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RUSSIAN BALLET



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Natalia Azarova (b. 1956) is a relative late-comer to poetry, with a distinguished academic career, and since 2012 has been a senior fellow and the head of The Center of World Poetry Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences. Her restlessly innovative work, very much in the spirit of the Chuvash Russian poet Gennady Aygi, is grounded in voice and performance. And so I'm very happy to add that, in addition to her poems in this issue, we've also got a special treat – a **video of Natalia Azarova performing her long experimental poem Brazil**, in eight movements, with English translation. Just click [right here!](#)



With remarkable discipline and consistency, **Mikhail Eremin** has for six decades now practiced an eight-line poem form (octave or octet) that he has made uniquely his own. A librarian for much of his working life, his poetry, while post-modernist in its syntactic and allusive complexity, is very much

imbued with the spirit of classically rhetorical elegance and encyclopedic knowledge. Like so many of our poets, he is also himself a translator (of Hart Crane and Wallace Stevens). Joseph Brodsky wrote: "Eremin is an unreconstructed minimalist. Poetry in essence consists precisely in the concentration of language: a small quantity of lines surrounded by a mass of empty space. Eremin elevates this concentration to a principle: as though it is not simply language but poetry itself that crystallizes into verse... Eremin's poetry may rightfully be called Futurist in the sense that, to this type of poetry, the future belongs."

Anton Vershovsky is a renowned scientist, as well as an art photographer and author, living in Saint Petersburg. When he came to Denmark in 2000, he was enchanted by this country and its residents who were unlike any other part of humanity that he had known. In his two years there, he managed to understand nothing, but made enough notes to share this bewilderment with others. That is how the book *On Denmark and Danes* was born, and then published in Russian, which we excerpt here in its first English translations.



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I once tried to treat my landlady to a normal, fragrant, made “over the fire” frothy coffee. She kept thanking me profusely and very politely, then took a sip, and when she thought I wasn’t watching her anymore, pushed the cup somewhere into a corner.

OF DANES AND DENMARK, AND JUST A LITTLE ON FRENCH, ITALIANS, NORWEGIANS, THE DUTCH AND THE ENGLISH, AS WELL AS ABOUT KINGS AND RED CABBAGE

BY ANTON VERSHOVSKY
TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN BY
ANNA NAUROTSKAYA

Aarhus, you see, is a city in Denmark. When my Danish colleague Christian calls American companies, he proudly presents himself: “Christian such and such, from Aarhus University, and Aarhus is the second largest city in Denmark!” Usually, the curious Americans seek to clarify: “Sorry, the second largest city of WHAT?” Indeed, Denmark is not such a big country. If you look attentively at a map of Europe, you’ll be able to notice a



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peninsula sticking out to the north of Germany. A couple of islands to the right – that is Denmark.



There live very peculiar people, not a bit resembling their European neighbors, let alone us, but wonderful in every respect – the Danes.

They are incredibly unhurried and good-natured, but for some reason consider themselves descendants of the bellicose Vikings.

Both fittingly and out of place, they proudly call themselves

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a “Nordic People,” and their homeland a “Nordic Country,” while even to go skiing, they have no other way but to fly to Norway. That is because in Denmark itself, it doesn’t snow every winter, and even when it does, the snow rarely stays on the ground for longer than two weeks.

They believe firmly that only they, the Danes, are veritable Scandinavians – and not some Swedes or, say, Norwegians. Although, truth being said, Denmark is not at all situated on the Scandinavian Peninsula...

There are altogether five million of them in Denmark, just like Petersburg, and all these five million live amazingly well and non-stressed. After a two-year long accountship with them, I absolutely cannot imagine a Dane busting a gut at work, no matter what the job is – be it a scientist or a loader.

Such a fairytale land could have been imagined by the nice old Danish story-teller Hans Christian Andersen. Very possibly, it was him who did imagine it, nobody would now remember. No, no, of course not everything is so idyllic here, but one thing is absolutely certain – nowhere in the large world surrounding the tiny country of Denmark people have learned to settle so comfortably, while making such a little effort to accomplish it. And managing to stay practically unnoticed by the rest of humankind.

August 20. As I have already had the chance to mention, they can be divided into Danes per se (gigantic, blondish

and unfailingly well-wishing) and Danish women...who offer a rather particular sight at first. To my provincial taste, it is rather difficult to call them blond – most of them are, as one would say, flaxen-headed... their hair, eyebrows and eyelashes are maybe of paper-white color, or maybe just transparent. Some of them are quite skinny and the expression they wear on their face... how could I put it... unambiguously testifies to their willpower, the unyielding moral high ground, the faith in the worldwide victory of the emancipation ideals, and simply the refusal to budge even by a centimeter in order to let you squeeze through the narrow passageway in a bus or in a store. Some, on the contrary, are distinguished by the horizontal extents of up to one and a half meters in diameter, but, most interestingly, wear the same facial expression.



Elderly ladies are, as a general rule, fairly sweet. However, on occasion, that very expression on their face can achieve a perfection of its own kind. And everybody – skinny, and chubby, and slender, and elderly – ride a bicycle all the time (unless, of course, they are busy at that moment blocking your way in a store or a bus). And almost everybody wears minuscule eyeglasses in metallic frames. And shines with aggressively-white, dazzling, in every respect remarkable, teeth. Possibly, it's a self-advertisement for the local dentistry? [...]

An especially impressive spectacle is a Danish young maiden bowling. One readily imagines an enemy's skull in her delicate hand, and a pyramid of enemy bones further away that she is about to destroy with a precise shot. By the way, that is how this game was invented, no doubt. Otherwise, where are the three holes in the bowling ball coming from?

* * *

September 30. I've been continuing my observations on the Danish working process. Everything started with paranoid Americans asking me to pre-pay for some equipment that I desperately needed, according to the principle "money in the morning – chairs in the evening."¹ I came to work early, on purpose, in order to receive the bill from America. Got it. Waited until nine o'clock and ran to see a special lady named Gunhilde who was in charge of processing financial documents. But she wasn't there. I'm asking in the office, "is Gunhilde here?" – and I am told, "no, but today is Friday, isn't it?" I understood nothing and left.

At 10:00 my coworker appeared in our office and explained that Gunhilde didn't go to work on Fridays, but that I could talk to another lady, named Bodil. Obviously, I didn't find that lady either, because she was already on her coffee break. At 11:15 she showed up in her office, started looking into my problem. Looked into it. And suggested I talk to Gunhilde. I'm saying, "I would have done so, but I need it today!" She's responding, "ah, you need it today? No, today,

¹ A quotation from a famous satirical Russian novel, "12 Chairs."

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it is not possible in any case." "The document, - she goes on, - has to be sent to the financial department, and it is already 11:30, and it's Friday!"

Later I found out that, in addition, the semifinals women handball match had been broadcast from the Olympic Games that day, in which the Danish team was playing, and at noon sharp the entire country had stopped working and gathered around TV screens in coffee shops and restaurants. The Danes won, not surprisingly, - you bet, with organisms of that size! The finals, obviously, they will be playing against the Norwegian women. But handball or not, at two o'clock there wasn't a living soul left at the institute. Just like that.

October 2. Gunhilde returned to work and informed me that everything was fine with my document and that she, Gunhilde, would send it to the financial department very shortly. There, it would be promptly signed - and with all that being done, we would be able to send it to America! And how soon will they sign it? Well, probably within two weeks...maybe, three - but it's unlikely!

Almost a half-year had passed before I began realizing just how many unnecessary steps I had made in this story. Pushing a steamroller with my shoulder, in the hopes to make it move faster, would have been just as successful. While in fact, all I had to do was to relax and enjoy the process to the maximum.

* * *

November 30. Today, on the central street in Aarhus, I

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bumped into my former college classmate and later a theoretical scientist from the Physico-technical Institute Kolia Fomin, and another absolutely legendary figure from our Physics department, a genius musician and widely known in narrow circles composer, singer and cult poet Silia (Sergey Seliunin, band "Exit"). Under the sign "Brain Drain," Silia and Kolia were playing the bass-balalaika and the bayan, performing some songs in the russ-punk-folk-rock style for their Danish audience. The audience was delighted, in other words - was not beating them up, but throwing them coins. Afterwards, we hung around, drank some beer, I got their autographed CD for a present, and we reminisced about our common friends - some are, indeed, no longer, and others are, indeed, far away².



When I shared at work that the street musicians playing on the central street in Aarhus were physicists holding doctorate and master degrees, my colleagues were incredulous. They presented me with the following argument: "And why are they playing music on the street, then?"

² Modified quotation from Pushkin

* * *

On Television

[...] By the way, if I have ever told them anything, it is solely because of my own chattiness, for Danes never question you about anything. An exceptionally uncurious people. During my whole stay here, I have been asked about Russia only a few times, and every time just to clarify whether it is true that we have snow the entire winter. On the other hand, several elderly Danes have informed me over a beer, taking turns (with a complete absence of any interest in my reaction), how they visited Russia in Soviet times or in the epoch of Perestroika, and what their impressions of it were – although, I, in my turn, did not express any interest in their impressions either.

These impressions are altogether very consistent and focused on the fact that all the signs in the subway are for some reason written in Cyrillic, and none of them are in the Latin alphabet, there is no heat switch in hotel rooms, all Russians drink vodka and champagne non-stop and force foreign visitors to do likewise.

In addition, about five younger Danes have claimed that they love Dostoevsky. To my question why, they reply that his books are written with real-life vitality, all the characters are very natural. Really? Dostoevsky's characters are natural? I should reread him or something...

At a certain point, the homogeneity of the answers made me suspect that Dostoevsky was part of the Danish school curriculum, and students were taught what they had to

love him for. But then I've discovered that there is no world literature program in Danish schools, so it must be a vogue of some kind or, possibly, F.M. touches some deep chords in the Scandinavian soul. Furthermore, they are all convinced that he, Fedor Mikhailovich, is the only writer we have here, in Russia. Like they have their Hans Christian Andersen. (I'm joking, of course. There are other writers in Denmark, some are even very good.)

* * *

March 18. [...] There is no Capitalism in Denmark. They have something between Communism and a stone age hunter-gatherer society: a primeval-socialist system that (contrary to ours) has proved to be very effective. Danes recall with great pride that just a hundred years ago, Denmark was the poorest country in Europe, and it has now transformed into the richest one, thanks to Danish Socialism.

* * *

May 23. Doctors have prescribed and fashioned a hearing aid - an infinitesimal capsule that costs two thousand dollars - for my landlady's oldest son Peter, who is in his forties, and sometimes stops by to visit his mother. It was done free of charge, obviously, under the wonderful socialist system. Sure thing, it took my landlady's dog a mere few seconds to discover this peanut on the table and crack it up. Afterwards, Peter was chasing the dog for a long time, smashing everything on his way, and, of course, did not

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catch it. As for the landlady, she fell into depression, caused by the prospect of getting a two thousand dollar bill now hanging over her head (Danish family relations are rational to a fault).

The story ended in a surprisingly simple manner: Peter went to the hospital and explained that his hearing aid had been gulped up by a dog. They said, "ah, an accident..." – and prescribed another two thousand dollar device for him. Free of charge.

Comodore Bender³ would find working in this country disgusting. Actually, since the topic has arisen: in a canteen, a café or a jam-packed bar, a Dane usually reaches into his pocket to get the wallet, fishes out a plastic card he needs, and then drops the wallet on the counter somewhere behind his back, out of his way. Later, still without as much as a glance, he picks this wallet up, puts the card in, and returns it to the pocket. I am recording all this honestly and calmly, without too much hope to earn my compatriots' credibility.

* * *

May 27. Unexpectedly even to myself, I ended up in Hamburg and spent there three long hours – not exactly enough for an in-depth encounter with Germany, but in any case, better than nothing. My friends have told me about Hamburg that according to some surveys, it is a city in which 70% of Germans would like to live. I guess, it

³ The main character in the already mentioned satirical novel, "12 Chairs," a skillful con artist.

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logically follows, then, that 70% of German cities are worse than Hamburg? The city is very multi-styled, there are many modern buildings in the old center, a number of them has been erected after the war in place of those destroyed by the bombardments. Stunning canals. An enormous port. An approximately 15-meter tall statue of Bismarck towers in the park, above the city – with a sword, a bold patch, mustaches, and German eagles, monumental in its German way to the point of being grotesque.

There are so many Russians in the city, the mother tongue can be heard everywhere. Interestingly, every time Russian residents of Hamburg hear it, they spring up and eye their compatriots warily, with this particular "you slid into our Germany" expression.

May 29. From Russian Internet: "Good news: the Border Police Day went on without any significant accidents" (the end of the good news list).

* * *

February 20. At 20:02, there happened a moment of "ideal symmetry," that is:

20-02.20-02.20-02



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(meaning 20 hours 02 minutes on February the 20th of the year 2002). Last time an analogous event took place was a thousand years ago, but back then nobody took notice of it. I, for my part, having been warned in advance, did take notice, and drank a shot of whisky for that occasion.

* * *

Rome, no doubt, is a beautiful city. But, it seems to me, that in contrast to Petersburg or Paris, it has been lacking a coherent architectural ensemble for a couple thousand years, offering instead ravishing ancient ruins, enchanting hills and parks, and pompous palaces – all of those being chaotically inlaid into neighborhoods of standard XIX century-built “commercial apartment houses” of sorts, the likes of which are so abundant around the center of Petersburg.

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Rome is illuminated at night in a way very different from Paris as well; the streets are a bit more wretched, and the paint is a bit more flaking. Actually, the similarly sad state of its ancient ruins is explained much less by the raids of the barbarians, and much more by the two thousand year long persistent effort in stripping and stealing off stones and marbles by the Romans themselves, for their own construction needs.

It defies understanding, how it could happen to the Roman Forum itself – the quintessence of life in the ancient city, in the very center of it, for centuries, the Romans were grazing their cows and while at it, digging up some pretty little pebbles and building cattle sheds out of them. And yet, it did happen.

Nowadays, there are no cows in Rome, but on the other

hand, there are scooters. They are more frequent than cars. Everybody drives as God lets their soul wish, utterly ignoring traffic lights and road markings (if there is any to begin with), but if one doesn't have time to jump out of the way, they brake, unlike in, say, Paris. One has to jump off constantly; some streets don't have side walks at all, some others have them so narrow that one is forced to step off on the road to let another pedestrian pass by. That is exactly how two thousand years ago, Roman pedestrians were dodging each other and Roman chariots.

* * *

June 15. The event that switched Denmark off the normal rhythm for a month was the soccer World Cup. Today the country is in mourning – after the glorious victory over France that every single Dane was celebrating in the most intense manner possible for two days, Denmark jolted into England, lost 0:3, and dropped out of the competition. Tens of thousands of fans in horned hats and painted red and white, are roaming around the central square in Copenhagen under a pouring rain and splashing each other with puddle water. However, they are not smashing shop windows, not overturning cars, and not chasing “individuals of English nationality” over the streets. They didn't even touch a handful of unnamed heroes who came to the square with the white and red English flag instead of the red and white Danish one (it's true: the English flag is an inversion of the Danish one: the heavy legacy of the times of Danish

domination, a red cross on white background, not to be confused with the blue-white-red British flag).

All Danes in Aarhus gathered in parties around their TVs to watch that match. Students headed back to the university (it happened to be Saturday), where the match was absolutely illegally broadcast on big screens. They brought bottles of beer, to open and drink after each Danish goal – and then spent the entire three hours in complete silence – of which in the whole world only Scandinavians watching soccer are capable – and immobility, and took their bottles with them afterwards... By the evening, however, Danish pragmatism prevailed over national sorrow, and a universal booze-up followed, for why let this beer spoil! Since it had been bought already...

June 21. An exceptionally pleasant trait in Danish upbringing is that Danes believe less than, possibly, anybody else in the whole world that the degree of superiority of some individuals of one species over some other individuals of that same species can be measured in the quantity of green pieces of paper marked “dollars” or anything else of this sort in these individuals' possession. [...] It is somewhat shameful to be rich here, somewhat un-Danish. Although, being poor is also inappropriate, since poor people fall out of the collective just as well as rich ones – but then again, there are no really poor people in Denmark, there is only a certain number of bum-ish alcoholics, for whom begging is not a necessity but a lifestyle. In Aarhus, there are approximately six of them, and they are always drinking

beer on the stairs at the same front door. [...]

And, finally, the main national particularity consists in the fact that Danes are constantly drinking coffee. They drink coffee at home in the morning and in the evening, at work three times a day during coffee-breaks, and in-between the coffee-breaks – in their offices, where they keep their personal coffeemakers. Coffee is made in the following way: the very best coffee beans, preferably those from a Danish company, are very carefully picked, purchased and ground right away; the coffeemaker is filled to the brim with water and coffee; all that bubbles for ten minutes and results in a bowl full of dark brown, ghastly in its taste, odor and color beverage that Danes immediately pour over into a special coffee thermos and subsequently drink cup after cup in its pure form, no milk or sugar. Ingesting even the smallest dosage of it by a normal organism instantly causes severe heartburn and nausea. I have never been able to explain this phenomenon. I don't know if this is the problem of coffeemakers, or Danish water, or the proportions. I have also got a coffeemaker in my office and after several unsuccessful attempts to produce in it anything not resembling Danish coffee, I've given up and began drinking the same thing as everybody else – just in much smaller dozes.

No deviations from the above-mentioned way of making coffee is tolerated. Coffee shops where one can get an espresso or a cappuccino can be counted on the fingers of one hand, while nobody has even heard of coffee prepared in a jezve (turka). They ask: "like what, over the fire or

something?"

I once tried to treat my landlady to a normal, fragrant, made "over the fire" frothy coffee. She kept thanking me profusely and very politely, then took a sip, and when she thought I wasn't watching her anymore, pushed the cup somewhere into a corner. Yet she drinks two-three one-litre thermoses of her beloved dark brown beverage a day. Tastes are a mysterious thing, indeed! In fact, Danes usually drink milk at dinner - and nothing happens. Admittedly, they also chew up the so-called "Danish cuisine dishes," and no harm comes to them, they just get healthier. [...] But enough of that. It's time for me to go get my coffee.

* * *

Historico-geographical reference: England – a small island state, former Danish colony. From the times of Danish domination, England inherited a white-red flag and the climate even more Danish than in Denmark itself.

* * *

July 21. Last night, I was having a terrible nightmare: I dreamt of coming back home to Petersburg, and the moment I got there, I was caught and brought to the Danish Consulate to take the mandatory examination in the Danish language.

* * *

I'm afraid I've gone a little overboard with snide comments. Sure thing, I've made them out of love... Denmark is a

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delightful country, but it's time to pack up. I will miss Aarhus streets, the working atmosphere in the labs, the music and the smoke of its cozy diners, the blushing smiles of flaxen-headed slender Danish women, the scent of sea and rain... I am not saying goodbye – we'll see each other again, as Danes put it – "Ve ses!"
Farvel, or see you soon!



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