A Vague and Lovely Thing:
Gender, Cultural Identity and Performativity
in
Contemporary Poetry by Russian Women

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Abstract

Poetry by Russian women which has been published since the fall of the Soviet Union reveals that the quest to explore female identity and experience is no longer inviolable in Russian literature. This thesis examines female personae, gender and cultural identity in the work of Russian poets Nina Iskrenko (1951-1994), Tatiana Voltskaia (b. 1960), and Iuliia Kunina (b. 1966). Although the poetics of these writers' texts are broad-ranging, all of their work takes up the subjects of gender and cultural identity. Their poems explore identity as a discursive practice, rather than a fixed construct within the strictures of authoritative metanarratives' binary oppositions (male/female, feminine/masculine, Russian/non-Russian). This lends their poetry to postmodern analysis, an approach that heretofore has rarely been applied to poetry by Russian women. Within this theoretical framework, Judith Butler's formulation of "performativity" and Mikhail Epstein's theory of "transculturalism" are particularly well-suited to the task, as each entails non-essentialist conceptions of identity. Donna Haraway's formulation of "woman" as "cyborg" is also a fitting theoretical complement, as it suggests the hybridization of identity, as well as the increasing role of the Internet in contemporary and future developments in Russian literature. The rapid changes in the late- and post-Soviet cultural landscape have engendered in contemporary poetry by Russian women powerful, new expressions of gender and cultural identity, which are resulting in startling subversions of authoritative discourses while at the same time forging coalitional "transmodern" identities.

Résumé

La poésie par les femmes russes publiée depuis la chute de l'Union Soviétique révèle que la quête d'exploration de l'identité féminine n'est plus un sujet tabou dans la littérature russe. Cette thèse examine les personnages féminins, le gender et l'identité culturelle à travers les œuvres des poètes russes Nina Iskrenko (1951-1994), Tatiana Voltskaia (née 1960), et Iuliia Kunina (née 1966). Malgré le large éventail de la poétique de ces auteurs, toutes leurs œuvres abordent le sujet du gender et de l'identité. Leurs poèmes explorent l'identité comme une pratique discursive, plutôt que d'une construction rigide à même les limite des dichotomies (mâle/femelle, féminin/masculin, russe/non-russe) des métarécits autoritaires. Ceci amène leur poésie vers une analyse postmoderne, une approche qui, jusqu'à maintenant, était rarement appliquée à la poésie par les femmes russes. À l'intérieur de ce cadre théorique, la formulation par Judith Butler de la « performativité » ainsi que la théorie de Mikhail Epstein sur le « transculturalisme », sont particulièrement adaptées pour cette tâche, car chacune invoque le non-essentialisme des conceptions de l'identité. La formulation par Donna Haraway de la « femme » comme « cyborg » est aussi une théorie complémentaire, car elle suggère l'hybridation de l'identité et le rôle grandissant d'Internet dans le développement de la littérature russe contemporaine et future. Les changements rapides dans le paysage culturel juste avant et suivant la chute du régime soviétique, ont engendré, dans la poésie des femmes contemporaines, de puissantes et nouvelles expressions du gender et de l'identité culturelle qui ont ensuite résulté en surprenantes subversions des discours autoritaires et simultanément forgé des identités de coalition « transmodernes ».

Note on Translation and Transliteration

All translations of Russian texts into English other than my own, including those in the appendix, are indicated in the bibliography.

Throughout the main text of this thesis, Russian poetry, terms and sources appear first in Cyrillic, followed by the English translation in parentheses. This format is intended to highlight the semantic and grammatical importance of the original Russian. Titles of Russian texts follow the above format in their first occurrence and thereafter are indicated in their English translation.

Russian-language sources in parenthetical citations, the footnotes and in the bibliography follow the American Library Association and Library of Congress (ALA-AC) system of transliteration but appear without diacritics. Russian names, which occur in the main text of the thesis also comply with the ALA-AC system, with the exception of names spelled otherwise by convention and those of authors of translated sources as given.

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Introduction: Vague and Lovely Things

> [T]o live within society *and* to be free of it – this is what culture is about. It enters the blood and bone of society, in order to liberate individuals from the constraints of their social existence.
>
> – Mikhail Epstein, *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture* (288)

Dissident writer and critic Andrei Siniavskii ironically noted that, in the Russian literary canon, "женщина . . . — это что-то туманное, чистое и прекрасное. Ей не нужно быть конкретнее и определеннее, ей достаточно (много ли с женщины спрашивается?) быть чистой и прекрасной, чтобы спастись" (427) ("woman is a sort of vague, pure and lovely thing. There's no need for her to be more concrete and more defined; it is enough for her (does one ask much of women?) to be pure and lovely to save man" [Marsh, *Women* 9]).[1] Siniavskii's comments refer to those chaste provincial Lizas, steadfast uxorial Tatianas and gleefully maternal Kittys of male-authored, nineteenth-century Russian fiction whose key functions were to serve as yardsticks for male moral fortitude and as mirrors to bolster men's self-image.[2] The idealized figure of the virtuous and hyper-feminine woman, also ubiquitous in other world cultures, has its earliest Slavic manifestation dating as far back as the Ice Age of the Eurasian steppes (Hubbs 3-4)[3] However, from the time of the Western world's second

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[1] I owe this translation from Russian of Siniavskii's lines, as well as the title of my thesis, to Rosalind Marsh's skillful rendering in *Women and Russian Culture: Projections and Self-Perceptions*. The original version of Siniavskii's Russian-language essay "*Chto takoe sotsialisticheskii realizm*" ("What is Socialist Realism") was first published in Paris in 1959 under his pseudonym, Abram Terts.

[2] As Virgina Woolf famously wrote, "women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and dubious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice his natural size" (35).

[3] In fact, according to Hubbs, Russia is regarded by many as the cradleland of the goddess statuette (4). The mother archetype is inseparable from all aspects of Russian culture and society throughout the ages, uniquely constituted as "Mother Russia" (237). Paganism held sway longer in Russia than in other regions,

wave of feminism in the 1960s, the 'vague and lovely' woman has been recognized as a figment of patriarchal discourse. For most Western authors and scholars, this archetypal female is no longer a subject of interest unless to be re-visioned or deconstructed and parodied.[4] For contemporary Russian women writers and academics, however, this image has had an enduring impact with complex effects on their understanding of gender and cultural identity. On the one hand, a certain reverence for, or at minimum, acceptance of, traditional gender dichotomies appears in their writing. On the other hand, the dislocations, reconfigurations and permutations of the late- and post-Soviet cultural landscape have engendered in most contemporary Russian women's work powerful, new expressions of female identity through diverse and shifting interplays between and among the elements of conventional binary models. The result is a startling and persistent subversion of authoritative discourses.

Due to this simultaneous engagement with, and reaction against, traditional identity paradigms, Western scholars must be cautious not to reify authoritative discourses by attempting to fit Russian women's work into Western notions of feminism or essentialist definitions of female or cultural identity. At

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but its authority was eventually usurped by mainstream patriarchal Christianity. The power of the Mother Goddess morphed into male deities, which were then absorbed by Christian Orthodoxy. The expectation then became that all were either to fit the valorized image of the Virgin Mary or else be relegated to the realm of the Whore, the latter of which was associated with paganism and witchery (McKenzie in Marsh, *Gender* 42-43).

[4] "Re-visioning" is a term that was coined by American feminist poet and essayist Adrienne Rich in "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision." Rich's definition offers a strong correlative to my thesis:

> Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for [women] more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for woman, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society (21).

the same time, it is precisely this seemingly paradoxical combination of contemporary Russian women's discourses on identity that constitutes their writing as a rich source for postmodern analysis of gender and cultural identity.

Literature by Russian women which has been published since the fall of the Soviet Union reveals, therefore, that the quest to explore gender identity is no longer a categorical national taboo. Poetry by Russian women writers, in particular, is in need of scholarly and public attention. Both in Russia and abroad, its publication is relatively scarce when assessed in contrast to its prose counterpart. Moreover, there is, in general, limited scholarship, which addresses work by contemporary Russian female poets and studies dealing specifically with how gender constitutes itself in their work are extremely rare. As Carol Adlam notes in *Women in Russian Literature After Glasnost: Female Alternatives* (2005), these problems result not only from cultural complexities concerning gender, but from scholarly examinations of any newly-available texts,

> All studies of the contemporaneous cast the relationship of researcher to the material discussed into particularly sharp relief, regardless of the subject matter. Chronological proximity between the material and researcher is not just a bare numerical fact, but affects the process of research and its outcomes in a number of ways. For example, there may be at best only a minimally developed community of research on the subject to hand. Similarly, the subject itself, or even its definitions and limits may be disputed in the absence of a consensus view consolidated over time. (ix)

However, as Rosalind Marsh points out, one the advantages of the late attention paid to writing by Russian women is that Slavic scholars are able to draw from a large accumulation of theories from outside the former Soviet Union and, with the aid of hindsight, prudently adapt it to their discipline (*Gender* 4). With the aim of bringing into focus the worthy contributions being made to Russian literature by women poets, this thesis offers an examination of contemporary female personae, gender and cultural identity in several poems by a selection of some of the foremost writers of recent generations, Nina Iskrenko (1951-1995), Tatiana Voltskaia (b. 1960) and Iuliia Kunina ([Trubikhina] b. 1966). Although the poetics of these writers' texts are broad-ranging formally and stylistically, all of their work takes up the subjects of gender and cultural identity. Their poems explore identity as a discursive practice, rather than a fixed construct in a dichotomized context. This lends their poetry to postmodern analysis, an approach that heretofore has rarely been applied to poetry by Russian women.[5]

Within a postmodern theoretical framework, Judith Butler's formulation of "performativity" and Mikhail Epstein's theory of "transculturalism," as discussed below, are particularly well-suited to the task of investigating contemporary poetry by Russian women.[6] While Butler's focus is gender and Epstein's – cultural selfhood, each entails non-essentialist conceptions of identity. Furthermore, both theoretical concepts suggest an understanding of identity as multivalent, in other words, as a form of hybridization, an idea central

[5] Notable exceptions are scholarly works by Vitaly Chernetsky and Dunja Popovic, detailed in the bibliography below.

[6] Butler's work may also be referred to as "poststructuralist." "Postmodern feminism," however, is generally acknowledged to be an appropriate rubric under which to place her theories on gender.

to Donna Haraway's formulation of "woman" as "cyborg." Her theory of the cybernetic organism is a fitting complement, not only because it addresses the question of what constitutes present-day female identity, but also because it connotes the ever-increasing role that the Internet plays in contemporary society and culture and, therefore, offers a position from which to keep an eye to current and future developments in Russian literature.

Russian Women's Literature versus Literature by Russian Women

There has long been much debate over whether there *is* "Russian women's literature" (Marsh, *Gender* 14). Only from as recently as the late 1980s have Slavic and literary scholars been exploring Russian women's writing and the research has been overwhelmingly Western and quantitatively limited (3, 8). Not surprisingly, Russian academics and authors, slogan-weary from decades of living under the weight of Soviet ideology and its accompanying literary directive to write only "civic-minded" work, have resisted the idea that sex or gender might have any relevance in literary investigations. In 1990, Tatiana Tolstaia, one of Russia's foremost contemporary writers, described the initial approach of contemporary Western feminists in their dealings with Russian women as akin to the "cold, rigid manner" of "bug inspectors": "How do your men oppress you? Why don't they wash the dishes? . . . Why don't they allow women into politics? Why don't women rebel against phallocracy?" (Holmgren 15).

Russian culture itself, since its first women-authored publications over two-hundred years ago, has given its female writers many reasons to feel ill at

ease with literary discussions along gender lines (Kelly, "Introduction" 1, 3). Russian women writers have made great efforts to disassociate their work from the Russian terms "женская проза/поэзия" ("women's prose/poetry") and "женская литература" ("women's literature"), as well as from the feminine gender-marked "писательница" ("woman writer") and "поэтесса" ("poetess") – words all of which were coined or used with pejorative intent by Russia male critics (Marsh, *Gender* 13-14; Kelly, "Introduction" 2; Sandler xix). In fact, historically, many women authors – poets in particular – have gone to great lengths to avoid using feminine grammatical markers, opting instead for speakers that are unidentifiable by gender or simply by taking on male personas (Weeks 367, 369).[7]

Even as recently as 2005, acclaimed writer Iunna Morits, whose poem "Между Сциллой и Харибдой" ("Between Scylla and Charybdis" [1975]) bears the epigraph, "Быть поэтессой в России – / труднее, чем быть поэтом: / единица женской силы в русской поэзии – 1 ахмацвет" ("To be a woman poet in Russia is harder than / to be a male poet: the unit of female power / in Russian poetry is 1 akhmatsvet"), refused to have her work published in Valentina Polukhina and Daniel Weissbort's pioneering English-language collection *An Anthology of Contemporary Russian Women Poets* (2005).[8] Morits assumed the book would be construed as a collection of writings by 'poetesses' (Sandler, xix). Additionally, an essay written by Morits in 1975, bearing the first line and

[7] The Russian language has three genders – feminine, masculine and neuter. The ways in which Russian writers have manipulated gender markers in their work is a topic, in itself, worthy of investigation and well-suited to a performative reading. It is, however, outside of the scope of this study.
[8] Hereafter, this text of Polukhina and Weissbort is referred to as "*ACRWP*."

a half of the poem as its title, demonstrates further the paradoxes and ironies at work when it comes to gender and writing in Russia. Like the poem, "Быть поэтессой" ("To Be a Poetess") addresses the discrimination suffered by women writers in Russia. Morits writes that,

> Никому не придет в голову . . . сравнивать любого из современных известных русских поэтов – с Блоком, Пастернаком и тем более с Пушкиным и Лермонтовым. . . . [Р]усские поэты наших дней чувствуют себя замечательно в лоне и в свете великих измерений нашей прежней поэзии, и не грозит им никакая опасность со стороны убийственных, быть может, сравнений. ("*Byt poetessoi*")

> No one would take it into his head to compare any contemporary well-known male poets with Blok, Pasternak, not to mention Pushkin or Lermontov. . . . Russian male poets of our day feel simply splendid in the bosom of, and in the light of, the great dimensions of our old-time poetry, and there isn't any likely threat to them of danger from fatal comparisons.

Women poets, however, are inevitably expected to measure up to "1 ахмацвет" ("1 akhmatsvet") – a contraction of Morits' making of the names of two of Russia's most famous poets, Anna Akhmatova (1890-1966) and Marina Tsvetaeva (1892-1941), and arguably the only female Russian poets that come to

mind for the majority of Russians ("*Byt poetessoi*"). For more than twenty-five years, Russian editors refused to publish Morits' essay, suggesting that the references to Akhmatova and Tsvetaeva were 'superfluous' and that, in general, the piece should be "lighter" if it were to ever see its way into print ("*Byt poetessoi*"). Sometime shortly after 2001, the work was finally published – on Morits' personal web site ("*Byt poetessoi*").[9]

Review of the Literature

Anthologies of writing by women in Russia have been few in number. Those that have been published, such as Larisa Vaneeva's *Не помнящая зла* (*The Woman Who Doesn't Remember Evil* [1990]) and Svetlana Vasilenko's *Новые Амазонки* (*New Amazons* [1991]) were groundbreaking compilations but were comprised solely of prose. In the West, Helena Goscilo, one of the foremost experts on contemporary literature by Russian women, has edited *Balancing Acts: Contemporary Stories by Russian Women* (1989) and *Lives in Transit: A Collection of Recent Russian Women's Writing* (1995). Russian-born scholar Valentina Polukhina and Daniel Weissbort, former editor and co-founder (with Ted Hughes) of *Modern Poetry in Translation* (*MPT*), however, have produced the only English-language collections of contemporary poetry by Russian women to date – *MPT*'s *Russian Women Poets* (2002) and *ACRWP*. Poet and scholar Dmitrii Kuzmin, who contributed essays to Polukhina and Weissbort's collections, is the founder of the Moscow-based АРГО-РИСК (ARGO-RISK) publishing company and the *Вавилон* (*Babylon*) web site. These

[9] No posting date is given for the essay, but the web site's copyright dates from 2001.

projects, which grew out of samizdat publications, focus on contemporary Russian literature and have been instrumental in providing young Russian writers with increased exposure. Many of the texts that are included in Polukhina and Weissbort's two anthologies first appeared on the pages of the *Babylon* web site or in *ARGO-RISK* publications, including several chapbooks by women.

In terms of scholarship, only since the mid-1980s have a small circle of Western scholars produced a number of key works on women and Russian literature. Barbara Heldt in her book *Terrible Perfection: Women and Russian Literature* (1987) and Joe Andrew in *Women in Russian Literature, 1780-1863* (1988) and *Narrative and Desire in Russian Literature, 1822-1849* (1993) found the Russian literary canon rife with misogyny. Although they aimed to bring some attention to female-authored texts, theirs was a focus critical of portrayals of women in literature by male writers. Critics such as revisionist Sona Stephan Hoisington, the editor of *A Plot of Her Own: The Female Protagonist in Russian Literature* (1995), disagreed, claiming that women personae are, in fact, central elements in Russian texts and are not relegated to the periphery. Theorists like Marsh have responded by trying to find a middle ground between the two approaches. A few scholars such as Goscilo, Adele Barker and Catriona Kelly have focused not on the Russian literary canon and its treatment of female characters, but on works by Russian women which emphasize female personae as wielders of their own subjecthood. Western scholars have dominated the field for reasons obvious from our democratic tradition and because of the frequently-voiced objections to the category of "women's literature" by Russian authors like

Tolstaia, Liudmila Petrushevskaia and Viktoriia Tokareva. However, Russian literary and feminist practitioners, such as Olga Lipovskaia, Anastasia Posadskaya and Olga Zhuk made contributions throughout the 1990s, though primarily on the subject of feminism and Russian women. The number of studies specifically addressing Russian women's literature written after the fall of the Soviet Union, and particularly recent poetry, however, remains small and this gap in scholarship needs to be filled.

Chapter One: Methodology

Russian Postmodernism and Poetry

Fortunately, due in part to the increasing attention drawn since the 1990s by Russian-born theorists such as Mikhail Epstein and Mark Lipovetsky to postmodernism with its accompanying questioning of grand narratives, there has been some discussion by Russians concerning the role of gender in their contemporary literature (Lyotard xxiv).[10] However, Russian academics who have produced postmodern studies have offered little in the way of specifically feminist literary analysis.[11] In the West, there does exist a considerable and growing body of research on postmodernism and gender in contemporary Russian prose but, likely due to the comparatively greater difficulty of translation, there is little on recent poetry written by women.

Russian postmodern poetry arose in the late 1960s and early 1970s as a self-conscious project, assuming the form of samizdat and "underground" performances (T. Epstein vii-viii). It took the failure of, and paradoxes within, the Soviet utopian metanarrative as its main subject matter (Popovic 628).[12] However, by mid-1980s, the time that Iskrenko joined the Russian underground literary scene, postmodern texts frequently confronted other grand ideologies,

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[10] Epstein and Lipovetsky's work on Russian postmodernism began in the 1980s, however, serious scholarly debate in Russia started in the early 1990s. They discuss a Russian version of postmodernism, which initially took Soviet ideology as one of the key grand narratives in need of questioning. Early Western theoreticians of postmodernism, such as Frederic Jameson in "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" (1983) and "Postmodernism: The Cultural Logic of late Capitalism" (1984), tended to view capitalism as the authoritative political metanarrative of interest. Otherwise, Western and Russian postmodernism share much in common.

[11] Some research centres in Russia have generated publications, but primarily translations and discussions of Western postmodern feminist theory or women in the arenas of politics, sociology and law. See, for example, the web site for *Moskovskii tsentr gendernikh issledovannii* (Moscow Center for Gender Studies).

[12] In the genre of poetry, this was exemplified by the Russian conceptualists, such as Dmitrii Prigov (1940-2007) and Lev Rubinshtein (b. 1947). See also Iskrenko's poem, "*Proekt konstitutsii*" ("Draft of a Constitution" [1988-89]) in *Ili. Stikhi i teksti.*

such as Christian Orthodoxy, monarchism, nationalism and Western humanism, all of which have attempted to rule as sole discourse over Russia at various moments in history (628). These poems of the late- and post-communist periods mix numerous elements from a vast range of discourses, including Soviet political jargon, Russian patriotism and imperialism, science, philosophy, references to Russian and world classic literature, and artifacts from "low" or popular culture (629; M. Epstein, "Catalogue" 145, 148).

Russian postmodern poetry does have, however, several common characteristics. The manner in which it resists metanarratives frequently manifests itself in the fragmentation of objects, themes and subjectivity (or in the latter's total absence). It also exhibits temporal disorder in historical and poetic narratives, as well as pastiches of language, often in the mode of blank parody. For example, Russian conceptualist poetry, which is a subset of postmodern verse and the literary equivalent to *sots-art*, shares in common with polystylistic postmodern poetry fragmentation, "chaotic" sequencing and pastiche, as the analysis of Iskrenko's poetry below will reveal. Russian postmodern verse's expression of pastiche has been well-defined, most notably in scholarly studies of conceptualist poetry, and in the theoretical bent that conceptualist poems themselves express. In *Endquote: Sots-Art Literature and Soviet Grand Style*, Gerald Janecek discusses Rubinshtein's early conceptualist poems, noting that postmodern pastiche is a like a "cosmic library catalog" of languages or (107), as Boris Groys puts it in his description of Prigov's work:

> It [pastiche] is a question not of living voices, which may polemicize among themselves, but of dead text-objects, which form a certain virtual library, or even, more precisely, a warehouse, in relation to which the poet himself performs in the capacity of librarian/inventory taker. (41)

Although articulated in different manners, the theories of subjecthood formulated by Butler, Haraway and Epstein each utilize postmodern notions of fragmentation, disorder and pastiche, or "cataloguing," in their visions of how identity is constituted and in the ways in which authoritative discourses may be subverted.

Performativity, the Cyborg and Transcultural Theory

> [A] few rejoinders from the ranks of ambivalence where some of us continue to dwell.
> – Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (135)

Primary among Butler's many significant scholarly contributions are her writings on gender, sexuality and subjecthood. The foundation of her postmodern philosophy is laid out in her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) in which she rejects the binary view of identity (e.g., male/female, masculine/feminine), claiming that it undermines the ability of those on the margins of mainstream society to attain some degree of empowerment (through personal agency, difference, and resistance) and reifies oppressive paradigms in which those who wield power have a vested interest in maintaining. Drawing on Foucauldian theory of sexuality and the Hegelian

concept of "dialectic," Butler sees identity not as fixed and immutable, but rather as discursive and fluid; it changes according to the context and historical (or temporal) moment in which it is temporarily situated and stems, as her "performativity" model suggests, from a repetition of acts, as outlined below.

Feminism is also an integral part of the theoretical approach that is laid out in *Gender Trouble.* As a feminist departure point, Butler refers to Simone de Beauvoir's well-known assertion in *Le deuxième sexe* (*The Second Sex* [1949]):

> One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine. (Beauvoir 267)

Butler elaborates,

> If there is something right in Beauvoir's claim that one is not born, but rather *becomes* a woman, it follows that *woman* itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification. Even when gender seems to congeal into the most reified forms, the 'congealing' is itself an insistent and insidious practice, sustained and regulated by various

> social means. It is, for Beauvoir, never possible finally to become a woman, as if there were a *telos* that governs the process of acculturation and construction. (*Gender Trouble* 33)

Since Butler's concept of identity emphasizes process, she qualifies her use of the Hegelian dialectic. It does include the idea of a thesis, negated by its antithesis which, in turn, produces synthesis. She does not, however, take a teleological view as Hegel does in *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (*Phenomenology of Spirit* [1807]) in which he assumes that the dialectic results in a fixed certainty or a static "truth" that provides closure (Salih 4).

Of Butler's own theoretical concepts, "performativity" is extremely well-suited to an investigation of identity in contemporary poetry by Russian women. In looking at gendered selfhood, Butler first conducts a "genealogy of gender ontology," a form of historical examination into the conditions by which identity categories are discursively constructed, a method that Butler herself suggests may be utilized in examinations of identity other than gender (*Gender Trouble* 6, 43-33). This type of investigation asserts that one ought to trace the factors that constitute the ways in which authoritative, dominant discourses create oppressive and illusory notions of essentialist and binary identity (9, 43-44). Performativity is that which she posits as the way identity *actually* comes into existence; identity is something that one *does* at a given moment, not what one is (25, 29):

> Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*. . . . This formulation moves the conception of gender off the ground of a substantial model of identity to one that requires a conception of gender as a constituted social *temporality*. (173, 179)

Butler's idea of performative identity, therefore, is constituted by the "doing" of a *subject-in-process* (136, 140, 25).

It is crucial to note that, for Butler, performative identity is inextricably bound to an ongoing dialectic with the dominant discourse. One is never able to extricate oneself from society's reigning ideologies (*Undoing* 1). Individual agency and identity, then, are paradoxically constituted by their ongoing negotiation with the prevailing "fixed" social dictates. Butler understands that the notion of the subject must be destabilized:

> Not only does one need the social world to be a certain way in order to lay claim to what is one's own, but it turns out that what is ones' own is always from the start dependent upon what is not one's own, the social conditions by which autonomy is, strangely, dispossessed and undone. . . . In this sense, we must be undone in order to do ourselves. (100)

While Butler's performativity does entail the "death" of the subject, it is only the complete demise of the *a priori* "I" of substance, the subject of essentialism (*Gender Trouble* 33).[13] Through her formulation of parody, she does suggest a way for a subject to gain some measure of autonomy in its ongoing negotiation with authoritative metanarratives. When the performative deed is constituted, not simply by a repetition of (hetero-)normative or phallo(go)centric practices that are prescribed by the given society's master narrative, but instead in non-normative "frames," it calls attention to the discursiveness, or fictiveness, of gender identities and thereby "denaturalizes" and subverts them (41, 180).

As examples of the potential subversive power of performative parody, Butler points to "drag, cross-dressing, and the sexual stylization of butch/femme identities" (174-75). Her formulation of parody, however, unlike its common usage, does not presuppose the imitation of an "original" (41, 175). In this respect, as she herself points out, performative gender parody is akin to Frederic Jameson's pastiche in that it entails a copy of a fictive ideal for which there exists no original (41, 175; Jameson 17); both involve simulacra and citationality (18; Baudrillard 166-67). However, unlike Jameson's pastiche, Butler's parody is not necessarily "blank" or "devoid of laughter" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 176; Jameson, *Postmodernism* 17). A parodic performative act may be unwittingly "blank," or it may be self-conscious discourse and, therefore, either seriously resistant to, or playfully – with "pleasure,"

[13] See Roland Barthes, "The Death of Author."

"giddiness" and "laughter" – subversive towards normative ideologies (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 175-77; Butler, *Undoing* 4, 29). In addition, even if one performs a potential act of resistance which sheds light on the citationality, or "imitative structure," and "contingency" of gender identity itself, such as drag, gender is still a "fabrication," a fiction or narrative, for which there is no original (*Gender Trouble* 136-38).

Some scholars have leveled criticisms against Butler for failing to address "the real situation of real women" (Nussbaum 38).[14] However, Butler does not wish to offer theoretical discussions of language and signs for their own sake. She is deeply concerned about "real" ethics. She notes, for example, that although gender can be a form of "play," the consequences for falling outside the hegemonic standards can be "severe," because "we continue to live in a world in which one can risk serious disenfranchisement and physical violence for the pleasure one seeks, the fantasy one embodies, the gender one performs" (*Undoing* 214).

In *Undoing Gender* (2004), Butler "relates the problematics of gender and sexuality to the tasks of persistence and survival" (4). She emphasizes the principle that, "The critique of gender norms must be situated within the context of lives as they are lived and be guided by the question of what maximizes the possibilities for a livable life, what minimizes the possibility of unbearable life

[14] Martha Nussbaum's derisive "Professor of Parody" (1999) is likely the most well-known and discussed critique in recent years of Butler's work. Additionally, Nussbaum and many others have commented on the density of Butler's theoretical jargon and her style of philosophical inquiry. See Martha C. Nussbaum's "Professor of Parody." Like the writing method of most postmodern writers, Butler's is a self-conscious one that seeks "to bring into relief the very framework of evaluation itself ("What is Critique?" 302). In a similar vein, in *Undoing Gender*, she advocates at length and in detail the opening up of the boundaries between academic disciplines, specifically of philosophy (232-250).

or, indeed, social or literal death" (8).[15] Furthermore, Butler does not view "livability" only as it applies to the individual in the context of her/his dialectic with given totalizing discourses. Her concern extends to communities and to society as a whole. At the junctures at which a subject and any given authoritative discourse meet, each challenges the other's ontological status. However, the encounter may also serve for them to question their assertions about what constitutes their own subjecthood, as they see themselves through and in relation to the other. This awareness of the fragmentation and 'loss of self,' offer the potential for "the beginning of community," as one comprehends one's "place as one strand among many in the fabric of culture" (228, 250).

As with Butler's "genealogy of gender ontology," "performativity" and her notions of subject formation and parody, Haraway's formulation of the cyborg and her accompanying notions of irony and "heteroglossia" in the "integrated circuit" are concepts that are applicable to the analysis of literature by Russian women (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 43, 173; Haraway 181). Like the "trouble" that Butler sets out to cause through performativity and parody, Haraway, in "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" (1984), advocates "ironic" and "blasphemous" "border crossings," which serve to subvert master narratives by blurring the lines between categories in binary oppositions (151-54). Her theory "is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are

[15] Butler, for example, speaks of the pathologization of, and violence done to, transgendered people, such as the murder of Brandon Teena (*Undoing* 6).

necessary and true. [It] is about humour and serious play. It is also a rhetorical strategy and a political method" (149).

It is Haraway's (primarily metaphorical) cyborg, which dwells on the virgules of dichotomies of phallogocentric discourse, that "is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (149).[16] This hybridity suggests the possibility of womanhood that is not held captive by essentialism, but rather goes beyond any notion of fixed identity; like Butler's performative subjects, the cyborg is is beyond, or "post-gender" (150). The mechanical and technological aspects and abilities of the cyborg "woman" thwart conventional authoritative discourse, which necessarily associates femaleness with domesticity, motherhood, goddesshood, nature and all other things fundamentally organic (150). Although, as Haraway points out, cyborgs are part of our contemporary reality, such as in our use of prostheses and certain machines and weapons of warfare, there is no true separation between "lived social reality" and "fiction" – "we are cyborgs" (150, 178). Cyborgs are also part of the collective cultural imagination, represented in science fiction and signifying a discursive embodiment of society's dreams and, often, fears (173, 178-79). Reality and fiction are inextricably linked, each continually influencing the other. It is in this sense, that one may interpret the cyborg's lack of a Western "origin story" as indicative of citationality (150). It is a performative pastiche, one that Haraway harnesses

[16] The cyborg may also be taken in a more literal sense. Contemporary Russian society, which still endures difficult economic circumstances, has fewer options than in the West for producing hard-copy publications. The Internet provides a means for literature to be published at a relatively low-cost. Kuzmin's *Vavilon* (Bablyon) web site offers just such an example.

to make subversively parodic by a Butlerian "framing" of the cyborg as "female," instead of male. Finally, *A Cyborg Manifesto* suggests that, if feminism is to be effective, it must replace essentialist notions of a stable female subject and identity with "affinities" and "coalitions" of women who will utilize the breakdown between public and private by 'networking' and 'interfacing' through the "heteroglossia" of the "integrated circuit" (181, 165).

Mikhail Epstein's concept and model of transculturalism grew out of his intellectual exchanges with members of three Moscow cultural institutions, the Club of Essayists (1982-87), Image and Thought (1986-88) and the Laboratory of Russian Culture (Berry and Epstein 2).[17] In his book *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture* (1995), Epstein offers a overview of his early formulation of transculturalism, specifically in the context of late- and early post-Soviet Russia. However, with the addition of the 'American stage' of the transcultural project (1990-98), it is in Epstein's collaborative effort with United States scholar Ellen Berry, *Transcultural Experiments: Russian and American Models of Creative Communication* (1999), that one finds an account of transcultural theory that is most relevant to a study of contemporary poetry by Russian women, particularly in the context of postmodern globalization (ix, 1).

Epstein builds his transcultural concept and method from his account of the Russian discipline of "culturology," his definition of "culture," and from key ideas of postmodern theory. Although the underlying philosophical approach of Russian culturology – the notion of culture as an "integral organism" – stems

[17] Epstein is the founder of these groups, among others.

from the ideas of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Johann Gottfried Herder, Osvald Spengler and others in the German intellectual tradition, it is a specifically Russian discipline (15). Epstein identifies nineteenth-century Slavophile thinker Nikolai Danilevskii (1882-85) as the progenitor of the Russian organic approach to culture and notes the long line of those Russians, from Pavel Florenskii (1822-1937) to Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) to Yurii Lotman (1922-93), who were instrumental in developing culturology, which has been a national focus of humanistic scholarship since the 1990s (15-16, 23).

Culturology views culture "as an integral system of various cultures – national, professional, racial, sexual, etc." and seeks to "realize the ideal of cultural wholeness, as it reveals connections and relationships unknown to separate disciplines" (Epstein, *After the Future* 284). It is for Berry and Epstein not merely a field of study, but a "metadiscipline," which explores all spheres, be they arts, sciences, philosophy or religion, and comments on them in a self-referential manner (Berry and Epstein 16, 53).

It order to follow the progression of Epstein's conceptual model, which moves from culture to culturology to transculture, a useful distinction may be made between 'cultures' and 'culture.' The former might be understood as analogous to 'discourses,' such as when Epstein mentions 'the national,' 'the racial,' 'the sexual" and so forth, in his transcultural writings (17). However, 'culture' as an overarching term, with its panoptical nature and interrelatedness, is akin to what postmodernists (and poststructuralists) would call 'citationality' or 'intertextuality' (17),

> The scope of culture is much broader and deeper than that of society as such. While society encompasses all living people in their combined activity and the interrelations of their roles, culture embraces the activity of all previous generations accumulated in artistic works, scientific discoveries, moral values, and so on. The social level is but one horizontal section of culture, which in its totality permeates all historical worlds as we see in the perpetual migration of texts and meanings – from country to country, from generation to generation. Culture is the totality of objectified relations of human beings among themselves. And therefore, as the individual becomes part of culture, growing in the knowledge of multiple levels of cultural heritage, s/he discovers ever more facets of humanity *within* him or herself. (M. Epstein, *After the Future* 287-8)

Since culture in Epstein's formulation entails interconnectedness between cultural discourses, it may only come to fruition when people are in a state of liberty, which includes intellectual freedom, access to information, and freedom from basics needs (288). This explains why, even with a plentitude of culturologists, the discipline of culturology with its constituent self-reflexivity could not flourish while still subject to the monolithic discourse of the Soviet regime (285, 288).

Transculture is both the theoretical extension of culturology and "a mode of being" (Berry and Epstein 25). It begins with the premise that all cultures are insufficient and incomplete and require "radical openness to[,] and dialogue with[,] [other cultures]" (3). On one level, transculture requires individuals to relinquish their identification with particular cultures, but it "is not a diminishment of[,] or confrontation with[,] our cultural selves but rather a way of expanding the limits of our . . . identities to new levels of indeterminacy and 'virtuality'" (24-25). On another level, transculture entails "interaction between cultures themselves in which more and more individuals find themselves 'outside' of any particular culture, 'outside' of its national, racial, sexual, ideological, and other limitations" (25). Berry and Epstein note that this outsider status is analogous to Bakhtin's notion of "вненаходимость" (*vnenakhodimost*), the meaning of which is "being located beyond any particular mode of existence" (25). In the context of transcultural theory, in particular, one aims toward "finding one's place on the border of existing cultures" (25). It is "[t]his realm *beyond* all cultures" that "is located *inside* transculture" (25). Transculture, then – like the juncture at which Butler's subject and authoritative disourse meet, and similar to the interface between organism and technology of Haraway's cyborg – is at the border-crossings where identity and difference intersect. It is at these intersections that identity discourses find their most productive expressions in "an open system of symbolic alternatives" (24).

A key aim of transculture is to transform "a divisive politics of identity" into what Berry and Epstein call "a politics of creative interference" (12). In a

transcultural context, "interference" does not take on its common negative connotations of intrusion or obstruction from without. Instead a transcultural interferential process involves the "spontaneous interaction between various kinds of cultural activity," or discourses, "that transpose the borders of interacting cultures, mentalities, and disciplines in multiple directions" (9-10). The result of interference is a productive diversification of cultures (8). It is a process which intensifies at historical turning points, such as with the rapidly increasing trends of pluralization and globalization which are presently occurring on the world stage (10).

The interferential model, itself, enables transculturalism to draw from "two principle aspects of postmodern theory that are increasingly found to be in fundamental disagreement" – multiculturalism and deconstruction (79). Multiculturalism, including identity politics, takes stock in a "metaphysics of presence" and origin (Derrida, *Grammatology* 74).[18] It posits an essentialist view of selfhood in which identity is constituted by a definable origin – a particular and stable ethnic, racial, sexual or other difference. Multiculturalism considers each culture to be independent and equal to itself and attempts to ensure respect for the differences of each culture (Berry and Epstein 80). Deconstruction sits in contrast to the multicultural model. Among its key functions is to expose as erroneous essentialism's claims that signs and texts, including cultural and identity discourses, hold fixed and certain meanings (Derrida, *Grammatology* 61). Signs have no set origin; instead, they exist only in relation to one another

[18] "Deconstruction" and "metaphysics of presence" are philosopher Jacques Derrida's neologisms. See his *Of Grammatology*.

and, therefore, 'meaning' is merely the interaction of signifiers or differences, which are infinitely deferred (61).

Transculture views multiculturalism and deconstruction as limited, but rather than categorically rejecting them, it extracts from both. Multiculturalism's assertion that individual cultures are self-sufficient entities, coupled with its tendency to promote "tolerance" of other cultural groups, fall short of enabling productive interaction *between* cultures (Berry and Epstein 97). Berry and Epstein do acknowledge that cultures and identities have origins. However, transcultural theory utilizes this notion only insofar as it assumes that culture begins in, and is "an escape from nature" (83). Culture is "the process of denaturalization or de-origination, which bears a connection with its origin only though the series of its erasures and subversions" (83).

Deconstruction functions in the reverse of multiculturalism, but with a similar result. It tends simply to expose as false the foundations of discourses that claim to base themselves on invariable truths and, thereby, fails to offer avenues or solutions for creating fruitful relationships between cultures. However, as Berry and Epstein point out, although deconstruction has come to be used in its "conventional form of academic poststructuralism" – as merely a negative critique – Derrida, himself, noted that he had not intended it as "a negative operation" (Berry and Epstein 160; Derrida, "Letter" 272). Instead of just disassembling, it was to serve also "to understand how an 'ensemble' was constituted and to reconstruct it to this end" (272). Rather than simply utilizing deconstruction to dismantle cultural discourses and, thereby, expose their

limitations, transculturalism uses the method of "*positive* deconstruction," or "potentiation," with a view to future possibilities. Potentiation reveals the deficiencies of discourses, including the inherent insufficiency of individual cultures when isolated from each other, in order to open a multiplicity of "alternatives and free spaces within and beyond certain cultural practices" (21, 160).

Transculturalism, then, is a means by which cultures and discourses may "transcend," or expand, the limits of identity through interferiential, or performative, processes, which in turn create "new improvisational communities" (12). Berry and Epstein suggest that a key task of transculture is to forge coalitions and they explicitly refer to Haraway's call for "collectivities" to create "an articulated world comprised of an undecidable number of modes and sites where powerful new connections can be made" (3, 71; Haraway 192). In terms of discourses on gender, in particular, Berry's comments invoke the cyborg,

> I think the model of transculture can provide an imaginative space – if not a social space – for us to explore our multiple differences from each other as they would configure themselves along gender lines. This would include an interrogation of our own differences from ourselves – my own maleness or what might exist outside or in between the categories of male and female – some new genders or an escape from gender altogether?" (309)

She adds that, "Transculture – by providing a model of intersubjectivity and interaction that builds on and for difference – holds great promise for feminist applications" (308). Indeed, transcultural theory, as well as Butler's theory of gender and Haraway's cyborg, are valuable approaches for elucidating and examining the complexity of modern-day expressions of identity in poetry by Russian women in which journeying beyond native discourses is a product and fact of the post-Soviet landscape in a climate of globalization.

Chapter Two: Nina Iskrenko, Postmodern Poet par excellence

Nina Iskrenko's poetry is acclaimed by many Russian scholars and artists as the most significant verse of the 1980s and early 1990s. Her untimely death is considered to symbolically mark the "the passing of the regime and communist culture, in all of its decadence and discovery" and the "last generation of Soviet poetry, closing the tragic and farcical circle" (High, "Crossing" xl; Bunimovich qtd. in High, "Crossing" xl). Kirill Kovaldzhi, a writer and key figure in Moscow literary circles since the early 1980s, summarizes the sentiments of many of his poet-contemporaries on the passing of Iskrenko:

> I find it impossible to reconcile myself to the premature death of Nina Iskrenko. Brilliantly talented, audacious Nina — she was youth itself, prepared for the fame that should have been just around the corner. In Nina there was something triumphant, over-conquering: a challenge to sentimentality, conventionality, hypocrisy. A breath of novelty, of freedom from everything inert and old-fashioned. She was the soul of the Poetry Club, an eccentric, shocking inventor, by nature avant-garde. Then suddenly an incurable disease, death, a funeral service in a small church on the outskirts of Moscow . . . .[19]
>
> At the grave Voznesensky, Arabov, Bunimovich, Aristov, Prigov, Zhdanov, Rubinshtein, Shatunovsky. Parshchikov appeared . . . . Poets,

[19] "*Klub 'Poeziia,*'" (Poetry Club), founded in 1986 under the auspices of the journal *Iunost* (*Youth*), was a group of young, formerly-underground Russian poets, which grew out of an early-1980s poetry workshop, initially led by Kovaldzhi (Aizenberg 3; Popovic 630; Bunimovich 244; Kovaldzhi 166). Iskrenko was considered the "motor" of the Club and was responsible for organizing some of its most memorable "happenings."

> well-known writers — none of Nina's generation could any longer be called young. On that mournful day they seemed to have aged. For the first time death struck their ranks and fixed their generation once and for all in the historical monolith. Something ended, passed away. Everyone sensed this. . . . (168)

Iskrenko belonged to a "new wave" of Russian poets whose work was both a product of, and a reaction against, the stagnation in art, economy and social life of the Brezhnev era, which followed the relative and short-lived freedom of the Thaw (166). Unlike their forebearers, the new wave poets were 'neither apologists nor dissidents' but rather postmodern writers (166; Hejinian 3).

Iskrenko is considered to be "the postmodern poet par excellence" and, indeed, as a "polystylist" who utilized a panoply of tropes and styles from many postmodern poetries, particularly conceptualism and metarealism (meta-metaphorism), she counted herself among the most vocal adherents of this trend (Chernetsky 105; Popovic 630). Much of her writing overtly and self-consciously declares itself as part of the postmodern project. Yet, as a handful of academics who have taken note of her extraordinary poetry have noted, many of Iskrenko's texts explore women's lives and experiences and constitute a markedly feminist stance, at times specifically Russian and, at others, Western or transcultural (Chernetsky, "Nina" 104; LeBeau, Popovic 630-31). The postmodern elements of her work stretch and blur theoretical and cultural

boundaries, moving far beyond mere "blank parody" of the Soviet regime (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 1). In her poetry, one encounters a distinct lyrical strain and the reemergence of the "I" accompanied, in particular, by discernible assertions concerning the performative identities and roles of poets and women. An examination of her writing reveals that her death and work mark, in fact, not only an end of an era, but a departure from the "conventional" postmodern project, and signal an important beginning in contemporary gender-conscious Russian poetry and Russian poetics in general.

Like the work of her postmodern contemporaries, much of Iskrenko's writing exhibits fragmentation and pastiche to create "catalogues" which resist grand narratives. More specifically, many of her poems display a brand of postmodernism called "polystylistics" – a word for which Iskrenko is credited as being the first to use as a literary term (Chernetsky, "Nina" 108n).[20] In his "Catalogue of Poetries," Mikhail Epstein reinforces the idea that cataloguing, or pastiche, is a key component of polystylistics (148). According to him,

> Polystylistics is multicoded poetry, uniting various discourses using the principle of *collage*. The "low" discourse of everyday life, the heroic-solemn ideological discourse, the language of traditional landscape painting and technological instruction manuals – these collages play with a multiplicity of intermingled discourses (for example, the "metallurgical scaffolding" that breeds "chlorophyll"). . . . Polystylistics plays with

[20] Iskrenko, who studied music, likely borrowed the term from composer Alfred Schnittke (Chernetsky, "Nina" 108n). Many of her polystylistic poems, including "*Fuga*" ("Fugue") and "*Dzhazovaia panorama*" ("Jazz Panorama") in her collection *Ili*, demonstrate obvious connections to music.

incongruity of objects in its collages and the resultant catastrophic disintegration of reality. (148)

Iskrenko's early poem "Гимн полистилистике" ("Hymn to Polystylistics" [1991]), considered by many to be the polystylistics manifesto, is a clear example of the use of "collage" (pastiche) (Janecek, "New Russian"; Polukhina and Weissbort, *ACRWP* 251). The text consists of five stanzas and a "coda" in which heterogeneous and ostensibly contradictory historical, intellectual and cultural elements exist side-by-side – "high" and "low" culture, the contemporary with things of old, the literary and the non-literary (Janecek, "New Russian"; Chernetsky, "Nina" 109). Gerald Janecek suggests that, in postmodern society, the totality of the past and present, as well as cultural artifacts ("ready-mades"), can exist together in a single moment or, more accurately, outside of time in a "virtual reality" ("New Russian"). From the first stanza of "Hymn to Polystylistics" these characteristics are present:

Полистилистика
это когда средневековый рыцарь
в шортах
штурмует винный отдел гастронома № 13
по улице Декабристов
и куртуазно ругаясь

роняет на мраморный пол

<<Квантовую механику>> Ландау и Лифшица

Polystylistics

is when a knight from the Middle Ages

wearing shorts

storms into the wine section of store #13

located on Decembrists' Street

& cursing like one of the Court's nobles

he drops his copy of Landau & Lifshitz's "Quantum

Mechanics" on the marble floor

A medieval knight seemingly rushes from his historical milieu into the quotidian of a Soviet grocery store and drops a Russian physics textbook.[21] The food shop bears the pragmatic designation of a number, suggesting Soviet bureaucratic discourse. In the context of real Soviet life, the use of "Decembrists" as a street name would not have appeared inappropriate, but simply would have been taken as a reminder of the revolutionary fervour that was a historical stepping stone in establishing the USSR. However, in Iskrenko's self-declared postmodern poem, the authority of metanarratives is challenged and objects are framed in such a way as to call their common

[21] Clearly Iskrenko, who had earned a physics degree and was a translator of scientific literature from English into Russian, was deliberate in her choice of Landau and Lifshitz's *Quantum Mechanics*. It is unlikely that she selected it to signal pseudo-scientific *Soviet* discourse as the textbook was, and still is, used and respected worldwide. However, the reference may be an allusion to the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle as a kind of natural science equivalent to "conservative" postmodern relativism.

significations into question. The text situates elements that would normally connote monarchic, Soviet-bureaucratic and revolutionary ideologies in a single "virtual reality," thereby subverting their hegemonic discourses and replacing them with a transcultural (and trans-historical) discourse instead. Added to this are the knight's unchivalrous cursing and his paradoxical donning of shorts – a clothing item that would have been considered inappropriate in both the Middle Ages and in Soviet Russia (Janecek, "New Russian"). In contrast to the pragmatism that Landau and Lifshitz's scientific text signifies, the knight himself connotes, as Chernetsky seems to suggest in noting that "literary" elements recur throughout the poem ("Nina" 109), the "high" literature of works dealing with the idealistic institution of European knighthood, such as *Amadís de Gaula* or Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*. Here, the *subversive* performative stance in Iskrenko's work already reveals itself as the knight's identity is "denaturalized" by its non-normative "frame." Through the intertexual references to social, political, intellectual and artistic metanarratives, the stanza acknowledges, plays with and parodies normative definitions of "knight," "Soviet," "Decembrist," "scientist," "writer" but, at the same time, creates the knight's identity in this "virtual reality."

The intermingling of "low" discourse with the artistic continues for the duration of the poem as the speaker catalogues additional definitions of polystylistics. In the second stanza, polystylistics is equated with couture – a dress of fine "голландское полотно" ("Dutch linen"). However, "быт" ("*byt*") – a specifically Russian concept of "everyday life" or "the quotidian" – subverts

the discourse of high fashion and culture as the reader discovers that the garment is inelegantly pieced together "из пластилина" ("[with] plastic & glue") presumably due to financial necessity. Postmodern poetry, like the dress, is patchwork, but its need arises from metaphysical chaos and an urge for semiotic play,

> это закон
> космического непостоянства
> и простое пижонство
> на букву икс.
>
> it's a law
> of cosmic instability
> & some stupid play
> on the "F" word.

In this stanza, the lofty "звездная аэробика" ("celestial aerobics") is combined with the more mundane (бытовой [*bytovoi*]) "разорванный рюкзак" ("torn backpack") and considerably baser "простое пижонство / на букву икс" ("some stupid play / on the 'F' word") – the latter likely alluding to pejorative Russian words beginning with "*x*" ("kh").

"Hymn to Polystylistics" becomes progressively more complex, and the performative and gender aspects more pronounced, as one finds the gaps between

discourses narrow (Janecek "New Russian"). The first lines of the third stanza state that polystylistics:

это когда все девушки красивы
как буквы
в армянском алфавите Месропа Маштоца.

is when all the young women are as pretty
as letters
from the Armenian alphabet composed by Mesrop Mashtoz.

The break after "красивы" ("pretty") causes the reader to pause and, therefore, to first reflect on the meaning of the line independently from the words that follow. The line "*все* девушки красивы" ("*all* the young women are as pretty") seems to imply a cultural (ideological) imperative – a prescribed, normative identity trait – that young women *must* meet the criterion of prettiness (emphasis added). On its own, the phrase might suggest a mode of hackneyed, sexist discourse. However, the text then thwarts that single connotation by designating the "letters" as the measure of beauty, conflating in the reader's mind the corporeal appearance of young women with the form of alphabet characters, as well as with the words on the page. In what Butler might call a subversive performative act, or Haraway – a "blasphemous" gesture, the text self-consciously removes the possibility of an essentialist expression of woman by

taking "female prettiness" out of the equation and replacing it with an unexpected trait. The young women become cyborgs, blurring, on multiple levels the line between social reality and fiction.

The reference to Mesrop Mashtoz expands the literary significations in the poem because, in addition to having been credited with inventing Armenian script, Saint Mashtoz is thought to have contributed to the coming of the Armenia's golden age of Christian literature ("Mesrop"). Iskrenko's poem does not simply become a self-referential text by drawing attention to its own literary, linguistic and typographical artifice, but creates an inextricable web between the worlds of people, literature, and tangible art and artifacts (i.e., the letters on the page of the physical manuscript). This technique, which Epstein calls "metabole," is the distinguishing literary trope of another type of Russian postmodern poetry that is contemporary with Iskrenko's own – metarealist (or "meta-metaphorist") (*After the Future* 44; "What is Metabole" 130). Metabole "registers the metamorphic transmutations of one reality into another and the creation of a multi-referential network among the disparate realities (Lutzkanova-Vassileva). This multidimensional reality appears to be what "Hymn to Polystylistics" suggests is "звездная аэробика" ("celestial aerobics") and a "закон / космического непостоянства" ("a law / of cosmic instability").

In the little scholarship that does exist on Iskrenko's work, academics have primarily assessed "Hymn to Polystylistics" as a full-blown relativistic postmodern text. Janecek claims that the concluding reference to Erich Maria Remarque's novel *Im Westen nichts Neues* (*На западном фронте без перемен,*

All Quiet on the Western Front [1929]) implies that Iskrenko's poem conveys a Sartrean message: there is "no exit" from meaninglessness ("New Russian").[22] He adds that the final lines of the poem are "alogical" ("New Russian"). In "Nina Iskrenko: The Postmodern Poet and Her Few Words," Vitaly Chernetsky goes so far as to say of the poem that "[t]he riddles pile on top of each other, and at the end the reader is not even sure that the black cat of meaning is, in fact, hidden somewhere inside the dark room of the poem's labyrinthic construction" (109). He does acknowledge in passing, however, that some sections of the poem are "undoubtedly ironic" (109). He points, in particular, to the fifth stanza; polystylistics,

это когда я хочу петь
а ты хочешь со мной спать
и оба мы хотим жить
вечно.

is when I want to sing
& you want to go to bed with me
& we both want to live
forever.

[22] Janecek clearly alludes to Jean-Paul Sartre's *Huis clos* (*No Exit* [1944]). While, strictly speaking, Sartre's work is existentialist, its philosophy intersects with postmoderism, most notably, perhaps, in its relativistic stance on metanarratives. The play also explores the notion of identity and subjecthood.

In order to recognize how Iskrenko's work marks a departure from conventional Russian postmodern poetry, it is crucial to establish what *kind* of irony the above-mentioned stanza of "Hymn to Polystylistics" conveys. Irony is a complex and contentious issue, the categories and definitions of which continue to be debated among many scholars and writers (Colebrook 1, 3; Davies 291; Hutcheon, "Irony" 1-3; Knox vii; Williams). However, as Claire Colebrook points out, "how we understand and value postmodernism depends very much on our definition and evaluation of irony" (153). Chernetsky does not make clear how, precisely, he comprehends the irony in "Hymn to Polystylistics" (107). He notes only the text's "juxtapositions" and 'shifts in meaning' ("Nina"109). It might first appear that he concludes that Iskrenko's poetry holds only the "black cat" of ludic or "blank irony," the type which postmodern texts are generally acknowledged to utilize: "an irony that operates somehow without any stable position of judgment, a free floating irony in which any apparently definitive position is subject to further ironization" (109; Jameson, *Postmodernism* 17; Dorst 117). Chernetsky's comments on this text are odd, as he does go on to demonstrate how other Iskrenko poems chart the "experiences of women living under the conditions of the crumbling Soviet empire" ("Nina" 107). However, it is significant that he pauses to note, in particular, the irony of aforementioned lines. What is especially striking is that it is the one place that the speaker distinctly emerges in the form of "I." Janecek, too, comments on these lines, referring to them as "personal" and as demonstrating a "bitter-sweet Chekhovian

moment of male/female cross-purposes in shared goals (immortality for him in the biological, for her in the artistic)" ("New Russian").

If one builds on Janecek and Chernetsky's comments regarding the fifth stanza, it is possible to view it as deviating from "conservative" postmodern blank irony. Instead, it takes up irony which expresses a *stance* that gently subverts phallo(go)centric metanarratives, in particular, concerning procreation and artistic creation. Janecek's remarks imply that, contrary to how most postmodernists would have it, neither the author nor the speaker is truly "dead" (M. Epstein, *After the Future* 96). He takes the view that, like Iskrenko herself, the "I" is a woman and, presumably based on this biographical link, interprets the "you" as a man, thereby establishing the existence of subjecthood in the text and a female subjectivity, in addition. A reading of this conspicuous "I" as the female poet–speaker, then, allows the stanza's irony to be understood as directed significantly more toward the male. Through the lens of the speaker, one sees that the greatest disparity between expectation and what will result resides in the man's desire to have sex in order to supposedly meet a metaphysical qualification for "eternal" life. Chernetsky bolsters this reading by noting that the line "а ты хочешь со мной спать" ("& you want to go to bed with me") comes from the language of "profane" discourse ("Nina" 109). By contrast, the sentiment expressed in the speaker's wish to sing and, therefore, to live forever, appears to be a plausible and sincere expression of a lyrical "I." Singing, like poetry, is an art form, as is "Hymn to Polystylistics" itself and if Iskrenko's work

is to warrant the reader's attention, poetry, as well as the tool of language that it uses, must be taken as valuable and sincere on a fundamental level.

Perhaps more striking than the lyrical and artistic assertions in the fifth stanza is the fact that reader catches sight of budding feminist discourse. Not only does the speaker have her own voice in her relationship with her male counterpart, but she effectively thwarts the masculinist literary tradition of man (and not woman) as speaker and poetic creator. Iskrenko's text does not place the woman in the patriarchically-defined, passive essentialist roles of mere whisperer through the "veil," "eternal feminine," "nature," nor muse (Weeks 367, 369; Marsh, *Gender* 3). It is a subversive performative act that the female speaker dares, like the most celebrated woman bard of Russia's nineteenth century, Karolina Pavlova, to assert herself, albeit briefly, as "*избранница*" (the "chosen one") – a poet (Weeks 368).

As the theories of Butler, Haraway and Epstein would assert, the privileging of a particular discourse in Iskrenko's work need not be understood as outside the parameters of postmodern art. Hal Foster in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* puts forward two useful types of postmodernism that respond differently in their incredulity toward metanarratives – a "postmodernism of reaction" and a "postmodernism of resistance" (xii). The former is a "conservative" postmodernism, one that seeks only to expose the speciousness of grand narratives and to assert that all discourses are necessarily and always equally open and valid (xii). It does not, however, attempt to judge or transform them (xii). Reactionary postmodernism is the most common strain

in both the West and in Russia (Popovic 629). It is the type observed by the Russian conceptualists and manifests itself simply as "instrumental pastiche of pop- or pseudo- historical forms" (Foster xii). A postmodern of resistance, on the other hand, not only conducts a protest against totalizing ideologies but offers critical analysis; as Foster notes, it tries "to question rather than exploit cultural codes, to explore rather than conceal social and political affiliations" and "to change the object and its social context" (xii). A postmodernism of resistance, then, does not categorically decry subjecthood. It rethinks how the subject is constituted and views it as multilayered and contradictory, much like Butler's subversive brand of performativity or Epstein's transcultural subjects. In addition, as Dunja Popovic states, it is most commonly the texts of authors belonging to marginalized groups that demonstrate a postmodernism of resistance (629). Contemporary Russian women writers are no exception, as Goscilo's introduction to *Lives in Transit: Recent Russian Women's Writing* attests (xv-xix). The works of Petrushevskaia, Tolstaia and Valeriia Narbikova, for example, frequently serve as loci for the subversion of metanarratives, particularly for authoritative patriarchal discourse (xv-xix; Chernetsky, "*Epigonoi*" 669).

The glimmers of resistant feminist postmodernism and its accompanying performative and lyrical strains that are present in "Hymn to Polystylistics" become far more apparent in Iskrenko's poem "Другая женщина" ("Another Woman" or "The Other Woman" [1991]). In this text, which runs several pages, the speaker weaves a complex web of what are usually considered to be two

diametrically opposed ontological states, both stemming from the Russian root meaning "to be": the aforementioned "*byt*" and "бытие" ("*bytie*," "spiritual" or poetic being"), which serve as vehicles for exploring both subjecthood and gender identity (Boym 157).

The poem immediately introduces the reader to a clearly-defined first-person speaker through whose multifaceted perspectives the entire text is filtered, and also to elements of *byt* which are for her a source of tension and conflict:

Когда мне невмочь
переселить беду
когда у меня бессонница
и целый бак грязного белья
когда я
путаю детей
с динозаврами
а благоприятное расположение светил на себе
принимаю за простую любезность
когда без
четверти восемь мне уже пора
и без четверти девять мне уже пора
и без четверти одиннадцати мне
уже пора

. . . . . .

потому что больше не может

а мысленно представленный кусок масло

не мажется на воображаемый хлеб

и вдобавок в темноте среди ночи я натыкаюсь на

велосипед в коридоре.

When I cannot stand

to muster strength against misfortune

when I cannot sleep

and face an entire tank of dirty laundry

when I

mistake my children

for dinosaurs

but take the favorable disposition of luminaries in the sky

for a simple act of courtesy

when at a quarter to

eight I have to go

and at a quarter to nine I have to go

and at a quarter to eleven I

have to go

. . . . . .

and a piece of butter brought to mind
does not spread on an imaginary piece of bread
and what's more I stumble in the dark of night on
the bicycle in the hall.

Although the "I's" gender is established as female from the second stanza onward when it is directly compared to "[д]ругая женщина" ("[a]nother woman"), she may immediately be regarded as such due to the fact that she is found struggling with everyday domestic tasks. While *byt* is certainly considered to be an integral element of some contemporary Russian literature written by men (most notably by Iurii Trifonov), beginning as early as Natalia Baranskaia's *Неделя как неделя* (*A Week Like Any Other* [1969]), it has much more frequently been the subject of work by women due to the fact that, in Russia, the phallo(go)centric metanarrative considers *byt* almost exclusively a female responsibility (Woll 102; Buchli 25-26). Iskrenko's speaker appears weary and besieged by *byt*: laundry, the responsibilities of childrearing, and the necessity of providing food, even when it is scarce. Her despair appears so severe that is seems to compel her to project her feelings on to things external to herself, as if from a desire to temporarily relinquish her subjecthood:

когда
. . . . . .
и по радио

говорят всякие нехорошие вещи

когда телефон наконец отключается

потому что больше не может.

when

. . . . . .

the radio

is saying all manner of bad things

when the telephone finally tunes out

because it can't take it anymore.

In the preface to *ACRWP*, Stephanie Sandler acknowledges the importance of "daily life" in "Another Woman" (xviii). She is, however, mistaken when she claims that the objects of *byt* in the poem are "not marked as Russian in any way," pointing, in particular, to those associated with "laundry and household clutter" (xviii). In Soviet times and, still often, in present-day Russia, a "*бак*" ("tank") that holds dirty laundry is typically a metal boiler used for washing clothes – not a likely item for such a purpose in contemporary Western homes. Furthermore, the extreme lack of space found in most apartments built in the Soviet era make hallways an area common for storing all manner of objects – bicycles among them – whereas a corridor is far less often used for this purpose in the more spacious houses and flats in the West. However, the cultural specificity of the discourses of Iskrenko's text, does not preclude a reading by

means of the theories of Butler, Haraway, or Epstein; the fluidity of their concepts allow for the interpretation of localized narratives. Additionally, Iskrenko's text does entail non-Russian allusions and intertextuality, as outlined below.

The references to Russian culture in "Another Woman," however, begin in the first two lines. Michael Wachtel points out that Iskrenko's Russian contemporaries would instantly identify "Когда мне невмочь / переселить беду" ("When I cannot stand / to muster strength against misfortune") as a citation from the song "Полночный троллейбус" ("Midnight Trolleybus" [1957]) by Thaw-era bard Bulat Okudzhava (26). The first-person narrator of the song recounts the emotional relief that he finds by merely being on the last streetcar through Moscow and in the company of other travellers who are, like him, suffering from hardships. Wachtel notes that "Another Woman" is a "polemic response to Okudzhava" (26). However, Iskrenko's text does not merely react against what Russian postmodern poets consider to be the excessive romanticism of the Thaw generation poets. As Wachtel asserts, "Another Woman" responds to Okudzhava's text as a specifically "feminist revision of a masculinist pose" – in other words, a form of ironic citationality (26). Where the speaker of Okudzhava's song can find refuge in other passengers, the "I" of Iskrenko's text, because her domestic responsibilities as an "essentialized" *woman* are taken for granted by the dominant masculinist discourse, can find no peace in другие ("others"). More still, the female speaker suffers because of others. This is most clearly expressed in the second and third stanzas by the

chiding words of the "ты" ("you"), who is later explicitly identified as a man ("по другому мужчине / По тебе наверно" ["for another man / For you probably"]), presumably the husband or live-in boyfriend of the female speaker:

раздается сонный слабораздраженный треск спички
и под дверь тянет дымом
Это ты
начинаешь мне талдычить про другую женщину

Другая женщина на твоем месте
Другая женщина в твоем положении
Другая женщина при нашем уровне цивилизации
не обратила бы внимания на эти регулярные
ежемесячные капризы не обратила бы внимания.

the sleep and slightly irritated striking of a match is heard
and smoke reaches under the door

This is you
Starting to talk on and on to me about another woman

Another woman in your place
Another woman in your position

Another woman at our level of civilization would pay no attention to these

regularly monthly whims would not pay attention would not pay.

The man's "sermon" triggers not only a witty and biting feminist retort from the female speaker, but prompts her to engage in an extensive exploration of identity and subjectivity. The imperative contained in the male companion's rebuke is that the woman ought to expend her time and energy, not on the mundane activities of daily life, but rather on the "high," more intellectual or metaphysical fields of concern – on *bytie*. This may, at first, appear to be contrary to Butler's and Haraway's concerns that phallo(go)centric metanarratives identify womanhood with all things maternal, organic, and natural; however, if one keeps in mind that both gender performativity and the cyborg represent theories that centre on the complexity and localization of identity discourses, Iskrenko's text clearly strives to subvert authoritative metanarratives. On a broader level, Epstein's transcultural model, as well as Forster's postmodernism of resistance, provide theoretical frameworks that are sufficiently intricate to see that the man's comments in "Another Woman" may still be viewed as an expression of a masculinist grand narrative. Like Epstein's transcultural model, Forster's taxonomy of postmodernism allows for the complexity of discourses and provides for the interpretation of *local-* (specific context and details) and meta-narrative levels simultaneously. Therefore, in the context of world within the text, it is not the man's insistence that the speaker

should take up "loftier" activities that may be taken as sexist; instead, it is what he fails to acknowledge. It is the female speaker – and not the man – who, while supposedly occupying herself with *bytie*, would still have to shoulder all the domestic responsibilities.

The man's words in "Another Woman," of course, are not verbatim but are, rather, seen through the female speaker's point of view. The word repetitions and hackneyed phrases are representative of a drawn-out, and likely reoccurring, reprimand. In response, the female speaker reiterates some of the man's key phrases, engaging in a form of citational semantic play and conferring on them not only simple, but also self-referential, irony:

> Лоб мой напрягается от усилия вообразить соб-
> лазнительную приспособленность другой
> женщины к нашему уровню цивилизации и
> когда на конец это удается я улыбаюсь доверчиво-
> пренебрежительной улыбкой чеширского кота или
> Хулио Кортасара охотно уступая другой женщине
> свое место у плиты и во сне и все-все свои гори-
> зонтально-вертилального-тригонометрические колено-
> ухие холодноносые спиралеглазые положения и пока
> она осваивается с ними не обращая на меня никако-
> го внимание я незаметно прокрадываюсь е входной
> двери нашаривая ногами туфли и думая только о

том как бы не зацепиться за велосипед

в коридор.

My forehead tenses up with the effort to imagine the seductive
adaptability of
a n o t h e r woman to o u r level of civilization and when finally I
succeed
I smile the trustingly disdainful smile of the Cheshire cat or of Julio
Cortazar
gladly giving up my place at the stove to the other woman and in sleep
and in
all of my horizontal-vertical-trigonometrical knee-eared cold-nosed spiral-
eyed positions and while she masters them paying me no attention
whatsoever
I steal up to the front door feeling for my shoes and thinking only about
how
not to get snagged by the bicycle in the hall.

The speaker endows the phrase "другая женщина" ("another woman") with multiple significations. The word "соблазнительная" ("seductive") suggests not only the "tempting" idea of surrendering one's domestic responsibilities to "another woman" in exchange for purely intellectual or spiritual pursuits, but also evokes the supposed sexual appeal of the mistress –

"*the* other" woman. The text brings this to the fore in a comical manifestation as it describes a woman on the television who,

> фатально прикрывает глаза упиваясь своей
> землеройной походкой и звериной тоской
> по другому мужчине
> По тебе наверно.

> whispers and wails into an invisible microphone
> fatally shuts her eyes revelling in her
> shrewish gait and animal longing
> for another man
> For you probably.

The humour in this stanza, of course, stems from the fact that the woman who is described is the embodiment of "camp." She imitates, as the microphone connotes, the *idea* of a femme fatale. Furthermore, the woman herself is "framed" by the television and is, therefore, not only a textual fiction but a fiction within the "real" world of the speaker. This casting of womanhood as types to underscore that phallo(go)centric metanarratives utilize mere simulacra of women is a device that is used throughout the poem.

The text's clustered references to geometry and animals serve as figurative descriptions of the female speaker's duties and identity as a person

engaged in *byt*. On the one hand, they function as a feminist rejoinder directed at the male "you" by drawing attention to the vast number of skills and to the physical endurance that *byt* requires one to possess. The density and quantity of the sesquipedalian adjectives suggest the rapidity with which the speaker must conduct the many mundane daily tasks. The mathematical words signify the agility that is required. The adjectives "колено- / ухие холодноносые спиралеглазые" ("knee-eared cold-nosed spiral-eyed") connote the keen senses that a woman must have in order to cope with the quotidian: the aural abilities of a grasshopper, the olfactory sense of a dog and the visual acuity of a fly. However, the speaker's self-described mathematical maneuvers and animal-like instincts also imply that she is well aware that *byt* requires actions that are looked upon as, and *are* for her, mechanical or instinctive. Additionally, the hybridization of numerous linguistic registers – the scientific and organic, *byt* and *bytie* – constitute the speaker as a cyborg or transcultural (in the sense of crossing beyond totalizing metanarratives) subject "doing" multiple identity discourses.

Iskrenko's speaker clearly indicates that she would eagerly change places with someone who would be willing to take up her daily duties. When she momentarily "удается" ("succeeds") in imagining such an escape, she makes her transcultural identity clearly known as she refers to Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* character the Cheshire Cat and to Argentine experimental fiction writer Julio Cortázar (1914-1984). Both figures connote *bytie* and literature or, more specifically, a postmodern notion of subjectivity in

literature. In Carroll's book, the Cheshire Cat, with his near-omniscience and ability to physically disappear but remain a conscious presence, functions as a kind of disembodied metaphysical philosopher and may be said to represent the idea of the writer. The cat's power of invisibility, coupled with his paradoxical statements, constitute a multilayered subjectivity, suggestive of the theories of Butler, Haraway and Epstein and postmodernism in general.[23] Similarly, Cortázar produced fiction which challenges traditional notions of what constitutes reality and, as in the case of "*Las Babas del Diablo*" ("The Devil's Drivel" [1959]), subjectivity and the lyrical self.

In her acerbic response to the male "you," the speaker explores the identities of several "other" women who might take her place. In other words, she engages, on the levels of discourse and textuality, in performative acts. She contemplates, for example, a woman in a Modigliani painting, "Кажется в моем положении ей до- / вольно удобно" ("It seems in my / position she is pretty satisfied"). However, as the use of "[k]ажется" ("seems") implies, doubt is cast on the speaker's initial assessment and she adds, "хоть Модильяни и не любит / когда на него смотрят" ("although Modigliani does not like being looked / at"). As the text indicates, the woman's eyes in the painting are blacked out; they are

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[23] This is illustrated, for example, in the following from Carroll's text:

> "Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to walk from here?"
> "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat.
> "I don't care much where –" said Alice.
> "Then it doesn't matter which way you walk," said the Cat.
> "— So long as I get somewhere," Alice added as an explanation.
> "Oh, you're sure to do that," said the Cat, "if you only walk long enough." (73)
> . . .
> "Well! I've often seen a cat without a grin," thought Alice; "but a grin without a cat! It's the most curious thing I ever saw in all my life!" (77)

"слепые" ("blind"). A parallel, then, emerges between the attempt by the speaker's male companion to impose an identity, his own definition of "woman," on the female "I" and the idea that Modigliani has seemingly blinded the woman in his painting in order that he may "see" her as he would like. In addition, the painter prevents the model from assessing him, and herself, from her own point of view. Both men, representing phallo(go)centric discourse, effectively, wish to strip away women's performative potential to "lay claim to what is [their] own" by means of what feminist scholar Laura Mulvey terms "the male gaze" (Butler, *Undoing* 100; Mulvey 366). Although the concept of the male gaze first appeared in Western film studies, it may be broadened to apply to feminist inquiry in literature, including the dynamics between the male and female figures of Iskrenko's poem. Mulvey, like Butler and Haraway, points to the oppressive nature of phallo(go)centric dichotomies:

> In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness . . . . (366)

The gaze of the male "you" in "Another Woman" is constituted by his ability to see only his definition of "woman" as correct and by *his* blindness in recognizing the value of his female partner's occupation with the everyday tasks in their household, as well as the inequity involved in the fact that she is solely responsible for *byt*.

In the final stanza of the poem, too, the reader encounters suggestions of what may be considered a manifestation of the male gaze, as the female speaker refers to herself as "другая женщина" ("another woman"), sardonically echoing her male companion's words. As she walks along the street, she "отражаясь в / каждом встречном лице" ("[is] being reflected in / every face"). While the faces are not specifically those of men, throughout the poem the speaker generally explores the notion of female gender identity using the prescriptions of the male "you" as her framework. In this context, the assessments of herself that the female speaker reads in the expressions of pedestrians may be interpreted as the presence of a looming phallo(go)centric gaze. It is a gaze which constantly threatens to overpower the "I's" potential for subversive or, at least, assertive performativity, and one that cannot be wholly diverted in the context of the world within the poem nor, as Butler would claim, in the reality outside of the text.

In spite of the fact, that the female speaker desperately wishes to lead an intellectual and spiritual life, she understands that the "other woman" whom her male companion describes, as well as the other women that she imagines would take her place by "mastering" and carrying out all of her everyday tasks, are

mere fabrications of women for which there are no real models. They are, in fact, simulacra that are the products of phallo(go)centric discourse. It is in the reoccurring appearance of the bicycle, the central signifier of *byt* in the poem, that the fate of the speaker is contained. In the final outcome she is "tripped up" by the unavoidable and physical reality of *byt,* just as notions of gender will always be caught up in the spokes of dominant discourse,

наконец не падает
навзничь в темноте среди ночи
нечаянно споткнувшись о велосипед
в коридоре.

finally she falls
flat in the dark of night
accidentally tripping on a bicycle
in the hall.

Iskrenko's work marks an end of the poetry of Russia's "dull years."[24] However, the progression of her writing from a postmodernism of reaction to one of resistance with its performative dimensions, signals a new era of Russian poetry, one in which doubt and chaos can coexist with subjectivity and a "new sincerity": "[A]s repetition and citationality turn into habit, they will become the

[24] See Iskrenko's "We Are the Children of Russia's Dull Years (On the Poetic Tendencies of the 1980s, and Some of Their Sources)." The title of the essay refers to Alexandr Blok's (1880-1921) poem "Those who were born in years of stagnation" in which occurs the line "We, the children of Russia's fearful years."

foundation for a new lyric poetry, whose journey has its beginning and not its end in ironic estrangement" (M. Epstein, "Place of Postmodernism" 461). Scholars have commented on Iskrenko's unique accomplishment, "What distinguishes Iskrenko from her flashier peers with a postmodern stance is the genuine lyricism of so many of her poems" (Meyer 200). Through the originality of her polystylistic poems, Iskrenko's "heroine[s] returns integrity and meaning to chaos of life" (Trofimova 217).

John High, a translator, writer and friend of Iskrenko, said that "[h]er favorite activity was searching for a black cat in a dark room, especially when it wasn't there" ("Note on the Author" 105). High forgets the Cheshire Cat. The great gift of Iskrenko's poetry lies in knowing that, at any given moment, the cat may or may not be there, or, at times, that one may catch a glimpse of that moon-shaped fragment of his knowing Cheshirean grin.

Chapter Three: Iuliia Kunina and Tatiana Voltskaia

Iuliia Kunina is one of many younger generation Russian poets on whose life and work the opening of post-Soviet borders has had a significant impact. Born in Moscow, she graduated from the Philology Department of Moscow State University. Like many writers in Russia, her first collection of work (*Кайрос* [*Kaipros*]) was not published until the watershed year 1991. Three books of her poetry followed, *Стихи* (*Poems* 1992), *Дюрер перед зеркалом* (*Durer Before the Mirror* [1996]), and *Ночные шуточки пространства*" (*Nighttime Jokes of the Expanse* [2004]). Kunina's poetry, as well as her translations of English-language literature into Russian, have appeared in numerous paper and Internet journals and anthologies, including John High's distinctly postmodern collection *Crossing Centuries: The New Generation of Russian Poetry* (2000).

In 1993, Kunina left Russia to pursue her doctoral studies in comparative literature and translation theory in the United States, where she has been teaching for several years. She also regularly organizes and hosts Russian-English bilingual literary events, among them readings by renowned poet Vera Pavlova (b. 1963). Kunina periodically returns to Russia as an active participant in the literary milieu. She continues to write poetry but, in what one might call a truly performative act, she chooses to distinguish her literary self from her academic self, publishing her scholarly works only under the surname "Trubikhina." In her life, as in her work, Kunina demonstrates a keen awareness of the complexities and consequences of that which constitutes a Russian woman poet's identity.

Kunina's poem "Inconsistent Self Portrait" (1996) – published, significantly, after her move to the United States – immediately signals that it takes the "paradox" of identity, "split between repulsion and attraction, estrangement and loyalty," as its theme (Weeks 372). The title suggests that the speaker's autobiographical account will be contradictory, bringing to mind the "trouble" of subjecthood that most postmodern theories address. Additionally, the original Russian-language text of the poem is set in contrast to its intended English title, suggesting the speaker's transcultural aspiration to multiple, if fragmented and problematic, non-Russian and Russian identities.

The first line of the text succinctly posits additional identity discourses. The speaker declares, "Я полурусская" ("I am a half Russian woman"). The adjective bears a feminine ending, "ая" ("*aia*"), indicating that the speaker is female and adding a third identity discourse to the text. These first words also seem to raise the question: if the speaker is *half* Russian, what constitutes the other half? Clearly, as the poem goes on to relay, the speaker is absorbed with what constitutes her identity:

. . . 30, почти магистр,
метр 67, реестр, регистр,
обрывки энциклопедии, выписки из словаря,
три языка, коротко говоря.

30, almost got my MA,

1 metre 67, on the list and registered,

fragments of an encyclopedia, excerpts from a dictionary,

three languages, to synopsize.[25]

Like the postmodern notion of identity, the speaker's self is not whole; it exists in "fragments." The qualities that are attributed to the speaker in these lines seem to lack the depth and vitality of those usually employed to portray human beings. The description is entirely official and factual: numeric descriptions, certifications, and lists. The woman appears to be no more than an entry in a reference book. It is a depiction which not only clearly suggests Butler and Haraway's theories, but shares much in common with key notions of Russian postmodernism in general, with the "cosmic library catalog" of languages or "dead text-objects" in a "warehouse" or "virtual library" (Janacek, "Lev" 107; Groys 41).

The speaker in Kunina's text provides a "catalogue" of her "self," but it appears less as the language of self-creation than as a citation from bureaucratic authoritative discourses. The following lines of the poem indicate that, indeed, much of her "[s]elf portrait" is constituted in the performative act of repeating others' accounts of her identity:

[25] Rather than "on the list," "*reestr*" might have been better translated as simply "catalogue." Additionally, "*registr*" ("registered") may also be translated as "nomenclature."

Это мои глаза, говорят - красивы.

Это мой длинный нос.

Губы - цвет сливы, или черники, или помады,

и разбирать зачем?

Это мой профиль, говорят - нубийский,

а может, еврейский, точнее, просто российский,

где черт знает что смешалось черт знает с чем.

Это моя повадка сорок-воровок.

Это мой решительный подбородок

решимости неизвестно на что и как.

Here are my eyes: people say they're beautiful.

Here is my long nose.

My lips are plum-coloured, or bilberry coloured, or lipsticked,

whatever.

Here is my profile: people say it's Nubian,

or perhaps Jewish, or really Russian,

the devil knows what the devil's mixed together.

Here is my thieving magpie's habit.

Here is my decisive chin,

although what is it decisive about? [26]

[26] The use of the word "Russian" here is a misleading and inaccurate translation. The original text employs "*rossiiskii,*" which is an adjective used to describe a person or thing that is from the geographical region Russia. It does not refer to culture or lineage, as does the word "*russkii,*" which is used in the first line of the poem.

The text no longer provides a mere "blank" pastiche of the speaker's traits. At the same time that the speaker recounts the descriptions that others have given of her, she makes a sharp and mocking riposte. Each time "people" believe that they have named one particular innate attribute that provides an essentialist account of her, such as the 'natural' colour of her lips, she indicates the inaccuracy of their account, thwarting their attempts to reduce her subjecthood to a single, stable signifier in their metanarratives. In actuality, the speaker is 'putting on' a discursively-constructed act, just as she puts on lipstick. She is a 'thieving' and 'devilish' "сорок" ("magpie") who 'mixes' "разные и разнообразные" ("differing and different") discourses; she is a performatively-contituted, "monstrous" cyborg (Haraway 154, 179).

Kunina's speaker is also keenly aware that she enacts, at various moments, two other key identities – female and literary. Her performative self is comprised of,

> старых девушек и интересных дам,
> ренуаровских баб и сомнительных персонажей,
> суфражисток и верных жен, и этих, не знаю даже,
> которым в дофеминистскую эру собирались дать по мозгам.
> Но это, так сказать, бахвальство, точнее, шкурка,
> лягушачья пупыристая кожурка,
> . . . . . .
> А так, я ползу, истлевая в прахе,

подобно гаду и черепахе,

повелевая умом громам!

old girls and interesting ladies,

Renoir women and dubious personages,

suffragettes and faithful wives, and these, whom I don't know

who were humiliated in the prefeminist era.

But this is, so to speak, bragging, or rather a hide,

pimply frog skin,

. . . . . .

And so, I crawl, smouldering in ash,

like a serpent or tortoise,

commanding the thunder with my mind.

The speaker does not "do" simply one type of femaleness or identity, but draws from numerous, and sometimes seemingly contradictory, discourses of womanhood and subjecthood. She is thoroughly conscious that she is donning, combining and changing 'skins.' On the one hand, the speaker, at times, considers this oppressive, physical "lived reality" akin to the existence of reptiles which must struggle along the ground, slowly or without the freedom of movement that limbs permit. On the other hand, even from the binding position of being 'grounded' in preexisting metanarratives, the final line, "повелевая умом громам" ("commanding the thunder with my mind") emerges as textual self-referentiality. Like Iskrenko's Cheshire cat who sits knowingly in a tree

above all that transpires below, Kunina's speaker understands that, in spite of her travails, she is able to move the heavens. It suggests the privilege of poet, who wields control over identity (and all other) discourses through the act of writing. Furthermore, the process by which the speaker of "Inconsistent Self Portrait" encounters and negotiates identity discourses suggests a gesture towards transculturalism, a move towards a rich and creative cultural environment of people with multivalent identities that exists beyond borders.

Tatiana Voltskaia is one of the few contemporary Russian literati who is willing to publicly entertain questions about gender and poetry. In her essay "Rhyme is Female," she acknowledges a suspicion that phall(og)ocentric metanarratives may still prevail,

> In the Middle Ages venerable [male] scholastics would often consider the question as to whether women were human and whether they possessed a soul. Since then, as this question with a few reservations has been decided in the affirmative, women have acquired a large number of useful rights – to study, to vote and be elected, to become astronauts, to have abortions, to wear trousers, to get divorced, to apply themselves in all spheres of human activity. Still, I cannot escape the feeling that the shadow of that accursed question, formulated by pedantic theologians, still hangs over us . . . .
>
> Otherwise, why should one publish an anthology of women's poetry? (10)

Voltskaia, herself, considers literature itself to be gendered, "у прозы и поэзии существует голос, и у прозы этот голос мужской, а у поэзии – женский, . . . просто высокий . . . . Хотя из этого и не следует, будто поэзией следует заниматься исключительно женщинам" ("*Po polomu priznaku*") ("prose and poetry [in the highest sense, of course] have a voice, that of prose being male and that of poetry female, in that it is high pitched . . . . Although . . . it doesn't follow that only women should occupy themselves with poetry" ["Interview" 241]). She has had something bold to say about the quality of literature written by women and men, as well. With the exception of the few poets with the status the likes of Joseph Brodsky,

> women-poets in Russia, in recent decades, have been better writers. . . . [O]ne of the main [reasons] being that the machine of Soviet ideology (and of any other) damaged women less, not because they are superior to men, but because they are more concerned with the private sphere, family, feelings – those areas that it is harder for any political entity to penetrate. The male tendency is to grasp the world as a whole, from the outside; women, on the other hand, try to grasp it from within. And in daily life as well as in art women resort to detail – nappies, love-letters, clothes, flowers. For bloodthirsty ideologists all this seems petty and inessential; however it is precisely such matters that enable a human being to remain human even in unhuman conditions (Voltskaia, "Rhyme is Female" 10).

Voltskaia's outspokenness, however, is not confined to the subject of gender and literature. Since the early age of seventeen, she has been working as a journalist in her native city of St. Petersburg and, in 2000, she began became a correspondent for the Радио Свобода (Radio Liberty), one of the few independent voices in media broadcasting in Russia. Although her essays and journalism frequently address literature and the arts, her interest is equally focused on issues that continue to be controversial in post-Soviet society. Her writing and broadcasts often concern such subjects as anti-Semitism, racism, war and militarism, democracy and free speech.

Given Voltskaia's penchant for taking up public issues in her work, it may appear in stark contrast that her poetry has been called "Russian classical" with elegiac, personal, and lyrical qualities (Lygo 11-12). Her career and writing as a poet, however, run parallel to her work as a journalist and essayist. At the time she began working as a correspondent in the late 1980s, she also took up poetry and her first collection *Две крови* (*Two Bloods*) appeared in 1989. It was soon followed by four more books of poetry, *Свитки* (*Scrolls* [1990]); *Стрела* (*Arrow* [1994]); *Тень* (*Shadow* [1998]) and *Цикада* (*Cicada* [2002]), as well as literary awards, including the Tepfer Pushkin Prize (1998) and an award from the St. Petersburg journal *Звезда* (*Star*) in 2002. Emily Lygo notes of Voltskaia's non-fiction and poetry that, "The same concerns and themes appear in both aspects of her work, but while in the prose Voltskaia sets these in the context of our lives and times, and examines the implications that they have for our society,

in her poetry she explores the significance which her subjects have for the individual" (11).

Voltskaia's poetry, with its strict verse form and classical and philosophical themes, is an heir to the Russian classical Petersburg school, which includes the work of writers such as Osip Mandelshtam (1891-1938) and Brodsky (1940-96).[27] Additionally, her poetry seems to show few signs of the irreverent and parodic play of postmodern poetry. Nevertheless, however "traditional" Voltskaia's verse may first appear, it does explore the lives and experiences of women. Lygo notes that, "At the centre of [Voltskaia's] lyrical poetry there is a woman trying to escape from her condition and isolation, seeking communication through dialogue" (11-12). Furthermore, in the content, rather than the form, her writing does, in fact, display postmodern qualities.

Voltskaia's poem "Рифма - женщина, примеряющая наряды" ("Rhyme is a woman, trying on clothes") explores gender identity, in part, through performative acts. It bears out, however, in an interesting manner – through the idea that discourse "does" the performer,

Рифма - женщина, примеряющая наряды,

В волосы втыкающая розу.

Она плещется в крови, как наяда,

И выныривает, когда не просят.

[27] In spite of Brodsky's common designation as a classical modernist poet, some scholars have viewed his works as either a precursor to, or example of postmodern poetry. See, for example, David Rigsbee, *Styles of Ruin: Joseph Brodsky and the Postmodernist Elegy* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999).

Rhyme is a woman, trying on clothes,
plaiting a rose into her hair.
She splashes in blood, like a naiad,
and surfaces, when not asked to.

Rhyme is personified as a woman and used metonymically to represent poetry and, by extension, language. It connotes Butler's notion that discourses "wear" subjects and constitute their performative identities. The stanza emphasizes, in particular, discourse that is gendered as female. It is similar to the performativity and self-referentiality of Iskrenko's "young women" as "letters," though the focus of Voltskaia's line is a subversion of poetic, rather than gender, discourse by seemingly turning the fictional,"Рифма" ("Rhyme"), into something 'real' – "женщина" ("a woman"). Moreover, from the viewpoint of transcultural theory, both Voltskaia's and Iskrenko's conflations connote an "open system of symbolic alternatives" that transpose seemingly fixed discourses in multiple directions, thereby increasing their possible significations (Berry and Epstein 24, 10).

Voltskaia's poem also suggests a triadic conflation between poetry, the nymph and the woman. The fact that the poem employs "наряды" ("clothing"), "роза" ("a rose"), a hairstyle, and "наяда" (a naiad) – traditional and archetypal images of "feminine" physical beauty – may at first appear to reinscribe femaleness in an essentialist and phallo(go)centric sense. However, in spite of the mythological creature's association with nature, corporeal feminine beauty

and sexuality, neither rhyme nor the woman nor the nymph herself surrender that measure of subversive volition to which both Butler and Haraway refer. Any of the stanza's three performative subjects may don, modify, or add to their identities whenever they wish, even "когда не просят" ("when not asked to"). Furthermore, Voltskaia's text, like Haraway's cyborg, is "not innocent" (180). Poetry "плещется в крови" ("splashes in blood"), as do, by extension, the woman and the nymph. The association of women with blood connotes menstruation, suggesting not only the more obvious loss of innocence and the female power to create children but, at the same time, poetry's ability to produce multiple significations. Similarly, undines are known for their enticing "siren songs," but to heed their call may be dangerous, just as to read a poem – to encounter new a discourse – poses a risk to the reader's formerly-held beliefs.

In thwarting metanarratives, "Rhyme" may have the ability to ward off "злые духи" ("evil spirits"), but doing so may amount to much more than performatively playing 'dress up.' There remain the consequences for falling outside hegemonic standards (Butler, *Undoing* 104). Like Butler, Haraway acknowledges the power and subversive potential of discourse and hones in on textual discourse, literature in particular. She emphasizes what may be at stake,

> Writing has a special significance for all colonized groups. Writing has been crucial to the Western myth of the distinction between oral and written cultures, primitive and civilized mentalities, and more recently to the erosion of that distinction in "postmodernist" theories attacking the

> phallogocentrism of the West, with its worship of the monotheistic, phallic, authoritative, and singular work. . . . Contests for the meanings of writing are a major form of contemporary political struggle. Releasing the play of writing is deadly serious. The poetry and stories of US women of colour are repeatedly about writing, about access to the power to signify. . . . Cyborg writing is about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other. (175)

For the speaker of Voltskaia's poem, writing is, indeed, "deadly serious." As it is for the speakers in Iskrenko's "Another Woman" and Kunina's "Inconsistent Self Portrait," creating is a wearying task for Voltskaia's speaker because it always requires the staving off of threatening discourses. Regardless of her willful acts, in the wake of her efforts, Voltskaia's speaker experiences,

> От души виновной, безлюдной,
> Когда ветер в зарослях чертополоха
> Плачет ночью холодной.

> [a] solitary guilty soul,
> when the wind in the thistle thickets
> weeps during the cold night.

In the third stanza of "Rhyme is woman," poetry divinely intercedes, giving the speaker a momentary reprieve, "Рифма - серебряный колокольчик, / Поднимающий меня из гроба" ("Rhyme is a celestial trumpet – that is, / it rouses me from the grave). The resurrection occurs almost simultaneously with the arrival of a male lover, "Когда ты приходишь, мой мальчик, / И, блеснув очками, целуешь в губы" ("when you come, beloved, with shining eyes, / and kiss me on the lips").[28]

The respite that the speaker experiences, however, is fleeting. At the end of "Rhyme is a woman," the text suggests that the speaker is a poet, "Я иду по ней - а куда, и сама не знаю, / Заговариваю зубы смерти" ["I, myself, don't know where, / I distract death with smooth talk").[29] She uses poetry as an amulet to stave off death. Voltskaia suggests, as Iskrenko and Kunina do, that although "the Muse is a goddess, . . like all divine beings, she demands sacrifice. It seems . . . that women writers are much more conscious of this than male ones" ("Rhyme is Female" 12).

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[28] "My guy" would be a more accurate rendering than "beloved." The literal translation of "*moi malchik*" is "my boy." In the context of the poem, however, it should be construed as a romantic term of endearment.

[29] That the speaker is female is indicated by gender-marked language in line 15 –"*sama,*" which means "myself." One could almost translate this as "my female self."

Conclusion: The Transmodern Subject: A Livable Life

> The modernist age, of "one way, one truth, one city," is dead and gone. The postmodernist age of "anything goes" is on the way out. Reason can take us a long way, but it has limits. Let us embrace post-postmodernism — and pray for a better name.
>
> — Tom Turner, *City as Landscape: A Post-Postmodern View of Design and Planning* (10)

Contemporary Russian women poets have, on the one hand, succeeded in breaking away from male-imposed definitions of woman in their craft. The work of Iskrenko, Kunina and Voltskaia demonstrates that recent poetry by Russian women is actively engaged in exploring gender and cultural identity and does so in a manner that now resists the age-old phall(og)ocentric dictates of the Russian literary canon. On the other hand, there does remain a quality of "vagueness" in Russian women poets' own expressions of female distinctiveness, but it is does not manifest itself in the form of the "pure and lovely" ladies of classic Russian literature. It is instead a positive, (re-)constructive ambiguity that multiplies, or "potentiates," the possible definitions of female and cultural subjectivity. As the application of the theories of Butler, Haraway and Epstein to the work of Iskrenko, Kunina and Voltskaia demonstrate, female personae exhibit a fluidity in their identities through the poetry of Russian women, whether overtly as direct themes or indirectly by way of a multiplicity of Russian and non-Russian styles, and literary and cultural references. These developments in the writing by Russian women may be explained, in part, by the fact that, since the collapse of the U.S.S.R., Russians have been making frequent forays beyond borders in

terms of both geographical and informational journeys – the latter, in particular, by means of the Internet.

No study of contemporary literature would be complete without a few words about the role that the World Wide Web currently plays in authors' lives and works, including in those in Russia. All cultural activities that now take place are inextricably woven into a landscape that is increasingly affected by globalization and technology is an inevitable thread in this international fabric. Literature is no less affected by these events than any other cultural phenomena. There is a seemingly endless array of literary web sites, online publications, electronic libraries and resources. In his note to the reader in *Russian Women Poets*, Weissbort writes, "Technological advances as well as the Internet have hugely increased the availability of writing, from Moscow to Vladivostok. This greatly complicates the task of anthologists" and, one might add, of any scholar undertaking a literary survey (5). Add to this the academic debate on whether, and if so how, to apply feminist, postmodern and/or cultural studies theories to Russian texts and the choice of which paths to take becomes daunting.

Additionally, Internet literary projects are not simply sources of transcultural literature in a broad sense, but they also embody the concept of performativity. Unlike hard-copy publications, the Internet, with its processual and reconstituent nature, allows for poets to continually modify and recreate their work and their (hyper)textual personae. Even authorial identity can be altered; HTML can be recoded, usernames and avatars may be changed with an ease similar to sampling masks in a costume shop. Russian authors who publish

on the Internet are keenly aware that their work is situated in these, not fixed, but moving "frames." Few scholars know, for example, that Russian women writers and academics, such as Irina Aristarkhova, Alla Mitrofanova and Olga Suslova, are among the founders of not just Russian, but transnational cyberfeminism, which originated in the 1990s and was inspired, in part, by Haraway who argues that "The cyborg is a creature in a post-gendered world" (150).

Although cyberfeminism is still developing and its intersections with Russian women and writers need to be further explored, due to its awareness of the artificiality of gender, cultural and political constructs and its emphasis on the primacy of women (re-)creating themselves and the world through the (re-)constructive use of computers and the Internet, it opens doors for Russian women poets and Russian women in general. As Mitrofanova has put it, "Cyberfeminism is a browser through which to view life" (Wilding).

The Internet also offers other, more concrete, possibilities for Russian women poets. Lacking the economic bases and stable social welfare systems that offer many Western women writers access to child-care centers and broad opportunities for the publication of their work, Russian women poets are taking advantage of the convenience and accessibility that computers and cyberspace offer. Sites such as Kuzmin's *Вавилон* (*Babylon*) are playing a key role in making Russian women's voices heard, not only in Russia but on an international scale.

It may be arguable, however, whether the performativity and cyborg identities that manifest themselves in the writing of contemporary Russian women poets amount to, as Haraway asserts, a literal "matter of survival" (153). Certainly, Western Slavists can hardly claim that applying feminist postmodern theories to poetry by Russian women will act as any kind of talisman again anyone's demise. At best, one might expect, as Butler does, that postmodern feminism allows scholars to follow along with female Russian poets as they explore identity in their texts in an attempt to better comprehend what it is to be "another woman," and by doing so make life a bit more "livable." (*Undoing* 1, 12). The most meaningful aspect of the writing of contemporary Russian poets may, in fact, dwell in its burgeoning expressions toward transcultural identity and a post-Soviet future in a *trans*modern world.

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Appendix

Iunna Morits (Иунна Мориц)

Между Сциллой и Харибдой

Быть поэтессой в России –
труднее, чем быть поэтом:
единица женской силы в русской поэзии – 1
ахмацвет.

Ходим в люльке с погремушкой,
Расцветаем, увядаем.
Между Арктикой и Кушкой,
Между Польшей и Китаем.

Покидаем с вечным всхлипом
Облак над лицейским прудом.
Между Лиром и Эдипом,
Между Цезарем и Брутом.

Сохраняем здравый разум,
Маслим свет над фолиантом.
Строим ясли голым фразам,
Между Пушкиным и Дантом.

Поднося фонарь к репризам,
Связь находим колоссальной
Между Блоком и Хафизом,
Между Музой и Кассандрой.

И дыша гипербореем,
Проплываем каравеллой
Между Женей и Андреем,
Между Беллой и Новеллой.

Но кровавою корридой
Угрожает путь старинный
Между Сциллой и Харибдой,
Между Анной и Мариной.

Между Сциллой и Харибдой
Между Анной и Мариной -
Кто проглочен был пучиной
Тот и выплюнут пучиной.

Стало следствие причиной
Объясняю образ странный
Кто проглочен был Мариной
Тот и выплюнут был Анной.

Золотою серединой
Отродясь не обладаем,
Между Анной и Мариной,
Между Польшей и Китаем.

И над бездною родимой
Уж не знамо, как летаем,
Между Анной и Мариной
Между Польшей и Китаем.

Between Scylla and Charybdis

To be a woman poet in Russia is harder than
To be a male poet: the unit of female power
in Russian poetry is one akhmatsvet

With a rattle we are walking
Round the cradle, flowering, fading.
Between the Arctic and Turkmenia,
Between the Polish lands and China.

With a deep sob we abandon
Clouds above the Lycée puddle –
Between Oedipus and Lear,
Between Julius and Brutus.

We keep our reason healthy,
Dim the light above the folio,
Make a crib for naked phrases,
Between Pushkin and Alighieri.

Highlighting the reprises,
We find a vast connection
Between Blok and Persian Hafiz,
Between the Muse and Cassandra.

And breathing, hyperborean,
We sail through, caravel-like,
Between Zhenya and Andrei,
Between Bella and Novella.

But like a gory bullfight,
The ancient path is threatening,
Between Scylla and Charybdis,
Between Anna and Marina.

Between Scylla and Charybdis,
Between Anna and Marina,
He whom the gulf has swallowed
Was spat out by it likewise.

Consequence became a cause.
I'll explain this odd idea:
He whom Marina swallowed,
Was spat out then by Anna.

In all our born days, never
Did we command the Golden Mean –
Between Anna and Marina,
Between the Polish lands and China.

And above our native chasm –
Who knows how! – look, we are flying
Between Anna and Marina,
Between the Polish lands and China.

Нина Искренко (Nina Iskrenko)

Гимн полистилистике

Полистилистика
это когда средневековый рыцарь
в шортах
штурмует винный отдел гастронома № 13
по улице Декабристов
и куртуазно ругаясь
роняет на мраморный пол
«Квантовую механику» Ландау и Лифшица

Полистилистика
это когда одна часть платья
из голландского полотна
соединяется с двумя частями
из пластилина
а остальные части вообще отсутствуют

или тащатся где-то в хвосте
пока часы бьют и хрипят
а мужики смотрят

Полистилистика
это когда все девушки красивы
как буквы
в армянском алфавите Месропа Маштоца
а расколотое яблоко не более других
планет
и детские ноты
стоят вверх ногами
как будто на небе легче дышать
и что-то все время жужжит и жужжит
над самым ухом

Полистилистика
это звездная аэробика
наблюдаемая в заднюю дверцу
в разорванном рюкзаке
это закон
космического непостоянства
и простое пижонство
на букву икс

Полистилистика
это когда я хочу петь
а ты хочешь со мной спать
и оба мы хотим жить
вечно

Ведь как все устроено
если задуматься
Как все задумано
если устроится
Если не нравится
значит не пуговица
Если не крутится
зря не крути
Нет на земле неземного и мнимого
Нет пешехода как щепка румяного
Многие спят в телогрейках и менее
тысячи карт говорят о войне
Только любовь
любопытная бабушка
бегает в гольфах и Федор Михалыч Достоевский

и тот не удержался бы и выпил рюмку «Киндзмараули»
~~за здоровье Толстого~~ за здоровье толстого семипалатинского
мальчика на скрипучем велосипеде

В Ленинграде и Самаре 17 — 19
В Вавилоне полночь
На западном фронте без перемен

Hymn to Polystylistics

Polystylistics
is when a knight from the Middle Ages
wearing shorts
storms into the wine section of store #13
located on Decembrists street
& cursing like one of the Court's nobles
he drops his copy of Landau & Lifshitz's "Quantum
Mechanics," where it falls on the marble floor

Polystylistics
is when one part of a dress
made of Dutch linen
is combined with two parts
of plastic & glue
and in general, the remaining parts are missing altogether
or or dragging themselves along somewhere near
the rear end while the clock strikes & wheezes
& a few guys look on

Polystylistics
is when all the young women are as pretty[30]
as letters
from the Armenian alphabet composed by Mesrop Mashtoz
& the cracked apple's
no greater than any one of the planets
& the children's notes are turned upside down
as if in the air it would be easier to breathe like this
& something is always humming
& buzzing
just over the ear

[30] In High's translation, "*devushki krasivy*" is "girls" and "cute," however, "young women" and "pretty" is a more accurate rendering.

Polystylistics
is a kind of celestial aerobics
observed through the torn backpack's
back flap
it's a law
of cosmic instability
& some stupid play
on the "F" word

Polystylistics
is when I want to sing
& you want to go to bed with me
& we both want to live
forever

After all how was everything constructed
if this is how it's all conceived
How was everything constructed
if it's still waiting to be constructed
And if you don't care for it
well then, it's not a button
And if it's not turning
don't dare turn it

No no unearthliness exists on earth
no pedestrian blushed as a piece of lath
Many sleep in leather & even less
than a thousand maps are talking about war

Only love
like a curious grandmother
running bare-legged & Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky
could not hold back from shooting a glass of Kindzmarauli wine
to the health of ~~Tolstoy~~ the fat boy riding through his home town
Semipalatinsk, on a screeching bicycle

In Leningrad & Samara it's 17-19 degrees

In Babylon it's midnight

On the Western Front there are no changes.

Другая женщина

Когда мне невмочь
пересилить беду
когда у меня бессонница
и целый бак грязного белья
когда я
путаю детей
с динозаврами
а благоприятное расположение светил на небе
принимаю за простую любезность
когда без
четверти восемь мне уже пора
и без четверти девять мне уже пора
и без четверти одиннадцать мне
уже пора
и по радио
говорят всякие нехорошие вещи
когда телефон наконец отключается
потому что больше уже не может
а мысленно представленный кусок масла
не мажется на воображаемый хлеб
и вдобавок в темноте среди ночи я натыкаюсь на
велосипед в коридоре

раздается сонный слабораздраженный треск спички
и под дверь тянет дымом
Это ты
начинаешь мне талдычить про другую женщину

Другая женщина на твоем месте
Другая женщина в твоем положении
Другая женщина при нашем уровне цивилизации
не обратила бы внимания на эти регулярные
ежемесячные капризы не обратила бы внимания
не обратила бы

Лоб мой напрягается от усилия вообразить соблазнительную приспособленность другой
женщины к нашему уровню цивилизации и
когда наконец это удается я улыбаюсь доверчиво-
пренебрежительной улыбкой чеширского кота или
Хулио Кортасара охотно уступая другой женщине
свое место у плиты и во сне и все-все свои горизонтально-вертикально-тригонометрические коленоухие холодноносые спиралеглазые положения и пока
она осваивается с ними не обращая на меня никакого внимания я незаметно прокрадываюсь к входной

двери нашаривая ногами туфли и думая только о
том как бы не зацепиться за велосипед
в коридоре

Звонят
Я открываю
Другая женщина жалобным выпрыгивающим из платья
голосом просит вызвать милицию муж напился а она
ударила его сковородкой с котлетами нет ли у вас
валерьянки спасибо что это за гадость никогда та
-кого не пила господи живут же люди тихо спокойно
дружно

Вернувшись в комнату за носовым платком
я замечаю как другая женщина упруго-вальяжно
развалилась на чем-то буро-красном и грязно-голу-
бом У нее великолепный золотистый почти мужской
торс обрезанный рамкой и замазанные черным
слепые глаза Кажется в моем положении ей до-
вольно удобно хоть Модильяни и не любит
когда на него смотрят

Мерцает телевизор
Другая женщина на экране
нашептывает и воет в невидимый микрофон
фатально прикрывает глаза упиваясь своей
землеройной походкой и звериной тоской
по другому мужчине
По тебе наверно

Через полчаса другая женщина в сбившейся вуали
и кирзовых сапогах
внезапно падает мне на голову с книжной полки
и лежит на полу без чувств вся раскрытая
на той странице где враги сожгли родную хату
где католики непрерывно режут гугенотов
а турки армян
и медный всадник загоняет медного коня
на пути из Петербурга в Москву
чтобы поспеть к утру стрелецкой казни

Кизиловой подливки к мясу и курице
у нас никогда не бывает
Не растет у нас на рынке кизил
наверное это другая женщина листает на кухне
поваренную книгу повернувшись ко мне своей

вкусной кизиловой попкой наклеенной на кар-
тонный пакетик от немецких колготок

Голубые сумерки мокнут
и контуры их теряются в речке и часами и минутами
наматывается на цифровой замок в подъезде страдаль
-чески-виолончельный скрип дверей

Во дворе дети старательно сопя лепят из снега
другую женщину
Ее голова все время разваливается
прямо наказание какое-то с этой дурацкой головой
кто ее только выдумал
может сделать ей глаза на животе

Темнеет Накрапывает Светает Тянется
Проглядывает Подморозило

Другая женщина на моем месте смотрит в зеркало
наклонив лицо так
чтобы не было видно кругов под глазами

Другая женщина в моем положении перебирает ложки
и лезет на антресоли за стиральным порошком

Другая женщина при нашем уровне цивилизации
шагает по тротуару в овощебазных джинсах
просматривает журналы в киосках
скучает за дружеской беседой
догадывается о концовке рассказа после третьего
абзаца хотя он состоит из двух

и выходит из метро наверх
к памятнику Пушкину в тот самый момент
когда поэт с застывшим каменным лицом
снимает цилиндр
и поворачивается к Тверскому бульвару
устало прислушиваясь к шуму самолетов
легкому постукиванию экипажей
и скрипу половиц в Михайловском
Он с напускным равнодушием разглядывает
другую женщину
которая не обращая на него никакого внимания
мелодически движется через улицу

Лицо ее розовеет в предупредительном сиянии

светофора Тормоза визжат
Она вскрикивает и бежит
не оглядываясь давясь морозным воздухом
механически прочитывая вывески и отражаясь в
каждом встречном лице пока наконец не падает
навзничь в темноте среди ночи
нечаянно споткнувшись о велосипед
в коридоре

Another Woman

When I cannot stand
to muster strength against misfortune
when I cannot sleep
and face an entire tank of dirty laundry
when I
mistake my children
for dinosaurs
but take the favorable disposition of luminaries in the sky
for a simple act of courtesy
when at a quarter to
eight I have to go
and at a quarter to nine I have to go
and at a quarter to eleven I
have to go
and the radio
is saying all manner of bad things
when the telephone finally tunes out
because it can't take this anymore
and a piece of butter brought to mind
does not spread on an imaginary piece of bread
and what's more I stumble in the dark of night on
the bicycle in the hall
the sleepy and slightly irritated striking of a match is heard
and smoke reaches under the door
This is you
starting to talk on and on to me about another woman

Another woman in your place
Another woman in your position
Another woman at our level of civilization would pay no attention to these
regular monthly whims would not pay attention would not pay

My forehead tenses up with the effort to imagine the seductive adaptability of
a n o t h e r woman to o u r level of civilization and when finally I succeed

I smile the trustingly disdainful smile of the Cheshire cat or of Julio Cortázar
gladly giving up my place at the stove to the other woman and in sleep and in
all of my horizontal-vertical-trigonometrical knee-eared cold-nosed spiral-eyed
positions and while she masters them paying me no attention whatsoever
I steal up to the front door feeling for my shoes and thinking only about how
not to get snagged by the bicycle in the hall

The doorbell rings
I open the door
Another woman with a plaintive voice jumping out of her dress asks me to call
the police her husband got drunk and she hit him with a skillet full of cutlets
you wouldn't have any valerian would you thank you what is this disgusting
stuff I've never taken anything like it good God some people have proper lives,
quiet and calm and happy

Coming back into the room for a handkerchief
I notice that another woman resiliently-weightily has collapsed onto something
brown-red and dirty-blue She has a splendid golden almost masculine
torso cut off by a frame and blind eyes smeared over in black It seems in my
position she is pretty satisfied although Modigliani does not like being looked
at

The television flickers
Another woman on the screen
whispers and wails into an invisible microphone
fatally shuts her eyes reveling in her
shrewish gait and animal longing
for another man
For you probably

In half an hour another woman in a crooked veil
and work boots
suddenly falls off the book shelf onto my head
and lies on the floor all open in a swoon
at that page where the enemy has just burned down a Russian village
where Catholics ceaselessly butcher Huguenots
and Turks do it to Armenians
and the bronze horseman wears down the bronze steed
riding from Petersburg to Moscow
trying to get there for the morning execution of the Streltsy

Bunchberry sauce for meat and chicken
is something we never have
Bunchberries do not grow at our market
probably another woman is in the kitchen looking through
the cookbook she turned to me with her

tasty bunchberry butt pasted on a cardboard
wrapper of German-made stockings

Blue twilight is soaked
and its contours are lost in the little river and for hours and minutes the suffering
cello squeak of the doors winds around the digital lock in the entryway

In the yard wheezing children work hard to carve from snow
another woman
Her head keeps falling apart
it's like some sort of punishment to make this stupid head
who ever thought it up
you could just cut the eyes in her stomach

Growing dark Starting to drizzle Growing light Stretching out
Peering through It started to freeze

Another woman in my place looks in the mirror
turning her face so that
the circles under her eyes aren't seen

Another woman in my position sorts through the spoons
and climbs up to the top shelf to get washing powder

Another woman at our level of civilization
walks along the sidewalk in dirty tattered jeans
looks through magazines at the kiosks
gets bored talking with friends
figures out the story's ending after the third
paragraph although it only has two

and she comes out of the metro
walking toward the Pushkin monument at that very moment
when the poet with his stiff stone face
takes off his top hat
and turns toward Tver Boulevard
listening wearily to the noise of airplanes
to the light clatter of carriage wheels
and to the squeak of floorboards in Mikhailovskoe
He is watching with feigned indifference
another woman
who pays him absolutely no attention
as she melodically moves across the street
Her face turns pink in the shining warning light
of the traffic signal Brakes squeal
She shrieks and runs

without looking back choking on the frozen air
mechanically reading signs and being reflected in
every face until finally she falls
flat in the dark of night
accidentally tripping on a bicycle
in the hall

Юлия Кунина (Iuliia Kunina)

Inconsistent Self Portrait

Я полурусская, 30, почти магистр,
метр 67, реестр, регистр,
обрывки энциклопедии, выписки из словаря,
три языка, коротко говоря.
Это мои глаза, говорят - красивы.
Это мой длинный нос.
Губы - цвет сливы, или черники, или помады,
и разбирать зачем?
Это мой профиль, говорят - нубийский,
а может, еврейский, точнее, просто российский,
где черт знает что смешалось черт знает с чем.
Это моя повадка сорок-воровок.
Это мой решительный подбородок
решимости неизвестно на что и как.
Это плечи - торчат ключицы,
любила сравнить с Наташей, а надо бы с птицей,
от которой лишь пух да перья - сожми кулак.
Путешествие ниже, конечно, таит соблазны.
Я, составленная из разных и разнообразных
старых девушек и интересных дам,
ренуаровских баб и сомнительных персонажей,
суфражисток и верных жен, и этих, не знаю даже,
которым в дофеминистскую эру собирались дать по мозгам.
Но это, так сказать, бахвальство, точнее, шкурка,
лягушачья пупыристая кожурка,
то, что любит еврей и чурка,
о чем и сообщаю вам.
А так, я ползу, истлевая в прахе,
подобно гаду и черепахе,
повелевая умом громам!

Inconsistent Self Portrait

I am half Russian, 30, almost got my MA,
1 metre 67, on the list and registered,
fragments of an encyclopedia, excerpts from a dictionary,
three languages, to synopsise.
Here are my eyes: people say they're beautiful.
Here is my long nose.
My lips are plum-coloured, or bilberry coloured, or lipsticked,
whatever.
Here is my profile: people say it's Nubian,
or perhaps Jewish, or really Russian,
the devil knows what the devil's mixed together.
Here is my thieving magpie's habit.
Here is my decisive chin,
although what is it decisive about?
Here are my shoulders – shoulder blades protruding. – I like to
compare them to Natasha's, but they are more like a bird's:
you can squeeze it in your fist, just fluff and feathers.
The journey down, of course, conceals temptations.
I am made out of differing and different
old girls and interesting ladies,
Renoir women and dubious personages,
suffragettes and faithful wives, and these, whom I don't know
who were humiliated in the prefeminist era.
But this is, so to speak, bragging, or rather a hide,
pimply frog skin,
loved by Jew and fool
which I am telling you about.
And so, I crawl, smouldering in ash,
like a serpent or tortoise,
commanding the thunder with my mind.

Tatiana Voltskaia (Татьяна Вольтская)

Рифма - женщина, примеряющая наряды

Рифма - женщина, примеряющая наряды,
В волосы втыкающая розу.
Она плещется в крови, как наяда,
И выныривает, когда не просят.

Рифма - колокол, отгоняющий злых духов
От души виновной, безлюдной,

Когда ветер в зарослях чертополоха
Плачет ночью холодной.

Рифма - серебряный колокольчик,
Поднимающий меня из гроба,
Когда ты приходишь, мой мальчик,
И, блеснув очками, целуешь в губы.

Рифма - тропинка с земляникой по краю,
То мелькнет, то исчезнет - так бьется сердце,
Я иду по ней - а куда, и сама не знаю,
Заговариваю зубы смерти.

Rhyme is a woman, trying on clothes

Rhyme is a woman, trying on clothes,
plaiting a rose into her hair.
She splashes in blood, like a naiad,
and surfaces, when not asked to.

Rhyme is a bell, driving away evil spirits
from the solitary guilty soul,
when the wind in the thistle thickets
weeps during the cold night.

Rhyme is a celestial trumpet – that is,
it rouses me from the grave,
when you come, beloved, with shining eyes,
and kiss me on the lips.

Rhyme is a path bordered by wild strawberries,
now here, now gone – so beats the heart.
I walk but don't know where,
I distract death with smooth talk.