Internationale Zeitschrift für Kulturkomparatistik
Band 6 (2022): *Poetics and Politics by Women in the Post-Soviet Space*
Herausgegeben von Anna Fees, Henrieke Stahl und Claus Telge
Sandler, Stephanie: The Body Returns: Recent Poems by Russian Women. In: IZfK 6 (2022). 45-83.
DOI: 10.25353/ubtr-izfk-11ad-b44b

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The Body Returns: Recent Poems by Russian Women

Abstract

Russian feminist poetry has flourished in the post-Soviet period, especially the last decade. It has provided inspiring modes of resistance to all forms of indifference to bodily harms, particularly the harms to women. That poetry is studied here through the lens of feminist theory. The essay argues that a wide range of such theories finds resonance in these poems, and it introduces several key poets: Galina Rymbu, Oksana Vasiakina, Lida Yusupova, Elena Fanailova, and Mariia Stepanova, with a coda on Konstantin Shavlovskii.

Keywords: feminist poetry, political poetry, feminist theory, poetry and anger, body, Galina Rymbu, Oksana Vasiakina, Lida Yusupova, Elena Fanailova, Mariia Stepanova, Konstantin Shavlovskii.

When Masha Gessen reported on the demonstrations and arrests in Russia during the summer of 2019 for *The New Yorker*, she concluded that the number of arrests would increase "as long as the current regime exists." She added that prison sentences would grow longer, enforcement more brutal. Her conclusion is devastating: "This is how freedom shrinks: once the vector has been established, there are no turning points, only the movement of the relentless, freedom-eating machine."[1] Gessen's prediction still has the ring of truth, and the implications extend far beyond Russia.[2] But one has to wonder whether she is right about there being no turning points, or whether there are not new ways to resist the

[1] Compare Gessen (2019).

[2] Compare Gessen (2020), about the US under Donald Trump.

"freedom-eating machine." In the year that has elapsed since those comments (this essay was completed in 2020), the COVID-19 pandemic has produced a vast health crisis and an equally serious economic crisis worldwide, and it has been used by some authoritarian regimes to tighten their rule (Hong Kong being the prime but not the only example). Nonetheless, the world has also seen the rise of an enormous protest movement, inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States. The social changes associated with #MeToo continue as well. Amid the pandemic, and despite clampdowns, resistance has persisted and grown, and some small sparks of political optimism glimmer forth.

Those sparks are vividly seen in Russia's poetry, particularly in poems by women and poems about women's bodies. Poets are pushing at all possible bounds of propriety, ethical norms, and professional loyalty, most especially in political poetry. They have broken a long silence about the way women's bodies are derided and harmed. As elsewhere, the #MeToo movement has made its mark in Russia, with a rise in dramatic conflict in the community of contemporary poets, some of it shockingly aggressive, all of it surely painful to its participants, male and female alike. Some of the most striking poetic texts that have emerged in this moment are poems meant to liberate their readers – poems meant to create freedom rather than to lament its lack. Even as those poems recount awful physical assaults and torturous emotions, their very existence promises a world where such pain, if not ended, will at least not be suffered in silence. Their rhetorical performances are doing what Svetlana Boym would have called cocreating the practice of freedom.[3] The co-creators are their readers as well as a community of poets who have risen to defend one another, when needed. This cocreation is ongoing as of the moment when this essay is being written, and what follows accounts for only the beginning of the kind of turning point that may yet throw a real wrench into the freedom-eating machine Masha Gessen named.

These poems are well illuminated by a range of feminist theories, and I would argue that they show the enduring legacy of feminist thought and remind us that feminism comes in many forms and makes a range of arguments, some of them in conflict with one another. The key poets are Galina Rymbu, Oksana Vasiakina, and Lida Yusupova;[4] their work has been inspired by Elena Fanailova, among others. At the end of this essay, I comment on Fanailova's significance and her current work, as well as that of Mariia Stepanova. At the conclusion, I return to some of the premises with which the essay began, to consider the poetry of Kon-

[3] Boym (2010).

[4] Throughout this essay, including for proper names, I have used the modified Library of Congress system, which would render the last of these names as Iusupova. But in correspondence with me, the poet has insisted that her name be spelled Yusupova in English, and so I defer here to her preference. That spelling has also been used for translations of her work into English, some listed below. For bibliographic references to the Russian texts, however, I retain the properly transliterated name, Iusupova.

stantin Shavlovskii. I start with Galina Rymbu, whose poetry has reclaimed a radical political voice in exemplary ways.[5]

Galina Rymbu

Galina Rymbu (b. 1990) has published five books of poems in Russian in the last five years. She has emerged as one of the most significant contemporary poets writing in Russian. Politics, as both theory and activism, saturates her work, although as interrogation or investigation, rather than as argument. For more than a decade, she led workshops on feminist theory and facilitated other women's publications in Moscow and Petersburg; she now lives in Lviv in Ukraine. In 2019, she began writing reports on gender and violence for the Free Russia Foundation, and in her byline, she identified herself as investigator, poetess, feminist, and philosopher.[6] She marked all of these terms as feminine in gender (*«поэтесса»*, *«феминистка»*, and *«философиня»*). Rymbu uses these new terms to associate herself with the upsurge in feminist activism in Russia in the 2010s.[7] Strikingly, she also uses an old word, *poetessa*, which has had associations with bad taste and cultural inferiority for speakers of Russian.[8] But Rymbu boldly rejects the term's embarrassment by attaching it to her merciless, detailed investigative reporting about acts of violence against women.

Rymbu has backed away from attempts to read her poetry as agitational work or as following a party line.[9] But she is very clear on the political elements of what she is doing, and has elucidated the abstract questions that motivate her work as a poet:

> Я могу назвать свое письмо политическим, потому что, являясь феминисткой и левой, ищу в своих стихах ответы на сложные вопросы, которые волнуют меня с детства: «почему у одних есть все, а у других ничего?», «почему

[5] My selection of poets to treat closely has necessarily excluded excellent poets whose work has also advanced feminist poetry in Russian, including Anna Al'chuk and Marina Temkina to name only two well-known examples, but there are also younger poets doing remarkable work. A bilingual anthology appearing imminently will give a fuller picture of this work: "F Letter: New Russian Femininist Poetry," selected and introduced by Galina Rymbu (2020a). And a remarkable and brilliantly accessible online project created by Mariia Bobyleva appeared as I was finishing this essay. It makes, a wide range of feminist poetry available in Russian, with well-chosen contextualizing quotations and multiple points of navigation. See «Поэтика феминизма».

[6] On the website Syg.ma, the phrasing is slightly different but with similar feminine endings: «поэтесса, литературная критикесса, кураторка, философиня».

[7] Эпштейн (2018).

[8] Svetlana Boym observed that poetess is "poet plus a feminine suffix, an excess, a mark of 'bad taste,' a sign of cultural inferiority," and that it is "embarrassingly gendered." See Boym (1991: 192).

[9] «Интервью» conducted by Горалик (2016: 25).

> люди ненавидят друг друга?», «возможен ли мир без насилия и войн?», «что такое свобода?», «как быть вместе и что такое чувство общего, солидарности?», «как двигаться вперед и воображать лучшее будущее, несмотря на боль и страдания?», «почему наше мышление так катастрофично и можно ли обжиться в катастрофе?» и т.д.[10]
>
> I call my writing political because, as a feminist and leftist, I seek answers to complex questions in my poems, questions that have disturbed me since childhood: "why are there haves and have-nots?"; "why do people hate each other?"; "is a world without violence and wars possible?"; "what is freedom?"; "how to be together, as one, and what is the feeling of shared solidarity?"; "how to move forward and imagine a better future, in spite of pain and suffering?"; "why is our thinking so catastrophic, and is it possible to live as if accustomed to catastrophe?" etc.[11]

As those questions illustrate, Rymbu's work is animated by a set of political concerns that are not practical (what political system or which laws improve lives) but rather philosophical. Rhetorically, she reaches toward philosophy in her poetry, and one of her models, perhaps surprisingly, is Arkadii Dragomoshchenko.[12] Terms like («материя», «форма», «время», «организация», «знак» ("matter," "form," "time," "organization," "sign") are mixed into poetic lines about a grimy street, a light-dappled field, a body speckled with wounds or mud. Blood, fire, excrement, and sweat are as likely to appear in her lines as textiles, plant life, or as those terms which function as telling signs of the lyric project – voice, vision, screen, space, sound. The texture of her poetry is roughened, and her most distinctive poetic device is repetition, used as a rhythmic device to unify her long texts. A line can stop all action by its repetition of a single short word, as in a line like «смерть, смерть, смерть» ("death, death, death") or «ОГОНЬ ОГОНЬ ОГОНЬ» ("FIRE, FIRE, FIRE") – the latter in caps, no less.[13] Writing against forms of decay or what she would call in one cycle, "de-

[10] Cited from Rymbu's commentary to her poem «Стихи с новыми словами» (Рымбу 2020a).

[11] Here and subsequently, all unattributed translations are by the author.

[12] Rymbu paid tribute to Dragomoshchenko in co-founding the Dragomoshchenko Prize in St. Petersburg; she is deep in conversation with him in such poems as «[…] прошли полумрак где кишит черешня» ("[…] we're past the half-darkness where cherry blossoms seethe"; Рымбу 2014b: 142-143).

[13] In the poem «Я перехожу на станцию Трубная и вижу» ("I transfer to Trubnaia station and see", Рымбу 2014a: 54-61). In the repeating word for fire («огонь»), Rymbu is likely in conversation with Aleksandr Skidan's poem «Делириум» ("Delirium"), which also uses the repeating word as a refrain. His surrealistic, nightmarish mental wanderings and expansive form in that poem show how his work, like that of Dragomoshchenko, was an important model for Rymbu. She also follows Skidan in taking Dragomoshchenko's work more in an erotic, personal direction. That move on Skidan's part is noted by Il'ia Kukulin (Кукулин 2019: 307). For Skidan's "Delirium" in both English and Russian, see Skidan (2008: 4-17). In Rymbu's work, longer phrases can repeat as well, like the first line of «Всю жизнь поднимался по этой лестнице» heard three times (Рымбу 2014b: 54).

cline" («Книга упадка», 2019), Rymbu exfoliates the stages of ruin that corrode landscapes, bodies, buildings, concepts, creating a poetic equivalent of the morally compromised beauty of the hulking whale carcass in Andrei Zviagintsev's film «Левиафан» ("Leviathan," 2014).

The poetic subjectivity of Rymbu's work aligns her with a deeply feminist project, even when her subject matter appears to be unmarked by gender.[14] It shuttles back and forth between individuality and community, between "I" and "we."[15] Her version of the new social poetry, to use a term that has gained some currency in the last decade, has its roots in feminism, where the personal is ever and insistently the political.[16] When Jacques Rancière writes, at the start if "The

[14] Rymbu's feminism was on particularly vivid display in a set of poems she shared on Facebook as this essay was being completed: «Моя вагина» ("My Vagina") and «Великая русская литература» ("Great Russian Literature"); both poems were also uploaded to Google docs by the Метажурнал channel of Telegram. The poems set off waves of controversy, as well as a flood of poems in support, on Facebook. See for example: Ирина Котова, «Я – устала» (July 4, 2020); Alla Gorbunova, «Стихотворение, которое я бы написала о своем члене, если бы была мужчиной» (July 7, 2020), and Екатерина Симонова, «Лето. Среда» (July 9, 2020). Rymbu's original poem was written in support of Iuliia Tsvetkova, an LGBT activist in Komsomolsk-on-Amur under house arrest and charged with pornography. On the Tsvetkova case, see Anna Malpas (2020).

[15] Rymbu is in a sense retheorizing the philosophical contrast between sameness and difference, and, like Alain Badiou, is coming down on the side of sameness. See for example his lectures in "I Know There Are So Many of You" (2018). Also pertinent is Badiou's masterwork "Being and Event" (2005: esp. parts 1-2, 23-122). Rymbu sends up Badiou in «Секс-Пустыня», Передвижное пространство переворота (2014a: 51), in part: «мертвый хуй торчащий из всей философии / Ален Бадью ебущий теории, цифры»; that line is translated as "the dead cock that protrudes from every philosophy / Alain Badiou fucking theories, numbers" in Rymbu (2016c). As has been noted by Dmitrii Kuz'min, Rymbu is very deliberate in her use of obscenity, often marking a turning point in a poem – in this case, a turn against pure philosophy, which she derides as useless («для чего нужен ты, если б мог ты спасти нас» / "what are you good for, if you could only save us"; Рымбу 2014b: 102), this despite the way in which her own poems dive deeply into philosophical problems. See Кузьмин (2014: viii). That dynamic positionality can read, in terms of genre, as an alternation between epic and lyric, which is surely one reason why Aleksandr Skidan began his essay on politics and poetics with reference to the Igor Tale (Aleksandr Skidan, «Политическое / Поэтическое», Скидан 2013a: 286-294). Skidan's point in the essay is also to push open the boundaries around political poetry well beyond the topically political, thus his central example after the Igor Tale is a 1918 poem by a poet whose work avoided political topics, Vladislav Khodasevich, «2-го ноября»; for the poem, see Ходасевич (1989: 110-112).

[16] Others have located Rymbu's poetic subject between the deeply person and the insistently public. See, for example, Ian Vygovskii's comments in «Отзывы» (2016: 30). To better understand the term "new social poetics," one can study the series of poems that began to appear under that rubric at the start of most issues of Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie in 2009; the poems were selected by Aleksandr Skidan, who joined the editorial board as if 2009. For a study of one of the leading practitioners of new social poetics, Kirill Medvedev, see Bozovic (2014: 89-118). For an attack on the concept and practice of new social poetics, see Житенев (2013).

Flesh of Words," that it takes a "new form of political experience to emancipate the lyrical subject from the old poetic-political framework,"[17] he presses us to ask about the experiences that have emancipated Rymbu. We might be tempted to simply recapitulate her biography, beginning with a childhood of economic desperation in Siberia. The poems bear datelines that trace her movements from Omsk and Ust-Ishim to Moscow, Petersburg, and Lviv. And the poems build on her experiences of student uprisings, feminist movement, and motherhood.

The biography, however, is but the skeletal framework on which the complex scaffolding of the poetry is built. Particularly striking is Rymbu's ability to keep multiple emotions and affects in play in her long poems. She creates a fine balance between the constraints and injuries of daily life on one hand, and the refusal to be undone by those harms on the other. A sense of free movement across geographical space persists, as does a rejection of limiting categories like poet or activist or mother or lover or – and this cannot be left out – victim.[18] The poems reflect Rymbu's constant shape-shifting identities. The thickening of image and diction gives the poems a distinctive signature.

Many of Rymbu's poems are dense with figuration that changes across the length of the text.[19] Her move toward longer form lets her create a great deal of space for the reader to wander through. Her poetic subjects are themselves in motion. As Rancière puts it, with regard to Wordsworth, it is "a way of seeing while on the move."[20] And it is a way of seeing and moving, I would add, that lets expansive oxygen fill the lungs, that airs out language itself.

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[17] Rancière (2004: 10).

[18] For Rymbu, the lyric subject is constituted by the mind-boggling combination of these freedoms with the refusal to let go of the imprint of all the limitations; it is such an emancipated lyrical subject that Rancière had in mind.

[19] Readers with no Russian can grasp a fuller sense of her range through the translations published by Joan Brooks. See, for example, the chapbook "White Bread" (2016), and the poems in Asymptote (Spring, 2016); The White Review (January, 2016); and Music & Literature (02/01/2016). A bilingual volume has appeared: Rymbu: "Life in Space" (2020b). For the Russian texts, two of her books, «Передвижное пространство переворота» (2014a) and «Жизнь в пространстве» (2018), are the place to start. See also the issue of Vozdukh where she is the featured poet: Воздух (2016: 5-35), including poems, an interview, and responses from other poets.

[20] Rancière (2004: 17). For Rancière, Wordsworth "experiences nature as the territory of walking" (ibid., 16), but for Rymbu, it is largely urban space that the poet traverses. It is worth noting that Rancière goes on to compare Wordsworth to Mandelstam, commenting astutely on the constricted airways and airless rooms of the late poetry (ibid. 26-40). For a continuation of Rancière's work, see John Mackay's superb book "Inscription and Modernity: From Wordsworth to Mandelstam" (2006).

Transformations are at the heart of Rymbu's poems.[21] Persons are inspected in public when they are in transit, like the man from Nefteyugansk who is arriving at the Omsk railroad station.[22] Or like the two oil and gas workers, riding in a train car described as a container of blood.[23] Or the guy in the metro who mutters that this isn't war.[24] Or like the speaker herself, constantly changing subway lines or moving between cities as she watches students themselves on the march.[25] Concepts as well as persons can be in motion, like the moving space of revolution that gives her poem and her book of poetry its title.[26] A holiday is deemed a "dialectical motion" that "does not permit resolution"; it "unfolds in reality" as a form of failure, and behind that concept is a figure of indeterminate gender moving between two windows and refusing to accept the established principles of magnitude, space, and time.

Those phrases come from the start of Rymbu's poem «Праздник» ("Holiday"), a poem of some three pages. Those phrases can be heard in the passages below, from the poem's beginning. It gives a sense of the diction:

> развернутое в действительности диалектическое движение
> не приносит разрешения, это – неуспех (он знал это).
> потому что за этим всегда есть та (тот), кто мечется между двух окон,
> не принимая установленных величин, пространства и времени.
> и потому, что еще *за этим* есть *одно окно, одно значение*
> *
> поэзия приобретает форму, испытывая отвращение к форме,
> устанавливая коридоры насилия, прикрывая дверь,
> оставляя закрытую комнату знака длиться вглубь
> *
> и продукты висят в смутном времени *под одной цене*
> *
> и голос
> несет себя сам.
> *
> он говорит: ты считаешь, что они живут в классовом гетто, но не
> можешь это обосновать, ищи язык. язык скажет: *но я не искал тебя,*
> *чтобы давать значение.*

[21] As Anna Glazova put it, "The motion of speech, its flow, is experienced by the author as a material form of motion." Анна Глазова «Истец за силу», in Рымбу (2018: 6). For a different approach to the topic of self-transformation in Rymbu's work, specifically in the book «Кровь Животных» and in terms of the use of photography in that book, see Чадов (2019: 210-221).

[22] Рымбу (2018: 121).

[23] Рымбу (2015).

[24] Рымбу (2016a: 13-14). «'Это не война' – сказал в метро один подбритый парень».

[25] Рымбу (2014a: 54-61).

[26] Or the man in a Che Guevara t-shirt pacing in a jail cell. See the title poem in «Передвижное пространство переворота» (ibid., 34).

*
тело вертится в уме, накручиваясь на праздник.[27]

a dialectical motion unfolds in reality
cannot resolve itself, this is failure (he knew that).
because beyond it someone (she or he) races back and forth between two windows,
refusing established principles of measurement, space, and time.
and because still further *beyond this* is *one window, one meaning*
*
poetry acquires a form as it experiences revulsion against form,
establishing the corridors of violence, carefully shutting the door,
closing off the room, its sign to last longer, deeper
*
and foodstuffs hang there in a time of troubles *all at the same price*
*
and a voice
emphatically carries itself
*
he says: you think they live in a class ghetto, but you
can't ground that in anything, find a language for it. language says: *but I wasn't looking for you* / *in order to provide a meaning*.
*
the body rotates in the mind, winding around a holiday.

The title, «Праздник» ("Holiday"), is initially perplexing. Later in the poem it is mentioned twice, called a "holiday without a sign." But it is a holiday that allegorizes art itself. One is reminded of the last lines in the film "Andrei Rublev," as Andrei comforts the sobbing boy who has miraculously cast the bell, «какой праздник для народа» ("what a holiday you have created for the people").[28] Tarkovsky's film also models Rymbu's juxtaposition of the story of one individual with a story of masses of people, people who are subjected to the violence, the suffering, and, in the final scene, the celebrations that move through history like the moving space of revolution.

The final lines of her poem show us a group on a holiday picnic, and here all the abstractions of the poem are brought together and rearranged. In these lines, we again hear a mix of abstract language with the objects of everyday life – buckets, apples, drinking – and a repeated lowering of stylistic level, in a picnic on a site where oil is to be pumped. Here is the ending:

[27] Рымбу (2018: 73).

[28] As if authorizing this mental backward glance at film, the poem includes a section about film, specifically about someone adjusting the coloration on hundreds of hours of film. It reads as an ironic reference to both the length of Tarkovsky's film and its controversial switch to color just after the bell-casting scene, when the film lingers in close-up over the richly colored surfaces of Rublev's icons.

работа поэзии становится все более отличима, как труд, как смешение
форм труда, происходящее без превосходства. мне снится, что мы
никогда не узнаем: что такое – *письмо доступное всем?*
*
детали производятся. рядом с деталями лежат. руки взлетают вверх и
вниз, вне зависимости от нашей позиции относительно их движений.
земля по-прежнему взрыта. доступ к шахтерам закрыт. где твои
налобные фонари языка, чтобы осветить эту тьму направленностью?
но лоб напряжен и без света, пока другую вспенивает тьму
рядом с болтливым
*
находясь в «истории», погружаешь руки в острое ведро
чьи это руки?
по Иртышу плывут вздымаемые водой огромные куски тины
Усть-ишимский человек держит железо прошлого назначения
на берегу
*
когда кровь станет матовой, а матка волшебной, и земля станет вся из
плодов – овощей и фруктов, вмерзших в землю,
и мы будем собирать их, чтобы отнести на нефтяную вышку,
где вместо откачивания нефти наши друзья играют музыку и что-то
пьют, я разрежу плоды, а из них посыплются семена значения
во множестве, предложу подруге съесть их, а она скажет: «ты что,
хочешь обидеть меня?»
нет, вот другие яблоко и перец, без семян, возьми[29]

the work of poetry is becoming more and more discernible as labor, as a mix
of labor forms, derived without supremacy. I dream that we
will never know: what is writing accessible to all?
*
details are being produced. lying next to other details. hands fly up and
down, independent of our position relative to their motions. the earth is dug up, as
before. access to miners is closed off. where are your language headlamps to di-
rect a light on this darkness?
but the forehead is furrowed even without light, until it foams a different darkness
/ near a chattering
*
located in “history,” hands dive deep into the sharp bucket
whose hands are these?
huge on chunks of mire float down the Irtysh on stirred up water //
the man from Ust-Ishimsk is holding a piece of iron left over from some by-gone
function
on the shore
*
when blood loses its shine and the womb is made magic, and earth

[29] Рымбу (2018: 75-76).

shall be
entirely its fruits – vegetables and fruit, frozen into the earth,
and we will gather them and carry them to the oil derrick,
where instead of pumping oil our friends are playing music and drinking
something or other, I will cut the fruit and sprinkle their seeds of meaning
in great number, I'll offer some to my friend to eat and she'll say, 'what do you mean,
are you trying to insult me?'
no, here's some apple, peppers, no seeds, take some.

The lowering of style is literalized by references by what is beneath, to the earth, to mines or to the layers where oil could be pumped (not unlike Tarkovsky's typical camera movement, in fact, down to the ground). And the labor of making poetry, as the poet puts it, is the labor to make poetry into a form of writing that is *«доступное всем»* (*"accessible to all"*). The italics mark the phrase as borrowed from an ideology Rymbu might support but one whose principles she interrogates. How to make a poetry "accessible to all" but preserve its sense of mystery and allusion?

Rymbu is keen to lower a different barrier, one which emerges in the prior sentence: a poetry derived without supremacy where the rejection of «превосходство» ("supremacy") is a rejection of social hierarchies (as in white supremacy, masculine supremacy). She rejects the idea that the poet stands supreme, epitomized perhaps in a canonical poem like Pushkin's monument poem.[30] Rymbu's revision comes in the final lines of this poem, where the pillar is replaced by an oil derrick, and the poetic speaker shares foodstuffs whose seeds she hopes to sow.

Even that gesture proves too high-minded, though, and she humbles herself further, offering seedless foods – something unlike the taboo pomegranate seeds eaten by Persephone – as if in apology. Rymbu, who can harshly criticize assumptions about women's diminished social status, and who has written about women's sexuality with exuberance and frankness, also refuses to leave aside the social roles and myths associating women with food, nourishment, and motherhood.[31] Here she makes good on that refusal, cutting up fruit into variations on the theme of poetry in the making. She cedes nothing, though, to the power of men. There is no bargain here with the male gods of Hades or anywhere else.

One other image in this final set of lines requires comment: the blood with its oddly matte finish. Blood turns up in Rymbu's poems more than any other material substance, reminding us of the embodied presence of all the persons and

[30] «Я памятник себе воздвиг нерукотворный» ("I have raised myself a monument made not by hands," 1836; Пушкин 1977: 340). There, the poet aligns himself with a Horatian tradition and towers over the peoples he describes even as he hopes they will remember him as merciful.

[31] Among other pertinent poems, see «В моем яичнике живет чудовище» and «Сыну», in Рымбу (2018: 120, 122). In the former poem, I have in mind the line where the son turns a cell phone flashlight on the mother's belly; in the latter, the remarkably apt sketch of late-night life in an apartment where a child sleeps and life makes its evening sounds outside the window.

beings, their fragility and their insistent clinging to life.[32] This blood, of animals and of battle wounds, is spilled blood, a marker of the transgressive nature of our violent world. Rymbu depicts a world in which the blood – «черная тухлая кровь» ("black, putrid blood") – is brought into obscene view.[33] She splatters that blood across her poems as a challenge to all readers to create a world in which wounds might be healed.[34]

Oksana Vasiakina

Oksana Vasiakina (b. 1989), was student with Rymbu at the Gorky Institute, and she said Rymbu showed her how her poems could have an emancipatory force.[35] From her first book, «Женская проза» ("Women's Prose," 2016), she allied herself with the cause of women's poetry, saying that her intended readers were women.[36] She drew broader attention in 2018 with a staggering poem on the website *Colta* under the heading «Два стихотворения о насилии» ("Two Poems about Violence").[37] It begins:

что я знаю о насилии

[32] The significance of blood in Rymbu's work has been nicely summed up by Eugene Ostashevsky, who wrote: "Even one's body is conceived as historical – and consequently fluid – in essence. It is not an object existing in the river of historical time but rather it itself is streamed through and formed by history. For there is no border between my body and the multiple processes of historical change, which are enacted through me, who am at once the mouth and the word of their polyglot glossolalia. If 'revolution' is history projecting itself into the future, 'my' revolution is history immanent in me as desire and anticipation. It is why the blood that comes out of the body is red." Eugene Ostashevsky (2016), introducing "Three Poems by Galina Rymbu."

[33] The phrase is «это кровь, кровь, чёрная тухлая кровь» from the poem «Я перехожу на станцию Трубная и вижу». (Рымбу 2014a: 55). One is reminded of the exclamation by Ivan Turgenev's Holy Fool Kasian, who is repelled by the hunter's casual shooting of wild birds. Blood, he says, is meant to be hidden from the light.

[34] Whether there is more hope than despair in Rymbu's work is an open question, all the more so as she is a prolific writer, and still developing and exploring new themes and modes of poetry. Themes of domestic and sexual violence are increasingly informing her poetry. On July 8, 2019, she put up a poem on her Facebook page that recounts her own history as an abused child, entitled «Лучи», adding that it was her work on domestic violence that elicited that poem from her, she was sure. A fragment of that poem was published in Юлия Подлубнова (2019).

[35] In an interview for Svoboda News with Dmitrii Volchek (2017a).

[36] See «Мой читатель» (2017: 254).

[37] «Два текста о насилии» (2017b). Elsewhere Vasiakina explained that she wrote this poem during a panic attack while riding on the Moscow metro. (It is thus another example of poetry created on the move, and also something like the post-traumatic poetry created by Rymbu.) See her comments in the interview «В моей утопии секса нет, есть какая-то другая близость» (2019c).

когда мне было 13 лет меня изнасиловал подонок по имени Артём
теткин сожитель на моих глазах выволок ее на лестничную клетку и прыгал на ее голове в ботинках пока та не потеряла сознание
сожитель моей матери избивал ее каждый месяц она ходила на работу с синяками
и каждые полгода ходила к стоматологу чтобы
тот нарастил ей передний зуб выбитый моим отцом.

what I know about violence
when I was 13 a creep named Artyom raped me
right in front of me my aunt's partner dragged her out onto the staircase and jumped on her head in his boots until she lost consciousness
my mother's partner beat her every month she went to work bruised
and every six months she went to the dentist to have her front tooth inserted my father had knocked it out.

Colta made an exception to its policy of not publishing poetry on this occasion, and the publication became the venue for a further discussion of sexual violence within the poetry community.[38] Poems and poets were taking their place as exemplary moment of Russia's freest and perhaps riskiest forms of speech. Vasiakina's poem became a signal moment in Russia's nascent #MeToo movement, which in Russian is «ЯНеБоюсьСказать» ("I am not afraid to speak").[39] Her poem helped bring post-traumatic discourse more out into the open.[40] Her own acts of speaking freely have drawn further attention to her, not all of it positive.[41]

[38] The other poet featured here is Konstantin Shavlovskii (b. 1983), who was better known as a film curator, producer, and critic and a founder of the Petersburg bookstore Poriadok Slov. His poem is discussed below. Shortly after the appearance of these two poems, Shavlovskii also published an account of rape by one contemporary poet of another several years earlier (Шавловский 2018). Recriminations exploded especially on Facebook, and involved Russia's most prestigious literary award, the Andrei Bely Prize, as well as a highly influential new prize for younger poets, the Dragomoshchenko Prize.

[39] Begun as a social media flash mob in 2016 and inspired by the equivalent hashtag in Ukrainian, the movement led to some legal reform in Ukraine. But in Russia, official scorn for victims of domestic violence has been slower to abate. There were widespread protests in 2019 against murder charges leveled against three sisters, Krestina, Andzhelina, and Mariia Khatchaturian, who killed their father after years of sexual and physical abuse. See Walker (2016); Масальцева (2019). In January, 2020, the murder charges were dropped. See "Russia to Drop Murder Charges Against Sisters Who Killed Abusive Father, Lawyers Say."

[40] The emergence of a discourse of trauma in the 2010s has been well studied by Il'ia Kukulin, for example, «Ангел истории и сопровождающие его лица: О поколенческих и "внепоколенческих" формах социальной консолидации в современной русской литературе», in Кукулин (2019: 479-501, esp. 494-498 (on poets) and Kukulin (2017: 341-368 (on fiction, memoirs, and film)).

[41] Dmitrii Kuz'min, who first published Vasiakina, heard an unwarranted attack on his professionalism coming from Vasiakina and Vera Polozkova in this interview: «Вот тут меня возненавидели по-настоящему» (2019). For his response, see Кузьмин (2019).

Two elements of Vasiakina's ways of writing are distinctive about her own work, and in turn revealing about the current moment. One has to do with sex, the other with anger. Russian poetry has a long legacy of prudery, and while there are ample predecessors for Vasiakina's erotic writings from the post-Soviet period, her calmness and sense of acceptance remain unusual (the closest comparison in terms of intonation is the work of Elena Fanailova). Vasiakina writes poems of great tenderness, and while some poems take up varied gender positions, the structure of lesbian desire is felt throughout. [42] There are few predecessors in Russian poetry for lesbian love lyrics, and uneasy attitudes if not internalized homophobia persisted even during the Silver Age.[43] But there were exceptions, and Vasiakina's erotic poems owe something to Sof'ia Parnok.[44] She has Parnok's distinctive mix of irony and desire, although her long lines of free verse and conversational tone are unlike the rhymed, metered stanzas of Parnok. That sense of a natural unfolding of stories is also surely the reason she called her book «Женская проза» ("Women's Prose") with its suggestion that the poems are as if prosaic.[45]

A more apt model for Vasiakina's poetic persona is Anna Barkova (1901–1976), a comparison which will also show the role of anger in Vasiakina's poetry. Barkova wrote with a strong and sure voice throughout her life: she began her poetic work as a strong voice for the revolution, representing herself an incendiary and a rebel, and as a dangerous lover.[46] Barkova's first book was called «Женщина» ("The Woman," 1922), an important predecessor for Vasiakina's «Женская проза». Barkova knew that strong emotions like anger

[42] An exception can be found, for example, in the erotic opening poem of «Женская проза». It is spoken by a young boy in an apple orchard; his erotic fantasies are prepared by the poem's epigraph, from Walter Benjamin's "One-Way Street," with its frank statement of collapsing into tears at the touch of an elbow. See Васякина (2016: 5-9). Other examples of alternative subject positions in the same volume include «Как поверх моей Кати вьются сосунки, я вижу», «Она протягивает свои загорелые пальцы», and «Когда я смотрю на тебя, я вижу тело зверя» (Васякина 2016: 16, 28, 32-33).

[43] See Burgin (1993: 177-203). Burgin shows how Parnok was exceptional in this regard.

[44] For an excellent account of Parnok's work and legacy, see Burgin (1994).

[45] Compare Stepanova's use of the word "prose" in the title of her book «Проза Ивана Сидорова», ("Ivan Sidorov's Prose," 2008). It contains a single narrative poem, unfolding of a tale of transformation, adventure, punishment, and escape. Vasiakina may have had Stepanova's book in mind, although her lyrics in «Женская проза» do not tell a single story, as Stepanova's book does.

[46] There is a notebook entry from 1956 when Barkova said she has never liked children, which is a singularly heretical utterance for a woman in the saccharine child-centric universe of Soviet Russia. For the notebook entry, see Баркова (2002: 367). For some poems where Barkova associates herself with violence and criminality, see «Преступница», «Зеркало», «Сафо», «Прокаженная», «Контрабандисты» (2002: 10-11, 18-19, 22-23, 35, 39). These are all early poems, most written around 1921, but the rage can intensify in later work. See for example, «Я хотела бы самого, самого страшного» (1938), also in Ibid., 77.

and vengeance were shocking in a woman's poems, and her later work, much of it written during her long years in the Gulag, builds on the foundation that those strong emotions had established. That same energy fuels Vasiakina's poem «Песня ярости» ("Song of Fury," 2019).[47]

In it, one hears echoes of Vasiakina's poem «что я знаю о насилии»: both poems feature the rhetorical structure of lists, the repetitions, the litany of crimes narrated in a nearly flat, journalistic tone, a tone used to stabilize the tales of relentless harm and unfathomable pain. What is stronger, sharper in «Песня ярости» is the sense of rage. It is an anger that readers of feminist poetry will recognize from US feminism, and from the poems of the great Adrienne Rich (1929–2012).[48] Vasiakina's own point of orientation is the French feminist Monique Wittig (1935–2003), from whom she takes her epigraph.[49] Wittig and Rich were pioneers in lesbian feminist movements, another lineage for Vasiakina's poetry that has implications in terms of her poetics and in terms of feminist theory.

Helen Vendler, writing about Rich, noted that "the poetry of pure anger is a relatively rare phenomenon."[50] But Vasiakina's poem challenges any notion that a poetics of anger must soon spend itself. She conjures up an army of women familiar from Wittig's 1969 novel « Les Guérrillères ». A utopian space emerges where women's anger matters and where hurt women can heal. That is how the poem opens, with a promise of healing: «Я зашью раны на твоем теле своим

[47] The poem appears in Vasiakina's book «Ветер ярости» (2019a) which she largely distributed in typescript to friends and acquaintances, as what she herself called a version of samizdat (in «В моей утопии секса нет»). But Vasiakina also published a version online. The poem has been translated by Joan Brooks: Vasiakina, "Wind of Fury / Song of Fury" (2018: 34-49). Quotations here are from these two sources. For Kelly's comments about Barkova, see Kelly (1999: 947).

[48] Thus, in writing about these poems, Lev Oborin emphasized a connection to the poetics of anger in Rich. See Оборин (2019). Oborin called «Песня ярости» the most radical feminist poem written in Russian.

[49] It reads: «Ремень на котором висит ружье, натирает мне шею и лопатки» ("The sling of my rifle presses on the base of my neck and in the hollow of my shoulder-blades"). Apart from the lineage Vasiakina thus creates, this epigraph also is notable for the way it constructs a powerful torso, one from which a weapon extends as if a further appendage. The novel cited is Virgil, non, translated into English in 1985 as Across the Acheron; Vasiakina has said it is one of her favorite works of literature (in the interview for Svoboda News with Dmitrii Volchek 2017a). In that interview, she also expresses admiration for Valerie Solanas and Alexandra Kollontai.

[50] Vendler (1980: 245). Her point might be proven in a poem like the six lines of Harryette Mullen's "Anger," where a tongue-tied speaker cannot speak her fury: "Nothing comes out / but spit." (Mullen 2002: 112). Elsewhere, Vendler noted that one of Rich's "characteristic methods of transforming her sociological generalizations into lyrical meditations" is "enumerations or catalog" and the other is "the vignette or anecdote" – and both of these rhetorical patterns are important in Vasiakina's work. See Vendler (1995: 221).

волосом / и поцелую – чтобы они зажили» ("I'll stitch the wounds on your body with my hair / and kiss them until they heal").

How does that healing work? First, because the unspoken is brought into language, brought to the surface – brought up, as Rich would have said, by diving into the wreck.[51] But unlike Rich's diving metaphor, Vasiakina, like Rymbu, imagines horizontal movement across space, picking up and shedding armaments, wounds, and new energies along the way. These are portraits of persons on the move, so much so that when Elena Fanailova read this poem, she said it made her feel an urgent need to get up, go out, and walk.[52]

That motion is impelled by fury, the «ярость» in the poem's title, and by the wind which rages. It makes the metaphor of air into the oxygenating exhilaration of freedom.[53] Like the women on the march, the air molecules of the poem are in fierce movement, so much so that the inhalation and exhalation of breath makes a sound as loud as the howling wind. The poet even sees the «ходы кислорода к дремлющим их ноздрям» ("movement of oxygen into their dreaming nostrils"). It is the very wind that sings.[54] At the end of the poem, a procession of women is imagined as touching the air on the wind («трогают воздух на ветру»).

Air has a materiality through which bodies move in strength and in anger, a materiality that is comparable to one of the poem's other strong metaphors, that of the earth (where bodies lie in wait) and of the body's blood (rendered thick with the symbolism of wounds, of menstruation and childbirth, and of a potent regenerative force). The final line of the poem predicts that «кровь прорастает сквозь землю» ("the blood will grow up through the earth").

Vasiakina's poem is a tour de force, one that insists on its own power to mix narratives of individual harm with litanies of warning, projection, and fantasy. Body parts are removable (for example, when she images her mother as an amazon who has sliced off her own breast) and exchangeable (as when she writes, «И если женщина потеряет хотя бы один орган своего тела / другая скажет – возьми мою грудь возьми мои пальцы» or «вырастут новые груди / вырастут новые губы / волосы вырастут новые»[55] / "if a

[51] See Rich (1973), and in addition to the title poem, see especially "The Phenomenology of Anger," a poem which has its own fantasy: "white acetylene / ripples from my body / effortlessly released / perfectly trained / on the true enemy." (Ibid., 29).

[52] That reaction opens her comments in «Почти всё о Еве» – Елена Фанайлова о новой книге Оксаны Васякиной (2019).

[53] Air is also a fleeting but significant metaphor in her poem «Ода смерти», which bears mention as well for its representation of the dying body. It is a poem of great tenderness and courage, and it shows a different side of her poetics. For the full text, see Васякина (2020a).

[54] The poet writes, «дуют ветры полные ярости / они поют песню ярости / и зовут нас встать и пойти / за нас отомстить» ("winds are blowing full of fury / they sing the song of fury / and call us to rise and walk / to avenge ourselves"; Васякина 2019a: 74).

[55] Ibid., 69.

woman loses but one organ of her body / another will say – take my breast take my fingers" and "new breasts will grow / new lips will grow / new hair will grow"[56]). Here is a fantasy where women's bodies, mutilated and degraded, are transformed into entities beyond all harm. If body parts have the capacity for renewal through amalgamation and recombination, then «Песня ярости» ("Song of Fury") has imagined women's bodies as invulnerable. Those bodies are paradoxically strengthened by absorbing the very muscle tissue of the enemy, creating an invincible armor. Hardened by the assurance of comfort and completion by their comrades, the women warriors move from a howl of despair – given as a long line of vowels – toward the power of song. It is the wind's song that they inhale deep into their lungs and exhale as powerfully.[57]

Vasiakina's writing is meant, then, not just to heal wounds, but to convey courage. Rather than a willingess to concede that «нет языка / которым опишешь ярость» ("there is no language / to describe the fury"), the poem rises to its replacement of «протяжные звуки» ("drawn-out sounds") that are, as Vasiakina said in an interview, like the work of mourners («плакальщики») who channel a family's sense of devastation with their wordless keening.[58] To those drawn-out sounds, Vasiakina adds in her own stories that refuse to go untold.[59] Hers is a wild retort of identification and determination. And optimism: as she wrote in 2020, the very question of what will happen as women's work comes out into the open is one that nourishes hope.[60]

[56] I am doing violence to these lines by quoting them all scrunched together. Vasiakina uses indentation and spacing in meaningful ways, to convey the rhythms and emphases of her lines. I have tried to retain those spaces between words, but readers should go to the text itself to sense the full effect.

[57] It is as if Vasiakina knows the truism once written by Adrienne Rich: "The poetry of extreme states, the poetry of danger, can allow its readers to go further in our own awareness, take risks we might not have dared." (Rich 2000: 58).

[58] In an interview with Joan Brooks, «Множественное женское тело» (2019).

[59] At the end of the poem, the speaker mutters «А если я не они то кто» ("And if I'm not them then who"). Vasiakina's line rephrases Akhmatova's line in "Requiem" («Нет, это не я, это кто-то другой страдает. / Я бы так не могла» ("No it is not I, it is someone else who suffers. / I could not bear it"; Ахматова 1989: 158). There is another startling moment of psychological denial in Vasiakina's text, in the seven lines that begin «только как будто не с ними / а какими-то-другими телами» ("only as if not with them / but with some other bodies").

[60] That observation concluded her short meditation on the myths and artworks that use the imagery of spiderwebs and weaving (Васякина 2020b).

Lida Yusupova

When she was asked in 2019 about her favorite books, Vasiakina mentioned Lida Yusupova (b. 1963) prominently.[61] They share important political affinities, including a belief that poems can accommodate tales of sexual violence. Their poems include a range of voices and stylistic registers as a democratizing gesture; and they assess shrewdly the harms that a culture of patriarchy and heterosexual privilege inflicts on sexual minorities and on women. Yet there are significant aesthetic differences, which themselves have political consequences. Yusupova is a poet who oriented her writings from the start toward pleasure, beginning with poems that evoked warm air on the skin, that spoke to lovers of paradise and joy. But war is sensed in the distance, and death hovers, bringing danger to this paradise.[62] Pleasure and danger was the formula for a sex-positive version of feminism advanced in the 1980s,[63] as against the radical feminism of Adrienne Rich or Catharine MacKinnon. Vasiakina, as the comparisons to Adrienne Rich suggested, resembles these radical feminists, particularly in the rejection of patriarchy and what radical feminists called compulsory heterosexuality.[64] Yusupova would seem to have taken up the opposite position, particularly in her book «У любви четыре руки» ("Love Has Four Hands," 2008), with its several configurations of erotic relationships and identities. But that does not tell the whole story, and her feminist politics are more complicated. By 2008, Yusupova was living part of every year in Belize, a second dangerous paradise, and the balance tipped from pleasure to danger. Her work crosses what were once separate strands of feminist theory: the metaphors of danger and pleasure persist, but her aesthetic increasingly also depends on exposure and denunciation of sexual violence, with an intensity that recalls the radical feminists.[65]

She built these new poetic texts around found documents. Historical and archival material marks her 2013 book «Ритуал С-4» ("Ritual C-4"), and legal documents turned into poems are a significant presence in her book "Dead Dad" (2016). This documentary turn is a foundational aspect of current political poet-

[61] See «Поэтесса и феминистка Оксана Васякина о любимых книгах» (2019b).Vasiakina also mentioned Elena Shvarts, for whom (I would argue) Anna Barkova was also a model; that could create a further and indirect pathway that connects Vasiakina to Barkova.

[62] See for example «а дальше было имя», in Юсупова (1995: 22), as well as the poem that ends the volume, «Буквальный рай» (ibid., 42).

[63] See for example Carole S. Vance (1989), which collected and published papers from a 1982 landmark conference at Barnard College. This strain in second-wave feminism was generative of the queer studies work pioneered soon thereafter by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and others.

[64] Rich's work is mentioned above; see also her important essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," which first appeared in 1980. Key works in radical feminism are MacKinnon (1987) and MacKinnon (1989).

[65] See for example Dworkin (1997). The original publication date is 1987.

ry.[66] In Yusupova's poems, the documentary impulse can yield a strangely cooler version of Vasiakina's anger. Yusupova's poems are organized around repetition, estranging us from the language on display.[67] And when violence intrudes, the poet presses herself to understand the perpetrators as well as the victims. Throughout, the body is a fundamental site of meaning.

Violence is not confined to Belize. In her representation of Canada from its age of colonial expansion and conquest, «камнеломки ᐃᓕᓴᕐᑐᖅ» ("saxifrage ᐃᓕᓴᕐᑐᖅ"), Yusupova writes about the death of Margaret Agnes Clay.[68] It is the strongest precursor to the poems of legal verdicts in her cycle «Приговоры» ("Verdicts," begun in 2015). Those poems are built entirely out of juridical language, splicing and repeating fixed phrases to horrifying effect.[69] In the second poem in the «Приговоры» cycle, for example, for nine of its fifteen pages, the poet writes only one brief phrase from the verdict «смерть потерпевшей» ("death of the victim" where the victim is a woman), at the top of an otherwise blank page.[70] When performing this poem, Yusupova reads it in a near whisper, making it matter that one woman perished by violent crime. She indicts a culture utterly lacking in curiosity to learn the story of the victim's life.[71]

In building her poems out of juridical language, Yusupova follows a documentary impulse that is powerful in contemporary Russian literature (witness the awarding of the 2015 Nobel Prize in Literature to Svetlana Aleksievich); in poetry,

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[66] Vasiakina's poem «Песня ярости», for instance, also embeds the histories of other women's experiences, and in «Множественное женское тело», she has said that this gesture brings something of the epic into her poem.

[67] This is particularly true of the poems based on judicial verdicts, but even the earliest work, with its mix of pleasure and danger, already glimpsed the inevitability of sexual harm. They unfold in beautifully utopian or bravely adventurous worlds. These can be tropical and lovely and thus based on her time in Belize, or cold and vast, not unlike the Petrazavodsk area of her youth or the Canada of her current life; the settings are often contemporary, and tied to known events or records of crimes, but can go back to earlier eras.

[68] The poem opens her book «Ритуал С-4». In the last line of that poem, the poet tells us how to pronounce the place name: Igluligaariuk (Юсупова 2013: 9).

[69] Yusupova, perhaps surprisingly, follows a path opened by the Russian Conceptualists (like Prigov and Rubinshtein), where the words that rattle around in our brains or that do the socially-constructing work of public discourse are held up for our scrutiny. That aspect of Conceptualism is at the heart of the argument in Jacob Edmond (2014: 275-308). See also the chapter on Prigov in Edmond (2019: 62-90).

[70] See «взял деревянную палку и с силой засунул ей эту палку во влагалище», in "Dead Dad" (Юсупова 2016a: 71-92). I am grateful to Lida Yusupova for sharing with me her typescript of the poem, in an e-mail, February 29, 2016.

[71] As Yusupova writes in the introduction to the poems from this cycle published in "Dead Dad," only one of the crimes made into poetry in her work was reported publicly (2016a: 63). It was not this poem. The trial transcripts, however, were available online, and it is on that basis that she created her «Приговоры» cycle.

Il'ia Kukulin describes it as "paratactic montage."[72] Yusupova has this kind of montage, but presents it differently from what Kukulin has described: she resists interpolating her own commentary or judgment, instead relying on formatting, rearrangement, and repetition to transform legal language into poetic language.[73] She gets great pathos from the ordering and reiterating of phrases meant by the court to be intonationally neutral. In another poem, a phrase is heard as if it were a refrain: «нетрадиционной сексуальной ориентации» ("nontraditional sexual orientation," a standard euphemism for "gay").[74] The flattened language of legal euphemism exposes a hate crime committed against a gay man lured to his death. Plain language, in its repetition, becomes a means to memorialization and recompense.[75]

Language is also what binds us as humans. It renders us all vulnerable, just as our bodies are the site of that vulnerability. "It could have been me," Yusupova intones in English in one of her short statements about her poetry. She describes herself standing before a poem she is writing as if it had a mirrored surface showing her own stricken face.[76] Vadim Kalinin has described Yusupova as turning an

[72] Kukulin (2010). Kukulin emphasizes "discontinuities and unexpected continuities within the usual semantic order of the world" as a result of these strategies (ibid., 586). He traces a pre-history for current poems, from Nekrasov and Maiakovskii to the Lianozovo School and the Conceptualists, among others. And, although this essay does not include Yusupova, I want to acknowledge that Kukulin was one of the first people to urge me to read Lida Yusupova's work – but not the first; the first was Dmitrii Kuz'min, who published the book «Ритуал С-4» and who continues to publish her work in Воздух.

[73] There is a parallel to the documentary poetry of Charles Reznikoff, as observed in Лехциер (2018: 242). Reznikoff's long poem "Holocaust" appeared in Russian translation in Резникофф (2016).

[74] The poem is «Жизнь М.В.И.» in Юсупова (2016a: 93-105). This poem is an important moment in the «Приговоры» poems for its narrative about a hate crime directed at a gay man. By repeating the phrase, Yusupova foregrounds the one fact that makes this murder a hate crime, and creates a refrain within the poem, just as she brings musical phrasing to a fixed legal phrase for designating the victim in the phrase «смерть потерпевшей» to create a requiem for the dead. In addition, she expands the poetic potential of the word «потерпевший» ("victim") by having it waver between functioning as a substantized adjective (a noun, basically) and a participle, which grammatically is what it is (e-mail from the poet, July 16, 2020).

[75] What was a phrase in a legal document is, she insists, is actually a way to designate a person, one whose lived reality is not recognized by the law. I am drawing here on Barbara Johnson, "Anthropomorphism in Lyric and Law," reprinted in "The Barbara Johnson Reader" (2014: 235-261). The essay first appeared in Johnson (2008: 188-207).

[76] In fact, she utters those words standing in front of a painting by Jean-Michel Basquiat, and staring at her own reflected face; they are his words, uttered after the violent death of a friend, as she recounts in a text entitled with those words, "it could have been me." See Юсупова, "It could have been me" (another instance of a text written in Russian but with an English-language title) in «Каракёй и Кадикёй № 3» (2016b). Basquiat's words become hers as she reflects on the murder victims and murderers in in her poems.

unexpectedly compassionate, empathic gaze to the past, and rightly so.[77] In the poem «красивые глаза» ("beautiful eyes"), Yusupova seeks to understand the disturbing blog posts of a convicted murderer, Sergei Bukhantsov. She writes:

он смотрит так нежно открыто он так
беззащитен и думаешь думаешь как же
он мог с такими глазами разве он мог
с такими глазами с таким взглядом
с такой беззащитностью
почему почему почему[78]

he looks so tenderly so openly he is so
defenseless and you think think how
could he with those eyes is it possible that he could
with those eyes with that gaze
with that defenselessness
why why why.

She is stunned into uncertainty as she tries to imagine the world he saw with those beautiful eyes. What does it mean to be the person who could murder and defile the body of a woman who spurned his advances?[79]

Yusupova makes a strong case for poetry's ability to make known the suffering of others, as law often fails to do.[80] Elsewhere in her work, Yusupova has turned to a different kind of feminist revisionism, one that goes back to the family as the original site of patriarchy. In 2016, she published a volume from which I have been citing several of the poems in the «Приговоры» ("Verdicts") cycle, entitled "Dead Dad," its title taken from a Ron Mueck sculpture also called "Dead Dad" (1996–1997).[81] Mueck usually works on much larger scale in his

[77] Калинин (2014: 8-9). That sentiment is echoed in the brief comments of Gali-Dana Zinger, who senses pity and tenderness («жалость и милость») in her work: Зингер (2014: 34).

[78] Юсупова: «красивые глаза» (2016b) and included in "Dead Dad" (2016a: 126-127), as an addendum to «Приговоры». The poem draws on the poetry of the murderer Sergei Bukhantsov (yet another kind of found document), as the poet observes in a footnote. Yusupova did something similar, including poems by a murderer, in the poem, «Ритуал С-4» (2012: 85-93), and included in the book «Ритуал С-4» (2013: 41-52).

[79] In implying that investigation, Yusupova is pushing her poem in the directions studied profoundly in Лехциер: «Экспонирование и исследование» (2018). One of his most interesting observations concerns the splintered subject position inherent in documentary poetry, and Yusupova's work demonstrates that potential exceptionally well.

[80] Here I draw on Sarat's "Knowing the Suffering of Others: Legal Perspective on Pain and its Meanings," which is its own kind of study of law's failures. See the astute observation that concludes its introduction: "law's ability to do justice can be no more successful than its ability to know the suffering that justice demands or seeks to remedy" (2014: 11).

[81] The sculpture "Dead Dad," by Ron Mueck (b. 1958), ca. 1996–1997 is a small (20x38x102 cm.) hyper-life-like sculpture of a naked male corpse, lying face up, hands up. The poem "Dead Dad" with the same image can also be found in «Митин журнал» (2014: 91-93). For images of the sculpture and a critical assessment of it, see Philip Pocock, "With Reference to

alarmingly lifelike, colossal figures or body parts, but "Dead Dad" is shrunken in size.[82] Yusupova used a photograph of the sculpture "Dead Dad" on the book cover, and Mueck's aesthetic of exaggeration and hyperrealism is a remarkably apt model for what she does in her poetry.

Mueck's sculpture, whether large or small, stages the potentially overwhelming encounter with the body of an other. In "Dead Dad," the small figure actually magnifies the vulnerability of the corpse, pitifully exposed for our inspection. Our eyes are drawn to the genitals – as if we are transgressively examining the phallus of the father. Yusupova is unfazed by being in the presence of the symbolic locus of male authority. In this steely gaze, she is engaging with yet another important strand in feminist theory, that of French (and psychoanalytically inflected, deconstructive) feminism. The understanding that the power of the father has invaded the unconscious, that it has seeped into dreams, artistic expression, as well as into the prosaic insults of daily life, is taken up by other contemporary women poets, including Elena Fanailova, and to some extent Galina Rymbu and Oksana Vasiakina as well. Yusupova, however, demonstrates a further principle of French feminism: that women's poetry can, as Luce Irigaray would put it, "play with mimesis."[83] Her replication and distortion of the discourse of the law in the «Приговоры» ("Verdicts") poems, like her turn to Mueck's sculpture, challenges directly what Irigaray, after Lacan, called the Law of the Father.

Yusupova challenges the law of the father in an unusual way: she denounces the father's legacy even as she ironically asks whether she can foist its burdens off entirely. In one passage, she writes that Ron Mueck gave his own hair to the "dead dad,"[84] and she compares that hair to the Chernobyl spider web pictured in the *New York Times*.

> Рон Мьюек дал метрвому папе свои волосы
> похоже на чернобыльскую паутину
> о которой я вчера читала в Нью-Йорк Таймс
> мои волосы дал мне папа

Death," (May 26, 2015),Yusupova has sparingly used photography in her work, most strikingly in the poem «А Маша Сигова молчит», which appeared with photographs included in "Dead Dad" (2016a: 128-132) and published separately in Юсупова (2017).

[82] His hyperrealism resembles 3-D copying rather than the fiberglass, resin, and such with which he in fact works. Some figures are small, like "Dead Dad," some closer to human proportions, all more than a little creepy. For some photographs that include gallery visitors to show scale, see Alan Taylor (2013). And for a strong review of Mueck's work, see Craig Raine (2006).

[83] As Irigaray says, to do that is to "try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it." (Irigaray 1985: 76).

[84] Art journalists confirm that last point. See for example Pocock (2013) and Hogg (2013). Hogg describes the sculptures aptly: "They are less sculptures than versions of humanity, with their flabby folds of skin, hair sticking out of pores, hard toenails and tangible sheens of sweat."

чернобыльские пауки плетут джазовые
паутины
Рон Мьюек дал волосы метрвому папе
мертвый папа дал волосы мне[85]

Ron Mueck gave the dead papa his hair
like the Chernobyl spider web
I read about in yesterday's New York Times
my hair was given to me by my father
the Chernobyl spiders weave jazzed
webs
Ron Mueck gave his hair to his dead father
My dead father gave his hair to me.

Yusupova seems to stare at her own hair and find it disturbingly like her father's. The similarity, she suggests, is an effect of damaged genes, like a damaged spider web in Chernobyl as scientists have described it. It is distinguished by a pattern of disorder, writes the *New York Times*. The spider web offers a glimpse of damaged paradise, a zone where biologists can study radiation damage in its purest forms.[86]

Yusupova has made of her own dead father a similar aberration of nature. The monstrous element is not just that he is dead, or that she was long estranged from him, both mentioned in the poem. The poem is not just about her father; the symbolic power of the father is turned into a metaphor of inheritance.[87] Patriarchy can only transmit damaged components – and, like all irradiated objects, the contamination threatens all it touches. The poet fearfully asks if her own biological existence continues the effects of his damaging genetic configuration.[88]

At that moment, Yusupova is asking fundamental ethical questions. Denunciation of the harms committed by others is not enough, she suggests; each of us must ask what we have inherited, what our own legacy might be. Particularly in her work on «Приговоры» ("Verdicts"), which now contains more than a dozen poems based on criminal court decisions,[89] Yusupova reaches beyond politics or

[85] Юсупова (2016a: 8).

[86] Fountain (2014).

[87] She has another poem about the father's dead body in which his hands are described as lying in shit: «используя связи» (Юсупова 2016a:22-23).

[88] One could argue that language itself is damaged in Yusupova's poetry. To Galina Rymbu's ear, her language sounds not quite Russian. See her comments in Рымбу (2014c: 36), where she calls this a queering of language. More dramatic deformations of language occur occasionally in the poetry, for example, in the lines that tell how she learned of her father's death: these stuttering words deform the sounds of the verb "to die" (умирать): «мама звонит и говорит папа умер в 4 часа утра» (Юсупова 2016a: 8).

[89] Since this essay was completed, a book, «Приговоры», containing the full cycle has appeared from Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie in Moscow (2020).

law toward a realm of good vs. evil. She presents a moral reckoning where only the language of poetry stands at the ready.

Elena Fanailova and Mariia Stepanova, briefly

Yusupova, like Rymbu and Vasiakina, has found herself as one of a powerful chorus of woman's voices in Russian poetry. The importance of women poets in the post-Soviet period was noted more than a decade ago by several critics, including Aleksandr Skidan.[90] Skidan's point was that women poets were the most effective heirs of the tradition initiated by Brodsky. Lest his point seem tendentious, I should point out that he was writing on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of Brodsky's death and was asked about the shape of Brodsky's legacy as he saw it.

We might instead ask about the women poets who are important to Yusupova, Rymbu, and Vasiakina, as to their younger peers, and we are perhaps in a different position to pose that question than was the case in 2006. The long tradition of women poets in Russia has also, at last, begun to receive deeper scholarly study; a clearer picture is emerging of how women poets, while not creating an entirely separate tradition, have taken encouragement from the successes of their predecessors and have learned from their strategies of self-presentation and self-protection.[91]

For the women poets studied here and for many others who work in similar ways on the poetics of gender, politics, and ethics, the most important model has been Elena Fanailova (b. 1962). One of Fanailova's great achievements is the creation of a radically democratic and empathic poetics, one based on conversation and connection across seemingly unbridgeable differences.[92] She has drawn on her own experiences as a medical professional and a journalist to tell stories of Russia in its age of transition, from the Soviet mentality in which she grew up, through the chaos of the 1990s, and in the face of the violence, authoritarianism, and uneven freedoms of the twenty-first century. Few poets have written as powerfully or with such astonishing, gentle hilarity about sex – in her poem «Лена и Лена» ("Lena and Lena") – or about the way women readers perceive

[90] Скидан (2006: 153-169). Skidan's essay is a good source for the broader context of women's poetry as it has emerged in the twenty-first century, and there are a number of other important innovators, particularly in the representation of women's bodies, whom I have not discussed here. Among them: Marina Temkina, Polina Andrukovich, and Linor Goralik.

[91] See, for example, Hasty (2019); for further scholarship, see 183-184 (n. 2), where an excellent list of English-, German-, and Russian-language scholarship is given. Catriona Kelly, mentioned there, built the foundation for much of this work, with her comprehensive account, "A History of Russian Women's Writing, 1820–1992" (1994).

[92] I explain and exemplify this point in Sandler (2017).

women poets – in her poem «Лена и люди» ("Lena and the People").[93] Fanailova has also provided an example about how a woman poet might take a leadership role in the poetry community, writing introductions for publications and reviews. Vasiakina and Rymbu are among those about whom she has written (as is Stepanova, to whom I turn momentarily). Fanailova has enabled the work of others with this kind of direct engagement and encouragement. As important, though, is the tone of her public comments and of her poetry: she has shown poets to speak frankly, even fearlessly. She has modeled a sense of comfort and ease in tackling difficult topics, showing, for example, how one might represent women's bodies across all gradations of age, beauty, desire, disease, and power.

Fanailova began doing that work as early as the 1990s, but in the 2010s she has also been doing something else: she has been writing a massive, sprawling, nearly borderless set of poems about the hybrid war in Ukraine and related cultural and political events. She has followed her journalist instinct to use poetry as a way to absorb and respond to quickly changing circumstances. There is a sense of poems with open borders, long and short pieces that interrelate and that can have the same hashtags when she posts them to Facebook, but that feel like they may be rearranged into a different form in print at some future point. While the labor of offering a comprehensive account of this work has to wait, its effect can already be gauged, and it is pointing the way toward a further kind of innovation by contemporary Russian poets.

These are a kind of open-ended conversation with readers, a way of establishing poems as real-time reactions to unfolding events and as gathering points for reflections on the recent past.[94] Anything posted to Facebook or any other social medium has a date stamp, which gives all poems shared in this way the implicit sense of reacting to what is occurring in the world at that time. And shared posts also have an immediacy, a sense of intimacy, as if the poet is making work available in advance of its publication – which in fact many poets do.[95] It is as if she is sending out bits of new work when they are ready, for a community of readers that includes many fellow poets and friends (some of whom she tags to make sure they see the poem). The poems posted to Facebook typically elicit many comments, some simple notes of gratitude and approval, but many asking questions, offering interpretations, and pursuing the poem's implications and exhortations. The poems generate further conversation, in other words. Face-

[93] They are translated as "Lena, or the Poet and the People" and "Lena and Lena" in Fanailova (2019: 148-179). This edition includes facing Russian originals.

[94] The poet has also now used this same approach toward her earlier work. There was a new poem, for example, that had the hashtag #ленаилюди («Лена и люди», the title of a poem mentioned above), posted to Facebook (January 4, 2018), about cleaning an apartment, with recollections of her years as a doctor (Фанайлова 2018).

[95] These and other traits of poems shared via social media are discussed by more than a dozen poets in the forum «Поэзия в эпоху социальных сетей» (2019).

book, for all its problems, and this was true of LiveJournal before it, has become a platform that lets poets send their work out into the world as if to those who are known to want it, to need it. Rymbu, Vasiakina, and Yusupova, among many other contemporary Russian poets, post new poems there as well, and I am not suggesting that they got this idea from Fanailova. But her way of using the platform is blazing a particularly inspiring trail: without publishing a book of her poems since 2011, she has remained a central figure in conversations about contemporary poetry, particularly political poetry, through her extremely active presence online as a poet, critic, and journalist.

Fanailova's example for women, indeed, for all poets, finds an unusual complement in the poet, editor, prose writer, and publisher Mariia Stepanova (b. 1972). Because I have had the occasion to write about Fanailova elsewhere, I will focus here on Stepanova, whose importance as a poet has received a great deal of attention but whose increasing advocacy for women has not. Stepanova is, like Fanailova, also a significant public intellectual, with a stature not often granted to women in Russia. She uses social media with similar effectiveness and has the further platform of her work as the editor of *Colta* (and before it, *Open Space*), that rarest of crowd-funded independent platforms for cultural journalism in contemporary Russia. The significant cultural presence of *Colta* is already apparent in this essay, where I have drawn on its publications several times. Stepanova's reach goes far beyond *Colta*, however, as evidenced by the phenomenal success of her engrossing and genre-defying work of prose, «Памяти памяти» ("In Memory of Memory," 2017). It won multiple major prizes and solidified her position as one of Russia's leading writers.

What Stepanova had not been known for, before the later 2010s, however, was political poetry. Her gifts as a formal poet were apparent from the start, and she made her mark especially with a brilliant set of ballads that showed both formal mastery and an extravagant imagination that could mix supernatural plots with psychological profundity. Something changed, or perhaps I as a reader first saw the change, when Russia annexed Crimea in 2014 and went to war with Ukraine. Like Fanailova, she found multiple ways to bring the violence of the hybrid war with Ukraine into her work; especially notable is her long text «Война зверей и животных» ("War of the Beasts and the Animals," 2015), built on the deceptively simple genre of the fable to create a meditation on history. In effect, she showed by means of imagery and lexicon that the contemporary war reenacted the military invasions of the past, going all the way back to the "Igor Tale."[96] In a number of her earlier texts she also showed an acute sensibility in the representations of women bodies («Женская раздевалка клуба 'Планета Фитнес'» /

[96] For the Russian text of the poem, see Степанова (2015b: 35-58). The poem was first published in Степанова (2015a). The text generated immediate, lively commentary, beginning with Ямпольский (2015): «О поэме Марии Степановой "Война зверей и животных"». There is a brilliant reading of the poem's cultural antecedents in Maria Vassileva (2019: 79-87).

"The Women's Changing Room at Planet Fitness") and, in the poem she wrote about her great-grandmother, «Сарра на баррикадах» ("Sarra on the Barricades"), the consequences of women's actions in public.[97]

Stepanova made the feminism of these texts explicit when she shared on Facebook in 2019 and then published in 2020 a long poem, «Девочки без одежды» ("Girls Undressed").[98] It drew an immediate and strong response, and Vasiakina named it as the poem that had been most important to her personally.[99] It is a long, generous, compulsively readable, and totally unnerving poem. Here is its beginning, the first of its fifteen stanzas, all of them ten lines long.

Всегда есть то, что говорит: разденься
И покажи, сними и положи, ляг
И раздвинь, дай посмотреть,
Открой, потрогай его, ты посмотрела?
Всегда есть комната с горизонтальной
Поверхностью, всегда стоишь там как дерево,
Всегда лежишь как дерево, как упало,
С глухими запрокинутыми ветками,
Между пальцами земля, во рту пальцы,
Яблоки не уберегла.[100]

There is always something that says: undress
And show, remove and set aside, lie down
And spread out, let me look,
Open, touch it, did you look?
There is always a room with horizontal
Surface, you always stand there like a tree,
Always lie there like a felled tree,
With toneless branches thrown back,

[97] Both poems appeared in Степанова (2005: 27-30, 37-42), and are reprinted in Степанова (2010: 73-74, 80-83). For translations into English by Sibelan Forrester, see Ciepiela (2013: 156-167). «Женская раздевалка» is particularly curious in light of the later developments in Stepanova's poetics. It mixes in memories of the poet's childhood, and it exudes curiosity toward grotesque and traumatic memories and bears a remarkably light tone.

[98] For the poem see Степанова (2020: 45-54), from which all quotations are taken. The volume opens with a poem, «Тело возвращается», a rich text that deserves its own essay, and the one that inspired the title of this essay. It shows her writing about a woman's body deep in the earth as the source of language. It is an image that recalls Elena Shvarts's «Зверь-цветок», although the poem is much more extensively and vividly in conversation with the work of Danish poet Inger Christensen, Marjorie Pickthall, and Anne Carson. For Shvarts's poem, see Шварц (2013: 37). For «Тело возвращается», see Степанова (2020: 5-24). As Lev Oborin has noted, throughout this book, it is precisely women poets with whom Stepanova is in conversation. See his review in Оборин (2020).

[99] Рымбу (2019c).

[100] Степанова (2020: 47).

Between fingers the earth, the mouth full of fingers,
Apples left unguarded, done for.

Stepanova's poem is about a structure of violence and humiliation inflicted on women, a structure that is shown at its most outrageous because the violence is inflicted on girls. The poem's intensity comes from its verbal repetition, its litany of the harms and actions, the forms of curiosity and shame that can always be found, but the intensity also comes from the fact that the violence is inflicted not on adults but on the young. The age of fifteen recurs in the poem, fifteen surely chosen because of the sonic waves that can spin out of its sounds (the word for spot or stain, «пятно» or for heel, «пятка» emerge from the first syllable («пят») of fifteen, and the poet writes early on «Пятнадцать – это число пятна» ("Fifteen – this is the number for a stain", 48). But that tender age of fifteen also lets the poet record the mix of curiosity and shame experienced by someone who, as the poem repeats, is having a first sexual encounter in a way that is imposed rather than freely desired.

This is how it begins, the poet seems to say, and once begun, how it lives in the world of eternal repetition, the world where the dominant temporal adverb in dozens of lines of poetry is «всегда» ("again"; the adverb is repeated 33 times over 150 lines).[101] «Девочки без одежды» ("Girls Undressed") is also marked by a high degree of syntactic and other verbal repetition, creating the sense of a closed and unchanging world. Rather than the layering of literary and cultural allusion that marks so many of her other texts, this poem lets Stepanova obsessively tread back and forth over the same terrain of exploitation, injury, harm – but also recovery.[102] She writes as if compelled, and to do so in a poem which it itself about forms of compulsion, of force, is paradoxically bold.

That possibility for repair is suggested in the title of the book in which this poem was published, «Старый мир. Починка жизни» ("Old World. Life Repair"). In this poem, repair emerges not in the lexicon (the phrase «починка жизни» does not appear here), but in its images. Here too, they are scant, the images presented are developed through repetition, circling back and forth obsessively over the same lexical items. These images unfold within two semantic

[101] Stepanova meditates on the force of that word, «всегда», in public discourse. She comments on phrases that are, to her mind, telltale signs of a worldview that believes that there is nothing to be hoped for in the future. There is no tomorrow, just as the past, revivified constantly, is not really past. See her essay «После мертвой воды» in Степанова (2015c: 36). A translation by Maria Vassileva of that essay has appeared in Stepanova, "The Voice Over: Poems and Essays," ed. Irina Shevelenko (2021).

[102] This is not to say that the layers of cultural memory are gone in this or in any other poem of Stepanova's, but rather that they are displaced into a different register. In «Девочки без одежды», that register is rhetorical. As Igor' Gulin has pointed out, the poet speaks as if from a position of having been silenced, precisely the rhetorical structure at the heart of Osip Mandelstam's great poem «Стихи о неизвестном солдате» (Мандельштам 1995: 272-275). See Гулин (2020).

fields. The first has to do with food, specifically fruit, heard as early as the image of the apple in the first stanza and then developed with terms for body parts that use the image of the apple (Adam's apple, and the Russian word for eyeball, «глазное яблоко») or of other fruit («груши» / "pears" and slang for "breasts"). The apple inevitably conjures up the temptations of the Garden of Eden, and it may call to mind as well, in the context of poems discussed here, the cut-up fruit and sprinkled seeds of Galina Rymbu's poem «Праздник» ("Holiday"). Stepanova has a powerfully revisionist attitude toward myth. Her poem is all about exposing the fake lure of forbidden knowledge – exposing what looks like seduction as the violence it actually performs.[103] The other metaphorical field is of course that tree, a tree that brings the knowledge sexual violence. But other aspects of this tree – its woodenness, its stolidity, its long-lived thereness – are repeatedly invoked in the poem. It is a tree to which the girl's body is compared again and again, as early as the second stanza's parentheticals «(она была как бревно) (чего ты как деревянная?)» ("(she was like a log) (why are you so wooden?)")[104]. The tree's status as living matter is emphasized in the images, for example, in the third stanza's image of bark opened out to reveal the wood within as if it were the musculature of a body:

> И тот, кто хочет, может заглядывать в самую
> Середину ее древесины, туда, где плоть
> Еще влажная и кажется, что дымится.[105]
>
> And he who wants can look into the very
> Center of the wood, there where the flesh
> Is still moist and seems to smolder.

The trees of the poem open the way for settings in the woods, the woods of folktales where danger lurks, and for the appearances of a hunter, a woodcutter, a fisherman, those men who bring harm to the trees and beasts of those woods. In the final stanzas even a soldier appears, one last image of the masculine force that brings harm – and shame and silence – into the poem.

The poem offers its own linguistic assertions against that silence, speaking forth the ungraspable nature of a world in which girls are treated like trees, their bodies like a tree trunk with limbs splayed out, their bodies numb with the relentless gaze and command of the other. What Stepanova has achieved, in her merciless representation of the subjective experience of that numbness, is to show that she who is treated in this way can yet speak. And when she does, she will speak

[103] An exemplary feminist reading of a Romantic poem that unwittingly exposes (as opposed to Stepanova's relentlessly intentional work of exposure) the nexus of knowledge, desire, and the feminine is Karen Swann (1988).

[104] Степанова (2020: 47).

[105] Ibid. 48.

like a poet: a girl who is turned into a tree is always in some ways repeating the salvation of Daphne, turned into a laurel tree to save her from rape.

Those laurel wreathes have now symbolically crowned the heads of Stepanova, Fanailova, and a number of other remarkable women poets, including Yusupova, Rymbu, and Vasiakina. For all these women, every metaphor for silencing is itself an outcry and an assertion that the silence is over. All of these women poets, in other words, will have their say on the violence and the falsehoods their culture perpetrates. They are ready for men to follow them.

Postscript

Let me end with one example of a man who has taken up that task. His is not the only possible voice,[106] but his text is perhaps the most useful place to begin because of its ethical force and its engagement with some of the same feminist theories adduced here already. The poem by Oksana Vasiakina discussed above was one of two texts about violence, «Два текста о насилии», published together, and the second one was Konstantin Shavlovskii's poem «Машенька, Медуза» ("Mashenka, Medusa"). It is his poem with which I want to conclude this essay.

Shavlovskii charts a whole history of boys' education in social practices that perpetuates what is essentially rape culture. Shavlovskii calls it the violence industry, «индустрия насилия», and his word choice is significant for the way it builds on a Soviet lexicon of an industrialized society as one that requires a communal subjectivity for its laborers. But he uses Marxist analysis in a novel way: rather than describing the production of goods, Shavlovskii is describing the production of behavior, and one of those behaviors is silence or silencing, about which the poem repeatedly comments and often does so in terms of shared social norms, instilled fears. He writes:

> с детства мы знаем
> как поступают с насильниками на зоне
>
> поэтому каждый
> насильник будет молчать
>
> каждый – насильник
>
> все мальчики постсоветского мира
> мы все молчим[107]

[106] A larger question could be raised here, about the role of men's participation in online discussions of women's self-representations in poetry. The case of Galina Rymbu's poem «Моя вагина», briefly contextualized in n 14 above, includes important examples of this trend, not just the voluminous commentary by male poets and critics, but also the poems written by men as part of the flash mob supporting Rymbu in the wake of that criticism. See, for example, Alex Averbukh's poem «Сказ о том как мой махонькой хуй…» (posted to Facebook July 7, 2020) and Петр Разумов: «Меньшевики» (posted to Facebook July 9, 2020).

[107] Шавловский (2017). Subsequent citations from this source.

from childhood we know
what they do to rapists in the Zone
therefore every
rapist will be silent
every boy is a rapist
every boy in the post-Soviet world
we are all silent.

In effect, Shavlovskii denounces the circular logic of rape culture by showing the unconscious mechanisms that produce silence and complicity in those who commit acts of violence.[108]

But he does not try to shift responsibility to some anonymous cultural mechanisms – on the contrary, he is explicit in acknowledging his own role, as a man, in keeping that industry alive:

я признаюсь в изнасиловании
после пятнадцати лет
молчания
чтобы ярость тех
кто хочет возмездия
обрушилась на меня
здесь и сейчас
///
в индустрии насилия
нет исключений
///
тех
кто отмывает тело
годами
от слабых следов
насилия
как если бы
я тогда
это я
изнасиловал всех женщин
///
потому что никто
не будет освобожден
иначе
потому
что
///
в индустрии насилия
нет исключений

[108] The Zone here is a penal colony, and Shavlovskii alludes to the practice in such prisons of subjecting those convicted of rape to sexual assault.

I am confessing to rape
after fifteen years
of silence
so that the fury of those
who want vengeance
can descend onto me
here and now
///
in the violence industry
there are no exceptions
///
of those
who cleanse the body
for years
of even the weak traces
of violence
as if
I at that time
yes I
raped all women
///
because no one
will be freed
otherwise
because
///
in the violence industry
there are no exceptions.

Like Vasiakina's poem, Shavlovskii's is calculated to have a strong effect, and he even integrates into the poem a prose aside that wonders whether he has been too direct.[109] That remark works to intensify the poem's irony rather than to undercut its argument.

This is all the more so as Shavlovskii aligns himself with those men whose own masculinity has been challenged (he suggests that the entire system of gender and identity is based on coercion, in effect). He recalls being taunted with the girl's name «Машенька» for his long hair when he was in school. His long hair was read a sign of femininity, and thus of weakness; that girl's name is also meant to imply that its bearer is gay; by the end of the poem his long hair is also associated with what he calls queer monstrosity («квир-чудовище»). But unlike the laurels that were invoked above, in my account of Stepanova's poem, here long hair is transformed into the wreath of snakes that sit on the head of the

[109] He writes: «Моя подруга, прочитав этот текст, сказала, что этот метод и этот язык не передают того опыта, о котором я хочу говорить. Может быть, сказала она, потому что это слишком прямой текст» ("My girl friend read this text and said that the method and the language don't convey the experience I intend. Maybe, she said, because it's too direct").

Medusa (hence the poem's title). It is an image that will recur in the poem and one with which the poet concludes the first part of his poem:

змеи в моей голове давно мертвы
но взгляд еще способен
остановить, возможно

я машенька
я медуза

я говорю

the snakes in my head are long ago dead
but their gaze is still able
to cause a stop, maybe

I am a mashen'ka
I am a medusa

I am speaking.

The power to bring something or someone to a stop is the Medusa's power to petrify, but Shavlovskii suggests that his power, brought about not by his gaze but by his speech act in this poem, instead can bring the violence industry to a sudden stop.

Like the other poets treated here, Shavlovskii has, wittingly or no,[110] engaged with a formidable figure in the history of feminist theory: Hélène Cixous, particularly her essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" (first published in French in 1975). Cixous has written an enormous amount, but this remains her most famous piece of work, and it generated a force field when it appeared that is comparable to the work of Irigaray, Rich, Wittig, and others mentioned above. Like Irigaray, she advocated for a form of women's writing, *l'écriture féminine*, that could liberate authors and readers alike. Cixous writes an exhortation to women to write about and for each other, and she offers a passionately utopian prediction of the power of women's words if can they only be written. Her Medusa is one who laughs (as she says, "You have only to look at the Medusa straight on in order to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing").[111]

Shavlovskii's poem, with its invocation of the power of the Medusa, reminds us of how Russia's women poets, particularly Rymbu, Yusupova, and Vasiakina, are continuing the work of creating *l'écriture feminine*, but on their own terms. His poem demonstrates the power of their words to elicit new forms of discourse from men. Shavlovskii's poem is an act of breaking a silence, men's silence, which

[110] Her essay also calls for men to open their eyes, to see themselves clearly, and thus, implicitly, her essay is also a call meant to rouse them to action. In effect, so is his poem. See Cixous (1976: 877, including n. 1).

[111] Cixous (1976: 886). This portion of the essay is the only place where the figure of the Medusa is present explicitly. But implicitly, the essay embodies the Medusa's gaze, its beauty and its laughter, in its every paragraph.

is to say, he is roused to speech in support of an end to male domination and an end to violent acts against women.

To see poetry turning to these topics, with courage, clarity, and conviction in our benighted age is heartening. It is a way to use speech to stop freedom from shrinking, to return to Masha Gessen's words with which I began. It is a way to return to the story of the body but to write it anew as a story of harm, risk, vulnerability, but also strength. That task is being taken up by poets, particularly the ones discussed here. But there are also tasks that fall to readers: we must learn to read poems that can be mysterious or hyper-realistic, exhilarating or rage-filled, endlessly long or frustratingly incomplete, humorous or heavy, explicit or elusive. Moreover, we are tasked to read with an empathy that recognizes new connections among poets who looked as if isolated on their islands of difference.[112] It is also an empathy that creates fresh if unlikely connections – among poets, and within the communities of poets and readers where poetry yet thrives.

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[112] I am drawing here on terms proposed by Oksana Vasiakina, although to make a somewhat different point. See Васякина (2019d).

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