

Poetry and FREEDOM

ALEKSANDR KUSHNER

A rain cloud, a swallow, my soul!
I am bound; you are free.

THAT IS HOW MY POEM “That Which We Call a Soul” ends. It was written in 1966 and appeared in my book *Signs* (Primety).¹ Even today it seems to me that in this poem I managed to capture the moment in which I first felt free as a person—perhaps not the first time I felt free in my life, but certainly the first time I felt that way in my poetry. It still seems strange to me that the poem was published. “I am bound; you are free.” From the point of view of official ideology, such an assertion was obviously suspicious and inadmissible. Moreover, I went on to write that the soul was “that which we must return when we die in the best possible condition.” Without a doubt, this statement contradicted Soviet materialist dogma. Nevertheless, I had demonstratively placed the poem on the first page of my book, and the censor had let it through! How could this be? What could possibly explain my good fortune? The same questions could be asked of the collection as a whole. It contains poems like “The Adoration of the Magi,” “In Memory of Anna Akhmatova,” “Despite All Your Talent and Wit,” and “This Evening Is Free.”²



Cover of Kushner's *Stikhotvoreniia* (2000; Poems), with a view of St. Petersburg

My explanation is that lyric verse, unlike poetry—which explicitly focuses on political or social issues—can get around ideological obstacles. The poetic word is specially constructed: it can convey many different meanings; it is associative, metaphorical; the nets of ideology are not woven finely enough to catch it (it slips through the holes); it lives by its own rules. Of course, under a tyrannical government the poetic word may for a time be threatened with complete destruction. There was such a period during my childhood: in 1946 the central committee of the Communist Party issued a decree condemning the journals *Zvezda* (Star) and *Leningrad*. I was only in the second grade—I was ten at the time—but even I quickly learned that there were writers named Akhmatova and Zoshchenko who had committed a grave offense against the people and that it was better not to read their work.³

I was lucky though. I was still in high school when Stalin died, and my adolescence took place during the Khrushchev thaw. The year 1956 was a key turning point: not only did the prisoners begin to return from the concentration camps, but poetry, prose, painting, and music returned to our lives.⁴ I do not think there will ever be a generation that will read poetry

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COUNTRY Russia

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and prose the way mine did. We did not just read the poetry of Blok, Mandelstam, Pasternak, Akhmatova, Khodasevich, Kuzmin, and Annensky, the prose of Bulgakov, Platonov, Zoshchenko, Thomas Mann, Camus, Hemingway, Faulkner, Salinger, Nabokov, and Proust: we lived it, we were delirious about it. I could talk in detail about that time, about the poetry readings and the literary circles, but that would lead me away from my main topic.

I will make one passing remark: when I speak about “my generation,” on the whole, I mean people who were born in 1935, 1936, or 1937. There is a difference between us and people who were born four, five, or six years later. We were able to appreciate the changes that took place after 1956, because we had something to compare things with: we remembered the war, the pictures of “enemies of the people” that had been inked over in our school textbooks, the campaign against “cosmopolitanism” that was so frequently discussed during our lessons, the “Doctors’ plot,” and so forth.⁵ Those who were younger than us thought the changes introduced under Khrushchev did not go far enough; they wanted more. It was much harder for them to bear the “frosts” that took place under Brezhnev once



Photo: David Draper Clark

Aleksandr Kushner, University of Oklahoma, February 2002

phrase “my hard-drinking people” had to be replaced. Brodsky refused to make the change and the whole project, which had cost so many people so much effort, fell apart.⁷

In 1824, while he was in internal exile at his estate in Mikhailovskoe, the poet Aleksandr Pushkin sent a letter to his

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Khrushchev was forced into retirement. The compromise to which my generation proved capable of acquiescing was not acceptable to many of those who were younger.

By saying this, I do not mean to pass judgment on either group: I just want to point out that each generation was characterized by a different state of consciousness and attitude to life. When I speak of my generation’s capacity for “compromise,” I mean that we took advantage of the principal opportunity afforded during that period: the chance to realize one’s talent, to sit at one’s desk and write whatever one wanted—but with the understanding, of course, that not everything would be published.

As an example, I would like to tell you a story I heard from Yevgeny Yevtushenko. It concerns an unsuccessful attempt to get some poems by the young poet Joseph Brodsky published in the journal *Iunost’* (Youth). At one point, Yevtushenko and the writer Vasily Aksyonov managed to convince the editor in chief of *Iunost’*, Boris Polevoi, to print ten poems by Joseph Brodsky.⁶ Ten poems! Polevoi made only one demand: the adjective in the

brother in Petersburg containing the following instructions: “In the name of Christ and his Almighty Father, I beg you to drag *Onegin* out from under the censor as quickly as possible. Fame be —. I need money. Don’t spend too long haggling over the verses: cut them, tear them, slash up all fifty-four stanzas if you have to, but for the love of God, send money!”⁸ Baratynsky, just to cite another example, published one of his best poems, “Still-born” (Nedonosok), with a line that was so mangled that it was unrecognizable.⁹ Instead of “Your splendor is a burden to me, oh, senseless eternity!” the following was published: “Your splendor is a burden to me, your expanse is burdensome, oh eternity.” The censors would not allow him to call eternity “senseless.” These are just two examples; I could cite many more.

All this aside, it would be wrong to say that Pushkin and Baratynsky were not free. Can we really bring ourselves to call them slaves or conformists? In the final analysis, such an assertion would be simply stupid. Poetry is a way of life. Poetry is freedom. It is one of the most perfect manifestations of liberty.

What Does a poet do?

Seated at his desk, a poet casts out his net and tries to lure this primordial and inexhaustible miracle into it; he finds exact words, he fixes and secures the world he sees with the word. **“A rain cloud, a swallow, my soul! I am bound; you are free.”**

Bending over my desk, looking down at a blank piece of paper, I found freedom in the 1960s. I have worked hard to hold onto it ever since, through all the succeeding decades, right down to the present. I want to tell you about one aspect of this sense of freedom: I was not allowed to travel abroad until I was fifty. The only country I was able to visit before perestroika was Czechoslovakia. They didn't let me go to Italy, France, or England. They crossed me off of every list of writers invited to go abroad. I traveled, however, seated at my desk: in my poetry, I visited the Adriatic Sea and the Mediterranean; I saw France, Italy, Greece, and Crete fifteen to twenty years before I saw them in real life.

Really, how can I complain when my favorite poet—Pushkin—was not allowed abroad even once in his life? All the same, there has perhaps never been a freer person in all of Russia than Pushkin. One of his last poems ends with the line, “This is happiness, these are our rights!”¹⁰ In his poetry, Pushkin exercised his rights long before the recognition of “human rights” became the norm in civilized life.

Perhaps it might be claimed that this kind of freedom, this poetic freedom, is “egotistical”—something of value only to the poet himself. A poet, one might argue, may be free, but why should this matter to his reader? I believe that the poetry reader inhales the freedom the poet has obtained for him as he reads—he breathes freedom in from the very verses themselves. Isn't that, by the way, why we love poetry so much in Russia? When I identify poetry as a source of freedom, I do not mean to suggest that poets must write on current social and political issues. In fact, such verse is generally of dubious value, as were most appeals to overthrow the czarist system or the Soviet regime that appeared in verse. Poetry has so much more to give.

Let's take Pasternak as an example—he never wrote appeals of this kind. Poetry, however, is built in such a way that from any single poetic line—even one that speaks of a “weeping garden” at night or a lovers' quarrel—you can understand a poet's views on tyranny.

How awful! The garden drips and listens:
Does it alone in the world
Crush the bough like lace against the window,
Or is there a witness?¹¹

When I read these lines, I know that this is free poetic speech. The intonation—which is so charming—the softness, and the

originality serve to guarantee humaneness and free political thought. Intonation is the heart and soul of poetry; you cannot fake it. It tells us more about a poet's worldview than slogans and direct statements.

Much evidence exists to show that poetry—including the poems of Pasternak—helped people to survive even Stalin's labor camps. I will mention just one example of such testimony: Eugenia Ginzburg speaks a great deal about poetry in her book *Journey into the Whirlwind*.¹²

I call poetry one of the methods for ensuring the continued existence of freedom in this world. With the help of poetry, a poet can achieve victory even when he finds himself in the most tragic of circumstances. Baratynsky's “Autumn” (Osen') is one of the darkest poems in the Russian canon, but, while writing it, the poet undoubtedly overcame despair and anguish. Although the meaning of the work is tragic, those who read it find joy and comfort in the poem's mighty orchestral sound: it is the same kind of joy that the music of Beethoven, for instance, imparts to us.

Didn't Mandelstam write what were perhaps his finest poems in the fatal year of 1937 (“Armed with the eyesight of slender wasps,” “I have gone, like Rembrandt, martyr to light and shade,” “The breaches of round bays, the gravel, and the blue,” “As I pray for pity and favor,” “I saw a lake, standing sheer,” “Blue island, joyful Crete, famous for its potters,” and many others)?¹³ When someone is about to take your life, it begins to seem particularly precious—you begin to look at life very differently, to “dig your stinger all the way into it” like the “mighty predatory wasps” in Mandelstam's poem.¹⁴ Every person who faces death experiences the same feeling regardless of how fortunate his living conditions might be. Tolstoy made the following entry in his diary on February 18, 1906:

People often think that those who have reached advanced old age are merely living out their days. Sometimes even the elderly themselves feel this way. Nothing could be further from the truth: advanced old age is the most precious and necessary time of life. It is of great value both to the individual elderly person and for all those who come into contact with him. Life becomes more valuable as one inches closer to death. It would be good if both the elderly and those around them understood this.¹⁵



Inasmuch as I have already mentioned Mandelstam, I will add his words here. While he was in internal exile in Voronezh, Mandelstam once said to his wife: "Don't be stupid: where would we find another country like this one—where they exile you for your poetry!"¹⁶ Life, death, poetry, freedom: the connections among them are so much more paradoxical and unexpected than those of us unburdened by thought or grief customarily imagine.

I want to be understood correctly: by what I have just said I do not mean to suggest that tyranny is a fine breeding ground for poetry or that people need no other freedom except "poetic freedom." Of course, this is not true. Even in conditions of tyranny, however, people must find freedom; poetry offers one possible solution to this problem. Not just poetry: any form of art, science, any activity you truly love, and love itself—in every possible sense of the word—can lead us to freedom.

Today, living in Russia rather than the Soviet Union, living in Petersburg (and not Leningrad)—it sometimes seems to me as though I have almost lived two lives—I think that Russia's tragic experience in the twentieth century must have some effect; humanity was given this experience for a reason. Just after his ten-year-old son, Vanechka, had passed away, Tolstoy made a very striking note in his diary: "One should live one's life as though each day a child was dying in the next room."¹⁷ I don't know that one can agree with this comment. Nevertheless, there is a deep and terrible meaning in Tolstoy's words.

For decades many people in Russia lived as though they were on the edge of a precipice, and such a life taught us how to value simple things and joys: tea on the table, a friendly conversation, the warmth of central heating, clean bedding, the chance to write poetry, to make sense of and clarify one's relationship with God and the universe. Perhaps this experience will prove useful; after all, there is no guarantee that humanity's future will be cloudless. Life is not just wonderful. It is also, by definition, tragic. "Chance waits in ambush for us all," as one Russian poet said.¹⁸ Chance lies in wait not just for us as individuals, but also for countries and states as a whole. Even in the freest of societies, the happiest of times, man is doomed to experience suffering, loneliness, illness, age, and death. This is where poetry can help us. I will go even further: a free society that rejects poetry seems to me to be on the decline, to be less than free. After all, freedom is not an abstraction, it cannot be truly said to exist unless man can use it to forward his intellectual, cognitive, aesthetic, and moral aims. I think Tolstoy would have approved of that last phrase: "moral aims."

No matter how difficult life in Russia is now, I would not want to return to the 1960s or the 1970s. Those who succeeded



Kushner (left) with Joseph Brodsky in Washington D.C., December 13, 1987

in feeling free twenty or thirty years ago—and, I just want to interject, for that one does not necessarily have to have been a poet (among my friends there are physicists, doctors, and scholars of literature who might fairly be compared to the dove in the Bible that flew off in search of dry land and returned to the ark with a green bow in his beak)—all those who found freedom twenty or thirty years ago see today that an enormous country, a sluggish Noah's ark, has slowly approached and is beginning to get

used to living in freedom. At the same time, it has become clear that it is impossible to remove evil entirely from the world. Two horses—good and evil—are harnessed to the carriage of the world. The old and repulsive jade, evil, cannot be unharnessed and good left alone to pull the carriage. A new evil inevitably appears in place of the old; you cannot avoid dealing with it. "Russia is the country of the executioner's revolver; America the land of ready money," Brodsky once said.

Today in Russia we, too, seem to be living in the land of ready money. Of course, I prefer this new way of living. I would note, though, that even now it takes courage and strength to keep from losing one's head, to avoid despair, and to continue, for instance, writing verse. In the new conditions, poetry again does not come easily. Some even say that it is doomed. I don't agree with that. I think that poetry does not depend on social structure and ideology, on "what millennium, my dear ones, is it out there?"¹⁹ Poems were written under Caesar and Augustus, under the Guelphs and the Ghibellines, under Napoleon and Nikolai I, in the time of both Stalin and Roosevelt. In this sense, there really is no difference between Pasternak and Mandelstam, who lived in the Soviet Union, and Eliot and Larkin, who lived in a free society.

Poetry would be doomed if it were something merely fabricated by poets. It is no fabrication, however. It has existed in this world since the first day of creation: "And God saw it was good." Someone—our creator—took the time to ensure that the clouds would sail across the sky, the waves of the sea would rumble, that the stars would shine out into the night. What does a poet do? Seated at his desk, a poet casts out his net and tries to lure this primordial and inexhaustible miracle into it; he finds exact words, he fixes and secures the world he sees with the word. "A rain cloud, a swallow, my soul! I am bound; you are free." **WLT**

St. Petersburg, Russia

Translation and notes

By Emily Johnson

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¹ "To, chto my zovem dushoi," in A. S. Kushner, *Primety* (Leningrad: Sovetskii Pisatel', 1969), 5.

² In Russian, the titles read: "Poklonenie volkhvov," "Pamiati Anny Akhmatovoi," "Pri vsem talante i ume," and "Etot vecher svobodnyi."

³ The journals *Zvezda* and *Leningrad* were condemned for publishing works by such writers as Zoshchenko and Akhmatova, which did little to instill party-sanctioned values in readers and for "servility toward everything foreign." The attacks on these journals represented part of a larger campaign against "cosmopolitanism," which had pointedly anti-Semitic overtones. For more on this incident, see Geoffrey Hosking, *Russia and the Russians: A History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 527; and Edward J. Brown, *Russian Literature since the Revolution*, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 180.

⁴ Joseph Stalin died in March 1953. In February 1956, at a special closed session of the twentieth congress of the Communist Party, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev delivered a lengthy speech detailing Stalin's crimes against humanity. This address paved the way for many of the most significant reforms of the "thaw" era, the decade of liberalization and de-Stalinization that roughly coincided with Khrushchev's term in power.

⁵ In January 1953 nine Jewish doctors were arrested and accused of assassinating a number of prominent Soviet leaders. Most scholars believe that by making these arrests, Stalin was laying the groundwork for a new purge. The dictator's death no doubt saved many thousands from imprisonment and execution in connection with the "Doctors' plot."

⁶ *Iunost'* was one of the leading liberal journals of the thaw period. Soviet writer Boris Polevoi served as its editor from 1962 until his death in 1981.

⁷ Joseph Brodsky was born in 1940; Vasily Aksyonov and Yevgeny Yevtushenko were born in 1932 and 1933, respectively. Kushner here is implying that writers of his generation, like Aksyonov and Yevtushenko, would generally have agreed to make minor changes to a literary work in order to ensure its publication. For Yevtushenko's account of this incident, see *Strofy veka: Antologiya russkoi poezii*, E. Yevtushenko, ed. (Minsk/Moscow: Polifakt, 1995), 850.

⁸ Letter to L. S. Pushkin, written no later than December 20, 1824, in A. S. Pushkin, *Sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia Literatura, 1962), 10:128.

⁹ E. A. Baratynskii, "Nedonosok," in *Polnoe sobranie stikhotvoreniĭ*, Novaia biblioteka poeta (St. Petersburg: Akademicheskii Proekt, 2000), 254–56.

¹⁰ A. S. Pushkin, "(Iz Pindemonti)," in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v desiati tomakh*, 4th ed. (Leningrad: Nauka, 1977), 3:336.

¹¹ This citation is from "Plachushchii sad" ("The Weeping Garden"), one of the poems in Pasternak's book *My Sister—Life*. See Boris Pasternak, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, Biblioteka poeta, bol'shaia seriia, 2nd ed. (Moscow/Leningrad: Sovetskii Pisatel', 1965), 113–14.

¹² In many passages in her memoirs of life in the Stalinist prison system and labor camps, Eugenia Ginzburg talks about the comfort she and other prisoners found in reading, writing, and reciting poetry. See, for instance, Eugenia Semyonovna Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind*, Paul Stevenson and Max Hayward, trs. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1995), 175–76, 198–99, 215–36, 291–96.

¹³ In Russian, the titles read: "Vooruzhennyi zren'em uzkiĭ os," "Kak svetoteni muchenik Rembrandt," "Razryvy kruglykh bukht, i khriashch, i sineva," "Ia moliu, kak zhalosti i milosti," "Ia videl ozero, stoiavshee otvesno," "Goncharami velik ostrov sinii." Translations of these poems can be found in *The Complete Poetry of Osip Emilevich Mandelstam*, Burton Raffel and Alla Burago, trs. (Albany: SUNY Press, 1973); *The Voronezh Notebooks: Poems 1935–1937*, Richard and Elizabeth McKane, trs. (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1996); and *Fifty Poems*, intro. Joseph Brodsky, tr. Bernard Meares (New York: Persea, 1977).

¹⁴ The reference is to the poem "Vooruzhennyi zren'em uzkiĭ os" ("Armed with the eyesight of slender wasps").

¹⁵ L. N. Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia Literatura, 1928–58), 55:198.

¹⁶ Kushner seems to be paraphrasing a line recorded in the memoirs of Nadezhda Mandelstam: "'Why do you complain?' M. used to ask. 'Poetry is respected only in this country—people are killed for it. There's no place where more people are killed'" (*Hope Against Hope: A Memoir*, Max Hayward, tr. [New York: Atheneum, 1970], 159).

¹⁷ Diary entry dated March 12, 1895. See L. N. Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia Literatura, 1928–58), 53:12. Tolstoy's youngest son, Ivan (Vanechka), died of scarlet fever on February 23, 1895.

¹⁸ Aleksandr Blok, "Prologue," in *Selected Poems*, Alex Miller, tr. (Moscow: Progress, 1981), 266.

¹⁹ Kushner is citing from Pasternak's poem "Pro eti stikhi," which appears in the collection *My Sister—Life*. See Boris Pasternak, *Sobranie sochineniia v piati tomakh* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia Literatura, 1989), 1:110.

ALEKSANDR KUSHNER is widely regarded as one of the most important Russian-language writers of the last half century. In recent years he has received the Russian State Literary Prize, the Northern Palmyra Prize, the Russian State Pushkin Prize, and the Pushkin Prize of the Töpfer Fund. His corpus of published work includes over a dozen books of poetry and one volume of essays. Kushner's verse is frequently anthologized and has been translated into most major European languages. Since 1991 he has served as editor in chief of the New Poets' Library, a highly respected Russian publishing series.

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