

The New York Review of Books

VOLUME 35, NUMBER 15 • [OCTOBER 13, 1988](#)

Feature

An Interview with Viktor Sosnora

By [Darra Goldstein](#), [Viktor Sosnora](#)

Introductory Note: The life of the poet Viktor Aleksandrovich Sosnora has been one of continual risk. When he was a year and a half, in 1938, he was confined to clinic for three years with osteotuberculosis, and doctors almost had to amputate his arm and leg. When World War II broke out, Sosnora spent a year under the blockade of Leningrad before being evacuated to the Kuban region in the south of the Soviet Union. Soon after he arrived, the Germans overran the Kuban. Sosnora was captured three times by the Gestapo, but because of his youth he was released each time. His grandmother decided that it would be safer for him to live with the partisan detachment led by his uncle, but the Germans captured and executed the partisans, and Sosnora survived only by pretending to be dead after a bullet had grazed his skull. It was in the Kuban that Sosnora began to write, using a twig to etch his poems on the clay paths, which were washed smooth each time it rained.

In 1945, Sosnora moved to Warsaw to join his father, who was a regional commander in Rokossovsky's army, and he attended second grade at a Polish school. The pair traveled throughout Europe, and then settled in Arkhangelsk on the White sea, where the elder Sosnora became deputy commander of the military district, and where Viktor studied at a music school. By seventh grade he had completed the university course in history and botany in Lvov and passed his university exams as an unmatriculated student.

Sosnora first decided to become a writer when he was sixteen. Over the next three years he wrote two novels, two plays in verse, and many stories and poems, all of which he destroyed. When he was drafted into the Soviet Army in 1955, he continued to write, even during the eight months he spent in solitary confinement for playing prank while on guard duty. After he was discharged, he once again burned everything he had written. In 1958 he enrolled in the philosophy department of Leningrad State University, supporting himself by working as a factory electrician.

His poems first appeared in 1960, thanks to the support of the poet Nikolai Aseev, and in 1962 his first book, *January Downpour*, was published with a foreword by Aseev. At twenty-three he became the youngest writer in the Leningrad Writers' Union. He traveled to Paris in 1965 to read his work during the evening of Soviet poets organized by Elsa Triolet and Louis Aragon, and again in 1970 as a lecturer

on eighteenth-century Russian literature at the New Paris University.

In 1981, after an operation on the his pancreas, during which he nearly died, Sosnora lost his hearing. His deafness is especially tragic, since, as with the Russian Futurists, the articulation of sounds, as much as meaning, shapes the seemingly disconnected free associations of his poetry. In "Afterwards" Sosnora evokes a highly sensory sorrow by alternating liquid l's with the intrusively harsh gutturals of g's and k's:

*Grafin i grust'. Golovka lampy.
Luchei zakata karuseli.
Lunoi bez solntsa paknet landysh.
Khuiut liagushku korosteli.*

*A carafe and sorrow. The bulb of a lamp.
Carousels of sunset rays.
The lily of the valley smells of a sunless moon.
Corncrakes peck at a frog.*

Often Sosnora's regular meters are fractured by irregular syntax, and words seem to arise from a dream or a state of intoxication. His images are startling, even hallucinatory. In "Insomnia," jackbooted rats scurry along stairwells. In another poem, "The Footsteps of the Owl and its Lament," uniformed owls stride through the city; at first blustering and guffawing, they adopt a more ominous pose:

*The owl will stab all with his trident
Like macaroni with a fork.*

Each of Sosnora's books is written in a different style. He regards himself as both an epic poet and a lyric one. His early collection, *Horsemen* (1969), is a contemporary rendering of legends and traditions from medieval Russian literature, particularly episodes from the twelfth-century epic *The Lay of Igor's Campaign*. The theme of Sosnora's "The Tale of the City of Kitezh" is the legendary city whose inhabitants prefer to sink in a lake rather than submit to foreign domination. In his modern evocation of the legend, Sosnora is implicitly asking us to examine our own times and to consider whether submission is preferable to a proud, if diminished, existence.

Sosnora's best recent poems, such as "Moscow in Fences," express a sense of physical and linguistic confinement that is less a reaction to his deafness than to his awareness of the restrictions of critical and political censorship. Perhaps to counterbalance this feeling of restriction, Sosnora has turned to more expansive prose forms. His most recently published book is a collection of imaginative essays on Greek mythological and Russian eighteenth-century historical themes (*Rulers and Fates*, 1986). He has also completed a trilogy, *The Golden Pendulum* (*The Day of the Beast*, 1980; *The Tower*, 1984; and *The House of Days*, 1986), whose characters include a mathematician living in a contemporary, imaginary city that resembles Petersburg and an amnesiac who awakens one day in the Roman Empire

to find that he can remember only the books he has read.

Although Sosnora continues to write prolifically, his poetry has become increasingly inaccessible, and has not met with official recognition in the Soviet Union. His work is considered too idiosyncratic and individualistic, insufficiently edifying and lacking a base in social and political reality. During the past ten years he has been able to publish only four poems, his collection of essays, and translations; he was not honored on his fiftieth birthday with the customary commemorative edition of his poetry. [\[1\]](#)

Ardis Publishers in Ann Arbor, Michigan, published a volume of his selected poetry in Russian last August, and in November Sosnora was allowed to travel to the United States for a five-week visit. During his stay he lectured and gave poetry readings at several colleges and universities—the first major public readings he has given since he became deaf. Just as Mayakovsky wrote many of his poems "for the voice," so Sosnora's verse is intended for declamation, but his voice has lost the richness it once had. The poems came across in his readings as abstract and almost disembodied, like a choral chant or recitative.

The following interview took place in Leningrad, before Sosnora was given permission to travel to the United States. We spoke in his apartment, a typical Soviet one room with a kitchen, on the outskirts of the city in a neighborhood of identical gray apartment blocks, surrounded by his collection of books and memorabilia, including abstract paintings by contemporary Russian artists and a stuffed spaniel, for many years his pet.

— *Darra Goldstein*

W*hat do you consider to be the moral obligations of contemporary literature?*

I don't believe there are any. Any obligations have been paid for and washed clean with blood. The twentieth century has provided an outlet for popular hatred of writers: as many have been killed in this century as in the preceding two thousand years. They've been executed, thrown into concentration camps, committed suicide. The list is endless, but I'll name the great ones: Blok, Mayakovsky, Tsvetaeva, Mandelstam, Lorca, Desnos, Virginia Woolf....

An artist creates an image of the world; that is his obligation. Literature is a matter of aesthetics, not morality.

How important to you is the place you live? Does living in the Soviet Union serve to stimulate your poetry, or could you compose it just as easily elsewhere?

Environment is what surrounds you. Around me there is nothing human. The stimulus for poetry is the poet's life, his language. Soviet life, or any other, is only a backdrop, material in the narrowest sense of the word. Not a single creative idea

can come from without, because the very notion of an idea is intuitive. And intuition reacts to any environment. Environment is nothing but geography.

What kind of environment did the deaf Beethoven or Goya have? One was a composer, the other a painter, and I, a writer, am a third deaf artist. I too lost my hearing at age forty-five. I can hear neither speech nor music.

The conclusion: all poetry is internal, not a question of geography or of acoustics.

Certain writers have commented that they have within them three or four or five fully developed characters. Do you have such a conception of yourself as a writer—a composite of characters waiting to be revealed?

Such statements are an affectation. In Russia, Dostoevsky and the Symbolists made declarations like that. A writer is a performer. Each book is a role, not a character. In the final analysis, each book is merely a hoax. In a long book, the writer plays many roles. Gogol was the greatest performer; not only did he become his characters, he was even the wheel of Chichikov's carriage. And what about Pushkin's assertion that he was Tatiana? And Flaubert's poisoning himself over Madame Bovary?

Memory involves guilt. More than others, the writer can free himself of his guilt because he has been granted a greater degree of conscience. It's useful for him to put his characters into writing: then perhaps they'll leave him alone. This is a certain way of writing, like a pledge or a purification. But writers' characters always return and throw themselves on the author with renewed strength; so there's no escape.

In other words, a writer creates the world of his conscience, in which there are millions of characters, not just a handful.

When did you recognize that your calling was to be a writer?

I don't know. I learned to shoot before I could write verse, and I was already writing at age five or six. You know, you can always scribble carelessly on paper with pencil, but it's impossible to compose sentences unconsciously. At seven I had a long argument with my grandmother. I maintained that everything had already been written and that nothing was left for me to write. I said that Hamlet, Don Quixote, and Evgeny Onegin already existed. What was I supposed to do? My grandmother didn't know how to comfort me.

Now, having finished my latest book, I feel exactly the same: it's a book after all, it's not me. And what can I possibly do now?

Alas, I'm still not convinced that I'm a writer. Here everything's relative. If Homer, Shakespeare, and Gogol are writers, then I am not. These three seem to me supermen; their writings are simply a means of applying their strengths. And another thing: they are immortal, while I am alive. Then again, if ten Nobel laureates are writers, I am not. If hundreds of millions of people don't know your language and read only surrogates [translations], then during your lifetime they will be unable to understand what gives your books life. And millions of people cannot

love a writer if he is alive. This is a mistake; it smacks of necrophagia.

You have Estonian, Polish, and Jewish ancestry. Do you conceive of yourself as a truly Russian writer within the tradition of Russian poetry? Or as more pan-European?

My forebears are also German, French, and Scottish. And I still haven't thoroughly studied my Turkish line. Everyone has ancestors from different tribes; it's just that many people don't know it, or else they hide the fact. It's already been two or three hundred years since my ancestors came to live and work in Russia. In other words, they lost their ethnic identities a long time ago, although in me they've created a creditable mixture. You can consider me any nationality you like, but no matter who I consider myself to be, as a writer I am Russian. Objectively speaking. I'll go so far as to say that in the continuity of Russian letters, I am now perhaps the only purely Russian classical writer. I'll explain what I mean.

The first book of importance to me was and remains the Bible. The second book, when I was eight, was the Life of Saint Makarius. This great book has never been translated from the old Russian. Since I lived in Poland and the Ukraine, I had no trouble learning the Slavic languages. From early childhood I had access to the primary sources of Russian and Slavic literature. Is it surprising, then, that I began my literary career with *Horsemen*, a poetic fantasy based on "The Lay of Igor's Campaign"? I was twenty-two. And ever since then my forms, my writings, my way of life, my faith—all are Russian, and none other.

For me the names of Gustave Flaubert, Marcel Proust, Edgar Allen Poe, and Walt Whitman are sacred. I read them in interlinear translations, since I don't know any languages other than Slavic ones. I can only guess at these writers' forms, their thoughts, their speech; I can't take them on with my whole being. They belong to other tribes, and other spirits move them. But still, they're very close. They themselves didn't know how close they were to the Russians—to Avvakum,^[2] to Kirsha Danilov,^[3] to Countess Bludova.^[4] The autobiography of Vanka Kain,^[5] a great Russian poet of the early eighteenth century, surpasses the horrors of Edgar Poe a thousand times: their alcoholism (as an idea!) may be equal, but the fate of Vanka Kain was nobler—he was martyred and put to death. But there are many other parallels.

The West knows how to advertise its writers, and everyone knows the European languages. The whole world can read about the appearance of a book written in any European language. But when a book appears in Russian, only a hundred Slavacists in the entire world read it. Then again, what does the West have to do with it, when even now we don't want to publish a large percentage of our own Russian classics, both ancient and contemporary? Like rats, we devour our newborn children.

Which writers, artists, and composers do you admire most, and have any of them influenced your work?

I've liked many writers, but none has particularly influenced me. Music was

drummed into me at a special school, and once I figured it out, I hated everything about it except for the melodies. My teachers never managed to teach me painting, so I'll say something about that. For me there are only two periods in the history of secular painting: the periods of Leonardo and Malevich. Everything between the Renaissance and Cubism is a huge bridge, sturdy but boring to walk across.

I see the highest manifestation of intuitive logic in Leonardo and in Malevich. The square and the circle of Leonardo are equal to the square of Malevich.

In general, visual images—the unexpected discoveries of artists — are closer to me and more comprehensible than people. I'd like to tell you about a great painter. Everyone knows about the Muscovites. But hardly anyone has heard of the great Russian painter Nikolai Demianovich Gritsiuk, who died nine years ago at the age of fifty-four. He painted a great deal. His creative biography reveals the straight path of a gifted painter up to age thirty-seven. Then suddenly—an explosion. Gritsiuk had served a long apprenticeship with mediocre artists when unexpectedly, and in a single glance, he became acquainted with Russian twentieth-century painting at the apartment of the painter Filonov's sister, where he met Vladimir Weisberg, Anatoly Zverev, and Mikhail Kulakov.^[6] Not wasting a minute, Gritsiuk abandoned everything he'd previously done and then worked for seventeen years more without stopping; he couldn't be torn from his work. I don't mean to say that people were completely indifferent to his work. He had many exhibitions. But not of the right paintings. It's difficult to describe Gritsiuk's work. It's like a gaze burning with furious life, or an eagle staring with open eyes at the sun. It's a strong and bright step after Cubism.

We were friends, we influenced each other.

You've said that you conceive of your poetry in cycles and as books. How, then, do you compose individual poems?

I don't know. In answer to such a question it's customary to quote Akhmatova: "If you only knew from what litter poems are often born." That's a harmful quote, and a demeaning one. If Mary Magdalene wipes Christ's feet with her hair, then a whore is transformed into something pure and sweet.

Where does a poem come from? If I wrote a thousand poems, there would be a thousand sources. A book is not a subject, it's a condition. Each book is predestined, hence the need to write it. If there's a law that blood must have cycles of circulation, then a writer, too, has his own circuits: books. It can't be explained.

Your verse is noted for its musicality. How important to your poetry is intonation?

We've talked about my deafness. If there is poetry in me, then it's intuition. Everything outside intuition is merely versification.

However, I'm an epic poet to a large extent in that my long poems have an external, pictorial layer, even some semblance of a subject. These poems present variations

on different models of the world. There, life dictates the rules.

What is your attitude toward the experiments of poets like Khlebnikov and the Russian Futurists who played with sounds, creating a "trans-rational" language?

Futurist poetry is the image of a young world; it represents the highest idea and the greatest degree of intuition since Pushkin and Fet. The Futurists' so-called trans-rational language is entirely comprehensible to me. Why? Because Futurism is a fundamentally Russian phenomenon that has a single pure objective: the Russian language itself. Hence the archaisms and slavisms of Khlebnikov and his school. Khlebnikov was actually a great philosopher in his understanding of the uses of language.

In contrast to the Futurists, there are aphorists. For example, the popular poet Stepan Shchipachev, who wrote, "Know how to value love." After him even great poets jumped on the aphorist bandwagon, selling themselves short in an attempt to make themselves accessible to the masses. Like Pasternak with his line, "To be famous is ugly." Or Nikolai Zabolotsky: "Do not allow your soul to idle." Two great poets, overimpressed by an obvious thought uttered by a mediocre poet like Shchipachev. A tragicomedy. They should have known they couldn't compete on this level with a hack.

But to return to the Futurists.... They had the right idea: obvious thought in poetry can play only an auxiliary role. The interplay of sounds and of words is the essence of poetry.

Many writers in the Soviet Union earn a living by translating, as you have with your translations of Catullus, Kleist, and Gakhinsky. To what extent does this activity interfere with your own voice; or to what extent does your own voice eclipse the poet you're translating?

I translate only to make a living. But I don't translate that much, so it only helps my voice (my throat—to eat! to feed myself!). My own voice can't eclipse anyone, because poets continue to exist in their own language.

You went through a very difficult period in the 1970s when you hardly wrote at all. How was it to return to writing poetry after such a long hiatus? Can you explain why you're so much more productive today?

In the Seventies, when I was thirty-seven, I had a serious crisis. People bothered me. I withdrew from everything, even from writing (almost: everything I wrote, I threw away). I stopped caring about life. This is quick in the telling, but I went through eight years of clinics, scandals, and delirium. For eight years I lived in an attic. I didn't eat.

My friends began to die. In 1976 Nikolai Gritsiuk threw himself down a stairwell. In 1978 Lilya Brik took a fatal dose of barbiturates. In 1979 my wife Marina killed herself. She drank a phial of poison.

When I entered her apartment, everything was sparkling and clean; the floor was polished her clothes were ironed, but the cupboard doors were open a crack. I

looked inside. Huge piles of manuscripts were lying there. It turns out that for all six years of our separation she had been writing. She wrote seven novels, sixteen novellas, and many stories, poems, and screenplays. All of the manuscripts were carefully arranged, page by page, and the originals had been retyped. She left no note. The open cupboard doors and the manuscripts inside were intended for me.

That experience was so shattering that now nothing can shake me. I sat down, took up a pen, and began to write. In 1979 I wrote a book of poems, *The Supreme Hour*; in 1980, a novel called *The Day of the Beast*. In 1981 I survived clinical death following two serious operations, and I lost my hearing. But even that didn't stop me. In 1982–1983 I completed a volume of poems, *47*, and in 1984, the novel *The Tower*. I just finished *The House of Days*, a novelistic memoir and final book of my trilogy. Must I add that in between these novels, in 1984, I had two more serious operations? I hope you understand what I'm trying to say. I'm not talking about myself personally, but about the "I" who writes books. Surgeons sliced into my personal "I," but it's the impersonal one that writes books. The physical "I" is strong. I think I've explained my productivity. I'll say it more precisely: writing is agony.

Which do you consider your most successful works?

I don't have any successful works. Since the very fact of birth foists the role of writer on you, what does success or the lack of it have to do with anything? I've written a lot of trash, and four times I burned everything I'd written. But that was when I was young. I no longer burn everything. There are objectively worth-while things. But neither I nor the reader can determine which they are. A certain Golden Pendulum—like Foucault's—exists in the world, and it will swing as long as the earth is alive. Only this pendulum allows you to know what's worth-while and what isn't.

You're very interested in historical and mythological subjects, yet your writing is highly contemporary. What period interests you most?

History is nothing but decoration. Only the intuitive "I" is important, because it transforms *everything* into verse.

I don't write for the present; I don't write for the future, either. No one has given me an order, and does anyone have the right to? Dumas wrote for money, fame, and out of narcissism. Stendhal calculated that in one hundred years he'd be read as he should be. And one hundred years later he was sumptuously published in twelve volumes and called a genius. That was in 1937, in the USSR.

I'm not a prophet. I write because that's what it takes for me to live. If I'm not published, that doesn't mean that I don't exist. I'm not obliged to anyone, and I don't write for any period.

You have been saved from death a number of times. Can you comment on some of these occasions and the effect they've had on you as a writer?

I'm obliged only to Him. The fact that I'm alive has nothing to do with either the

will of others or with my own will. Both as a man and as a writer I thank Him, for He gave me the subject and the setting for my novel *The Tower*, which describes the life of a man who's come back from death. And after all, you're interviewing me after doctors certified that I was dead. [He was revived after clinical tests showed brain death.] Isn't that strange?

Who would your ideal reader be?

An ideal reader has a talent equal to that of the writer. I've had three such readers who understood poetry in the absolute sense: Nikolai Aseev, Lilya Brik, and Nikolai Gritsiuk. I want to stress that I'm fifty-one, I've published nine books, and I have had only three readers. True, more than twenty of my books have yet to be published, but that's not the point.

Before these three read my verse, my ideal reader was my wife Marina. Marina was my second spirit.

But the most penetrating reader of all was my grandmother lulia loganovna. She didn't just save me, she literally snatched me from death four times. She was the first to die.

Your imagination and your sense of play sometimes extend your fantasies into the factual world.

That's a sobering observation. But perhaps you're confusing premise and consequence. It seems to me that in the beginning there's a fact, and I (the writer), by virtue of my own active intellect, fantasize around this fact. I recognize this peculiarity in my life as well. And what's to be done with it anyway? The epigraph from my novel *The Tower* is appropriate here, too. It's from the Arabian philosopher Avicenna: "If you happen to learn a secret, believe it, for belief in this secret will not burden you."

Notes

[1] Translations of Sosnora's poetry have appeared here in four anthologies: *Russian Poetry: The Modern Period*, eds. John Glad and Daniel Weissbort (University of Iowa press, 1978); *Post-War Russian Poetry*, ed. Daniel Weissbort (Penguin, 1974); *The Living Mirror*, Suzanne Massie (Doubleday, 1972); and *The New Russian Poets*, ed. George Reavey (October House, 1966).

[2] Archpriest Avvakum, a founder of the Old Believers sect, attacked the mid-seventeenth-century church reforms of Patriarch Nikon, for which he was exiled to Siberia. During his fifteen years in prison, he wrote his *Life*, now considered a classic of Old Russian literature. He was burned at the stake.

[3] Kirsha Danilov was an eighteenth-century minstrel of the northern epic school, the first compiler of traditional Russian *byliny* or heroic poems.

[4] Countess Antonina Bludova published her *Sketches* in 1872. She was closely

associated with the literary circles around the poet Vasily Zhukovsky.

[5] Vanka Kain was a legendary robber who terrorized Moscow and Leningrad in the eighteenth century. Many popular songs are attributed to him.

[6] All three of these painters were considered "unofficial artists" in the Soviet Union. Vladimir Weisberg belonged to the "Group of Eight." He saw himself as a "transcendentalist" who used color as a means of expressing the spiritual content of his art. Anatoly Zverev was supported for many years by the well-known collector George Costakis, a Greek who lived in Moscow. He was an expressionist whose works include portraits and landscapes. Mikhail Kulakov emigrated to Rome in 1976. He said that his painting is concerned with eliminating the boundary between external and internal space through linear perspective.

Copyright © 1963-2006 NYREV, Inc. All rights reserved. Nothing in this publication may be reproduced without the permission of the publisher.