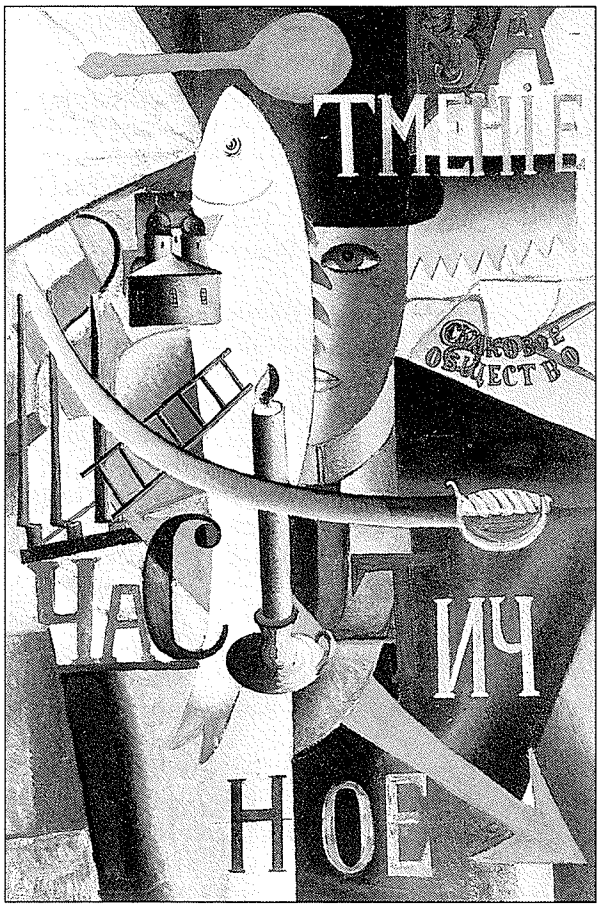
Language on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown



An Englishman in Moscow, *by K. Malevich*

BY ANATOLY NAIMAN

Shortages of all kinds contribute to Russia's turmoil today, but none is more damaging than the dearth of meaningful language. Anatoly Naiman here tells how decades of totalitarian rule have enfeebled language, making political discussion next to impossible and paving the way for the ascent of extremists.

It happened in Moscow sometime in the middle of the 1970s. A researcher at one of the institutes—a timid 30-year-old bachelor who had lived his whole life with his parents in a tiny two-room flat and had long since been pummeled into submission by the usual body punches of the Soviet system—this man at length resolved to buy a co-op apartment for himself and begin life on his own. Naturally, his application was turned down by the authorities "on the basis of law"—meaning, because this was Soviet law, that he needed to proffer a bribe. The most important thing in bribery, as everyone knows, is identifying exactly who should get the goods. People told the man, in appropriate whispers, that if he appeared on such-and-such a day, at such-and-such a time, at office

number such-and-so of Moscow's City Hall, and gave the official he found sitting there 1,000 rubles, the official would "put him in line" for an apartment.

The timid little man did everything as instructed. In the designated office, behind a desk, sat an immobile gentleman with an inscrutable face. The timid man entered and began, stammering, to recount his story of elderly parents and a life not yet under sail on his own. In response came neither word nor gesture. The timid man took out an envelope with the 1,000 rubles and, nearly fainting, placed it on the desk as he mumbled something incoherent. The ominous figure, in an ill-fitting black suit, opened a drawer of the desk, tossed the envelope in, and slammed the drawer shut again. The unfortunate supplicant, turning toward the door, could manage only a plaintive "So I can hope. . . ?" Not a sound came in reply, and the timid man left the room.

Reaching the stairwell, he began to come to his senses. And then it dawned on him: He was the victim, he realized bitterly, of a primitive swindle. That was no official, merely somebody's front man using an office that was empty at the time; neither the 1,000 rubles nor the apartment would ever be heard of again. Enraged to the point of unthinkable rashness, the man rushed back, threw open the door of the office, and from the threshold hurled out in a cracking voice: "And what kind of guarantee do you give me?" The inscrutable face turned to the man, and the mouth at its base intoned: "The word of a Communist!"

What an incredible journey our language has made, having come, like the serpent, full circle and caught itself by surprise from behind, bruising its heel with its head. The giving of one's "word," which for untold centuries (even into our own) signified a commitment better to die for than to dishonor, and the word "Communist," which signaled service to the idea of the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth—these two words had been joined in the Russian of our time to form a sentence equivalent to a Chicago gangster's saying, "My word is as good as gold."

The Russian language, like any language, is a system—an organic, self-regulating, and self-cleansing system, more precisely. It can accommodate a great deal: the abstruse, the babble of didacticism, even the word pranks of the Russian futurists and other linguistic innovators. But it tolerates this type of thing only on its outer shell, so to speak, like a birthmark, a sunburn, or a blister. On the "inside" things are different: Language can purge itself of the poison of deception and outright falsehood, but only if the dose is limited.

You may, for example, call a rutted, potholed country lane a "road"—but you cannot call it a "highway." I mean, you may call it whatever you like, of course, call it an airstrip if it suits you; the word itself cannot resist. But *language* as a system can and does repel such assaults. By the context which the word organizes, by the artificiality of the elevated style or the mocking wink of irony—by the resulting deformation, briefly put, which is plain for everyone to see, language signals that such a usage is simply not true, that language, against its own will, is being "used." The word is simply not functioning *as itself.*

Viewed from another perspective, language also shows itself to be a system at once agile and reflective. It is ready to bring to bear its entire treasury of semantic and grammatical properties, those on active duty and even those in the reserves, to meet the needs of the individual speaker and the speakers of a whole society. Our language is relatively indifferent, for example, to whether a government institution is called an "office" or a "department" (much less a "department" or a "ministry"). It is also ready and willing to anoint everything alien with a foreign word. Thus the dubbing of a man in a leather coat, sporting a revolver and a pince-nez, a man from outside or who had left "his own" people—calling such a man a "commissar" was, as with the application of any other unknown word, almost natural. And the adjective appended to it, "people's," with its maximum degree of

indefiniteness, simply confirmed in one's consciousness that the subject in question was something brought in from elsewhere, something that needed not so much to be understood, heaven forbid, as to be learned by rote. The Russian acronym *Narkom*—from *Narodnyi* (People's) *Kommissar*—while seeming to preserve at least the external traits of the parent words that spawned it, was associated on a deeper and surely more spontaneous level with concepts inherited by language from nature, as in someone who appears *narokom* and *narochno* (one sent with a mission, on purpose) and someone you must "feed" or "satisfy" (*nakormit*). So the transition from the word "ministry" (*ministerstvo*) to the acronym *narkomat* (from the words for "People's Commissariat") did not seem forced at all. On the contrary, the change gave a long, incomprehensible concept a semblance of human features and the ring of human speech.

II

Such examples are legion. It was impossible, for example, to call by their proper names the fraud, treachery, theft, and murder that became Soviet state policy. The necessity of replacing these terms with words that expressed the same concepts yet somehow covered over their ugly reality (with a web of strategic commonplaces cast over it from critical angles)—this led to the creation of a special language of double-entendres, a two-track phenomenon that Orwell later named "doublespeak." A man is fired from his job, arrested, and shot; this comes to be called a "purge." In effect such renaming resembled someone's deciding that alongside the standard number system, based on 10, one could also employ a base-two system when the mood struck—so the number 100 could mean either 100 or four, depending. "So-and-so was shot" was the truth, but "such-and-such an establishment cleansed its ranks of an alien element" was not an untruth. The "element" who had been shot really was "alien," and the "ranks" really had been cleansed of him. The concept of "destruction" was invested with a positive connotation by the substitution of the word "cleansing." Such an operation, however, required the effective demotion of the concept of "people" to the category of "ranks" and "elements." The organism of speech, forced to function in an environment of artificiality, compensates for the overload on some of its parts by diminishing the activity of others.

And there they were: running up against the fact that our language does not simply suborn itself to the whim of the speaker—that one really cannot call a country lane a "highway." The people who wanted to do just that resorted to two general strategies. The first was to insert an alien tissue into the natural organism of language: a sort of injection of an extraneous idea which, as a rule, lent itself to free interpretation, and led everything associated with it into the realm of the subjective (or what passed for the subjective)—who would explain, after all, whether "people's" or "nonpeople's" went with "commissar?" And thus christened, a People's Commissar (whatever that was) might indeed remark, for example, "This country lane does not seem to me the least bit bumpy; on the contrary, how smooth and broad it is, like a great turnpike."

The second tack was to introduce a word into a system wider than that in which it actually belongs—that is, into a group to which it does not now belong but at some point could. Thus one could give the country lane a route number and affirm publicly that it be-

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longed to the network of roads under the administration of the Ministry of Highway Transportation. Doing so, one could now begin to call our humble lane a primary national thoroughfare.

The trick in both strategies was to force the displacements of terminology right up to the limit of language's capacity to accept them, but not beyond. The sense of a word had to slip ever so gradually, a degree or two at a time, down the slope in the desired direction. The spine of language, so to speak, had to be bent until the bones were cracking and the head was bruising its own heel—but not to the point where the spinal column itself snapped. The result of this methodology was that the direction in which the language evolved, at each step along the way, was dictated arbitrarily by (and always to the advantage of) those whose power permitted whim and willfulness.

III

I don't mean to suggest that this process was unique to the Soviet period of Russian history. In fact, the replacement of one meaning for a word with another, without apparent change in common usage, dates back quite a long time in Russia—all the way to the period when Ideas began to displace Belief in the popular consciousness. This is a nation whose very origins trace to the acceptance of the Christian word and Christ as the Word; for centuries Russia retained the sacramental concept of the word as such. And it is from this, no doubt, that Russians' notorious and boundless faith in the printed word springs as well.

Russia's first printed book, *The Apostle* (1564), was in fact a one-volume compilation of the Book of Acts and the Epistles. All books following this prototype were, in the eyes of the people, mere derivatives; they were composed, after all, of words made from the same letters used for the original book. It was left for Russia's Age of Enlightenment to secularize the vocabulary. It turned out that one could "pray," for example, to things other than God. So while the external appearance of words remained the same, the familiar and "eternal" images just as before, the foundations of the fortress of language began to acquire new stones, stones that supported not beliefs but ideas. And ideas, in contrast to beliefs, could replace one another. This in turn gave rise to a sense of uncertainty about the judgments now being expressed; the many and various—and competing—opinions seemed to corrode the wholeness of Truth, which had been taken as perhaps ultimately unattainable but nevertheless objectively real.

This gradual destabilization of language, so vividly demonstrated in Russia, was in fact part of a larger, more universal phenomenon. For in the very modus of language lurks an unresolvable contradiction. From the moment of the appearance of language (not its body but its use) there has been at work a kind of natural impulse or energy directed toward overturning the hierarchy of beings, things, concepts, and qualities that are represented by words. Food is greater than the taste of food, and hunger is greater than food; pleasure is greater than the object of pleasure, and pain is greater than pleasure. God is greater than man. But the words used to express all these and other concepts are formally equal to one another. "Death," in Russian a noun of the feminine gender and third declension, is on equal footing with "life," a word in the same categories. So it is with "evil" and "good," both of them second-declension neuters. God said: Do not eat of this tree; if you do, you will die. The serpent said, No, you will not die. Adam and Eve ate of the tree—because "yes," as a grammatical particle, is equal to what is only another grammatical particle, "no." And they died—because in reality the word of God is the real word, while the "no" of the serpent is nothing, a lie.

The enlightened strata throughout the world have, at the appropriate moments in their respectives cultural histories, recognized the onset of this fundamental shift in language. Those in Russia were particularly alert to it—especially to the gradual replacement of the

word of faith by the word of ideas. In Russia, however, the word in its printed form—embedded in the old traditions, so to speak—continued to cast its remarkable hypnotic spell. In 1830 no less a figure than Alexander Pushkin, who shaped the Russian language that we speak to this day, could write, "I have noticed that the most unsound judgments and ridiculous abuse gain a certain weight of credibility from the magical effect of typography. To us the printed page still seems sacred. We keep assuming: How can this be ridiculous or unjust? It is right here in print, after all!"

By the beginning of the 20th century, the institution of "opinion" had triumphed: One opinion after another, each one contradicting the previous contender, was being assembled from the very same typographical tools used once to produce only the Word. Universal literacy, brought about after the revolution of 1917, was the same kind of revolutionary development in the history of Russian civilization as the invention of the candle, which lightened the darkness after sunset, or the introduction of glass for windows, letting light indoors and making pictures of the day outside. Eyes that had never before beheld print began to read, wresting literacy from the privileged control of a particular social class of "booklords"—the clergy, the bureaucracy, and the nobles. The new readers cared little that these former lords had been the masters not of the cheap wisdom of the new brochures and the propaganda of the postrevolutionary press but rather of certain kinds of *books*. (In one of Alexander Ostrovsky's plays an illiterate policeman remarks about an armload of just such books, "And that's only at my house; imagine how many more there are in other places!") To the eye that had just mastered the deciphering of letters and their assembly into words, there was no difference between something written long ago and something just written. Books were all very well, this new reading public muttered to itself, but these leaflets and newspapers—well, they didn't read these to us before, did they now, so look at the truth here they were hiding from us! Psychologically, then, the Russian people were primed to consume precisely the literary bread baked for them by the state authorities.

IV

"But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be liable to the hell of fire." So says Jesus in the Gospel according to Matthew. Modern man is hardly likely to take this as literal instruction, and until recently I regarded this warning as merely another of those great maxims by whose ideal Christianity points the way to the holy life. It is hard to imagine that in reality someone who says to someone else "You're an empty-headed dolt" should answer for this before the supreme clerical court of the land. But the history of Russia in the 20th century does nothing if not reveal the real and immediate wisdom of these words from the New Testament.

Once you call someone by something other than his own unique name, once you resort to some other term that suits you simply because a person angered you or showed himself a fool or a lunatic in your eyes—once you have done this, you have started down a path on which there is no stopping. Logically, and most frequently, this path ends in the taking of a life. After all, when you have someone who is clearly a good-for-nothing, a general nuisance, a nonentity, a nut case, a sociopath, a public enemy, a monster, you get rid of such a person only by destroying him. This string of epithets illustrates the rule: Each name on it differs only slightly from its predecessor; each puts a finer edge on the point, if you will. Each succeeding term can become—and as a rule does become—a retort used by the accused against the accuser. The terms will go back and forth a few times, and only happenstance dictates whose word will prove the

decisive one, the last uttered before the destruction of one speaker by the other. Over the course of 70 years of Soviet power, this chain of purposeful epithets, a short enough fuse as it was, was shortened to a minimum: from first word immediately to the last. A man trying to squeeze into a crowded bus would bark at someone blocking his way, "Aristocrat!," to which the other would almost automatically respond, "I'll kill you for that." So putting someone who has insulted his brother before the council makes all manner of sense, because the very enunciation of the word begins the unstoppable torrent of all the words in the arsenal; someone is required to hurl "fool" at someone else, which in turn finally brings on "I'm going to kill you." In appropriate circumstances there *will* be a killing, and the Evangelist's reference to eternal hellfire acquires a new and serious air.

So this chain reaction, this landslide of words, has a clear and distinct direction to it—and a sadly notorious endpoint. With the phrase "I'm going to kill you," a circle of animosity closes, after which each word in the circle becomes equal, each at once means everything and nothing. That is, in using any one of them you cannot be sure which one you may *really* be snarling out—simply "Idiot!" or, in fact, the command "Fire!" In the haze stirred up by this landslide of words, it is easier by far to call things by whatever's handy.

A simple old woman asks a student of the new era what kind of textbook it is that he is reading:

"It's *Marxist Dialectics*."

"And what, pray tell, is that?"

"How can I explain it to you, granny? Let's try this: Who will go to the bathhouse first, a clean man or a man who's dirty?"

"The dirty one, of course."

"Ah, but you're wrong there. You see, the clean man is clean precisely because he's used to going to the bathhouse, and the dirty one is dirty because he isn't."

"So, the clean one, then."

"Wrong again. The clean man doesn't need a bath—he's clean—while the dirty man is precisely the one who needs to wash."

"Ah, so both of them go."

"Oh no; don't you understand? The clean man is already clean, and the dirty one doesn't like to go to the bathhouse."

"So—neither one, then?"

"Why do you say that? The clean one is accustomed to washing, and the dirty one clearly needs to. So who is going to go to the bathhouse, then?"

"The devil only knows!"

"That's dialectics for you, granny."

At the moment the goal is reached and the circle closed, all restrictions governing the possible meanings of words are removed. The first reaction of the people who reached this goal was to treat their success as a great and unqualified victory. Soon, however, they discovered that the complete removal of restrictions on the use of the words which they strove so to manipulate to their own advantage had another practical result: the collapse of the language's basic standards, words whose *commonly accepted precise* meanings simply could not be done without. "The veranda was bathed in sunlight," recalled the poet Vladislav Khodasevich of his trip to the countryside shortly after Soviet power had established the concept of Time by Decree. "But because my host took off his pince-nez and his boots, then unhitched his belt and lay down, I understood that night had fallen. It was ten o'clock by Soviet Time; in reality it was six."

In the recent past, during the Brezhnev period, there came to be more than a dozen kinds of rubles, all of them officially recognized: There were ordinary rubles, accounting rubles, nonliquid rubles, yellow certificate rubles, blue certificate rubles, and on and on, all the way up to gold rubles—which in the real world simply didn't exist. And not one of those rubles was a "stump of silver of a known value," as the old dictionaries defined the word. Thus it was that the dollar—which began to be used in settling accounts, first foreign and then domestic as well—became for us the unofficial yet universally recognized standard unit of money.

V

In language this kind of standard unit is the word of poetry. Poetry is, after all, the work and the art of naming things. Actually, it might be more precise to call it the work-art of naming things, as clearly no one could produce an inventory of everything in existence without being an exceptionally talented worker-cum-artist. It is a relatively undemanding business to name a bunch of shoots protruding from a single plant a "bush"; the protopoet who named it thus had at his disposal both a nice selection of words not yet in use and, no doubt, an appropriate hint from some external Muse as to which of these words to pick. Also at work in the process, finally, was the well-known element of random chance.

But to name a thorny bush which in the spring covers itself in a profusion of rose-colored petals—such a thing could not simply be done by choice or at random. For at the moment of naming that bush, so many words—essentially all words—were already in circulation. And they existed in defined relationships with one another, developed over centuries; violating these arrangements arbitrarily was out of the question. The word *boyarishnia* (nobleman's daughter) existed; but so did the word *zarya* (dawn). The ethereally untouchable *boyarishnia*, in her rosy freshness, could be likened to the dawn; the dawn, for that matter, could be likened to a young "rose-fingered" goddess. Either term, in short, could have been used with justice as the basis for naming this plant. As it happened, the Romance languages chose the affinity to the dawn, giving us the French *aubepine*, while the Slavic languages chose the flower of feminine nobility and dubbed the plant *boyarishnik*.

Yet every new day is unlike any that has come before, and in the course of the hundreds of thousands of days in which the *boyarishnik* has been called that, untold legions of unanticipated connections with other things have arisen around the word. Some of these things gave the word part of their own meaning; others took part of the word's meaning for themselves. In any case, the moment eventually arrived when the poet Proust had to cover several pages with words just to be able to name the thing once again, this time in more exact correspondence to what exactly it now is in the universe of man.

Or more accurately, in more exact correspondence with what it either is or seems to be. Human vision, once poisoned by the juices from the fruit of Eden's tree of knowledge, has taken on a hard-edged sharpness—but in the process has sacrificed clarity. This serves to penetrate the dim shroud between the seer and the world around him only enough to reveal the most elemental blacks and whites: Is it skin or clothing before me, a man or a woman, a smile or bared teeth, and so on. Our vision, in other words, can only *distinguish* things and people, not *see* them. Knowledge has become, first and foremost, the dissection of the world and the analysis of its constituent parts. The comprehension of the world in its entirety and the relationship of its parts to the whole has been left to the End of Time, and even then will be given, it is believed, only to those who have so agonizingly and consolingly labored to clear their vision during their time here on earth.

If we humans are the image and likeness of God, then our thoughts, though as distant from His as earth from sky, nevertheless convey something, preserve something, reflect something of the image and likeness of the thought of God. In this connection it bears recalling that God himself named five things; and it follows that these, since He alone named them, are true cornerstones. The light He called day and the darkness night; the firmament became the heaven, the dry land He called earth, and the great waters were seas. The naming of the birds and beasts He gave to man, "to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name." This act of bestowing upon man a divine prerogative was an act of complete trust and concerned involvement. The creation of the dry land was inseparable

The poet Velimir Khlebnikov, drawn from memory by Vladimir Tatlin, died in 1922 at age 37, still a believer in the Revolution.

from the act of naming it earth. Having assigned to man further naming, God by that act separated the art of naming from other arts, affirming its primacy and unique power, its synchronicity with the advent of things themselves. And thus He left man with a model—of naming, of poetry, of speech.

It is further worth recalling that this happened *before* human vision became distorted, so man could name the bush with the same conviction and indisputable authority that God commanded when he called the dry land earth. Obviously, after man stopped seeing with his original clarity and began to view things differently, he lost the ability to name things truly and as a result lost the freedom to create new names for things not yet assigned identities. The names already given things remained in force, but new names had to be manufactured from those already in currency by ferreting out hidden connections, trying untried combinations, and making novel comparisons between and among them.

This is what poetry has always been about: Its great calling has been precisely that, a Great Calling, a critical assigning of names that has gone on unceasingly since the day the human mind and tongue originally put intuition and sound together and produced the first Name for a thing.

Trying out the "feel" of specimen words, taken from under a dim glass cover of the laboratory, the poet has the power to choose any he likes and the right to insist on the choice he alone makes. Yet he also, unavoidably, must submit to the exigencies of language, whose mechanisms engage with the very first, most superficial touch of its vocabulary. The listener must be consciously convinced, or at any rate sense strongly, that the name chosen by the poet rings true. The ear of the listening public must not only remain unoffended; it must in the end find pleasure in the poet's proffered novelty, for the voice of the people, when all is said and done, must merge with that of the poet himself. "If the horn puts forth only an incomprehensible noise, who will prepare for battle?" the Apostle Paul soberingly asked the reveling citizens of Corinth. "And if you speak incomprehensible words, how will people know what you are saying? You will be talking into the wind."

VI

So the standard currency of language is the poetic word, that is, each of those words

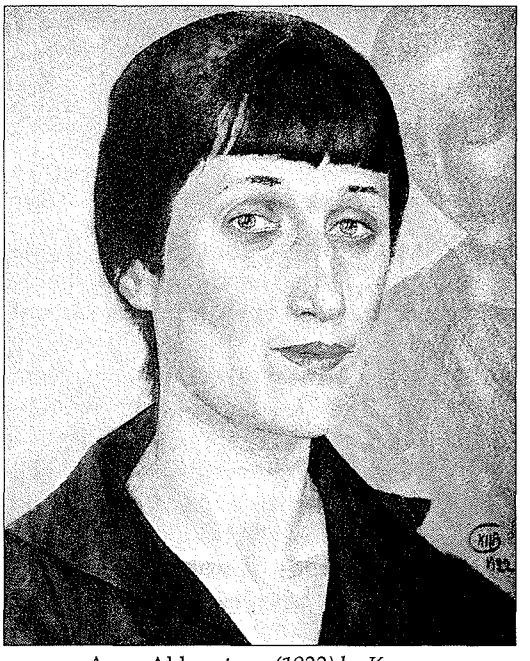
which, having been forged together in a sure and certain bond, make up a sure and certain text—and receive an equally sure and certain meaning unto themselves as units of that text. Such a text is always absolutely precise, for if its creator, the poet, makes a mistake in word choice, by accident or design, the inexactitude or plain falsehood will spread like an infection to everything around it—and a text so poisoned cannot be poetry. In this regard, moreover, it bears mentioning that poetry itself is always blameless. It cannot and does not share responsibility for the miscalculations, misfires, and missteps of the poet himself, for when such things occur, the resulting agglomeration simply ceases to be poetry.

And so it is that poetry certifies words, examining and verifying each one as a sower checks each seed before planting: alive or dead, strong or weak, what strain or culture, and so on. The authenticity of a word, the sense that a word *works*—this is something literally everyone determines, those sensitive to poetry and those without a poetic bone in their bodies. The poet defines the value of a word, imprints it with a hallmark, so to speak, which no one can dispute; thereafter the word can be used as standard currency—until the clumsiness or greed of manipulation, of someone's great Plan for it, debases the word altogether.

One of the first to begin such manipulations is the reigning Power. This power has two goals, which are mutually exclusive: to use this word for internal consumption, thus preserving it as a genuine gold ruble; and, having made up various derivative copies, to put this counterfeit currency into circulation in channels which the Power controls. Take for example "freedom," a word lauded by the poets and an uncontentious concept in both its universal and individual dimensions. One attaches this word to the Castro regime, which "freed" Cuba from its predecessor, and for decades one refers to the country over and over again, as virtually an official name and repeatedly in officially approved articles and books, as the Island of Freedom.

As to the first goal, here the Power must enter into an absurdly self-contradictory relationship with the poet. On the one hand, the Power is at least in principle interested in seeing the poet speak freely and openly, to give some stability to the order of things. On the other hand, when the poet speaks thus unhindered, everybody hears him—and what he says bears witness to the corruption of language by the Power.

A means of squaring this circle—combining a ban on poetry with a partial toleration of it—was hit upon in Russia in the halls of government. The proscription lists that issued forth from the new Soviet regime came to include the names of all the greatest poets of 20th-century Russia: to the names of Nikolai Gumilev (shot by firing squad) and *gulag* victims Osip Mandelstam and Nikolai Kliuev it is difficult not to add those of the Soviet-era suicides Sergei Esenin, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and Marina Tsvetaeva. The thunderous directive of the Party Central Committee against Anna Akhmatova in 1946 and the state's persecution of Boris Pasternak in 1958 demonstrated the "constructive" line taken by the Power: Shut their mouths, but don't slit their throats.



Anna Akhmatova *(1922) by Kuzma Sergeevich Petrov-Vodkin*

It was precisely through this great—negative—recognition of the importance of poetry in the life of the nation that the state authorities confirmed the primary *status* of the word above all else. And this word, the provocative, influential, ever-active word of poetry would not be harnessed; so the state resolved to destroy the Russian language, thoroughly and systematically, by bending it for state purposes: strip-mining its derivatives from the greatness of its whole, turning poetry into the handmaiden of demagoguery.

An out-and-out lie is normally readily apparent, and dispensing with it is relatively easy. It is more artful (if one may use that word in this context) and more productive to channel speech into a tortuous and dusty riverbed in which the streams of poetry and those of demagoguery flow together. The crime against language was not the naming of a Soviet concentration camp in Kazakhstan "Freedom," but rather the transporting of a whole speech culture to a place where such an act of naming becomes possible.

And then came *glasnost*, which announced—and brought to life!—the freedom of speech for which so many martyrs had hoped for so many years in so many fantasies. It was freedom of speech, all right—freedom of *that* kind of speech: words long corrupted, disenfranchised, devoid of sense were given freedom. Then, and only then, did we come to fathom the true depth of the crisis in which the Russian language now finds itself.

The governmental crisis, the economic crisis, the political, moral, and cultural crises—all these must wait their turn in a country where words themselves are no longer trusted, where faith in human speech is exhausted almost entirely and almost everywhere. After the elections of December 1993, one of the television crews went into the countryside, reaching a village a good hour and a half from Moscow:

"So," the reporters asked the villagers, "are you pleased that Zhirinovsky won?"

"Of course we're pleased. We voted for him!"

"You voted for fascism, then?"

"What fascism? Fascism's something in Germany. There's never been fascism here."

"And what about going to war?"

"Why would we go to war?"

"But Zhirinovsky says that before long Russian soldiers will be washing their boots in the Indian Ocean. How are they going to do that without a war?"

"Oh no, we didn't vote for war, we won't go off to fight anywhere."

"But your candidate says it quite plainly. . . ."

"Well, people say a lot of things."

That is the next step, and presumably the final one, after Orwell's "War is peace" and "Love is hate": We have now moved on to "War is not war" and "Hate is not hate."

And yet, and yet . . . it bears repeating that belief in the word is not completely exhausted, merely almost. The "neofascist" villagers are talking the same *way* that villagers just after the revolution talked. Anna Akhmatova captured that language in one of her poems:

> The smart ones, they always decide.
> Our job—to stand to one side.

In language, as in man, the instinct for self-preservation is strong; thanks to that instinct, neither one nor the other marches willingly toward extinction. Man instinctively guards himself against falsehood. And language instinctively guards itself, by abstention, withdrawal, and refusal to cooperate in the debasement of its trust, from those who would wreak its demise.

—Translated from Russian by Mark Teeter