

The Energy of Honesty, or Brussels Lace, Mandelstam, “Stolen Air,” and Inner Freedom. A Visit to the Creative Workshop of Andrei Bitov’s *Pushkin House*

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“I divide all works of world literature into those that are authorized and those written without authorization. The former are scum, and the latter, stolen air.”

—Osip Mandelstam, “Fourth
Prose” (“Chetvertaia proza,”
416)

“For the first time, I rejoiced in freedom.”

—Andrei Bitov, “Text as
Behavior: Reminiscences
about Mandelstam” (“Tekst
kak povedenie. Vospominanie
o Mandel’shtame,” 282)

“The dimensions are different.”

—Andrei Bitov, “Notes from
around the Corner” (“Zapiski
iz-za ugla,” 90)

Sometimes I feel as if trying to describe the shape of *Pushkin House* (*Pushkinskii dom*) is like trying to fix in place the movement of an amoeba, and like the amoeba, the novel resists being confined to one particular shape. But that is the nature of life: it is ever moving, ever changing. And it is the

shape of life, of reality, in one particular place, Leningrad, in the Soviet Union of the 1960s, that Bitov attempts to reflect between the covers of *Pushkin House*, a book that is at once grand, powerful, brave, brilliant and, ultimately, extraordinarily heart-wrenching. Bitov attempts to present that reality honestly. He attempts to convey it in its complexities. As a writer, he attempts to convey it in a form that is true to that reality, in a form that is honest, real, instead of in a shape that conforms to the conventions of a realist novel.

In order better to understand *Pushkin House*, both in terms of honesty about reality and in terms of the honest presentation of reality, it is helpful to explore relevant Bitov creations, written not long before he started to work on his novel. I shall first discuss “The Garden” (“Sad”), “Life in Windy Weather” (“Zhizn’ v vetrenuiu pogodu”), and “Notes from around the Corner.” Central to this discussion will be the significance of Bitov’s reading of Mandelstam’s “Fourth Prose.” In a 26 May 2003 telephone conversation with me, Bitov stated that Mandelstam “is a key to *Pushkin House*” (“klich k *Pushkinskomu domu*”). I shall discuss the relevance, to the book, of all of the factors above.

Bitov has spoken about links that he sees between the characteristics of Faina, in *Pushkin House*, and those of Asya, the object of Aleksei’s love in the story, “The Garden,” which he completed in 1963 (Bitov, “Kommentarii” 476). By the end of “The Garden,” Aleksei has discovered what the category of love is by experiencing what love is not. In other words, Bitov describes in “The Garden,” a world that includes what is not (not-love) as well as what is (love). Thus reality consists of what is not as well as what is.

In 1963, the year before he began *Pushkin House*, Bitov wanted to write something, but was having trouble writing. He stated that he remembered Chekhov’s advice: if a writer has nothing to write about, then he should begin to write about the fact that he has nothing to write about. Bitov then began to write what turned out to be the story, “Life in Windy Weather,”

about a writer who has trouble writing.¹ In the course of the story, he shows that part of the creative process of writing is not writing. At his dacha, away from the clutter of city life, Sergei is all set to sit down at his desk. He insists on going to the city to do errands that he knows, even beforehand, are not necessary. Not creating, for Sergei, is part of creating.

Moreover, in his life at the dacha, Sergei discovers that when he peels away the usual routines, the old forms and structures of his life, when he lives in accordance with his own rhythms, he is able to perceive life directly, in a meaningful way. He says that at the dacha, “all the parameters of his existence [had] changed” (“izmenilis’ vse parametry ego sushchestvovaniia...”) (“Zhizn” 5). As he and his infant son are taking a walk, he experiences a moment of “accidental symmetry,” when everything exists, as if on one axis.

Sergei realizes that in his writing, when he lets go of old forms, a new form comes to him. He tells his wife, “Not only did genuine art never strive for conventionality; it was perpetually obsessed with the attempt to avoid it. To free oneself from the fetters of convention, of ossified forms . . . and to get close to the living truth is the mechanism for the birth of new forms” (“Zhizn” 14).

During the summer of 1963, Bitov began to write another work, nonfictional, about the same events and nonevents that are traced in the fictional story, “Life in Windy Weather.” After having finished the story, he read Mandelstam’s “Fourth Prose” and was, he said, profoundly shaken. He declares that after that, he started his “second prose” (“Posleslovie” 94). (The phrase, “second prose” [“vtoraia proza”], echoes the title “Fourth Prose” as well as Mandelstam’s book of poetry, *Second Book* [*Vtoraia kniga*].) Bitov says that he then became a different writer. He was struck by the “energy” of “Fourth Prose,” which, he says, he realized only years later, had left a deep imprint, although not in terms of direct imitation, on “Notes from around the Corner,” the nonfictional companion piece to “Life in Windy Weather” that he completed during the next few months of 1963. In

“Fourth Prose,” he says, “there is the energy of rebellion, if you will [the energy of] hatred of the situation in which we all found ourselves . . .” (“Posleslovie” 94).

In “Fourth Prose,” written in 1929-1930, Mandelstam cries out with impassioned rage at the corrupt, rotten state of the literary establishment. He lashes out at the writers’ “tribe” that, he says, practices prostitution, and that protects and defends those in power. He defends himself against a false accusation of plagiarism. He boldly stands up to his accuser, the critic Arkady Gornfeld. (The publisher had asked Mandelstam to take two translations of Charles de Coster’s *Till Eulenspiegel*, one by Gornfeld and another by V. N. Kariakin, and to edit and make them into one translation. In the new version, the publisher accidentally printed only Mandelstam’s name and not that of Gornfeld and Kariakin. Gornfeld accused Mandelstam of intentionally omitting his name.)² He blasts a literary scholar, Dmitry Blagoi, who lives in Herzen House³ and who, he writes, is a Bolshevik toady of the “breed that tiptoes through the blood-stained Soviet land, while heads are being chopped off” (“Chetvertaia” 416). He attacks official literature and defends true literature. He writes, “I divide all works of world literature into those that are authorized and those written without authorization. The former are scum, and the latter, stolen air.” (“Vse proizvedeniia mirovoi literatury ia deliu na razreshennye i napisannye bez razresheniia. Pervye—èto mraz’, vtorye—vorovannyi vozdukh”) (416).

In “Text as Behavior: Reminiscences about Mandelstam” (“Tekst kak povedenie. Vospominanie o Mandel’shtame”), an essay written in 2001 as a tribute to and in deep appreciation of Mandelstam’s profound importance for him, Bitov quotes the line about authorized and unauthorized literature. The first two words of the epigraph to his essay, from Mandelstam’s poem, “Ariosto,” are “Power is loathsome . . .” (“Vlast’ otvratitel’na...”) (Tekst 277). Bitov characterizes “Fourth Prose” as a “shot in the air” (“vystrel v vozdukh”), a “real shot and real air” (“nastoiashchii vystrel i nastoiashchii vozdukh”) (282). He describes the joy of freedom that he found in “Fourth

Prose.” He laughed out loud, he writes, as he read Mandelstam’s characterization of a Gillette razor blade as “a Martian’s visiting card.” “For the first time,” Bitov writes, “I rejoiced in *freedom*” (“Vpervye radovalsia *svobode*”) (281).

“Notes from around the Corner,” which in recent editions is subtitled “Diary of a Single Combat Fighter” (“Dnevnik edinobortsa”),⁴ can be seen as a “shot in the air,” an account of a battle for honesty. It contains the spirit of rebellion and the spirit of freedom that characterize “Fourth Prose.” Bitov speaks about deception and self-deception, and he speaks about wanting to write the truth about himself. He speaks about people’s being deceived in childhood and about their then having the world turned upside down. There is a scene reminiscent of “Fourth Prose,” with people speaking Chinese. One episode describes a Herzen House functionary who looks at people and visually takes their measurements for coffins. A diary entry, for October 4th, is subtitled “House” (“Dom”). In it, Bitov admits that if a writer opens his eyes to what he is really doing as he takes his manuscript from publisher to publisher, then he must admit that the process is equivalent to prostitution in a house of prostitution. Therefore, writes Bitov, the writer does not open his eyes (“Zapiski” 74-76). In this entry, one can sense the rage, that “energy” of Mandelstam about which Bitov had spoken, that spirit of rebellion against the system.

The diary entry for the next day, on the anniversary of Bitov’s having started writing, contains his description of opening his eyes wide the way one opens a window, in order to let in fresh air.⁵ By the end of “Notes from around the Corner,” Bitov has described a spiritual rebirth, in which everything has changed even though nothing in his life has really changed. He explains that the *meaning* of his life has changed because his perspective on life is different. Therefore, he writes, “The dimensions are different.” (“Izmereniia drugie.”) (“Zapiski” 90). He has reached reality.

Years later, as he was putting together the English translation of a collection of his short stories, *Life in Windy Weather*, Bitov realized that

“Life in Windy Weather” and “Notes from around the Corner” formed one unit, the fictionalized version of events and the nonfictional simultaneous description of the author’s inner state (“Posleslovie” 95). They appear together, in *Life in Windy Weather*, under the rubric, “A Country Place.” (He explains that he had not even tried to get “Notes from around the Corner” published in the Soviet Union, but he figured that the Soviet authorities would not read the English translation.) In 1999, “Life in Windy Weather” and “Notes from around the Corner” came out as a separate book, entitled *Dachnaia mestnost’. Dubl’ (The Dacha District. A Double Take)*.

What, then, in the cluster of “The Garden,” “Life in Windy Weather,” Mandelstam, and “Notes from around the Corner” is important for us to note as we look ahead to *Pushkin House*? First of all, there is the structural pattern. Although he had not yet consciously realized that “Life in Windy Weather” and “Notes from around the Corner” formed an entity, Bitov, in *Pushkin House*, used the same principle of writing a “double take” of one set of events, from two different perspectives. Thus we have the versions and variants, different takes on the same events. We have the “double take,” the two different perspectives on the same time frame in Leva’s life, that are provided by Parts One and Two.

In “Life in Windy Weather,” Bitov uses imagery of the unfinished process of building the dacha. He describes some of the tasks of fixing the house. In the passages about writing, he describes the fact that there is no ceiling between him and the roof. He describes the moment of accidental symmetry in terms of everything being united by the cupola of the sky. Leva, in his article, “Three Prophets,” describes Pushkin and Mozart as seeing the “whole edifice of the world, a temple, clarity” (*Pushkin House* 228). As he reads his notes for his article, “The Middle of the Contrast,” he is excited by the unity of all of his writings. And he exclaims, “A cupola” (*Pushkinskii* 297).

The “house” as the literary institution rotten and corrupted by the Soviet system comes to *Pushkin House* from “Fourth Prose” through “Notes from

around the Corner.” We recall that the section of “Notes from around the Corner” that deals with the corruption and dishonesty of the institution of literature is called “The House.” We recall that the section of “Fourth Prose” that had to do with the corrupt and rotten state of contemporary literature and the institution of literature includes references to Herzen House. (We should also recall that in one episode of “Notes from around the Corner,” Herzen House is mentioned.) *The House (Dom)* was the first title of what then became *Pushkin House*, and in the novel, one of the first things that the reader finds out is that the house, Pushkin House, which will be the center of attention, is a research institute. Later on, we read that one of the meanings of the title is an institution.⁶

In a few sentences in “Notes from around the Corner,” Bitov uses physics imagery, that of Brownian motion, to depict people. He then talks about people’s interrelationships in terms of the interdependent motions of molecules. In *Pushkin House*, while Leva is in the Café Molecule, he describes his relationships to certain significant people in his life in terms of organic chemistry. He draws a diagram that, in organic chemistry, is a “constrained ring,” an unhealthy ring. “Notes from around the Corner” can also be seen as part of the creative workshop for the “(Italics Are Mine—A.B.)” (“[Kursiv moi—A.B.]”) sections of *Pushkin House*. The author presents “raw material,” his own thoughts on what has transpired, what is about to transpire, and/or his thoughts on the process of writing his novel.

“Fourth Prose” comes into play as Bitov confronts, starkly and honestly, the Soviet reality of his day. In “Text as Behavior,” he thanks Mandelstam’s works for helping to teach him, during the Khrushchev era, what he had not known while Stalin was alive. As we know, he speaks about the experience of reading “Fourth Prose.” He also speaks, in that essay, of being powerfully moved, before 1963, by reading Mandelstam’s “Tristia,” and he speaks about Nadezhda Mandelstam’s introducing him to Mandelstam’s “Voronezh Notebooks” (“Tekst” 283-84).

Pushkin House seems to bear the imprint of some of the lessons Bitov learned from reading Mandelstam. First of all, in no published Bitov work before “Notes from around the Corner” is there an account of a direct confrontation with the Soviet political system or an account of the implications of that system for people’s individual lives. Bitov had previously written about time in a person’s life—a young man’s growing up, the importance of memory of the past in the present, the importance of living in the moment, observations on life and travel—but it is only with “Notes from around the Corner” that he conjoins people’s internal psychological worlds with the political situation in which they live. (Of course, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the very fact that Bitov had focused, in his writings, on an individual’s subjective feelings was in itself an act that went directly against the Soviet Socialist Realist method. Socialist Realism insisted that subjectivity does not represent reality, is not real literature, that writing only objectively about a protagonist’s positive steps toward optimism, the collective, and socialism can be viewed as worthwhile literature.)

In *Pushkin House*, Bitov faces head-on the psychological effects, the internal states of people, that issue directly out of their link to their time and therefore to the Soviet regime.⁷ In Part One, Bitov keeps saying that the *time*, the historical epoch, is the hero. There are powerful episodes about people’s stifled and distorted existence under Stalin and in the years beyond his death. Even during the Thaw period after Stalin’s death, Leva’s father lives a life behind the closed door of his study. Leva’s parents still hide truths from him—the fact, for instance, that his grandfather, Modest Platonovich Odoevtsev, is alive. They have kept a piece of his own family history from him because the elder Odoevtsev had been a victim of Stalin’s purges and had spent many years in the gulag. Uncle Dickens had also spent years in the camps. Bitov describes the crippling psychological legacy that the Stalin era and the Soviet system have left to three generations of those Soviets who spent time in concentration camps and those who did not.

From the very beginning of the novel, he points his readers to the destructive effects of the revolution. He gives us those effects in terms of the energy of the revolution, especially in terms of his description of the rain and wind. The wind, in contradistinction to its positive role in “Life in Windy Weather,” is a destructive force here. Bitov writes, in the prologue, that if this were a movie, the wind would chase a child’s lost toy, the so-called “toss-me, catch-me,” and it would “burst open, as if to reveal the wrong side of life: the sad and secret fact that it was made of sawdust”(4). This is exactly what Bitov does throughout the rest of the novel. He shows us the reality of the wrong side, the seamy side of the life of his characters in the Soviet Union of the 1960s. He shows us that the “wind” of revolution has burst open the “construction” of his characters’ lives to reveal sawdust.

In the prologue, the wind is immediately linked to the November 7th holiday celebration, a celebration that marks the anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution. The day described is the day *after* November 7th, which is important to the plot and which, symbolically, points to a Soviet Union once the revolution has taken place. The imagery in that scene, and in certain other passages of the novel, is reminiscent of Pushkin’s “The Bronze Horseman” (“Mednyi vsadnik”), which is, of course, a work that pits the little man against a political leader, Peter the Great. It has been interpreted as Pushkin’s criticism of Peter the Great (and by implication, political authorities) for his destruction of the little people. As readers of Russian literature know, a major theme of the poem is that of Peter’s will. He insists that a city be built on a swamp, an act that then makes the city and its inhabitants vulnerable to floods and, therefore, to the destruction of their lives. The lives of Evgeny and his loved one are ravaged by the destructive forces of nature that have been unleashed by Peter, the wind, and the flood. The story of “The Bronze Horseman” is about Evgeny, who is completely terrified by Peter. By the end of *Pushkin House*, the story of Leva’s life duplicates Evgeny’s, in a chapter whose plot repeats “The Bronze Horseman,” and whose epigraph, from that Pushkin poem, describes a

terrified Evgeny.⁸ Thus, by implication, we can see that the Soviet political system has sent waves of terror to its citizens.

If the reader does not grasp the link between the Pushkin narrative poem and *Pushkin House*, Bitov presents the connection in an excerpt from a newspaper article that he says could be placed on any page of his book. The second to last full sentence of the excerpt, from the article, “The Connection of the Times,” poses a question: “How did translation of *The Bronze Horseman* [into the Avarian language] give rise to the splendid realism of the Avarians’ latest poetry?” The last sentence is, “All these questions and answers would form a great and useful book” (6). He explains, therefore, that a big and useful book could be created, based on the investigation of the translation of “The Bronze Horseman” into the contemporary Avarian language. This means that the author is connecting the tale of the destruction wrought by one political ruler on people’s lives with his own tale of the destruction wrought on people’s lives by another ruler. The article, we should recall, is called “The Connection of the Times.”

The newspaper clipping is in the first of several “(Italics are Mine)” sections included in the novel. This one is placed at the end of the novel’s prologue, right after its last line, a separate one-sentence paragraph that compares the wind to a thief, a comparison that links this passage to Pushkin. In “The Bronze Horseman,” the evil waves are compared to thieves (see Meyer 129-30).

We have seen that Bitov’s focus on the individual’s life against the backdrop of political reality can be traced to his reading of “Fourth Prose.” Mandelstam is important to *Pushkin House* in other ways, too. He is present both directly and indirectly. Direct references appear in Bitov’s commentary to the novel, and indirect references appear in the novel itself. (The commentary contains explanations of references, keyed to pages in the novel, that have to do with generally known things from the time period. Bitov explains that knowledge of these things disappears. Thus, he says, the

structure of his commentary differs, in principle, from scholarly commentaries, which elucidate obscure references.)⁹

The first direct reference comes in an excerpt from a Mandelstam poem (presented without its title, “Midnight in Moscow. Luxuriantly Buddhist Summer” [“Polnoch’ v Moskve. Rokoshno buddiskoe leto”], or the date, 1931, when it was written). The first line of the excerpt, which mentions a Soviet clothing firm (“I am a man of the Moscow Garment epoch —/Look how I bristle in my suit!/Look how I walk and talk . . .” [“Commentary” 378]), is therefore a reference to the Soviet era. The line in the poem that comes before the one Bitov quotes is, “It’s time for you to know: I’m also a contemporary” (“Polnoch” 149), and the ones after, talk about the fact that Mandelstam converses with his era. A few lines before that, he says that he will not glorify lies. Living lives of lies or refusing to lie is one of the main themes of *Pushkin House*. In fact, Bitov, at one point, had thought of calling his novel *The Lie*. What Mandelstam did in “Fourth Prose” and elsewhere was to refuse to tell lies.

Bitov’s reference to the crude Soviet clothing firm comes during Part One of *Pushkin House* (20), where he talks about the time as being the hero of that part. He refers to the Soviet Moscow and Leningrad garment firm as he describes the Thaw. He does so by focusing on the daring young people who—through narrowing their slacks (thus moving away from the Stalin era, with its wide slacks)—helped open society to the possibilities of the new, the unfamiliar, the other (19). Even though Mandelstam’s words are about the conformist Soviet clothing industry, the reference to him is tied to a discussion of a move away from conformity, a move toward greater freedom and individual expression.

Bitov’s second direct reference to Mandelstam is a quotation ascribed to him, but without its source, “Fourth Prose.” The Mandelstam quotation is embedded in a section of the commentary about Gillette razors. Bitov explains, “this safety razor was a unique reminder of a vanished civilization” (“Commentary” 380).¹⁰ The comment comes in the course of his

reminiscences about his father's and his own use of a Gillette razor at a time in the Soviet Union when, he explains, there were no imported products. He goes on to quote a line from "Fourth Prose" about a Gillette razor blade looking like "a Martian's visiting card," a line that he quotes years later, in "Text as Behavior," when he talks about the joy of freedom he had experienced when he first read "Fourth Prose."

The third direct reference to Mandelstam is a part of the commentary keyed to the section, in Part One, that deals with Leva's parents having lied to him about the fact that his grandfather is still alive. Leva learns that his father had made his reputation by attacking *his* father's ideas (38-40). When Leva demands an explanation, his father defends himself. The note in the commentary traces the "strained," complicated histories of these "old traitors." Some of them committed unspeakably evil deeds, and, using the same methods, in the post-Stalin era, were responsible for getting banned writers published. One of the examples that Bitov gives is the man who pushed for the publication of a collection of Mandelstam's poetry. He placed his own introduction there, instead of the one written by a person of substance ("Commentary" 382-84).

Bitov deals here with the publication and/or lack of publication of important representatives of past culture whose creations had not been allowed to appear during much of the Soviet period. This was the fate of many, including Mandelstam, whose works were banned in the Soviet Union until 1973. We learn later in the novel that Leva had not read Yuri Tynianov because his works had been unavailable for decades. This reference to Mandelstam is therefore directly connected to one of the major themes of *Pushkin House*, the preservation (or lack of preservation) of culture in the Soviet era. And we know that Mandelstam was acutely and passionately committed to the importance of past culture for the present. The importance of the preservation of past culture in *Pushkin House* (beginning even with the title of the novel) is one of the major thematic and structural foci in Bitov's novel.

Indirect references to Mandelstam—links by association—are also, I believe, present in *Pushkin House*. Take, for example, the freewheeling, drunken conversation, when Leva, Mitishatiev, Blank, and Gottikh are gathered in Pushkin House. (Everyone except Blank is drinking.) Bitov writes, “They spoke as one man, one bulky man with indefinite clay features who had absorbed them all. And all their trite words were made new again by the mere fact that this clay mouth had never before pronounced them . . .” (267). Then Bitov lists the topics they discussed—among others, freedom, poetry, and the decline of literature. The words “clay mouth” are in Mandelstam’s poem, “January 1 1924” (“1 ianvaria 1924”), about the “clay life” of the Soviet age, about the fact that there is nowhere to run away from the century, about the man who “lost himself,” about the pain of the search for the “lost word,” about lies, about the son who will remember how time went to sleep outside the window, about the “fraudulent and deaf times,” about the loss of culture.¹¹

That Bitov knows this poem is made clear in “Text as Behavior,” where he quotes extensively from it, including the line with the words “clay beautiful mouth” (“glinianiye prekrasnyi rot” [277]) and the line about remembering how time went to sleep (280). That Bitov knew this poem before he wrote *Pushkin House* becomes clear from the same essay. He speaks about significant moments in his life, each significant because of its connection with Mandelstam. He speaks of each as a “rectifying breath” (“vypriamitel’nyi vzdokh”), a phrase from a Mandelstam poem, “I Love the Emergence of the Weave” (“Liubliu poiavlenie tkani”) (“Tekst” 282-84). First of all, he declares that among the “unauthorized” things that he borrowed from his uncle’s library (like Leva and Uncle Dickens’s library) when he was young, was a Mandelstam poem. He writes, “a Mandelstam poem became my first prayer” (283). He says that he has never felt poetry more deeply than he felt “Tristia” (283). Speaking about the year 1961, he writes that he acquired all four issues of the thick journal *Russkii*

sovremennik. That was the journal in which the poem “January 1 1924” appeared. Reading certain lines, Bitov confesses, sent him into raptures.¹²

In the same essay he discusses “January 1 1924” in a way that is intriguing for the reader of *Pushkin House*. He says that “The Twelve” (“Dvenadtsat”) is Blok’s “Bronze Horseman” and that “January 1 1924” is Mandelstam’s “The Twelve” (286). Bitov uses epigraphs from the former two (we shall discuss these elsewhere) for his verse “synopsis” (“konspekt”) of *Pushkin House*, thus guiding the reader to the energy of revolution that sweeps through people’s lives. The poem “January 1 1924” also describes the deadening effects of the “clay mouth” of the revolutionary age. In *Pushkin House* we see an example of the “collective” clump of clay that people have become. Bitov describes people as being entangled in a clump, so that Leva, with his entangled life, becomes part of a “collective hero,” the result of the effect that the clay age has had on individual lives.

Another indirect reference to Mandelstam occurs in the third epilogue. As the time of the hero and that of the author move closer to one another, Bitov mentions future writing projects that Leva is considering. One is “Journey from Russia,” which was the original title of Bitov’s travelogue, “Armenia Lessons” (“Uroki Armenii”), written from 1967 to 1969, two of the years of his work on *Pushkin House*. Crucial to the travelogue—which is about the importance and universality of authentic culture and values, and about the significance, for the present, of past culture—is the link, without attribution, to Mandelstam’s Armenia poems and to his “Journey to Armenia” (“Puteshestvie v Armeniiu”). In the same *Pushkin House* passage Bitov quotes Pushkin’s travelogue, “Journey to Arzrum” (“Puteshestvie v Arzrum”), a different part of which forms the opening epigraph to Bitov’s “Armenia Lessons.”¹³ Thus the creations of Mandelstam, pieces of authentic past culture, are alive, in his writings, even though as a person, he died in a hospital in Stalin’s gulag in 1938.

Bitov, in a lighthearted way, then refers to the fact that Pushkin had never been abroad. He thus indirectly links the difficult fates that connect

Pushkin and Mandelstam. Both had difficulties with the political authorities. Pushkin was never allowed to go abroad although he wanted to. Leva thinks about the fact that there is no article entitled “Pushkin and Travel Abroad” (336). These comments come in the very passage in which he is being doled out privileges by the Pushkin House authorities—the promise of a trip to the West—because the authorities find him trustworthy. (I shall return to this epilogue, in greater detail, in another context.) Here, too, there is a connection to the author’s—Bitov’s—future works, even beyond the confines of the years marking the writing of *Pushkin House*. Bitov makes this point the center of his playful 1989 essay “Freedom to Pushkin!” (“Svobodu Pushkinu!”). He even calls the theme of that essay “Pushkin and Travel Abroad” (“Pushkin i zagranitsa”) (465; *Pushkinskii* 394), and in the course of the essay, he quotes the same sentences from “Journey to Arzrum” that he quotes in the passage in *Pushkin House* (“Svobodu” 467).

There are other ways, I believe, in which the novel is affected, indirectly, by Mandelstam. One of those has to do with Bitov’s characterization of the two major characters of Mandelstam’s generation who inhabit the book. Again, let us turn to the commentary. We recall that one of Bitov’s feelings when he had first read “Fourth Prose” was the joy of freedom. We also recall that Bitov made that statement in his Mandelstam essay, right after quoting the poet’s description of the Gillette razor blade as “a Martian visiting card.” It seems to me that it is no accident that Bitov, in the novel, gives the Gillette razor to Uncle Dickens, who, in certain ways, represents that same spirit of freedom and individuality about which Bitov had been talking in his comments on “Fourth Prose.” Uncle Dickens speaks about institutions—in this case, the Botanic Institute—as “shit.” Like Mandelstam, Uncle Dickens had been arrested by the Soviet regime and sentenced to prison camp. He has, we are told, individual taste and his own individual way of expressing things. He describes a lorgnette as “Eyeglasses with handle” (41). He did not have a permanent home. Mandelstam, for a time in the Soviet era, did not have a settled home.

Modest Platonovich can, I believe, also be connected to Mandelstam. Bitov writes that Odoevtsev is a “sign” (58). Leva’s grandfather is a “sign,” a representative of so many of his generation who suffered the same fate. Again, we must turn to the commentary. In a reference explaining the origin of and prototypes for Modest Platonovich, Bitov says that he had in mind the biography of Mikhail Bakhtin and of a count, Igor Stin, both of whom had spent years in the prison camps. In the same passage, Bitov wrote that well after he had completed *Pushkin House*, he met the writer, Yury Dombrovsky, who had spent years in the gulag. Bitov writes that he realized that Dombrovsky was also a model for the grandfather, as was Oleg Volkov, whom he had also met only after he finished writing the section about Odoevtsev (“Commentary” 386-89).

As we know, Bitov stated that he only recently realized that Mandelstam is a key to *Pushkin House*. It seems to me that one of the ways in which this is true is to consider that same spirit of freedom, rebellion, and honesty that Bitov noted in his written comments about Mandelstam. Modest Platonovich’s speech is marked by precisely those qualities that Bitov highlighted when discussing “Fourth Prose.” Odoevtsev is wildly anti-Soviet. He attacks its educational system, telling Leva that the idea of his dependence on the system is inaccessible to him. His is a free spirit. He is upset that the human species, with its attachment to mechanical and technological progress, is breaking the lock of nature, while being unwilling to approach it gently and organically.

It is Modest Platonovich who represents that powerful spirit of freedom in his writings. It is Modest Platonovich whose composition, “The Sphinx,” from the larger work, “God Is,” ends the novel. It is Modest Platonovich who, like Mandelstam, speaks about the importance of muteness and silence. It is Modest Platonovich who speaks of a “secret freedom” that exists independently of any political regime. It is Modest Platonovich who passionately asserts the necessity of fulfilling one’s function. “Secret freedom,” in this case, refers to words, quoted by Odoevtsev, from

Alexander Blok's poem "Pushkin House," in honor of Pushkin. "Function" refers to Blok's article, "On the Poet's Function" ("O naznachanii poëta"). These words, however, can also be connected to that energy, that spirit of freedom which Bitov found in Mandelstam.

It is Modest Platonovich who, in the scene that closes the novel proper, looks up at the sky and says that had he lied, he never would have been able to look up and see the little hole, the patch, of blue sky. It is Modest Platonovich who, in that scene, is sitting in the "calm" ("bezvetrii") and silence (as opposed to the windy days of destruction described at the beginning of the book). It is Modest Platonovich who writes, "But the temple stands" (353). Here, too, there is a connection with Mandelstam, who used architectural motifs in his poetry. For example, in two of his "Stone" ("Kamen") poems, "Hagia Sophia" ("Aiaa-Sofia") and "Notre Dame" ("Notre Dame"), he described culture in terms of the images of architectural structures.

Leva, writing his article, "Three Prophets," about Pushkin, Lermontov, and Tiutchev, is, we read, original in some ways. We are told that in his article, he is following his grandfather's spirit of freedom. His grandfather, in "The Sphinx," spoke about the importance of fulfilling one's function. He has freely made the choice to tell the truth rather than to distort it. Leva, in his article, speaks about the fact that everyone makes a choice to be free, like God, like Pushkin; to act like a whining adolescent, like mankind, like Lermontov, like Leva in his relationships with other people; or to be like a devil, like Tiutchev in his relationship to Pushkin and, the reader surmises, like Mitishatiev, in his relationship to Leva. Leva writes about Mozart and Pushkin, who create without comparing themselves to anyone. They build "the edifice as a whole" (229), instead of living in one corner, thinking that what they see, with their limited perspective from that one corner, is a view of the entire world. Through the grandfather's "The Sphinx" and through those writings of Leva's that continue that free spirit, the reader witnesses a

temple of individual freedom, individual choice, commitment to truth and to culture.

There are still other ways in which Mandelstam's presence can be felt in *Pushkin House*. Perhaps these instances can best be described not as influence, but as an affinity between Bitov and Mandelstam. In order better to understand this presence, we shall have to consider the following. In an essay, "Under the Cupola of Glasnost" ("Pod kupolom glasnosti"), on the contemporary Russian comedian Mikhail Zhvanetsky, Bitov writes about the creative use of silence by artists during the Soviet era. Zhvanetsky, he explains, includes the "little hole," between words, that was characteristic of Soviet speech. He praises Zhvanetsky for his understanding that a tree is a tree, with its branches and leaves, but that the tree is also the sky that one sees through the branches and the shade under the tree (131, 133).

A few paragraphs before this part of the essay, Bitov quotes Mandelstam: "for me, it is the little hole in the bagel that is valuable. . . . You can gobble up the bagel, but the little hole will remain. Real labor is Brussels lace. The essential thing in it is what holds the design together: air, pierced holes, and absences" (132). Bitov cites Mandelstam as the author of the quotation, but he does not identify the source, which is "Fourth Prose."

It seems to me that in theme and form, this principle, of showing the design *and* the air, holes and absences, is central to *Pushkin House*. Bitov shows us what is *not there* as well as what is there. (This is like Bitov's earlier focus, in "The Garden"—what is absent [i.e., love] is as important as what is there [not-love].)

Stalin is absent in *Pushkin House*. He is not mentioned once in the entire novel, yet he is a strong presence in terms of the energy (that of "devils invisible to the eye") that he unleashes. This destructive energy is like a chain reaction, as characters who have been poisoned by Stalin and the Soviet system, in turn, poison others and themselves. These forces are embodied in Mitishatiev. The word "strength" ("sila") is often used to describe this negative energy. Mitishatiev tells Leva that he feels his own

“strength,” that he wants to destroy Leva. Faina tells Leva that she wants to feel his “strength.” It is important to note that Peter the Great, that other political leader who, in “The Bronze Horseman,” wrought havoc, is described by Pushkin as having a “strong” will. Leva tells Mitishatiev that Jesus refused to use his strength.

The negative energy of forces “invisible to the eye”—lies, betrayal, fear, and Leva’s father’s silences—are all present in the overall structure of Soviet life because of Stalin, the absent one. In a scene reminiscent of one in “The Bronze Horseman,” in which Evgeny thinks that the statue of Peter the Great is chasing him, Leva, in sheer terror, runs away from a policeman. Bitov includes, in this section of the novel, two epigraphs, from “The Bronze Horseman,” that describe Evgeny’s acute terror.

If one reads, in sequence, all of the epigraphs to Parts One, Two, and Three of *Pushkin House*, one can see, first of all, that they tell the entire story, in shorthand, of the events in the novel as a whole, from the servant in the first epigraph who works in an institution, a hotel, and who is alarmed, to the final epigraphs, where Pushkin’s Evgeny is totally within the grips of terror. Second, the servant in the episode is “alarmed,” not in a frenzy of terror, as Evgeny is in the final sets of epigraphs. Third, a frenzy of terror is described in the quotations in the final epigraphs, one set having to do with duels, and one set, with devils invisible to the eye. In each of these two cases, the sequence of epigraphs goes along a continuum from a dignified approach to one with mad, distorted energy, from Pushkin’s description of a duel to Fedor Sologub’s description of Peredonov’s frenzied battle with the wall.

Thus Bitov, through the epigraphs, is reflecting the ever-increasing negative energy that grips Leva more and more, as he careens from one episode of being poisoned, first by his father’s lies, then by his grandfather’s attacks, then by his behavior to Uncle Dickens, then by Mitishatiev’s and Faina’s cruel treatment of him, then by his behavior toward Albina and Blank. In addition, by having one epigraph per section for most of the novel

and then by having three about devils and seven about duels, it is as if Bitov is duplicating Leva's state of having lost himself and of being more and more susceptible to living in someone else's structure, in someone else's quotations. He is living as someone else's version of him, rather than being true to himself. He loses himself, piece by piece, as the novel proceeds toward its tragic denouement.

In either of Bitov's versions and variants for Leva, he is dead, either by real death or by spiritual death. In one case, he ends up trapped in the institution, someone else's structure, dead on the floor, amidst the broken glass, scattered manuscripts, the post-November wind blowing rain into the broken window, victim of the unclean revolutionary forces embodied by the jealous, vindictive Mitishatiev. In the other case, Leva is spiritually dead. He has lost himself. He has covered up the tracks of his rebellion. We read that he did not die in the duel. We read that he gets up and busies himself with seeking out help to repair the destruction that the duel with Mitishatiev has caused—the tipped over bookcase, the broken exhibit cases, the broken glass, and the papers strewn across the floor. Leva enlists the help of Uncle Dickens and Albina because, as Bitov writes, he needs them here. Bitov points out that Uncle Dickens died, in an earlier part of the novel, but that he needs him here. Since Albina had told Leva that because of his cruel behavior toward her, she did not love him anymore, the reader might think that her help is as implausible as that of Uncle Dickens.

As Leva is walking back to Pushkin House, carrying the plates of glass, he has, around his neck, a rope with a package of putty. Bitov writes, this “gives him the definitive appearance of a suicide” (325). The author therefore underscores Leva's “lifeless” situation by calling attention to the nooselike appearance of the rope. Moreover, it is as if Leva is fulfilling his grandfather's prediction—that he is so dependent on the Soviet system that if his collar were removed, he himself would ask that it be put back on. He himself places the rope around his neck. He is about to “glue” himself back to the system.

It is fitting that as he is showing the American around the city, he cannot even find the place of Pushkin's duel. In his life, attached as it is to the Soviet regime, Leva can no longer find a place of rebellion.

The glass is replaced, the floors are washed, the place, tidied up. The next day, after the holidays in honor of the revolution are over, when everyone comes back to work at Pushkin House, absolutely no one notices that anything had happened. Leva thinks to himself, "Good Lord, how unobservant people are!" (333). And what is the result? Leva is rewarded for suppressing his rebellion. Those in power at Pushkin House even offer him a trip to the West, and, more immediately, they entrust him with the task of showing an American writer around Leningrad.

We read that Leva had fixed the glass into place with "special BF-2 glue" (326). In the commentary, Bitov speaks about this particular glue as being the glue that had been awarded a Stalin Prize. Thus Leva has "rebuilt" the Soviet literary institution with Stalin glue.¹⁴ Bitov informs us, on the last page of Part Three, that Leva is like "a slave who suppressed his own rebellion with his own strength" ("rab, svoimi silami podavliaiushchii sobstvennoe vosstanie") (*Pushkinskii* 398). (Note the word "strength," which, in Russian, is that same word, "sila," that has been used as a word of destructive force. Here Leva is himself wreaking havoc on himself.) This is the seed, the embryo, and ultimately the crux of the matter in *Pushkin House*—the story of the slave who, with his own strength, suppresses his own rebellion. Bitov is telling the tragic, painful story of the lives of many Soviets whose lives were destroyed, muffled, stifled because they themselves suppressed their own rebellion.

Bitov began writing what turned out to be *Pushkin House*, at first as a story, after hearing the anecdote that the eminent Russian literature scholar Boris Bukhshtab told him.¹⁵ The embryo of the novel was, according to Bitov, an incident, told to him by Bukhshtab, about two young scholars who were on duty during the May 1st holidays in an institute-museum. They got completely drunk, fought, tore the place apart, and before the next working

day, repaired the damage so thoroughly that no one noticed, and no one had an inkling of what had transpired (Savitiskii 423; “Akhilles” 148). Bitov said that he was haunted by the story. He stated, “The fight and the liquidation of one’s own revolt seemed to be very revealing to me” (“Draka i likvidatsiia sobstvennogo bunta—eto kazalos’ mne ochen’ pokazatel’nym”) (qtd. in Savitskii 423).

It is highly significant, in this respect, that Bitov’s “synopsis” of *Pushkin House*, written in verse form in 1971, has, as one of its two epigraphs, the lines from “The Bronze Horseman” that highlight Evgeny’s brief moment of rage at and rebellion against Peter the Great: “All right, builder of Petrograd! . . . Just you wait!” (“Dobro, stroitel’ Petrograda!.. /Uzho tebe!..”) (“Kommentarii” 484).¹⁶ Significant here is the fact that right after that moment, Evgeny becomes absolutely terrified, and he goes mad. The fact that Bitov has chosen this particular quotation as an epigraph is crucial, it seems to me. In Pushkin’s poem, this is the key psychological moment, after which it might be said that Evgeny, in raw terror at his own feelings, “suppresses his own rebellion with his own strength” and proceeds along his self-destructive path to death.

It is the tragic, painful fact of Leva’s nonrebellion that provides much of the substance of *Pushkin House*. Bitov informs the reader, in the first “Italics Are Mine” section, that he will be following the scientific principle according to which matter is divided into ever smaller entities until it completely disappears. We see, throughout the novel, that Leva, through the affliction of wounds by others (because they have been wounded by that first ring, the Soviet system and Stalin) and through the wounds he inflicts upon others and himself, is reduced to nothing. On the final, painful, devastating, humiliating day described in the novel, when he does not defend Blank in the face of Mitishatiev’s ugly anti-Semitic remarks, Leva, we read, sinks to his lowest ring of humiliation. In the French translation of the novel, Bitov added a subtitle, *La maison Pouchkine. Roman de l’humiliation infinie*.¹⁷ Leva has lost himself. In terms of healthy life energy, he therefore does not

exist. Bitov describes this state in the first “Italics Are Mine” section, too, when he talks about his “nonexistent hero.” And later, he talks about the nonexistence of life during the chunk of time that is the major focus of the novel.

Thus we are back to Mandelstam’s characterization of Brussels lace as including the absences upon which the design is held. We are back to Bitov’s structural principle of including absences in the structure of his novel. Mandelstam is absent, and yet present in the book. Stalin is absent, yet his presence is essential to the reality of the Soviet Union of the 1960s and early 1970s, and his absence/presence is essential to the plot of *Pushkin House*. We are back to the energy of honesty, the energy of that essential truth that so impressed Bitov when he read “Fourth Prose.” We are back to “Life in Windy Weather,” where Bitov wants to create *honest* literature, not in an arbitrary, conventional way, but by letting the form find him. We are back to “Notes from around the Corner,” where Bitov describes the way that things really happened.

This is what he is doing in *Pushkin House*, for he describes the *real* reality of that period in the Soviet Union. In order to do so, he has to describe the *nonreality*, for the nonreality *was* people’s reality. The system had inflicted the psychological wounds of nonreality, and Bitov, in his novel, traces the trajectory of the psychological processes of that nonreality that was the Soviet reality. It is as if he has to be true, in form, to describing that reality. Therefore, for example, the “honest” guidelines to the novel offered in the “Italics Are Mine” section, while present in the novel, are absent in the table of contents. Thus he is duplicating, in the structure, some of the “absences” that were “present” in the Soviet reality. The table of contents contains, as he points out, only the titles of books that were on the syllabus of Soviet schools. Thus, in the table of contents, he reflects the educational system, the institution. In the “Italics are Mine” sections, he offers the subjective comments of the author, which present his “honest” reflections on reality and on the realist novel.

He had also said that his hero, Leva, is named after Tolstoy, for Leva's first name and patronymic, Lev Nikolaevich, are the same as that writer of great nineteenth-century realist novels. Bitov writes that he is not sure whether his hero is named in *honor* of Tolstoy or whether he is just a namesake. We must ask ourselves why Bitov would make that point and, in addition, what his purpose was in giving his character Tolstoy's name. It seems to me that this, once again, is part of his concern with reality. It seems to me that what Bitov does, for example, in his absent, but present "Italics Are Mine" sections is to show the seams with which he, the author, is stitching together the novel. He points the reader toward the seams. In other words, once again, we are with the absences and presences, for the writer of the third-person so-called objective narrative, a Tolstoy, does not show us the thread with which the pieces are sewn together. Although the author, Tolstoy, is present, he does not show that he is. Bitov tells his readers that he is honest, in showing the seams, the pattern, the design. And we even see "sewing" imagery in *Pushkin House*. Near the beginning, we are told that the "divine thread" of Leva's life was interrupted. The grandfather, in his speech, speaks of nature unraveling like a stocking. Leva sews a clumsy suit for himself.

The reader also knows that Tolstoy's "objective" realist style was the one according to which Socialist Realist writers were supposed to model their realist fiction. It seems to me that Bitov, with his "Italics Are Mine" passages, with his versions and variants, is attempting to capture reality as it is, in order to "come close to living truth." Reality has different versions, different perspectives, so the writer has to present those versions in order to present a picture of reality. A writer has a relationship with his hero, and in order to be fair and truthful, Bitov even discusses the bringing of the writer and hero together in time. In an appendix to the novel, "Bitov" meets Leva. The narrator discusses books as dissolving into life, and that is exactly what happens in this book, as the hero and author part company. An appendix to the novel is called "Achilles and the Tortoise (The Relationship Between

Hero and Author)” (340). The book dissolves into life, but life keeps going on . . . and so does *Pushkin House*. The commentary was written from 1971 to 1978. In recent editions of the novel, the “Commentary” has become “Commentaries” (“Kommentarii”), with a section, “Scraps (Appendix to the Commentary)” (“Obrezki [Prilozhenie k kommentariiu]”) (“Kommentarii 481-86), that was written in 1971, but not previously added to the published commentary.

Some of the “scraps” contain alternative titles that Bitov had been contemplating for *Pushkin House*. Some relate directly to the topics we have been pursuing here, the attempt, in the novel, to reflect the chilling reality and the attempt to show it in a realistic fashion. He says that the titles with “house” are all “terrifying” (“strashnye”), thus using a form of the same word he uses to describe Leva’s state near the end of the book (and Evgeny’s state in “The Bronze Horseman”). Bitov includes *The Boarded Up House* (*Zakolochennyi dom*), *Bleak House* (*Kholodnyi dom*), *Icy House* (*Ledianoi dom*), *The Big House* (*Bolshoi dom*) (this is what KGB headquarters were called), *The Yellow House* (*Zheltyi dom*) (this was what insane asylums were called), and then, finally, *Pushkin House*. The purpose of a subtitle, he writes, was to define the genre. He includes, among many others, the following: *Synopsis of the Novel* (*Konspekt romana*), *The Draft of the Novel* (*Nabrosok romana*), *Novel-Model*, *Novel-Framework* (*Roman-Model’*, *Roman-Ostov*), *Two Versions* (*Dve versii*), and *History with Trampings and Breaches* (*Istoriia s toptaniiami i proryvami*) (“Kommentarii” 482-83).

In the newly added “Scraps” section of the commentaries, in speaking about the form of his novel, Bitov writes, “We wanted to vindicate ourselves with the premeditated and consciously created disruptions, we thought up fairly figurative terms to elucidate the forms of this work. . . . Or we wanted to go through architecture with aplomb, to talk about contemporary styles where the builder consciously does not conceal parts of some concrete form or other, when he lets the steel reinforcement stick out—as if to say, the material speaks for itself” (“Kommentarii” 483-84). This is exactly what we,

the readers, see with the various versions and variants, the “Italics Are Mine” passages, the inclusion of Leva’s article, his ideas for future articles, the appendices, the commentaries, and the appendix to the commentary, where the above quotation is found. Bitov attempts to be true to the process of writing the novel, just as he attempts to be true to outlining the life process of his characters.

In the next paragraph of “Scraps,” Bitov writes, “That’s all nonsense. The novel is written in the only form and only method possible: I wrote it the only way I could. I think it can’t be any other way. All prose is the necessity of extricating oneself from a sentence written by chance. All style is the attempt to get out of the rickety and collapsing complex syntactic structure of the sentence, and not to get bogged down in it; the whole novel is the attempt, once you have started on it, to find a way out of the situation into which you have gotten” (484).¹⁸ Bitov, in his novel, adheres to the Brussels lace principle by showing us both the design and what holds the design together. He shows this structurally, and he shows this in terms of the structure of Soviet life. By suppressing their own rebellion with their own strength, people are the absences that hold the design together.

So after all this, is there any hope, in the world depicted by Bitov in *Pushkin House*? For an answer to that question, we must return to “Life in Windy Weather,” where creativity and inspiration were connected to truth. We must return to Bitov’s initial responses—the energy of integrity and honesty, the joy of freedom—when he read “Fourth Prose” for the first time. We must return to the honesty and integrity of expression that Bitov found in “Fourth Prose” and in the person who wrote “Fourth Prose.” We must return to Mandelstam’s statement about Brussels lace—that the air, pierced holes, and absences are as important as is the design. We know that Bitov, in *Pushkin House*, had been describing the negative forces of “devils invisible to the eye.” We have seen his use of wind and rain imagery. We have seen the negative effect of silence and absences upon Leva. We have seen the negative forces of terror that are present in the everyday life of Leva and

others. Bitov also weaves into his novel examples of an energy that can counter the energy of negative forces. There is a positive energy that can combat those “devils invisible to the eye,” yet it is an energy that does not *directly* do battle with an “enemy.”

It is the force of freedom, of that “secret freedom” about which Modest Platonovich writes in “The Sphinx.” This is an intangible force that, as Leva writes in “Three Prophets,” anyone can *choose*. This is a life that is marked by the “inner freedom” that Leva discusses in his article, that same article that we, as readers, know, bears the imprint of Modest Platonovich’s free spirit and ideas. This is a life, as Modest Platonovich writes, that is free, no matter what the political regime. This is a life that is lived in integrity. This is a life that is lived in muteness, in silence, when that is required by one’s inner being, rather than a life that speaks out, distorting the meaning of words. This muteness, silence, differs from Leva’s father’s concealing of information from Leva. In the former case, silence protects the truth, and in the latter, it leads to lies.

This is a secret freedom that contains within itself a spirit of rebellion against conformity and against complicity with a political regime, but paradoxically, it is, at the same time, *not* a rebellion. It is that free spirit that Pushkin and Mozart represented. It is that free spirit that meant that they never looked over their shoulder to compare themselves to anyone else. They did not have to rebel. They were just themselves.

This is the secret freedom that we glimpse in the comments of Modest Platonovich when he says that he is astounded that people do not question, that they take for granted the most surprising and yet elemental things in life—like water.¹⁹ This is the energy of freedom that is present in Modest Platonovich’s statement to Leva that air and water—the free entities that everyone takes for granted—are much more valuable than precious stones. This is the energy of secret freedom that is present in Modest Platonovich’s statement that human beings are attempting to violate nature, in using strength (again, that word “*sila*” used in a negative way). He says that they

are attempting to break the lock of nature in order to discover its secret, in order to gain control over nature, rather than acknowledging that humankind is a part of the larger whole of nature. This is the secret freedom that infuses Modest Platonovich's statement that if we do not look reality in the eye now, it will be too late when man realizes that technological progress is destroying the earth and the natural processes of earth as we know it will break down.

This is the spirit of "inner freedom," of "secret freedom" that Modest Platonovich talks about when he speaks, in "The Sphinx," about the "poet's function," when he speaks about the fact that each person must fulfill his function. "On the Poet's Function" ("O naznachanii poëta") is the title of a speech that Blok wrote at the same time that he wrote the poem, "Pushkin House" ("Pushkinskii dom"), from which Bitov quotes in one of the two epigraphs opening the novel as whole. The Blok poem was written in 1921 in honor of the eighty-fourth anniversary of Pushkin's death. The accompanying speech speaks about Pushkin's internal, untrammelled freedom, about his dedication to culture, about the fact that the essence of what he stood for lives on, about the fact that the essence of poetry is immutable. He writes that the function, the purpose of the poet is to create harmony and order out of chaos and confusion. The poet, he says, is the "son of harmony," and it is his responsibility to insert harmony into the external world. The task of the poet, Blok asserts, is to "reveal the depths" of the spirit, to remove the cover from a sound, and to ensure that sounds and words form a unified harmony (163). Blok writes that the common people demand that the poet serve the external world (164). The only function of the poet, he states, is one of universal culture (165). He speaks about Pushkin's words, "secret freedom." The poet, he says, dies without air, without the breath of freedom. Blok warns bureaucrats not to encroach upon the mysterious function of true poetry (167).

Pushkin House ends with Modest Platonovich's impassioned cry, based on Pushkin's and Blok's words, for freedom. It ends with his plea for people to choose the road that is always free. It ends with his quotation, from Blok's

poem, “Pushkin House,” of Pushkin’s “secret freedom,” and with Blok’s plea for Pushkin’s help with the “mute struggle” (353). It ends with Modest Platonovich’s question about finding the true meaning of the word (355). The intangible forces of creativity and freedom have the last word in Bitov’s book. The genuine, true word, the book, culture, and the continuity of culture are all present in Modest Platonovich’s composition.

The importance of the continuity of culture was essential to the writings of Mandelstam. In so many ways, then, we see that Mandelstam is, as Bitov said, a “key to *Pushkin House*.” In the Bitov works that led directly to the creation of the novel, in direct and indirect references to Mandelstam, in the affinity of Bitov’s and Mandelstam’s Brussels lace principle, and in the commitment to and continuity of culture, important to Mandelstam and Bitov, we can acknowledge the importance of Mandelstam’s “energy” to Bitov.

When we think of the idea with which Bitov began, the idea of a person’s “liquidation of his own revolt,” of the “slave’s suppression of his own rebellion with his own strength,” we know that Bitov had in mind the particular situation of the Soviet Union. Yet it is true that Bitov highlights a universal human trait. Most people, in various ways, deal with, or have dealt with, or refuse to deal with, the struggle to be true to one’s inner self. Most people struggle, or refuse to struggle, with the demands of an external society and/or of individuals attempting to take one away from that inner core of personal freedom. Most people move between those same intangible forces, positive and negative—the external and/or inner voices of totalitarianism and of freedom—about which Bitov is writing. The British psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott, in his book, *Playing and Reality*, has a chapter on exactly this struggle. He also devotes some attention to the struggle for personal freedom and creativity in totalitarian societies (53-64, 65-85).

In one of the appendices to *Pushkin House*, entitled “The Hero’s Profession,” Bitov facetiously lists a number of professions that he rejected

for his hero: night watchman, architect, physician, and bridge-builder. Although he rejects them for Leva, by the end of the book, Bitov figuratively fulfills the function of each of these professions. Bitov, as a writer, is like the night watchman, for he is observing the night side, the “wrong side,” “underside,” “seamy side,” the “other side” (“iznanka”) of life. He looks at places where people do not usually look because they are asleep. (In “Notes from around the Corner,” Bitov writes that one of his enduring themes has been “the lulling of the consciousness . . . the substitution of reflex for consciousness, . . . so characteristic of our times” [180]). Like Mandelstam, he is an architect, for he builds (and tears down) his “house,” the novel *Pushkin House*. His hero uses glue to help put Pushkin House back together again. Bitov shows his readers the “materials” with which he builds his novel-house: “Italics are Mine” sections, appendices, commentaries, and appendices to the commentary. Bitov is the doctor who, like Chekhov, diagnoses the disease. We also recall that in the “Italics are Mine” passage that begins Part Two, “A Hero of Our Time,” the author urges his readers to read the introduction to that Lermontov novel. In his “Author’s Introduction,” Lermontov notes that in presenting the “hero of his time,” he is setting forth “a portrait composed of all the vices” of his “generation in the fullness of their development” (2). Finally, Bitov in this novel is a builder of bridges, for he connects the past and the present, the underside of life and life’s surfaces, nonreality and reality, experience and life, absences and presences, existence and nonexistence, literature and life.

And when, with the impetus of Mandelstam, Bitov, in *Pushkin House*, brings the reader “close to the living truth,” when he helps the reader see, build, diagnose, and connect; when he helps the reader learn lessons in life, nothing at all changes in life, but the energy of honesty changes everything. As Bitov wrote, after reading Mandelstam, he was struck by his spirit of rebellion, his spirit of freedom. As he writes in “Notes from around the Corner,” the meaning of life is different. The “dimensions are different.” With the truth, the reader can take a deep breath that sets things in order, that

same kind of deep breath that makes one stand tall, that same kind of “rectifying breath” that Bitov discovered in Mandelstam, that same kind of breath, the breath of honesty and inner freedom, that the reader finds in *Pushkin House*.

NOTES

¹ Bitov discusses the history of the creative process of “Life in Windy Weather” in “Posleslovie. Razgovor s knigoizdatelem” (94).

² Mandelstam apologized, but Gornfeld nevertheless published an accusatory letter in a newspaper. The letter served as the pretext for “Fourth Prose.” Russian scholar Mikhail L. Gasparov writes in a 12 January 2004 e-mail letter to me, that when he first read “Fourth Prose” in a typewritten text (it was not allowed to be published), he and others of his generation, which is Bitov’s generation, had no idea of this background information since Mandelstam does not include the specific details of the misunderstanding.

³ Herzen House was, at the time, a center of writers’ organizations, and Mandelstam lived there in 1922-1923 and 1932-1933. Alexander Herzen had been born in that house.

⁴ Its first publication, “Notes from the Corner [*sic*],” was in English, without the subtitle. It first appeared in Russian in *Novyi mir*, No. 2, 1990, 142-65, without the subtitle. When it was published in Andrei Bitov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Molodaia Gvardiia, 1991) 183-230, an author’s note at the bottom of the first page of “Zapiski iz-za ugla,” describes it as a “diary of a single combat fighter” (“dnevnik edinobortsa”). The subtitle is included in its appearance in Bitov’s collection, *Dachnaia mestnost’. Dubl’*.

⁵ Bitov, “Zapiski,” in Bitov, *Dachnaia* 81. The word for opening the window wide, *raspakhivaiut*, is the same verb that Bitov repeatedly uses in *Pushkin House* to describe the post-Stalin thaw.

⁶ For an insightful discussion of architectural motifs in *Pushkin House* and of the image of the house in that novel and elsewhere in Russian literature of the time, see Spieker, *Figures* 105-07.

⁷ For an interpretation of the novel that emphasizes Bitov's use of ring and circle imagery, the importance of relationships and interdependencies, including those of organic chemistry, against the background of the psychological effects of the Stalin era upon people's family connections (Part One), peer relationships (Part Two), and creative talents (Part Three), see Chapter 11 in my *Andrei Bitov* (202-45).

⁸ For an excellent article on "The Bronze Horseman" and *Pushkin House* parallels, see Meyer. Meyer is especially good on the Leva-Evgeny parallels in this chapter in Bitov's novel.

⁹ The commentary first surfaced as a separate, unpublished manuscript, "Appendix to Andrei Bitov's Novel, *Pushkin House*" ("Prilozhenie k romanu Andreia Bitova *Pushkinskii dom*"), under a pseudonym, È. Khappenenn (A. Happening). Under the title "Commentary" ("Kommentarii"), it appears in some subsequent published editions of the novel. The first published edition of the novel in Russian (Ardis, 1978) did not include the "Commentary," nor did the first edition in English (trans. Susan Brownsberger, Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1987). The only English-language edition with the commentary is the Ardis edition of 1990. Subsequent editions in Russian have the commentary. See Andrei Bitov, *Pushkinskii dom. Roman* (Moscow, 1989); Andrei Bitov, *Pushkinskii dom. Roman* (St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Ivana Limbakha, 1999); Andrei Bitov, *Puskinskii dom* (2000). The latter two have "Commentaries," including materials, written in 1971, but published only in these later editions. The "Commentaries" also appear in the *Pushkinskii dom* volume of Andrei Bitov, *Imperiia*, vol. 2, 351-96. The commentary does not appear in the *Pushkinskii dom* section of the one-volume edition, *Imperiia v chetyrekh izmereniakh* (Fortuna Limited, 2002).

For an interesting discussion of the role of commentary in Bitov's writings, see Von Hirsch.

¹⁰ In a 12 January 2004 e-mail letter to me, Gasparov provides interesting historical background for Bitov's response to Mandelstam's words about a Gillette razor blade. He writes that Georgii S. Knabe, an octogenarian Russian scholar of Roman history, noted, "'Have you noticed that in our lifetimes, three cultural epochs—each of which would have stretched out for several centuries—now fit into one life? In our youth, we shaved with 'dangerous razors' ('опасными бритвами'), resembling knives, then with 'safety razors' ('безопасными бритвами') (Gillette), and now we shave with electric razors!'" Gasparov continues, "In Mandelstam's time, Gillette razors were a rarity (perhaps only imported); our fathers shaved only with these 'dangerous' knives; after World War II, Gillette razors started to be widely distributed (but they were patriotically renamed 'safety' razors, and the word Gillette was forgotten), and people of Bitov's and my age learned to shave only with these razors, with the result that the rare word Gillette remained an enigma."

¹¹ For a detailed analysis of the poem, see Ronen 225-329.

¹² In this context he mentions these lines: "That's the cartilage of the Underwood [typewriter]: so quickly tear out the key—/ and you'll intuitively find the little bone;" ("To undervuda khriashch: skoree vyrvi klavish—/i shchuch'iu kostochku naidesh';") ("Tekst" 283).

¹³ For more on the Mandelstam-Bitov links and on the Pushkin-Mandelstam-Bitov links in "Armenia Lessons," see Chances 133-37. Also on "Armenia Lessons," see Spieker, "Andrei Bitov's Bookish Landscapes." and Spieker, *Figures* 80-83. For more on the significance of "Journey to Arzum" and other Pushkin works, including "The Prophet" ("Prorok"), a poem discussed in *Pushkin House*, see Chances 132-33, 136-37.

¹⁴ Bitov notes, in the commentary, that people felt that once the glue had been awarded the Stalin Prize, Stalin was doomed (406). Does it make sense,

then, by analogy, to consider Leva as doomed because he had received the official “prize”?

¹⁵ In a real-life link of Bitov, Bukhshtab, and Mandelstam, Bukhshtab’s article on Mandelstam’s poetry, which had not been published in the USSR, first appeared in print in English, in 1971, the same year that Bitov finished writing *Pushkin House*. The article came out in the inaugural issue of the journal *Russian Literature Triquarterly*, published by Ardis Publishers, the same publisher that, seven years later, put out the first Russian edition of *Pushkin House* (Bukhshtab 262-82).

¹⁶ Bitov, ““Dvenadtsat” (Konspekt romana *Pushkinskii dom*),” in Bitov, *Pushkinskii dom* (2000), 484. And, of course, “The Twelve” (“Dvenadtsat”), the title—set off in quotation marks—of the “synopsis,” is the title of Blok’s long narrative poem about the Bolshevik revolution. The second epigraph to Bitov’s verse synopsis of his novel comes from that Blok poem, and also contains an expression of rage, rebellion and revenge: “He escaped, the scoundrel! Just you wait, stop, I’ll deal with you tomorrow!” (“Utek, podlets! Uzho, postoi,/Raspravlius’ zavtra ia s toboi!”).

¹⁷ Andrei Bitov, *La maison Pouchkine. Roman de l’humiliation infinie*. Trans. Philippe Menecier (Paris: Albin Michel, 1989). In my copy of the 1978 Ardis edition, Bitov penned in, in parentheses, on the title page, the words “Roman o beskonechnom unizhenii” (“A Novel of Endless Humiliation”).

¹⁸ In a 12 January 2004 e-mail letter to me, Gasparov points out that this sentence is like the structuralists’ (A. Greimas and others) idea that “a story’s plot is constructed according to the same rules as is the grammar of a sentence,” an idea that his generation had heard about, but had not read much about.

¹⁹ In another “link by association” of Mandelstam to *Pushkin House*, it is curious to note that Gasparov, in his preface to Mandelstam’s *Stikhotvoreniia*, mentions characteristics of Mandelstam’s personality that are true for Modest Platonovich as well. Gasparov quotes Nadezhda

Mandelstam, “he delighted in everything that people don’t notice: a stream of cold water coming out of the faucet . . .” (10).

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