

Alisa Slaughter and Julia Sushytska (eds.)

**A Spy for an Unknown Country:
Essays and Lectures by Merab Mamardashvili**

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Table of Contents

Preface by <i>Caryl Emerson</i>	7
Introduction	17
Texts included in this volume	53
European Responsibility	57
Topology of a Path: Lectures on Proust	63
Lecture 1.....	65
Lecture 6.....	86
Lecture 11.....	108
What Belongs to the Author	134
<i>Аѳморское</i> – Original Facsimile of “What Belongs to the Author”	139
Consciousness and Civilization	146
The “Third” State.....	167
On Civil Society.....	179
The Illegal Joy of Merab Mamardashvili by <i>Annie Epelboin</i>	211
<i>Verwandlung</i>, or the Human Crucible by <i>Miglana Nikolchina</i>	219
A Note on Primary and Secondary Literature	239
Selected Bibliography	243
Acknowledgments	247
Contributors	249

Preface

Caryl Emerson

For a long time, the Cold-War West clung to a simple binary: in the Soviet twentieth century, Russian creators were either dissidents or collaborators. It was hard for outsiders to process the fact that awful regimes also contain a rich spectrum of courageous, morally astute survivors. Often this was survival at a very high creative level—in and out of official institutions, with and without an audience, constantly pushing the limits of what was permissible and then standing back to see what the regime would do. In literature and the staged arts, scandals made world news. Works and performers were banned, ballet dancers defected, writers were expelled or died in obscurity as their novels and poems circulated clandestinely or were hidden away in clothes closets. All this danger and humiliation enormously increased the prestige of art, for no one inside or outside Russia doubted that genuine operas, movies, plays, symphonies and novels were being created, even if not approved for public life.

In philosophy, the situation was different and more complexly debilitating. The Russian Academician Vladislav Lektorsky, who co-edited with Marina Bykova a recent (2019) anthology dedicated to post-Stalinist Soviet philosophy, readily admits that many Western sovietologists presumed there was no Soviet philosophy at all. How could there be, since philosophy presumes “a critical examination of whatever is taken for granted,” and such critique was forbidden by the Party and Soviet state?¹ What is more, the great Russian novelists and poets had long flourished as carriers of philosophical thought. With their high moral stature and eloquent manifestos, from Leo Tolstoy to Andrei Bely, Alexander Solzheni-

¹ Vladislav A. Lektorsky, Chapter 1. “The Russian Philosophy of the Second Half of the Twentieth Century as a Sociocultural Phenomenon,” *Philosophical Thought in Russia in the Second Half of the 20th Century. A Contemporary View from Russia and Abroad*, ed. Vladislav A. Lektorsky and Marina F. Bykova (New York: Bloomsbury Academic: 2019): 19-34, here 19.

tsyn and Anna Akhmatova, literary creators satisfied the world far better than could any dry academic efforts. Lektorsky asks us to correct this view. Although the Soviet-era classroom and university lecture hall had its informers and stool pigeons like every other official institution, these venues also enjoyed the advantage of young minds united by a reading list and charged not with entertaining themselves but with disciplining their mental life. Lektorsky focuses on those academic philosopher-teachers who made possible the “Russian philosophical Renaissance of the 1960s-80s.” It began as a relatively safe, non-ideological “cognitive turn” in the fields of symbolic logic, systems theory and epistemology, but soon spread to the softer humanities. Merab Mamardashvili, who defended a dissertation at Moscow State University in 1961, belongs to this uneasy but liberating generation.

In a follow-up essay for the same volume, Mikhail Epstein fills in the uncharted, risk-taking realm that opened up with the Thaw.² At mid-century, Soviet philosophy was both crippled and explosively fertile. In Epstein’s view, Russian thinkers have always tended to be Platonists, drawn to “ideocracy” – that is, to a model of the State, or a state of mind, where abstract idealist thought favoring wholeness, integrity, and all-unity takes precedence over fragmented empirical experience. Such passion for oneness has helped Russian thinkers avoid the stubborn binaries that persist in the West (reason versus faith, body versus mind or spirit), but at considerable cost in the political and social sphere. The Soviet variant of this totalizing national tendency was “Marxist Platonism,” a paradoxical mix of dialectical materialism and idealism. Precisely because the doctrine was so internally contradictory did it become so ferocious and inflexible. If for Plato “the world of ideas exists in and of itself, without necessarily demanding historical embodiment,” then for Marxists, as inconsistent Platonists, “ideas are

² Mikhail N. Epstein, Chapter 2. “Main Configurations of Russian Thought in the Post-Stalin Epoch,” *Philosophical Thought in Russia in the Second Half of the 20th Century*, 35-52. Epstein identifies eight trends: humanized Marxism, Neo-Rationalism, Philosophy of the National Spirit, Personalism and Liberalism, Orthodox Christian thought, Cosmism and other esoterica, Culturology, and Conceptualism (42-48). Further page references in text.

inseparable from the material process and are greedy for realization and implementation” (38-39). In the literary imagination, the prose writer Andrei Platonov became the most accurate chronicler of this traumatized, hyper-idealistic, wholly unrealizable Russian Marxism. (Mamardashvili’s 1989 lecture on “Civil Society,” included in this volume, cites Platonov’s forlorn slogan-bearing heroes as exemplary of thought developing “according to the mechanical laws of ideological illusion.”) But literature has freedoms that philosophy does not. The responsible philosopher of a failing society must seek first principles on a more objective plane. On a spectrum stretching from humanized Marxism through religiously-inflected personalism to experiments in Conceptualist art, Epstein places Mamardashvili among the “neo-Rationalists.” The philosopher’s specific recuperative task was to restore to individual ownership the very process of thinking, which had been co-opted by the State. His method would be a phenomenological analysis of consciousness.

This was not the theory-laden academic phenomenology of German philosophers in the interwar period, however.³ As we learn from his brief, impressionistic autobiographical statement in this volume, “What Belongs to the Author,” Mamardashvili was early captivated by French culture – its literature, philosophical priorities, modes of expression. This French tradition, with its secular metaphysics, respect for solitude, autonomy for rational being and at the same time license for a personal absurd, became the core of his most precious constellation of values, which he identified as Enlightenment Europe. Mamardashvili’s former student Mikhail Ryklin recalls that this idealization of European culture was something that progressive Europeans had long since cast off (replacing it, more often than not, with an idealized Marxism); it “presupposed a prolonged separation” from the culture it idealized and

³ On this see A. V. Akhutin, “In Mamardashvili’s Country,” published in Russian 2009, translated by Stephen D. Shenfield for *Russian Studies in Philosophy*, vol. 49, no. 1 (Summer 2010): 20-52, here 26: “M.M. may be considered a phenomenologist, if only it be understood that for him phenomenology is not a discipline or doctrine in whose development he participates, but a sort of organ of understanding that – like any organ of understanding – starts working only when it is wholly personalized, even privatized.”

owed much to “a forced stay in a closed repressive society.”⁴ Nevertheless this cleansed, radiant ideal of Europe allowed Mamardashvili to construct a productive and pedagogically charismatic zone for himself as survivor during the darkest years of the Brezhnev Stagnation. Marx, a stimulant to the young Mamardashvili, had increasingly little to do with this zone. Indeed, as Epstein wrote of this connection: “The entire project of Marxism was based on two assumptions antithetical to Mamardashvili’s theory: that consciousness is determined by being, and that it can transform being. . . . Philosophers cannot explain the world, but neither can they change it.”⁵ With intense effort, perhaps philosophers might succeed in observing their own thought processes. That was enough. Some of Mamardashvili’s academic colleagues, such as the immensely popular Evald Ilyenkov, took a more Marx-and-Hegel-friendly route out of destalinization. For them, intellectual heroes of the Thaw, objective reality was still cognized as reasonable; but (so argues one historian of this period, Vadim Mezhuev) that faith collapsed after 1968. “Those loyal to Ilyenkov probably did not notice the collapse,” Mezhuev writes. “But those who had lost that faith found solace in the philosophy of Mamardashvili.”⁶

What is the nature of this solace, this renewed quest for mental self-respect? How is it compatible with civic responsibility, and why is art so often an essential component of it? The texts in this volume offer various clues. Common to them all is one overarching methodological concern, with roots in Kierkegaard, which has led some commentators to classify Mamardashvili as a “post-secular” philosopher.⁷ Mamardashvili’s own term for this concern is “post-

⁴ Mikhail K. Ryklin, “Consciousness as a Domain of Freedom. The Metaphysical Theme in Merab Mamardashvili,” written in 2004, published in Russian in 2009, translated by Steven Shabad for *Russian Studies in Philosophy*, vol. 49, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 28-50, here 29.

⁵ Mikhail Epstein, *The Phoenix of Philosophy: Russian Thought of the Late Soviet Period (1953-1991)* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), especially Part II, 7, pp. 103-11 on Mamardashvili, here 107.

⁶ Vadim M. Mezhuev, “Philosophy From the Period of ‘Thaw’ to the Period of ‘Stagnation’: A Philosophical Reflection,” Chapter Six in *Philosophical Thought in Russia in the Second Half of the 20th Century*, 103-14, here 107.

⁷ See Dmitry Ryndin, “Merab Mamardashvili: the concept of the event and the post-secular situation of the twentieth century,” *Studies in East European*

(or non-) classical rationality,” when an act of thinking can no longer be considered transparent to itself. Mikhail Epstein summarized the revolution in thinking that Mamardashvili saw in Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, Marx, and Nietzsche (one that did not distinguish between believers and atheists, idealists and materialists) in the following way: the “abandonment of traditional rationalism in favor of complicity with hidden engines of motivation.” Due to existential uniqueness, or primordial will, or material forces of production, or vital instinct, “thinking [now] finds its ground in something *unthinkable*.”⁸

This state of affairs would seem to put philosophy professors out of business. It is incompatible with classroom procedures. One cannot read about it, conceptualize it, take notes on it, assign it to others or recall it later. The fact that you are reading this Preface is already a corruption. But happily, Mamardashvili was of a temperament that could confront the problem head on, and in the lecture hall. The urgent nature of “unthinkability,” and our human need to live through it (to experience it to the end, with no guaranteed residue) before any understanding is possible, links Mamardashvili with two of his predecessors in the history of Russian thought, also non-conforming personalists who were shaped by the European philosophical tradition into citizens of an unknown country: Leo Tolstoy and Mikhail Bakhtin. For Tolstoy, the unthinkable is death. For Bakhtin, it is the live event. For Mamardashvili, it is thinking itself. As different as these thinkers are from one another, each came to believe that the most difficult task faced by consciousness is to learn to live in the present. For each, art held the key. Art was not a disinterested realm, however, as it ideally was for Kant. An artistic creation was a model for coming-to-know that possessed an unalienable ethical dimension, since “consciousness is involved in the

Thought 71 (2019): 259-276. The post-secular approach does not place itself in opposition to secularity, Ryndin insists, but rather “reveals the historical, contingent and relative nature of the secular position, exposes certain theological implications in secular thought and questions the traditional dichotomies of classical rationality, for example, the natural/supernatural, rational/irrational, faith/reason, sacred/profane dualisms” (260).

⁸ Epstein, *The Phoenix of Philosophy*, 107.

realm of values and not facts.”⁹ The remainder of this Preface will speculate on the potential of Mamardashvili’s method for intellectual solace in a feral time.

Presence, infinity, event

The essays translated here all belong to the end of Mamardashvili’s life, its final half-decade. The crumbling Soviet ideocracy was again allowing him to travel abroad, although internally he had been exiled from Moscow to his native Tbilisi in 1980. As with Yuri Lotman (1922-93), that other great Soviet-era thinker from the imperial periphery who passed from the scene on the cusp of a (previously unthinkable) regime change, Mamardashvili’s untimely death in 1990 deprived us of a synthesis from a person singularly well prepared to provide it. His thought was becoming more openly political, angrier. “Consciousness and Civilization” (1988) opens on the “anthropological catastrophe.” “The Third State” (1989) speaks of a “monstrous trash heap of thought and language.” But given his oral mode of philosophizing (without a prepared text, in the language of his audience whether Russian, Georgian, or French), this anger and politics was of a peculiar texture. It was not directly translatable into civic action or even into civic speech, but focused on the cultivation of consciousness itself, a prerequisite for the civic act. For one thing must be kept in mind. Although Mamardashvili referred to himself as an internal émigré, in no sense did this mean he escaped nostalgically to some earlier well-furnished place. When his mind plied its trade in the presence of his students, there were no furnishings anywhere: not only no written text or pretext, but also no finalized argument. What interested Mamardashvili was the experience of thinking — not the contours or content of a given thought. If thoughts could be “had” and then stored away, this was not the case with thinking. In a programmatic interview from 1989, published as “How I Understand Philosophy,” Mamardashvili stated categorically that philosophy was not a “system of

⁹ Diana Gasparian, “The Transcendental dimension of consciousness in Merab Mamardashvili’s philosophy,” *Studies in East European Thought* 71 (2019): 241-258, here 253.

knowledge” but the cultivation and “development of internal states . . . on the basis of personal experience.”¹⁰ Perhaps on analogy with Tolstoy’s infection theory of art, one could “catch” philosophy from a person who is practicing it; Mamardashvili remarks in this interview that “being in the individual presence of a thinker . . . and listening to him will possibly set you too in motion, induce some sort of spiritual experience.” Because philosophizing is an experience, it cannot be transmitted by a profession, a textbook, or a totality of ideas. For Mamardashvili, philosophy could only be a practice, or as Marina Bykova put it, “a virtue, and to exist it must be accomplished over and over again.”¹¹ This is concentration training, a type of mindfulness.

But in fact, the challenge is even greater than it sounds. Conscious thinking is so difficult that we do it only intermittently. Not only must we constantly goad ourselves to make the effort to think, an act that is neither easy nor natural; in addition, we cannot stockpile the things we think up since a thought “exists only at the moment of its ‘realization,’ which requires a specific personal effort and particular responsibility.”¹² This radical present-tenseness of philosophical thinking, its transitoriness and continual falling-into-arrears combined with the absolute ordinariness of what triggers it, is part of what dazzles Mamardashvili about Marcel Proust. The three lectures translated in this volume (#1, #6, and #11, taken from a course on Proust offered first in 1982 and then again in 1984) utilize this French writer much as Bakhtin utilized Dostoevsky and Rabelais: as vehicles for the philosopher-critic’s own worldview and deepest emerging matrix of moral values. But Bakhtin’s readers at least knew the novels. Few of us have designed, or sat through, literature courses like Mamardashvili’s, where the profes-

¹⁰ “How I Understand Philosophy. A Conversation with Merab Mamardashvili (An Interview Conducted by O. Dolzhenko.)” Transl. by Stephen D. Shenfield for *Russian Studies in Philosophy*, vol. 49, no. 1 (Summer 2010): 7-19, here 8. Subsequent quote on same page.

¹¹ Marina F. Bykova, “Editor’s Introduction. Philosophizing Out Loud.” *Russian Studies in Philosophy*, vol. 49, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 3-7, here 4.

¹² A. L. Dobrokhoto, “The Tradition of Immortality. Mamardashvili as a Philosopher of Culture,” publ. in Russian 2009, English transl. by Steven Shabad for *Russian Studies in Philosophy*, vol. 49, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 51-76, here 71.

sor admits that most likely the students have not had access to the assigned texts, either in the original or in translation. A professor need not be limited by that unhappy fact, however. One can even be liberated by it. In Lesson 11 we learn that Mamardashvili does not distinguish between ethics and aesthetics, or between philosophy and aesthetics. In Lesson 6 we read that to be an artist (as Proust and Flaubert were) was not to be a performer, a life-fashioner like the Russian Symbolists or an exhibitionist like the Russian Futurist poets, but to blend modestly in, the better to spy on life. In both literature and philosophy, a spy must be willing to risk improvisations and ragged drafts—and to ask, at every moment: what is possible, and how is it possible?

Staying focused on the present, a mantra for the late Tolstoy, entails a radical revisioning of lived time. Tolstoyan characters like Ivan Ilyich or Prince Andrei Bolkonsky grasp bodily death only during their experience of dying; maddeningly, that's why they cannot teach the living anything about it, and why so little wisdom about death accumulates on this side of the boundary. For Tolstoy, the answer to death is not to ask the question, which will resolve itself. At the right time, an "organ of understanding" (Mamardashvili's term) will appear. In her recent provocative book on Mamardashvili and Russian film, Alyssa DeBlasio devotes an entire chapter to Tolstoy and the psychologist-turned-film-director Alexander Zeldovich, one of Mamardashvili's students in the 1980s, whose 2011 film *Target* interrogates precisely our neglect of the infinite (always available to us immediately and at any depth) in our vain pursuit of the immortal.¹³ Infinite present-tenseness is also a vital enabling condition for Bakhtin. His dialogism is fully experiential, unfinalizable by definition, a texture made up of one person's unique, individuated and answerable responses to events (ideas, utterances) from the outside.

Such literary artists and philosophers demand a great deal of their audiences. Little wonder that the prominent St. Petersburg

¹³ Alyssa DeBlasio, *The Filmmaker's Philosopher. Merab Mamardashvili and Russian Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), ch. 5, "Alexander Zeldovich's *Target* (2011): Tolstoy and Mamardashvili on the Infinite and the Earthly," 124-46.

historian of philosophy, Igor Evlampiev, wrote the following exasperated, but wholly correct, assessment of Mamardashvili's thought in his 2017 survey *Russkaia filosofiiia v evropeiskom kontekste* [Russian Philosophy in European Context]: "Unfortunately, Mamardashvili did not leave a precisely elaborated *system* of ideas; to the extent that he was oriented toward conversational and not written speech, it is not always possible to uncover in his compositions a straightforward and obvious logic in the development of his thought, while at the same time his compositions are burdened with many digressions from the basic theme and with unnecessary repetitions."¹⁴

The best answer to that riposte is Mamardashvili's closing words to his 1988 statement, "The Problem of Consciousness and the Philosopher's Calling." "The philosopher deals with something that cannot in principle be known in advance, that cannot be conjectured, imagined as possible, or introduced by a definition. But it is something that can happen as the path is traveled."¹⁵

The present volume is offered to the reader in that spirit.

¹⁴ I. I. Evlampiev, *Russkaia filosofiiia v evropeiskom kontekste*, ch. 4.4 "M. Mamardashvili i traditsii russkoi filosofii (na material "Lektsii o Pruste")" (2017: Sankt-Peterburg. Izdatel'stvo RKhGA), 419.

¹⁵ Merab Mamardashvili, "The Problem of Consciousness and the Philosopher's Calling," translated by Steve Shabad for *Russian Studies in Philosophy*, vol. 49, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 8-27, here 26.