RUIN PHILOSOPHY, POETIC DISCOURSE AND THE COLLAPSE OF META-NARRATIVES IN ALEKSANDR KUSHNER'S POETRY OF THE 1970s

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Abstract

This article offers an analysis of the trope of ruin in the poetry of Aleksandr Kushner (born 1936), in particular through a close reading of two of his poems: "In a slippery graveyard, alone" and "Ruins". The analysis of these poems is preceded by an overview of ruin philosophy from Burke and Diderot to Simmel and Benjamin, with particular emphasis on the way the trope of ruin contemplation stages a confrontation between the self and what transcends it (death, history, nature, etc.). This philosophical background serves as a heuristic tool to shed light on the poetry of Kushner. Through the trope of ruin, Kushner explores the legitimacy of poetic speech after the collapse of all meta-narratives. Kushner has no truck with Diderot's solipsism, nor with Hegel's bold narrative of progress, nor with Simmel's peaceful reconciliation with the creative forces of nature. Nor, really, does he intend to bear witness to history, the way Benjamin does in the faint anticipation of some miracle. Instead, Kushner posits the endurance of a community united not around a grand project, but around the idea of carrying on in the face of everything, muddling through despite the lack of hopes for a transformational future and making the most of fleeting moments of positivity that emerge out of the fundamental serendipity of history.

Keywords

Aleksandr Kushner; ruins; historical consciousness; historical cataclysm; progress; teleology; modernity; contingency; Fedor Tiutchev; Edmund Burke; Denis Diderot; Hegel; Georg Simmel; Walter Benjamin

What is a ruin? By definition, this artefact resists neat delimitation as it results from the decomposition and disintegration of a prior object. Reference to common sense usage suggests that a ruin must present signs of decay, although loosely speaking, well-preserved abandoned buildings can also be called ruins for rhetorical effect. Nor is the absence of practical use a necessary condition, for suitably secured ruins have been pressed into new uses, whether as memorial churches (in Coventry or Berlin, for example), or as exhibition spaces. How much of an object must be preserved before it stops being a ruin and turns into mere rubble? This, too, is a matter of debate, and archaeologists, preservationists, art historians, and political leaders will likely disagree about the line separating ruin and rubble. How authentic does a ruin need to be to deserve our attention? The proliferation of reconditioned ruins, not to speak of outright fakes (the sham ruins in landscape gardens, for example, which in themselves became valuable artefacts), makes such a determination highly problematic. The ruin is always a work in progress, the result of various interventions (or lack thereof), so it never achieves a primordial, authentic state. Indeed, ruins are processes as much as objects. In certain historical situations, the difference between ruin and ruination becomes immaterial. In

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the light of the debates about the conversion of post-Fordist industrial ruins, it is not even clear how old a ruin needs to be to qualify as such. In short, the ruin is a cultural construct, more than a physical object. It is, in a true sense, in the eye of the beholder.

The cultivation of ruins reveals a paradoxical affinity with modernity.[1] Ruins began to be perceived and preserved as ruins during the Renaissance, when the awareness of historical discontinuities exemplified by the demise of ancient civilizations raised the status of traces from the past. Ruins became particularly important during the Enlightenment, as the historical consciousness of the age, inspired by the ideology of progress, transformed ruins into ambivalent signs — at once superseded and yet still desired — of the advance of societies. At the same time, ruins resulting from wars and natural catastrophes complicated providentialist notions of history and conjured up the vision of a universe abandoned by God. The beginning of systematic excavations at Pompeii and Herculaneum raised awareness about the value of ruins. In the nineteenth century, in the context of the rise of historicism, the fantasy took hold that through ruins, one could reconstruct the past in its totality. This led to the practice of notional reconstruction evidenced, for example, by the work of Viollet-le-Duc. Subsequently, the fate of ruins became tightly linked to changing views of heritage preservation. Yet at the same time, political investment in ruins, notably in the imperial context, where the treatment, or plundering, of the ruins of colonial countries reinforced notions of historical advancement and civilizational superiority, proceeded unabated. By the beginning of the 20th century, ruins began to be seen in a more philosophical sense as ciphers of temporality. The works of John Ruskin, Alois Riegl and others laid the ground for a better recognition of the "age value" of a monument, of the significance of its accretion of traces of various historical periods, which should be preserved, rather than sanitized -- ideas which eventually were formalized in the Venice Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites in 1964. In Western societies, ruins became unique *lieux de mémoire,* which contributed greatly to the consolidation of national identity. Now, ruins have become obligatory destinations of the tourist industry, and their contemplation is part and parcel of our post-modern, or super-modern, mass culture.[2]

In Russia ideas about the importance of preserving ruins have been slower to take on and the state has played a comparatively greater role in either destroying ruins or ordering their complete reconstruction. Through a series of case studies, I have attempted elsewhere to analyse the reasons for this state of affairs and to shed light on the way ruins could therefore play a kind of counter-cultural role at various historical junctures.[3] Suffice it to say that rulers have tended to view the urban fabric as a reflection of their governance and have therefore undertaken energetic interventions in its design and development, which therefore exposed ruins to political projects they could hardly be

[1] By modernity I mean a worldview that sweeps aside traditional moral and political representations, institutes a rupture with the past, and defines the present as a transition toward the future. The first philosophical conceptualization of this new sense of time belongs to Hegel. See Habermas 1987 1-22. For a thorough discussion of the meaning of "modern" through the ages, see Gumbrecht 1978 93-131. For a discussion of the various strands of modernity, including the contradictions and intensity of Russia's embrace thereof, see Berman 1982.

[2] For a recent overview of the history of heritage preservation, see Miles Glendinning, *The Conservation Movement: A History of Architecture* Preservation (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013). For the concept of supermodernity, see Augé 1995.

[3] A more extensive analysis of the "ruin philosophy" can be found in Schönle 2011 8-17.

immune from. But as a result, the ruin became a trope through which writers, artists, and thinkers could articulate their views of the relationship between the subject, space, history, and the state.

This article will consider the trope of the ruin in the poetry of Aleksandr Kushner, born 1936, a Leningrad/Petersburg poet who has not yet received the critical attention he deserves. I will focus in particular on his poetry of the 1970s, the time of so-called stagnation, when history in the Soviet Union seemed to have ground to a halt. To shed light on the resonance of the ruin in Kushner's poetry of the 1970s, I will juxtapose this trope with some of the main philosophical conceptions of the ruin elaborated since the eighteenth century. This is of course not an argument about influence in any measurable way. References to the Western philosophy of the ruin will serve as a set of critical tools or markers, which will help put Kushner's poetry in a larger conceptual field. I am not even claiming that Kushner had direct knowledge of the philosophical corpus I will utilize, only that his own ideas present analogies and contrasts with it, which will allow me to set Kushner's poetry in a vicarious dialogue with it. By drawing on this body of thought, we can better understand Kushner's idiosyncratic position.

Let us start with Edmund Burke, who offered a striking apology of the ruin from a conservative standpoint. In his *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, Burke meditates on the fact that although nobody would desire the destruction of London, "the pride of England and of Europe," people would delight in the spectacle of its destruction if it were to take place (Burke 1998 94). "There is no spectacle we so eagerly pursue, as that of some uncommon and grievous calamity; so that whether the misfortune is before our eyes, or whether they are turned back to it in history, it always touches with delight," he adds (Burke 1998 93). Burke explains our enjoyment of ruins through a particular disposition towards compassion, "the bond of sympathy," which God instilled in us in order to unite society. The delight we experience from the grief of others draws us to such spectacles, while the uneasiness and pain we feel from identification with the victims prompt us to offer them relief. The mixed feelings inspired by ruins are indispensable for social cohesion. For otherwise, in keeping with Burke's sensualism, if ruins generated only unpleasant ideas, they would turn us off, which would undermine solidarity and lead to the atomization of society. Interestingly, both real and imaginary destruction are equally capable of inciting our compassion, and the more underserved the suffering, the keener our pleasure. For ruins are less historical artefacts, than instruments of social engineering, and the more shocking they are, the greater their effect. In short, ruins are a grand spectacle engineered by history in order to foster social cohesion. The spectacle of ruins can be seen as the keystone of Burke's philosophical construction in that it redirects self-preservation into a communal aspiration and thus unifies the person and society. Naïve as it may seem at first glance, Burke's rationalization of the ruin captures its possible effect as the cornerstone of an imagined community. Historian Peter Fritzsche, for example, described how the ruins of medieval castles on the Rhine, re-discovered by German Romantics during the Napoleonic occupation, contributed to the invention of a shared history and thus to the rise of German nationalism (Fritzsche 2004 92-130).

Denis Diderot owed much to Burke's theory of the ruin, though he deployed it to opposite ends. In his *Salon of 1767*, he accepted Burke's notion of the pleasure we take at the misfortunes of others, yet without Burke's providentialist justification thereof,

referring instead simply to the beauty and usefulness of the compassion we experience at the sight of some calamity. His foremost purpose was to demonstrate how the art of his time constitutes the individual subjectivity of the beholder. To him, art invites the spectators to step into the painting and absorb themselves into the landscape depicted, illustrating the power of the imagination to move across spatial and temporal boundaries and instilling an exhilarating feeling of freedom (Fried 1980 122-131). Ultimately the contemplation of art turns into an introspective reverie, the discovery of "the pleasure of belonging to myself, the pleasure of knowing myself to be as good as I am, the pleasure of seeing myself and of pleasing myself, the even sweeter pleasure of forgetting myself."[4] Ruins are uniquely capable of inspiring these flights of the imagination and of constituting a subjectivity that society otherwise holds in check. Although they evoke the great levelling ubiquity of death, ruins allow the self "to make a solitary stand," poised at the edge of "a torrent" that "drags each and every nation into the depths of a common abyss." A ruin "delivers us up to our inclinations," Diderot says, as time and death denigrate the importance of societies and nations. On the site of a ruin, he adds,

> I'm freer, more alone, more myself, closer to myself. It's there that I call out to my friend, it's there that I miss my friend; it's there that we'd enjoy ourselves without anxiety, without witnesses, without intruders, without those jealous of us. It's there that I probe my own heart; it's there that I interrogate [hers], that I take alarm and reassure myself" (Diderot 1995 2: 199)

Ruins emancipate us from social constraints, free our senses and desires, and enable introspection. Even more poignantly, they invite us to relive in the absence of the lover "the same intoxication that had so completely and deliciously possessed our senses" (Diderot 1995 2: 200) An emblem of transience, ruins in fact afford an imaginary repetition of the past similar in intensity to the original sensations it elicited, abolishing objective time. Diderot seems to imply that it is precisely on account of the fleetingness of life that ruins foster imaginary pleasures, which allow us to "make a solitary stand" against time and decay. His philosophy gives expression to an individualistic, subjective, and contrarian experience of the ruin, one which can explain the fascination it has exerted over many individuals who felt trapped in history.

For the sake of contrast, let us now turn to Hegel. Hegel represents the opposite stance, for he invoked reasons of state to justify the production, rather than the contemplation of ruins and he mounted a frontal critique of the aestheticization of ruins. In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, Hegel famously developed his idea of the dialectical process by which reason, the essence of the world, comes to itself. Yet Hegel is keenly aware that his thesis about the rational basis of history is deeply counter-intuitive. He underscores the fact that the view of the demise of once prosperous kingdoms throws us into "moral affliction" (moralische Betrübniss) and can only lead to fatalism and to withdrawal "into the selfishness that stands on the quiet shore" [in die Selbstsucht zurücktreten, welche am ruhigen Ufer steht] (Hegel 1970 12: 34-35).[5]

[4] Translation from Fried 1980 126.

[5] Text translated by J. Sibree, available at http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/hi/hiconten.htm

Hegel seems to polemicize with Burke and Diderot and through them with philosophical sensualism. The contemplation of the ruins of history can provoke only negative feelings, "hopeless sadness," which nothing can assuage and which ultimately force us to step back and distance ourselves from ruination. Hegel is deeply suspicious of sentimental meditation, which to him serves only "to gain a gloomy pleasure from the sublime but fruitless feeling of ineluctability" (Hegel 1970 12: 38). Hegel clearly rejects the pre-romantic cultivation of mixed feelings that Burke initiated with his theory of the social value of ruins.

Now Hegel fights the aestheticization of ruins because he is deeply suspicious of its nostalgic component. In a different passage, Hegel remarks that the aestheticization of ruins prompts us to associate negative feelings with historical change. In fact, however, ruins ought to instil confidence in the strength of the spirit, which continuously discards old forms in its progress toward self-realization:

> But the next consideration, which allies itself with that of change, is that change, while it imports dissolution, involves at the same time the rise of *a new life* — that while death is the issue of life, life is also the issue of death. […] Spirit — consuming the envelope of its existence — does not merely pass into another envelope, nor rise rejuvenescent from the ashes of its previous form; it comes forth exalted, glorified, a purer spirit. It certainly makes war upon itself [. . .] but each successive phase becomes in its turn a material, working upon which it exalts itself to a new grade. (Hegel 1970 12: 98)

Thus destruction, including self-destruction, is an intrinsic component of dialectical change, and it is hence as ineluctable as it is necessary. The advance of reason produces its ruins, but ruins that signal not external contingencies, but the Spirit's self-transcendence. The ruin, here, is less a static spectacle than a dynamic process, a reminder for people of their mortality, which prompts them to identify with the state and dedicate all their efforts to its empowerment, as Hegel advances in his *Principles of the Philosophy of Law* in the context of his notoriously controversial discussion of the "happy war." Hegel refers in various places to the metaphor of the wind, which moves the seas and keeps them healthy, just like wars prevent people from hardening in their petty everyday life, confined to a deadening stasis (Hegel 1970 7: 492-3). The wind, likewise, is what moves ships forward, thus enabling the journey of the spirit in its progress from the east to the west. For Hegel the only genuine individual is the state, and the state requires that its citizens relinquish their autonomy, including the intimate pleasures of aesthetic contemplation, and exert themselves on behalf of a common purpose. Hegel would have set even less store by Diderot's staunchly individualistic, escapist, and eroticized enjoyment of ruins.

In the end, then, Hegel, too, ascribes to ruins a collective, social significance, just like Burke, but with the difference that he substitutes a progressive philosophy of history to Burke's conservative evocation of the ruin as an awe-inspiring spectacle. In both cases, however, the ruin is instrumentalized. If for Burke the ruin gains meaning through the compassion it inspires in the spectator, in Hegel the ruin gives rise to a philosophical view of existence, which is predicated on inner distancing from the immediate experience of loss.

Hegel's disdain for the contemplation of ruins forms the background for Georg Simmel's turn-of-the-century celebration of the ruin. In his famous 1907 essay "On the ruin. An aesthetic experiment," the German sociologist writes of the profoundly peaceful effect of ruins (Simmel 1993 124-130).[6] Although the ruin seems to signal the revenge of nature on the strivings of human agency, in reality the ruin returns us to the source of our energy, to the core of our self, in which nature and human reason share their common root. How is this possible? The ruin of a building indicates that nature develops new strengths, which it grafts onto an old structure, thus creating new forms, a new unity, in which the creative spirit of humanity co-exists with the continuous becoming of nature. The ruin thus is a window into the future as it demonstrates that an object continues to exist and to develop even after it has been subjected to "rape" when it was given a specific form by man. The ruin is not equivalent to decay, as it creates a "new form" and "a new meaning." Much like Hegel, Simmel rises against existential stagnation, but if Hegel credits the spirit with the ability to transcend itself, for Simmel it is the creative energy of nature that is the agent of change. The novelty created by the ruin differs from Hegel's synthesis in that in it, the conflicting elements retain "the autonomous logic of their forces" (Simmel 1993 125). In bringing into balance "the conflict between intention and chance, nature and spirit, the past and the present," the ruin creates a sort of "equalizing justice" (Simmel 1993 129-30). As a result it acquires a face "that is stable in its forms and endures peacefully" (Simmel 1993 128-29). Simmel is clearly interested in relatively well-preserved ruins.

We find the ruin attractive not merely because it betokens a conflict between humanity and nature, but also because it reveals our inner contradictions. Simmel's concept of nature also refers to our internal pulsions, which the process of civilization subjects more and more to the control of reason. Thus, in vindicating nature, the ruin valorises the creative potential of human instincts, their endurance and necessary role in history. The ruin returns us to ourselves, cures our alienation, suggests the "peaceful unity of belonging" (Dazugehören). It instils in us a taste for the "unfinished, the formless, and for that which breaks frames." The beauty of the ruin does not stifle the consciousness of the viewer, on the contrary it releases its unconscious energy and thus exerts a liberating effect. The Nietzschean overtones in this language are unmistakable. Unlike with Burke or Hegel, the ruin illustrates not the necessity of the state and of society, but the legitimacy of our own desires. In his discussion of the return to mother nature, Simmel seems to echo Sigmund Freud's notion of the ruin as the archaeology of the unconscious (Freud 2003 231). But where Freud detects the complex consequences of psychological repression, Simmel lays emphasis on the creative dimension of such a return. The important idea to retain for us here, is the notion that ruins have the ability to unlock powerful subconscious energies.

Walter Benjamin's seminal *The Origins of Baroque Drama* further radicalizes the anti-Hegelian and anti-social import of ruins. For him ruins are famously the material analogue of the collapse of metaphysical systems (Benjamin 1998 177-78). As in Hegel, the ruin emblematizes history, but as the manifestation not of the advance of reason, but of a perpetual tumbling out of a state of unity, a process of continuous decay and atomization. Nature here is seen as a continuous process of decay, rather than a Simmelian creative

[6] There is an English translation of the version of the essay Simmel reworked in 1911; see Simmel 1965 259-66.

force. In its haphazard nature, the ruin signals modernity's inability to conceive a totality, as well as the aesthetic superiority of destruction over beauty. The baroque artist, and by implication the modernist one as well, can do no more than to pile up fragments and shards, without clear idea of the goal and in expectation of a miracle. The ruin thus reveals both the utterly meaningless regime of contingency we live in, and the irrational need we experience for redemption. To transpose Benjamin's discourse into a less metaphysical language we could say that the ruin indicates the collapse of structures of identity that had enabled us to imagine ties with fellow human beings, across time and space, and to think of the present as a meaningful link between the past and the future. Instead, we have the reign of random events and arbitrary juxtapositions, which could only be made meaningful with the intervention of a transcendent force.

Benjamin returns to the image of the ruin in his later "Theses on the Philosophy of History." Referring to the painting "Angelus Novus" by Paul Klee, Benjamin describes an "angel of history" aghast at the sight of a "single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage" (Thesis IX) (Benjamin 1968, 257). This angel is even more helpless than the baroque artist: however much he would want "to awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed" [die Toten wecken und das Zerschlagene zusammenfügen], he is drawn against his will backwards toward the future, swept by the wind of progress. Burke's instinctual sympathy is thus defeated. This passage evidently conveys the impossibility of the miracle the baroque artist had hoped for. The wind, which nullifies the angel's desire to provide assistance to humanity, harks back, of course, to the Hegelian wind, which moves ships across the oceans towards a more rational future. In Benjamin's view, Hegel's teleological idealism is inextricably conducive to decay, rather than to progress.

The angel is at once within and outside of history, at the fleeting intersection between teleological and eschatological conceptions of history. He anticipates an eschatological catastrophe, but he lacks a stable foothold, a "shore" from which to contemplate history, a transcendent leverage point, and is himself engulfed by historical becoming. Thus progress and decay are interlaced, negating and strengthening each other at the same time. The best the angel can do is to document the historical destruction he has captured with his eyes before he is swept away. We could read this as a metaphor of the materialist historian à la Benjamin, who goes against the historical grain by responding with weak messianic force to the past's need for redemption (thesis 2), unlike traditional historicism, which reflects the point of view of the winner and obfuscates ruination (Benjamin 1968 254, 257). In short, however senseless, the role of the historian is akin to that of the baroque artist, namely to bear witness to ruins in the faint hope of redemption. This philosophy hardly provides a stable moral platform upon which to support political activity, and in recent discussions of Benjamin's philosophy of history, scholars have tended to put the emphasis on its philosophical hopelessness, which ultimately led to Benjamin's suicide (see Maeseneer 2003 511-27).

We can thus see how the theory of ruin has moved from a confident assertion of the social significance of ruins to a much more despondent sense that ruins speak of the ineluctable decay that governs history, a reversal of Hegel's confident sea-faring narrative of progress. Obviously much has been left out, from Horace Walpole in the eighteenth century to Adorno, Baudrillard, Žižek and most recently Augé in the 20th and 21st. It has become apparent in these theories that the ruin is instrumentalized and allegorized. It was

invoked to strengthen the social fabric, to ground the subjectivity of the self, to foster the advance of the spirit, or to legitimize the rejection of teleology. Even in Benjamin, the ruin points beyond itself, to a metaphysical condition presumed universal and what W.G. Sebald subsequently called the "natural history of destruction" (Sebald 2003). But do we not do violence to the ruin when we attempt to compress it into a metaphysical conception that it has no knowledge of? Does the wind that erodes the ruin blow from the faraway reaches of universal history or is it the result of local weather conditions?

This brief philosophical survey will enable us to discern the distinctiveness of Kushner's deployment of the ruin. One of Kushner's main statements about space, time, and decay takes the form of an implicit response to the poetic sensibility of the Romantic poet of Fedor Tiutchev. "Na skol'zkom kladbishche, odin" ("In a slippery graveyard, alone"), published in 1978, stages a visit to Tiutchev's grave on the Novodevich'e cemetery in St Petersburg, which is described as a seemingly abandoned graveyard, full of broken tombstones and ruins, as well as rotten trees ("Na skol'zkom kladbishche, odin", *Golos*, Kushner 1997 176-77).[7] Standing at his grave, the poet references several of Tiutchev's poems, using key words from his poetic idiom: "all-absorbing abyss," "light from elsewhere," "chaos," these terms allude intertextually to some of Tiutchev's most famous poems, such as "Day and Night," "A Dream on the Sea," and others. Without going into details, suffice it to say that Kushner evokes, but rejects Tiutchev's variously connotated binary worldview, whereby this world is but a brief vision, dream, or appearance that promptly lapses into a primordial chaos or infinity. In Tiutchev's "Ot zhizni toi, chto bushevala zdes'" ("Of the Life that Rages Here"), all that remains from history are a few burial mounds, which serve as fertile ground for oak trees to grow "boldly" and in complete indifference to the memory of the person who rests among their roots. Nature is not only unmoved by the travails of humanity, it actively swallows all its "children," regardless of their "pointless heroic deeds," into its "all-absorbing and peaceful chaos" ("Poocheredno vsekh svoikh detei, / Svershaiushchikh svoi podvig bespoleznyi, / Ona ravno privetstvuet svoei / Vsepogloshaiushchei i mirotvornoi bezdnoi" (Tiutchev 1987 261). And yet in Tiutchev's poem, this lapse into the indeterminate primordial sphere is perceived as "instilling peace" (mirotvornyi). In other words, beyond humanity's quest for individuation, there is a longing to merge with the immensity of nature, which death and forgetting provide. This poem, written in 1871, clearly indexes a sensibility that is also at the heart of Simmel's theory of the ruin. As we saw it, Simmel speaks of the "peaceful unity of belonging" to which we return when we absorb ourselves in contemplation of the ruin. This is a return into the embrace of nature, which acts with "equalizing justice," much like here the "peace-inspiring abyss treats everyone the same."

Now Kushner disputes this binary tension between individuality and surrounding primordial nature or chaos. To him, there is nothing behind, beneath or beyond this world. What there is, instead, is simply decay, the residues and detritus of history, which he describes as "the obsolete rubbish of swept-off years, simply a dump." The ubiquity of decay, so vividly embodied in Leningrad's crumbling graveyards, of course also indexes the state of Soviet society in the 1970s, when the lack of social progress dashed hopes of meaningful change. The decrepit cemeteries are furthermore both "a rejection of life and a rejection / of death." They exist in the interval between life and death, or in their

[7] References to Kushner will indicate the title of the poem, the collection to which it belongs, and the edition I used.

indistinguishability.[8] Contrary to Tiutchev's mighty oaks, trees are also rotting away, just like human artefacts. Nature does not offer an eternal haven, nor a powerful alternative to human life. It is caught in a similar process of decay, rather than creation. Nor is death a grand moment that can be immortalized: "Does haughtiness grace the dead? Is humility in poetry insincere?" In the light of the ubiquity of decay, life and death become inseparable, yet without evoking any sense of tragedy.

This acceptance of loss makes the burden of responding to the cruelty of twentieth-century history only more problematic, as it could lead to an endorsement of historical violence. Can the poet bear witness to the violence of history? Does he face an intractable ambivalence similar to that of Benjamin's Angel? The poet concedes that "A hundred of our years / Can surpass the destruction / Of a millennium: so many catastrophes / Have fallen, bombs, which have switched off the lights / Devastating night calls." The use of the first person plural ("A hundred of our years") signals that the poet acknowledges his participation and co-responsibility in causing such misery. But instead of bearing witness, he explores the possibility of oblivion, of self-cancellation. The call to use a rubber to erase "our" lines implies an act of self-denial and atonement that undermines the self-confidence of poetic expression. In any case, the response to decay is emphatically not one of aestheticization: "After all, we wouldn't grow pretty flowers / On these remains and rubble!" There is no conceivable way in which solipsistic pleasure could compensate for historical violence, contrary to what Diderot had implied. Kushner comes close to the radical anti-aestheticism of Adorno in his famous statement that one can no longer write poetry in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Yet the very poetic form of Kushner's assertion about the impossibility of poetry belies or at least qualifies his pronouncement. Similarly, the image of the dead Tiutchev discreetly assenting to his own loss through "eternal sleep" rests on the paradox that he remains sufficiently alive to express his feelings for worldly affairs. In short, Kushner's poem invokes Tiutchevian antinomies—life and death, world and chaos, day and night, speech and silence—in order to turn them inward against one another. They become opposite poles through which the poet muddles, cutting a paradoxical, aimless path. For us, the main dimension of this paradox is the foregrounding of decay and dilapidation as the only site of authenticity, precisely because of its paradoxical nature. The "interrupted singing / Of two-three bird's phrases" is the poetic equivalent of this muddling through decay: haphazard, discontinuous shreds of poetic language, breaking through the muteness of destruction, are all that can remain.

Referring to Tiutchev's grave, the poem briefly alludes to a more typical stance: "If it was not Tiutchev, perhaps/ They would have ploughed it over. / Our entire character is in this/ And our rapture." But the poem leaves no doubts as to the vanity of such thrilling attempts to start life anew and throw the past overboard. This poem thus dismisses the modernist aspiration for a new beginning as a fleeting intoxication. Hegel's advance of the spirit, embodied in the state, is no more than an illusion. There are no historical

[8] A variant of this poetics of the interval can be found in the verses "Life is finished, but death doesn't know yet / About it. How shall we use this pause?" ("Zhizn' konchilas', a smert' eshche ne znaet / Ob etom. Pauzu na chto upotrebim?") (from "Zhizn' konchilas', a smert' eshche ne znaet," *Tavricheski sad*, Kushner 1997 237). For Andrei Ar'ev, "the whole of [Kushner's, A.S.] poetry is in this pause, and this pause is poetry" (Ar'ev 2000 112). See also the poem "Lace", in which the gaps or openings between the threads, this "airy element" ("vozdushnaia stikhiia") become a metaphor for poetry and love ("Kruzhevo," *Golos*, Kushner 1997 186).

masterplots, indeed no predetermination. As Kushner puts it in another poem, things happen "in excess of the programme . . . / By virtue of the lucky weakness of fate" ("sverkh programmy . . . / Po schastlivoi slabosti sud'by") ("Vse, chto dal'she, kak by sverkh programmy," *Priamaia rech'*, Kushner 1997 153) Instead, the only form of existence the poem envisions is that of rambling among the back alleys of sepulchral fields, dressed "not in purple, but in tatters." There is no Elysian afterlife to aspire for as humanity is doomed to roaming among the vestiges of history, not as a king or god, but as a vagrant. The poem thus conveys a sense of living in the aftermath of a calamitous history, without a sense of direction and purpose, without hope from the future, yet with a sense that in accepting decay, we come to terms with the paradoxical tensions of the human condition.

I will now briefly take up another poem by Kushner, published in the same collection in 1978 under the title of "Ruins" (*Golos,* Kushner 1997 159-160). The poem initially describes the creation of fake neo-classical ruins in gardens of the Russian aristocracy. It indexes an elegiac sensibility, which paradoxically recovers in mourning about the transience of life a sense of its fullness ("For complete bliss only ruins /were missing..."). This is, again, not unlike the aestheticized enjoyment of the ruin promoted by Diderot, the pleasurable absorption with one's own solipsistic feelings and the power of one's subjectivity. But the erection of these ruins also reveals a cultural project, the westernization of a social group that has its roots in the East: "Among the diluted darkness of the North, / Rose the mirage of Mycenea and the Parthenon / The powdered descendant of Tatar hordes / Revered Felten and Cameron." Charles Cameron was a Scottish architect invited to Russia by Catherine the Great and Iurii Felten was a Russian architect who also worked for the court. Both adopted a neo-classical idiom, and contributed to re-fashioning imperial estates according to the latest western, Palladian fashion. In referring to these two architects, one foreign and one Russian, Kushner indexes the eighteenth-century state project of creating a westernized elite as a way to help Russia catch up with other European countries in its historical development. In other words, fake classical ruins here serve the project of overcoming Russia's delayed modernization, a Hegelian endeavour, one could say, only that this project also involves contemplating the ruined remnants of classical civilization, which provide a model of imperial grandeur.

But now the poem flashes forward to the devastation of World War Two and the poet's memories of the ruins he witnessed as a child, contrasting this pervasive landscape of destruction with the aestheticized infatuation with ruins of the eighteenth century. The ruins of World War Two are anthropomorphised as a "stiff face of grief without expression," in other words the ruins paradoxically evoke a human face so thoroughly dehumanized that it has lost expressiveness. In the face of this calamitous experience, the poet firmly rejects any possibility of aestheticizing the ruins: "Let others admire, / How elder blooms among the devastation." The collapse of buildings is likened to the sudden implosion of "former ideals" and old friendships, to amorous partings, desperation and disappointments, giving the ruins a much broader meaning as an index of the breakdown of all hopes the past had placed in the future. This utter calamity makes human beings into ruins and leaves them without a clear place in life, as neither home nor travel provide any relief ("And even the home is repellent to the ravaged son / And there is no oblivion in departures"). For the children of this history, such as Kushner (born in 1936) to a certain extent is, we could say, there is no possibility of belonging to this world any more.

And yet this state of affairs does not lapse into unremitting gloom, as the poet hints at the possibility of rescuing some scraps of meaning: "My friends, hold on to the railings, / To this bush, to paintings, to a line, / To the best, we had in life/ To the inconsistency of misery and interruption." Not only does the poet reaffirm the existence of friendship, which had been denied before. History does not seem to follow a stringent masterplan, and among the diversity of phenomena, including the world of the arts and the workings of memory, one can grasp at some tenuous hold onto life. Indeed, it is precisely the vagaries of history that present a tiny spark of hope. As the poet puts it, "We know where to find the ruins: in the past. / And the future, perhaps, is beside the point" (ni pri chem). In other words, the future is not in any way restricted or closed off by the past. There is always the possibility of unpredictable novelty or inconsistency, which is, perhaps, worth living. Andrei Ar'ev places this interest in the unexpected trifle in the context of Kushner's rejection of Romanticism, of any sort of spirituality, mysticism or ineffability of the subjective sphere (Ar'ev 2000 112). In short, it is in the sense of the future's contingency, of the randomness of life, of history's lack of purpose and continuity, that the poet identifies some reason to carry on living despite the heavy burden of the past. And the openness of the future translates into the changeability of space. In a poem devoted to mutations in the landscape, the poet writes "And you know, even glad / I am: our world / Is not a reserve; its shape / Is fickle; the gaps / Cannot be patched; but then / It is newish for those / Who drew in the *loto* / Their number after us, / Whose whispering and laughter / You hear in the late hour." ("I znaesh', dazhe rad / Ia etomu: nash mir — / Ne zapovednik; sklad / Ego izmenchiv; dyr / Ne zalatat'; zato / Novekhonek dlia tekh, / Kto vytashchil v loto / Svoi nomer pozzhe nas, / Chei shepotok i smekh / ty slyshish' v pozdnii chas.') ("Poseshchenie," *Golos*, Kushner 1997 183).

In short, taken together, the two poems I have briefly analysed delineate a stance of carrying on despite the collapse of all illusions, whether those are about the existence of another life or the pursuance of a civilizational project such as westernization or modernization. Not even beauty comes to the rescue as aestheticization is deemed inadequate in view of the enormity of destruction. Accepting the ubiquity of loss and decay is the precondition of this ethical project, which resigns itself, in a sober but unheroic fashion, to muddling through life while taking advantage of moments of positivity that emerge out of the fundamental serendipity of history. Strikingly, the Soviet context is hardly referenced specifically here, yet as he dismisses historical masterplots, the poet clearly also settles scores with the Soviet version. The messiness of his attitude to life is reflected, perhaps deliberately, in the embrace of contradictions (speech and silence, friendship and solitude, eternity and mortality, etc.), as if the requirement to be coherent would in itself smack of the kind of reductionism that has shaped historical illusions.

Kushner, clearly, has no truck with Diderot's solipsism, nor with Hegel's bold narrative of progress, nor with Simmel's peaceful reconciliation with the creative forces of nature. Nor, really, does he intend primarily to bear witness to history, the way Benjamin's Angel does, in the faint anticipation of some transcendent totality. Indeed, forgoing the longing for totality, for a meta-narrative that ties us to a certain destiny, is at the heart of Kushner's project. In a poem called "The Course of Life," Kushner seems almost to acknowledge the pointlessness of Benjamin's Angel, using strikingly similar imagery. Life is "Irreparable, irretrievable, / Elusive, semelfactive" ("Nepopravima, nevozvratna, /

Neulovima, odnokratna"), and no one can escape its relentless course, which leads only to death: "No one will row back! / It is driven by obscure winds" ("Nikto ne vygrebet obratno! Vetrami temnymi gonima"). The poet can do no more than be transfixed by the contemplation of its vastness: "Its immense face, without make-up / Taking my leave, I scrutinize greedily. / Boundless and immense, / By what intercessor protected?" ("V litso ogromnoe, bez grima, / Proshchaias', vsmatrivaius' zhadno. / Neobozrima i gromadna, / Kakim zastupnikom khranima?") ("Khod zhizni," *Pis'mo*, Kushner 1997 99-100). The sublime spectacle of life is unfathomable, uncontrollable, and ungovernable; the winds that drive life forward are incomprehensible and not directed to progress; and no higher-order being can assist humanity in making sense of its existence.

Perhaps surprisingly, the position Kushner comes closest to is that of Burke, in the sense that the spectacle of devastation places a moral responsibility on us not to revel in destruction, but to seize erratic opportunities to re-affirm the few things that are positive – a scrap of memory, a sign of friendship, a piece of art, a brief line of poetry, a glance cast on a detail of the scenery outside. In so doing, Kushner posits the endurance of a community united not around a grand project, but around the idea of carrying on in the face of everything, muddling through despite the lack of hopes for a transformational future. We could call this stance stoic, but even this would risk making too much of it. I prefer to call it a commitment to micro-narratives, discrete and self-contained moments where something seems to make sense, even if only fleetingly. According to Ar'ev, the contemporary world for Kushner is "the world of private thoughts and fleetingly attentive observations. Like quicksand, its innumerable trifles swallow every global conception" (Ar'ev 2000, 175). Kushner puts it more figuratively: "I like the close-up of life, / Its unevenness, shiver / The flaw seen in it, / Like in a powerful microscope." ("Mne dorog zhizni krupnyi plan, / Nerovnosti, oznob / I v nei uvidennyi iz''ian, / Kak v sil'nyi mikroskop.") ("Pridesh' domoi, shursha plashchom," *Golos*, Kushner 1997 167).

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APPENDIX

Literal English rendition of Kushner's poems by Andreas Schönle.

'In a slippery graveyard, alone', by Aleksandr Kushner	Александр Кушнер, «На скользком кладбище, один»
In a slippery graveyard, alone	На скользком кладбище, один
Among broken tombstones, ruins	Средь плит расколотых, руин,
That tore veins of marble,	Порвавших мраморные жилы,
Rotten aspen trees,	Гнилых осин,
I stand at Tiutchev's grave.	Стою у тютчевской могилы.
Can't tear myself away.	Не отойти.
Close to the Obvodnyi, among	Вблизи Обводного, среди
Factory walls, pressed tightly,	Фабричных стен, прижатых тесно,
Look: the almost forgotten	Смотри: забытая почти
'All-devouring abyss'.	"Всепоглощающая бездна".
Here it is! Light from elsewhere,	Так вот она! Нездешний свет,
Pitifully coming out through the greenery?	Сквозь зелень выбившийся жалко?
The inside-out of life? Chaos? No.	Изнанка жизни? Хаос? Нет.
The obsolete rubbish	Сметенных лет
Of swept-off years, nothing but a dump.	Изжитый мусор, просто свалка.
What graveyards we have!	Какие кладбища у нас!
Their neglect	Их запустенье
A rejection of life and a rejection	Отказ от жизни и отказ
Of death, the interrupted singing	От смерти, птичьих двух-трех фраз
Of two-three bird's phrases.	В кустах оборванное пенье.
In the sepulchral fields we roam,	В полях загробных мы бредем,
Dressed not in purple, but in tatters,	Не в пурпур, в рубище одеты,
Through back alleys.	Глухим путем.
Give me a rubber, we'll erase:	Резинку дай, мы так сотрем:
Not a line, not a trace of us left.	Ни строчки нашей, ни приметы.
A hundred of our years	Сто наших лет
Can surpass the destruction	Тысячелетним разрушеньям
Of a millenium: so many catastophies	Дать могут фору: столько бед
Have fallen, bombs, which have switched off the lights,	Свалилось, бомб, гасивших свет,
Devastating night calls.	Звонков с ночным опустошеньем.
To fall asleep, to get cold.	Уснуть, остыть.
After all, we wouldn't grow pretty flowers	Что ж, не цветочки ж разводить
On these remains and rubble!	На этом прахе и развале!
If it was not for Tiutchev, perhaps	Когда б не Тютчев, может быть,
They would have ploughed it over.	Его б совсем перепахали.
Our entire character is in this	И в этом весь
And our rapture.	Характер наш и упоенье.

Is there a Kingdom of God?
Does haughtiness grace the dead?
Is humility in poetry insincere?
Let's ask Tiutchev, he too
Through eternal sleep
Waves his hand and shrugs his shoulders.
And it seems to me, he blesses
His own deadly loss, among us.

И разве царство божье здесь?
И разве мертвых красит спесь?
В стихах неискренно смиренье?
Спросите Тютчева и он
Сквозь вечный сон
Махнет рукой, пожмет плечами.
И мнится: смертный свой урон
Благословляет, между нами.

("Na skol'zkom kladbishche, odin", Golos, Kushner 1997 176-77)

'Ruins', by Aleksandr Kushner

Александр Кушнер, «Руины»

For complete bliss only ruins
Were missing and so they put them up
In alleys from material
Such that they look like chaos
Of marble, dust, and rubble,
Granite masonry and crumbling bricks.

Для полного блаженства не хватало
Руин, их потому и возводили
В аллеях из такого матерьяла,
Чтобы они на хаос походили,
Из мрамора, из праха и развала,
Гранитной кладки и кирпичной пыли.

And they liked, climbing on the fragment,
To stand on it and sigh, grief-stricken.
Amids the diluted darkness of the North,
Rose the mirage of Mycenea and the Parthenon
The powdered descendant of Tatar hordes
Revered Felten and Cameron.

И нравилось, взобравшись на обломок,
Стоять на нем, вздыхая сокрушённо.
Средь северных разбавленных потёмок
Всплывал мираж Микен и Парфенона.
Татарских орд припудренный потомок
И Фельтена ценил, и Камерона.

If only they had known, what
Graves and destruction the world would see.
From childhood remember the naked skeletons
The stiff face of sorrow without expression.
Ruins ... Let others admire
How elder blooms among the dilapidation.

Когда бы знать могли они, какие
Увидит мир гробы и разрушенья!
Я помню с детства остовы нагие,
Застывший горя лик без выраженья.
Руины… Пусть любуются другие,
Как бузина цветет средь запустенья.

I remember the destroyed neighbourhoods
The rusted beams listing and hanging
How horrible you are, ideals of yore
How bitter, amorous partings
And the sudden collapse of old friendships
Desperation and disappointments!

Я помню те разбитые кварталы
И ржавых балок крен и провисанье.
Как вы страшны, былые идеалы,
Как вы горьки, любовные прощанья
И старых дружб мгновенные обвалы,
Отчаянья и разочарованья!.

Here is a man who looks like a ruin,
A gaping hole in his eyes.

Вот человек, похожий на руину.
Зияние в его глазах разверстых.

Such a breach, and wound, and avalanche
You won't see in the Dresdens and the Brests.
Even home grew repellent to the ravaged son
And there is no oblivion in departures.

Friends, hold on to the railings,
To this bush, to paintings, to a line
To the best we had in life
To the inconsistency of misery and interruption
This temple was destroyed not by lighting,
It was conceived in this way. Let's put a stop.

In this meticulously correct wreck
Why seek another, bloody and rusty?
We know where to find the ruins, in the past.
And the future, perhaps, is beside the point.
Go away, ragged ghost, in the haze of the northern lights,
Or stay here, but as a childish amusement.

Такую брешь, и рану, и лавину
Не встретишь ты ни в Дрезденах, ни в Брестах.
И дом постыл разрушенному сыну,
И нет ему забвения в отъездах.

Друзья мои, держитесь за перила,
За этот куст, за живопись, за строчку,
За лучшее, что с нами в жизни было,
За сбивчивость беды и проволочку,
А этот храм не молния разбила,
Он так задуман был. Поставим точку.

В развале этом, правильно-дотошном,
Зачем искать другой, кроваво-ржавый?
Мы знаем, где искать руины: в прошлом.
А будущее ни при чём, пожалуй.
Сгинь, рваный призрак, в мареве сполошном!

Останься здесь, но детскою забавой.

("Ruiny", *Golos,* Kushner 1997 159-160)