite. If you announce somebody *cannot* come, that makes it a great attraction. One Moscow colleague (*nomina sunt odiosa*—and she was a charming woman) suddenly realized that there existed this very vibrant seminar to which she was not party. So she approached me, saying she wanted to participate in *the Seminar* (one could clearly hear the capital *S*). I said, Yeah, sure, but first, there are only so many chairs, and, moreover, we have a rule, that, you know, you can't just come and sit there. You start by giving a paper. And we have another rule: you speak for an hour or two, then we spend another hour or two discussing quite bluntly what we heard, possibly tearing you to pieces, and only after that do we serve the tea and the cake. (My then wife—now a big wig in the department of AI of the NSF in Washington—and I used to buy a huge cake with raisins at the famous "Praga" deli and only served it after some three hours' hard work—to make the point that this was no *светское мероприятие*, no high-life soiree for snobs.) Remarkably, the colleague gave a very good paper (and never attended again).

Many notable scholars came and gave papers—regularly or when they were in town: Yuri Lotman, Boris Gasparov, Boris Uspensky, Mikhail Gasparov, Yuri Shcheglov, Yuri Levin, Nikolai Kotrelev, Sergei Gindin, Eleazar Meletinsky, Irina Semenko. Inevitably, it became a coveted venue, where you wanted to be and were afraid of being excluded. I had achieved my goal. Once even Vladimir Toporov came, and he was famous for never going anywhere. But Shcheglov wanted his talk about Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to be heard by Toporov, and I said, Okay, I'll get you Toporov—and did.

IP. Sounds amazing to those who remember Toporov never coming to any conference and only sending his papers for publication.

AZ. So that's the way the seminar thrived for three years, 1976 through 1979, meeting every two weeks. In 1978, I applied for emigration and mailed a letter to Mikhail Gasparov (I think he mentions it somewhere), typewritten in Russian but in Latin transcription, saying that from the font used he could infer my plans. And I asked whether he would want to continue participating in the seminar at my apartment, which was becoming officially suspect. His—and the other participants'—response was

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[62] On Zholkovsky's relationship with Yuri Lotman, see Alexander Zholkovsky, "Zh/Z–97," in *Moskovsko-tartuskaia semioticheskaia shkola: Istoriia, vospominaniia, razmyshleniia*, ed. Sergei Nekliudov (Moscow: Shkola "Iazyki russkoi kul′tury," 1998), 175–209.

"No problem," and everything went on as before—until I actually left (in August 1979). After that, the seminar moved: the Meletinskys hosted it at their place, and it continued as the second stage of what is now historically known as the Zholkovsky-Meletinsky Seminar.

As you can see, the scholarship at the time was kind of elitist, clannish. People belonging to different clans would be on barely speaking terms. It might have been good for the professional interactions inside the groups, but there was no healthy dialogue between them.

IP. Did you find your European and American academia also divided into clans?

AZ. I don't have much to say about Europe. Arriving there in 1979, I was invited to the University of Amsterdam by Teun van Dijk. He did not require that I be an adherent of his text theory, he just gave me the floor. I taught my and Shcheglov's study of Tolstoy's children's stories.[63] Clearly, there was a tolerant, even welcoming attitude towards a refugee from Soviet censorship and political oppression. Later on, once I came to this country, I realized there are problems with earning tenure, publishing, peer review. I don't think the peer review system does work in American Slavic journals.

IP. Why?

AZ. First of all, to be quite frank, there are few colleagues who would qualify as peer reviewers for what I submit, and those select few are not likely to undertake it, busy as they are. As a result, some graduate student or assistant professor who, let's say, doesn't know enough linguistics, will be reviewing my paper that has a major linguistic component. And they will just hate it and say that there is too much linguistics in it. A completely inadequate reaction, and one that you cannot really fight. It's not due process at all, it's a joke.

I remember attending the Taranovsky centennial conference in Dartmouth College in 2011. Among the participants was his son, Theodore, who, during an evening chat by the fireplace, told a story of how Taranovsky was about to submit a paper to an American Slavic journal. On being told that

the paper would have to be reviewed internally by two peer reviewers, he exclaimed: "What? Who can do that?" Meaning: where can you find peers for my work on Russian versification? And in hindsight we clearly see that he had no peers—aside from Jakobson and later on Mikhail Gasparov.

I'll tell you another story. Long ago, before I stopped submitting my papers for peer review, I mentioned to the editor in chief of one of our three major Slavic journals that the anniversary of a certain author was coming up, so why don't we do something about it? I, for one, could submit an article. "Good idea! Who else could contribute?" I mentioned a couple of names. The editor collected a group of papers and after a while wrote to me: "I got two internal reviews of your piece. One says it's absolute nonsense, the other, it's a great paper. My editorial decision is to publish it." Good for him, me, and the journal! I've heard complaints from other people about the nonsense that parades as negative reviews. In one case, the editor in chief basically agreed with the submitter that the process didn't work fairly—and suggested she take the journal to court!

A discussion in front of a big audience is another thing; sometimes you get feedback that makes sense. But the crucial problem is who counts as a "peer." When I submit a paper, it usually carries the names of half a dozen people who have read and critiqued it, suggested comments, and corrections, which I have in turn acknowledged and sometimes followed. Thus, the paper has indeed been peer-reviewed already, because I am only interested in submitting a mature piece of work. Perhaps there should be an editor in chief who is in charge for several years, is during that time fully responsible for the quality of the journal, and stakes his/her reputation on it. Rotation would take care of the rest.

IP. But American academia is not divided into the official and unofficial as it was in the Soviet Union.

AZ. In the Soviet Union, we had the official and the unofficial. The official was depressingly ideological and involved censorship. The unofficial was, unfortunately, in many cases, the same thing in reverse. There was a lot of censoring there as well, just based on different values. You had to conform to their mode and style of thinking. In an authoritarian system, both sides are inevitably at intellectual risk. Now, as I have said, in this country, I think we are beginning to have a sort of ideological censorship. The further, the more we have all these identity politics, all these isms impinging on what you must, may, and may not say. As a result, you are not free to concentrate on the text under analysis. You have to bow all the time to the various idols of ideology. Which means professionalism is in trouble.

Back to the issue of poetics and linguistics. As you well know, linguistics is very much a part of literary studies in Russia, while in this country, it is not. When literary scholars here look for their interdisciplinary neighbors they think of theater, cinema, music, ballet, political science, interna-

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[63] Ju. K. Ščeglov and A. K. Žolkovskij, "The 'Eclipsing' Construction and its Place in the Structure of L. Tolstoy's Children's Stories," *Russian Literature* 7, no. 2 (1979): 121–59; Ščeglov and Žolkovskij, "Ex ungue leonem: The Invariant Structure of Leo Tolstoy's Children's Stories," *VS* 24 (1979): 3–36; Ščeglov and Žolkovskij, "Ex ungue leonem: Leo Tolstoy's Children's Stories as an Echo of His Major Works," in Ščeglov and Žolkovskij, *Poetics of Expressiveness: Theory and Applications* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1987), 155–253; Ščeglov and Žolkovskij, *Ex ungue leonem: Detskie rasskazy L. Tolstogo i poetika vyrazitel´nosti* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2016).

tional relations… There aren't enough people that can follow a linguistic argument, who know what an infinitive is—as distinct from an imperative.

There was a funny early episode in my American career: at a national convention (in one of the World Towers no less!), I gave a paper on voices in Pasternak, and not one person in the audience understood me correctly. I was talking about grammatical voices: active, passive, et cetera, and the poet's remarkable innovations in their treatment. But everybody thought I was talking about Bakhtinian voices—the multi-voicedness. *J'entends des vois*, as Jeanne d'Arc used to say.

Q16. As a scholarly community, are Pushkinists different from non-Pushkinists?

AZ. Pushkinism is among the more advanced branches—along with Mandelshtam studies. When you try to write something new about Pushkin or Mandelshtam, you'll find out that 80% of your discoveries have already been made, so you'll have to settle for 20% originality. But if you go after Khlebnikov or Akhmatova you'll see how little has been done. You have an 80% chance of being first because the extant studies are busy perpetuating the cult of that figure, a phenomenon I have labelled "solidarity reading." But scholarly analysis should be independent—"un-coopted, un-complicit," resembling not religion but history of religion.[64]

I'd like to stress that some of the best living Pushkin scholars work in this country: Alexander Dolinin, Oleg Proskurin, yourself, several others.

IP. "Normal science" is not only done by a few outstanding figures, but also by many professionals of different ranks doing their job in any given well-structured field. Therefore, places like Pushkinsky Dom are of great significance.

AZ. And several first-rate scholars work there.

IP. What is important is the existence of a field and a social institution that is engaged in promoting this field. From this point of view, the very existence of the *Pushkin Review* in the United States is essential for the status of Pushkin studies as an integral part of Slavic studies.

AZ. I fully agree. But as a reservation, let me say that too much concentration on Pushkin, good as it is, is by definition a rather conservative

attitude. Let's discover the literary phenomena of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, let's move on. Why not make Pasternak, Limonov, or Prigov the testing ground of new methods?

IP. Why not, indeed. But we need a punchline at the end of our interview. Preferably, from Pushkin…

AZ. How about Salieri's "Ты, Моцарт, бог, и сам того не знаешь; / *Я знаю, я*!"—a literary scholar's archetypal claim?!

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[64] On demythologization of poets' cults, especially Pushkin's, see Sel. Bib.: 19 and 33.