

## ANXIETY AND THE RUSSIAN SILVER AGE

Part of the meaning of Stonehenge is that we do not remember what it means.

—Gary Taylor, *Cultural Selection*

In the course of a conversation [with her son, Lev Gumilev] about the Russian poetry of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Anna Akhmatova mentioned the Golden Age of Pushkin, and they had roughly (as preserved by prison camp memory) the following exchange: "That's fine, but the twentieth century may just as well be called the 'Silver Age' . . ." "A remarkable characterization! Sell it to me!" Anna Andreevna exclaimed. "Only for a quarter-liter bottle of vodka!" Lev Nikolaevich was quick to respond and was rewarded immediately with the required sum of money, whereupon the vodka that appeared on the table was consumed in a convivial atmosphere, and Anna Andreevna earned the right to a period description that subsequently became a common label. Without attempting to join a historico-literary discussion of the origin of the term, I'm just relating faithfully Lev Nikolaevich's story, whether it is true or not. However, he sincerely believed himself to be the creator of this formula.

—L. A. Voznesenskii, "Mozhno ia budu otvechat' stikhami?"

The postperestroika restaurant the Silver Age (*Serebrianyi vek*) is an important landmark on the Moscow scene. It is one of the few enterprises that can boast a ten-year survival history through the most turbulent times that have gripped Russia in recent decades. It occupies the glamorously refurbished building of what used to be

the Moscow Turkish Bathhouses. Located only a few blocks from the infamous Lubyanka, it combines the late imperial grandeur of its decor with the dullness (and emptiness) of a big Soviet restaurant of the Brezhnev era. In the summer of 2005, I made my third visit to the Silver Age. The doorkeeper greeted us with the disconcerting question: "Whom would you like to see? (*Vy k komu?*)" He looked anxious. When I explained that all we wanted was to have lunch there, his face showed puzzlement, but he opened the door. The service was impeccable, as usual, and the food was good. However, the buffet where they kept the wine and liquor was locked after last night's banquet, and we had to wait for the owner (who was in no hurry to get there on a rainy afternoon) to unlock it. The restaurant's main mission, as we were told, was to host various receptions and weddings. People rarely came there in small groups for lunch or dinner. Back in 1999, in response to my question about the appropriateness of such a name for their restaurant, one of the waiters replied, "I guess we called it the Silver Age because we hoped that it would make the Silver Age come back."

Why would a Russian nouveau riche, who opened this restaurant in 1993, care about the Silver Age? Why would anybody want the Silver Age to come back? Although the restaurant has changed hands several times, the name has remained intact. Apart from eating alone at an expensive restaurant, until recently one could get a taste of the Silver Age by gambling in two Moscow floating casinos named after the most prominent representatives of the Silver Age, Aleksandr Blok (1880–1921) and Valerii Briusov (1873–1924). The promotion flier for the Aleksandr Blok Casino said that their "aquarium fish never stopped the act of reproduction, hinting to the customers how nice it would be to spend the night in the arms of a loving beauty in the Blok Hotel on board." Both casinos went out of business in 2005. At other casinos, one can still celebrate one's good fortune or cool down one's disappointment with a glass of sparkling wine called "The Silver Age." Would everyone who drinks the so-called Russian champagne know what the Silver Age was all about? Most likely not. It would seem, however, that the name is expected to stir some forgotten memories of something

vaguely beautiful and familiar; otherwise, why would anyone promote a businesses in such a manner?

In her essay “Pushkin’s Children” (1992), the writer Tatiana Tolstaya describes the Silver Age as “that legendary time” and as “the *Titanic* floating in the night and gloom on its way to destruction”:

During the years before the revolution, the arts flourished in an extraordinary manner . . . . Now when we look back with a feeling of sorrow and loss at that legendary time, which seems separated from us by a transparent but impassible barrier, when we hear the dim, underwater voices of those people—their debates and quarrels, their amorous admissions, their unrealized and realized prophecies—we have a vision of the *Titanic* floating in the night and gloom on its way to destruction, a vision of a huge ship brightly illuminated, full of music, wine, and elegant people, a bit afraid of the long ocean voyage, of course, but hoping that the journey will end well. After all, the ship is so large, strong and reliable!<sup>1</sup>

Will this majestic boat be forever floating in the darkness? Will we or should we ever start looking at its passengers in broad daylight? Will this adulation of the Silver Age survive into another century or two? Or will it eventually perish like the *Titanic*, despite (or, most likely, because of) being so “strong and reliable”?

For years, the Silver Age has been one of the most intensely studied topics in Russian literary studies, and for years scholars have been struggling with its precise definition. The term is often employed to denote loosely a period in Russian cultural evolution that ended with the advent of the Bolsheviks in 1917. What is generally known as the era of modernism in Western cultures (1890–1939) was frequently divided into the blossoming Silver Age (the flourishing of the arts in the years immediately preceding the revolution) and the decaying age of socialist realism (the sterile formations of the arts in the late 1920s and beyond). Many literary scholars, both within and outside Russia, still see Russia’s Silver Age as a charmed lost era or as a historical period in cultural evolution on a par with romanticism and the Enlightenment.

They have argued about its temporal boundaries, about its primary participants, about the chronology of its “seminal” moments, indeed, about the applicability of its very name.

### What’s in a Name?

Omry Ronen is duly credited with starting a debate on the appropriateness of the term *Silver Age*. “My purpose in this inquiry,” he states in the opening chapter of his celebrated *The Fallacy of the Silver Age* (1997), “[is] to trace the history of the term ‘Silver Age’ as applied to the first two (or three or four) decades of the twentieth century and to scrutinize its appropriateness for this particular stretch of time in Russian literary history.”<sup>2</sup> What, in part, inspired Ronen’s inquiry was the “manifestly uncritical attitude toward the metallurgical metaphors” that he detected in the works of his colleagues.<sup>3</sup> The specific book he had in mind was *Cultural Mythologies of Russian Modernism: From the Golden Age to the Silver Age* (1992), edited by Boris Gasparov, Robert Hughes, and Irina Paperno.

The unity of the articles comprising *The Cultural Mythologies*, as Gasparov explains in his introduction, is anchored by the “self-conception” that Russian modernists shared. For all their diversity, they “all shared an essential interpretation of their age.”<sup>4</sup> This was the modernists’ keen awareness of their cultural past, which meant their creative appropriation of Pushkin, both his life and his work. Gasparov, however, hastens to do away with the discussion of the trickiest part—what was the time frame of Russian modernism? “With the historicizing vision of hindsight,” Gasparov writes, “as the early twentieth century receded into the past, Russians were able to view the culture of the era as a single, unified phenomenon which may be designated—at least provisionally—as ‘the age of Russian Modernism.’”<sup>5</sup> To explicate the book’s subtitle, *From the Golden Age to the Silver Age*, and to avoid tautology, he uses modernism and Silver Age as synonyms. Gasparov goes on to trace the genealogy of the term Silver Age, attributing some of its first usages to Anna Akhmatova, Sergei Makovskii, and Nikolai Berdi-  
aev, to conclude that the “phrase’s indefinite origin as well as the mul-

tiplicity of later references may indicate that the expression was simply ‘in the air,’ a commonplace in early twentieth-century oral usage, and thus implicit in the period’s figurative language, although not directly incorporated into contemporary texts.”<sup>6</sup> In his study, Ronen sets out to complete Gasparov’s unfinished list of the Silver Age’s attributions.

Despite his remarkable erudition, Ronen fails to answer one of the questions that he himself outlines in his introduction, namely, how appropriate is the term Silver Age regarding Russian culture of the beginning of the twentieth century?<sup>7</sup> Nor is his list of usages as exhaustive as he implies. Petr Pertsov’s review of *The Anthology of New Poetry* (*Antologiya novoi poezii*, 1914), published in *Novoe vremia* on the brink of WWI, offers yet another use of this term: “There is absolutely no doubt, that ‘from a certain distance,’ a future historian of Russian literature will describe the last twenty years as the second revival of Russian poetry, some sort of its ‘silver age,’ following the ‘gold age’ of the 1830s and the 1840s and a barren interval between 1860 and 1880 dominated by civic concerns.”<sup>8</sup> Unlike the futurist Gleb Marev and the literary critic R. V. Ivanov-Razumnik, who highlighted derogatory connotations of the term, Pertsov used Silver Age to denote a period of cultural vitality, a definition very similar to the generally accepted meaning of this term, which Ronen attempts to deconstruct. A salient feature of Pertsov’s definition was that full appreciation of contemporary poetry required time. It is also significant that Pertsov drew his conclusions on the eve of a major upheaval in world history. As I shall demonstrate, both “the historicizing vision of hindsight” and the interconnectedness of the Silver Age with major political and social upheavals are the cornerstones of this cultural construct.<sup>9</sup>

On more than one occasion, Ronen highlights inconsistencies in how the term the Silver Age is applied—hence the alleged “fallacy” in the book’s title. However, inconsistency does not necessarily mean fallacy or inappropriate usage. What is missing in Ronen’s inquiry is a conceptual framework. He does not relate these differences in the use of the term Silver Age to particular cultural and political situations in Russia (and Russia Abroad) throughout the twentieth century. His

task is to invalidate and discredit the term. Ronen goes so far as to suggest alternatives that might “help exorcize [the Silver Age’s] pallid, deceptive and meddling ghost.”<sup>10</sup> One such candidate is the Platinum Age, a term coined by Oleg Menshikov and wholeheartedly approved by Roman Jakobson.<sup>11</sup> Ronen appears unaware of how much his own prescriptions and perceptions of prerevolutionary Russian culture stem from the same unfounded adoration for the Silver Age that initially inspired him to question the validity of this term. Like the Golden Age, only more so, the Silver Age is a multilayered socio-cultural phenomenon. However earnest Ronen may be in his call for correction, it is virtually impossible to conduct any large-scale revision of the Silver Age’s cultural resources and to evaluate its merits definitively.<sup>12</sup>

Gasparov’s and Ronen’s approaches to the Silver Age nicely illustrate Paul Ricoeur’s argument that hermeneutics is driven by “double motivation.” According to Ricoeur, there are two ways of obtaining the “truth”—one by restoring a meaning (as exemplified by Gasparov’s and his collaborators’ careful reading of the Silver Age through the prism of Pushkin) and the other by demystification and “reduction of an illusion” (as exemplified by Ronen’s exposure of the “fallacy” of the Silver Age).<sup>13</sup> Here I attempt to preserve some balance between these polar motivations but approach the Silver Age in a radically different way. Instead of a thorough reevaluation of the prerevolutionary literature or a search for a unifying idea, I posit a different question: how did the idea of the Silver Age come to occupy such a prominent place in the Russian collective consciousness? Several provocative studies of the Silver Age have expanded our understanding of its cultural sources (and resources) and describe how its legacy evolved in subsequent epochs.<sup>14</sup> Yet this imperative question has still not been answered. Here I focus not on the history of cultural evolution, but on the collective experience of this evolution, traced through the larger portion of the twentieth century. I submit that the Silver Age is a cultural construct of retrospective origin brought to life as a means of overcoming the existential anxieties unleashed by the Bolshevik Revolution, the civil war,

and the Stalinist terror. At the same time, it was also one of the main sources of anxieties that dominated the Russian cultural and political scene through the greater part of the twentieth century. I chart these anxieties through case studies of Anna Akhmatova, Boris Pasternak, Vladimir Nabokov, and Viktor Erofeev. Because the two phenomena I examine are obviously connected but not identical, I address them separately.

### **In Search of the Silver Age**

In the eyes of many beholders, the Silver Age ended in 1917.<sup>15</sup> Its immediate rediscovery was instigated by the death of Aleksandr Blok in 1921. However, unlike Howard Carter's celebrated discovery of Tutankhamen's tomb that instantly put ancient Egypt back on the map in 1922, the rediscovery of the Silver Age stretched over most of the twentieth century. It is not surprising, therefore, that the cultural excavating machines, while removing historical sediments from one side of the dig, often dumped them on the other. Thus when the future *shestidesiatniki* (people whose coming of age coincided with the 1960s) were sorting through the treasures of a perfectly preserved Silver Age, which in their eyes had somehow cheated and survived the Bolshevik Revolution, they were unaware that the perceived totality of that "period" owed its conceptualization and existence mostly to that same revolution. The Bolshevik Revolution not only claimed people's lives but also enhanced the ever-present sense of uncertainty and existential anxiety. In "Anxiety and the Formation of Early Modern Culture," William Bouwsma hypothesizes that any culture is the product of "man's ability to impose a meaning on his experience that can give to life a measure of reliability and thus reduce, even if it cannot altogether abolish, life's ultimate and terrifying uncertainties."<sup>16</sup> Bouwsma sees culture as "the collective strategies by which societies organize and make sense of their experience. Culture in this sense is a mechanism for the management of existential anxiety."<sup>17</sup> I argue that the Silver Age was created as a result of the collective appropriation of the historical experience that befell the Russian people in the first third of the twentieth century.

Despite the widespread assumption that the Bolshevik Revolution consigned the Silver Age heritage to oblivion, the voluminous material written about this “period” suggests otherwise. The Silver Age has inspired a profusion of memoirs, letters, various other testimonies, and works of fiction, not to mention numerous scholarly articles. Many of these works were produced in the 1920s and 1930s—that is, during the first twenty years after the end of the era. Thus, having read Andrei Bely’s memoirs about Blok in 1923, Bely’s friend and long-time correspondent Ivanov-Razumnik described them as “a unique (in the whole of Russian literary tradition) monument to a cultural epoch, erected by its own contemporary.”<sup>18</sup> To be in a position to create such a monument, Ivanov-Razumnik further stipulates, one has to feel completely cut off from one’s own past, which Bely would have experienced while residing in Berlin in the early 1920s.<sup>19</sup> It would appear, therefore, that the perceived rift between pre- and postrevolutionary cultures was in fact beneficial in creating an entire cultural apparatus, or even an institution, that became seriously engaged in reproducing the Silver Age’s legacy for a contemporary audience, thus securing its vitality for later periods. It was this institution, for example, that was responsible for generating new mnemonic spaces where memory about the Silver Age would be stored and conserved for the greater part of the twentieth century. Such mnemonic spaces include the myth about the continuation of the Silver Age in Russian emigre circles; museums, cemeteries, private photograph albums, and even private literary graveyards, such as Vladislav Khodasevich’s collection *Necropolis* (1926–1939); the *Tartu Blokovskie sborniki* (1964– ); and the Silver Age restaurant mentioned earlier.

The reason we now remember almost every name and every detail connected with the Silver Age is because of the all-preservationist approach toward the Silver Age adopted in literary studies in the 1950s and prevalent ever since. Angela Brintlinger describes her writers-cum-historians-cum-literary critics of the 1920s and the 1930s, Tynianov, Bulgakov, and Khodasevich, as “sifting through patches of historical



data—characters, events, places—and choosing which patches to piece together into a story.”<sup>20</sup> With contemporary critics, this ability to sift and differentiate seems to have largely atrophied. Russian cultural archeologists do not want to lose anything remotely related to their revered past. They fill in their boxes with bones, jewelry, pottery, and other precious artifacts, together with tons and tons of soil that had enveloped those relics of the bygone era. When Akhmatova claimed in 1964 that “almost nobody has been forgotten; almost everyone has been remembered,” by “everyone” she meant a group of outstanding representatives of the prerevolutionary culture, such as Andrei Bely, Boris Pasternak, and Viacheslav Ivanov, Igor Stravinskii, and Vsevolod Meyerhold.<sup>21</sup> By the beginning of the twenty-first century, this group of the “remembered” has expanded to include much lesser-known cultural figures succeeded by members of their families and distant relatives. Not surprisingly, works of literature that deal directly with literary history and tradition, such as Dmitrii Galkovskii’s *The Endless Dead End* (*Beskonechnyi tupik*, 1988, 1998), average 700–1,000 pages in length.

The boom of interest in the Silver Age in Russia coincided with the late 1980s when many Russians were made aware of their political and cultural history. One of the achievements of Gorbachev’s perestroika was to make the new revelations about the political and cultural past a priority on the pages of scholarly and popular journals and newspapers. By the early 1990s, following numerous publications that emphasized the hardships endured by its many representatives in the Soviet period, the Silver Age truly became a popular symbol of democratic development and of moral and artistic freedom. As Kathleen Smith observes, “Politics always has a symbolic dimension. Politicians in general have a particular interest in shaping versions of past events because shared memories of nationally significant events provide grist for the formation of collective identities.”<sup>22</sup> Because the “truth” about Russia’s cultural history tended to be presented along with the “truth” about Russia’s political history, these phenomena became permanently entangled in the eyes of beholders. The Silver Age was like a territory

once annexed by a foreign power and then reunited with the mainland. In this situation, the euphoria of reconciliation with the past eventually gave way to torturing queries and concerns.

Renewed interest in the Silver Age and its position within Russian cultural history stemmed to a large extent from various popular attempts to reevaluate the past, particularly the experience of the October Revolution, which has been blamed by many for all the atrocities of the Russian twentieth century. In such reconstructions, evaluation of the period immediately preceding the revolution plays a major role. The famous study by Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism* (1988, 1992), in which he convincingly demonstrates kinship and continuity between the Russian avant-garde movement and socialist realism, made readers ponder the existence of similar links between the Silver Age and the Stalinist culture of the 1930s.<sup>23</sup> In 1997 the journalist Boris Paramonov took credit for extending a special service to Russian speakers in 1989 while working for Radio Liberty by exposing the traps that people infatuated with the ideas entertained by popular figures of the Silver Age might have fallen into:

I guess I had rather unconventional ideas at the time. . . . I have worked for Radio Liberty since 1986, and when, in the course of “perestroika,” Russia began to resurrect new cultural personalities and subjects in its search for alternative ideas to communism, I had the following comment to make. During the “period of stagnation,” the philosophical and religious works by cultural figures of the Silver Age were beneficial reading by way of an antidote to the dominant ideological clichés. But having arrived in the West and having put all those writings in the context of normal, so to speak, civilized life, one begins to realize that all of them are mere intellectual fantasies. . . . I just want to say that, when everybody began to talk about going to the representatives of the Silver Age for the truth, I set as my aim to show that this ground had already been covered and the results were disastrous. All of those people were undoubtedly very interesting, vivid, and talented, but they were evil geniuses, as the saying goes, and that applies to Berdiaev,

Florenskii, and, of course, to Viacheslav Ivanov—a totally ominous character. . . . My main idea was the following: Bolshevism in Russia wasn't something absolutely alien to the general cultural developments at the turn of the twentieth century. It was [part of the same] flood. An orientation toward a total transformation of being was characteristic of both religious philosophers and Bolsheviks. The project of a new heaven and a new earth. They never reached the heaven but fouled up the earth. . . . I discussed this for several years, based on concrete analyses of books, events, and intellectual conflicts. I never came across any definite expression of such ideas in the press. Today I believe they have been absorbed by public consciousness and are generally not unexpected.<sup>24</sup>

Even if one disagrees with Paramonov's pronouncements, his assessments are typical of the 1990s and are shared by some free-spirited Russian intellectuals. In a recent episode of the Russian literary broadcast *The School for Scandal* (*Shkola zlosloviia*, May 2005), the writer Sergei Gandlevskii suggested that one of the main reasons for the popularity of the Silver Age in his youth was "because it was forbidden." It also allowed him and his friends "to be different from the gray Soviet people." When prompted to talk about Anna Akhmatova, Gandlevskii did not conceal his animosity toward one of the Silver Age's renowned cultural icons. He dismissed Akhmatova both as a poet and a human being because of Akhmatova's "need for [some sort of] a narrow-minded audience—a dependence that doesn't do you a lot of credit," and also because of "her ability to strike an attractive classicist pose in any kind of situation." As Paramonov's and Gandlevskii's comments suggest, in the past decade the near-surface cross-cultural and cross-temporal studies of the Silver Age, so typical of the 1960s, because of the abundance of new information about this period, coupled with rising nationalism, have given way to meticulous "excavation" of the lives of its representatives. Probing the past by digesting and analyzing previously concealed official documents, personal diaries, memoirs, official and private letters, professional and amateur photographs—and

on the basis of these new discoveries rejecting that past or reconciling oneself with it—all this has been on the agenda of many Russian newspapers and “thick” journals for the last twenty years. I maintain that because of its political dimension, the myth of the Silver Age reveals many conflicting attitudes. To paraphrase Foucault, the Silver Age is “a place of rest, certainty, reconciliation, a place of tranquillized sleep.”<sup>25</sup> It is also a source of anxiety and insatiate ambitions and an active battleground. To borrow from Stephanie Sandler’s elegant summation about Pushkin’s enduring popularity in Russia, “one would think that other, more urgent needs might take priority, and of course in many forums they have, but Russians still argue” about the Silver Age.<sup>26</sup> It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that although in the eyes of the rest of the world twentieth-century Russia came to be primarily associated with the Bolshevik Revolution and its aftermath, it was the myth of the Silver Age through which Russian collective consciousness in fact revealed its identity and, in Bouwsma’s words, “managed its existential anxieties.”<sup>27</sup> Even the prevailing discourse on the Stalinist terror that has gained popularity over the last twenty years has not eclipsed the ongoing debate about the Silver Age and its legacy. And this is only to be expected: while the Stalinist terror has been perceived in general as an abominable past experience that one should either try to forget or never stop speaking about, the Silver Age so far continues to resist clear-cut definitions.

### **The Silver Age and the “Anxiety of Influence”**

In his study of what he calls cultural selection, Gary Taylor observes, “Culture is the gift of the survivor. It is always bereaved, always retrospective, always at war with the present.”<sup>28</sup> For Taylor an emblematic example of the very mechanisms by “which culture is made” was the story of Nadezhda Mandelstam (1899–1980). For many years after Osip Mandelstam’s death in 1938, Nadezhda Mandelstam was the sole custodian and interpreter of her husband’s poetic legacy and of his life in general. In Taylor’s brief analysis, Nadezhda Mandelstam succeeded in preserving the memory of her dead husband for posterity despite all

odds and repressions. Would she have been more successful had she had to promote her husband's legacy under more favorable conditions? The answer is probably no. Most likely, her name and the name of her husband would have been known to a limited group of people with a developed taste for great poetry. What added tremendously to the popularity of Osip Mandelstam's work and Nadezhda Mandelstam's memoirs was the fact that they were both seen as victims of Stalinist terror.<sup>29</sup> As revealed by the controversy surrounding the publication of Emma Gerstein's subversive and provocative *Memoirs* (*Memuary*, 1998), without the protection of being seen as a martyr and an unjustly persecuted person, Nadezhda Mandelstam could have been subjected to severe criticism and accused of perjury and amoral behavior.<sup>30</sup> In 2001 Elena Chukovskaia published posthumously her mother's *The Poet's House* (*Dom poeta*), a lengthy critique of Nadezhda Mandelstam's second book of memoirs, *Hope Abandoned* (*Vtoraia kniga*, 1978).<sup>31</sup> Written largely in the late 1970s, *The Poet's House* was not meant for publication. Rather, it served Chukovskaia as an outlet to vent her indignation about Nadezhda Mandelstam's unscrupulous approach to portraying her illustrious contemporaries, such as Anna Akhmatova, Boris Pasternak, and Nikolai Khardzhiev, to name but a few. Both Gerstein (1903–2002) and Chukovskaia (1907–1996) were upset that Nadezhda Mandelstam usurped the right to speak for the dead, refused to recognize any other influence on her husband's creativity apart from her own, and dishonestly appropriated other people's ideas. In a 1999 interview, Gerstein went even further by trying to expose Nadezhda Mandelstam as a double-dealer and accused her (and not the Soviet authorities, as one would expect) of impeding the first Soviet publication of Osip Mandelstam's poetry.<sup>32</sup> She did this, according to Gerstein, for purely selfish reasons—to promote her own memoirs (they achieved much wider recognition, while Osip Mandelstam's poetry was banned in the Soviet Union) and to establish her unquestionable authority outside the Soviet Union on all issues related to her husband's legacy.

Both Chukovskaia and Gerstein were cultural historians and memoirists by vocation. Why then did they wait for over twenty years

to challenge Nadezhda Mandelstam's stories? The answer is obvious for anybody familiar with the cultural and political situation in Russia in the 1970s. What took Gerstein so long to come out with her memoirs and what made Chukovskaia suppress the publication of *The Poet's House* indefinitely was a self-imposed moral obligation to keep silent while so-called unofficial literature was under a cloud. Such heightened feelings of obligation toward one's culture, along with anxiety both about its loss and omnipresence that many Russian intellectuals shared in the twentieth century, are at odds with Harold Bloom's famous pronouncements about literary sons and daughters always wanting to oust their so-called forefathers and foremothers. For example, Bloom sees the relationship between Christopher Marlowe and Shakespeare as a poetic rivalry that did not end with Marlowe's untimely death.<sup>33</sup> According to Bloom's theory, Chukovskaia and Gerstein would have seized an opportunity to topple Nadezhda Mandelstam and, given their talents and access to information, would have gained fame by erasing her version of the past forever. However, Bloom's otherwise illuminating theory has its limitations when applied to the cultural situation in twentieth-century Russia.

Whether we ponder it explicitly or not, our relationship with the past is mediated through a set of anxieties regarding its influence on our present and future lives. With writers (and artists in general), such anxieties are inextricable from the creative process, since no writer creates in a vacuum and no writer can be oblivious to the works of his or her predecessors. Vladimir Nabokov, who was notoriously secretive about his actual sources of inspiration and particularly loathed being compared to Dostoevskii, by the end of his life composed and disseminated through his *Strong Opinions* (1972) a list of writers that he himself was willing to be compared to. Bloom describes the attitude of an artist toward the achievements of his predecessors as an explosive mixture of admiration, jealousy, and "the anxiety of influence."<sup>34</sup> The artist evokes earlier works not in order to repeat them or to establish some special bond with them, but in order to "swerve" from them and produce something essentially new out of this contact. Russian literature was

no exception. The classical case study is Yuri Tynianov's illuminating exposure of Dostoevskii's appropriation of Gogol's legacy in *The Village Stepanchikovo and Its Residents* (*Selo Stepanchikovo i ego obitateli*, 1859).<sup>35</sup> By intentionally reducing Gogol to the victimized and victimizing self-professed writer Foma Opiskin, whose literary and other influence did not exceed the circle of certain senile old ladies, Dostoevskii successfully purged himself from the burdening influence of his distinguished predecessor who was inadvertently present in Dostoevskii's early fiction. As Bloom reminds us, "Poets are neither ideal nor common readers. . . . They tend not to think, as they read: 'This is dead, this is living, in the poetry of X.' . . . For them, to be judicious is to be weak, and to compare, exactly and fairly, is to be not elect. . . . Poetic history . . . [is] indistinguishable from poetic influence, since strong poets make that history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves."<sup>36</sup>

A collection of memoirs by such "ordinary talents" as Leont'ev-Shcheglov, Moshin, Iasinskii, and Ezhov offers further support for Bloom's theory, revealing how little some contemporaries cared about Chekhov and the preservation of his memory after his premature death in 1904.<sup>37</sup> These memoirs, although not written to be published as a group, capture a kind of primordial state in which geniuses did not know that they were geniuses and weaker talents were unaware of their inferiority. This was the merry time when the literati drank and ate together, exchanged anecdotes, sold land to each other, played cards, visited monasteries, went hunting, traveled by train—that is, did anything but write and read. Most of the memoirists were fortunate to know the majority of Russian writers of the last third of the nineteenth century; however, they frequently referred to "our great writer" and "our esteemed author" primarily to ridicule the thought that this or that figure might indeed be considered great. The title of this collection, *Among the Great* (*Sredi velikikh*), underscores this sense of being oblivious to greatness, a kind of being-lost-in-the-virgin-woods situation.

Likewise, when the acmeists vehemently attacked the symbolists

in the 1910s for their addiction to mysticism, detachment from mundane experience, and failure to live in the three-dimensional world, and themselves cultivated an obsession with the “real,” material world, they did so not out of piety toward their declining predecessors, but to expose the novelty of their own ideas and to emphasize their superiority over their former teachers.<sup>38</sup> Such a rebellious mood left no time to consider what was fair and ethical. Thus, in the early twenties, Osip Mandelstam—at that time himself preparing to switch from poetry to prose—was particularly vicious toward Andrei Bely, whom he compared to “a *grande dame*, sparkling in the blinding brilliance of universal charlatanism,” and whose novels he likened to “exhibition pavilions soon to be dismantled.”<sup>39</sup>

By the 1930s, however, Mandelstam had changed his negative view of Bely.<sup>40</sup> This happened not because by the end of his life Bely started to behave differently or adopted a different way of writing, but because in the 1930s Bely and everything he stood for—a prerevolutionary culture that received the name of the Russian Silver Age—had acquired in the eyes of Mandelstam and many other intellectuals a distinct aura of martyrdom and respect. In his otherwise laudatory review of Bloom’s *Anxiety of Influence*, Paul de Man saw one of the major weaknesses of Bloom’s theory to be its initial assumption that the past had such a strong appeal in the eyes of his poets-beholders. According to de Man, this was “a mere assertion without evidence to make it convincing.”<sup>41</sup> However, Russian literature of the twentieth century provides ample support for Bloom’s assertion, for Russian writers were not merely attracted to their past, they were obsessively attached to it. It is precisely this obsession with the immediate cultural heritage, rather than any attempts to overcome it, that distinguishes the twentieth-century Russian writers from their English counterparts cited by Bloom.

Although representatives of prerevolutionary culture were often criticized for their irresponsible, highly individualistic, and hedonistic behavior, some of their memoirists, like Nadezhda Mandelstam, even held them accountable for the atrocities of the subsequent periods. Open battle with tradition was virtually impossible, since many of its



representatives had met with tragic deaths or persecution by the authorities. In such a situation it was more important to preserve what was left than to attack or rebel against it.<sup>42</sup> In the effort to preserve the effaced and forgotten, political revolt against the present substituted for artistic revolt against the past. Writers were looking to European or “classical” Russian literature for inspiration while addressing their numerous poems to their older contemporaries and peers. In the 1930s, any “sophisticated” mockery of the early twentieth-century culture and its representatives—such as one can find in the memoirs of Andrei Bely or Georgii Ivanov, for example—was regarded by most of their contemporaries as indecent behavior. This unhealthy prohibition against wrestling with tradition, a restraint that many artists seem to have imposed on themselves, resulted in the conscientious smuggling of numerous quotations and references to forgotten or forbidden names, events, and literary sources into their own works, as can be seen in Akhmatova’s *Poem Without a Hero* (*Poema bez geroia*, 1940–1965). Pasternak’s slow buildup toward the big novel *Doctor Zhivago* (1945–1955), for which a succession of shorter works published in the late 1930s had laid the foundation, should be considered in the same vein. It was only in the mid-1940s, when the Silver Age started to make its way back into Russian culture, that Pasternak found it possible to commence his revision—or in Pasternak’s words, his “translation”—of its legacy into the modern language of his time.

If before the 1917 revolution Russian writers had typically been preoccupied with undermining and destabilizing cultural traditions, after the revolution, they began to see themselves and were seen as the sole bearers of cultural memory.<sup>43</sup> Anna Akhmatova’s *Poem Without a Hero* about the rupture between the Silver Age and “the real—not the calendar—twentieth century” is particularly notable in this respect. Even in Akhmatova’s lifetime, the *Poem* was generally considered to be a carefully encoded message about the past that required a similarly careful deciphering on the part of the reader, as is amply demonstrated by many of Akhmatova’s scholars and admirers. The key idea of Mandelstam’s ethics and aesthetics—“to remember,” an idea that

first appeared in his essays of the early 1920s—was shared to a greater or lesser extent by many of his contemporaries both inside and outside the Soviet Union.<sup>44</sup> For writers like Vladimir Nabokov, who started to write seriously only after emigrating to Europe, the legacy of the Silver Age was an umbilical cord that tied them to Russian literary tradition.

When something is not remembered, it disappears. In *Doctor Zhivago*, a novel largely devoted to questions of memory, and particularly cultural memory, Pasternak depicts the following situation: The same day little Yura forgets to recall his father in his prayers, his father commits suicide a few miles away from the estate where Yura has been invited to stay with his uncle. Not surprisingly, the works of Harold Bloom were unknown to Russian readers until very recently. And those who read him in the 1970s and 1980s, like the poet Joseph Brodsky, were clearly troubled by his parricidal theories. In his “A Note to a Commentary,” Brodsky recorded his own anxiety at being subjected to Bloom’s scrutiny:

A true poet doesn’t flee influences and continuity but often cherishes and emphasizes them in every possible way. There is no greater physical, even physiological, pleasure than to repeat silently or out loud somebody’s lines. A fear of influence or (a fear of) dependence is a disease—the disease of a savage but not of culture, the whole of which is continuity, the whole of which is an echo. Let somebody pass this on to Harold Bloom.<sup>45</sup>

Clearly, Brodsky was not afraid of being influenced by his forefathers and foremothers. As Susan Sontag recalled after the poet’s death, “One should write to please not one’s contemporaries, but one’s predecessors, Brodsky often declared. Surely he did please them—his compatriots agree that he was his era’s unique successor to Mandelstam, Tsvetaeva, and Akhmatova. Raising the ‘plain of regard’ (as he called it) was relentlessly identified with the effortlessness and ambitions and appropriate fidelities of poets.”<sup>46</sup> Brodsky’s affirmation of his loyalty to the past notwithstanding, by the late 1960s, the strong sense of moral obligation toward the legacy of the Silver Age started to subside and

gave way to a healthier curiosity, mixed with amiable irony and sarcasm. This trend is evident in the works of the so-called *shestidesiatniki*, particularly in the novels of Andrei Bitov and, to a lesser extent, Vasili Aksenov. The new cavalier approach to the Silver Age reached its apogee in the writings of their younger colleagues such as Sasha Sokolov, Viktor Erofeev, and Viktor Pelevin. The 1960s were the time when the Silver Age started flowing back into the mainstream of the Russian culture, while the 1980s and the 1990s saw its complete reintegration.

Accordingly, the anxiety of influence, as a theory, is both an instrument and an object of my research. In this, I follow Bloom, who claims that any “strong” work of art is always “the achieved anxiety.” Bloom emphasizes that this statement is true regardless of whether the anxiety was actually “internalized by the later writer” or not.<sup>47</sup> In the case of the writers whose reactions to the past form the substance of my book, there is no need for such a clarification, since there is much evidence that they were all very much aware (sometimes painfully so) of their long-term engagement with the past. More so, these writers’ attempts at conceptualizing their relationship with their predecessors accord rather well with Bloom’s hypotheses.<sup>48</sup> What gave a boost to her studies of Pushkin in the 1920s was Akhmatova’s research on the writers that might have influenced Pushkin and her ex-husband, the poet Nikolai Gumilev. Some of her formulations about Pushkin “unscrupulously” borrowing from other writers everything he liked (which, according to Akhmatova, was the sign of a true genius) long preceded Bloom’s statements on strong poets “appropriating for themselves.”<sup>49</sup> By the 1960s, Akhmatova had revised her earlier versions of her relationship with Gumilev; from then on she interpreted it primarily in light of her anxiety about his constricting influence on her work and her struggle to develop her own voice.

Gumilev was one of the first victims of the Bolshevik terror. Akhmatova, as she revealed to her confidantes, had been tortured ever since Gumilev’s execution in 1921 by the guilt of not having loved him enough. This feeling of moral responsibility for the dead and/or forgotten and forbidden (some of whom were intimately related to her)

made her a perfect keeper of the prerevolutionary cultural tradition. It was probably because of that guilt that she later opened up her *Poem* to every other discourse. Years later, in *Russian Beauty* (1982, 1990), Viktor Erofeev parodied the Russian institution of widowhood (of which Akhmatova was a moral beacon and its most famous representative) through his character Irina Tarakanova, who made her body accessible to anyone who wanted to satisfy his or her sexual and textual needs. With Irina Tarakanova, the level of textual and emotional chaos reaches an apogee and she commits suicide. In real life Akhmatova suffered no less. The work on the *Poem* was finished only with Akhmatova's own death. The last years of her life were marked by four heart attacks and bouts of anxiety about the reception of the *Poem*, which she had hoped would surpass any other work in quality.

Obviously, with regard to the Silver Age and its influence on later writers, Bloom's model has to be expanded to accommodate both the piety and suspicion that its image has encouraged in its various beholders. Bloom's Freudian model of literary influence is based on a family of two—that is, a poet always wanting to rid himself of the influence of his poetic father (or fathers) in order to prove himself. But what if a particular “father” is portrayed by neighbors or relatives as a criminal, or, conversely, as an unjustly persecuted person? What if a father is actually a mother? What if there was no father at all?

For any happening to turn into an event proper, it has first to be contextualized and textualized. As is well known, not only the meaning of the Bolshevik Revolution, but even its time span have provoked numerous debates.<sup>50</sup> Its perceived time frame depends on how one chooses to conceptualize its goals and outcome. As Sheila Fitzpatrick explains:

Since revolutions are complex social and political upheavals, historians who write about them are bound to differ on the most basic questions—causes, revolutionary aims, impact on the society, political outcome, and even the timespan of the revolution itself. In the case of the Russian Revolution, the starting-point presents no problem:

almost everyone takes it to be the “February Revolution” of 1917, which led to the abdication of Emperor Nicholas II and the formation of the Provisional Government. But when did the Russian Revolution end? Was it all over by October 1917, when the Bolsheviks took power? Or did the end of the Revolution come with the Bolsheviks’ victory in the Civil War in 1920? Was Stalin’s “revolution from above” part of the Russian Revolution? Or should we take the view that the revolution continued throughout the lifetime of the Soviet state?<sup>51</sup>

Likewise, there is no such thing as the “true” history of literary evolution, since its recorded trajectory is a joint effort of a certain group of beholders. Do we shape cultural phenomena to fit the trajectory of political events? Or do we need these political events to make sense of the otherwise inexplicable trajectory of cultural evolution? These are the questions that I attempt to answer in chapters 2 and 3.

Although the riches of the prerevolutionary culture were not confined to literature and literary criticism alone, I concentrate on writers and literary critics, their lives and work, primarily because, as I have mentioned before, Russian writers of this era (unlike their American or Western European counterparts) felt themselves to be charged with the preservation of continuity and therefore were forced to negotiate an intricate balance between cultural conservation and the need to develop their own creative identity. While chapters 2 and 3 concern the ways in which anxieties caused by political and cultural upheavals were managed at the collective level, in the five chapters that follow I focus on the various strategies used by Akhmatova, Nabokov, Pasternak, and Viktor Erofeev in assimilating the legacy of the Silver Age into their writings. My aim is twofold: to determine the contributions of these figures to the myth-making process and at the same time to assess the effect of popular conceptions or misconceptions about the Silver Age on their writings and personal life.

Bloom is often accused of ignoring women writers in his interpretative schemes. Some critics believe that his theory of literary influence was meant to apply only to the sons wrestling with their fathers, while

daughters were excluded. Although I am not convinced that these accusations are valid, my analysis of Akhmatova's ingenious strategy of unloading her jealousy and anxiety not on her illustrious fathers and brothers but on their wives and companions addresses a gap in Bloom's theory.

Today the Silver Age has come to occupy a well-defined place in the landscape of Russian culture. What happens to cultural constructs such as the Russian Silver Age when they lose one of their important constituent elements—their delectable “outsideness,” “foreignness,” and novelty? I address these issues in my conclusion.