The Habit of Dramatization

Lev Rubinstein

The following translation of contemporary Russian poet Lev Rubinstein—what he terms a “poetic text,” should not be merely read. Rubinstein’s poetic texts should rather be engaged, installed, staged, and performed. They are scripts, tatters of speech, the ruins of discourses, set into conversation with other ruins.

Rubinstein, a former librarian at the Lenin Library in Moscow, began composing these poetic series on library index cards in the 1970s, influenced by avant-garde traditions, Zen, and postmodernism. What I love about his version of conceptualism is that his poems can be read either as a parody of discourses or as the renovation of the fragments of truth which they attempt to illuminate; in other words, I find the poems to touch on utter banalities which nonetheless contain elements of truth, even as they expose official truths as banal. He’s a lot of fun, dancing between “high” and “low,” but in the way that Frost believed poetry should “play for mortal stakes.” Since the late 1990s, Rubinstein has been writing weekly essays for various Russian publications, and recently has been involved in the democratic movements against Vladimir Putin.

The following work is from the forthcoming “Compleat” edition of Rubinstein’s work, due out from Ugly Duckling Presse in April, 2014 and translated by myself and Tatiana Tulchinsky.

-Phillip Metres

Philip Metres is the author of a number of books and chapbooks, most recently A Concordance of Leaves (Diode 2013), abu ghraib arias (Flying Guillotine 2011), winner of the 2012 Arab American Book Award in poetry, To See the Earth (Cleveland State 2008), and Behind the Lines: War Resistance Poetry on the American Homefront since 1941 (University of Iowa 2007). His work has appeared in Best American Poetry, and Inclined to Speak: Contemporary Arab American Poetry, and has garnered two NEA fellowships, the Thomas J. Watson Fellowship, four Ohio Arts Council Grants, the Beatrice Hawley Award (for the forthcoming Sand Opera), the Anne Halley Prize, the Arab American Book Award, and the Cleveland Arts Prize. He teaches literature and creative writing at John Carroll University in Cleveland, Ohio.

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By Lev Rubinstein
(translated by Philip Metres and Tatiana Tulchinsky)

1. QUIET!

2. And now again, again he calls and beckons,
Ahead he looms and calls, again.
Let’s follow him...

3. --Well, hello!
--Ah! Hi, hi!

4. --Hello, friends!
--Hello! Speak of the devil!

5. --Hello!
--Hello! Come in, take off your coat.

6. --And here I am! Hello!
--Hi! Come in. Everyone's here.

7. --Hello. How are things?
--Okay. And you?

8. QUIET!

9. Right on the brink of paradise
To go blind, deaf, half-paralyzed?

10. --Excuse me, please.
--Don’t worry, it’s nothing. Don’t worry.

11. --A thousand pardons. It appears I’m late.
--And how!

12. --Am I late? I’m sorry, dear.
--All right, already. It’s good that you came at all.

13. --Forgive me, Mama, that I came back late. You were probably worried!
--Well, yeah, but that’s okay.

14.
--If you can, forgive me please, Tamara.

--Well, okay, Victor. For the last time.

15.

--I want to apologize to your face, Laura, for my words. I was wrong.

--Okay, Borya, let’s not talk about it.

16.

--I extend my deepest apologies, Natalya Victorovna, for not restraining myself and slandering you with crude words.

--Thanks, Dmitry Borisovich, I accept your apologies. I hope it won’t happen again.

17.

QUIET!

18.

As long as an alien grief does not threaten,
We close our eyes to our own...

19.

--I want to invite you over.

--Thanks. I’d be happy to come.

20.

--Let’s visit Kolya. He’s sick.

--Let’s. But when?

21.

--Tanechka, want to dance?

--No way! I’m mad at you, Vadim!

22.

--Sergey Sergeevich, do you want to go for a stroll after lunch?

--I’m afraid I can’t. My heart seems to be acting up, Nikolai Dmitrievich.

23.

QUIET!

24.

Do you think it’s a picture of the world?
I think that it’s a medical chart...

25.

--How awful! I broke your tea cup!

--Oh, that’s nothing. Don’t worry about it.

26.

--How annoying! I lost my favorite fountain pen.

--It’s a trifle. Nothing to be upset about. I’ll give you an even better one.

27.

--I’m hurt. Slavik was terribly crude to me last night.

--Yes, very unpleasant.
28.

--Such awful pain in my ear!
--Oh, I feel for you! I’ve had inflammation of the inner ear, and I know what you’re talking about.

29.

--Just imagine: Vasya went downhill skiing and broke his leg. And now he’s in the hospital.
--Well, it could have ended far worse.

30.

QUIET!

31.

Away from them. Where should we...?
Imposter’s shadow, you’re always with me...

32.

--Can you break five rubles?
--Gladly.

33.

--Would you let me have a look at today’s newspaper?
--Sure. Here it is.

34.

--Couldn’t you move over to my place?
--Well, okay, I’ll do it.

35.

--Could you turn off the radio? My head hurts.
--Yes, of course.

36.

--Would it trouble you to change seats with me?
--Of course, not a problem. Here you go.

37.

--Could I ask you to open your window? A little breeze would be nice.
--Of course, with pleasure.

38.

--May I hang your coat somewhere else? It’s in the way here.
--Yes, of course.

39.

--Could you not smoke here? I can’t stand cigarette smoke.
--Okay, I won’t.

40.

QUIET!

41.

Open the curtain now with a casual gesture,
And look at what’s out there. What? Scared?
42.
--You’re dressed so stylishly today, Valya!
--Thanks, Anna Fedorovna!

43.
--Blue is so becoming on you. You look charming today, Tamara!
--Thanks. That’s nice to hear, Natalya Konstantinovna.

44.
--You are so elegant! That outfit looks great on you. And the color makes you look even younger, Nadya.
--Thanks, Allochka, I’m glad you like it.

45.
--You haven’t changed at all! Time has been easy on you, Semyon Evseevich.
--Well, that’s just your imagination, Ekaterina Vyacheslavovna!

46.
--And you look the same, Marina Petrovna!
--Oh, Grigory Filippovich! You’re just flattering me!

47.
--You’re such an interesting conversationalist. It’s so good to talk to you, Vladimir Ivanovich!
--I could say the same about you, Inna Sergeevna.

48.
--You have very expressive and lively hands. It’s immediately obvious that you’re a musician, Victor.
--Thanks, Liubochka.

49.
--You dance so well and lightly, Liusya!
--You too, Leonid.

50.
QUIET!

51.
Leave! I’m not afraid of you! Let go!
How can we evade such misfortune?

52.
--I’d recommend changing your hairstyle, Galya. It’s not very good on you.
--I’ll think about it, Nadezhda Fyodorovna.

53.
--Can I recommend that you not wear gray, Galochka? That color doesn’t work on you.
--Thanks for the advice, Tatyana Ivanovna.

54.
--Valeria, I’d advise you to use orthopedic shoes.
--Thanks. You’re probably right, Misha.

55.

QUIET!

56.

Kind of a man. He kind of loves. He kind of suffers.

He kind of speaks. He kind of breathes. He kind of lives.

57.

--Thanks for the wonderful gift, Kostya. You’re very attentive.

--You’re welcome, Zhenya. I’m glad you liked the flowers.

58.

--Many thanks, Olya, for bringing me this book.

--You’re welcome, Lilya.

59.

--From the bottom of my heart, I thank you, Ivan Grigorevich, for being so helpful.

--It’s nothing, Andrey Mikhailovich. It was not a problem.

60.

--Everything was so tasty, Tamara Fyodorovna! The pies were so marvelous. Thanks so much!

--You are welcome, Larisa!

61.

--QUIET!

62.

What is he like? What is he saying?

What do his words mean, known since the beginning?

Who thanks fate in advance

At the edge of the last decision?

63.

--Mama, will we go to the forest today?

--Yes, dear.

64.

--Young man, can you tell me what time it is?

--Unfortunately, I don’t have a watch.

65.

--Valya, can I borrow your textbook?

--Take it, but give it back soon.

66.

--Guys, let’s go to the stadium.

--No, Dimka, I have a test tomorrow. Have to study.

67.

--Grandpa, read me a book!

--Okay, honey.
68. --Doctor, can I get out of bed? I already feel better.
   --No, no, and again no. It’s way too early for that.

69. --Hey miss, what’s your name?
   --Why do you want to know?

70. --Mashenka, what brings you here? I didn’t expect to see you, of all people, among soccer fans.
   --I came to see what draws all you men here.

71. --Buddy, can I bum a cig?
   --I don’t smoke.

72. --Grandma, look away a minute.
   --Stop that, I’m busy!

73. --Hey girls, how do I get to Shevchenko Street?
   --We’re not from here.

74. --Son, I want to talk with you frankly.

75. --Boy, why are you hanging around here? Have you lost something?
   --No.

76. --Nikolay, are you aware of what you just said?
   --What did I say?

77. --My dear, you look sick!
   --Yeah, I don’t feel too well.

78. --QUIET!

79. Who is he? Who searches night and day
For the meaning of a single word?
Is he gone? But will he return?
They await him here, thinking of him.

80. --Well, goodbye, don’t be a stranger, come again.
--Thanks. Goodbye.

81.
--Farewell. Thanks for everything. Don’t think badly of me.

--Best of luck! Bye.

82.

-- See you soon. Call me.

--And you call too. See you soon.

83.

--Well, until next summer?

--Yes, until next summer.

84.

--Well, all the best. Break a leg.

--Thanks!

85.

--QUIET!

86.

Who is he? Where did he come from?

He came and put an end to death.

And the rain has stopped, the ash thinned out.

And the rooster’s crow has resumed.

87.

--A touchstone, thrown at random, reaches its goal. Isn’t that so?

--Without a doubt.
--I get it, you don’t have to go on…

96.
DAMN, CAN’T YOU BE QUIETER?!

97
STILL QUIETER.

98.
JUST LIKE THAT.

REFERENCES

[1]