Shishkin and his wife Zhenya.
Photo by Yvonne Böhler.

AN INTERVIEW WITH MIKHAIL SHISHKIN

BY BRADLEY GORSKI

The prize-winning Russian novelist on reading, writing, and suicide "by lying on the couch."

Mikhail Shishkin has won all three of Russia's major literary awards: the Russian Booker, the National Bestseller, and the Bolshaia Kniga Prize. The translation of his novel *Maidenhair* (Open Letter Books, 2012) has already shown up on short lists of the best translations of 2012. The translation of his novel *The Light and the Dark* was published in the UK in early 2013. The Harriman Institute sponsored his residency at Columbia in April 2013, during which he taught a seminar on "Classics and Politics in Contemporary Russian Literature."

Bradley Gorski: For years you've been living in Europe. The Russian literary world sees you as an émigré writer. How does life abroad affect your relationship to the Russian language and Russian literature?

Mikhail Shishkin: The word emigration isn't completely accurate. We live in the twenty-first century, in a world without borders. My move to Switzerland in 1995 was not at all political—at the time I was married to a Swiss woman, my translator. But I am a citizen of Russia and still travel there often and spend significant time in the country. In recent years I have divided my time between Moscow, Switzerland, and Berlin.

There's a prevailing opinion that a Russian writer cannot live without his language—in foreign lands he must be tormented by nostalgia. I think that this notion was spread by rulers and tyrants reluctant to let go of their writers because it would be harder to control them. If we remember *Dead Souls* (and what could be more Russian?), it was written in Rome and in Switzerland and in Paris. I don't think it is at all important where a writer lives. And furthermore, it seems to me that a writer should leave his home country, his native language for some time. Because then he begins to see himself and his country as if in a mirror. You live in Switzerland, you see yourself in Switzerland—and you see your own reflection. How could you live your whole life without ever looking in a mirror? A different perspective always helps in understanding your own country and yourself.

Leaving Russia, where the language lives and changes constantly, was very important for me. What today seems fresh and new will have already gone bad by tomorrow. Leaving Russia helped me understand that I should create my own language, which will be fresh and vital forever, even after I'm gone.

Any experience of another life is enriching, especially for a writer, and especially for a Russian one. We lived for too long in a walled-off prison space. We retreated too far into our own exotic Russian problems. It's very important to live in various countries in order to understand a simple thing, something Russians often do not understand: Russia is not the whole blessed world. It's only a small part of it.

All true texts, films, plays, have the same plot: the transformation of reality, which is made up of cruelty and death, into warmth and light.

Bradley Gorski: Literature for you is not primarily a game (as it can be for other contemporary writers), but rather a serious engagement, especially with language. How do you see the relationship—or even the responsibility—of literature to language?

Mikhail Shishkin: Literature is to language as Christ is to Lazarus. Language died long ago, and the writer makes it live again. From the outside looking in, being a writer means making words even though they all already exist, and always have. In reality, though, a writer is someone who understands that words cannot say anything. Words that can actually express something do not exist. All words were used up long ago.

I'll never forget the first time I wanted to profess my love to a certain girl, I opened my mouth, and I understood that the world did not have words that could express what I felt. Everything real, everything important that happens with us is beyond words. Words are traitors. Not a single one is to be trusted. The writer starts with an understanding of the futility of words, with a recognition of the impossibility of conveying in words that which exists outside of words. For everything that is real, words are not needed.

Even in school, I was already bored to tears by the poster above the blackboard with Turgenev's famous words about the "great and powerful Russian language." Then I started to write, and all the words were dead, decaying flesh. This is where the writer starts—from understanding that language is finished, like toothpaste in a tube. All my books are about that which cannot be conveyed in words. And this point, it seems, is not limited to Russian, but applies to language in general.

A writer is someone who must take the language he is given, the most impoverished and dead language, and make it great and powerful. Here you're on your own. Your whole life you fight with language in solitude.

Bradley Gorski: Several of your characters actively read in the pages of your novels. Often they write as well. How do they see their own reading process? What do they try to get out of reading?

Mikhail Shishkin: For me and for my characters, reading and writing are ways to cope with reality.

In one way or another, all my texts are about the power of the word. My characters are metaphors for the writer. In "Calligraphy Lesson," it's a court secretary who has to write down everything that happens in that monstrous world. His method of protest is calligraphy. This is exactly what art does when it transforms Christ's sufferings on the cross into an aesthetic experience. The horror of reality is transformed into the beauty of art. The protagonist in *The Taking of Izmail* is a lawyer. With his words, he recreates reality, and that changes people's fates. The protagonist of *Maidenhair* is a translator in a Swiss refugee center. He translates fate into words and words into fate. In *The Light and the Dark,* my protagonist becomes an army staff scribe—he writes to parents with notices of their sons' deaths. "Your son is dead, but he is alive and well."

Bradley Gorski: And when you read, what do you want to get out of it? I understand that literary critics and writers read very differently. Do you find that to be the case?

Mikhail Shishkin: It seems to me that I lost the unmediated pleasure of reading long ago. The reader, after all, reads because it's interesting to know how everything ends: Will the two characters get married or not? For me the characters' wedding is completely uninteresting. What is interesting is how the book is constructed. If I understand its construction, then why read it? If I don't understand, then it's interesting. But that rarely happens anymore. I do read quite a bit, but specifically those books that I need for my work, mostly memoirs.

But in general, I should say that in Russia, reading has always played a quite special role. Reading saved me when I realized that I was born in a country of slaves. Reading in Russia was always the way for the reader to reclaim human dignity. True literature circulated through the country like blood through a body. Russian reading is like a blood transfusion. The author shares with the reader that which is most important, that which sustains life. But most importantly, the reader and the writer must have the same blood type. If they don't, reading will be poisonous—you'll be taking foreign words into your bloodstream. My writers back in Soviet times saved me, in the literal meaning of that word. And those whom I do not count as my own, the official Soviet writers, whom they made us read in school and in college, poisoned me.

And that's how it's always been in Russia, because under any regime the first thing to go is human dignity. It's the same today. And I'm afraid it'll be that way forever. It's bad for people, good for literature. If normal life comes to Russia, reading will stop playing that role—it will become entertainment. But "normal" life probably won't make it there for a long time. Alas.

Bradley Gorski: Your fourth novel, *Pis'movnik* (literally, Letterbook) has been translated into more than 25 languages (including English, as *The Light and the Dark*). It has won awards in Russia and Germany. It's your most successful book yet, both critically and commercially. In your view, what sets it apart from the others?

Mikhail Shishkin: Why is *The Light and the Dark* successful in so many countries? Probably because everything that divides us: language, skin color, body shape, customs, history—all of that is external. Inside, we're all similar: we fear death and want love. All true texts, films, plays, have the same plot: the transformation of reality, which is made up of cruelty and death, into warmth and light. My greatest teacher has been and remains [Soviet director Andrei] Tarkovsky, even though he made films and I write books. That's not important—creativity is of a single nature. When I was still in school, Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublev* stunned me—you are shown horrors, and you leave the theater feeling illuminated. That's why the artist is needed. He takes on that nightmare that people have made the world into and restores dignity to a person, filling him with human warmth and otherworldly light.

It seems that the secret of *The Light and the Dark* might actually be my grey hairs. I don't think I could have written this book when I was younger.

Tradition is important for me, and the letter is at the very heart of literature. The Russian word for letter [*pis'mo*] is yet another synonym for prose, the art of writing. The correspondence of lovers is one of literature's major genres, going back to the letters of Eloise and Abelard or Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. The Russian

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eighteenth century saw the popularity of Kurganov's "Letter-book," a collection of exemplary correspondences, a sort of guide for how to write business and love letters. My most recent novel is also a correspondence. He and she are separated. The impossibility of touching one's beloved creates the need for words. If Adam and Eve had got separated in paradise, they would have had to invent writing.

In order to move forward, to do something new, you need to understand where you're from, what came before you. And what could be more traditional than a correspondence? The letter stands at the beginning of literature, of writing in general. The letter does not simply convey information; it is a confession, a message about yourself, not only for a concrete reader, but also to posterity and to God. The writers of letters, after all, have a habit of disappearing while their letters remain. In the twenty-first century, alas, the world of actual letters has receded into the past, yielding its territory to e-mails and texts. My novel in letters is an homage, a memorial to all the letters ever written.

The Light and the Dark is a novel about closeness, about understanding. People can be physically close, live in one

In February 2013, in an open letter published widely online, Mikhail Shishkin refused to participate in the official Russian delegation to this year's BookExpo America. His letter provoked several strong reactions—both supportive and antagonistic—throughout the Russian press. Below is a translation of those paragraphs from Shishkin's letter that explain his abstention:

The political course of Russia, and especially the events of the last year, have created a situation in the country that is absolutely unacceptable and degrading for its people and for its great culture. What is happening in my country makes me, as a Russian and citizen of Russia, ashamed. Taking part in this book fair as part of the official delegation and taking advantage of the opportunities it would provide me as a writer would mean taking on the responsibility to represent that very government, whose policies I consider poisonous for the country, and that official system, which I reject.

A country where a corrupt criminal regime seized power, where the government is a pyramid scheme, where elections have turned into a farce, where the courts serve the authorities and not the law, where there are political prisoners, where state television has been turned to prostitution, where imposters adopt senseless laws in droves, returning everyone to the middle ages—that country cannot be my Russia. I cannot and will not take part in the official delegation representing that Russia.

I should and will represent a different Russia, my Russia, a country free of imposters, a country with government structures that defend not the right to corruption but the right to personhood, a country with a free press, free elections, and free people.

Shishkin tells us his next novel hasn't come to him yet. In the mean time, he has translated Robert Walser's *Der Spaziergang* (The Walk, 1917) into Russian and written an extended essay to accompany it. He says that in Russia, as in America, Walser is underappreciated, despite his work being available in translation for several years. He hopes that his essay, which will be published along with his translation as a single volume, will explain Walser's importance and appeal to a Russian audience.

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apartment, share a spousal bed, but still completely fail to understand one another. My characters live in intimacy and understanding, even though everything separates them, everything that can separate people: thousands of kilometers, time, death.

The novel begins with "time out of joint." This sort of thing happens to each of us at least once in our lives. You don't need to be Hamlet for this to happen, just yourself. The usual connections between things fall apart and nothing holds firm, the world falls apart, disappears. And there's nothing to grab hold of—everything has lost its solidity, its reality. And only then does a person begin. He needs to find himself in this emptiness and grab hold of himself, of something real inside. Only then does real time begin, time that does not depend on the calendar. These letters are their only chance of finding themselves in another, in each other. And the reader reconnects disjointed time within himself.

Bradley Gorski: In April you taught a course at Columbia University on "Classics and Politics in Contemporary Russian Literature." Obviously, it was impossible to include all the Russian classics, so you've chosen just two: Gogol and Goncharov. Why did you choose these two?

Mikhail Shishkin: This question seems to want a confession of my love for these two specific writers, but I love all of classic Russian literature as a whole. Gogol lives in my texts both indirectly and directly: in *Maidenhair*, I visit him in Rome. He walks through the pages of my books. I have an indescribable feeling of personal closeness to him. Goncharov, in his *Oblomov*, exposed the mechanism of the Russian soul. That mechanism is the true perpetual motion machine. It will forever torture Russian souls as long as there are Russia and Russians.

Bradley Gorski: Is there something in Goncharov (or maybe in *Oblomov*) that is still relevant in the twenty-first century?

Mikhail Shishkin: Oblomov will be relevant in any century. His problem is every normal and decent person's problem in any society: How can one live with dignity? Russia's own peculiarity makes honest business—without self-debasement, without bribes, without becoming a part of a corrupt system—impossible. Oblomov's solution is escapism on his couch. Some retreat to a monastery, some resort to alcohol, others to revolution. Suicide by lying on the couch—that is Goncharov's brilliant metaphor.

Bradley Gorski: And what about Russian politics? How do you feel about the recent developments in Russia—from the protests of 2012 to the present day?

Mikhail Shishkin: The twentieth century locked Russian history into a Mobius strip. The country turns out to be an empire every time it tries to build a democratic society, introduce elections, parliament, a republic.

The events of the last year polarized Russia. The country is in the midst of a civil war, for now a "cold" one, between the criminal empire and "educated" society. And every arrest of a member of the opposition, every adoption of the latest draconian law by an illegitimate duma, only radicalizes the two sides. The "crackdowns" have brought the country further under the control of the criminal organizations of oligarchs and bureaucrats, and the "protest" movement has been forced into an Internet ghetto.

The biggest paradox in new Russian literature is the reader: thinking, profound, educated. He has not disappeared.

The hopes for "Europeanization" that we saw during the perestroika period have crumbled. Again, for the umpteenth time, it has been confirmed that Russia is the perfect country for scoundrels and those who would fight them. This empire is not meant for a decent, "normal" life. If you are, by nature, neither a fighter nor a scoundrel, and you just want to live with dignity, making an honest living for your family, all the same, you have no choice: every day you're shoved toward one or the other. You don't want to be a scoundrel with the rest? You'll become a tragic fighter, ready to sacrifice everything, including your family, for the fight. You don't want to be a hero and rot in jail or get beaten to death in front of your home? Get comfortable with the scoundrels. And what are decent people to do these days if, on the one hand, they don't want to become part of the criminal structure—and the whole government has become one enormous criminal structure—and on the other hand, they don't want to foment revolution? There are few ways out—either the couch, like Oblomov, internal emigration, or emigration abroad.

Bradley Gorski: Is there any connection between your novels and the political situation in Russia today?

Mikhail Shishkin: Absolutely, they are intimately connected! My first novel, *Notes of Larionov*, comes from my experience of life in a totalitarian country. When I was writing it, the Soviet system collapsed and democracy came to Russia. Within an hour, it seemed, the novel was obsolete. But after a short time it became relevant once again. This question will forever be relevant in Russia: How to live in Russia while maintaining a sense of human dignity.

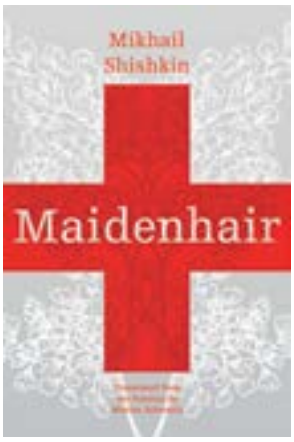
Or in *The Taking of Izmail*. There is a huge monologue in which the heroine says that Russia does not allow one to live a normal life, that she has to leave the country, that if we don't flee, our children will, and if not our children, then our grandchildren. After the peaceful protest movement was quashed by Putin's regime, all that once again sounds even more than relevant.

Bradley Gorski: How do you see the potential future of Russian literature both in Russia and abroad?

Mikhail Shishkin: The biggest paradox in new Russian literature is the reader: thinking, profound, educated. He has not disappeared. He is not looking for entertainment, but for a book that will not insult his intelligence, one that will make him feel his readerly and personal dignity.

As for the future, it has always seemed that everything was already written. Even before Tolstoy it seemed that way. I don't doubt that Russian literature has its best days ahead of it.

Bradley Gorski is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Slavic Languages, Columbia University. He conducted and translated the interview.



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