

# Maria Stepanova

## Aporias of the Self and History

By Mark Lipovetsky

In February 2020, with no inkling of the coming pandemic, the Harriman Institute and the Slavic departments at Columbia and Barnard, together with the Moscow-based NLO Publishers and the Mikhail Prokhorov Foundation, organized the Super-NOS Russian Literary Festival in New York. The open debate conducted by expert critics, scholars, and graduate students in choosing the best book of the decade proved to be the festival's highlight. Candidates were drawn from the winners of the annual Russian NOS Literary Prize, created 10 years earlier by Irina Prokhorova, who cohosted the debate with yours truly. To make a long story short, the finale of the debate came down to a very close competition between two major books: Vladimir Sorokin's *The Blizzard*, winner of the prize in 2010, and Maria Stepanova's *In Memory of Memory*, which won in 2018. *The Blizzard* won Super-NOS by a small number of votes. It is now clear, however, that Stepanova's book defines the future of Russian letters—and not only in the domestic context but in the global one as well. (And this is said by an ardent admirer of Sorokin.)

Maria Stepanova.  
Photos on this  
and facing  
page by Andrey  
Natotsinsky.

Translated into English by Sasha Dugdale (New Directions, 2021) and presently being translated into several other languages, *In Memory of Memory* garnered major literary honors, including being shortlisted for the International Booker Prize and longlisted for the National Book Award for Translation. Selections of Stepanova's poetry and essays have been collected in the volume *The Voice Over*, edited by Irina Shevelenko, and translated by a team of brilliant translators (Columbia University Press, Russian Library, 2021). In Russia, Stepanova is also known as the editor-in-chief of Colta.ru, "Russia's only independent and crowdfunded cultural magazine, sitting somewhere between the Huffington Post and *New York Review of Books*" (*Guardian*, February 11, 2021).

Praised by the *Guardian* as "Russia's next great writer" and "a writer who will likely be spoken about in the same breath as Poland's Olga Tokarczuk and Belarus's Svetlana Alexievich in years to come," Stepanova in fact persistently eludes any attempt to pin her down to a "trend" or typology. She is at once classical and experimental, modernist and postmodernist. She is equally intuitive and rational and is gifted both intellectually and emotionally. A dazzling stylist, she is at the same time open to voices of popular culture and street speech. An amazingly erudite cultural analyst, she constantly compares, or rather *tries on* the experiences of other writers, thereby turning an analytical interpretation into a lyrical self-exegesis. She speaks about herself through other voices, rather than vice versa. Mikhail Iampolski aptly characterizes the fluidity of Stepanova's poetic subject:





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“Stepanova’s ‘personalities’ are unstable, they reflect one another and flow into one another [...]. This indeterminacy transcends similarities based on kinship and transforms them into almost Ovid-like streams of metamorphosis.” Curiously, the critic wrote these words years before Stepanova’s most recent poetic cycle, *The Sacred Winter 20/21* (2021), in which Ovid becomes one of the central voices and the logic of metamorphosis dominates overwhelmingly.

In one of her programmatic poems from the collection *Spolia* (2015), Stepanova writes:

где твое я, почему его не видно  
почему за тебя говорят посторонние  
люди  
или ты говоришь  
голосами шутих и трусов  
выйди из себя  
поставь этот словарь на полку

она не выходит  
это у нее не выходит

where’s your *I*, where is it hidden?  
why do strangers speak for you  
or are you speaking  
in the voices of scolds and cowards  
get out of yourself  
put that dictionary back

she won’t come out  
it won’t come right  
(trans. Sasha Dugdale,  
*The Voice Over:  
Poems and Essays*, 137)

However, in the beginning of the cycle, she warns:

у кого нет я,  
может позволить себе не явку,  
хочет отправиться на свободу.

Anyone without-an-I  
is permitted a non i-pppearance  
wants libert-I  
(trans. Sasha Dugdale,  
*The Voice Over:  
Poems and Essays*, 114)

Stepanova’s original, immediately recognizable voice endlessly oscillates between two opposing strategies. One is defined by the quest for

freedom through escape from narrow and debilitating “identity” into the multitude of performed selves; while another suggests that the voices (or even “truths”) of others would remain mute if she did not ventriloquize them. Her freedom turns out to be a dependence, almost an addiction, to diverting selves, and vice versa. This is one of her many aporias.

Stepanova has a knack for aporia, which is her primary method of exploration. Her aporias dwell on the impossibility of what is deemed necessary and the vital necessity of the impossible; she cannot avert her eyes from the yawning abyss between what we see in reality and how we interpret it; and there, in this baffling gray area, she detects a glimpse or rather a hope for light.

Her recent book of poems, *The Sacred Winter 20/21*, explores the lasting condition of living-within-death—whether temporary or final, nobody knows. This condition relates both to the COVID pandemic and the Russian political winter—both may very well last longer than one’s own, individual life. The metaphors inhabiting this wonderful book include Kai from Hans Christian Andersen’s *Snow Queen*, Sleeping Beauty, and frozen sounds from Baron Munchausen’s tales. But at its center we see (or rather hear) Ovid in exile, complaining about the eternal cold and night in passionate poems defying death and despair. With Ovid’s help, Stepanova launches a stream of metamorphoses, blurring the borderlines not only between the self and others, but also between life and death, between defeat and triumph. Her vision is simultaneously pessimistic and utterly optimistic. There is no reason to hope for a thaw (or the Thaw); there will be no release

and no escape from our historical condition. When this pandemic ends, another one will begin. When this dictator dies, another one will replace him. But this condition is not incompatible with creativity and metamorphosis—in other words, with life. We simply must learn to live *within* death, or what seems to be death.

Nowhere is Stepanova's aporia-based method more tangible than in her book *In Memory of Memory*. The prominent historian Yuri Slezkine wrote an exasperated review under the title "Arias in the Archive" about Stepanova's book (*New York Review of Books*, November 18, 2021). The source of his irritation is precisely Stepanova's aporias. In Slezkine's words, "having established that 'telling these histories' is both impossible and objectionable, she tells us her family history anyway." Slezkine cannot conceive how "any story about her ancestors is in fact a story about her." He sarcastically summarizes the book's central thought: "The dead need to be saved from oblivion [...]. The decent thing to do would be to save everyone indiscriminately, but that cannot be done because it obviously cannot be

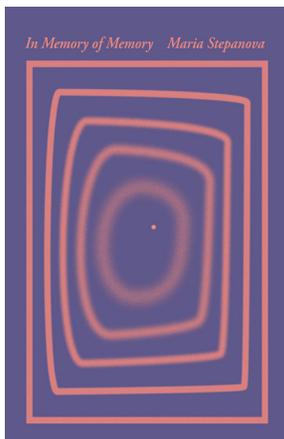
done and because the natural human desire, 'involuntary as a muscle spasm,' is to choose the very one." This is mostly true, and Stepanova does not conceal these contradictions; on the contrary, she highlights them. The problem with Slezkine's reading is that he treats *In Memory of Memory* not as a literary text but as a scholarly work and is bewildered by its artistic, that is, aporia-based, logic, claiming that "sentence by beautiful sentence, Stepanova seems to have written herself into a corner." But that is not the case—and the success of *In Memory of Memory* is the proof.

In their rebuttal to Slezkine's article, Irina Paperno, Stephanie Sandler, and Irina Shevelenko—all scholars who have written about Stepanova's poetry and prose—draw attention to Stepanova's reinvention of the poetic subject, suggesting that "her poetry explores the limits and lures of a lyric self and implicitly teaches us how to read *In Memory of Memory*." But in his response to his critics, Slezkine assigns merely a decorative function to Stepanova's style, treating it as a veneer, and continues to scold her for her lack of rationalism—basically, for not writing

*In Memory of Memory* as a dissertation in history or in memory studies.

Curiously, other critics in their approaches offer contradictory, but paradoxically, coexisting and equally resonant interpretations of Stepanova's book, while also reflecting its aporia-based logic. In his book *The Park of Culture: Culture and Violence in Today's Moscow* (2018), Iampolski locates the importance of *In Memory of Memory* in Stepanova's attempt to confront the cult of family memories, which, he argues, devalues the meaning of history in contemporary culture. On the contrary, in the Russian edition (2021) of her book *Stories of the Soviet Experience: Memoirs, Diaries, Dreams*, Paperno insists on the ethical import of *In Memory of Memory*, suggesting that it overcomes the impression of the "nightmare of history" created by perestroika-period memoirs and restores the historical significance of the family story.

Indeed, Stepanova uses her family archive to reconstruct a thread in the history of the Jewish intelligentsia in Soviet Russia (incidentally, Slezkine's *The Jewish Century* was one of the most important attempts to write just such a history). But Stepanova's book, certainly, cannot be reduced to the reconstruction of family history; that's merely one element, which Slezkine deems its center, unfairly accusing Stepanova of "tribalism" and representing "some traumas and histories as more authentic than others." Most importantly, while fully acknowledging the illusory and elusive character of memory and especially "post-memory," Stepanova builds her own imaginary community, consisting of writers, artists, and visionaries from different cultures and historical periods, from Osip Mandelstam to W.



*In Memory of Memory (A Romance)*  
 Maria Stepanova;  
 Sasha Dugdale (Translator)  
 New Directions (2021)  
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G. Sebald—all those whose experience of writing, imagining, or re-creating history prefigure her own attempts to express unbearable traumas, among which the heaviest is the trauma of alienation from history.

The pain shared by those who have confronted the tragic impossibility of making sense of catastrophic history is made even more relevant by the current attempts that flood the Russian cultural and political mainstream—attempts to resurrect historical metanarratives that would justify not only the war but all the suffering and violence perpetrated by the state in the name of its own supposedly superior ends. The recent “liquidation” of Memorial in Russia demonstrated this all too clearly and cynically. Contrary to the new Russian “official” metanarratives, Stepanova seeks to liberate history from totalitarian ambitions, restoring its personal dimension, connecting it with the creative process, and disconnecting it from any pretenses to “ultimate” historical truth and from any shadow of grandeur.

The aporias that cement the logic of Stepanova’s book are, by default, anti-

teleological, and as such they resist any application for political ends. Instead, they create a protective mechanism against the appropriation of private and highly individual encounters with the pain of historical memory by any impersonal, nationalist, or statist narratives. (Many may recall how Russian “patriotic” propaganda hijacked the grassroots movement The Immortal Regiment and turned it into a state ritual.)

What’s more, the aporias in Stepanova’s *In Memory of Memory* serve as the foundation for a new—artistic rather than scholarly!—vision of history. In her book she not only constructs a decentered, historical narrative that draws equally on personal memories, documents, wordplay, and fiction; she also convincingly and even pedagogically illustrates how the individual can take responsibility for that which has been crippled and destroyed by the grand narratives of the “Great Epoch.” Stepanova constructs from the ruins of life a new narrative and history in which one can live with dignity. Only such a narrative can accommodate those who lived their unique, ordinary, and sometimes

even happy lives through the tragic circumstances of their history—and our history as well. ■

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*Mark Lipovetsky is professor of Slavic languages at Columbia University. His recent publications include *A History of Russian Literature*, coauthored with Andrew Kahn, Irina Reyfman, and Stephanie Sandler (Oxford, 2019); and a critical biography of Dmitry Prigov, coauthored with Ilya Kukulín, *A Guerilla Logos (NLO, 2022)*. He is the author of several monographs, including *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue with Chaos (1999)* and *Modern Russian Literature: 1950s–1990s*, coauthored with his father, Naum Leiderman (Academia, 2001).*