

### Introduction: Toward a Russian Geopoetics, or Some Ways of Relating Russia to the World

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Geopoetics is concerned, fundamentally, with a relationship to the earth and with the opening of a world.

—Kenneth White, *Geopoetics: Place, Culture, World* (2004)

The thread that links these convergences is the question of landscape, the poetics and iconology of space and place, and all their relations to social and political life, to experience, to history.

—W. J. T. Mitchell, “Geopoetics: Space, Place, Landscape,”  
Introduction to a special issue of *Critical Inquiry* (2000)

“Geopoetics” may be a novel concept for Russian studies, but the term is by no means new. The Scottish poet and critic Kenneth White coined it in 1978, inaugurating an international intellectual and creative movement of the same name that has gained particular momentum in the new millennium.<sup>1</sup> Its urgency in a world that has grown exponentially more connected and networked yet, paradoxically, remains deeply bound to the “iconology of space and place” is evident from the way in which the cultural theorist W. J. T. Mitchell, in conversation with Edward Said and others in the symbolically freighted location of Birzeit University in the West Bank, recouped the term as the organizing principle of a special issue of *Critical Inquiry* in 2000. If anything, geopoetics as an animating force as well an analytical framework for what Mitchell identifies as “social and political life,” “experience,” and “history” appears in even starker relief against the myriad transnational conflicts that define the globe in 2016—within which, in turn, the region we study has been rapidly redefining itself vis-à-vis the world.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, since the “geopolitical catastrophe” of the dissolution of the USSR, as Vladimir Putin famously put it in 2005, nation-states and their spheres of influence—the foundational conceptual armature of geopolitics as it was formulated by competing imperial powers at the turn of the twentieth century—

1. Kenneth White’s foundational texts can be found on the website of the International Institute of Geopoetics at <http://institut-geopoetique.org/en> (last accessed March 12, 2016). The site is fully operative in Chinese, English, French, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, and Vietnamese, which shows the truly international orientation of the institute.

2. W. J. T. Mitchell, “Geopoetics: Space, Place, and Landscape,” *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 2 (2000): 173.

seem to have given way to various *geopoetic* modalities of imagining the self in relation to the world, in which space and spatial identity have become open fields of contending representations.<sup>3</sup> Their discursive construction across a multitude of media freely interpenetrates and powerfully shapes the politics and practices of everyday life.<sup>4</sup> If, as the geographer David Harvey asserted in 1993, “representations” are “as fiercely fought over and as fundamental to the activities of place construction as bricks and mortar,” then in 2010 the French political theorist Dominique Moisi has called for the reconceptualization of geopolitics itself as the interaction and flow of affect rather than concretely mappable vectors of state power.<sup>5</sup> Moisi’s “geopolitics of emotion” rather than nations brings us back to Said’s exploration of *geopoetics* “at the intersection of memory and invention,” in the above-cited conversation with Mitchell in 2000. For Said, this is a practice that simultaneously mobilizes the past, present, and future in the dialectical processes that constitute space not as a static object that merely provides the context for human thought and action but as a dynamic set of relations produced by them.<sup>6</sup>

The theoretical import of *geopoetics*, as this brief overview of its various deployments suggests, is particularly apparent at our current moment. The phenomenon of *geopoetics*, however, both as a quality immanent in the spatial politics of cultural texts and as an approach to interpreting them, is certainly much older. Nowhere are its implications more evident than in the fields of literary and cultural practice that have variously attempted to position Russia in the world. In the discipline of Russian studies, whose institutional history is deeply imbricated in the twentieth-century geopolitics of the Cold War, this may be the time to turn to *geopoetics* as both an object of study and a generative methodological approach. *Geopoetics* offers a new set of ways to *relate* Russia, in both the narrative and the spatial sense—as both an ontology and an epistemology as White suggested—that is deeply historical yet urgently contemporary.<sup>7</sup>

Two examples of creative expression across multiple media from a century

3. Vladimir Putin, “Poslanie federal’nomu sobraniuu rossiiskoi federatsii,” 2005, at <http://archive.kremlin.ru/text/appears/2005/04/87049/shtml> (last accessed March 12, 2016).

4. For an early exploration of how new media landscapes reconfigure spatial affiliations and allegiances, see David Morley and Kevin Robbins, *Spaces of Identity: Global Media, Electronic Landscapes, and Cultural Boundaries* (London, 1995). The recent volume, *Digital Russia: The Language, Culture, and Politics of New Media Communication*, eds., Michael Gorham, Ingunn Lunde, and Martin Paulsen (London, 2014), offers several in-depth studies of transmedial constructions of space and history on post-Soviet networks and their interactions with the politics of identity in real life.

5. David Harvey, “From Space to Place and Back Again: Reflections on the Condition of Postmodernity,” in Jon Bird, Barry Curtis, Tim Putnam, George Robertson, and Lisa Tickner, eds., *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change* (London, 1993), 29; and Dominique Moisi, *The Geopolitics of Emotion: How Cultures of Fear, Humiliation, and Hope are Reshaping the World* (London, 2009).

6. Edward W. Said, “Invention, Memory, and Place,” *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 2 (2000): 175–92.

7. On *geopoetics* as ontology and epistemology, see White, “An Outline of *Geopoetics*,” at <http://www.institut-geopoetique.org/en/articles-en/37-an-outline-of-geopoetics> (last accessed March 12, 2016); Federico Italiano, “Defining *Geopoetics*,” *TRANS-:Écriture et*

ago illustrate the potentialities of geopoetics in both these dimensions and set the stage for its diverse explorations in the essays that follow. We choose as our first example the 1914 artist book, *Tango with Cows* (*Tango s korovami*), produced by the Russian futurist Vasilii Kamenskii in collaboration with the artists David and Vladimir Burliuk.<sup>8</sup> Printed on commercial wallpaper, the recto of each leaf of the book, cut to look as if missing the upper-right corner, featured a sample of what the cover proclaimed to be “ferro-concrete narrative poems” (*zhelezobetonnye poemy*). As ferro-concrete poems, *Tango with Cows* seems to make literal the ways in which artistic texts are, to quote Harvey, “as fundamental to place construction as bricks and mortar,” yet the poems themselves programmatically resist the rational logic of place construction: combining wild manipulations of letters and words with radically asymmetrical geometric shapes, the poems subvert the conventions of both reading and mapping. In order to discern the relationships between the constituent elements on the page, the eye, trained in reading Russian to move from left to right and top to bottom, is repeatedly forced to veer off along unexpected tangents and to connect fragments between and across the borders of the shapes. Emplacement and enclosure of stable meanings, consequently, become impossible within the linear Cartesian coordinates of either typography or cartography. The poem from *Tango with Cows* entitled “Constantinople” (“Konstantinopol”) (figure 1) is an iconic example of this inimitable poetics.

“Constantinople” may be the perfect embodiment of the definition of geopoetics offered by White. It is place translated into poetic form, its idiosyncrasies mediated by the relationship of its creator with his physical surroundings. Described as a “word map”—albeit distorted, as Scott Palmer suggests, by the poet’s uniquely privileged perspective as an aviator—the poem has been extensively analyzed as a creative rendition of Kamenskii’s actual meanderings through the Turkish city, which he visited in 1904.<sup>9</sup> Based on this biographical fact, critics have read the printed page as an indexical catalogue of the poet’s “relationship with the earth,” as White puts it. While recognizable words signal straightforward correspondences with iconic landmarks, personages, and objects (such as Hagia Sophia, mullahs, coffee, and fezzes) in Vladimir Markov’s early commentary, Gerald Janecek, more creatively, has traced back many diffuse and partial linguistic elements to the exotic sonic landscape of the city’s streets.<sup>10</sup>

For our project of Russian geopoetics, however, Kamenskii’s poem provides tremendously generative points of departure precisely in the places where the logic of mimetic representation begins to flounder. It consists of signifiers that

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*chaos* 6 (2008): 2–10; and Jeff Malpas, ed., *The Intelligence of Place: Topographies and Poetics* (London, 2015).

8. Vasilii Kamenskii, David Burliuk, and Vladimir Burliuk, *Tango s korovami: zhelezobetonnye poemy* (Moscow, 1914). Daniel Mellis and Eugene Ostashevsky are currently completing the first English translation of the book.

9. Scott W. Palmer, *Dictatorship of the Air: Aviation Culture and the Fate of Modern Russia* (Cambridge, 2006), 27–29.

10. Vladimir Markov, *Russian Futurism: A History* (Berkeley, 1968), 197; and Gerald Janecek, *The Look of Russian Literature: Avant-Garde Visual Experiments, 1900–1930* (Princeton, 1984), 125–27.

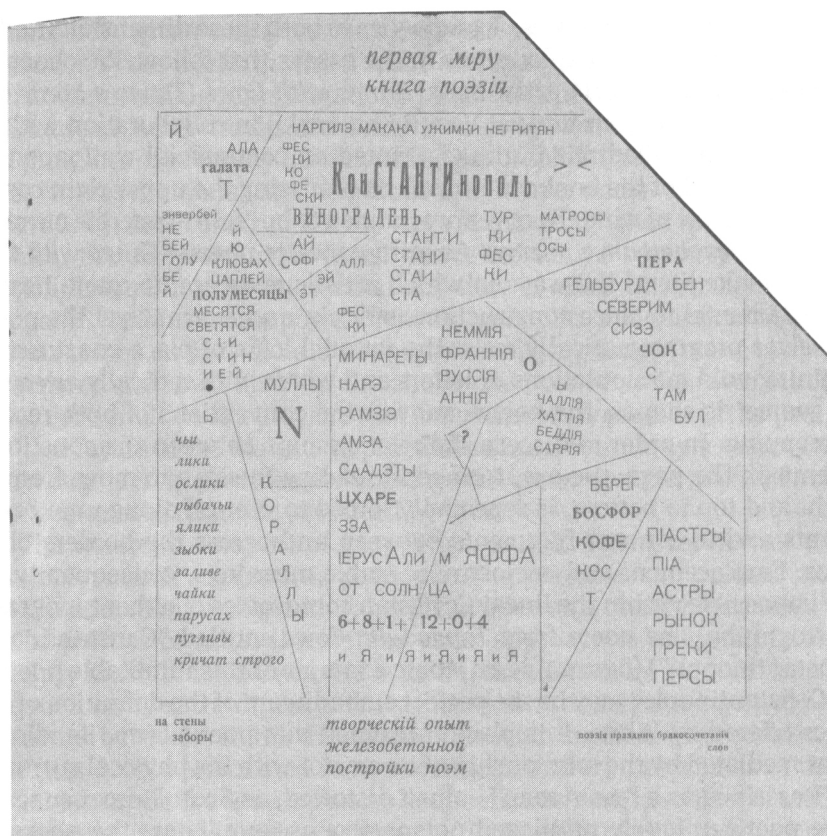


Figure 1. “Constantinople” from Vasilii Kamenskii and David and Vladimir Burliuk’s *Tango with Cows*. Reproduced with the permission of the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles

do not “fit” in either biographical or geographical terms, whose presence in the space of “Constantinople” are either dismissed as mere projections of the poet’s desire to travel the world or require significant leaps of interpretation in order to make sense.<sup>11</sup> Jerusalem and Jaffa taper off towards the bottom, a “hookah” (*nargile*), “macaque” (*makaka*), and “Negro grimaces” (*uzhimki negretian*) fill the top margin, and the seemingly incomprehensible markers of *Challiia*, *Khattiia*, *Beddiia*, and *Sarriia* bleed into the semi-recognizable names of the major imperial players on the eve of World War I—*Nemmiia* (Germany), *Franniia* (France), and *Anniia* (England)—which are nestled in the very heart of the city, with *Russiia* (Russia) prominently listed among them. Contrary to the geopolitical hierarchy of powers, however, these territorial entities are typographically dwarfed not only by the minutiae of Turkish life but even by the distant shores of Africa and Palestine. Cartographically, they might lie at the center of the poem, but unlike what a contemporaneous map

11. Markov, *Russian Futurism*, 198; and Janecek, *The Look of Russian Literature*, 128–29.

would have shown, their sphere of influence on this printed page is reduced to the smallest polygon. Such asymptotic positioning strategies defamiliarize the legible parts of the poem, including the very concept of home, Russia, through the process of what White called “the opening of a world.” Thus, the literary word-map of identifiable Constantinople becomes a geopoetic wor(l)d map whose horizons are multiple and limitless.

This is precisely how Kamenskii’s poem also illustrates the distinction between geopoetics and geopolitics. Is geopoetics merely a metaphorical projection or an embellished articulation of geopolitics? In the case of “Constantinople,” both the date of publication, 1914, and the inscription, “the first book of poetry for the world” (*pervaia kniga miru poezii*), identify urgent geopolitical concerns of the time as embedded referents. Yet, as discussed above, neither the array of places on the page, nor the ways in which they confound hierarchical constructs of spatial history allow the poem to be reduced to a mere allegory of geopolitics. If this irreducible excess of relations between places and people defines geopoetics for us, its power to disrupt and perhaps transform the parameters of spatial thinking signals the generative potential of the term for Russian studies.

While Kamenskii’s “Constantinople” resists geopolitics by “opening up a world,” the prologue to Andrei Belyi’s novel *Petersburg* (*Peterburg*), which first appeared in book form in 1916, creatively mobilizes “the iconology of space and place,” as Mitchell puts it, to challenge its relations to “social and political life, to experience, to history.” Framed as an address to “Your Excellencies, Your Worships, Your Honors, and Citizens,” the prologue seems to reinforce the politics of empire even as it questions: “What is this Empire of ours?” This interrogation of Russia’s “geographical unity” (*geograficheskoe edinstvo*) is encoded in a reflexive wordplay on the very concept of the *prostranstvo* or space of its capital city—which, in turn, is refracted through its quintessential geographical other, Constantinople:

Petersburg, or Saint Petersburg, or Pieter (which are the same) actually does belong to the Russian Empire. And Tsargrad, Konstantinograd (or, as they say, Constantinople), belongs to it by right of inheritance. And we shall not expatiate [*rasprostraniat’sia ne budem*] on it.

Let us expatiate [*rasprostranimsia*] at greater length on Petersburg: there is a Petersburg, or Saint Petersburg, or Pieter (which are the same).<sup>12</sup>

The narrator’s insistence on ex-patiating—or *ras-prostraniat’sia*—sets the nested geo-histories of Petersburg (and its double, Constantinople) into centrifugal motion, such that instead of mapping the boundaries of the city vis-à-vis the nation-state and the world, the word “Petersburg” itself ends up with no concrete referent. Even *petrus* or stone, the primal geological basis of the city and an etymological source of its name, dissolves alongside the dematerialization of its geopolitical identity: “Petersburg not only appears to

12. Andrei Belyi, *Peterburg: Roman v vos'mi glavakh s prologom i epilogom*, ed. L. K. Dolgoplov (Moscow, 1981), 9; and Andrei Bely, *Petersburg*, trans. and ed. Robert A. Maguire and John E. Malmstad (Bloomington, 1978), 1. For an in-depth consideration of Belyi’s uses of the prefix *pro-*, see David M. Bethea, *The Shape of Apocalypse in Modern Russian Fiction* (Princeton, 1989), 131–34.

us, but actually does appear—on maps [*na kartakh*]; in the form of two small circles, one set inside the other, with a black dot in the center; and from precisely this mathematical point, which has no dimension [*ne imeiushchaia izmereniia*].”<sup>13</sup>

As a site that paradoxically exists and does not exist, that appears “on maps” but only as a mathematical point that “has no dimensions,” Petersburg is momentarily emptied of its “relations to social and political life, to experience, to history” and becomes an imaginary place impossible to chart using any existing cartographic conventions. If Kamenskii’s “Constantinople” presents a deformed aerial view of proliferating spatial relations that resists the controlling gaze of either the poet or the reader/viewer, Belyi’s prologue eviscerates the capacious semiotics of the imperial capital and compresses it into a purely conceptual mathematical symbol, a point with no dimensions.<sup>14</sup>

Juxtaposing the spatial operations of “Constantinople” and *Petersburg* are particularly illustrative for articulating a *Russian* geopoetics. As thinkers, policymakers, and scholars have variously asserted over well nigh two centuries, to speak of Russia—much like Kamenskii’s and Belyi’s cities, which are also each other’s doubles—is to grapple with the fundamental conundrums of spatiality itself. Together, the texts demonstrate that the geopoetical *imaginary* can neither be contained by nor neatly mapped onto the *imagined* spaces and communities of geopolitics, be it in the turbulent years of war and revolution in the early twentieth century or in our postmillennial era of informal, asymmetrical conflict. Thus, our approach to Russian geopoetics seeks to radically expand and re-conceptualize the spatial turn in literary and cultural studies that has had a transformative effect on the field since 1991. Over the last two and a half decades, the existential questions of “where is Russia?” and its corollary, “what is it to be Russian in the world?” have been subjected to rigorous theoretical, methodological, and historical interrogation. Formerly essentialized binaries such as nation and empire, metropolis and periphery, and last but not least the hemispheric divide between Europe and Asia, far from remaining mutually exclusive categories, have been revealed to be mutually constitutive.<sup>15</sup> The rich body of recent scholarship that attends to Russia’s con-

13. Belyi, *Peterburg*, 10; and Bely, *Petersburg*, 2.

14. Olga Matich’s edited volume, *Petersburg/Petersburg: Novel and City, 1900–1921* (Madison, 2010), produces a very different reading of the interplay between the novel and city.

15. On nation and empire, see, for example, Geoffrey A. Hosking, *Russia: People and Empire, 1522–1917* (Boston, 1997); Harsha Ram, *The Imperial Sublime: A Russian Poetics of Empire* (Madison, 2003); and Nancy Condee, *The Imperial Trace: Recent Russian Cinema* (Oxford, 2009). On the metropolis and the periphery, see, for instance, Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States* (New York, 1998); and Adeeb Khalid, *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (Berkeley, 2007). On the hemispheric divide, see Mark Bassin, *Imperial Visions: Nationalist Imagination and Geographical Expansion in the Russian Far East, 1840–1865* (Cambridge, 1999); Marlène Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism: An Ideology of Empire* (Baltimore, 2008); David Schimmelpennick van der Oye, *Russian Orientalism: Asia in the Russian Mind from Peter the Great to Emigration* (New Haven, 2010); Edith W. Clowes, *Russia on the Edge: Imagined Geographies and Post-Soviet Identity* (Ithaca, 2011); and Susanna Soojung Lim, *China and Japan in the Russian Imagination, 1685–1922: To the Ends of the Orient* (London, 2013).

tiguous imperial territories has significantly enhanced a longer tradition of locating it on the peripheries of Western metropolitan power and culture.<sup>16</sup> A number of innovative studies on Russian urban centers and cosmopolitanism have emerged that challenge conventional maps of modernity.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, the strong scholarly engagement with spatial imaginaries in recent years rarely strays from historical or contemporary spheres of active political involvement by the Russian and Soviet nation-states. Even, and especially, in the humanities, whose objects of study are certainly not limited by the exigencies of geopolitical action or influence, the horizontal axis of Russia's proverbial Janus-face, one turned towards the West and the other towards the East, continues to circumscribe the scope of interpretation and intervention.

To move from geopolitics to geopoetics, then, is to "open up" Russia to a wider world, to mobilize the existing boundaries of "context" into a proliferative, plastic field of *relations*. Through the geo-poetical frame, Russia can be reimagined from Beijing, Baku, Bamako, or Bari as powerfully as from Petersburg, Paris, Berlin, or Rome—or for that matter Constantinople. Our proposal of a Russian geopoetics, however, does not only aim to diversify the locations or increase the number of "outsides" or "others," whether couched as "Orientalized," "minor," "peripheral," or "subaltern" in the diverse postcolonial theories that have been actively incorporated by various scholars in the post-Soviet era. This gesture would merely reposition dominant notions of Russian culture. That would be geocriticism, whose importance in literary and cultural studies is well demonstrated by recent works on peripheral modernisms and alternative modernities.<sup>18</sup> Instead, following White's insistence that geopoetics is simultaneously an ontology and an epistemology, this special section approaches the fundamental relationship between space and culture as already embedded in diverse circuits of contact, contamination, translation, and transculturation. Epistemologically, this means that our notion of geopoetics focuses not so much on decentering Russian literature, art, or media as the spatial turn in the field has actively sought to do. Instead, the essays that follow engage in rigorous, historically and geographically informed

16. On Russia's contiguous territories, see Susan Layton, *Russian Literature and Empire: Conquest of the Caucasus from Pushkin to Tolstoy* (Cambridge, 1994); Edyta M. Bojanowska, *Nikolai Gogol: Between Ukrainian and Russian Nationalism* (Cambridge, MA, 2007); and Katya Hokanson, *Writing at Russia's Border* (Toronto, 2008). For some recent studies of Russia and Western metropolitan centers, see Leonid Livak, *How It Was Done in Paris: Russian Émigré Literature and French Modernism* (Madison, 2003); Anna Frajlich, *The Legacy of Ancient Rome in the Russian Silver Age* (Amsterdam, 2007); and Judith E. Kalb, *Russia's Rome: Imperial Visions, Messianic Dreams, 1890–1940* (Madison, 2008).

17. See, for example, Katerina Clark, *Petersburg, Crucible of Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 1995); Julie Buckler, *Mapping St. Petersburg: Imperial Text and Cityshape* (Princeton, 2005); Emily D. Johnson, *How St. Petersburg Learned to Study Itself: The Russian Idea of Kraevedenie* (University Park, 2006); Mark D. Steinberg, *Petersburg Fin de Siècle* (New Haven, 2011); Matich, ed., *Petersburg/Petersburg*; and Katerina Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931–1941* (Cambridge, MA, 2011).

18. For two particularly bold recent interventions in the geographies of modernism and modernity, see Laura Doyle and Laura A. Winkiel, eds., *Geomodernisms: Race, Modernism, Modernity* (Bloomington, 2005); and Susan Stanford Friedman, *Planetary Modernisms: Provocations on Modernity Across Time* (New York, 2015).

investigations of the networks and flows that have played critical roles in shaping cultural production and consumption within and beyond Russian, Soviet, and post-Soviet spaces.

Within these networks and flows, correspondingly, geopoetics emerges at the crossroads of diverse encounters between Russia and the world at large, whether formally in each other's geopolitical ambit or farther afield, across textual and visual media in old and new forms, and often across transhistorical divides. Through the geopoetics of "translating" Nikolai Gogol's parodic voice into the Islamic Turkic ethno-linguistic milieu of Baku soon after the 1905 revolution, Leah Feldman offers a unique account of identity on the banks of the Caspian Sea. Instead of positioning the emergence of Azeri print and political culture in the oppositional paradigm of center and periphery, poised between the competing Russian and Ottoman empires, "Reading Gogol' in Azeri" brings to light the essential but often neglected aspect of geopoetics as mediation. Rather than limiting the relations between metropolitan imperial cultures and their distant colonial outposts to a binary geopolitical framework, Feldman introduces the generative role played by third spaces such as the nineteenth-century writer's Russophone Ukraine. Gogol's signature parodic prose is appropriated across the historical divide of a century to become the voice of the Azeri people as they engage with the revolutionary legacy of 1905—albeit in a modality radically different from Belyi's.

Tashkent replaces Baku in Rossen Djagalov and Masha Salazkina's investigation of the geopoetics of cinema, which emerged with the founding of a Third-World film festival in the city in 1968. By bringing African, Asian, and, eventually, Latin American filmmakers, actors, critics, and officials together in the Uzbek capital, the Tashkent Film Festival succeeded in fostering a creative contact zone that resisted the dynamics of "colonizer-colonized" or "center-periphery," or, for that matter, other forms of hegemonic relations. Instead, as "Tashkent '68" persuasively demonstrates, the festival functioned as a quasi-utopian space that fostered a fluid exchange between the Second and Third Worlds and that managed to produce a new, shared language of postcolonial cinema that offered an aesthetic and ideological alternative to Hollywood and west European models.

Jacob Edmond's "Scripted Spaces" also ranges through media and publics in order to delve into the discursive heart of geopoetics. His focus is on the avant-garde writers Sergei Tret'iakov's and Dmitrii Prigov's creative appropriation of the newspaper. The seemingly contradictory ways in which the medium of the newspaper engages with the world provides the conceptual model for Edmond's argument: the newspaper embodies an inherent tension in its simultaneous reliance on the hierarchical dissemination of information and on non-hierarchical networks of information. This paradox, as Edmond demonstrates, was creatively exploited by Tret'iakov in the 1920's and Prigov in the late- and post-Soviet periods: both artists draw upon the official and non-official discursive aspects of the newspaper to generate their own inimitable aesthetics of space at different moments of radical political transition.

In conjunction with this introduction, these essays continue to develop the "global conversation" that *Slavic Review* has been fostering on its pages and that will be taken up as the theme of the annual convention of the Associ-



ation for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies in November 2016. Following recent special sections of this journal on “Ethnographies of Absence in Contemporary Georgia” (vol. 73, no. 2, summer 2014), “Platonov’s Turkmenia” (vol. 73, no. 4, winter 2014), and a “Critical Forum on Ukraine” (vol. 74, no. 4, winter 2015) that intervene variously in the debates about spatial identity and politics, Russian geopoetics calls for an even more expansive spatialization of literary, cultural, and media studies. Far from constituting a definitive and exhaustive collection of sites and approaches to what White calls the primary concern of geopoetics—“presence in the world”—this special section represents an effort to “open up” Russia itself to a qualitatively different set of spatial relations than those offered by geopolitics alone.<sup>19</sup> Russian geopoetics does not aspire to provide a new map; in the words of another celebrated theoretician of space, Michel de Certeau, it is but an itinerary whose trajectory is yet to unfold.<sup>20</sup>

19. Kenneth White, “An Outline of Geopoetics,” at <http://institut-geopoetique.org/en/articles-en/37-an-outline-of-geopoetics> (last accessed March 12, 2016).

20. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, 1984), 118–22.