The Language of a Private World

Peter Bishop

‘To refashion the fashioned, lest it harden into iron, is work of an endless vital activity.’

Goethe

THE YEAR 1937 was the centenary of the death of modern Russia’s first great poet, Alexander Pushkin. Celebration was mandatory in the USSR, and it wasn’t a good year to ignore the dictates of Stalin’s bureaucrats. So the Soviet satirist Mikhail Zoschenko takes us into a grim but determined apartment block in Moscow, past a slap-dash artistic rendering of the great poet wreathed in pine branches, into a room where the tenants are gathered and a slightly flustered youngish man is preparing to speak. There is a general doziness and smell of old onions.

I would like to point out with a feeling of pride that our building is not lagging behind in the march of current events.

In the first place, we have obtained for six rubles and fifty kopecks a one-volume edition of Pushkin for general use. In the second place, a plaster-of-Paris bust of the great poet has been placed in the tenants’ co-operative office, which fact, in turn, should remind negligent bill-payers about arrears in their rent payments.

Of course, perhaps this isn’t very much but, to tell the truth, our tenants’ association didn’t expect there would be such a to-do …

The second speaker, attempting to bring the great poet closer to us in a heartfelt manner, becomes carried away with the speculation that his great-grandmother, born in 1775, could have dandled the young Pushkin on her knee and even awoken certain poetic emotions in him as she rocked him and sang lyrical little songs, thus inspiring the composition of several poems. Except that she lived in Kaluga and maybe Pushkin never went there …

Then he comes to the official point: ‘So, as I was saying: Pushkin’s artistic influence on us is enormous and undisputed. He was a great poet of genius, and we must regret that he is not alive at present, together with us. We would carry him in our arms and arrange a fabulous life for the poet.’

Pushkin, in the late months of 1830, was confined to his estate at Boldino by an outbreak of cholera in the region. He was frantic to be in Moscow with his fiancée, Natalya. How many others might be laying siege to her affections in his absence? For her mother, she sent demure schoolgirl missives censored by her mother, assuring him passionlessly that her affections remained unchanged, while exhorting him to observe fast days and to attend church at every opportunity. Return to God, she recommended, through prayer and contrition. His many visits to the little village church were in fact for the purpose of reading out instructions to the peasants on proper precautions to take during a cholera epidemic.

The village of Boldino was a wretched cluster in a flat and treeless steppe. Mud was everywhere; peasants moved in the fields like ghosts. But Pushkin loved it: the sinister melancholy, the poverty, the emptiness, the monotony. And he was working. He wrote to a friend:

Just between us, I will tell you that at Boldino I have written as I have not written for a long time. Here is what I am bringing back: the last two chapters of Eugene Onegin … a short story in octaves (a matter of four hundred lines) … several dramatic scenes or little tragedies: The Covetous Knight, Mozart and Salieri, The Feast in Time of Plague and The Stone Guest. And I have also written some thirty poems. Not bad, eh? And that’s not all. Keep it to yourself, but I have composed five prose tales that will make Baratynsky rear and whinny.

It is pure pleasure to transcribe such a letter: it could be described as bragging, and yet so gaily it gives us a writer coming into the fullest powers of his art. In this place, alone, amid mud and sickness, and in forced and indefinitely extended exile, a poet has discovered the fountain of the Russian language and is jumping up and down, kicking his legs in the air.

Ah, we can sigh, but how much greater a poet Pushkin would have been if he had brought some intelligence to bear on his choice of lovers. And what poetry he might have given to the world in his full maturity if he hadn’t thrown his life away in a duel fought in a fit of jealousy over a cold and stupid woman. Just as sensibly, we could speculate on the great poetry the twentieth century might have gained if Pushkin had been born in 1899 rather than 1799 and had been able to have his creativity protected and guaranteed by the full force of Stalin’s Five-Year Plans.

Pushkin at Boldino is one of the humbling moments in the story of literature. The poet could have raged and complained, yawned and slept, played cards, drunk, had affairs or fought duels out of sheer boredom. Instead, for no reason other than that he was a great poet and this was his moment, he wrote, stupendously.

A hundred years later, by official decree, this glorious fountain has hardened to iron: Pushkin’s artistic influence on us is enormous and undisputed. He was a great poet of genius.
PUSHKIN’S MOZART, in the little tragedy Mozart and Salieri, is Pushkin at Boldino. His Salieri embodies the German word Schwerfälligkeit and implies the opposite of all that Pushkin discovered at Boldino: heaviness, clumsiness, slowness, awkwardness, ponderousness.

Pushkin’s Mozart could also have been Jane Austen, a writer who, had she been born and bred in Russia, could have been another candidate for dandling the infant poet on her knee.

There seems almost a general wish of decrying the capacity and undervaluing the labour of the novelist, and of slighting the performances which have only genius, wit and taste to recommend them. ‘I am no novel reader — I seldom look into novels — Do not imagine that I often read novels — It is very well for the novel.’ — Such is the common cant. — ‘And what are you reading, Miss — ?’ ‘Oh, it is only a novel,’ replies the young lady; while she lays down her book with affected indifference, or momentary shame. ‘It is only Cecilia, or Camilla, or Belinda;’ or, in short, only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language.

In Austen’s day, the novel was thought to be too frivolous a thing for the proper passing of time in the lives of young ladies. If there were a book catalogue to be had, it would first list ‘improving’ books, books of high-toned instruction in duty and obligation, religious or domestic, urging readers to observe fast days and attend church at every opportunity, and to return to God through prayer and contrition. A novel, buried under the title Belles Lettres, might appear at the end of the catalogue.

A novel, of course, has always been a dangerous rather than a frivolous thing, and a young lady reading a novel is a young lady learning, however passively it might seem to her and the world at the time, about freedom, about the ways the lives of Cecilia or Camilla or Belinda might be lived, the choices that are available or denied. She is a young lady listening to a voice that says It is possible that rather than Thou shalt.

Against the charge of frivolousness, Austen, in Northanger Abbey, makes a proud and spirited defence. A century later, Ford Madox Ford spoke of the novel of Gustave Flaubert as ‘the immensely powerful engine of our civilisation’, Jane Austen had a similar respect for the power of the novel, and located this power precisely in excellence: the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, the most thorough knowledge of human nature. And this display is to be made in the best chosen language.

Austen lists three attributes of the use of language in the novel: genius, wit and taste. Genius is to be defined here as natural ability or capacity. Genius is style, technique: the fineness and personality of mind that makes possible those best choices. Igor Strawinsky was once asked: ‘What is technique?’ He answered immediately: ‘The whole man.’ Genius is the whole person.

Wit can be thought of as quickness, seeing and catching the essence in its exact movement. And taste is accuracy, precision, discrimination. Henry James wrote of Eugenia in The Europeans:

A compliment had once been paid to her, which, being repeated to her, gave her greater pleasure than anything she had ever heard. ‘A pretty woman?’ some one had said. ‘Why, her features are very bad.’ ‘I don’t know about her features,’ a very discerning observer had answered; ‘but she carries her head like a pretty woman.’ You may imagine whether, after this, she carried her head less becomingly.

IN THE AIRY COMPANY of these Mozarts, the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer might seem a discordant presence, a breath of Salieri.

We have seen Pushkin in the mud of Boldino joyously discovering himself as a fountain of Russian language. But spare a thought for Schopenhauer, born in 1788, and his generation. The first great artist of any cultural epoch, as Bernard Shaw once pointed out, ‘reaps the whole harvest and reduces those who come after to the rank of mere gleaners, or, worse than that, fools who go laboriously through all the motions of the reaper and binder in an empty field’. With a gaiety equivalent to Pushkin’s, Goethe, born in 1749, had reaped the harvest of the German language, creating exemplary masterpieces in fiction, drama, poetry, autobiography, travel writing, letter writing and conversation. The great German literary artists of Schopenhauer’s generation and after could only reap a field that Goethe had chanced to leave untouched: philosophy.

Schopenhauer’s final major work is a collection of essays and aphorisms, titled, with a grand thud of Schwerfälligkeit, Parerga and Paralipomena. In a collection of aphorisms, On Books and Writing, Schopenhauer divides writers into meteors, planets and fixed stars: meteors producing a momentary effect then vanishing forever; planets shining more steadily, but with a borrowed light; fixed stars shining with their own light. Only the latter can in any way endure in the firmament.

The philosopher speaks of two kinds of writer: those who write for the sake of what they have to say, and those who write because they are writers and because writing is what writers do. ‘Style,’ he tells us, ‘is the physiognomy of the mind’, stylistic affectation being ‘comparable to pulling faces’.
The essential nature and prevailing quality of thought, he claims, is revealed by style. ‘For style reveals the formal nature of all a man’s thoughts, which must always remain the same no matter what or upon what he thinks … The first rule, indeed by itself virtually a sufficient condition for good style, is to have something to say.’

Schopenhauer, one guesses, would have had little time for Austen (his aphorisms On Women are recommended for those who enjoy being provoked). But he would have had no quarrel with the idea of literature as the greatest powers of the mind and the most thorough knowledge of human nature expressed in the best chosen language.

Igor Stravinsky, in his long life (1882–1971), spent much verbal energy battling the Salieris of the composing world. Robert Craft, in his book Stravinsky: Chronicle of a Friendship, has wonderfully revealing things to say about the great composer’s last years:

I also realise that I have nowhere recorded one of his favourite and most characteristic expressions … This [expression] is employed in a variety of circumstances, but never more frequently than at concerts of modern music. He will listen quietly for a minute or so … then grow restless and start to squirm, then turn to me and stage whisper: ‘But who needs it?’

Whatever one may hold about the music of Arnold Schoenberg, whose works have frequently given rise to violent reactions or ironic smiles — it is impossible for a self-respecting mind equipped with genuine musical culture not to feel that the composer of Pierrot lunaire is fully aware of what he is doing and that he is not trying to deceive anyone. He adopted the musical system that suited his needs and, within this system, he is perfectly consistent with himself, perfectly coherent.

I give these quotations in order to provide a background to Stravinsky’s stage whisper at the concert. But who needs it? does not mean I don’t like it. And it doesn’t mean I don’t approve of it, I can’t be bothered understanding it, or I have a toothache today and want all sounds to stop immediately. It means: Art is important, and this, though adopting the manners and methods of art, simply does not matter.

Stravinsky, of course, was known to be caustic about his contemporaries. Limiting these opinions just to his fellow S’s, we read that, when asked by a student what it was specifically that he disliked about the music of Richard Strauss, he said: ‘I do not like the major works, and I do not like the minor works.’ He did once confess to a minor fondness for a short piece by Sibelius — ‘the first half of it anyway’. When Shostakovich blurted out like a schoolboy that he had been overwhelmed by his first experience of Stravinsky’s Symphony of Psalms, the best the older composer could do to return the compliment was to tell the younger that he shared some of his high regard for Mahler.

This is good gossip, and Stravinsky could lash out at Schoenberg in a similar way: ‘the unison Adagio in the fourth quartet makes me squirm.’ But consider this passage from his 1939 lectures, The Poetics of Music:

For myself, I cannot begin to take an interest in the phenomenon of music except insofar as it emanates from the integral man. I mean a man armed with the resources of his senses, his psychological faculties, and his intellectual equipment … [W]ithout a speculative system, and lacking a well-defined order in cogitation, music has no value, or even existence, as art … [A]rt presupposes a culture, an upbringing, an integral stability of the intellect.

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‘I F I’D HAD A NORMAL LIFE,’ rages Chekhov’s Uncle Vanya in a moment of high desperation, ‘I could have been a Schopenhauer, a Dostoevsky!’ It is one of Vanya’s most touching moments of self-revelation, and one of the saddest strokes of Chekhov’s comedy, the pathos of the claim lying in the fact that Uncle Vanya could only ever have been Uncle Vanya — Uncle Vanya with property maybe, with a wife, children — why not? — but even his name (in Russian, an Uncle Vanya is a nobody) denies him his Schopenhauerhood, his Dostoevskydorm!

Our second speaker at the Pushkin Centennial, having extricated himself from the muddle over who might have dallied whom by reciting the required official wisdom about
Pushkin, blunders with delightful naïveté into one of the knottiest problems of the artist and society:

He was a great poet of genius, and we must regret that he is not alive at present, together with us. We would carry him in our arms and arrange a fabulous life for the poet — provided, of course, we knew he would turn out to be Pushkin. Otherwise, it sometimes happens that contemporaries have high hopes for one of their own and arrange a decent life for him, giving him cars and apartments, and then it turns out he’s not the thing at all.

Literature was once thought of as a matter of destiny. Rilke’s first question to the young poet is not Do you want to write? but Must you write? In Chekhov’s play, the destiny of Uncle Vanya is implied in his name, as is the destiny of the old professor: Alexander (the conqueror) Serebriakov (the silver) — Alexander the Silver: Alexander the Not-Great.

Yugoslavian writer Danilo Kis (The Encyclopaedia of the Dead, A Tomb for Boris Davidovich), responding to the question Is it wanting to write that makes the writer?, stated:

No one comes to writing by accident. The first and most important stimulus is the treachery of biography, and the mechanism that triggers the imagination in a biography is an overwhelming sense of difference, the ‘shameful stigma’ of difference. By trying to explain the origins of our difference and its relation to the world, we writers or future writers question our existence, and in so doing we take the most decisive step toward literature, which, as Barthes has said, entails just that: asking questions of ourselves.

It wasn’t, of course, the normality of their lives that made passionate creators of Schopenhauer and Dostoevsky, and it isn’t the provision of a fabulous life that can guarantee a Pushkin. We, however, live in a time of positive thinking and anti-élitism, so we reject the idea of destiny, or the treachery of biography, and embrace instead the idea of career, or lifestyle. Every week we must read of a new Uncle Vanya who has just signed a contract for a six-figure sum and will be leaving on a world publicity tour in October.

The critic Cyril Connolly, writing under the pseudonym Palinarus in The Unquiet Grave, confesses (with gentle and revealing irony) that he ‘would like to have written Les Fleurs du Mal or the Saison en Enfer without being Rimbaud or Baudelaire, that is without undergoing their mental suffering and without being diseased and poor’. So, yes, Uncle Vanya, this is an age when Schopenhauerhood and Dostoevskydom will not be denied you!

Danilo Kis reacts to a question about the future or the death of the novel with some irritation, and some venom:

But look at the American novel: it’s doing fine. The Central European novel, too. And the Latin American novel. I personally don’t believe the novel is on its way out; I believe it’s being transformed into the commercial novel, something that both partakes of the literary heritage — the psychological novel, the realistic novel, and so on — and distorts it … You can’t deny it: the bestseller is the genre of the century. No, the novel isn’t on its way out; it’s multiplying, even becoming a kind of cancer.

Kis believed that, with this multiplication of the commercial novel, ‘literature is becoming a rarity’.

When the idea of the career or lifestyle of the writer comes to replace the idea of the destiny of the writer, when asking questions of ourselves becomes an optional extra in this career or lifestyle, it’s small wonder that the chattering of meteors is so pervasive that the lights of the planets and fixed stars become invisible, irrelevant. ‘According to Herodotus,’ Schopenhauer tells us, ‘Xerxes wept at the sight of his enormous army to think that, of all these men, not one would be alive in a hundred years’ time. So who cannot but weep at the sight of the thick fair catalogue to think that, of all these books, not one will be alive in ten years’ time?’

A.D. Hope takes this thought in an arresting direction in an entry in one of his notebooks:

I keep meeting American poets … and I get some of their verse and read it. I find it very like the verse written in Australia, but with a feeling of being a little more — and more luxuriously — occasional, as though produced for an audience who could afford a better product and could equally afford to throw it away when they had used it once.

My first thought was that this reminds me of something going on all over the world … the natural and perhaps quite unconscious response to a civilisation increasingly given over to the idea of using and discarding: highly finished and acceptable products, but products not really meant to last and indeed often designed to be replaced by ‘next year’s model’.

My second thought was: why not? It is well known that language is a very perishable product … The other arts present us with direct sensual material, poetry only with code and symbol capable for a time — while poet and audience share a common set of habits and experiences — of transferring the dance from one mind to others. But a new set of habits, a new fashion, other corps of taste can intervene to cripple the old code.

So why not? Why not abolish the planets and fixed stars from the firmament and settle for the marvellous whizzing of meteors?

When Stravinsky died in 1971, Craft received a telegram that read: ‘This is the first time since Guillaume de Machaut that the world is without a great composer.’ For many years, I have pondered this. Can I imagine a present or future creator whose presence in music could possibly be as commanding, as unarguable, as Stravinsky’s? There may be canals, rivers, waterfalls — but where’s the sea? What is it about the present age that refuses the possibility of the sea?

The New York magazine of 15 February 1999 quoted sources from the Julliard School claiming that the number of
Americans who ‘consider themselves composers of classical music … [ranges] between an astonishing 20,000 and 40,000’. Clearly, there is no diminution in the activity of composing, but activity is not, in itself, any indicator of meaning. Knowing hardly a sound of the music of the 20,000 to 40,000, it would be rash of me to claim their activity is meaningless or that there is not among them a Stravinsky awaiting discovery. But I think of Stravinsky’s advice to young composers:

A composer is or isn’t; he cannot learn to acquire the gift that makes him one … The composer will know that he is one if composition creates exact appetites in him, and if in satisfying them he is aware of their exact limits. Similarly, he will know he is not one if he has only a ‘desire to compose’ or ‘wish to express himself in music’.

Karl Shapiro’s essay ‘Is Poetry an American Art?’ expresses a deep unease with the quantity and sameness of what is being produced in the name of poetry:

They [so many poems] always seem to me to be written by the same person or Thing. I can’t name five poets writing in the English or American language today who have enough individuality or style to be distinguished from one another. That some get ahead of others in reputation is purely a matter of chance.

Could it be the case that the normal life — the life apparently comfortably and productively devoted to writing or composing — simply doesn’t bring forth the Schopenhauer or the Dostoevsky, or indeed any literature or music of lasting grace? That a writer or a composer with a career rather than a destiny will always be vulnerable to Stravinsky muttering in the front row? Could it be the case that the fields have been reaped, and that there is nothing left for the 20,000–40,000 to do but to go through all the motions of reapers and binders in empty fields? Or is there one among them — or tens, or hundreds — who ponders the section in Rilke’s strange and sometimes wonderful novel The Notebook of Malte Laurids Brigge, which begins:

It is laughable. Here I sit in my little room, I, Brigge, of whom no-one knows. I sit here and am nothing. And nevertheless this nothing begins to think and, five flights up, on a grey Parisian afternoon, thinks these thoughts:

Is it possible, it thinks, that nothing real or important has yet been seen or known or said? Is it possible that mankind has had thousands of years in which to observe, reflect and record, and has allowed these millenia to slip past, like a recess interval at school in which one eats one’s sandwich and an apple?

Yes, it is possible.

Is it possible that despite our discoveries and progress, despite our culture, religion and world-wisdom, we still remain on the surface of life? Is it possible that we have even covered this surface, which might still have been something, with an incredibly uninteresting stuff which makes it look like drawing-room furniture during summer holidays?

Yes, it is possible.

Is it possible … ?

‘THE MORE BOOKS WE READ, the clearer it becomes that the true function of a writer is to produce a masterpiece and that no other task is of any consequence.’

This is the bold first sentence of a work I’ve had with me for more than thirty years: Cyril Connolly’s wartime meditation on life and loss, and the abrasions and consolations of culture, The Unquiet Grave. When I read this book now I am frequently repelled by its inherent snobbishness of tone, and the interplay of language and idea strikes me as disappointingly dated. Nevertheless, the idea of the book itself continues to fascinate me: Connolly, in the guise of Palinus, the master helmsman of the Aeneid, gives us the autobiography of the self rather than the autobiography of the life. He gives us the mind of the self in conversation. In this conversation, literature is not something that has hardened into iron: Pushkin’s artistic influence on us is enormous and undisputed. He was a great poet of genius. In this conversation, literature is living thought, an essential of the self.

A contemporary writer who does this astonishingly is W.G. Sebald, most notably in The Rings of Saturn. In Australia, I think of the work of Brian Castro, and in particular the essays collected in Looking for Estrellita. Francis Bacon once said: ‘Reading maketh a full man.’ Sebald and Castro are writers whose selves are bright and complex with reading as living thought and culture, and with refashioning the fashioned, which, as Goethe said, is the work of an endless vital activity. They give us the most valuable of a modern literature’s possible qualities: the language of a private world.

Of course, autobiography of the self is not solely the preserve of writers who converse vitally and definitively with the past. Marina Tsvetaeva’s My Pushkin and Osip
Mandelstam’s *Conversation about Dante* are obvious (and marvellous) examples of the Connolly/Sebald/Castro type, but Boris Pasternak’s novella *Zhenia’s Childhood* is no less profoundly an autobiography of the self, even though this comes to us through the biography of the pubescent Zhenia. The self implies many possible lives, the actual life being only one possible expression of these many possible lives.

Thinking about my experience of reading, it occurs to me that I read a writer new to me with a series of questions in mind, running something like this:

Who is this person? Why are they writing? What do they make of the world? Do they have a rich and personal experience of it? Have they thought deeply about themselves and the world and drawn interesting or provocative conclusions? Where might this person take me that I haven’t been before? Where has this person come from — intellectually, spiritually, physically — and what is their relation to their forebears? If style is the ‘physiognomy of the mind’, what mind is this writer’s style revealing?

It’s not that I’m anxious to come to judgment; it’s more that I’m hungry for the experience of spending time with genuinely luminous minds and can’t see excitement in the mere motion and surprise of meteors. I think of Stravinsky: ‘art presupposes a culture, an upbringing, an integral stability of the intellect.’ I think of Thomas Mann, writing about Wagner: ‘Art gives us the truth — the truth about the artist.’ I think of a remark by the great pianist Artur Schnabel: ‘The process of artistic creation is always the same — from *inwardness* to *lucidity*.’ Above all, I think of J.H. Newman who, in *The Idea of a University*, gives us this splendid definition: ‘Literature is the personal use or exercise of language.’

The *personal use or exercise of language* does not imply stylistic affectation, which, as Schopenhauer observed, is a matter of pulling faces. Nor does it imply a collection of mannerisms masquerading as ‘personal’ style. We’re not speaking of something that can in any way be *imposed* on material; we’re speaking of what can *arise* from ‘a culture, an upbringing, an integral stability of the intellect’; we’re speaking of the language of the autobiography of the self.

I find the *personal use of language* exercised with constant wit and delight in the essays of *Looking for Estrellita*. Because of my admiration for them, and because the passage I wish to quote provided me with a title for my own essay, I will give the last word to Brian Castro. It comes from the introduction to an essay titled ‘The Public and the Private’:

> It has long seemed as if the world is entering a new Dark Age rather than leavening within the glorious light of a new millenium. Principally concerned with language, I’ve felt anxious over its crumbling, its disappearance into jargon and specifically into the jargon of postmodernist theory. The latter, I suspect, has been playing into the hands of the forces of darkness by mutating literary language into the language of the corporate and technological world. In doing so it attempts to work theoretically, indifferently and interchangeably with that terrifying shift in the episteme Michel Foucault foreshadowed, which dispensed entirely with the human subject.

> Viewing this pessimistically, I’ve felt the burden of defending works of the imagination against charges of degeneracy and irrelevance levelled at them by those whose career paths depended on a kind of newspeak. The language of a private world, it seems to me, is the only respite and refuge from this. It is quite easy to see now that most of my works centre around the notion of autobiography and sadness. Literatures in the minor key have always attracted me and for much of the 1990s I read everything I could by those Europeans who spent the first half of this terrible century salvaging civilisation from barbarism and then surviving it.