



Samizdat.

Between Practices
and Representations

Lecture Series

at Open Society

Archives, Budapest,

February-June 2013.

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VALENTINA PARISI

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The dispersed author. The problem of literary authority in *samizdat* textual production.

Valentina Parisi

In his ground-breaking “Panizzi” lectures, delivered at the British Library in 1985¹, Donald F. McKenzie emphasized the effects of meaning that material forms produce in the transmission of literary and non-literary texts. As all works of lasting value are reproduced, re-edited and re-read over the centuries, they take on different forms and significations that are constructed in the encounter between authorial proposal and readers’ reception. As the New Zealand scholar pointed out, “...new readers of course make new texts and their new meanings are a function of their new form” (McKenzie 1999: 29). While providing some basis for a re-evaluation of both bibliography and book history, McKenzie’s remark seems to fit perfectly to *samizdat* practice. It is common knowledge that in the Soviet Union *samizdat* readers did make new texts *in the literal sense*, i.e. not only by actualizing in various ways the virtual meanings contained in a work, but also by physically reproducing it, usually with their own typewriters. As a number of studies have shown (Todorov 2008, 2009, Parisi 2013), readers often took on the role traditionally performed by publishers; that is, they fixed a text, shaped new carriers of meaning and, in so doing, instigated a new proliferation of singular acts of reading. As a consequence, not only was any *samizdat* text likely to be deformed by the technical circumstances of its production and transmission, but even the form it did have was shown to be “less an embodiment of past meaning than a pretext for present interpretation” (McKenzie 1999: 33). But, since any text, stable in its letter, is invested with a new status when the mechanisms that make it available to the audience change (McKenzie 1986, 1999, Chartier 1994, 1998), one can ask what it actually meant to read a text in a manuscript or typewritten form supposed to be equivalent to print publication². Which kind of response could *samizdat* texts generate in Soviet readers well accustomed to dealing with printed books? And, namely, what could be the consequences of the choice to commit the preservation and the transfer of a literary work to such a medium?

It is generally assumed that *samizdat* was a key form of dissident activity which aimed to spread forbidden works within and beyond the borders of

1. Then re-arranged and collected in McKenzie 1986, 1999.

2. In this respect *samizdat*, rather than being a return to a Pre-Gutenberg era (Skilling 1982, Komaromi 2008), reactivated the complementary coexistence of printed books and manuscripts during the 17th century, when the manuscript functioned “both as a normal form of personal record, and a normal form of publication” (McKenzie 2002: 245) and a well-organized manuscript trade functioned concurrently with the trade in printed items.

the Soviet Union and thus to discredit or undermine the authority of the Soviet State. But from a different viewpoint *samizdat* can also be analyzed as a self-significant medium which challenges to a great extent our presuppositions about what a published text should look like. In particular, while it established a parallel level of textual production and dissemination, *samizdat* revived aspects of scribal culture which the invention of the printing press had made anachronistic or pushed to the margins of the publishing process. While challenging the presupposition that print in itself is a guarantor of textual stability, in the introduction to his study *The nature of the book* Adrian Johns summarizes all the characteristics of printed items that the contemporary reader usually takes for granted: “We do not have to agonize over the reliability of a published book before we can put it to use. We do not need to undertake investigatory work to confirm that its author does exist and that its text is authorized. No literary spy needs to be hired to ascertain that it was indeed made by its stated publisher and that its contents will be the same as those of another copy of the same book found in any other place. In our world, all these characteristics are inherent in virtually any published book” (Johns 1998: 2). On the contrary, as we will see, *samizdat* text often confronted both readers and authors with problems that, at least in Western print culture, seemed to have become obsolete.

My purpose is to look at *samizdat* in the theoretical framework offered by book history and, in particular, to analyze how the non-print character of such a publication affected the process of the production, dissemination and appropriation of text. More specifically, in this lecture I intend to question to what extent *samizdat* challenged the stability of what Michel Foucault in his essay *What is an Author?* called the “institution of literature and its categories”. If we assume that a book is not the mirror of the author’s intention, but the result of a collaborative process between several non-authorial agents such as editors, publishers, translators, readers etc. (McKenzie 1999: 27), how does this dialectic change in the context of self-publishing? And if we define our relationship to texts – as Chartier does – as the interplay between the set of constraints imposed by the author on the reader and reader’s liberty in deciphering the text³, what additional meanings does this encounter assume, when the reader becomes a self-appointed publisher?

As a starting point I would refer to a particular case which in my opinion represents an excellent example of what Jerome McGann called “the socialization of texts”⁴, that is the permanent journey of a work from one context to another. In 1990 – which means at a very late stage of *samizdat* history⁵ – the Leningrad typewritten journal *Sumerki* (“Twilight”) published an unauthorized translation of *A Room and a Half*, an English essay by Iosif Brodskij (or, better, Joseph at this point of his career), which first appeared in *The New York Review* on February 27th, 1986, and then was re-published

3. Chartier 1994: viii.

4. Mc Gann 2002: 39–46.

5. Sumerki editors, Aleksandr Novakovskij, Arsen Mirzaev, Aleksej Gurjanov and Dmitrij Sinočkin were fully aware of the redundant character of their journal, since Gorbačev’s glasnost’ and the consequent loosening of censorship made *samizdat* apparently less necessary than in the past. At the same time, self-publishing continued to be the only way to give voice to the young generation, unable to gain access to official “thick” journals, which all of a sudden were allowed to publish authors such as Pasternak or Nabokov. See Mirzaev 2007.

in the volume *Less than One*⁶. Brodskij's memoir on his childhood in a Leningrad communal apartment was translated into Russian by Aleksandr Kolotov, who in the 1990s was to become a professional translator dealing with authors such as Dylan Thomas and Isaac Asimov⁷. An editorial note published in the 8th issue of *Sumerki* makes it clear to what extent Brodskij was disappointed by the uncontrolled proliferation in the Soviet Union of unofficial translations of his English essays. The editor Aleksandr Novakovskij wrote bitterly: "After issuing the first run of *Sumerki* n. 8, we heard that Iosif Brodskij had categorically prohibited the publication of his English texts in Russia. [...] We express our apologies to Iosif Brodskij. We do hope that the status of our journal will prevent him from charging us with piracy crime"⁸.

Far from being idyllic, the dialectic between authorial writing strategy and readers' reception (and re-creation) of a text often turned out to be conflictual. The author's legitimate aspiration to preserve the form of his work from eventual corruption collided with readers' interest in appropriating it and re-using it in a creative way in their own unauthorized publications. This is particularly evident in the above-mentioned case: The editors of *Sumerki* not only included Brodskij's memoir in their typewritten journal, but also tried to integrate it into their own publishing project, by presenting it in the permanent section devoted to the St. Petersburg urban space and by adding a folded map of the Litejnyj district where Brodskij spent his childhood. In a way, they tried to bring the exiled poet "back home". This *samizdat* appropriation of a text published abroad goes conceptually far beyond the decision taken by Vladimir Maramzin in 1973 (that is the year following the poet's departure from the USSR) to collect all Brodskij's *samizdat* poems circulating in Leningrad in order to assemble them in a complete works edition and allegedly save them from oblivion. At that time young writers from Petersburg perceived Brodskij as a truly *samizdat* poet, "existing outside the normal literary process"⁹ and were deeply concerned about the fact that abroad he might stop writing as a consequence of the loss of a responsive audience. As Michail Chejfec pointed out:

When the poet was expelled from the USSR, we were afraid that emigration could destroy his creative personality. How could he continue writing at a high level, being torn away from the natural element of his mother-tongue, from the "wild" environment of the Russian language, from his readers, who were able to perceive any nuance, any hint to a endless number of cultural realia [...]? In the end we were just average Soviet citizens, obsessed by the idea that every writer who emigrated, and especially every young poet, was condemned to starvation in the West. In brief, we thought that Joseph's destiny had been irreparably broken at its highest point (Poluchina 2006: 26-27).

6. J. Brodsky, "In a Room and a Half", *The New York Review*, February 27th, 1986: 40-8; re-published in J. Brodsky, *Less than one. Selected essays*, New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1986: 447-501.

7. A. Kolotov's translation, entitled *V polorach komnatach* (*Sumerki*, 1990, 8) also appeared in the Leningrad newspaper *Smena* (in two installments, March 20th, 1991, p. 5 and March 27th, 1991, pp. 4-5). Later on an authorized Russian translation by Dmitrij Čekalov, entitled *Poltory komnaty*, would be published in *Novyj mir* 1995, 2: 61-85.

8. *Sumerki*, 8, 1990, Research Centre for East European Studies, Bremen University, FSO 01-53.

9. See Valentina Poluchina's interview with Michail Chejfec, in Poluchina 2006: 29.

10. See for instance Michail Chejfec's recollections: "In the USSR a network of samizdat activists was established at the grass-roots level. Maramzin was possibly a main spreader of self-published literature in Leningrad (I am not really sure about his status, anyway I can say that I received from him on a regular basis a lot of samizdat documents – articles, novels, short tales). I don't know who gave Maramzin all this stuff, the only thing I knew was that after reading I had to return everything. But Maramzin was not aware of the fact that I gave all texts to a trusted type-copyist (Ljudmila Ejzengardt) who would type me five copies. I sold 4 copies to my friends for 20% of the expenses I incurred. I selected sheets from different copies, so that every booklet could be equally legible and I kept the first copy for myself as a kind of reward for having organized the reproduction process. This network was fully invisible, I insist: Maramzin didn't know about my 'clients', he thought I was just a reader. As far as I am concerned, I cannot assume that someone involved in my "company" did not reproduce his own text in five more copies, and then sell them to his own friends" (Poluchina 2006: 27–28).

11. Todorov 2008: 735–758.

Therefore, Maramzin's *samizdat* edition was conceived as a kind of unofficial homage to the absent poet, meant to perpetuate both his memory and his presence in the motherland through his works. By contrast, *Sumerki's* editors turned to Brodskij when he was a definitely well-established author, who – one must not forget – had been awarded the Nobel prize in 1987.

In order to clarify why reader response and self-publishing strategies conflicted with authorial intention, I think it is worth drawing on Foucault's theory of the author-function. In the relevant essay *What is an author?* he claims that the notion of author is the fundamental principle for the designation of a text, the "privileged moment of individualization in the history of ideas" (Foucault 2003: 378). As an ideological figure, the author is the incarnation of a unifying principle, which strives to identify a certain way of writing or a text corpus with a certain person and, in this way, impedes the free manipulation, the free composition and re-composition of texts. As a result, "the author is the principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning" (Foucault 2003: 390). This principle is obscured, if not obliterated, when publishing activity is performed by readers at the grass-roots level. In self-publishing the author-function disperses into those who reproduce the texts and construct their meanings. Since textual dissemination is virtually unrestrained and free from the usual boundaries set by copyright policies¹⁰, textual instability is not only a matter of possible authorial re-thinking and revision (McKenzie 1999) but a consequence of the reader's involvement in the process of editing and composition, i.e. in the core of publishing activity.

Such an argument can be easily proved, if we turn to archival materials. A striking example of textual instability caused by readers' personal interpretation is the case of Varlam Šalamov's short stories, reported by Leona Toker in her essay about *samizdat* and what she calls "the problem of authorial control"¹¹. The author of the *Kolyma Tales* was highly sensitive to readers' attempts to edit his very individual style and to "correct" his works. In a letter to his life partner Irina Sirotinskaja, he complained that *samizdat* scribes, copying his short story *How It Began*, tended to complete the word *rabo[tali]* ("we worked") which he had deliberately left unfinished. This means that when, on the typewritten copy which they received, they found only the correct expression "rabo...", they thought that the typist could have omitted some letters by mistake and so they added them in their new copy, in order to restore what they believed should have been the author's original text (Toker 2008: 743). My suspicion is that, if they had found "rabo..." in a printed version of Šalamov's story, they would have not perceived it as a mistake and they would have tried to figure out what the author could have actually meant by it. But since they had found it in a typewritten copy, they unconsciously distrusted *samizdat's* capacity to be a reliable medium and, consequently, they produced what, borrowing a term used by linguists,

we could define as a hypercorrection. That is, they introduced a “mistake” into Šalamov’s text precisely because they wanted to correct it.

Still, it would be wrong to regard every shift from authorial intention as a corruption of the authoritative text. Drawing on McGann’s “critique of modern textual criticism”, I would rather argue that – far from simply playing the role of the ancient scribes who sought to preserve and transmit the classical texts, but who introduced, in the process, various contaminations – *samizdat* readers took on the more complex role generally performed by editors and publishers by dictating the form that the outside of the literary work would eventually take. As in the *Sumerki* case, they did not limit themselves to reproducing a text, but exceeded the responsibilities traditionally ascribed to the recipient of a literary work by creating the very form of the artefact and thus directing it toward a particular audience and a particular interpretation. In Genette’s terms, they invented a paratext, that “fringe” of the printed text that is always the conveyor of a commentary (authorial or more or less legitimated by the author) and “constitutes a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of *transaction*: a privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that [...] is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it.” (Genette 1997: 1).

This is especially true in the case of the *samizdat* edition of Lev Rubištejn’s poems (*Kartoteka*), originally written on bibliographical cards and intended not to circulate as a text, but to be performed by the author before a restricted audience. Nevertheless, *samizdat* editors strove to publish *Kartoteka* in their typewritten journals in order to make it available for a broader audience than the narrow circles which could attend Rubištejn’s public performances in Moscow or Leningrad. By sinning against the author’s intention, readers/editors created for *Kartoteka* a new form which was eventually adopted in the 1990s, when Rubištejn’s works finally appeared in print. Rubištejn’s *samizdat* texts were usually accompanied by an editorial note explaining to the reader those characteristics of *Kartoteka* that had been obliterated by its physical inclusion in the literary journal¹². Hence, the “authority” for the text rests neither with the author nor with the readers/editors; it resides in the actual agreement which these two cooperating authorities have eventually reached. By contrast, in many other cases, “the author as a principle of thrift” seems to volatilize, due to his inability to control the very process of reproduction and dissemination of the work; consequently the readers’ liberty prevails over authors’ choices.

This is not surprising, if we consider that readers’ expectations played a crucial role in self-publishing from the very start. Their interest in reading a certain work could even determine the choice of the technique used in the

12. See for example: “Editorial note: we would like to make it clear that the above-published text [...] exists only in the form of a small stack of bibliographical cards. Our decision to present it as an uninterrupted text in a way goes against the author’s intention and it is due only to technical reasons.” (Rubištejn 1983: page without number.

reproduction process and thus condition the physical features of *samizdat* texts. Such an attitude is demonstrated by Leonid Žmud', editor-in-chief of the Leningrad self-published magazine *Metrodor*:

I incessantly received books, but sooner or later I had to give them back and I couldn't bear it. Consequently, I started to reproduce them by Xerox or I gave them to typists. Nabokov and Platonov passed through the typewriter, because typists loved them, while Solženicyn and Zinov'ev would end up in the Xerox (Žmud 1998: 205).

After the mid 70s the increased circulation of photocopied and photographed materials established a dualism in *samizdat* production: on the one hand mechanically duplicated documents, theoretically more authoritative than typewritten copies (provided that the source-text was a reliable one) and, on the other hand, texts reproduced either by readers or professional typists who would receive a fee for it. In the latter case – as Žmud' pointed out – *samizdat* scribes read (and possibly edited) texts while typing; textual appropriation went along with the individual creation of a new carrier of meaning. Such a merging of reading with editing/publishing practices generally led to a more creative and intimate relationship with the book as an object. This became clear to many by the end of 1980s, when once-“forbidden” authors started to be published both in volumes and in the so-called “thick” literary journals:

Now on my book-shelves there are many books by Belyj, Achmatova, Cvetaeva, Platonov, Bulgakov and Kafka. At a certain point the almost illegible typescript of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* has turned into a weighty gift edition, unfortunately with awful illustrations. Anyway, I like to re-read my self-made books [...] because they are part of my life (Leksin 1987).

On the other hand, self-publishers sometimes seemed to be concerned about readers' unlimited freedom to copy and assemble various materials without any legal restriction. A possible attempt in foucaultian terms to re-affirm the author function as the principle of thrift in textual circulation is to be seen in the paradoxical emergence of a *samizdat* copyright. In July 1983 the typewritten journal “Transponans” released in its 17th issue some unpublished materials by avant-garde artists thanks to the collaboration with the art historian Nikolaj Chardžiev, who as a young man in the 1930s befriended leading members of the Russian avant-garde and preserved their manuscripts long after their works were banned as subversively bourgeois. In view of the inestimable historical value of such texts – unpublished poems by Aleksej Kručënych and Kazimir Malevič – “Transponans” editors Sergej Sigov and Anna Taršis decided to “forbid” readers to copy them by

specifying in a notice “*reproduction is forbidden*” (“perepečatka zaprešaet’sja”). Moreover, they appropriated the copyright on the materials together with Chardžiev by adding a typewritten copyright symbol beside them (Parisi 2013: 237). At that time it was generally assumed that readers had to mention the title of the journal they had copied texts from, but nobody had yet tried to prevent readers from copying texts¹³. Of course, Sigov and Taršis did not expect any financial return from this formal ownership of rights and it is unlikely that their prohibition prevented any reader from falling into temptation. Anyway, their paradoxical attempt to reassert the principle of intellectual property in a context where copying, sharing and assembling was the rule, introduced a bias in *samizdat* practice, since some documents were evaluated as too precious to be copied by the readers without any authorial or editorial control. Here ideals of authorship and reception started to become deeply involved in conflicts over self-publishing, in a way which definitely evokes contemporary debates on creative commons and piracy.

13. In 1973 the typewritten journal «Veče» published the notice: «When copying texts, please mention the journal “Veče”» (Veče 1973:). In 1983 «Molčanie»’s editors pointed out: «Copying original texts is allowed only by mentioning M.» (Molčanie» 1983: page without number).

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