

Mikhail Gronas  
Why Did Free Verse Catch on in the West, but not in  
Russia? On the Social Uses of Memorized Poetry<sup>1</sup>

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In memory of Lev Loseff

I have to reiterate — on the off chance that someone, while leafing backwards, happens to open the book to this page. Don't read me. He who writes in blood wishes to be learned by heart, rather than read. I spit upon leisured readers. You might as well go and watch TV.

Revolt Pimenov

## 1. Introduction

Some day an outside observer, say a Martian terrapaleo-philologist with a statistical bent, might well decide that in the second half of the twentieth century the word „poetry” meant two different things in Russia and in the West. Russian earthlings continued the usage of their seventeenth- to nineteenth-century ancestors and applied the term to a body of texts organized by

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this article will be included in my book, *Cognitive Poetics and Cultural Memory: Russian Literary Mnemonics*. New York: Routledge, forthcoming in 2010. I am grateful to Penny Burt for invaluable help in preparing the manuscript. Thanks go to Grigory Dashevsky, John Kopper, Mikhail Makeev, Stephany Sandler and Barry Scherr who read the manuscript and provided thoughtful criticism and advice. I am also grateful to the creators and developers of the Fundamental Digital Library of Russian Literature and Folklore at <http://feb-web.ru> and the database of Gulag memoirs maintained by the Andrei Sakharov Museum and Public Center at <http://www.sakharov-center.ru/asfcd/auth/>.

specific constraints, such as the patterned distribution of syllables and stresses and phonic similarities between line endings; Westerners (Americans in particular) diverged from the usage of their forebears and applied the label „poetry” to texts that seemed at times to differ from prose only by the visual fact of lineation.<sup>2</sup> Our Martian’s view is, of course, very schematic: clearly, a lot of rhymed and metered poems (including the most beloved ones) were written in America and Europe throughout the century; and quite a few Russian poets experimented with free verse. Still, statistically speaking, the twentieth century (especially its second half) was marked by the dominance of free verse in the West, but not in Russia. Not only is the sheer amount of Russian free verse minuscule compared to the ocean of rhymed poetry produced in Russia during this period; so is its symbolical significance. All the canonical Russian poets — from the greats of the Silver Age (Blok, Esenin, Kliuev, Khlebnikov, Mayakovsky, Kuzmin, Mandel’shtam, Gumilev, Akhmatova, Tsvetaeva, Khodasevich, Pasternak, Kharms, Vvedensky, Zabolotsky, et al.) up to the last universally recognized national classic, Joseph Brodsky — wrote primarily in rhyme and meter. Only towards the end of the millennium did a significant and ever-growing free verse movement appear among the younger post-Soviet poets; however, traditional versifiers still outnumber them in most literary camps.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> I deliberately avoid the complex — and, in my opinion, not very interesting — problem of the precise definition and metrical nature of free verse and its difference from traditional verse. Throughout this article I assume that modern poetic utterances comprise a spectrum, rather than a dichotomy. On one end of the spectrum is regular and patterned poetry employing the basic elements of traditional versification (such as the count of feet, accents, or syllables, rhyme, and strophes); the other end is occupied by texts in which no such elements are intentionally employed. Throughout the article, when I refer to regular (traditional, formal, patterned, rhymed and metered) poetry and free verse I mean texts at or near their respective ends of the spectrum. The fact that in reality we often observe intermediate forms does not change the main logic of the proposed argument.

<sup>3</sup> A small but very active group of „ideological” verslibrists (Vladimir Burich, Arvo Mets, Viacheslav Kupriianov, and Aleksandr Makarov-Krotkov) first appeared in the 1970s. Poets of this group spent considerable energy on cultivating a wider acceptance of free verse through such venues as open de-

Although this divergence between the Russian and Western poetic traditions is as obvious as it is curious, there have been surprisingly few attempts to explain it. Before suggesting my own — mnemocentric — hypothesis, I will revisit the ideas that have been suggested before.<sup>4</sup>

One explanation emphasizes the independence of the Russian tradition: why should we expect it to follow the common Western track away from rhyme and meter in the first place? Indeed, Russian poetry is not the only holdout of traditional verse. Until recently free verse (again, statistically speaking) has rarely been adopted in modern non-Western poetries. However, what makes the Russian case interesting is precisely the fact that Russian poetry is, for all intents and purposes, quite Western.

For three hundred years of its poetic history Russia's bards sang largely in unison with their occidental colleagues. After the failure of the seventeenth-century attempt to import Polish syllabic versification, the accentual-syllabic system was then successfully imported from Germany; Russian classicists and ro-

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bates with traditional poets and a yearly free verse festival. Nonetheless, the free verse stayed off the cultural mainstream (both in its official and various underground versions) until much later. Gennadii Aigi was perhaps the only Russian poet writing primarily in free verse who achieved a considerable reputation both in the domestic underground literary circles and, especially, abroad. In my opinion, the highest achievement of late twentieth-century Russian vers libre may have been Olga Sedakova's cycle *Old Songs*. One can argue, however, that this cycle, not unlike its two predecessors — Mikhail Kuzmin's *Alexandrian Songs* and Pushkin's *Songs of the Western Slavs* — is written in a loose accentual verse. Free verse is much better represented among the younger poets who became known in the 1990s and 2000s, especially those initially associated with the literary group Vavilon, such as Kirill Medvedev, Stanislav L'vovky, Aleksandr Anashevich, Andrey Sen-Sen'kov, and Dmitry Kuz'min. Still, the absolute majority of texts that are defined by their creators as poetry in today's Russia is still rhymed and metered — and this proportion holds true across all varieties of literary taste (although, as one might expect, more so on the traditionalist than on the avant-garde flank).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the special issue of the then influential magazine *Voprosy Literaturny* (2, 1972) dedicated to the polemics over vers libre. The participants included verslibrists Arvo Mets, Vladimir Burich, and Viacheslav Kupriianov, and traditionalists, including some of the most important poets of the period Arsenii Tarkovsky, Boris Slutsky, and David Samoilov.

mantics followed the genre system, the diction, the rhetoric of their Western prototypes; and toward the end of the nineteenth century and in the first quarter of the twentieth century, Russian poetry was an inseparable part of the international modernist movement. Most Western poetic innovations and movements had their Russian counterparts: some through a direct borrowing of ideas and stylistic devices, such as symbolism and futurism, some through an independent development stemming from the same „zeitgeist“: for example, the Russian Acmeists are often compared to the French Parnassians, or, later in the century, OBERIU can be seen as a Russian answer to Dadaism and a precursor of the theater of the absurd. When free verse started its triumphal progress through Europe<sup>5</sup>, the leading Russian modernists did not lag far behind: Briusov, Blok, Kuzmin, and Khlebnikov tried their hand at it more or less simultaneously with comparable attempts in the West. Some of these attempts were undoubtedly successful. Thus, Mikhail Kuzmin’s free verse cycle *Alexandrian Songs* (1906) and Velemir Khlebnikov’s poem *Zoo* (1909) were among the most influential poetic texts of the period. The poems of Walt Whitman, frequently cited as one of the sources for French and European free verse, were translated and popularized in Russia by the most energetic, prolific, and widely read literary critic of the period, Korney Chukovsky — the best advocate Russian verslibrists could have hoped for. Thus, based on the close parallelism between Russian and European poetic histories and judging by the early successes of Russian free verse, one might well have expected that it would become the predominant mode of poetic diction in Russia, as it did in Europe and America.

Another possible explanation has to do with the relative age of the Russian poetic tradition. By Western European standards Russian poetry, which only began in earnest in the late eighteenth century, is a rank adolescent. According to this view, European free verse arose because traditional versification was

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<sup>5</sup> See Scott 1990, Steele 1990, Finch 1993, Kirby-Smith 1996, and Beyers 2001 for accounts of the history of free verse in the American and European traditions.

worn out, whereas Russian poetry had not yet had time to exhaust all the possibilities of formal verse and thus was not ready to abandon it. However, the exhaustion of the means of poetic production that supposedly affected the West but spared Russia, even if real, is impossible to measure objectively. In any event, Russian poets also complained about just such an exhaustion as well, and did so long before the twentieth century. No less an authority than Alexander Pushkin wrote about it as early as 1833:

I think that in time we will turn to blank verse. There are too few rhymes in Russian. One brings about another. *Fire* (plamen') inevitably drags *stone* (kamen') after itself. *Art* (iskusstvo) always peeks out from behind *feeling* (chuvstvo). Who is not bored with *blood* (krov') and *love* (liubov'), *difficult* (trudnyi) and *miraculous* (chudnyi), *faithful* (vernyi) and *hypocritical* (litsemernyi)?

(Pushkin PSS 11, 263)

Pushkin's laments about the impending collapse of Russian rhyme (rhymes are too few and too predictable) turned out to be an exaggeration.<sup>6</sup> Russian poets happily experimented with

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<sup>6</sup> Voltaire makes a very similar complaint:

All the tragic situations are foreseen, all the sentiments that these situations arouse are correctly divined; the rhymes themselves are often uttered by the audience before the actor can deliver them. It is difficult to hear a line spoken that ends in 'letter' [*lettre*] without envisioning clearly the hero to whom it will be delivered [*remettre*]. The heroine barely has time to show her fears [*alarmes*] and immediately we expect to see her flood of tears [*larmes*]. Can one envision a verse that ends in 'César' [Caesar] and not be sure of seeing his vanquished foes being dragged behind his chariot [*char*]?

Toutes les situations tragiques sont prévues, tous les sentiments que ces situations amènent sont devinés; les rimes même sont souvent prononcées par le parterre avant de l'être par l'acteur. Il est difficile d'entendre parler à la fin d'un vers d'une *lettre*, sans voir clairement à quel héros on doit la *remettre*. L'héroïne ne peut guère manifester ses *alarmes*, qu'aussitôt on ne s'attende à voir couler ses *larmes*. Peut-on voir un vers finir par César, et n'être pas sûr de voir des vaincus trainés après son *char*?

rhyme throughout the nineteenth and especially in the twentieth century. What this example shows is that the concept of exhaustion is hardly applicable to the domain of literary forms — one can always redefine or tweak a formal element, as long as there is an interest in such innovations. The production of cultural forms stops not when it runs out of resources — these are limitless, but when the demand for these forms falls off. And this is in fact the gist of the hypothesis I am going to propose. I will try to show that in the case of traditional verse such demand is sustained by the mnemonic use of poetry, a network of cultural practices built around the memorization and mnemonic transmission of important religious or literary texts. These practices are primarily based in education, which shapes the way society uses literature and produces predispositions toward and skills at poetry memorization.

Whereas the mnemonic use of poetry has been in continuous decline in the West, it was artificially propped up and sustained by the specific needs of both the totalitarian Soviet state itself and its population. Put simply, meters and rhymes and stanzas are mnemonic aids: when a society stops learning poetry by heart, phonic constraints are no longer needed, and that's what happened in the West. In Soviet Russia, both the rulers and the ruled had reasons to continue memorizing, thus throwing a life-line to rhymes and meters. I have intentionally formulated this idea to make it sound reductionist: and in fact I believe that the determining factors of cultural phenomena lie outside the culture itself, in the domain of the social uses of culture. In what follows I will try to flesh out and contextualize the causal connection between the mnemonic use of poetry and poetic form itself, and to sketch out some episodes in the history of poetry memorization in the West and in Russia.

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(Voltaire 1817, 352)

The passage is taken from a section entitled „Literary Commonplaces [*Lieux communs en littérature*]” often found in editions of Voltaire’s *Philosophical Dictionary*. Apparently the complaint about commonplace rhymes had itself become a commonplace by Pushkin’s time.

## 2. Memorization: Early Criticism

Memorization, along with verbatim recitation, is one of the oldest and most widespread textual practices, prominent in all cultures with fixed authoritative central texts, be they the Vedas in Ancient India, the scriptures and prayers in Judaism and Christianity, the Qur'an in Islam, the Confucian canon (the Four Books and the Five Classics) in Imperial China or the Homeric epos in Classical Greece. In the grand scheme of cultural history, verbatim memorization accompanies the introduction of writing and succeeds and partially replaces the previous stage of purely oral folklore — the singing of tales.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Scholars have pointed out that verbatim recitation is almost inseparable from writing, since, as distinct from purely oral folklore, the memorized text has to be initially acquired from and eventually checked against the fixed written version. According to Jocelyn Small, the new dynamic of writing, at least in Ancient Greece, brought about the appearance of poetry as a specifically mnemonic practice:

With writing comes the concept of a fixed text that must be repeated word for word — a phenomenon that made a poet a natural as an inventor of a system for memorization. He had to have a good memory, because he still recited his works orally. Yet, unlike the oral singers of earlier times, he did not compose anew for each performance, but delivered the text he had written ahead of time. The whole point of performance depended on the exact words. Freed from the constraints of memory for a totally oral creation, the new breed of poets no longer relied on stock phrases to complete lines.

(Small 1997, 83)

The importance of exact (verbatim) reproduction in the new mnemonic context, as opposed to the oral production that preceded it, may be illustrated by a novella about Dante included in *Il Trecentonovelle*, a collection of stories by the fourteenth-century Italian writer Franco Sacchetti. In this (probably legendary) story, Dante encounters a smith who, while hammering on his anvil, sings to himself a poem of Dante's as if he were performing a piece of folklore, „jumbling his [Dante's] verses together, clipping them and adding to them.“ The furious Dante, insulted by the lack of respect towards his text, rushes to the smith and throws his various tools into the street and then explains his behavior to the amazed victim of his fury: „‘You sing my book, but not as I have made it. I also have a trade, and you are spoiling it for me.’“ Significantly, in the context of the present discussion, the story ends with the castigated smith taking up the

Once established as a channel of textual transmission that enhances and supplements writing, memorization assumes a variety of culturally specific forms. It plays a central role in the ethos of most established religions, in which both clergy and laity memorize and perform either individually or collectively prayers, parts of the liturgy or even scriptures as a whole, as in the craft of professional reciters of the Qur'an. It served as an indispensable tool of effective speech delivery in legal and political oratory in Classical Antiquity, while in Imperial China memorization served to maintain a bureaucratic meritocracy through an examination system that required those aspiring to become officials to internalize the form and content of philosophical and literary works. In most traditional literary cultures, including the pre-modern West, the memorization, recitation, and citation of canonical verses has been a central way in which a society uses, enjoys, and circulates its poetry.

Inseparable from the literary and aesthetic use of memorization is its use in pedagogy. For millennia memorization has served as one of the most basic educational techniques, an effective mechanism for a deep-reaching internalization of the knowledge that a particular culture deems worthy of perpetuation. In memorizing a text one first retains it as a sequence of sounds, words, and sentences, and then incorporates its meaning. Thus, memorization bridges two primary modes of learning: mechanic imitation of patterns or models, used in acquiring basic physical and social skills, and discursive instruction, used for perpetuating more abstract knowledge. The obvious connection between studying and memorization is reflected in the many languages that express the concept of „committing a text to memory“ by intensifying the verb *to learn* itself in a variety of ways: for example, the English pair *to learn* and *to learn by heart*, the Russian *uchit'* and *vyuchit' naizust'*, and the Greek *manthanein* and *ek-manthanein* (literally „out-learn,“ „learn thoroughly“). In the history of

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singing of safer poems: „when he wished again to sing, he sang of Tristan and of Launcelot, but left Dante alone“ (quoted in Whitcomb 1903, 30). Tristan and Lancelot refer of course to popular romances with unstable texts, transmitted through more traditional — and less stringent — oral channels.



pedagogy, memorization and verbatim recitation often spread from their original domain of religious and literary texts to other, non-literary subjects, e. g., committing to memory manuals and textbooks, a practice known as *rote learning*. The memorization of a central text and the corresponding practice of rote learning have been the mainstay of all traditional pedagogies, partly due to the obvious advantages of acquisition and storage: the memorized texts are transmitted and preserved with a minimal loss of information and — as long as memory keeps them intact — they remain very close to the cognitive „surface“ and can easily be called up on demand.

The drawbacks, however, are no less evident. First, verbal memory limits and shapes the information it stores, imposing external constraints of length and mnemonic effectiveness on the objects to be learned. Second, and far more important, rote learning results in passive knowledge rather than active understanding and the ability to apply abstract principles, which are vastly superior for most (though far from all) intellectual tasks. In order to use the acquired knowledge, the memorizer (and the rote learner) must constantly resort to the inherently hopeless task of matching a finite set of pieces of memorized knowledge to an infinite set of possible situations and contexts. Such matching is relatively easy when the task is to impart meaning to a specific lived experience, such as recalling a line from scripture or poetry that might help in coping with an existential crisis. But it becomes less and less possible when dealing with practical scientific and technological problems. Finally, rote learning encourages an excessive reliance on external authority by not allowing the memorizer any control over the content and truth value of what he or she internalizes. The memorized text may thus be construed as a cognitive intrusion, someone else's voice installed inside your head, a potential foothold for indoctrination or brainwashing.

The pedagogical and cultural emphasis on memorization and rote learning and the spread of the corresponding cognitive patterns may be among the factors that determine the „traditionality“ of a culture. What may mark Western civilization (loosely defined) as exceptional is that the resistance to rote learning ap-

peared rather early in its history. In fact, one of the very first attested discussions of the pedagogical use of memorization, found in the seventh book of Plato's *Laws*, already contains a critique of it. In the following passage, the main character in the dialogue, the Athenian (who represents Plato's own point of view), offers his two listeners an overview of existing pedagogical practices and his own commentary upon them. When he turns to the uses of poetry memorization, his tone grows sarcastic:

I verily affirm that we have composers of verses innumerable — hexameters, trimeters, and every meter you could mention, — some of whom aim at the serious, others at the comic; on whose writings, as we are told by our tens of thousands of people, we ought to rear and soak the young, if we are to give them a correct education, making them, by means of recitations, lengthy listeners and large learners, who learn off whole poets by heart. Others there are who compile select summaries of all the poets, and piece together whole passages, telling us that a boy must commit these to memory and learn them off if we are to have him turn out good and wise as a result of a wide and varied range of instruction.

(Plato 1961, II: 77 [7.810e])

The ironic reference to „tens of thousands of people” who believe in the beneficial effect of making youths memorize poetry helps the Athenian to distance himself from the opinion of „the crowd.” But it also tells us that by the time Plato was writing his *Laws*, around 340 BCE, the practice was quite widespread and well-established. Plato also provides a mocking rendering of how those „tens of thousands” explain the usefulness of the practice. In fact, there are two groups. The first group emphasizes the amount of acquired information, and states that „rearing and soaking the young” (*trephein kai diakoreis poiein*, literally: „rendering them satiated”) with poetry will make them erudite: „lengthy listeners” (*poluêkoous*, literally „well-listened, much-listened, those who have listened to many things”) and „large learners” (*polumatheis*, literally: polymaths). Although Plato gives no further details, we may infer that by learning „whole poets” this

group means memorizing the Homeric poems (and possibly Hesiod). The second group seems to be more concerned with the ethical effects of memorization, and recommends not whole poems, but a varied and salutary selection from them. The Athenian disapproves of both approaches: the quantity of memorized knowledge in itself is not valuable and the ethical content of poetry cannot always be subject to meaningful control. He concludes the discussion with a rather pessimistic evaluation of the pedagogical value of poetry memorization: „every poet has uttered much that is well, and much also that is ill; and this being so, I affirm that a wide range of learning involves danger to children” (Ibid.).

Thus, in addition to making fun of the quantitative aspect of memorization, Plato is apprehensive about its qualitative aspect. He fears that the young memorizers may end up internalizing — and thus accepting unquestioningly — potentially harmful poetry. Plato’s position is understandable in light of the fact that he himself belonged to the diametrically-opposed pedagogical tradition of Socratic maieutics („the midwifery of thought”) and dialectics, which prescribes a dynamic and processual arrival at new knowledge by way of conversation with a living interlocutor rather than the unquestioning acceptance and internalization of a static written text.

The fact that a skeptical attitude towards the pedagogic use of poetry memorization may go back to the teachings of Socrates himself finds support in the less subtle treatment of the topic found in Xenophon’s *Symposium*. In this dialogue, Socrates asks the banquet participants to share with their fellows what each person „thinks is his most valuable asset.” One of the guests, named Niceratus, replies that he takes utmost pride in the fact that he has committed to memory the whole of the Homeric epics:

My father, in his anxiety to make me a good man, made me learn the whole works of Homer; poems, and I could now repeat by heart the entire *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

(Xenophon 1970, 242)

Niceratus fails to impress his demanding interlocutors, one of whom, Antisthenes, expresses his doubts about the intellectual value of this mnemonic feat. Antisthenes points out that it is regularly accomplished by *rhapsodes*, those professional reciters of Homer who, for all their memorized wisdom, are reputed to be stupid. „Well, do you know any class of people sillier than they [the rhapsodes] are?“ asks Antisthenes, forcing Niceratus to concur: „No indeed... I don't think I do“ (Ibid.).

Whereas Plato in *Laws* mistrusts memorization mostly because of the possible harm from memorized texts, the skeptical assessment of professional memorizers in Xenophon's *Symposium* (which may have been a commonly held attitude or one specific to the Socratic circle) stems from the passive or mechanical nature of the knowledge acquired through memorization, a criticism that would become the central argument against the pedagogical use of memorization in later epochs.

### 3. Memorization and Its Discontents

Plato's and Xenophon's early criticism of pedagogical memorization was made possible by the fact that Greek civilization did not possess a „sacred text“ whose unquestionable authority derived from its divine origin. Since criticism of the pedagogical memorization of sacred texts may easily be construed as an attack upon their contents such a critique was unlikely to arise in the context of religious education in the Middle Ages. But when secular texts (at first from the classical canon and then from the national literatures) once again, as in Antiquity, became the object of school memorization in the West, the practice of memorization (together with the rote learning of non-literary subjects) became the favorite target for successive waves of educational reformers. In fact, new pedagogical methods were often consciously constructed in opposition to *memoriter* instruction, that is, one based on the memorization of literary texts and non-literary textbooks, which gradually came to be perceived as the most passive and least effective aspect of traditional pedagogy.

An early modern example of such criticism is found in the section on the *memoriter* method in John Locke's influential treatise *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*. Locke sternly disapproved of the pedagogical effect of memorizing

scraps of authors got by heart; which when a man's head is stuffed with, he has got the just furniture of a pedant, and 'tis the ready way to make him one; than which there is nothing less becoming a gentleman. For what can be more ridiculous than to mix the rich and handsome thoughts and sayings of others with a deal of poor stuff of his own; which is thereby the more exposed, and has no other grace in it, nor will otherwise recommend the speaker than a thread-bare russet coat would, that was set off with large patches of scarlet and glittering brocade?

(Locke 1996, 133)

Locke thus denies the main premise of the practice, namely, that memorization enriches students' memories with useful knowledge. Rather, according to Locke, the memorized texts can never be organically appropriated and are therefore bound to be misused. Locke's criticism also registers the changing societal attitudes towards the use of literary quotations in everyday communication: quoting classical authors from memory may now be seen as a sign of pedantry, inappropriate for a gentleman. Locke concludes that *memoriter* education is not just useless — it is in fact counterproductive: „I know not what it serves for but to mispend their time and pains and give them a disgust and aversion to their books, wherein they find nothing but useless trouble“ (Ibid.).

The eighteenth- and nineteenth-century educational reformers continued Locke's fight against school memorization. The French philosopher Condillac succinctly expressed the spirit of the age when he wrote: „He, who knows only by heart, knows nothing“ (Compayre 1899, 317). Rousseau's insistence on „natural“ education and respect for the pupil's freedom was as antagonistic to the *memoriter* method as were Pestalozzi's emphasis on empiricist and inductive learning, Froebel's use of playful social

activity in the classroom, and, later on, Dewey's „problem-centered“ method.

This theoretical assault on memorization was accompanied by two momentous changes in practical educational technologies which were gradually displacing memorization from the classroom: first, the spread of visual aids, part of the long process of the 'de-textualization' of western education, which began with the first introduction of pictures as teaching aids in the *Orbis Pictus* (1657) of Johann Amos Comenius and continues today in the widespread use of Powerpoint; second, and more important, the spread of print and the increasing affordability and availability of printed matter which rendered memorization less necessary as a remedy for the scarcity and costliness of textbooks.

Towards the beginning of the twentieth century the rote learning of non-literary subjects was universally condemned and survived in European and American education only among pedagogical retrogrades or in schools for the poor, where the lack of textbooks was still a factor. Classroom memorization of poetry was less vulnerable to explicit attacks due to the prestige (or, in Pierre Bourdieu's terms, the cultural capital) still associated with the mastery of poetry as a highly authoritative symbolic form and the ability to both quote and recognize quotations from it. However as this „capital“ slowly devalued, the centrality of poetry in the literary curriculum and, by extension, the usefulness of memorization became legitimate targets of criticism. For one thing, „rote“ is still rote, even when applied to poems: it could still be perceived as the worst pedagogical offence. Thus, in a telling and humorous passage, Harold E. Gorst, secretary of the Minister of Education of the British Empire in the late 1890s and self-proclaimed educational „revolutionary,“ does not differentiate between types of rote learning and gives a rather harsh assessment of *Casabianca*, a harmless didactic ballad by Felicia Hemans, which happened to be a staple in contemporary school anthologies:

The pernicious custom of learning by rote ought to be inscribed upon the penal code. Hanging would be too light a

punishment for the teacher who destroyed the minds of his charges by making them commit *Casabianca* to memory.

(Gorst 1901, 848)

Notwithstanding such vigorous attempts to dethrone the school memorization of poetry, the practice has survived — even while shrinking and losing its educational centrality — well into the twentieth century. Its retreat — although more or less universal throughout the West — advanced with different speeds in different cultures.

#### 4. The Decline of Poetry Memorization in America

The United States seems to have been ahead of Europe in de-memorizing the curriculum. This was due at least in part to the influence of American progressive educators who mounted a vigorous assault upon both „learning by rote“ in non-literary subjects and the very rationale of classroom poetry memorization, what they perceived as the unjustifiably privileged place that the study (and memorization) of poetry occupied in the curriculum.

According to John Dewey, an interiorized poem may provide pleasure, but not much knowledge, because whatever value its subject matter may have, it would be better to study it directly instead of through the medium of verse. In the following passage from *The School and Society* Dewey chooses as the object of such criticism Longfellow's *Hiawatha*, one of the most frequently taught, memorized, and recited literary works in the American curriculum of the time.<sup>8</sup>

Whatever may be the worth of the study of savage life in general, and of the North American Indians in particular, why should that be approached circuitously through the medium of *Hiawatha*, instead of at first hand? Either the life of the Indian presents some permanent questions and factors in so-

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<sup>8</sup> For a detailed analysis of *Hiawatha*'s place in the American educational canon, see Sorby 2005, 1–34.

cial life, or it has next to no place in a scheme of instruction. If it has such a value, this should be made to stand out on its own account, instead of being lost in the very refinement and beauty of a purely literary presentation.

(Dewey 1915, 160)

It goes without saying that Dewey and his followers did not oppose teaching poetry and literature as such; however, as is clear from the passage above, the progressive educators tended to assume that the significance of a literary work lies in its being an aesthetic object, rather than an instrument of cognition, a reservoir of condensed social or psychological experience, and the like. And for them purely aesthetic enjoyment did not justify the investment of time and cognitive effort that goes into memorizing. And, on top of this, the memorization of poetry was strongly associated with rote learning in non-literary classes — learning by heart passages from history textbooks, chronological tables, maps, mathematical theorems and physical laws, all of which lacked even the aesthetic rationale of poetry memorization and stood for pure pedagogical evil. The outcome of the progressives' distrust of rote learning is nicely summarized in the following complaint by the cultural critic and historian Michael Knox Beran:

If there's one thing progressive educators don't like it's rote learning. As a result, we now have several generations of Americans who've never memorized much of anything. Even highly educated people in their thirties and forties are often unable to recite half a dozen lines of classic poetry or prose.

(Beran 2004)

Thus, the retreat of its educational role led to the disappearance of memorization as an established and culturally sanctioned channel for the circulation and transmission of poetry: children who have never memorized poetry in school are unlikely to develop the habit later on. This process was both spurred by and, in its turn, accelerated the continuous loss of symbolic value associated with the ability to quote or recognize



poetic quotations. And I would venture a guess that towards the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century the decline in the memorization of poetry as a social practice and the main channel for the transmission of poetry brought about a radical change in the nature of the medium: namely, the rise and eventual domination of free verse, a poetic form decoupled from its mnemonic function. To sum up, in the second half of the twentieth century America unlearned learning by heart: teachers no longer assigned poems for memorization, pupils no longer memorized them either at school or when they grew up, and poets no longer designed poems to be „memorable.“

## 5. Learning by Heart in Russia: Anecdotes

The decline in the mnemonic use of poetry did not happen everywhere or to the same extent. In Western Europe, thanks to the stronger influence of conservative educational traditions, such as Catholic and classical gymnasia, and the lingering need for shared national literary canons as bases for ideological and cultural identity, the process has advanced more slowly than in America. And in Russia poetry continued to be memorized both inside and outside the classroom throughout the twentieth century and, although to a lesser extent, remains mnemonic even today. It is difficult to measure the amount of poetry Russians know by heart without sociological surveys, so in order to illustrate this point I'll resort here to two pieces of anecdotal evidence.

The first comes again from Brodsky. When he taught creative writing or Russian poetry in American universities, he would often walk in on the first day of class and tell his students that in his course they would have to memorize and recite quite a few poems. The poet Carol Muske-Dukes, who taught with Brodsky at Columbia, remembers that students eventually became „converts“:

By the end of the term, students were „speaking” the poems of Auden and Bishop and Keats and Wyatt with dramatic authority and real enjoyment. Something had happened to change their minds. The poems they’d learned were now in their blood, beating with their hearts.

(Muske-Dukes 2002)

However, at the beginning of the course some of the students were understandably unhappy and even considered a rebellion. After all, they had come to class expecting to study how poetry works or to learn how to produce their own, and, at least at first glance, the archaic rite of rote memorization hardly seemed to serve either purpose.

The students may have ascribed Brodsky’s somewhat eccentric insistence on rote memorization to his idiosyncratic understanding of the poetic craft. As we have seen, Brodsky was indeed a self-proclaimed „mnemonic” poet, ever concerned with the memorability of his own verse, and engaged in a lifelong habit of committing to memory the poems of others. But, along with Brodsky’s personal taste, the students were also encountering a bit of a manufactured intercultural misunderstanding. Well into the last quarter of the twentieth century, members of the Russian intelligentsia were still routinely expected to know by heart, recite, and quote plenty of poetry, and Brodsky — no doubt somewhat playfully — imposed the same expectations on their American counterparts.

Like Brodsky’s students, the cognitive scientist (and computer scientist and physicist and a very good translator of poetry) Douglas Hofstadter was an unlikely convert to the cult of memorized poetry. In the preface to his delightfully inventive rhymed translation of Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin*, he tells how he first encountered a Russian friend who surprised him by being able to continue a random quote from the novel:

Natasha was not a literary scholar, or even a student of Russian literature — she was a fairly typical product of the modern Russian educational system. And yet out of some 5,300 lines of *Eugene Onegin*, she had instantly and effortlessly

recognized my few words — but not just that, without even blinking, she had instantly and effortlessly completed the stanza.

(1999, x)

Later on, coping with the tragic loss of his wife and trying „to regain some vague semblance of normalcy” (Ibid., xi), Hofstadter — who at the time had only residual Russian left over from his college years and not much experience in poetry memorization — turned first to reading and then to committing to memory the original text, stanza by stanza — so as to emulate his *Onegin*-quoting Russian friends. His translation then grew out of the experience of having memorized and thus internalized the novel.

Why has the mnemonic use of poetry survived in Russia much longer than in the West? One possible answer to this question would be that this phenomenon is a manifestation of the Russian „literary-centrism,” the high prestige and symbolic power that Russians traditionally associate with literature. Such an answer, although perhaps generally true, is tautological: of course people memorize — or assign the memorization of — what is perceived as having symbolic (or aesthetic, or educational, or psychological) value. In other words, literary-centrism (if such a notion makes sense to begin with) *consists in* the mnemonic use of poetry: it does not *explain* it. In addition, the concept of Russian literary-centrism is rather fuzzy — and at least for the first half of the nineteenth century, probably misleading: it is impossible to show (and unlikely to be true) that literature as such was then in any sense more important or central for educated Russians than for educated Europeans. What initially made the Russian situation different was not the relative significance of literature, but the conditions of its circulation and transmission. Over the whole span of Russian literary history, official ideological and religious censorship has been much more severe in Russia than in other European nations. The government’s tight control over printed matter contributed to a continuing demand for ‘uncensorable’ alternatives to print: namely manual copying (sam-

izdat in the twentieth century) and, in case of poetry, memorization. However, the opportunity to avoid censorship and governmental intervention by reverting to an oral means of textual reproduction that preceded not just print but also writing was just one facet of the mnemonic use of poetry. In its heyday in early nineteenth-century Russia, it was a rich cultural phenomenon that spanned private and social domains, the home, the school and the salon, and encompassed a whole chain of cultural practices, such as learning by heart in nursery and school, copying by hand and memorizing favorite poems, internal recitation to oneself, recitation in a circle of friends, public recitation, quoting and recognizing poetic quotes in conversations, public speeches, and literary texts. And it is one of the central theses of the mnemonic approach<sup>9</sup> that in a mnemonic literary culture, the composition of poetry belongs to the same chain of practices — a mnemonic poet's mind is filled with pre-existing poetic utterances that serve as material or background for the ones being newly created.

## 6. Learning by heart in nineteenth-century Russia: Pushkin

To illustrate the importance of mnemonic culture in early nineteenth-century Russia, I will now turn to the early literary career of Alexander Pushkin, who was during his lifetime and — thanks to his continuous centrality in the collective cultural memory and school curricula — still remains the most memorized of all Russian poets. Accounts of Pushkin's own mnemonic prowess appear in others' memoirs of his early childhood. Thus, Lev Pushkin (himself famous for knowing by heart almost all of his brother's poetry) notes that „[Alexander] Pushkin was endowed with an extraordinary memory and at the age of eleven already knew by heart all of French literature” (Lev Pushkin 1998, 47). This bit of obvious exaggeration is nonetheless re-

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<sup>9</sup> See Gronas 2009 for a detailed discussion of the mnemonic mechanism of poetic creativity.

peated almost verbatim in a memoir by Pushkin's Lyceum friend Sergei Komovskii):

Upon entering the Imperial Lyceum in Tsarskoe Selo, Pushkin stood out especially for his extraordinary memory and his excellent knowledge of French language and literature. He only had to read any poem on a page two or so times and he could already recite it by heart without the slightest mistake. At just twelve years of age, he not only knew by heart all the best works of the French poets, but even wrote rather good poems in that language himself.

(Komovskii 1998, 56)

Such „mnemonic“ evidence sheds a somewhat different light on the old and tired topic of literary intertextuality. We tend to treat this phenomenon, in accordance with the inner form of the term itself, as a relation *between* texts (inter + textual), neglecting the obvious fact that before a text can exert influence, be alluded to or played upon in another text, it has to be internalized by the writer's creative memory. The cognitive reality of the early Pushkin's intertextual connections to French classicism resided in the young boy's avid memory, which was filled with French poems to such an extent that his contemporaries felt comfortable reporting that he had memorized „all of French poetry.“ Thus, the young Pushkin's allusions to French poems (and, for that matter, a majority of poetic allusions in general) can be viewed not only as literary but also as mnemonic events: interactions between the memory that stores memorized texts and the memory that produces new texts — two cognitive faculties that are closely interwoven and interdependent (Gronas 2009).

As soon as the young Pushkin burst onto the literary scene, he started absorbing the poems of his older contemporaries, literary friends who doubled as drinking buddies: Zhukovsky, Batiushkov, and Vyazemsky among many others. The Pushkin's first biographer, Pavel Annenkov, relates a story about Vasily Zhukovsky, the leading poet of the preceding generation, then in his early thirties, and Pushkin (still a teenager), which illustrates

something akin to a mnemonic friendship, if not collaboration, that developed between the poets:

V. A. Zhukovsky made it a habit to visit Pushkin in Tsarskoe Selo. He checked on the talented student's progress and recited his own poems. Pushkin possessed a prodigious memory. He remembered whole stanzas long after the recitals and kept coming back to them again and again. Zhukovsky would make changes to any verse that Pushkin couldn't remember. This alone [the fact that Pushkin couldn't remember it] was sufficient for rejecting any such verse.

(Annenkov 1984, 69)

Zhukovsky's use of memorability as an aesthetic criterion is very typical in a mnemonic poetic culture.<sup>10</sup> The fact that he chose the youth's memory as a poetic litmus test testifies to Pushkin's rapidly growing literary authority. As Pushkin was committing to memory the best poetry of his contemporaries, the nation began to memorize Pushkin. Here is how Pushkin's brother Lev, the writer Lazhechnikov, and the critic Polevoi remember the early days of Pushkin's literary fame:

Pushkin's fame, both literary and personal, was growing with each passing day. Young people recited his poems from memory, repeated his witticisms, and told jokes about him.

(Lev Pushkin, 1998, 48)

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<sup>10</sup> In the search for a tangible measure of poetic quality, the criterion of memorability has been often suggested, prompting its detractors to point out, correctly, that advertising jingles or pop song lyrics beat out the classics in any contest of sheer memorability. Still, the idea has intuitive appeal in a mnemonic literary culture: aesthetic enjoyment facilitates memorization and, conversely, its survival in the memory testifies to a poem's aesthetic value. Compare, for example, the way in which Viazemsky expresses his admiration for Pushkin's poem *To the Sea* in a letter to its author: „Your *Sea* is beautiful! I learned it by heart right away, which, for me, is a great sign” (November 6, 1824; Pushkin, PSS XIII, 117).

Pushkin's small poems, hastily copied in pencil on scraps of paper, spread like fiery streams all over Petersburg in a few hours, and in a few days Petersburg knew them by heart.

(Lazhechnikov 1998, 168)

Pushkin's lyrical poems of that epoch were, for the most part, not written for publication and were swiftly handed around in manuscript. Soon a whole notebook of such poems was compiled. The young people of that time diligently copied it out, and could not help learning it by heart. Thus Pushkin achieved the most resounding and brightest fame and the passionate love of his young contemporaries.

(Polevoi 1998, 57)

Citing these three passages together shows not just the surprising agreement between the accounts, but also the shared underlying understanding of poetic fame as synonymous with the mnemonic success of poems. In the eyes of Pushkin's contemporaries, posthumous glory (or literary immortality) and temporal fame were conceptually symmetrical: the former, in keeping with the classical tradition, was assured when one's literary works were *remembered* by posterity, while the latter depended upon being *memorized* by one's contemporaries.

In the last two passages above, Lazhechnikov and Polevoi provide a glimpse into the practical details of the mnemonic dissemination of Pushkin's poems. Memorization and manual copying are mentioned together („copied out, and could not help learning by heart”) as interconnected parts of alternative (non-print) textual transmission. As one might expect, poems were frequently memorized as a result of copying by hand, a by-product of the well-studied mutual reinforcement of motor and verbal memories. As for the reasons for this return to pre-Gutenberg channels of distribution, Polevoi laconically mentions that Pushkin „wrote not for publication,” hinting, of course, at the early Pushkin's libertine and liberal („freethinking”) poems. It is through this network of manual and mental copying that Pushkin's subversive lyrics of the late 1810s and early 1820s —

poems dealing with erotic, religious, and, especially, political ta-boos — implanted themselves in nation's collective memory.

This phenomenon could not escape the attention of the authorities, who, after all, partook of the same collective mnemonic pool as the rest of the educated class. The mnemonic ubiquity of Pushkin's poetry was a factor in the deliberations over the appropriate punishment for the poet. This can be confirmed by the highest source: in 1820 Tsar Alexander I himself reprimanded the Lyceum's director Engelhardt for the misbehavior of his recent alumnus as follows:

Pushkin should be exiled to Siberia. He has flooded Russia with his outrageous verses. All the young people know them by heart. I liked his frank deed with Miloradovich; but it does not remedy the situation.

(reported by Pushkin's fellow lyceist,  
Ivan Pushchin 1998, 90)

Incidentally, Pushkin's „frank deed“ that so moved the emperor had a mnemonic component as well. The tsar refers to the encounter, in April 1820, between Pushkin and the Petersburg governor-general Miloradovich. Miloradovich called on Pushkin and inquired about the anti-government and blasphemous poems ascribed to Pushkin; the latter not only bravely confessed his authorship but also wrote out — on the spot, *from memory* — all of the poems in question, thus earning himself a few brownie points for chivalrous deportment (Tsiavlovskii 1951: 1, 211–12).

Of course, the tsar did not really mean to send the poet to Siberia; that would have been an anachronistically harsh punishment for a literary (and mnemonic!) crime, quite feasible before, or a hundred years after, but not during Alexander I's enlightened reign. Instead, the tsar ended up exiling Pushkin to the South (Kishinev and Odessa), a realm much milder than Siberia, but still sufficiently remote and in the right direction to allow the poet a game of historical allusion, in which he painted himself as the exiled Ovid and Alexander I as the inexorable Octavian (Augustus Caesar). In one of the poems developing this parallel,



Pushkin addresses Ovid (and, through Ovid, himself) and complains, among other things, that

Напрасно Грации стихи твои венчали,  
Напрасно юноши их помнят наизусть:  
Ни слава, ни лета, ни жалобы, ни грусть,  
Ни песни робкие Октавия не тронут.  
(*To Ovid*, 1823; Pushkin, PSS 2 (1), 218)

[In vain did the Graces crown your poems [with laurels],  
In vain do youths remember them by heart:  
Nor fame, nor age, nor plaints, nor sadness,  
Nor timid songs will move Octavian.]

While Pushkin was in exile, the youths (and maidens) continued to learn by heart his poetry, both published and „written not for publication,” although the proportion of the latter diminished as the poet grew older.<sup>11</sup> Pushkin’s southern poems (*Prison-*

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<sup>11</sup> Soviet literary scholars liked to muse on whether Pushkin would have „come to Senate Square” (i. e., joined the Decembrists), if he had happened to be in St. Petersburg at the time of the uprising. This is, of course, an unanswerable question. However, we do know that at least in one, rather tangible sense, Pushkin indeed was present on Senate Square. Almost all the Decembrists knew by heart Pushkin’s subversive lyrics, and seemed to rely on them for the sense of ideological coherence that the eclectic and ill-defined movement sorely needed. During the police interrogations many of the Decembrists mentioned reciting Pushkin’s poems at their gatherings (see, e.g., Pugachev 1979). The Decembrist Zavalishin testifies that the mnemonic efficiency of Pushkin’s verses made them an ideal medium for propaganda among potential conspirators:

One can probably say that it was from his [Pushkin’s] poetry that at least nine out of ten, if not ninety-nine out of a hundred, of the young people at that time got their first ideas about atheism, blasphemy, and...extreme revolutionary measures. The very quality of the verse, so easy to retain in the memory, contributed to the spread of blasphemous and revolutionary ideas; not everybody may have put them into practice but still, everybody was acquainted with them through Pushkin.

(Vatsuro et al. 1998: 1. 497)

er of the Caucasus, *Fountain of Bakhchisarai*, and *Gypsies*) and the first chapters of *Eugene Onegin*, written in exile and published in metropolitan presses, became instant and durable mnemonic triumphs, a remarkable feat if one takes into account that these long poetic narratives comprise thousands of lines. References to the spread of memorization became a cliché in contemporary critical discourse, a shorthand allusion to the fame and familiarity achieved by these poems. Thus, an anonymous reviewer in *The Northern Bee*, while making fun of one of Pushkin's numerous imitators, states that he does not even need to quote from Pushkin to expose the copycat:

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The Decembrist Iakushkin talks about the popularity of Pushkin's anti-government poems among young officers, the very ones who would later join the movement:

All of his [Pushkin's] unpublished poems: „The Countryside,” „The Dagger,” „A Quatrain to Arakcheev,” „An Epistle to Chaadaev,” and many others were not just known to everybody, but at that time there was no halfway-literate ensign in the army who did not know them by heart.

(Iakushkin 1998, 1: 357)

His fellow lyceist Ivan Pushchin was one of Pushkin's closest friends among the future Decembrists. When the perspicacious Pushkin began to harbor suspicions, it fell to Pushchin to keep the poet — whom the conspirators deemed either too light-minded or too valuable to be one of them — away from danger. Here is Pushchin's account of one such conversation, in which he tried to dispel Pushkin's suspicions and assure him that he was already doing his part — or rather his poems were, since they were stored in everyone's mind:

He pestered me with his questionings and cross-questionings, to which I replied as best as I could, reassuring him that he, personally, without being a member of any „secret society” that he could possibly dream up, was furthering the good cause in the best possible way: at the time his „The Countryside,” „The Ode to Liberty,” „Noel,” and other similar pieces were being circulated, copied, and learnt by heart everywhere.

(quoted in Oksman 1934, 622)

We might have quoted a lot from *The Prisoner of the Caucasus* and *The Fountain of Bakhchisarai*. But why repeat what everybody knows by heart even without our help?

(quoted in Stolpianskii 1916, 151)

Similarly, the critic Nikolai Polevoi in his review of *Onegin*, announces that he will abstain from quoting the novel at length because it would be superfluous: „half of the people who have read *Onegin* know it almost by heart” (quoted in Vatsuro and Fomicheva 1996, 266).

Whereas the mass memorization of Pushkin’s risky poems was inadvertently supported by censorship, the mnemonic dissemination of the perfectly safe published works of the 1820s compensated, at least in part, for a more prosaic limitation of print, namely the cost. For most of the decade the entrepreneurial Pushkin was able to capitalize on his extraordinary success by charging publishers and, through them, booksellers and the reading public record sums for editions of *Ruslan and Lyudmila*, *Collected Poems*, and *The Fountain of Bakhchisarai*. As for *Eugene Onegin* he decided to publish it himself (with the help of friends) and sell the novel piecemeal, by chapters, to maximize profits.<sup>12</sup> As a rule, high prices for poetry were not much of a problem for those in the poet’s own social milieu. However, Pushkin’s then nascent status as national poet was precisely due to his widening readership, reaching beyond Moscow and St. Petersburg high society, both geographically, to the provinces, and socially, to the rising class of *raznochintsy*, i. e., educated commoners, usually bureaucrats on small salaries. It is this new provincial and middle class audience, especially the young (and most likely poor) among them, which felt the pinch of a theretofore unheard of price — five rubles — for a book of poetry.

Throughout his career as an author and publisher Pushkin seemed to prefer the high-end marketing strategy, aiming to sell less for more, rather than vice versa. Whatever its commercial merits, this strategy made the less affluent public resort to what

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<sup>12</sup> See Gessen 1930 for the details on Pushkin’s honoraria and pricing strategy.

has always been its favorite maneuver in the perennial tug of war with creators and producers, namely unauthorized copying. Much to the chagrin of Pushkin the entrepreneur, the creations of Pushkin the poet — this time perfectly printable and available in print — continued to be copied out manually and memorized. However, Pushkin the poet could not fail to appreciate — and, perhaps, enjoy and celebrate — the deeply intimate, meaningful and durable connection to the reader created by his poetry's mnemonic presence in the reader's mind.

The following episode from the memoirs of Nikolai Potokskii contains a more explicit illustration of the mechanism of manual copying and learning by heart in the late 1820s, and a snapshot of Pushkin's attitude towards the memorization of his poems. Potokskii ran into Pushkin by accident, in 1829, when both men were in the same group traveling to the Caucasus. Having recognized and approached the poet, Potokskii decided to initiate a conversation by reciting a nature description from *The Prisoner of the Caucasus* that seemed to fit the majestic view that lay before them. Here is Potokskii's account of what followed:

Alexander Sergeevich [Pushkin], shouting bravo! bravo!, quickly turned to me, seized my hand and pressed it firmly with his own; he was silent for a short while, and then he asked: how did you come to know this? Then I told him that I've known his works almost by heart from my earliest youth. „Well, well, recite something,“ said he. I began with the poem *Gypsies*, and soon recited it from memory all the way to the end, then [I recited] the first chapter of *Eugene Onegin*, and finally I started *The Prisoner of the Caucasus*, but Alexander Sergeevich stopped me, saying „You are tired. You have a beautiful memory. Tell me when did you have time to learn this by heart?“ Here is how I did it — answered I. When still a school-boy I often sat through whole nights copying out all of your delightful works that appeared in print, because at that time they cost a lot, for example, each new chapter of *Eugene Onegin* sold for 5 roubles, and other works cost even more; then, having read them once or twice, I already knew them by

heart...And just like me, our young men, and especially our ladies and young girls, learn your works by heart and go into raptures over them.

From that time until [we reached] Tiflis Alexander Sergeevich was particularly attentive towards me and called me his young traveling companion [iunym dorozhnyim tovarishchem].

(Potokskii 1880, 578)

Potokskii's story seems to have been typical for a young provincial lover of poetry. The high price of the books was certainly an important factor in making the young man copy out and memorize his borrowed Pushkins. No less important was the psychological and social value of recitation, implicit in the reference to many of his peers, young people of both sexes who shared the same passion, learning by heart and going into raptures over Pushkin's poetry. And Pushkin's warm and friendly response — following this encounter he „became particularly attentive“ to the young man and even promoted him to the rank of his „traveling companion/buddy“ — shows that in a mnemonic poetic culture the shortest way to a poet's heart may go through learning by heart his poems.

Although in the 1830s Pushkin never replicated the popularity and commercial success of the previous decade, his central place in the nation's memory remained unassailable. Pushkin's poetry became — and for three centuries has remained — the most recognizable and most widely shared cultural mnemonics of educated Russians. Here, for example, is a telling passage from an anonymous review that appeared in *The Northern Bee* in 1832:

Every literate Russian knows Pushkin's poems by heart...right now, young and old are reciting non-stop from memory: „Three girls sitting at the window,“ and so on. This is our very own, this is national.

(quoted in Stolpianski 1916, 190)

As distinct from the critical praise in the previous decade, Pushkin's mnemonic presence is here described not just as a sign of literary fame, but as a part of national identity. The sweeping generalization in the first sentence sounds less like a rhetorical flourish, and more like a proud — if exaggerated — statement of the newly developing cultural norm. Soon enough, in two decades or so, every literate Russian *will indeed* know by heart at least some Pushkin, due to the inclusion of his poems in textbooks and curricula at all levels of education, from village schools to universities, wherever Russian language and literature were taught.

## 7. Learning by heart in the USSR: from the kindergarten to the labor camp.

Pushkin's (and later on, Nekrasov's and Nadson's) mnemonic cults notwithstanding, a trend away from school memorization took hold in late nineteenth-century Russia, as elsewhere in Europe and America. Just like their western counterparts, Russian educational reformers criticized the predominance of the *memoriter* method; and this criticism also at times extended to rote learning in teaching literature as well as religion (God's Law — „zakon Bozhii”), another „rote-heavy” subject traditionally taught by making the student commit to memory the catechism and selected prayers.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Perhaps not surprisingly, one of the leading voices among the critics of memorization was Leo Tolstoy, who in the 1860s and 1870s turned his immense creative energy to the domain of pedagogy. Tolstoy treated memorization as the purest and most literal example of his perennial target — the accepted wisdom, the opposite of free and creative learning. Moreover, Tolstoy seemed to consider rote learning a violent intrusion into the pupil's mind, a psychological counterpart to corporeal punishment. The equation of „rote” and „rod” is especially evident in the following passage from Tolstoy's pedagogical treatise *Education and Culture* (1862). Tolstoy here is waxing indignant over those retrogrades who only half-agree with his educational ideas:

The whole trouble, both in the matters of university instruction and of culture in general, is caused mainly by people who do not

In the first years after the Revolution, the earliest Bolshevik educators predictably intensified the attack against rote learning which they inherited from the late nineteenth-century educational reformers and denounced memorization as a form of bourgeois oppression. But as the state and ideology stabilized and congealed in the early thirties, school poetry memorization was rediscovered as one of the most effective weapons for infusing a sense of national and ideological coherence into the minds of Soviet children. What could be a better indoctrination tool than literally putting words into minds? Whereas Lenin famously proclaimed cinema to be the most important of all arts, Stalin, him-

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reflect, but who submit to the ideas of the age, and who thus imagine that it is possible to serve two masters at once. Those are the same men who reply to my thoughts expressed before as follows: „It is true, the time has passed when children are beaten for their studies and when things are learned by rote, — that is all very true; but you must admit that it is sometimes impossible to get along without the rod, and that the children must be compelled to memorize. You are right, but why go to extremes?“ and so forth, and so forth. You would think that these people reflect charmingly, but it is even they who have become the enemies of truth and freedom.

(Tolstoy 1904, 128–29)

Not only does Tolstoy mention beatings and memorization in the same breath, he also seems to refer to his criticism of these two practices as the gist of his pedagogical program. And the fact that he calls those who still allow rote and the rod in the classroom „the enemies of truth and freedom“ shows how he considered both practices to be absolutely — and what is more interesting, equally — evil. In his criticism of rote learning Tolstoy went beyond theoretical polemics. He eliminated all forms of memorization from the curricula he developed for his own peasant school at Yasnaya Polyana. In his *Azbukas* (the elementary textbooks he wrote on a variety of subjects in the 1870s) he even advised against learning the multiplication table by heart, theretofore considered an absolute mnemonic necessity.

Memorizing the multiplication table is not just useless — since by dint of frequent practice each pupil quickly compiles his own table — but even harmful, because knowing the products by heart obscures the process of calculation.

(Tolstoy, PSS 22, 550–51)

self a failed poet, was more partial to good old literature.<sup>14</sup> Or at least so one can infer from the disproportionately high number of class hours Stalin's curriculum-builders allotted to literary subjects. Quite a few of those hours were to be devoted to learning by heart and recitation.

The rote repertoire of the Soviet school included a good deal of the nineteenth-century classics, especially Russia's perennial mnemonic favorites: Pushkin, Lermontov and Nekrasov. Preference was given to those nineteenth-century poems that were (or could be construed as) critical of the monarchy and sympathetic to the oppressed. This meant, ironically, that the very same poems which were once voluntarily memorized as a sign of political dissent, such as Pushkin's early „freethinking” lyrics, were now assigned for memorization to establish ideological conformity. Increasingly, as time passed and ideological rigor became more subdued, the „non-political” lyrical classics were assigned for memorization as well, under such heading as „poems about nature, love, friendship, and fatherland.” As for the newly established twentieth-century mnemonic canon, it was centered around Mayakovsky's propaganda poetry and Gorky's romantic poems in prose, with the later addition of Blok's *Twelve*, interpreted as unambiguously supportive of the Revolution. As official tastes, ideological needs and political circumstances changed, other poems by various Soviet poets were added or subtracted from the school memorization lists. But the emphasis on literature in the curriculum and on memorization in the teaching of literature, with the core of a few dozen poems assigned for memorization, established in the thirties, survived until the end of the Soviet Union.

For a glimpse into the internal mechanism of Soviet rote learning, I will now turn to a peculiar document, an interview given to an American sovietologist by Irene Semenuk Guy, a former kindergarten teacher from the Soviet provinces. What makes her perspective unique is that because she came to the

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<sup>14</sup> See Vaiskopf 2001 for an in-depth account of Joseph Stalin's literary and rhetorical tastes.



United States for personal rather than political reasons (as a result of a romance with and then marriage to an American tourist), she kept intact the „ideologically correct“ opinions and attitudes of a typical Soviet teacher.

Q. What sort of things did you teach your kindergarteners?

A. One aim was to have them memorize fifteen poems and acquire basic reading skills.

Q. Why was this emphasis on memorization such a good thing?

A. All parts of our body must be trained. That's one reason. For example, I have noticed that sometimes, here in the United States, children do not even memorize the multiplication tables. But for our kids, that is like learning another poem. Also, they can visualize what they have learned right in front of their eyes, even if they do not have a copy handy. And they can recall famous stories and poems later when the teacher wants to refer to them. After twenty or thirty years they still remember these things. Once a child becomes accustomed to memorizing brief poems, he will be able to memorize big textbooks and scientific problems more easily. In that sense, we regard memorization as a technical skill to be learned early.

Q. Why is it good to know the best stories of your country's authors so intimately?

A. Because they are part of our culture. Second, it is part of our political-moral education; besides, there is national pride in these things. We have to raise our children as patriots. Therefore, it is part of our educational practice — everybody expects it.

(Renner and Guy 1981, 142)

The rationale for early memorization, as explained in this interview by an average practitioner of the method, is threefold. The first reason is cognitive: learning by heart is considered to be a way of exercising the mind, a memory workout that will help with acquiring other types of knowledge later on. In agreement with official Soviet materialism, the teacher treats the mind as a

part of the body, which has to be trained since „all parts of our body must be trained.“ The rote skills developed by learning poems will then be used in memorizing the all-important multiplication table and after that „textbooks and problems.“ The second reason has to do with coherence: sharing in the same storage of memorized wisdom creates a sense of cultural, national and doctrinal unity. Finally, her last answers hint at the third, and perhaps most important reason: to instill and affirm values, to provide children with a set of easily applicable examples, maxims, and labels which help to structure and interpret reality in the ways prescribed by the state: „we have to raise our children as patriots.“

As Soviet ideologues learned only too well, memorized poetry is a weapon that cuts both ways: those children (and adults) who did not particularly appreciate being raised as Soviet patriots could find refuge in the private worlds of their cultural and literary memories, which formed the last line of defense against ideological intrusion. Censorship and the scarcity of printed editions brought about the rebirth of manual copying and memorization as alternative modes of textual transmission, familiar to us from Pushkin's epoch. The main difference was that for much of the Soviet period the punishment for the copying and possession (including mnemonic possession) of banned texts were incomparably more severe. This had the inadvertent effect of valorizing literary artifacts to the utmost: where people can perish for writing, copying or memorizing a poem, the poems acquire an ultimate value.

„Unofficial“ poetry memorization was common among the literary-minded in all parts of society, but perhaps nowhere was it as central to people's everyday existence as in the labor camps, where state control over the individual's mind, body, space, and time reached an extreme, thus making memorized poems the last and most treasured private possessions. Hence survivors of the GULAG offer moving evidence of the magnified — or enhanced — social and psychological importance of memorized poetry under conditions of extreme deprivation.

Although specific regulations varied from period to period and from prison to prison and from camp to camp, writing in the GULAG was either prohibited or severely limited; if allowed correspondence, a prisoner could write a set number of letters per year, but keeping private written texts was mostly forbidden. The same with reading: although some exceptions were made, and specific regulations varied, keeping books was either proscribed or practically impossible. In any event, all written and printed matter was subject to searches and examinations that could lead to severe punishments. These limitations prompted the reversion of camp culture to oral and mnemonic channels of communication and textual transmission. Many prisoners discovered that they could counter the forced isolation, monotony and lack of new information by reactivating long forgotten literary memories in their minds. Eugenia Ginzburg tells of such a mnemonic awakening in *Journey into the Whirlwind*:

During the long months and years I spent in various prisons, I was able to observe the virtuosity that human memory can develop when it is sharpened by loneliness and complete isolation from outside impressions. One remembers with amazing accuracy everything one has ever read, even quite long ago, and can repeat whole pages of books one had believed long forgotten. There is something almost mysterious about this phenomenon.

(Ginzburg 1975, 71)

Anna Larina-Bukharina, the widow of Nikolai Bukharin, the Soviet leader turned „enemy of the people,“ describes a similar psychological process in her memoir called, significantly in the present context, *This I Cannot Forget* (*Nezabyvaemoe*):

I was an experienced zek [from *zaklyuchyonnyi*, „prisoner“], having already been detained in many prisons: Astrakhan, Saratov, Sverdlovsk, Tomsk, Novosibirsk. I had become accustomed to an isolated existence without books, paper, or pencil, unable to do anything but string together rhymes and memorize them by endless repetition, read from

memory the verses of my favorite poets, and repeat Bukharin's letter-testament, as I did every morning without fail.

(Larina-Bukharina 1993, 156–57)

The letter-testament mentioned in the last line refers to the exculpatory letter to the Central Committee that Nikolai Bukharin wrote before his arrest to clear his name in the eyes of the posterity. Not trusting this all important document to paper, which could perish or cause those who kept it to perish, Bukharin chose his wife's mind as a vessel, and instructed her to memorize the letter and keep refreshing it in her memory until the time came to bring it into the open — which eventually did happen.<sup>15</sup> Along with memorizing her husband's letter, Larina mentions, in the same breath, both „stringing together rhymes“ (that is, composing her own poetry) and reciting favorite poems by other poets as part of the same mnemonic activity. This experience was typical for many educated prisoners, whom camp existence made not only into memorizers but also composers of poetry.

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<sup>15</sup> This heroic mnemonic mission made Larina's fate similar to that of another widow, Nadezhda Mandelshtam, whose memory has preserved for us Mandelshtam's most dangerous poetry and the „Fourth Prose.“ The connection was made even closer by the fact that Bukharin, while still in power, helped protect Mandelshtam. The poet's widow expresses her affinity with Larina in the pages on mnemonic survival in her memoir *Hope against Hope*. She first gives a detailed account of her own mnemonic efforts:

Despite everything, I have managed to save a good deal of M.'s work, though whether it will ever be published here is another matter — there is still no sign of it. I have had to give up one method of preserving his work — namely committing it to memory. Until 1956 I could remember everything by heart — both prose and verse. In order not to forget it, I had to repeat a little to myself each day

Then she recounts the very similar story of Larina-Bukharina, and concludes:

There are many women like me who for years have spent sleepless nights repeating the words of their dead husbands over and over again.

(N. Mandelstam 1970, 276)

One such poet was Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who soon after his arrival in camp took up writing and then committing to memory a long epic poem *Little Road* (*Dorozhen'ka*). This unskillful and meandering poem hardly counts among Solzhenitsyn's creative successes, but the process of its composition and memorization was critical for his cognitive and possibly his physical survival; it served both to preserve his mental health and to organize, structure, and give meaning to his experience, thus preparing the writer for his role as one of the ultimate witnesses of the terror. In a 1975 interview on French TV Solzhenitsyn describes both the psychological effect of composing, and the ingenious mnemonic system he created to keep his huge poem in memory:

In the camp I had to do something, anything else, so as not to perish, spiritually and creatively. And I had the idea of writing some verses and trying to memorize them. I wrote them in tiny little chunks — no more than 20 lines, then learned them by heart and burned them. But towards the end of my sentence I had gradually accumulated 12,000 lines or so. This is really a whole lot of verses, and I had to repeat them all twice a month, so that 10 days a month I did no writing, but just repeated what I'd already composed. For that purpose I had a small necklace, just like a Catholic has his rosary, and he tells the beads, and each new bead means he's supposed to say a new prayer. And so just like him I would tell my beads and keep count of the lines: the tenth, the twentieth, the thirtieth line, and so on...all the way to the hundredth. I wore these beads in my mitten. If they found them on me during the body search, I said that I prayed, and they went like, uh, well, ok, let him pray.

(Solzhenitsyn 1995, 263)

As is clear from this passage, the continual counting of beads and repetition of lines helped to structure, and thus domesticate, the time — perhaps the most important dimension of a prisoner's life. The object of this sophisticated technique, the poem *Little Road* itself contains an explicit reference to its own

mnemonic nature in the prologue, where the narrator states that his speech can only be preserved „if it's harmonious and measured,” that is, mnemonically effective. Then, since the memorized poem is impossible to find and destroy, he challenges the powers that be to frisk and search him, exulting in the fact that they will not find a single line or scrap of paper:

And as for God's miracle, our indestructible memory,  
You won't get to it with your hangman's hands.  
(Solzhenitsyn 1999, 6)

Solzhenitsyn reveals two important properties of memorized verse that were critical in the camp. The first has to do with sanity: due to its ability to harmonize the mind, memorization may serve as a preventative against mental deterioration.<sup>16</sup> The second concerns dignity: being both concrete and tangible and yet completely immaterial, mnemonic possession is unalienable; it cannot be discovered or destroyed; its rhymes and rhythms thus provide a foothold for one's inner freedom, right in front of guards and overseers, and yet beyond their reach. The following

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<sup>16</sup> Another, more explicit and emotional, example of the therapeutic use of memorized poetry, comes from the memoirs of Eugenia Ginzburg:

I heard the sound of several feet, muffled cries, and a shuffling noise as though a body were being pulled along the stone floor. Then there was a shrill cry of despair; it continued for a long while on the same note, and stopped abruptly....

I prayed, as Pushkin once did, „Please God, may I not go mad! Rather grant me prison, poverty, or death.” The first sign of approaching madness must surely be the urge to scream like that on a single continuous note. I must conquer it and preserve the balance of my mind by giving it something to do. So I began again to recite verses to myself. I composed more of my own and said them over and over so as not to forget them, and above all not to hear that awful cry.

(Ginzburg 2002, 222)

Here the scream of utmost despair and madness is juxtaposed and countered by the internal recitation of newly composed or earlier memorized poetry. The coherence, orderliness, durability, and articulateness of the formal verse help the mind to fight off the seduction of an indistinct and chaotic despair.

passage from the memoir of Olga Adamova-Sliozberg (in the camps from 1936 to 1954) is an example of how memorized poems could become the subject of a contest of wills between prisoners and guards, one instance (and a very rare one) in which the prisoners emerged victorious:

Once, as Galya Ivanova was reciting from [Griboedov's comedy] *Woe from Wit*, a convoy commander and three soldiers approached our *teplushka* [freight-car] at a stop. Apparently, they waited listening for some time, then quickly opened the door and demanded that we hand over the book (carrying books was forbidden). We replied that there were none. The commander grinned countering that he heard her read with his own ears. They started their search. They ransacked the *teplushka* but couldn't find the book. Galya suggested that she could read from her memory in the presence of the commander: „My uncle was a man of virtue” [The first line of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* — M. G.] After about ten minutes of glancing around, suspecting that someone might be giving her cues from afar, the commander gave up, turned around and left. Still, he was under the impression that we outsmarted him.

(Adamova-Sliozberg 1993, 75)

For the first time we encounter in this episode the social dimensions of camp mnemonic culture: what the guards interrupted was a public recital in a small circle of trusted friends, one of the very few forms of collective cultural life available to prisoners. During such recitals the educated zeks could share in each other's mnemonic possessions; those who did not have any or did not know the ones being recited could listen and often learn *by heart from ear*, thus perpetuating the oral and mnemonic transmission of texts within the camp.

One particular kind of recital stands out as a realization of the metaphors of possession I have been using throughout this article. At times the ability to recite long poetic narratives could become a profitable skill, a craft practiced only by the educated political prisoners, but in especially high demand among *real*

criminals, who rarely read and never memorized. In exchange for entertaining the — usually hostile and dangerous — crowd of thieves and gangsters with lines of poetry, one could be remunerated with necessities like food and clothing, or patronage, or even respect.<sup>17</sup> This commodification of memorized verse is illustrated in the following episode from the memoirs of Teodor Shumovsky, a Leningrad philologist who was in the camps from 1938 to 1956. Shumovsky is recalling the appearance in the barracks of a new young prisoner, who became instantly popular among the criminals thanks to the poem *Luka Mudishchev* („Mr. Luka Bigdick”), the classic of Russian bawdy lyrics, usually ascribed to Ivan Barkov:

It turned out that he [the newly-arrived prisoner] knew by heart the notorious *Luka* by Barkov. Thieves, burglars, murderers listened with bated breath....When he finished, everyone was hushed for a minute. The silence was broken with exclamations of admiration for the speaker: — Wow...Man!

— Fellas like this one aren't made of the same flesh and blood as the rest of us. Think about how much he memorized!

— Listen, brother. You don't be too shy. We'll pick up the slack for you. You just keep telling us about this Luka. What a story!

(Shumovskii 2006, 192)

Luka's grotesquely indecent adventures must have had a special appeal as pornography; but reciting high-culture poetry could also be rewarded, as in the following episode from the memoirs of Nadezhda Ioffe, imprisoned and in the camps at various times between 1936 and 1952:

In my cell, I survived on the parcels sent to fellow prisoners. This was my earnings for my tales. I recounted something almost every night. Of course it came from the books I

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<sup>17</sup> In this instance, the verse form is not specifically important. In fact, more frequently the criminals were entertained by stories in prose, in part recalled, in part improvised by the educated narrators. See Shalamov 1998: Vol. 2, 92–100 for a detailed eyewitness account and penetrating analysis of this phenomenon.



had read, not from myself. The most popular was Rostand — *Cyrano* and *L'Aiglon* — perhaps because I could effortlessly recall page after page of the versified text by heart.

(Ioffe 1992, 210)<sup>18</sup>

Finally, the last facet of the phenomenon of memorized poetry in the camps has to do with another aspect of social interaction, even more important than the exchange of goods and services. Memorizing poetry, being a quintessentially private and individualistic experience, paradoxically serves to delineate social groups into those who share a common mnemonic storehouse and those who do not. As we have seen, this property was used by Soviet educators to instill children with a sense of ideological coherence and communality. Similarly, in the non-official culture, and especially under condition of forced mistrust and suspicion in the labor camps, knowing the same poems by heart could signal a cultural — and therefore social and psychological — affinity. Such a mnemonic recognition is described in Eugenia Ginzburg's memoirs where she tells about meeting her son (future writer Vasily Aksyonov), from whom she had been separated since her arrest when he was a young child.

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<sup>18</sup> Such an exchange of memorized verse for something much more tangible is not without a historical precedent. After the disastrous defeat at Syracuse 413 BC during the Peloponnesian War, the victorious Sicilians spared the lives of some of the captive Athenians in exchange for a few lines of tragic poetry. According to Plutarch's *Life of Nicias*:

Several were saved for the sake of Euripides, whose poetry, it appears, was in request among the Sicilians more than among any of the settlers out of Greece. And when any travelers arrived that could tell them some passage, or give them any specimen of his verses, they were delighted to be able to communicate them to one another. Many of the captives who got safe back to Athens are said, after they reached home, to have gone and made their acknowledgments to Euripides, relating how that some of them had been released from their slavery by teaching what they could remember of his poems, and others, when straggling after the fight, been relieved with meat and drink for repeating some of his lyrics.

(Plutarch 1992, Vol. 1: 723)

I found myself catching my breath with joyful astonishment when that very first night he started to recite from memory the very poems that had been my constant companions during my fight for survival in the camps. Like me, he too found in poetry a bulwark against the inhumanity of the real world. Poetry was for him a form of resistance. That night of our first talk together we had Blok and Pasternak and Akhmatova with us. And I was so glad to be able to offer him an abundance of those things that he looked to me to supply.

„Now I understand what a mother is....you can recite your favorite verses to her, and if you stop she will go on from the line where you left off.“

(Ginzburg 1981, 266–67)

What is described here is akin to Aristotelian *anagnorisis* — the recognition of long-lost relatives by secret signs. In this case, the shared secret is the non-official mnemonic canon that developed in opposition to the official school canon (although in fact it partly overlapped with the latter). Mother and son realize that their blood affinity miraculously coincides with their social and cultural affinity: it turns out that they both belong to the intelligentsia, a social group in part defined by sharing in a common cultural mnemonics.

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It goes without saying that the GULAG experience cannot be viewed as a proxy of Soviet life in general. However, the conditions that brought to the fore the mnemonic use of poetry in the camps existed (in a less severe form, of course) in society as a whole. Therefore the uses of memorized verse — avoiding censorship, coping with and imparting meaning to reality, recognizing one's own — worked in the same way for the society at large.

Whereas in the West (especially in the English-speaking world) rote memorization of poetry was gradually eliminated from school curricula in the first decades of the twentieth century, in Russia this practice survived until the end of the Soviet

period. To use an overtly dramatic metaphor, both the Soviet and the dissident cultures used memorized verse as a weapon in the cognitive war for the most valued possession — memory, thus allowing the mnemonic, that is rhymed and metrical poetry to survive into the twenty-first century.

Throughout this article, I have been talking mostly about readers (or rather memorizers and reciters) of poetry. But a mnemonic poetic culture encompasses both producers and consumers of poetic goods, imposing the logic of supply and demand: the readers expect memorable poems, the poets expect (or hope) to be learned by heart.

And although readers (and critics) frequently discuss the mnemonic qualities of poems, poets rarely discuss the mnemonic capacities of readers. After all, to be memorized means to be installed for a long time or even for life in somebody else's mind — quite an immodest ambition. In fact, I have come across only one clear-cut *demand* to be memorized, in the passage from Revolt Pimenov<sup>19</sup> that I chose as the epigraph for this article. Here it is again:

I have to reiterate — on the off chance that someone, while leafing backwards, happens to open the book to this page. Don't read me. He who writes in blood wishes to be learned by heart, rather than read. I spit upon leisured readers. You might as well go and watch TV.

(Pimenov 1996, 1: 553)

Perhaps not surprisingly, this comes from a political prisoner, someone whose mnemonic sensitivity was heightened by seven years in the camps. But as with other GULAG examples in this article, I believe that Pimenov's demands reflect, in a condensed and magnified form, the attitudes of all poets participating in a mnemonic culture. What's more, the mnemonic expectations

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<sup>19</sup> Paradoxically (taking into account the tone of the passage), being a poet is the least known of Revolt Pimenov's numerous occupations. Pimenov was a leading mathematician, turned philosopher and historian, turned human rights activist. He was arrested in 1957 for dissident activity.

shape the way poetry is composed, the cognitive mechanism of poetic creativity. But this is a topic of another study.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> For a detailed treatment of this hypothesis see Gronas 2010.

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