

## Article

# “Only God Can Be”: Aleksandr Vvedensky, Kant, God, and Time

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**Abstract:** This article discusses the place of God in the poetic system of Aleksandr Vvedensky. Vvedensky’s famous pronouncement on his “poetic critique” is more throughgoing than Kant’s critical enterprise, and invites a comparison between the movement of Kant’s thought in the Critique of Judgment, and what Vvedensky’s recourse to senselessness aims to achieve. Time in Vvedensky poetics may be seen as a radical extension of Kant’s philosophical system where it ultimately resides in an equally inaccessible realm on which its entire edifice is founded.

**Keywords:** Aleksander Vedensky; Russian avant-garde; time; God

The poet is a cocoon that unwinds itself in our reading, and this cocoon unwinds into an endless thread that doesn’t lead anyone anywhere, whether it flashes or disappears into darkness,—not because it doesn’t know the beginning, but because as we try to “walk along, or follow” this thread, we will never have enough time which in its tireless becoming an enveloping “cobweb” draws its own experience from nothing and only then from “before”.

“Mesh”. (Dragomoshchenko 2011)

Aleksandr Vvedensky, arguably the most outstanding poet of the late pre-war Soviet avant-garde and a key member of the Chinar-OBERIU group of poets and philosophers, has been the focus of notable critical attention in the last two decades, most recently after the publication of the definitive complete edition of his surviving oeuvre.<sup>1</sup> He is a very difficult poet to tackle critically. As Keti Chukhrov points out, “his work not only surpasses all interpretations and analytical observations, but has the capacity to cancel their significance and explanatory pathos. This happens because Vvedensky’s writings already contain within themselves those meta-positions with which one could approach them, including philosophical, theological, and strangely enough, political ones” (Chukhrov 2011, p. 145). This could be part of the reason why to date there has been little effort to identify the place of God in his works. According Vvedensky’s most often cited statement, the poet was interested only in three things—time, death, and God (Vvedensky 1993, vol. 2, p. 167). Equally famous is his overarching desire to *overstep* reason, undertaking what he called “a poetic critique of reason—a more substantial one than that other, abstract critique”,<sup>2</sup> the latter being of course Kant’s First, *Critique of Pure Reason*.

Kant, a one-time Russian subject and member of St Petersburg Academy of Science, was most certainly a visible influence on the development of the Russian philosophical and religious-philosophical thought. It was not until the late 19th century that an explosion of interest in his work occurred in the Russian academia—owing to the influence of European neo-Kantianism (with one of the most important Russian philosophers of this school being, curiously, a different Aleksandr Ivanovich Vvedensky (1856–1925), the poet’s complete namesake who as professor of St Petersburg University taught, among others, influential figures as Nikolai Lossky, Petr Struve, and Mikhail Bakhtin). Overall, much as the Russian philosophers were interested in Kant, they were also critical of him. According to Semyon



**Citation:** Pavlov, Evgeny. 2021. “Only God Can Be”: Aleksandr Vvedensky, Kant, God, and Time. *Religions* 12: 658. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12080658>

Academic Editor: Dennis Ioffe

Received: 9 July 2021

Accepted: 14 August 2021

Published: 18 August 2021

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Frank, “critique of Kant’s philosophy and struggle against Kantianism are . . . a constant theme in the Russian philosophical thought” (Zenkovsky 1999, vol. 1, p. 347). Most Russian philosophers incorporated Eastern Orthodox beliefs into their systems which were often more than tinged with irrationality. Like Kant, they recognized the limitations of human reason, but they also allowed for mystical experiences and intuitions that could give access to what in Kant is inaccessible, i.e., the realm of the noumena. It is the privileging of ontology that stopped Russian philosophy from developing its own branch of Kantian thought. According to another prominent Russian philosopher Aleksei Losev, the cognition of the hidden realm can only be achieved in a symbol, an image, through the power of imagination and “inner living agility” (Losev 1991, p. 213).

This postulate was key to the work of Russian symbolists, especially Andrei Bely who was the only one among them to have studied Kant. In their endeavours, they actively worked against what they perceived to be purely rational spirit of Kantian philosophy. “True symbolism”, writes Belyi in an early article “Krititsizm i simvolizm” (“Criticism and Symbolism”) (written in 1904 on the centennial of Kant’s death), “begins only beyond the gates of criticism. Symbolism born of criticism, unlike the latter, becomes a living method that equally differs from dogmatic empiricism and abstract criticism by overcoming them both” (Bely 1910, p. 29). He argues that the difference Symbolism makes lies in its ability to overcome the “purely scientific” character of knowledge in Kant and ultimately bridge the schism between phenomena and noumena—this “Scylla and Charibdis of the Kantian philosophy” (ibid., p. 25)—by means of creative, intuitive cognition: “The cognition of ideas reveals in temporal phenomena their timelessly eternal meaning. This cognition joins together understanding and feeling into something different from them both, something that covers them both” (ibid., p. 29). Bely’s younger colleagues who, as said, hardly read any Kant at all, saw him as a Prussian prisoner, a sinister spider whose web of rigid logic and concepts unfairly limits the freedom of poetic genius, barring it any access to the noumenal world. To paraphrase the poet Marina Tsvetaeva, “БИТЬ КАНТА НАГОЛОВУ” (“rout Kant, beat Kant hollow”) becomes a mission for many figures of Russian modernism who in their quest for a new poetic language think of Kant at best as a powerful enemy (and at worst, a beating boy).

The Oberiu poets were no exception in this respect. As Iakov Druskin, Vvedensky’s devoted friend, colleague and astute interpreter testifies, neither Vvedensky, nor his close associate Daniil Kharms whose work has garnered a much greater critical response were particularly well-steeped in philosophy. And yet Kharms famously scribbled “against Kant” underneath his “Blue Notebook no. 10”, prompting future scholars to speculate on the anti-Kantian drive of the Chinar-Oberiu ideas.<sup>3</sup> Druskin (he along with Leonid Lipavsky were the only real philosophers in the group) once remarked that even though Daniil Ivanovich may have dropped a quote from Kant, he never really read the philosopher’s works.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, Druskin himself held Kant in the highest esteem and in his diaries listed the philosopher alongside Bach and Vvedensky among the greatest geniuses of humankind (Druskin 1999, p. 433–34). Moreover, to philosopher Druskin who considered Vvedensky greatest Russian poet of all times, Kant and Vvedensky share not only greatness but also a certain universality. Kant’s task was to “abolish knowledge to make room for faith” (Kant 1993, p. 21); Vvedensky’s “poetic critique of reason” in search of answers to the questions of time, death, and God pursued the very same objective. Yet, neither was Kant a religious philosopher, nor Vvedensky a religious poet. Both their projects were thoroughly critical, even if Vvedensky’s was more thoroughgoing than Kant’s in that it turned its critique to language.

In what follows, I would like to comment on several crucial passages from Vvedensky’s *Grey Notebook* where the poet is at his most revealing on the subject of time, death, and God (1932–1933). I hope to demonstrate that instead of “anti-Kantian”, Vvedensky’s poetics should be described as “ultra-Kantian”. Although he collapses the edifice of Kantian rationality by blowing up its structural supports, he does so in order to show us that rationality and a rationality share the same bottomless foundation that cannot be removed. According

to Kant, “unconditioned necessity, which as the ultimate support of all existing things is an indispensable requirement, is an abyss on the verge of which human reason trembles in dismay” (Kant 1987, p. 418). Vvedensky’s celebrated line is an eloquent affirmation of this thesis: “горит бессмыслицы звезда, она одна без дна” (“the star if senselessness is shining, it alone has no bottom”).

This is how Druskin describes the poetic *bessmyslitsa* of Kharms and Vvedensky in his essay “Chinari”:

“Works of Vvedensky and Kharms are linked by “the star of senselessness”:

The star of senselessness is shining,  
It alone has no bottom”

writes Vvedensky in the epilogue to his large [...] dramatic poem “God is Perhaps All Around”. I distinguish semantic senselessness which distorts rules of so-called “normal” speech from situational senselessness which follows from a logical nature of human relationships and situations. Vvedensky has not only situational senselessness, but also semantic, while Kharms uses mostly that of the situational kind. (Druskin 2000, vol. 1, p. 60).

In another essay on *chinari*, “Stages of Understanding”, Druskin says the following with regard to senselessness in the work of Vvedensky:

One has to understand Vvedensky’s senselessness, the logic of alogicality. By itself, this word combination is senseless, for alogical is that which is not logical. Senselessness is that which has no sense, is incomprehensible. Fichte once said: we need to understand the incomprehensible as incomprehensible. Vvedensky would have said: we need not to understand the incomprehensible as incomprehensible. This is what he did say: to truly understand is not to understand. Still, alogicality has its own logic, alogical logic. But this logic would always be alogical to our reason fallen in Adam—not relatively, but absolutely alogical, *docta ignorantia* (Nicholas of Cusa), madness for reason. (Druskin 2000, vol. 1, p. 420f)

That Druskin brings up Nicholas of Cusa here is supremely significant. The German philosopher’s doctrine of learned ignorance states precisely this: “Since the unqualifiedly and absolutely Maximum (than which there cannot be greater) is greater than we can comprehend (because it is Infinite Truth), we attain unto it in no other way than incomprehensibly. For since it is not of the nature of those things which can be comparatively greater and lesser, it is beyond all that we can conceive” (Nicholas of Cusa 1981, p. 8). When Druskin brings up Cusanus’ concept of Divine madness, it is in the context of an absolute break between human logic and the alogical Logos. According to Druskin, as we have no logical means of passing from human wisdom to Divine madness, we must conduct this *passage* (“perekhod”) “in leaps” (“skachkami”): “Each of us makes it daily, without realising that it is alogical. The poet, the philosopher make it consciously” (ibid., p. 421). From this he concludes that most often people make mistakes when they follow the logic of correct reasoning, and vice versa: “erroneous, alogical reasoning is correct” (ibid.).

To Vvedensky, in the relationship between poetry and life what matters is the “correctness of the verse line”, “правильность стиха”. As he explicitly states, “it is incorrect to discuss art in terms of beautiful/not beautiful. Art should be discussed in terms of correct/incorrect” (as per Druskin 1993, vol. 2, p. 167). In Kant’s third Critique the feeling of the beautiful is seen as arising out of the play of the understanding and the imagination, and it only concerns the finite forms of phenomena: It concentrates on the capacity of transcendental imagination to present a form that accords with its free play. At issue in the Analytic of the Beautiful is the existence of an accord between the sensible manifold and a certain pre-conceptual unity of the supersensible (Kant 1987, p. 15). The kind of art that Vvedensky proposes is not about the imagination and its play, but rather about what Kant discusses in the Analytic of the Sublime, which turns to the realm of infinite Ideas, and this is where we are indeed faced with the notion of passage. The sublime enters at a crucial point in the Third Critique where the philosopher is in search of a passage, an *Übergang*, between the theoretical and the practical realms and to do violence to imagination as sensorily

determined by clashing it with reason's supersensory demands. The sublime is a powerful reminder of the fact that the *a priori* principle, which grounds reflective judgment cannot cover up the abyss separating the worlds of nature (phenomena) and freedom (noumena). Although, the reconciliation of the two is promised in the sphere of the beautiful. In its violence, the sublime also involves a presentation, albeit a negative one, of imagination's inability to present ideas of reason. As imagination strives to progress toward infinity, "reason demands absolute totality as a real idea, and so [imagination]... is inadequate to that idea" (Kant 1987, p. 106). Yet, with the spontaneous arousal of the feeling "that we have within us a supersensible power", reason forces the mind to an invariably doomed effort to make a presentation of the senses adequate to the totality.

While the beautiful "concerns the form of the object", i.e., limitation, the sublime strives for the unlimited as it seizes us in the presence of "a formless object insofar as we present unboundedness" (Kant 1987, p. 98). The beautiful "concerns the form of the object, that is its limitation", whereas the feeling of the sublime seizes us in the presence "of a formless object to the extent that the unlimited here represents itself" (Kant 1987, p. 99). The feeling of a lack of limits that the sublime brings with itself is about disorder and a return to the chaos, which the transcendental imagination orders by imposing form. It is in this sense that Vvedensky's art directly speaks to the ideas of reason which it of course cannot represent, but at which it continuously gestures through a critique of language whose "poverty" it exhibits as a means to discredit completely our rational knowledge, the ego-centric self and its spatio-temporal reality as expressed in language.<sup>5</sup> Let us once again ponder Vvedensky's most important poetic pronouncement in Lipavsky's *Conversations* where the poet draws the often-cited comparison between Kant's and his own critiques:

Можно ли на это [проблему времени] ответить искусством? Увы, оно субъективно. Поэзия производит только словесное чудо, а не настоящее. Да и как реконструировать мир, неизвестно. Я посягнул на понятия, на исходные обобщения, что до меня никто не делал. Этим я провел как бы поэтическую критику разума—более основательную, чем та, отвлеченная. Я усумнился, что, например, дом, дача и башня связываются и объединяются понятием здание. Может быть, плечо надо связывать с четырьмя. Я делал это на практике, в поэзии, и тем доказывал. И я убедился в ложности прежних связей, но не могу сказать, какие должны быть новые. Я даже не знаю, должна ли быть одна система связей или их много. И у меня основное ощущение бессвязности мира и раздробленности времени. А так как это противоречит разуму, то значит разум не понимает мира. (Vvedensky 2010, p. 593)

Could one respond to this [the problem of time] with art? Alas, art is subjective. Poetry produces only a verbal miracle, not a real one. Besides, we don't know how to reconstruct the world. I infringed upon concepts, primary generalizations, which no one has done before me. By doing so I conducted a kind of a poetic critique of reason—a more substantial one than that other, abstract critique. For example, I put in doubt that "house", "dacha", and "tower" must be connected and joined together by the concept "building". Maybe "shoulder" must be connected to "four". I did it in practice, in poetry, and thus proved it. And I saw for myself the falseness of previous connections, but I can't tell you what new ones should be. I don't even know whether there should be one system of connections or whether there are many of them. And I've got a general sense that the world is disjointed and time is fragmented. And since this contradicts reason, then reason doesn't understand the world.

This passage sums up Vvedensky's poetics as a critique of reason which certainly appears to go against the grain of Kant's First Critique where the philosopher aims to explain how synthetic *a priori* knowledge makes the phenomenal world cohere via concepts of understanding. However, the First Critique contains within itself those fundamental theoretical postulates that are at the core of Vvedensky's poetic practice. In the *Critique*

of *Pure Reason*, synthetic *a priori* judgments (and hence our knowledge) hinge upon the idea of time as an *a priori* non-figurative form of all forms in which “alone all reality of appearances is possible” (Kant 1993, p. 54). However, according to Kant, it only has empirical reality insofar as it is a form of our internal intuition: “If we take away from it the special condition of our sensibility, the concept of time also vanishes; and it inheres not in the objects themselves, but solely in the subject which intuits them” (Kant 1993, p. 58). Time also determines the reality of our very selves: just as time without us is nothing, we are nothing without time. This is precisely what Vvedensky states in *Grey Notebook* where we read, “Время единственное что вне нас не существует. Оно поглощает все существующее вне нас. Тут наступает ночь ума. Время восходит над нами как звезда” (“Time is the only thing that doesn’t exist outside us. It consumes all that exists outside us. Here the night of reason sets in. Time rises above us like a star”). (Vvedensky 1993, vol. 2, p. 78). Here we are once again confronted with the need to make a leap, to cross over from what Druskin designates “this” and “that” (“*eto*” and “*to*”—see Druskin 2000). What Vvedensky terms “correct” art is the kind that operates within this “night of reason”. In Kant’s first Critique, understanding, the faculty Vvedensky wants to shut down, is “comprehension of plurality in unity” in the sense of a unifying intention of imagination that reproduces past moments, in order to open the horizon of the present, keeping present what passes, creating, as it were, an illusion of the temporal flux. Vvedensky famously proposes an experiment that would demonstrate that in what we perceive as linear continuity is, in fact, a discontinuous succession of apprehension.

Если с часов стереть цифры, если забыть ложные названия, то уже может быть время захочет показать нам свое тихое туловище, себя во весь рост. Пускай бегают мышь по камню. Считай только каждый ее шаг. Забудь только слово каждый, забудь только слово шаг. Тогда каждый ее шаг покажется новым движеньем. Потом, так как у тебя справедливо исчезло восприятие ряда движений как чего-то целого, что ты называлошибочно шагом(ты путал движенье и время с пространством, ты неверно накладывал их друг на друга), то движение у тебя начнет дробиться, оно придет почти к нулю. Начнется мерцание. Мышь начнет мерцать. Оглянись: мир мерцает(как мышь). (Vvedensky 1993, vol. 2, p. 81)

If we were to erase the numbers from a clock, if we were to forget its false names, maybe then time would want to show its quiet torso, to appear to us in its full glory. Let the mouse run over the stone. Count only its every step. Only forget the word every, only forget the word step. Then each step will seem a new movement. Then, since your ability to perceive a series of movements as something whole has rightfully disappeared, that which you wrongly called a step (you had confused movement and time with space, you falsely transposed one over the other), that movement will begin to break apart, it will approach zero. The shimmering will begin. The mouse will start to shimmer. Look around you: The world is shimmering (like a mouse) (Vvedensky 2002, p. 11).

Such non-understanding of time would cancel not only most basic logical connections but also memory. In order to make the world shimmer, one has to forget every movement of the mouse before it makes a new one. Some sixty years earlier Friedrich Nietzsche suggested in his *Untimely Meditations* that a very similar mode of perception would characterize an animal: “[Man] wonders about himself, that he is not able to learn to forget and that he always hangs onto past things. No matter how far or how fast he runs, this chain runs with him [...] Man says, “I remember”, and envies the beast, which immediately forgets and sees each moment really perish, sink back in cloud and night, and vanish forever” (Nietzsche 1983, p. 61). Nietzsche thinks the beast is happy for existing purely in the present even though it cannot communicate this happiness because it immediately forgets what it wants to say. Vvedensky refrains from such pronouncements although he too envies the beast (cf. “Мне жалко что я не зверь . . .”. “Я с завистью гляжу на зверя...”). (“I feel sorry I’m not a beast . . .”, “I look at the beast with envy . . .”). In the *Grey Notebook* he is far more ambivalent about the happiness of animals for he can only observe them from

within his “glass jar of time”: “Букашка думаето счастье. Водяной жук тоскует. Звери не употребляюталкоголя. Звери скучают без наркотических веществ. Они предаются животному разврату. Звери время сидит над вами. Время думаето вас и Бог. [...] Но мыоставим в покое лес, мы ничего не пойдем в лесу”. (Vvedensky 1993, vol. 2, p. 82) “The little bug is thinking about happiness. Water beetle is sad. Animals don’t take alcohol. Animals are bored without narcotic substances. They give themselves to animal lechery. Animals time sits above you. Time is thinking about you and god. But let us leave the forest in peace, we won’t understand anything in the forest” (Vvedensky 2002, p. 15). What we can do instead is try some of those substances that animals do not take and see whether we could approximate their condition and cast off the chain of time. The character named Svidersky’s relates the following story:

Однажды я шел по дорогеотравленный ядом,  
и время со мною шагало рядом [...]  
Я думало том, почему лишь глаголы  
подвержены часу, минуте и году,  
а дом, лес и небо, как будто монголы,  
от времени вдруг получили свободу.  
Я думал и понял. Мы все это знаем,  
что действие стало бессонным китаем,  
что умерли действия, лежат мертвецами,  
и мы их теперь украшаем венками.  
Подвижность их ложь, их плотностьобман,  
и их неживой поглощает туман [...]  
Яостановился. Я подумал тут,  
я не могохватить умом нашествие всех новых бедствий.  
И я увидел дом ныряющий как зима,  
и я увидел ласточкуобозначающую сад  
где тени деревьев как ветви шумят,  
где ветви деревьев как тени ума.  
Я услышал музыкиоднообразную походку,  
я пытался поймать словесную лодку.  
Я испытывал слово на огне и стуже,  
но часы затягивались все туже и туже,  
И царствовавший во мне яд  
властвовавал как пустой сон.  
Однажды. (Vvedensky 1993, vol. 2, p. 77)

Once upon a time I walked poisoned down a road

And time walked in step by my side. [...]  
I thought about why only verbs are  
subjugated to the hour, minute, and year,  
while house, forest and sky, like the Mongols  
have suddenly been released from time.  
I thought about it and I understood. We all know it,  
that action became an insomniac China,  
that actions are dead, they stretch out like dead men,  
and now we decorate them with garlands.  
Their mobility is a lie, their density a swindle,  
and a dead fog devours them. [...]  
I stopped. Here I thought,  
my mind could not grasp the onslaught of new tribulations.  
And I saw a house, like winter, diving.  
And I saw a swallow signifying a garden  
where the shadows of trees like branches make sound,

where the branches of trees are like shadows of the mind.  
 I heard music's monotonous gait,  
 I tried to catch the verbal boat.  
 I tested the word in cold and fire,  
 but the hours drew in tighter and tighter.  
 And the poison reigning inside me  
 wielded power like an empty dream  
 Once upon a time. (Vvedensky 2002, p. 9)

This poem presents a certain narrative, which Vvedensky discusses in a series of comments in the remainder of the *Grey Notebook*. Here, we have a sequential series of actions, unfolding, strictly speaking, one after another, i.e., as a temporal progression: “Шел, шагало, думал, понял(walked, thought, understood)—all these are verbs that are points in a simple sequence of events. Yet, it is the synthesis of unfolding actions into a single story that Vvedensky sees as the source of our habitual delusion with regard to time. According to the *First Critique*, “if I always let the preceding representations escape from my thought . . . and if I did not reproduce them as I arrive at the following representations, no complete representations . . . not even the fundamental representations, not even the most pure and completely primary ones of space and time could be produced” (Kant 1993, pp. 114–15, 133). This is indeed the death of actions, and a slipping of the world into a senseless chaos—precisely the kind of thing that we witness in Svidersky's monologue. The corpses of verbs unleash an attack of “new tribulations”, that are no longer connected with one another, or with anything else for that matter, and that proliferate ad infinitum once the synthesis has stopped. The mind can no longer grasp what is occurring, and the scenario is very much that which Kant describes in the *Analytic of the Sublime* where imagination falters, leaving us with a negative presentation of the effort to represent infinite ideas of reason, in this case, time itself.

The moment of failure is marked not only in the actual narrative but also in the rhythmical pattern of the poem: ‘Яостановился. Я подумал тут,/я не могухватить умом нашествие всех новых бедствий’. This is the *locus classicus* of Hölderlin's caesura which the German poet famously defines in his *Annotations to Oedipus* as “the pure word, the counter-rhythmic rupture” necessary, “in order to meet the onrushing change of representations at its highest point, in such a manner that not the change of representations but the representation itself very soon appears”. In relation to the Greek tragedies that Hölderlin comments on, a silent moment of truth is presented so we can glimpse the unbridgeable rift between the hero and gods. It is not easy to articulate what Hölderlin's “representation itself” would be without falling back into the associative chain of the succession of representations. However, one could say that the interruption of the sequence of representations transforms it into a *presentation* of representation, which is no longer the associative chain of imagination but the presentation of its construction [presentation in the sense of “putting on display”]. As Jacob Rogozinski persuasively argues in an illuminating analysis of the temporality of the sublime, originary time is then not reducible to transcendental imagination and the latter's violent maintenance of it in the form of a homogeneous, monotonous progression, “for if originary temporality were identical to imagination, nothing other would be possible, nothing sublime could happen” (Rogozinsky 1993).

In the commentary that follows the poem, Vvedensky says the following: “Глаголы на наших глазах доживают свой век. В искусстве сюжет и действие исчезают. Те действия, которые есть в моих стихах, нелогичны и бесполезны, их нельзя уже назвать действиями. [. . .] События не совпадают со временем. Время съело события. От них неосталось косточек”. (Vvedensky 1993, vol. 2, p. 81) (“Verbs live out their last days in front of our very eyes. In art, plot and action are disappearing. Those actions that exist in my poetry are alogical and useless you can't call them actions any more. Events don't coincide with time. Time has eaten up events. No bones are left of them’.) (Vvedensky 2002, p. 12). Unable to comprehend the bad infinity of illogical and useless actions, his imagination now proliferates, and he is left with mere verbal building blocks that time deprives of any

referential meaning. The word “однажды” at the end of Svidersky’s monologue is more than just a repetition of the “однажды” at the beginning. It is perhaps the very word he has been testing “in cold and fire” only to see it snap under the pressure of “tightening hours”. As a singular occurrence torn from the thread of violent synthesis through which imagination operates, it is exhibited as an empty shell that means everything and nothing. It can be interpreted as the point in the temporal series when time momentarily halts; in conjunction with the imperfective “властвовал”, it also indicates the open stretch of time in which the story ends. “Однажды” is indeed the empty dream with which we end up: Nothing which is pure time that we can never access. Events have all been eaten up, with no bones left of them, but this “once upon a time” is the allegorical last bone of the sublime event when time momentarily “showed its quiet torso”. To paraphrase Walter Benjamin, it is the scull in whose language “total expressionlessness—the black of the eye sockets—is coupled with the wildest expression—the grinning row teeth” (Benjamin 1973, IV-1:112).

Chinari had another word to describe this “scull”: hieroglyph. The hieroglyph, in its simplest sense, is a sign that contains several meanings, some of them mutually contradictory. By definition, it is illogical. It seeks to make the individual commit to a dynamic, richly ambiguous symbol always in the process of being transformed. For Vvedensky and for other Chinari, such a sign is valuable because of its closer proximity to the fragmented truth of our existence than does the logical world of reason.

In a footnote to the Analytic of the Sublime, Kant famously illustrates the inability to grasp pure time by citing the sublime image of veiled Isis: “Perhaps nothing more sublime has ever been said, or a thought ever been expressed more sublimely, than in that inscription above the temple of Isis (mother Nature): “I am all that is, that was, and that will be, and no mortal has lifted my veil” (Kant 1987, p. 187). Vvedensky’s commentary on the poem that contains Svidersky’s monologue insists on the same:

Все, что я здесь пытаюсь написать о времени, является, строго говоря, неверным. Причин этому две. (1) Всякий человек, который хоть сколько-нибудь не понял время, а только не понявший хотя бы немного понял его, должен перестать понимать и все существующее. (2) Наша человеческая логика и наш язык не соответствуют времени ни в каком, ни в элементарном, ни в сложном его понимании. Наша логика и наш язык скользят по поверхности времени. (Vvedensky 1993, vol. 2, p. 79)

All that I am trying to write here about time is, strictly speaking, untrue. There are two reasons for this. (1) Any person who has not understood time at least a little bit—and only one who has not understood it has understood it at all—must cease to understand everything that exists. (2) Our human logic and our language do not in any way correspond to time, neither in its elementary nor in its complex understanding. Our logic and our language slide along the surface of time.

Yet, perhaps one can try and write something, if not about time—nor on the non-understanding of time—then at the very least to try to fix those few positions of our superficial experience of time, and, on the basis of these, the way into death and general non-understanding becomes clear (Vvedensky 2002, p. 9; translation modified).

If our logic and language slide along the surface of time, it is because the irreducible veil of the phenomenal world is woven of the thread of temporality. The violence of the imagination veils itself under an illusory transparency that Vvedensky calls into question. It is only at the moment of death that its texture can be broken. To Vvedensky, this is the moment—the only moment that deserves to be called “moment”—when a *real* miracle can happen: “Чудо возможно в момент смерти. Оно возможно потому что смерть есть установка времени” (“A miracle can happen at the moment of death because death is the stop of time.”) All other miracles are merely verbal, and yet, “If we experience wild non-understanding we will know that no one will be able to counter it with clarity. Woe to us who ponder time. But then with the growth of this non-understanding it will become clear to you and me that there is no woe, neither to us, nor to pondering, nor to time”. (“Если мы почувствуем дикое непонимание, то мы будем знать, что этому непониманию

никто не сможет противопоставить ничего ясного. Горе нам, задумавшимся времени. Но потом, при разрастании этого непонимания тебе и мне станет ясно, что нету ни горя, на нам, ни задумавшимся, ни времени”) (Vvedensky 1993, vol. 2, p. 79). There is a very thin line between the sublime and the monstrous, which Vvedensky’s poetry never crosses even though there is a degree of madness in the sublime and definitely in his art. Being a critical project, his poetics slips neither into visionary insanity nor into what Kant calls metaphysical *Schwärmerei*, or empty flights of fancy. “Уважай бедность языка”, “respect the poverty of language”, insists Vvedensky in “A Certain Quantity of Conversations”, as he pushes language to its limit. However, it is entirely consistent with his overall poetic position, which is based on the most radical incomprehension that schematises time, as we do not know the cost of disfiguration and fragmentation. The proliferation of impossibly arational actions that so overwhelms Svidersky is in fact the totality, the *vse* (everything), which appears to be the very last word of Vvedensky’s very last surviving piece “Gde, kogda” (“Where, when”). When in *Krugom vozmozhno bog* (*God is Perhaps All Around*) Vvedensky says, “Only God Can Be” (“БЫТЬ МОЖЕТ ТОЛЬКО БОГ”), he points to the totality of all that is for which God is one name. Vvedensky’s “Gost’ na konie” (“Guest on Horseback”), poses the question

Бог Ты может бытьотсутствуешь?  
 Несчастье.  
 God could You be absent?  
 Woe. (Vvedensky 2010, p. 183)

That Vvedensky posits God in the same inaccessible realm where time and death reside is very telling. Nicholas of Cusa proposed the idea of *coincidentia oppositorum*. God, in his view, cannot be part of his own creation, and thus, his presence can only be appreciated if one acknowledges His absence (see Nicholas of Cusa 1981, p. 79).

This is immediately countered with a vision of totality:

Нет я все увидел сразу,  
 поднял дня немую вазу,  
 а сказал смешную фразу,  
 чудо любит пятки греть [. . . ]  
 Я забыл существованье  
 я созерцал  
 вновь  
 расстоянье.  
 Now I saw everything at once  
 lifted the mute vase of the day  
 I said a funny phrase,  
 miracle likes to warm you heels [. . . ]  
 I forgot existence,  
 I contemplated  
 again  
 the distance. (Vvedensky 2010, p. 183)

This is precisely the sort of uncomprehending that Vvedensky is after. Far from denuding the goddess, his irrational project, just as the rational project of Kant, reveals nothing except the veil itself, the non-figurable weave of time that is the world of phenomena and that is our human language.

In a pursuit of incomprehension, Vvedensky’s “poetic critique of reason” unfolds according to the very same principles that Kant postulates for his rational philosophy, and the thoroughness of the poetic critique very thoroughly undertakes to prove Kant right. As I have demonstrated, the passage that Kant proposes in his *Analytic of the Sublime* does not lead into the world of noumena, but rather, demonstrates the texture of the veil out of which phenomena are woven: Vvedensky’s ultra-Kantian poetic project shows us “the

surface of time". In the epigraph for the article that I chose from a short piece on Vvedensky by the late poet Arkady Dragomoshchenko, the poet is said to unwind himself through his language, like a cocoon. The thread of temporality shows neither a beginning, nor an end, but rather that it comes from nothing, the nothing that is, in fact, everything—given in presence, in absence as death and as God—incomprehensibly, by a radical disfiguration which language alone can make visible.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See (Vvedensky 2010).
- <sup>2</sup> "Я посягнул на понятия, на исходные обобщения, что до меня никто не делал. Я провел как бы поэтическую критику разума—более основательную, чем та, отвлеченная". In Leonid Lipavsky, "Razgovory" (Vvedensky 2010, pp. 592–93).
- <sup>3</sup> Very few scholars writing on the philosophy of *Chinari* and/or Oberiu failed to describe the group's views as "essentially anti-Kantian". See, for example, (Roberts 1997, p. 126). In her study of Bergson's influence on Kharms, Hilary Fink argues that Kharms discarded Kant's analytical tools in favour of "more intuitive ways of apprehending reality" which in turn led to the birth of the absurd in his works (Fink 1998). For a more involved discussion of the anti-Kantian tenor in the philosophy of *chinari* see Protopopova. See also V. Sazhin's assessment in *Sborishche družei*, (Sazhin 2000, p. 770). Notable exceptions to the above include Skidan 2011 and Rezvykh 2014. Evgeny Ostashevsky's article offers an extremely interesting analysis of Vvedensky's poetic critique in the context of Wittgenstein's philosophy of language (Ostashevsky 2011). See also Protopopova 2007.
- <sup>4</sup> See (Jaccard 1995, p. 369): "Канта Даниил Иванович не читал" ("Daniil Ivanovich never read Kant). Jaccard uses this testimony to suggest that given Kharms's lack of philosophical sophistication, it would not be particularly productive to read his works through the Kantian lens.
- <sup>5</sup> "Уважай бедность языка. Уважай нищие мысли". ("Respect the poverty of language. Respect squalid thoughts". (See "Nekotoroe kolichestvo razgovorov", Vvedensky 1993, vol. 2, p. 196)

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