

# Futurism is the Future

Four Translations of Russian Futurist Poets  
with an Essay by Basil Lvoff



We're delighted to present today four new translations **of Russian Futurist Poets translated by Basil Lvoff**, accompanied by an insightful essay that provides historical context, personal details from the lives of the poets, and illuminating process notes. We hope you'll enjoy Lvoff's erudite article and his fun selection of poems as much as we did.

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—*Claudia Serea and Loren Kleinman*

BASIL LVOFF

## FUTURISM IS THE FUTURE

### Four Translations of Russian Futurist Poets

The Russian poetic idiom reached a zenith in the first decades of the twentieth century, and Futurism was its flagship—Futurism, but with a Russian soul, as Lermontov said on a different occasion, since the Italians known as the Futurists and led by Marinetti were their namesakes rather than soulmates. At least, the Russians claimed so. Hence the appellation *budetliane*, with which the Russians would style themselves—from *budet* (“will be”) and with the suffix that means “the dweller of,” as in the word *inoplanetiane* (“aliens”), all of which adds up to “the dwellers of the future.”

At the turn of the century, the hand of time made a vertiginous revolution, imprinted on the face of Russian Futurism. Bizarrely attired, loud, insolent, their faces daubed with the war paint of geometric abstraction, the Russian Futurists stormed into the new age—when the fundamental laws of physics, math, and thought were reexamined and rewritten—to reinvigorate the lackadaisical chatter of the declining West, as people like Spengler wrote, or better yet, as Viktor Shklovsky put it, to resurrect the word in its primaeval purity and verve.

The Russian of the Futurists rattled with consonants as though a Polish machinegun and chirped with vowels like birds of paradise, or those from the enchanted forests of ancient Slavs. It was in this delightful and savage tongue that the Futurists declared war on the jade of history (to quote Vladimir Mayakovsky) and on everything of yore, taking an oath to throw old culture off “the steamboat of modernity”—although, as it turned out, only to reembrace that culture later. Yet in 1913, at their inception, they delivered a resounding slap in the face of public taste (as one of their numerous manifestoes was called), accompanied by the ferocious, barbaric, bellicose, unmeaning, and merry clang of *Дыр! Бул! Щыл! Darr! Boore! Tharr!*

Thus spake **Aleksei Kruchenykh (1886–1968)** in his famous prewar poem—prewar, but for all its martial spirit, not necessarily prowar, as suggested by Kruchenykh’s other, poetic and artistic, works, especially his 1916 [Universal War](#), with collages and poems laying bare the terrors of WWI. (It is noteworthy that, while the Italian Futurists tended to fight in the Great War, the Russian ones tended to oppose or dodge it, enthusiastic instead about the Russian Revolution.)

Kruchenykh’s *Дыр бул щыл* is an epitome of Russian Futurism, part of its DNA, and that is why it is so hard to translate, since language for a Futurist is not a fitting glove for ready meanings but the blood flow of life itself, undetachable from it, when *world* reads as the declension of *word*—an exercise in the grammar of the universe, which was being devised by Velimir Khlebnikov, an ally of Kruchenykh’s and another great, if not the greatest, Futurist, also represented in this selection.

One may wonder, in fact, whether *Дыр бул щыл* is translatable at all. For it is written in the glossolalic tongue of *zaum*, i.e., transrational language, language beyond—but not without!—reason. The very premise of Kruchenykh’s poem, then, is to cast off the shackles of habitual meaning, and the attempts to decipher the poem (one of them belongs to another prominent Futurist, David Burlyuk) are only productive insofar as the poem routs them. The poem sounds nonsensical all right, and what could be a word in Russian, e.g. the poem’s inaugural *дыр* (Genitive plural for “holes”), simply does not read as one.

That is why those who take upon themselves the task to translate this poem in its untranslatable glory are closer to the truth. The only such attempt that I am aware of is that of Larissa Shmailo ([Pot nag chog](#)), and while one could question its decisions, that is a real translation,

unlike the surprisingly naïve or plain lazy Romanizations of Kruchenykh’s text, which is how students of Russian literature usually encounter it in their anthologies.

The moment this poem is transliterated into English, it is emasculated. *Дыр* rendered as *dyr* reads like “deer,” nothing belligerent about it anymore, and *бул* rendered as *bul*, or even *bool*, is nothing short of “bull”—if the reader will pardon the occasional pun. Besides, nonsense prevails no longer when there is a manger scene instead of it.

My approach was to find a method to Kruchenykh’s “madness,” transubstantiating the bread of Russian consonants and the blood of Russian vowels into English ones. I merely arranged the vowels of the original by pitch, from the highest to the lowest (*as I hear them*), finding an equivalent for each. To cite but one example for the vowels, I translated the last line, *р л эз*, as *ererr arr orrth*. Э, the lowest vowel of the original, finds its match in [ɔ:] (one can see how deep it is in Monty Python’s *The Woody Sketch*). You can also hear э if you read the names of the Russian letters *р* and *л*, *er* and *el* respectively, but of course you may also sound them; still, both consonants are voiced and sonorous, and one may make out a distant echo of э, but, there being a progression from this hushed э to the manifest one in эз, I decided to go from the nonsensical English *ererr* to the lower *arr* (pronounced as the Sea Captain from the *Simpsons* says “argh”), and finally to the dead point of *orrth*, at which the poem implodes. Meanwhile, the doubling and tripling of r’s is my attempt to trigger the enunciation of [r], which is often not pronounced in “more” or “gore,” depending on which version of English one speaks.

As for consonants, something had to be done about the particularly Slavic *u* and *yu*. Both are hissing consonants, the latter being softer; how was I to convey this given the fact that English only has [ʃ], as in “shout?” I ended up picking the mesmerizingly serpentine dental *th*—which I would rather be read not as in “thing” ([θ]) but as in “heathen” ([ð])—alternating it with [z]. Hence my rendition of *ubesh shchur* as *oobaz thoor*, which duly sounds like the language spoken by the orcs of Mordor.

The other three poems from this selection, while longer than Kruchenykh’s, call for less commentary. **Velimir Khlebnikov’s (1885–1922)** is easier to appreciate since the traditional definition of culture as a second nature is not simply a metaphor in Russia. Why? An average representative of the Russian intelligentsia, a liberal who may not be particularly optimistic, for optimism, thanks to the Russian government, is once again a luxury, may explain Russia’s worship of culture as follows. Russia’s countless riches have been squandered too often without turning into a tradition of wealth; the great victories of Russia were pyrrhic, like the Fire of Moscow; the country’s history, though genuinely glorious in many of its chapters, is as unpredictable as its future, because reliable historiography demands freedom—a most volatile element in Russian climes. Nature? It sure is a haven, but it is impossible to live in peace with it without being interrupted by the government: the majority cannot escape from society. And so, our average Russian intellectual concludes, what else is left but culture, and literature especially? For literature is almost as hard to take away from a person as language. Literature may feign loyalty while tongue-in-cheek; literature can be easily smuggled; it may even survive without paper, in one’s memory. If Russian history proves anything, it is that the great authors remained with their people, bound by the same language, whereas rulers toppled down with their regimes.

Be it as it may, the three authors from Khlebnikov’s pantheistic pantheon are Alexander Pushkin, Fyodor Tyutchev, and Fyodor Dostoyevsky, and the imagery associated with each makes perfect sense for someone who has read them. Pushkin, proclaimed upon his death “the sun of Russian poetry” and later declared “our everything,” floods Russian culture with Apollonian light. Khlebnikov’s neologism *pushkinoty*, translated as *Pushkinaughts*, resonates with the Russian word *dlinoty* (rather than translate this word, which means a type of length, I would have you imagine long languorous rays or shadows); and it also resonates with *noty* (notes, as in music); meanwhile, *n*

belongs to Pushkin, so that the way Khlebnikov prolongs the poet's name with the suffix *ot* is, likewise, most mellifluous. To make the coinage meaningful in English, I translated it as Pushkinaughts; that naught, shaped like the sun, is the degree zero of Russian civilization as we know it, its beginning and end, both words being of the same root in Russian.

The next mythical personage of Khlebnikov's poem is Fyodor Tyutchev. (I previously translated Tyutchev for *NTM*—in [2017](#) and in [2019](#).) Tyutchev's poems, a great many of them nocturnal, are the Moonlight Sonata of Russian literature, for their thoughts and feelings, inmost to the point of getting otherworldly, do not stand the vanity of daytime.

As for the clouds, the reader of Dostoyevsky will easily recognize them. Sullen, anxious, always on the go, goaded into madness by the tubercular winds of St. Petersburg, these clouds, like the characters of his great novels, speed Dostoyevskingly, until they clash, burst, and fulminate with thunderous harangues, arguing about the purpose of life over an abyss of human condition.

**Boris Pasternak (1890–1960)**, the author of *Doctor Zhivago*, needs no introduction; in Russia, he is primarily valued for his poems. He stood apart from the Futurists mentioned above, and yet he was a futurist as well, especially if futurism is understood as an intimate bond with language, when the poet does not use language as an instrument but becomes it, changes with it, and lives through it; when the inflections of language and of the soul “throb as one heart.” That is why Pasternak's poems are often difficult to read, especially the earlier ones, including the one published here. Yet, as his contemporary Yuri Tynianov wrote, “the peculiarity of Pasternak's language is that his difficult language is more precise than the precise one”—precise to the last syllable, to a tee, or any other letter, when the lips and the tongue, these organs of language and love, are so sensitive they can “unbend / The dislocation of an ant.”

Case in point is the third stanza, which mentions a chaffinch. In Russian, that bird is called *ziablik*, of the same root as *ziabnut* (“to be chilly,” “to shiver”). The Russian name has to do with the fact that these are “early birds” because they return before most others after winter, when the snow is still around. The English name, by contrast, has to do with the chaffinches' picking through discarded chaff, and while “chaff” and “chafe” are not cognates, folk etymologies are permissible in poetry, especially in a pantheistic poem such as Pasternak's, where everything is busy turning into everything else. That is why rather than use “shiver,” “freeze,” or something of the sort, I used “chafe”:

The meadow's blue enamel scraped  
Would be in case one felt it chafe, nor  
Would a chaffinch, drunk, be slow  
To shake dew's diamonds off his soul.

This stanza, like the rest of the poem, is not so easy to read at first try, and perhaps it should not be, or why else would people reread and memorize poems? The whole poem is an elegant yet arduous tour de force as far as rhymes are concerned. As a translator, I tasked myself with recreating the poem's cobweb, and not for a moment did I entertain the condescending idea of evening the poem out because something may be lost on the reader. There is no harm in it, as I have just argued. What is much worse is when the uniqueness of the poem is lost. The only advice I would give to someone little familiar with Pasternak is to read the poem aloud and read it more than once: first for its “rhyme,” then for its “reason,” and then again and again, until the two merge beyond distinction.

With **Viktor Sosnora (1936–2019)**, we have to fast-forward from the first decades of the last century to 1979, when he finished his collection of poems *The Highest Hour* (*Verkhovnyi chas*), the one published here among them. The title of Sosnora's masterpiece speaks for the whole collection. Pithy modernist poetry is taken in it to the second power—not to postmodernism, but to something

much more complex, noble, and obliging—something for the twenty-first century, as Vladimir Novikov, Sosnora’s friend and insightful critic, opines.

Sosnora was born much later, of course, than the other three poets from this selection, but if anyone was the dweller of the future, that was Viktor Sosnora. Moreover, he got the “blessing” of Lilya Brik, the fatal muse of the Futurist of Futurists, Vladimir Mayakovsky; she discerned a great poet in Mayakovsky, and decades later she acknowledged one in Sosnora. Should one be willing, however, to compare Sosnora with a Russian Futurist of the first wave, the parallel with Khlebnikov would be more fitting. For both Khlebnikov and Sosnora, like Siegfried or Zarathustra, tended to switch from poetic Russian, still decipherable, to the transrational language of the birds, fluttering away from gentrified expression. Furthermore, both Khlebnikov and Sosnora moved Russian forward by turning to its past, in mythology and in history, in Old Russian and Church Slavonic. Moved forward by turning to the past: such is the paradox of words such as *forward*, *foresight*, *forecast*, etc. As Pasternak wrote,

Once Hegel without thinking of it,  
And probably by way of jest,  
Called the historian a prophet  
Foretelling future in the past.

Accordingly, what we have in Sosnora’s poems is a quilt of Russian proper, then other Russians, of different epochs and registers, as well as Ukrainian and Polish (both of which played a role in his biography), and not only. Some of his poems read as a monument to peaceful and amicable Balkanization, making one think about the past and the future of what got unified at some point in an empire and now keeps diverging. And if Sosnora’s poems are a perfect Babel, then it is this omniscient polyglot called God who is listening.

There have been some attempts to translate Sosnora into English, but these translations (*nomina sunt odiosa*) hardly do him justice, omitting his rhythms, his rhymes (highly original, including consonant-based rhymes), his humor, and so much more that, if that is the best a translator can do, why translate at all? It is my firm belief that, in order to make the reader experience the heart-rending and painfully beautiful modulations of Sosnora’s predominantly tragic poetry, one must bend the English language as much as Sosnora bent Russian. That is not to say, of course, that the translation offered here is not a failure. If it is, however, it is a necessary one, as a step in what I would argue is the right direction.

Commenting on this poem is not easy, but Sosnora himself gives us a key. The poem is based on Alexander Pushkin’s classic that opens with “I loved you once” and ends with “And I loved you so tenderly, so truly, / As God grant by another you may be” (translated thus by Julian Lowenfeld). In fact, there are multiple variations on Pushkin’s poem; the one that belongs to Joseph Brodsky, for instance, partly repeats Pushkin’s original only to argue against it: the lyric hero of Brodsky’s poem, unlike that of Pushkin, is not ready to let go and would rather do away with himself. By contrast, Sosnora’s poem, while not an elegy but a tragedy, has much in common with the tenor of Pushkin’s, and yet it is unlike anything else.

The greatest challenge of translating Sosnora’s poem were the pronouns. Whenever we address someone in English, we use “you”; few remember that “you” was the formal address, which took the place of the intimate “thou,” so that “you” no longer feels formal, whereas “thou” is associated either with classical poetry or with paternosters. In Russian, both forms exist: the formal second person plural and the informal second person singular. Pushkin’s poem is addressed to a lady and uses the formal address. Sosnora’s poem juggles the two. In my translation, I inverted Sosnora’s pronouns: whenever he uses the formal *vy* (plural “you”), I use the now lofty and distancing “thou.”

and when he writes *ty* (informal, singular “you”), I use the habitual “you.” Some other decisions I made are too many to comment on, so I will mention just one more. Ophelia’s orisons came to my mind when I was reading about the flowers in Sosnora’s original, and so I translated them with pansies—the very flowers Ophelia held before she went mad.

I hope the reader will forgive me this lengthy introduction; after all, the poems from this selection require not only a translator but also an interpreter. What they all share, though strikingly different, is the freedom of expression, earned through the discipline of form—the freedom we lose every day as we submit to the irksome suggestions of Word, Grammarly, and other word processors, as well as to the blind followers of White and Strunk for whom passive voice and its inversions, like so many other faculties of the English language, are taboo, not to mention those who believe that free verse is still as fresh and rhymed poetry as hackneyed as in the times of Whitman, etc. etc. The real dwellers of the future, no matter whether Russian or not and their style notwithstanding, are here to remind us: history is not over, and we are yet to roam new galaxies in our spaceship of modernity, as long as we *do not* speak the same language.

My thanks go to Boris Pasternak’s grandson Evgeny Petrovich and to Viktor Sosnora’s wife Tatiana Vladimirovna for granting *NTM* and me the right to publish the poems of Pasternak and Sosnora.

## Aleksei Kruchenykh

*This translation is dedicated to Mark Lipovetsky*

Darr boore tharrl  
oobaz thoor  
skroom  
warr seh booh  
ererr arr orrth

Дыр бул щыл  
убеш щур  
скуп  
вы со бу  
р л эз

**Aleksei Kruchenykh (1886–1968):** a famous Russian poet, artist, and theoretician of the avant-garde. Together with Khlebnikov, he was a prophet of the new art, particularly that of *zaum*, or *transrational* language. It also fell to his lot to be the last of the Mohicans: by the end of the 1930s, Kruchenykh had already outlived most of his avant-garde comrades, including Khlebnikov, Kazimir Malevich, and composer Mikhail Matyushin, together with whom he created the first Futurist opera, *Victory over the Sun* (1913).



Kruchenykh had to withdraw from literature in the 1930s, which was an anticlimactic time for any art that was not Socialist Realist (the new state doctrine). Living in a communal apartment, he tried to survive by paddling Futurist books and manuscripts, autographs, etc. Before dying, he gave his blessing to the young poets who continued to experiment with language, including those well-known in the West, among them Gennadiy Aygi and poets of the Lianozovo group.

## Velimir Khlebnikov

*This translation is dedicated to Irina Denishchenko*

O, the Dostoyevskingly of a cloud a-choo-choo!  
 O ye, the Pushkinaughts of sybaritic noons!  
 The night is staring down like Tyutchev,  
 The tetherless in thirtherness cocoons.

О, достоевскиймо бегущей тучи!  
 О, пушкиноты млеющего полдня!  
 Ночь смотрится, как Тютчев,  
 Безмерное замирным полня.



**Velimir (Viktor) Khlebnikov (1885–1922):** poet and Chairman of the Globe. He came up with the latter title himself. He believed to have discovered the fateful number governing the course of history (317), correctly prophesying based on it the end of a certain empire in 1917. Khlebnikov recruited poets, artists, and scholars for his Society of the Chairmen of the Globe (e.g. H. G. Wells and Sergei Prokofieff), to consist of 317 members to govern the global State of Time, thereby safeguarding this world.

Even at the backdrop of the ambitious and eccentric avant-garde projects of his time, Khlebnikov's was the strangest, and while many if not most around him took it as a game, Khlebnikov was dead serious about it. This seriousness was the reverse of his childish naivete, both of these qualities equally important for his verse, in which transrational bird talk of a Slavic Siegfried longing for the Orient meets with baby talk. It is the inability of adults to prattle freely that created the myth of recondite Khlebnikov. Poets, however, with their gift to listen to our language in its primordial strangeness, valued Khlebnikov as one of the greatest among them.

Most of Khlebnikov's work was yet to be published when he died: he would lose his manuscripts easily, and what he had not was found after his death as a heap of papers in two pillowslips. Having applied the fateful number 317 to the life of Pushkin, who lived for thirty-seven years, Khlebnikov died from paresis almost at the same age: thirty-six.

## Boris Pasternak

*This translation is dedicated to Elizabeth Beaujour*

### Our Thunderstorm

Like shaman, lilacs lightning's charred,  
In sacrificial incense swathing  
All eyes and clouds—with lips unbend  
The dislocation of an ant.

Pails' chime is knocked atilt, apart.  
The greed! The very sky's your plaything!  
A hundred hearts throb as one heart.  
Lilacs, like shaman, lightning's charred.

The meadow's blue enamel scraped  
Would be in case one felt it chafe, nor  
Would a chaffinch, drunk, be slow  
To shake dew's diamonds off his soul.

At vats, the storm's still being lapped  
From brimming caps, sweet as a wafer.  
And clover, crimson like a crime,  
Is splashed with colors red as wine.

Naughty gnats raspberries climb,  
Yet, probes, malarial, suck brine  
Right here and hit the spot, the sadists,  
Where summer's glory is the reddest?!

Under a blouse, a lump carmine  
To nurse and fly in ballet prime?  
To sting with mischief to the hilt  
Where blood, wet as a leaf, is spilt?!

O, feign my game, believe and hark  
The thunderous wake of your migraine.  
Day's ire, thus, is doomed to spark  
A juvie wilding in the bark.

You fell for it? Don't go, remain,  
Give me your face, lit by the rain  
Of your blest summer of desire,  
I shall fan it into a fire!

Lend me your ears, I shall not hide:  
You clothe your lips in snows of jasmine,  
I feel it melting on my lip,  
It's melting on it in my sleep.

### Наша гроза

Гроза, как жрец, сожгла сирень  
И дымом жертвенным застлала  
Глаза и тучи, расправляй  
Губами вывих муравья.

Звон ведер сшиблен набекрень.  
О, что за жадность: неба мало?!  
В канаве бьется сто сердец.  
Гроза сожгла сирень, как жрец.

В эмали – луг. Его лазурь,  
Когда бы зябли, – соскоблили.  
Но даже зяблик не спешит  
Стряхнуть алмазный хмель с души.

У кадок пьют еще грозу  
Из сладких шапок изобилья,  
И клевер бурен и багров  
В бордовых брызгах маляров.

К малине липнут комары.  
Однако хобот малярийный,  
Как раз сюда вот, изувер,  
Где роскошь лета розовой?!

Сквозь блузу заронить нарыв  
И сняться красной балериной?  
Всадить стрекало озорства,  
Где кровь, как мокрая листва?

О, верь игре моей, и верь  
Гремящей вслед тебе мигрени!  
Так гневу дня судьба гореть  
Дичком в черешенной коре.

Поверила? Теперь, теперь  
Приблизь лицо, и в озареньи  
Святого лета твоего  
Раздую я в пожар его!

Я от тебя не утаю:  
Ты прячешь губы в снег жасмина,  
Я чую на моих тот снег,  
Он тает на моих во сне.

Where shall I turn with all my joy?  
 To verses? ruled-out sheets of jazzmen?  
 The lips are chapped, intoxicated  
 By ink on pages perforated.

Their paper wars with letters blaze  
 With blushful cherry on your face.

Куда мне радость деть мою?  
 В стихи, в графленую осьмину?  
 У них растрескались уста  
 От ядов писчего листа.

Они с алфавитом в борьбе,  
 Горят румянцем на тебе.



**Boris Pasternak (1890–1960)** was born to a father who was a renowned painter and a mother who was a pianist. Poets are said to be of two types: those who lean towards painting and those (these are perhaps rarer) who lean towards music. Pasternak seems to have belonged to the latter type, his infatuation with composer Alexander Scriabin and his desire to become a composer himself described in his autobiographical prose; yet it is both astoundingly rich and subtle imagery, on one hand, and nonpareil musicality, on the other, that distinguish his work.

Poetry often tends to be self-centered, hermetic; Pasternak, by contrast, was extraordinarily open to the world, and the difficulty of his poems was the result of their high-fidelity, not obfuscation. Pasternak's motto was "to get to the essence of everything," hence, also, his studying philosophy in Marburg. Pasternak was as open to other poets, as evidenced by the famous correspondence of Pasternak, Marina Tsvetaeva, and Rainer Maria Rilke, as well as by Pasternak's homage to the poets of the past whom he translated, including his famous translations of Goethe and Shakespeare into Russian.

Pasternak's coexistence with the Soviet government had its twists and turns: he had a personal relationship with Stalin, which he used to intercede for persecuted friends and their relatives, and for a while he entertained high hopes for the Soviet project; later, Pasternak fell out of graces with the regime and distanced himself from it as well, but the regime did not leave him alone, and he was hounded by the Soviet press. This hounding reached its peak when Pasternak's novel *Doctor Zhivago* was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Pasternak's prize became a pawn in the Cold War between the West and the USSR. The pressure on Pasternak was tremendous, and he was compelled to reject the prize. His reaction to this drama was the poem "The Nobel Prize," published in the West, for which he was threatened with the charge of treason. The poet's health, already weakened by a heart attack, was further undermined by it; soon he was diagnosed with cancer and died in the following months.

**Viktor Sosnora**

*This translation is dedicated to Vladimir Novikov*

Who loved Thee? Thee! Yes, Thee! – all types!  
Wherefore art castles Thou from pipes?

Кто Вас любил? Да Вас! — да всяк!  
Зачем вы замки в воздухах?

Wherefore Thy fiddle’s fibers fibbed?  
Wherefore Thy filial Heart ad-libbed?

Зачем Вы жили скрипкой жил,  
дочерний Дух Вам не служил?

Why didst Thou sound, my mute, my mime?  
Why didst Thou others love with mine?

Зачем звучали, мой немой?  
Зачем любили многих — мной?

Thy poison’s plain. But whom could part,  
on their deathbed, pansies new?  
Forgive me, sweetheart, for “Thou art,”  
for old times’ sake not saying “you.”

Вам ясен яд. Но чьи цветы  
и чьей погибелью — новы?  
Прости, что милый, не на ты,  
все в жертву памяти — на Вы.

I’ve muddled up she am and live,  
verbs, proverbs, pronouns, quo pro quid.

Все спутал, — жизнь, себя, жена.  
В местоименьях имена.

We only dream the drama, breathers.  
Sea-sickness unto ship and sea.  
God grant that Thou may’st be loved thither  
as I love you, deprived of Thee.

У нас живых лишь дрема драм.  
Болезнь морская — кораблю.  
Дай Бог, чтоб Вас любили там,  
как я без Вас тебя люблю.



Already in his younger, his tender years, **Viktor Sosnora (1936–2019)** had witnessed what would have filled several lifetimes. Soon after his birth in Crimea, his parents divorced, and for some years he lived with his father in Lvov, present-day Ukraine, the cosmopolitan history of this city

reflected in its many names: Lviv, Lwów, Lemberg, and others. Then, still a child, he was brought to Leningrad to his mother; shortly after, he found himself in the Dantean hell of the Siege, in which more than a half million of Leningrad civilians perished from hunger alone. It was a stroke of luck that Sosnora did not die, either in Leningrad itself or during the extremely dangerous evacuation from the city, taking place under German fire. His grandmother evacuated him to Kuban, which soon fell under the German occupation; the little boy was brought to Gestapo several times. At some point the partisans, led by Sosnora's uncle, took him with them; they were captured by the Germans and executed by a firing squad, and again Sosnora, who watched that execution, survived: not long before that, he had been wounded by a mine and thought dead. Later, his father, by that time a commander in the (Soviet) Polish Army, found his son; eight- and then nine-year-old Sosnora followed the army all the way to Frankfurt (Oder); he learned to shoot, becoming a sniper.

After the war, Sosnora finished school in Lvov, then studied philosophy in Leningrad, without graduating, served in the army in the area where nuclear tests were carried out, getting exposed to radiation; then worked as a welder all the while being a correspondence student of philology at Leningrad State University. It was about the same time that his first book was published.

The indelible and ineffable impressions of his early years aside, this experience manifested itself in Sosnora's "gift of tongues," his early poems written not only in Russian but also in German, Polish, and Ukrainian—all of them, by his own admission, destroyed by him, burned (a noble habit that Sosnora shares with other genuine artists such as Gogol). Still, Sosnora's poems that can be read today are a palimpsest of languages, dialects, voices—including those of ancient Russian literature, which beckoned many a Futurist.

It was Sosnora's early poems about Old Rus' that won him favor with his first readers, including the great Russian mediaevalist Dmitry Likhachev. As importantly, Lilya Brik and Futurist poet Nikolai Aseev acknowledged one of their own in Sosnora.

Sosnora had his success in the sixties and was even allowed to travel outside the USSR, but his poems (some published officially, others in samizdat and tamizdat) were growing more and more esoteric, which is why most of them, stylistically inappropriate for the mainstream, would start to see the light of day already during Perestroika. With time, Sosnora had become a living classic (which, by Mark Twain's definition, means that one is revered, not read). Sosnora was read of course, but truly so only by few; Vladimir Novikov, Sosnora's friend and one of the first critics of his work, believes that Sosnora is a poet for our, twenty-first, century and is yet to be read.

Sosnora himself did not seem to care much to be "understood," saving his work for higher understanding; he was aloof even for Leningrad underground art (unofficial, unpublished). When he lost his hearing after an unsuccessful surgery in the eighties, he claimed not to suffer much: worldly buzz no longer distracted him from hearkening to something much more important, transcribed in his poems.

In 2011, the author of this translation saw Sosnora being honored as the laureate of the Poet prize in Moscow. The ceremony felt as though a play by Beckett. Deaf Sosnora sat in an armchair, musicians playing on stage, and, at Sosnora's request, Vladimir Novikov read Sosnora's speech addressed to the public, even though Sosnora could still talk; not once did Sosnora utter a word. But why would he? Has he not said all he wanted in his poems and prose?

### About the translator



**Basil Lvoff (Василий Львов)** combines creative writing with scholarship, his dissertations in literary theory defended at The Graduate Center of the City University of New York and at Moscow State University. His essays and poems have been published in *The New Review* (*Novy zhurnal*), *Novy mir*, *Zvezda*, *Interpoezia*, *Gastarbajter* (*Slavic Diaspora Magazine*), *Syndic Literary Journal*, and elsewhere. Basil Lvoff has taught Russian culture, history, and language courses at Columbia University, Barnard College, and Hunter College, as well as English composition courses at Baruch College. In 2017, together with his filmmaker wife Olga Lvoff, he launched *Moving Lyrics*—an international festival and workshop of poetry-based short films, organized between Columbia University, Hunter College, and Moscow State University. To learn more about Basil Lvoff, you may visit [blvoff.com](http://blvoff.com)