

Title: Border Crossings: Mikhail Shishkin Reads James Joyce  
Author: José Vergara, Swarthmore College

Abstract:

Part of a longer project that examines Russian prose responses to James Joyce throughout the long twentieth century, my paper compares Mikhail Shishkin's 2005 novel *Maidenhair*, which blends characters, plotlines, and time frames almost indiscriminately, to Joyce's highly innovative *Ulysses* (1922) and *Finnegans Wake* (1939).

By his own admission, Shishkin has viewed Joyce as a major influence since he first read *Ulysses* as a young man. In a 2005 interview, for example, he contrasts the Western literary tradition's "love of the Word" (Joyce) with the Russian tradition's "love of man" (Gogol). He says that he wishes to direct Russian literature toward the combination of the two trends. More recently, he has commented on the way Russians "skipped Joyce and an entire generation of Western writers, their breakthroughs, their achievements." He was surprised to learn that he had even first "read" Joyce *through* other writers who came after him. All the same, Joyce's lessons made it to Shishkin.

The recently published essay "More Than Joyce," which consists of an abbreviated literary biography of Joyce and speaks to his place in Russian letters, serves as my point of departure. It acts as a kind of Rosetta Stone that helps shed light on Shishkin's poetics and themes by highlighting certain aspects of his own work through the prism of Joyce's life and art. In my paper, I focus on two key components of Joyce's novels that Shishkin underscores in his wide-ranging essay: the iterative nature of storytelling and the life-affirming energies of the word as such. These twin points, which, Shishkin emphasizes, allow writing to preserve humanity in time, strongly manifest themselves in *Maidenhair*, and we can thus tease out Joyce's place in Shishkin's book.

Although critics have frequently called Shishkin's work "Joycean," an extended consideration of the links between the two figures remains to be undertaken. More than other writers of his generation, Shishkin's writings clarify how Joyce symbolizes, in his words, "more than Joyce": a lost forefather, a visionary, a luminary who can resurrect dead language.

Mikhail Shishkin, "Mat i molitva - eto priblizitel'no odno i to zhe," *Gazeta* 105 (June 9, 2005).

Sergei Ivanov, "Pisatel' dolzhen oshchutit' vsesilie," *Kontrakty UA* (August 4, 2010).