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## Politics

WRITING POEMS IN A WORLD OF HARM

*Medvedev • Golyenko • Arseniev • Fanailova •  
Stepanova • Rymbu*

A work of art, after all, is one of the few spheres in which human freedom is realized—even in those societies where such freedom is essentially unknown.

—MIKHAIL IAMPOLSKY

Maybe poetry isn't so helpful out on the square, during protests or in the technical political sense, but it's needed so that revolution is born within us.

—GALINA RYMBU

RUSSIAN POETRY HAS A long history of civically engaged poetry, what is termed *grazhdanskaia lirika*. Its origins came earlier, but Vladimir Mayakovsky charted a revolutionary pathway that influenced twentieth- and twenty-first-century poetry. He showed how to energize the poetic line and electrify a vast readership. His suicide and the subsequent political course of the USSR also show the risks of political poetry, and socially engaged poetry seemed more programmatic than energizing from the 1930s onward. Engagement with the present was a requirement of socialist realism; its seeming opposite, undue concern for aesthetics or form, was taboo. Many unofficial poets in the late Soviet period fled obviously political topics, but they could not flee politics, and some did not even want to. Their work was regarded as suspect for its free-thinking ethos and for its very resistance to ideologies and political idioms.<sup>1</sup>

Reassessment by poets and critics of their legacy has recognized that their endeavors were profoundly political and ethical.<sup>2</sup> As practitioners of what Foucault called fearless speech, unofficial Soviet poets have remained vital in the post-Soviet period.<sup>3</sup> In search of ways to continue their practices of fearless speech, contemporary poets have built on their legacy, particularly since 2000.<sup>4</sup> Many saw the reinvention of political poetry as an urgent task, and their work has flourished to considerable critical acclaim within and beyond Russia.<sup>5</sup> For left-leaning poets, talking about the language of poetry was a way to talk about political change, and many poems self-consciously ask how to widen their audience. Some who learned lessons of mimicry and mockery from the late Soviet Conceptualists have found other ways to make language matter, as they layered the discourse of the other into lyric poems of impressive eloquence and force. Key figures here include Pavel Arseniev, Keti Chukhrov, Dmitry Golyenko, Kirill Medvedev, Roman Osminkin, Galina Rymbu, Alexander Skidan, and Evgenia Suslova.

These poets have been leaders in what is sometimes called a new social poetry (*novaia sotsial'naia poezii*).<sup>6</sup> They are most invested in the middle term of this name, the social. That is what counts as political in their work: social relations, and the production of a communal ethos in which relationships of equality can flourish.<sup>7</sup> Most have worked together in varying combinations. Some have been associated with the *Chto delat'* (What Is to Be Done) group, and their work has appeared in the journal [*Translit*] and in the Kraft poetry series of the Free Marxist Press.<sup>8</sup> Several of them actively edit these publications.

Their important work, though, is not centrally my subject, although I treat some of it briefly and then devote considerable attention to the work of Galina Rymbu. I am more interested in some questions that are not always theirs: what happens at the border zones between narrative and lyric, between the impulse to tell a story—about injury or war or a disturbing encounter with an other—and the readiness to let that story unfold in the deformations and disturbances of language and selfhood. This political poetry, as Kirill Korchagin has written, “proposes a special status for the subject, whose duty is to express correlation between collective unity and the emancipation of the individual.”<sup>9</sup> I also look elsewhere because I am concerned about a particular ethical commitment: the refusal to turn away one’s gaze from harm. Mostly that refusal has to do with the harm of the present, although repairing the traumas of history, both collective and personal, is here as well, best exemplified in the work of Maria Stepanova. Two recurring scenes in this work are those of war (the ongoing war in Ukraine and the Chechen wars) and of sexual violence.<sup>10</sup>

Before focusing on these poets, however, I want to introduce a few of the new social poets, because their work has created a crucial context in which poets are testing the boundaries of what counts as political poetry. They set forth a whole host of new ways in which poetry can engage with politics and can reflect on its own politics, and several of them have become known outside Russia through excellent translations and collaborations with international cultural enterprises.

### To Start: Kirill Medvedev, Dmitry Golynko, Pavel Arseniev

Of the new social poets, Kirill Medvedev is the best known both in Russia and in the West.<sup>11</sup> He is a well-published poet and prolific activist, a strong voice for a revived Marxist politics, who can anchor a political event with exhortation and song alongside his band, Arkady Kots (named for the translator of the “Internationale” into Russian). His renunciation of copyright in 2003 and temporary refusal to publish his works gained him a different kind of fame, as he sought to wed the politics of popular uprising with a critique of the post-Soviet marketplace. He returned to publishing in 2007 with the founding of the Free Marxist Press (Svobodnoe marksistskoe izdatel'stvo). His poetry has ridden the crest of free verse with a strong lyric voice and a compelling ability to mesh seemingly very personal poems with political invective. As a Marxist, Medvedev can offer a utopian glimpse of the changed world to come, and his poems seem designed to chronicle the steps toward that transformation. They can sound almost entirely prosaic, as if their only goal is to report the experiences and observations of a poet walking through urban or pastoral space. Somewhat like the poets of the new epic poetry (*novyi epos*),<sup>12</sup> Medvedev is a storyteller, committed to teaching readers to notice the political impact of the minutiae of daily life, and committed to showing what it means to be the kind of person who can advance the socialist project in post-Soviet Russia.<sup>13</sup>

Vivid examples of poems that strive for those goals appear in his book *It's No Good* (*Vse plokho*; OGI, 2002), including one that begins “I really like when” (*mne ochen' nraivitsia kogda*). It starts as a stroll through Moscow, reflecting on the kinds of labor he has performed in the past and present. Placing persons in terms of their jobs is also the mental gesture that will end the poem. But at the halfway point, when the poet's mind is most engaged with noticing and estimating the significance of various subject positions, he insists that his is the point of view of someone who does not have a job. The poem unfolds at a slow pace, the pace of the poet's own self-reflections.

I walk further,  
 thinking about how  
 my poems  
 are the poems of a *nonworking* person  
 (as opposed to, say, the poems of the poet  
 Stanislav Lvovsky,  
 which he sent me not long ago:  
 his, in my opinion, are  
 the opposite—  
 a person in his poems is always  
 returning from work  
 moving around the glaring twilit  
 cityscape  
 given shape by information streams—I don't know  
 how things are in reality, but  
 that's the feeling you get  
 reading these poems).  
 I think about how  
 self-sufficiency  
 and dignified aloofness are qualities foreign to me  
 I think  
 I need involvement;  
 I thirst for some kind of solidarity;  
 having forgotten that tunnel  
 (which stirred in me, by the way,  
 in addition to everything else,  
 a kind of fixed, if not ruinous  
 obsession,  
 evoking the image  
 of some cheerful, ruinous chill  
 of a cool freedom taking in breath  
 of some kind of heavy, low flight  
 a feeling that  
 comes over me pretty often of late  
 it's a kind of knowledge  
 that lies like a lump  
 in my soul;  
 I sometimes wonder

where it comes from  
 and cannot understand;  
 in the end I think  
 it's the kind of knowledge  
 that comes  
 from without)<sup>14</sup>

я иду дальше,  
 думая о том,  
 что мои стихи  
 это стихи *неработающего* человека  
 (в отличие, например, от стихов поэта  
 Станислава Львовского,  
 которые он мне недавно прислал:  
 у него там, по-моему,  
 наоборот—  
 человек всё время  
 возвращается с работы,  
 передвигаясь по какому-то сумеречному,  
 прорезанному информационными токами  
 бликующему городскому пространству—не знаю,  
 как там на самом деле, но  
 стихи оставляют  
 именно такое ощущение)  
 я думаю о том,  
 что мне, в каком-то смысле,  
 несвойственна самостоятельность  
 и исполненная достоинства отрешённость,  
 я думаю,  
 что мне нужна вовлечённость;  
 я жажду какого-то слияния;  
 забыв об этом тоннеле  
 (вселяющем в меня, кстати,  
 помимо всего прочего,  
 какое-то глухое, чуть не погибельное  
 наваждение,  
 навевающим представлением  
 о каком-то весёлом гибельном холодке,

о дышащей прохладной свободе,  
 о каком-то  
 тяжёлом низком полёте,  
 ощущение которого  
 довольно часто охватывает меня  
 в последнее время—  
 это какое-то знание,  
 которое лежит комом  
 у меня на душе;  
 я иногда думаю о том,  
 откуда оно,  
 и не могу понять,  
 откуда оно у меня взялось;  
 я думаю всё же,  
 что это какое-то наносное  
 знание)<sup>15</sup>

These short lines give a good example of the way Medvedev builds a dynamic of self-description and self-projection in his poems. The reference to Stanislav Lvovsky invokes a poet known for his innovative use of free-flowing conversational verse lines, and thus a model for the kind of poetry Medvedev writes.<sup>16</sup> But Lvovsky is also a point of contrast: not for Medvedev is the position of aloofness and distance, of purposefully moving through space *on the way to work*.<sup>17</sup> He seeks instead the attitude of absorption, of fierce attention to the surrounding environment. He wants it to surprise him, even to scare him.

The psychic pleasure of this relationship to surrounding space is associated with freedom: he thinks “about a cool freedom taking in breath” (o dyshashchei prokhladnoi svobode). A kind of sensory enrichment accompanies this metaphysical widening. Freedom brings a cooling surplus of oxygen, and the poet implicitly breathes in that cooled air as if it could carry into his body a form of being not shuttered by the limiting visions of success and failure vividly represented by the workers’ fates he lists in the poem’s ending.<sup>18</sup> Medvedev’s poems can reach for a kind of freedom that comes from a new relationship to one’s surroundings, then, and he represents that freedom by the expansive metaphor of oxygenating air. But his poems are not without some limitations on the capacity of others to share that freedom, and here one could argue that his real model is not Lvovsky, but Mayakovsky.

That lineage is keenly felt in a later long text, *Live Long Die Young* (*Zhit' dolgo umeret' molodym*, 2011), about a failed interview with the filmmaker Claude Lanzmann in Moscow.<sup>19</sup> The poem uses changing font sizes to convey the rising frustration and intensity of the questions left unasked (about what the poem calls “the Holocaust industry,” for example). The illustrations by Nikolai Oleinikov that accompany the poem show a grinning, armed version of Medvedev and another figure aiming a rifle.<sup>20</sup> The small book packs a big punch, and it prompts a question about the place of aggressiveness in poetry. Is hectoring or rage-filled, invective-laced work likely to inspire the progressive social change Medvedev seeks? Such aggressive poems with a pointed political orientation surfaced elsewhere, including in feminist poems written in the wake of the #MeToo movement, and in response to the Russia-Ukraine war. How do we read their anger and their angst? What are the ethical implications of responding to harm with a readiness to inflict pain in return? And what are the consequences for a political project that emphasizes not social transformation, Medvedev’s goal, but the rising sense of human dignity and freedom in every individual? Those are questions to which I return below, grateful to Medvedev’s poems, even when they are problematic, for pressing them upon me.

A related angst is conveyed with more indirection and more of a high-theory intonation in the poetry of Dmitry Golyenko, who published prolifically until his premature death in January 2023. He wrote what he called as of 2012 applied social poetry, suggesting his orientation, like Medvedev’s, toward the social order.<sup>21</sup> His base was Petersburg (compared with Medvedev’s Moscow), and, especially earlier on, he could savagely parody a recognizable Petersburg poetic tradition.<sup>22</sup> Without Medvedev’s programmatic Marxism, and with a broader range of philosophies and theories as well as a deep interest in cinema and the visual arts, he cast a no less critical gaze on the world around him. He brilliantly remixed the discourses of the present, as Kevin Platt has put it, writing “a poetry that is capable of channeling the raw energy of contemporary language towards its own critical self-disclosure.”<sup>23</sup> The element of critique was a late-blooming feature of the work, which in the 1990s re-created the voices of hip urban youth.<sup>24</sup> In translating Golyenko, Eugene Ostashevsky gently reproached himself and his collaborators for not drawing on something close to hip-hop discourse (they chose more neutral styles).<sup>25</sup> Yet the undertone of disgust and the overtones of bravado easily recall hip-hop, as does the mix of found language and clashing stylistic registers. By 2016, Golyenko could insist that poetry must be “severe, embittered, and cruel.”<sup>26</sup> In 2018 he oriented

himself toward the uncertainties of a postapocalyptic future; he claimed that in our post-truth and posthumanistic era, poetry becomes the instrument of cynical gossips, but also the only possible way to react to an anemic, stagnating social model.<sup>27</sup> These observations were grounded in the terms of social philosophy and political theory, operating as abstractions but charged with a relentless insistence that there was no way out of the closed space of global capitalism.

This account could leave the impression that the poems are meant to prove the theories, but the rigidity is illusory: Golyenko was ever transforming himself as a poet, and his lines are dynamic, charged with energies and shifting valences. Like Medvedev, he could write poems riveted to the oxygenating scenes of the present, and his piercing attention to phenomena and to language itself is perhaps his signature. He was invested in what one poem called, in its title, “Looking at the Around” (“Ogliadyvaia vokrug,” 2010).<sup>28</sup> The poem is long (twenty-five five-line stanzas) with an ironic, droning repetitiveness. All stanzas start with the title phrase and proceed to list observed phenomena. The lines are more or less equal in length, but the verse is free, so what organizes the poem is the syntactic pattern of a list. The observed phenomena are without hierarchy: a woman darning a sock appears in the same stanza as a peasant living through the Holodomor famine. A tour operator merits the same mention as economic default; the Orange Revolution is mentioned alongside the ultrasound of a fetus. The experiential impact of economic crises or political movements is no different from an overheard conversation between two women about love. Because so many kinds of persons are integrated into the list of things seen “in the around,” it is hard to know who precisely is experiencing all these sights. Does the leveling extend to the poem’s attentive subject—could this all be observed by anyone, everyone?<sup>29</sup> Whose attitudes are encoded in the poem’s discourses, we are pressed to consider, by a poetic text that uses pronouns or missing grammatical subjects to keep in abeyance any commitment to a lyrical subject? Platt argues that the result is to make it everyone’s experience: we are all implicated in the ugliness and injustice that give Golyenko’s poems their distinctly uncomfortable feel. But political discussions are sometimes at their best when one also asks how that *we* is constituted, and what it does to account for radically different subject positions in terms of power or privilege. To take only one difference, what happens to gender when such a collective is created? Quite apart from the poems themselves, Golyenko’s statements about poetry and responsibility suggest that he fully recognized a less than level playing field.



Golyenko's theories draw a line between the privileged position of the poet and the voiceless, downtrodden subject position of "the masses," and that difference motivates his turn to an applied social poetics.<sup>30</sup> His poetry thus presses readers to ask how a poet can faithfully transmit what would otherwise be silenced. Does Golyenko's often allusive, cleverly compacted diction channel or transform the voice of the other? Or does it transmute it to make it more like poetry? Moreover, are there really no differences in the potential for self-recognition in the poetry? To answer those questions too quickly feels to me like a mistake, all the more so in the wake of Golyenko's early death; there will be a much fuller sense of his work as archival materials are published.<sup>31</sup> But let the questions of gender linger, alongside the ways in which Medvedev's poetry urges us to reconsider the role of anger and invective in political poetry. Both topics are foundational for the longer treatments of Fanailova, Stepanova, and Rymbu to follow. But first, one more example of the new social poetry.

Pavel Arseniev relies on found language and ready-made materials, which undergo little hammering or distortion in his nearly documentary poetic texts.<sup>32</sup> In the volume of his work that appeared in English with facing Russian texts, *Reported Speech* (2018), Arseniev assembles poems out of found bits of language, with a political charge racing through familiar words. He tells stories of how poems are created and performed, and he lets language laugh at its own seriousness. That laughter is a key factor in Arseniev's success and in his specific challenge to the conventions of political and civic poetry. In "Mayakovsky for Sale" ("Prodaetsia Maiakovskii," ca. 2008–12), the poem's eight lines are built out of internet terms in links that appear after an announcement that a set of Mayakovsky's writings is for sale. A video of the poem shows the cursor moving across a changing computer screen to assemble the poem's words as they appear serially. One takes the video as an estranged representation of the act of poetic composition and its dissemination, for the video ends with the poet clicking on the links in his email app that will send the poem to [*Translit*] for publication and will presumably post this very video.<sup>33</sup> The legacy of political and avant-garde poetry signaled by the name Mayakovsky seemed to be a trigger for a potential commercial transaction, with books for sale; writing and publishing the poem became a performance in the age of digital reproduction.

In "Forensic Examination," ("Ekspertiza," ca. 2008–12), Arseniev goes one step further, building the poem around declarations of thematic and self-referential content. It begins:

This poem is yet another specimen  
 Of how inserting  
 Political declarations  
 Into works of art  
 Flattens  
 And simplifies them

На примере данного стихотворения  
 Мы снова увидим, как  
 Политические декларации,  
 Включенные в произведения искусства,  
 Распрямляют,  
 Упрощают<sup>34</sup>

The poet declares that the voicing of political views impoverishes the poem, that art and politics are incompatible, which the poet ironically declares he would have learned if only he had studied in a Department of Comparative Literature; the poem announces that it betrays the great poetic tradition by its failure to use familiar meters, and that it violates the Russian criminal code by inciting extremist measures. The poem prophetically makes a joke out of Arseniev's later arrest for reading a poem in public with an obscenity (that event is the subject of another poem, "Russia Day" ["Den' Rossii," 2013]), but its association of poetic ready-mades with violations of both poetic tradition and civic law raises the stakes for the kind of poetry at hand. There is disruptive potential here beyond the jokes.

The joyful quality persists, however, and this trait distinguishes Arseniev's poetry from that of Golyenko—intonationally, it can bring it closer, in this one sense, to the performance-oriented work of Roman Osminkin.<sup>35</sup> The exuberant pleasures of the poetic act particularly show through in some of the actionist gatherings, installations, and internet-oriented videos created by Arseniev. The wry sense of humor marks even the political slogan for which he is perhaps best known: his punning sentence that means both "You can't even imagine us" and "You don't even represent us" (Vy nas dazhe ne predstavliaete), which dates to the mass protests in 2011 against the falsified parliamentary elections. It is certainly a splendid pun, but the real cleverness here may be the adverb "even" (dazhe), which adds just the right fillip of invective and taunts elite officials for being unable either to represent or to imagine their fellow citizens.

What place is there in politically charged poetry for such humor, such lightness? Some ethical conundrums can spring up as a result: mockery is rarely a

way to connect across differences, so such poetry, if it is aimed at persuasion, must rely on a kind of triangle, where one group is to be wooed at the expense of another. Arseniev's poems build on the ready-made, the quotation, the borrowed or mimicked discourse of the other, and derision can be an intonational side effect of the method. Is there any place for ambivalent, complicated connections across such differences? And is connection to the other even valued as a political or ethical act?

Let that be our last lingering set of questions, as we turn now to a different set of possibilities for what might count as political poetry in contemporary Russia. One of the issues that has figured in some corners of the new social poetry—particularly the work of Suslova, Chukhrov, and Rymbu—is gender, and it could be argued that in the late 2010s and particularly in 2020, struggles around gendered identity overtook the discourse around social and economic class in Russian poetry. Women poets, among others, have reminded their readers that there can be no freedom without bodily autonomy. Poetry about women's bodily freedoms and vulnerabilities is my next subject, where I reorient that work on bodily harm toward the poetry of war. The questions raised above—about anger, about gender, about connections across differences—are rewoven into a different fabric, one that can also take on questions of nation and destiny, and of the state's violence.

By writing about Russia at war (including the memory of the Afghanistan campaign that began in 1979–80, the First and Second Chechen Wars in 1994–96 and 1999–2009, and the Russia-Ukraine war that began in 2014), poets have forged a new form of political poetry. It is a poetry of the body, and of resistance against an authoritarian state that has failed to make good on the post-Soviet promises of equality, rule of law, justice, and human dignity. Some poems offer testimony of a defiant individual in the face of the repressive and dishonest state. Some poems are committed to making memories that can bind citizens together, memories based on experiences and losses that the state would cast as false (what in a short time would come to be known as fake news). The ones that interest me the most have taken up an ironic challenge, formulated succinctly in 2014 by the Minsk poet Dmitry Strotsev in his poem "Shame" ("Pozor"):

### **Shame**

what has been done by Russia  
 what has taken place in Ukraine = in Crimea  
 is unworthy of a poem

*March 18, 2014*