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Crossings: The Centrality of Movement in Natalia Gorbanevskaja's Poetry and Life

("In movement, my happiness lies in movement...")¹

Beginning when she was still a young samizdat author, Natalia Gorbanevskaja regularly and systematically published smaller and larger cumulative collections of her verse. They were curated according to her own priorities, chief among which seems to have been a strong desire to control what was included in her oeuvre and how it was presented to her readers. It was not until very late in her career that she initiated a strictly thematic organization of her poetry, beginning with a 2011 collection of poems built around religious motifs, and published in conjunction with the awarding of the "Russkaia premiia" for 2010. Entitled **Pril'pe zemli dusha moia: Stikhi (1956 – 2010)**², it contains a large selection of her poems that have significant religious motifs and themes. The publisher's note on the copyright page asserts that "[Gorbanevskaja] ... represents a spectacular example of the Russian spiritual lyric, focused on **two flows of time: the earthly, quotidian, and the greater, heavenly one, which moves according to eternal laws of truth and love and crosses into Eternity**"³.

Her second thematic volume, published 2 years later, was entitled **Goroda i dorogi, (Cities and Roads)**⁴, two subjects which were central to her daily and aesthetic existence. Just as her life

¹ See below for a full discussion of the 1984 poem this line is taken from.

² Moscow: "Russkii Gulliver", Tsentr sovremennoi literatury, 2011. The title [henceforth **Pril'pe**] comes from Psalm 118:25 of the Russian Orthodox Bible. In the English King James Version, it is Psalm 119:25: "My soul cleaveth unto the dust..." The exegesis of this phrase varies considerably, but generally points to a particular tension for believers between the hold of this world where life is lived and the next, towards which they aspire and where these and other tensions will be resolved. The experience of this tension between high and low is at the heart of much of Gorbanevskaja's oeuvre and is expressed through an array of images of movement and related ideas and motifs, as I will show.

³ Emphasis added. All translations from Russian into English are my own. My translations of her poetry make no claims to being artistically or poetically adequate.

⁴ Natal'ia Gorbanevskaja, *Goroda i dorogi: Izbrannye stikhotvoreniia, 1956 – 2011* (Cities and Roads: Selected poems, 1956-2011); Moscow: Russkii Gulliver: Tsentr sovremennoi literatury, 2013. Unless otherwise noted, all citations of poems are from this volume, with page numbers given in square brackets. My focus here will be on 'roads' and not 'cities' of course.

and work were full of real and metaphorical streets and roads, crossings and journeys, so her poetry is also truly full of images of motion of all sorts, of paths and routes travelled and imagined. In my reading of her work, they can all be viewed through the conceptual category of *movement*. It is a ubiquitous and multivalent principle which informs and sustains her poetics and her world view. Although I would always maintain that she is fundamentally and primarily – but not only – a religious poet, that characteristic of her life and work is inseparable from the images of movement we encounter on almost every page. Based on a range of examples from the entire chronological range of her work, my objective is to demonstrate and explore the centrality of movement for her, and to establish the presence of a complex and sophisticated system of ideas and images around it. I will refer to and examine poems and images that discuss movement explicitly, that are built around forms of movement or the spaces where it happens, or that engage with various means of locomotion and their connections to physical, metaphysical, as well as spiritual movement, and the system of ideas and beliefs associated with them.

While Gorbanevskaja would be among the first to caution against making too close a connection between the poet and the poems, there is no denying that many of the streets, roads, buses, trains, bridges and rivers that we find in her work are very often from her life, transformed perhaps, but not invented. They were the fundamental elements out of which her physical and poetic worlds were constructed and they were also the fundamental elements out of which she constructed her spiritual and metaphysical world. Whether she is talking about waiting for the train in Chudovo, riding bus # 83 in Paris, travelling by Eurobus from Poland to France, or observing the Seine on Pont Neuf, these are the real places of her life, with both biographical and poetic significance. By acknowledging the scores of poems written to and about specific or unnamed streets, train stations, or other forms of locomotion, we can begin to form an image of her world of movement, or more specifically the physical world in which she moved and which she expressed so brilliantly in her poetry.

But there are also many referents in her oeuvre which transcend this sort of specificity, and here we observe a series of ever more complex images and ideas within a broad understanding of movement. In order to explore this more fully, it will be necessary to return to the key word in the title of this essay, namely “crossings”. I want to suggest that many, indeed most of the crossings in Gorbanevskaja’s work can best be understood as referring to liminal spatial and temporal frames. This is seen, for example, in the kinds of passing which occur in train stations and other similar junctures of movement, such as “Perekrestki, rasput’ia, razvilki.” (Intersections, crossroads, forks in the road.) [351] This connects with zones of liminality, which are typically associated with conditions of transition, impermanence, change, and passing, as well as summoning images of fog, dusk, dreams or other indeterminate or transitional contexts or conditions⁵. Liminality

⁵ For example: “vse, chto ty nashel, / obrashchaetsia v dym, / ne donesh’ do domu” (everything you have found / turns into smoke, / you can’t carry it home) [336], or “My sogreem kholodnye steny saraia dykhan’em svoim”, (We will warm the cold walls of the barn with our breathing) especially the final line which combines the image of ash dissipating in the wind with the train leaving the station, fading out of view. Natalia Gorbanevskaja, *Russko-russkii razgovor: Izbrannye stikhotvoreniia. Poema bez poemy: Novaia kniga stikhov*; (Russian-Russian Conversation: Selected Poetry. Poem Without a Poem: A New Book of Poems.) Moscow: OGI, 2003. Henceforth [RR]. [11]

is also associated in her work with a variety of borders or thresholds, as well as doors, entrances and passages, among others. The titles of many of her collections capture this: e.g. *Granitsa sveta*; *Poberezh'e*; *Nauka rasstavaniia*; *Pereletaia snezhnuiu granitsu*; *Dolgoe proshchanie*; *Peremennaia oblachnost'*; *Poslednie stikhi togo veka*; *Krugi po vode*; *Razvilki*; etc. (*The Edge of the World*; *Coastland*; *The Science of Parting*; *Crossing the Snowy Border*; *The Long Farewell*; *Intermittent Cloudiness*; *Final poems of That Century*; *Ripples in the Water*; *Forks in the Road*). I will show how, working with these shifting, transitional and unstable ideas and images, she creates a sense of movement completely out of time and place, often expressed through a particularly ethereal kind of flight.

Among the most important phenomena related to movement in her work are rivers, many of which are named⁶, but very often their specificity is subsumed into a kind of nameless generality⁷. This raises the importance of their function as symbols of movement or change, in the Heraclitian sense as, for example, when she says “v etu rech' utekaiushchuiu podobno ruch'iu / ia khochu stupat' skolk' raz zakhochu // i pod tu zhe samuiu ten' rakit / chto by tam ni rasskazyval Geraklit” (*Into this language flowing like a stream / I want to step as many times as I wish // and under the shade of these same brooms / no matter what Heraclitus might have said*)⁸. Rivers from Russia and France, Poland and the Baltic states, as well as other places often occur in the same short poems, underscoring the importance not only of their distinctness within her world, but also of their generality and symbolic function in depictions of the journeys we all are on. Rivers are both those things along which we move, ie along which movement itself occurs, and they also form real and metaphorical borders or boundaries which must be crossed. They are archetypal symbols of “crossing”, and among the frequent references to rivers in her poetry we find the familiar names of the rivers of classical Greek mythology by which souls crossed into the next world (*Styx*, *Acheron*, and especially *Lethe*)⁹. Bridges are literally crossings, usually over rivers, and there are also a great number of them in her work. I will focus here on bridges as sites of liminal movement, crossings not just from one bank of a river to another, but as fundamental images of crossings as such,

⁶ To cite just one example of many, from “Snova bereg i veter – (Again the shore and wind – ” [170]: “Zdravstvuite, koli ne snites', / veter, i bereg, i mokh, / Svisloch' i Nevezh, i Svitez', / Niva i Svir'..., //” (Hello, if I am not dreaming you, / wind, and shore, and moss, / Svisloch and Nevezh, and Svitez, / Niva and Svir. ., //)

⁷ “Naberezhnye zakhlestyvaet voda, / no reka bezymianna – // Bezymianna kak glinnianaia posuda, / perepolnennaia cherez krai / ozhidaniem chuda ili khotia by ne chuda, / ozhidaniem – // Ozhidaniem chego-nibud' ili chego-to, / nazyvan'em po imeni mokrykh kamnei, / i razmyvom granits, ... //” (The water flows over the banks, / but the river is nameless – // Nameless like a clay vessel, / filled over the brim / with the expectation of wonder or perhaps of not a wonder, // Expectation of something or something else, / called in the name of wet stones, / and the washing away of borders, ...). [84]

⁸ Natalia Gorbanevskaia, *Russko-russkii razgovor: Izbrannye stikhotvoreniia. Poema bez poem: Novaia kniga stikhov*; (Russian-Russian Conversation: Selected Poetry. Poem Without a Poem: A New Book of Poems.) Moscow: OGI, 2003. Henceforth [RR]. [179] The poem goes on to refer quite explicitly to questions of time and space and the symbolism of rivers.

⁹ For example, “Nezametno perekrestit'sia, / natianut' rubashku iz sinego sittsa, pereplyt' na tu storonu Stiksa, / pozabyt', kto s toboi ne prostilsia. [...] (To inconspicuously make the sign of the cross, / to pull on a blouse of blue chintz, / to row across to the other side of the Styx, / to forget those who parted without saying farewell. [...]) [RR195]

as symbols of transition and of transitional reality. I will argue that not only do bridges and other liminal sites function as sites of observable crossings, but they also serve as sites of unobservable crossings, ie from one form of reality, into another, or between the two. According to this reading, bridges, along with intersections of various other sorts, especially urban intersections, are frequently the sites of the most important kinds of movement, which I have chosen to designate as movement along a *vertical axis*. In this type of movement, she suspends the laws of time and space, positioning her (lyrical) self both above and below, as it were, often suspended or travelling along something she calls a wire or a thread (provoloĳa, nit', vetĳa), sometimes situated on a suspended platform of one sort or another, with frequent references to pulling back or raising the curtain from physical reality to reveal a higher form of reality. The movement along the vertical axis should also be considered alongside the very frequent references to flight in her work.

Although Gorbanevskaja was not given to philosophical discussion as such, there is more than a little awareness of philosophical and theological ideas in her work and this is certainly the case in regards to the problem of movement. In philosophical terms, movement or motion is generally considered within discussions of the problem of change which itself as a problem is primal and enduring¹⁰. In the western tradition it was originally formulated by Parmenides and the Eleatics on the one hand, who seem to have somewhat enigmatically argued that because change is permanent, it is therefore impossible, ie an illusion, and on the other hand by Heraclitus who, while observing the same reality, appears to have held that everything is constantly in movement and changing, as exemplified by the idea of a river, whence his famous (alleged) dictum that you cannot step in the same river twice¹¹. (Of course, the elaboration of this problem pre-dates the Greeks in other traditions, given that it is at the core, for example, of the **Epic of Gilgamesh** no less than the **Bhagavad Gita** and, fundamentally, of all religious and philosophical traditions which concern themselves with the impermanence of our earthly life.) Gorbanevskaja doesn't overtly refer to the Eleatics, but she does frequently refer to Heraclitus and his theory of flux, several times by name and many more times by implication or allusion, sometimes, as seen above, polemicizing with him¹².

She also makes substantial, if less frequent references and allusions to classical physics and its laws of time and space, ie those things which ultimately purport to govern our understanding of motion and change in our physical world. There are clear indications that she thought a lot about how particular kinds of movement, as she imagines them within her poetic world, violate or happen outside of the norms of physics, or at least that they cannot be explained within that framework. Indeed, just as she rejected the limitations of mainstream social and aesthetic norms, she realized that

¹⁰ For an overview of the problem of change see, for example, Chris Mortensen, "Change and Inconsistency", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.) URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/change/#intro>>; "Change and Inconsistency"

¹¹ See, for example, Daniel W. Graham, "Heraclitus", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2015/entries/heraclitus/>>

¹² A particularly interesting example is seen in this creative transformation of his dictum: "Dvazhdy v tot zhe rukav ne nader' pal'to, / ne ispit' vody iz ruch'ia, [...]" (You can't put your arm in the same sleeve twice while putting on your coat, / you can't drink up all the water from a stream, [...]) [164] See also "V tu zhe reku, v tu zhe Senu," (Into the same river, into the same Seine,) [326 (7)]

her view of the world, in its metaphysical ramifications, also required challenging the norms of the laws and principles that explain the world of our daily lives. For example, in regard to Newton's laws of gravity, she proposes that we push them aside: "ottolkni zakon N'utona / i ochnis' na oblakakh" (push aside Newton's law / and wake up on the clouds) [181]. It is important to bear in mind that waking up on the clouds is a form of the suspension of reality she posits in many of her poems as part of the experience associated with the vertical axis, and it is part of those forms of movement which explore and attempt to resolve the tension between high and low that informs her work from start to finish. In another poem from the same year, she addresses the relation between time and space, which in the Newtonian-Kantian world are absolutes: "Dvoiniashki rasstoianie i vremia / menia priznali nazvanoj sestroi, / my vmeste roem iz zemli koren'ia / zavarivaem viazhushchii nastoi," (The twins time and space / took me as their foster sister, / together we dig up a root from the earth, /and brew an astringent infusion,) [182]. The three sisters then perform operations which, to say the least, unsettle the expectations we have about these things. She explores the violation of the laws of physics with deliberate and careful consideration, leading to a proclamation that together they raise a glass "za bezgranichnyi budushchii prostor", to the "unlimited expanse of the future", to the great unbound beyond.

Again, in a long work from 2009, "Svoboda Voli: Pochti Poema" (Free will: A Poem, Almost Epic) [330] she once again takes up the familiar question of time and space, and connects it to the vertical axis. The subject matter is "Etot god" ie "This year", and it consists of 3 sections, the first of which consists of 25 lines in 5 stanzas, and begins "Etot god nachinalsia xoreiami..." (This year began with trochees) and moves through a series of transformations of her experiences. The second section (44 lines, 5 stanzas) opens with the following stanza:

"Etot god" – eto vremia. A mesto?
 A mesto, uvy neumestno,
 ia kachaius' na provolke mezh,
 i rastet iz slovesnogo testa,
 gde slovam (a ne mysliam) ne tesno,
 tot istaiavshii snezhnyi rubezh,
 chto i sluzhit mne provolkoi shatkoi,
 smotrovoiu ploshchadkoi.

("This year" – that's time. What about place? / Well, place, alas, is out of place, / I am swinging on a wire in between, / and it grows out of a verbal dough, / where words (but not thoughts) are not crowded, / that melting, snowy border, / which also serves me as a flimsy wire, / and an observation deck).

In this challenge to the normal categories of time and place she once again describes being suspended by a thread or wire, and finding herself, not this time on a base of clouds, but suspended on an ethereal "observation platform", from which her view of what is both below and above is enhanced, even if in ways that time and place, as we typically understand them, cannot encompass. As we will see below, she would not allow herself to be limited by the two-dimensional world of her