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## NOTES ON ARONZON

И какая это радость  
день и вечность перепутать!  
Л. Аронзон, «Еще в утренних туманах...»<sup>1</sup>

Вот жизнь дана, что делать с ней?  
Л. Аронзон, «Увы, живу, мертвецки мертв...»<sup>2</sup>

My first encounter with the poetry of Leonid Aronzon goes back more than twenty-five years, to a day (I think in 1981) when Arkady Rovner introduced me to Richard McKane's translations of Aronzon. While these translations were certainly intriguing, my initial reading also seemed to demonstrate something we all know about translation: much is lost. What wasn't lost on me however was the extraordinary passion, even devotion that Rovner and his poet-wife Victoria Andreyeva displayed in regard to Aronzon. To them he was a figure of election, the poet-mystic with experience of other worlds and their kings. Some eight years later, having myself by then mastered Russian (a gross exaggeration! but a quest in part fueled by my desire to read Aronzon in the original) I set out to do a small anthology of the Leningrad cultural Underground of the 1970s and 80s.<sup>3</sup> Once again Aronzon's name (part of a genealogy that included the central figures of the Russian Silver Age but also somewhat lesser-known ones such as Kuzmin, Vvedensky, Kharms, Poplavsky and others) came up repeatedly, and again with special reverence, from the mouths of contemporary poets such as Elena Shvarts, Viktor Krivulin, and Vladimir Erl'. As a 'Westerner,' professionally trained to view all contemporary Russian poetry through the lens of Joseph Brodsky, the frequent invocation of Aronzon, an exact contemporary and (as I had come to learn) something of a rival of Brodsky, presented a kind of mystery and challenge. The publication, by Ivan Limbakh in 2006, of the splendid two-volume *Sobranie sočinenij* of Aronzon, has made two things eminently clear: the solidity of their judgment of Aronzon as a major poet and the dramatic challenge and continued relevance of Aronzon (and much of the Leningrad Under-

<sup>1</sup> L. Aronzon, *Sobranie sočinenij v dvuch tomach*, T. 1, St. Peterburg 2006, 230.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, T. 1, 197.

<sup>3</sup> Published as "Madmen, Metaphysicians and Poets: New and Underground Russian Writing" in a special issue of *The Literary Review* (Spring 1991, Volume 34, Number 3, 293-415).

ground/Unofficial Culture of the Soviet-Russian 1970s and 1980s) to the current cultural moment.

To the ‘unofficial’ poets of the Leningrad Underground of the 1970s Aronzon’s significance is felt in a variety of ways. He is of course a precursor, having died (in 1970) just as the post-1968 poetic generation and its literary “samizdat” were taking shape. His biography combines a commitment to absolute inner freedom, so central to the ethic of the Leningrad Underground, with a sensitivity, human warmth, humour and joy (paradise, “raj”, and garden, “sad”, are surely his favourite words and central tropes) in a Leningrad (and Soviet Russia) that was strikingly short on these qualities. Perhaps most importantly, Aronzon was both a technically accomplished verse maker and thus a crucial link with the Silver Age, as well as a stunning incarnation of the pure, indeed primordial Poet in an age that professed to live without them. (This tendency applied as much to Western Europe as it did to Soviet Russia.) Aronzon thus combined the sophistication of Russia’s Petersburg tradition with the simplicity, even ‘idiocy’ of the archaic poet-singer who proclaims love, beauty and transcendence in a world of evil, time and death. Yes, Aronzon’s poetry was, then and now, felt in some sense to be ‘naïve’, immediately lyrical, intimate, and bound to nature – yet at the same time his poems are infinitely complex, as complex as the self, language and world Aronzon experienced. Unlike so many of his contemporaries, Aronzon did not strive to be a citizen-poet in the Soviet-Russian or a ‘professional’ poet in the Western sense; not a poet of thought and premeditation who constructed himself and his verse ideologically, as part of an (officially or unofficially) sanctioned circle, organisation, or academy. Rather Aronzon was and is a poet of the complexities of language and consciousness, of mind *and* body, of song and spirit; a paradisaical sensibility that sees transformation everywhere, in everything: thing into word, word into thing, hill into water, all into One, an inherently metaphorical and symbolist striving in a world supercharged by the senses and separated from its eternal source by experience itself – “Ne dokazat’ Tebja primerom: / pered Toboj i mirom ščit“. At bottom:

Всё лицо: лицо – лицо,  
пыль – лицо, слова – лицо,  
всё – лицо. Его. Творца.  
Только Сам он без лица.<sup>4</sup>

This perception, this direct experience of the essential facelessness and invisibility of the Creator lies at the heart of Aronzon’s complex vision. For Aronzon as lyrical sensualist the visible is nevertheless rooted in the unseen: it is its foretaste and its aftertaste. Paradise, he assures us, was and will be, but outside

<sup>4</sup> Aronzon 2006, T. 1, 201.

of time and space. For now, though, we are inside them; and our higher humanness consists in seizing upon those signs, achieving those states, that point toward Heaven. While unabashedly worshipping beauty, which is the essential pointer, in its various forms (nature, God, poetry, and his wife Rita) Aronzon always remained acutely aware that the beauty he sought (and the self he would be) lay beyond the beauty (and the self) he could *know*. In the collision between time and eternity that is experience Aronzon became ever more conscious, and tormentingly so, of the necessarily spectral, constructed, indeed theatrical, nature of all experience. While the complex lessons of Pasternak, Khlebnikov and Zabolotsky were certainly assimilated by Aronzon, this poet of the third Soviet generation did not claim to have a key to understanding, to mastering the world, but rather described the various states of tension between knowing and unknowing. In other words, for all the ecstasy that pervades Aronzon's work, it never falls into Utopian traps (whether aesthetic, cognitive, or personal) because acutely aware that the roots of the world are in the sky. Here, as in other ways, the link with Aleksandr Vvedensky, whether based on coincidence of vision or a combination of coincidence and direct influence,<sup>5</sup> is especially strong. Both poets demonstrate that it is at the limits of language as rational structure, at the breaking point of time, logic, self, knowledge and thought, that the experience and expression of the mystery of things (what Vvedensky called 'miracle') becomes possible: "Uvažaj bednost' jazyka. Uvažaj niščie mysli".<sup>6</sup> This journey to the center of thought-things, which the two poets pursued in opposite directions (Aronzon toward embrace, Vvedensky toward flight<sup>7</sup>) produced an apophatic vision in which poetic experience culminates in a form of non-understanding that makes possible an experience of what is, freed of the bonds of time, logic, and death. As early as 1961, in an untitled poem "O Gospodu, pomiluj mja", Aronzon wrote (in a very Tiutchevian spirit):

И в отраженьях бытия –  
 потусторонняя реальность,  
 и этой ночи театральность  
 превыше, Господи, меня.<sup>8</sup>

Into this darkness poetry casts a very special, if somewhat ironic, light. With its clarity of form poetry becomes a privileged vehicle of experience, one that

<sup>5</sup> According to Vladimir Erl', who was both Aronzon's friend and a primary channel for the dissemination of Vvedensky's work, Aronzon only read Vvedensky at the end of his life.

<sup>6</sup> A.I. Vvedenskij, *Polnoe sobranie sočinenij*, Ann Arbor 1980, T. 1, 142.

<sup>7</sup> While the Vvedensky-Aronzon connection is beyond the limits of these *Notes*, I should indicate that what I am pointing toward here is Aronzon's tendency to concentration of linguistic energy, Vvedensky toward dispersal.

<sup>8</sup> Aronzon 2006, T. 1, 326.

both reveals meaning and articulates its limits. Face to face with this elusiveness, style as performance or meaning as self-expression can no longer hold. Instead a new kind of lyrical hero is born, a figure of language and fantasy, simultaneously classical and unreal, indeed a mask that nevertheless seeks eternity in immediacy, nature outside of weather, God outside of suffering:

Утратив задушевность слога,  
я отношусь к писанию строго  
и Бога светлые слова  
связую, дабы тронуть Вас  
не созерцаньем вечной пытки  
иль тяжбы с властью и людьми:  
примите си труды мои  
как стародавнюю попытку  
витыми тропами стиха,  
приняв личину пастуха,  
идти туда, где нет погоды,  
где только Я передо мной,  
внутри поэзии самой  
открыть гармонию природы...<sup>9</sup>

However, this imaginary pastoral poet's solitary journey to perfection and transcendence is inherently unrealizable: what is achieved instead is an experience of desire ("Bylo celyj den' segodnja, / perejti želajia v zavtra...")<sup>10</sup> that points to the real goal of desire: a world outside this one, governed by different rules. In this world time (weather) does not go away but instead, if attended to, reveals ever more convincingly the *necessary* incompleteness of experience, the absence in presence, of which art is one, indeed perhaps the supreme example:

Погода – дождь. Взираю на свечу,  
которой нет. Не знаю состоянья,  
в котором оказаться я хочу,  
но и скончаться нет во мне желанья.

Сплошное «нет». Как будто бы к врачу  
пришёл я показать своё страданье  
и место аааааааа я неееееет ему мычу,  
и нету сил мне оборвать мычанье.

Но мы способны смастерить сонет:  
сбить доски строчек гвоздиками рифмы.  
На этот труд два полчаса убив, мы

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., T. 2, 61.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

не просчитались: гроб есть и скелет.  
 Убитый час мы помещаем в гроб  
 и, прежде чем закрыть, целуем в лоб.<sup>11</sup>

The sonnet form, often used by Aronzon and of which he is a modern master, points to one of the most productive tensions in his work: that between Tradition and novelty. (One of several ways in which Aronzon reminds one of Baudelaire.) From the side of Tradition Aronzon can be read as a classicist (or even archaist) in spirit, ruled by form and order, recognition and repetition. In his sonnets he in part really becomes the self-proclaimed, perennial pastoral Greek poet of harmonious beauty that Russia couldn't produce. On the other, and at the same time, Aronzon's poetry is modern disorder, a confession of non-being: his Poet creates literally out of Nothing and always feels himself drawn back 'there', as if to his source. In this sense, rather than classical harmony based on rational ordering of discrete experience, poetic form becomes an arbitrary integument enveloping randomness – but here randomness miraculously takes on a *positive* value because outside time and logic's polar oppositions. The sacred and miraculous now draw near:

Уже в спокойном умиленье  
 смотрю на то, что я живу.  
 Пред каждой тварью на колени  
 я встану в мокрую траву.

Я эту ночь продлю стихами,  
 что врут, как ночью соловей.  
 Есть благодать в музыке, в дыханье,  
 в печали, в милости Твоей.

Мне все доступны наслажденья  
 Коль всё, что есть вокруг, – они.  
 Высоким бессловесным пенъем  
 Приходят, возвращаясь, дни.<sup>12</sup>

In this small, astonishingly beautiful poem Aronzon brings together the divided consciousness and prayerful attitude to nature of the traditional Romantic; the critical self-consciousness of the modern poet who describes all experience in terms of poetry and language (and their limitation, in silence); who both celebrates and equates the song of the nightingale – the traditional poem – with lies (“vran'ë”); and perhaps most amazingly, who marries sensual – indeed sexual –

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., T. 1, 147.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., T. 1, 145.

energy with spiritual in a way rarely seen before in Russian verse. Where then does Aronzon come from and where, to whom, does he belong?

Clearly Aronzon is not a Soviet poet; but he is equally not an anti-Soviet poet, not a Soviet-Russian "man of the 60s" with his liberal-intellectual aesthetic, political and ethical concerns.<sup>13</sup> Aronzon participates instead in a different but no less significant strand of the international and Russian poetic tradition; one that is rooted in Modernism (and to what led up to Modernism) but which was 'exploded' by the multiple dislocations and holocausts of 1914-1946.<sup>14</sup> Like the Beat poets Aronzon was a man-child as if born, indeed reborn from out of the ruins, from the ashes of the end of the world (Hiroshima, Kolyma, and Dachau will do), with an insatiable thirst both for body and soul. Like two of his favourite musicians, Glen Gould and John Coltrane, Aronzon was simultaneously hyper-spiritual and deeply sensual; a poet complex yet naïve, self-centered yet universal, electrically sensitive to the Mystery, to the wonder, pain and ecstasy of being – for him, all matter was potentially music.

With Kafka and Beckett on one side, the Beatles and Bob Dylan on another, Pasolini and Godard filming it, the Zeitgeist of the period was one of absolutes: All or Nothing, All *and* Nothing. While for many the result of this cult of desire was an ethic of political resistance and public revolt, for others the unlimited, in some sense empty landscape of the post-war period entailed instead not mere self-affirmation (and self-mythologization) but a wider sense of the human, which now included the vegetable, the animal and the divine. For art, the sacred and the banal 'threatened' to merge – anything and anyone could, must make art. Extending in spirit as far East as it did West, it did not so much seek to realize desire as to make a virtue of powerlessness.

This is not to move Aronzon to Paris or London: his experiences and expression are clearly delimited by the Leningrad-Petersburg topos and the vast expanses of the Russian north, Soviet Central Asia and the Caucasus. Nevertheless Aronzon's obvious Buddhist tendencies; his feeling for the sacredness of the earth and the rituals of the body; his sense of the absurd and the oniric: all of these are signal elements of the counterculture of the 1960s, some of whose remnants are still with us today. One of his Surrealist-Absurdist-Dostoevskian-Buddhist sonnets of 1968, entitled "Zabytyj sonet" ("Forgotten Sonnet" or perhaps even "Sonnet of Forgetting") can stand as a quintessence of this synthesis:

<sup>13</sup> Brodsky comes much closer to that ideal.

<sup>14</sup> In this sense Aronzon was probably no less drawn, although in a more private way, to Achmatova, the last great living link with that tradition, than were her 'orphans' who draped themselves in her legacy.

В часы бессоницы люблю я в кресле спать  
и видеть сон, не отличимый  
от тех картин, что наяву мной зрими  
и, просыпаясь, видеть сон опять:

старинное бюро, свеча, кровать,  
тяжёлый стол, и двери, и за ними  
в пустом гробу лежит старуха вини –  
я к ней иду, чтоб в лоб поцеловать.

Однако ночь творит полураспад:  
в углу валяется забытый кем-то сад,  
томя сознание, падает паук,

свет из окна приобретает шорох,  
лицо жены моей повернуто на юг,  
и всё – в печали, нет уже которой.<sup>15</sup>

Love – at bottom love for Rita, which extends outward, to embrace everything – lies at the very center of Aronzon's considerable poetic achievement. Through it we have his reverential attention to experience; his humanistic critique of anthropomorphism (in this way he is quite unexpectedly with Derrida and Deleuze) and a 'deconstruction' of language, identity and God; perhaps most profoundly and prophetically, there is his growing perception of the inseparability of nature and culture: they are a single physico-spiritual entity that is a sign of a world beyond it. In one of his great love poems he writes:

Любовь моя, спи, золотко моё,  
вся кожей атласною одета.  
Мне кажется, что мы встречались где-то:  
мне так знаком сосок твой и бельё.

О, как к лицу! о, как тебе! о, как идёт!  
весь этот день, весь этот Бах, всё тело это!  
и этот день, и этот Бах, и самолёт  
летающий там, летающий здесь, летающий где-то!

И в этот сад, и в этот Бах, и в этот миг  
усни, любовь моя, усни, не укрываясь:  
и лик и зад, и зад и пах, и пах и лик –  
пусть всё уснёт, пусть всё уснёт, моя живая!

Не приближаясь ни на йоту, ни на шаг,  
отдайся мне во всех садах и падежах!<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Aronzon 2006, T. 1, 157.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., T. 1, 180-181.

Repetition, a hallmark of Aronzon's style, reaches here one of its most revealing summits – not only does everything seem to rhyme with everything else, affirming the ecstatic intuition of the connection of All, but the poem itself, this sonnet, is part of a diptych in which the second poem is identical to (mirrors) the first: "Vsě lico!"<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless Aronzon, like the decade of the 1960s, came to what we, the living, would have to call a bad end, in time. While his best friend, Alexander Altshuler, believes that the gunshot wound that killed Aronzon, in a rural meadow outside Tashkent, was accidental, most other contemporary observers believe that Aronzon committed suicide: that his own death became the only, and indeed logical, 'solution' to the problems posed by his very bold life and art. The poetry certainly describes a trajectory of growing human negativity and despair, with even a notorious reference to suicide ("Čtob zastrelit' sja tut ne nado ni čerta: / ni tjaoty v duše, ni poroča v nagane...";<sup>18</sup> and yet (and perhaps not even "yet") there are not only numerous ecstatic moments in the poetry right up to the end but in form the poems tend to grow freer and looser (most strikingly in "Zapis' besed"), and generally more experimental, as the end nears. He also begins to write more of his ineffable prose. It is as though the bounds/bonds of culture can no longer contain him, as though he has reached, at age thirty-one, 'the verge of his confine' as it said of King Lear.

Where are we now? Surely in a world dominated by desire(s); but essentially violent desires that attempt to dominate and control others;<sup>19</sup> desire that posits power and obedience to power ('marketing') as culture; in which poetry – and there is less and less of the real thing – becomes harder and harder to find. This is a world that thinks it has outgrown Aronzon's brand of culture, of desire – for Aronzon, it can be said, is a poet of desire; but the desire Aronzon espied disclosed another, more essential object: a world *beyond* mere man and even 'mere' God, beyond politics *and* poetry, an aesthetic and an ethic that sees in what *can't* be seen our 'authentic' essence. Perhaps this all too human voice still has something to say to us:

Вода в садах, сады – в воде.  
Вдоль них спокойные прогулки,  
пустые замки Петербурга  
и небо при одной звезде.  
Красиво всё, печаль везде.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., T. 1, 201.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., T. 1, 217.

<sup>19</sup> Without doubt the most shocking discovery for this reader in Aronzon's *Sobranie sočinenij* is the second part (77-79 in Volume 2) of his 1969-70 play "Ėgotomia", with its depiction of unspeakably sordid sexual violence. It feels *far too* contemporary.



Внутри построенной природы  
брожу, как юноша безродный  
или как Пушкин в бороде.<sup>20</sup>

Who knows?

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<sup>20</sup> Aronzon 2006, T. 1, 171.