

Бак-Морс «Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West» («Мир мечты и катастрофа: исчезновение массовой утопии на Востоке и Западе»), в котором видная американская исследовательница рассказывает, какое впечатление произвели на нее встречи и интеллектуальное общение в Москве. А это было в первую очередь общение с Подорогой и сильной группой коллег, с которыми он работает в тесном творческом взаимодействии.

Susan Buck-Morss  
*Cognizing Body\**

I met Valery Podoroga in May, 1987, at one of life's accidental intersections. I was in Moscow for no purpose of my own. My husband, a physicist, had been invited to speak at the Landau Institute and I was there to accompany him. As I had just finished the manuscript for a book on Walter Benjamin, a visit to Moscow, capital city of twentieth-century socialism, which Benjamin had visited sixty years before, seemed entirely appropriate. My status as a tourist was short-lived, however, due to the network of Moscow's intelligentsia. On the second day, through the family connection of a Landau mathematician, I was brought to the Institute of Philosophy on Volkhonka Street and introduced to the small working group surrounding the young and highly regarded philosopher, Valery Podoroga, senior researcher at the Sector of the Philosophical Problems of Politics. He had written his dissertation on Theodor W. Adorno, and we had that in common. He had read my book on Adorno, which was available in the library of the Academy of Sciences, a fact that I found

\* Text based on material from the book by *Susan Buck-Morss*, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2000).

surprising – as he did my appearance in the Institute with neither an official invitation nor the usual peace-group affiliation.

Podoroga had been holding a series of increasingly public «underground seminars» at the Institute, in order to consider seriously philosophers and theorists formerly dismissed as bourgeois: Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Husserl, Heidegger, Freud, Merleau-Ponty, Barthes, Adorno, Benjamin, Foucault. He was not the only person in Moscow influenced by European continental philosophy, nor even the only philosopher writing on Adorno. But he and his close associates were unique in appropriating the methods of Western theorists in order to launch a sustained, critical analysis of Soviet culture. In going beyond a critique of *political* totalitarianism, this group was breaking new ground. Indebted particularly to the theories of the Frankfurt School and of Michel Foucault, their project was to criticize power by philosophizing from cultural phenomena – architectural forms, literary texts, cinematic practices, the modalities of everyday life – and it was here that our interests touched closely.

At dinner in Podoroga's home, I met Mikhail Ryklin, his colleague and friend from student days, when they both worked with the remarkable Georgian existentialist, Merab Mamardashvili. Ryklin launched into a lecture on Walter Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* – in fluent German. Numerous Institute members, many of whom had never been abroad, addressed me freely in German, French, or English, while I was only beginning to enter the world of Russian script. The fact that our collective communication reached a level of intellectual rigor, however, was due to the translation skills of Helen Petrovsky, post-doctoral student working with Podoroga, who as a child had attended the English-speaking United Nations school in New York. Petrovsky, then writing her dissertation on the image of the Indian as the enemy «other» in the American intellectual landscape, acted as translator for our official talks and informal conversations. Her American English was flawless, and she transported not only our words but also our souls across the linguistic divide.

There were many others – philosophers and artists – whom I came to know during subsequent visits, but these three personalities

would be the pivot around which our collaboration turned: Valery Podoroga, idiosyncratic, esoteric, brilliant, and charismatic, at times blunt and bungling – the very prototype of a Russian philosopher; Mikhail Ryklin, openly communicative, fluent in four languages, and impressive in his knowledge of various theoretical traditions which he delighted in parrying with Nietzschean black humor; Helen Petrovsky, able to copy an impressionist painting with the same mimetic skill as translate a text, brilliant in her own right, and raised with a precocious confidence from having been at home on both sides of the Cold-War world. Their personalities gave expression to the various objective possibilities that existed at the time. As a specifically Russian philosopher, Podoroga's interest in Western theory was tactical, a means of prying open the past of his own, national culture in its pre- and post-revolutionary forms, whereas Ryklin saw himself more in international terms, affirming the intellectual and aesthetic avant-garde whether it showed itself in Moscow, Paris, Berlin, or New York. Petrovsky prefigured a new potential hybridity, choosing to adopt values from both East and West. She loved Moscow, but specifically for its contributions to international culture. Unimpressed with Western materialism, she used the privilege of her family's foreign travel for one purpose, to acquire a collection of recent books that would have made any Western academic envious, and these circulated widely among her Moscow friends.

Podoroga's institutional position, made possible by the new spirit of glasnost', allowed our chance meeting to turn into a five-year collaboration. The fact that I had been schooled in Western Marxism had everything to do with my desire to begin such a venture. And yet this Marxist orientation was of little interest to my Moscow counterparts. Granted, at the level of the Academy of Sciences, philosophers had been exposed to a sophistication of Marxist theory lacking in the ideology of Marxist-Leninism. (The general Soviet public did not read Marx himself.) The French Marxist Louis Althusser visited the Institute of Philosophy during the Brezhnev years; the rehabilitation of the Hungarian Georg Lukacs had been signaled by a recent translation of his aesthetic theory. But these thinkers spoke to an older generation than the one

with whom I was becoming involved. In the Soviet Union, the *shestidesiatniki*, or «sixties generation,» was that of Petrovsky's parents – and, indeed, of Gorbachev himself. They were born in Stalin's time, their childhood experiences were of war, and they came to maturity during the era of Khrushchev's reforms. As students they discovered the writings of the young, humanist Marx, and many later sympathized with the spirit of the Prague Spring of 1968 – the call for «socialism with a human face.» There was a time lag between this sixties generation and the one that I had encountered as a student in the United States and Germany at the very end of the decade. Podoroga and Ryklin, my peers, considered themselves already beyond the neo-Marxism of the Gorbachev generation. But if their politics differed from mine, the terms of our critical analyses were close. We understood culture as fundamentally political, operating on the body in a material sense. The machinery of modern power was not so much hidden behind the ideology of mass utopia as it was produced by it. Intrinsic to the politics of modernity was the potential for abuse of power against the collective, and at the same time in its name. These were problems that neither Western capitalism nor Soviet socialism had managed to resolve.

We met continuously from 1988–93, holding conferences at the Institute of Philosophy and several American universities, and arranging visits to Moscow of other Western philosophers (Jacques Derrida, Fredric Jameson, Jean-Luc Nancy). In the politically charged climate of October 1990, we had a historic meeting in Dubrovnik, joined by Mamardashvili, just a month before his sudden death. Our intellectual debates took on increasing political urgency as Communist regimes started to fall. The outcome of historical events was unclear, and the future seemed open.

These meetings were formative for all of us. Our work together does not add up to a philosophical school. Rather, we share an orientation, a materialist approach to metaphysics – the point where German Critical Theory and French Existentialism converge – that places emphasis on the cognizing body and what Ryklin called «the irreducibility of corporeal phenomena» that forces us «to think through the skin.» Such a philosophical anthropology is aesthetics in

the original meaning of the term, not the reduced sense of art appreciation. Petrovsky analyzed the techniques of painting that allow Goya and Picasso to reproduce not merely the fact but the corporeal *experience* of political violence, depicting its horror in a way that undercut the justifying discourse of the enemy other. Podoroga described how certain artworks «rediscover, or to be more exact, *invent* the catastrophic spaces and times» that official culture covers over: «the open mouth without sound reaching anyone in the paintings of Bacon, the human being so utterly consumed in the act of producing a sound that it cannot be heard, coincide with the way in which pain engulfs the one suffering pain, but remains unsensed by anyone else.»<sup>1</sup>

For me, the great brilliance of Podoroga's philosophizing remains precisely this capacity to make culture speak a metaphysical language that, because of its material and historical specificity, is as profound in its political implications as it is devoid of overt political intent. Podoroga has a unique and powerful way of thinking through a problem. On multiple occasions, I have witnessed how he turns literary or artistic criticism into philosophical dynamite, an illuminating blast that exposes metaphysical problems in a new light. Evil in the modern world is visible not only as intentionally inflicted pain, but as the cultural dismissal of this pain, not only the fact of Auschwitz, but the everydayness of its horror. These realities are reanimated by artworks in which the catastrophes of history are imprinted on the natural body, producing what Podoroga calls «mutant forms»: «Figures of Beckett's plays – bodies-cripples, bodies-skeletons, bodies-stutterers – represent our new bodies, those that survived the catastrophe of Auschwitz.»<sup>2</sup> Podoroga has in mind his own, post-Soviet situation when he observes in Kafka's texts that «the language of the old empire offices and the language of national minorities are constantly at war»:

This language is saturated by fear; listen to it – surpassing the threshold of normal hearing, we begin to 'see' these sounds-ges-

<sup>1</sup> These quotations are from notes that I took at the time.

<sup>2</sup> Valery Podoroga, «The Phenomenon of Auschwitz and Adorno's Hermeneutical Experience,» manuscript.

tures; the words begin to scream, squeak, cry, whisper and mutter, binding us with the invisible threads of mimetic resonance <...> to the inner dimension of catastrophic space. Indeed, these threads of fear transform us as readers into others, into animals, and we become those creatures on the surface of our skin.<sup>3</sup>

Far too little of Valery Podoroga's work exists in translation. The global culture industry that prevails today does not take risks. Relevance, not marketability, is a philosopher's concern, and in terms of the former, Podoroga's contribution is extraordinary. Recently (May, 2006) Helen Petrovsky organized a conference on media and visual studies at RGGU that brought our group together, giving me the opportunity to listen again to Podoroga, and share philosophically our experiences of contemporary events. In fact he spoke specifically about «the event,» giving a phenomenological analysis of time, perception and power in the changed context of mass media. I was struck again by his capacity to philosophize out of the everyday, bodily experiences of cultural life, making them appear both utterly strange, and utterly familiar. He demonstrated his capacity to address a new audience, a philosophical community whose potential is repressed by the political, cultural and economic power of the media. He made us feel its presence, not as a simulacrum, but as flesh and blood.

It is a pleasure to participate in this issue of  
*Sinii Divan*, and to pay tribute to Valery  
Podoroga in appreciation of the historical  
role that he plays in Russian  
philosophy. In friendship  
and great esteem, Valery,  
I toast you:  
*Za vstrechu!*

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Сюзан Бак-Морс

## *Познающее тело\**

Мы познакомились с Валерием Подорогой в мае 1987 года на одном из случайных перекрестков жизни. Я приехала в Москву, не имея особых планов: моего мужа, физика, пригласили прочитать доклад в Институте Ландау, а я его сопровождала. Только что мною была завершена книга о Вальтере Беньямине, и посещение Москвы, социалистической столицы двадцатого столетия, куда Беньямин приезжал шестьдесят лет назад, вполне соответствовало моему расположению духа. Впрочем, благодаря московским интеллектуалам туристом я пробыла недолго. На второй день, через родственника одного математика из Института Ландау, я попала в Институт философии на Волхонке и была представлена небольшой рабочей группе, философскому кружку, в центре которого находился Валерий Подорога, молодой, но уважаемый ученый, старший научный сотрудник сектора Философских проблем политики. Подорога написал диссертацию, посвященную Теодору Адорно, и это нас объединяло. Он прочитал мою книгу об Адорно; то, что книга оказалась в наличии в библиотеке Ака-

\* Текст написан на основе материала из книги: *Susan Buck-Morss, Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2000).