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To cite this article: Pavel Arsen'ev (2018) “The Contemporary Russian Poet Comes Out and Sorta Drops Us a Hint”, *Russian Studies in Literature*, 54:1-3, 141-153, DOI: [10.1080/10611975.2018.1507525](https://doi.org/10.1080/10611975.2018.1507525)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10611975.2018.1507525>



Published online: 22 Dec 2018.



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PAVEL ARSEN'EV

“The Contemporary Russian Poet Comes Out and Sorta Drops Us a Hint”

Toward a Pragmatics of the Artistic Utterance

This article examines the creation of a speaking subject in contemporary Russian poetry, its relationship to political action and the expectations readers have for particular stylistic habits, especially those of the avant-garde. These features stand out against the context of other poetic movements, especially Futurism/Formalism and the Oberiu.

Reference to the problematics of the subject [*sub'ekt*] in contemporary poetry is a potentially politicizing analytical gesture. But the subject of contemporary poetry too is on a quest for his or her own political articulation. The question “Who is speaking?,” for all that it is, on the one hand, posed by critics and theoreticians and latently present in poetic practice, on the other hand is neither an idle question nor an

English translation © 2017 Taylor & Francis Group, LLC, from the Russian text © 2013 “Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie.” ““Vykhodit sovremennyi russkii poet i kagbe nam namekaet’: k pragmatike khudozhestvennogo vyskazyvaniia,” *Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie*, December 2013, no. 124, pp. 243-251.

Pavel Arsen'ev is a poet, published in a variety of print and online journals and almanacs, editor-in-chief of the literary-critical almanac *Translit*, for which he received the 2012 Andrei Bely Prize. He has translated theoretical works by Pierre Bourdieu, Antoine Compagnon, Michel de Certeau and others, and holds an MA in theory of literature from Saint Petersburg State University.

Translated by Liv Bliss.

expressly linguistic one (leading to exposure of an utterance's narrative registers). From the very moment at which theory rendered obvious the lack of self-identity [*nesamotozhdestvennost'*] of the subject of a speech act, the ideological character of the interpellative procedure, and the correlation between discursive formations and certain ideological formations,¹ a linkage has developed between it and the study of an author's stance relative to everyday language and the dominant ideology. In other words, the form of the utterance refers directly to the political construction placed on the instance of the utterance.

Let us imagine how the issue of political subjectivization [*sub"ektivatsiia*] in poetry and of attribution of a poetic utterance to political utterance (or, as they would have most likely said back then, to "civic lyricism") would have been resolved two centuries ago: it was the thematic connection with current political agendas by way of events described or foretold and of feelings experienced because of those events (and thereby definable as "civic") that made it possible to attribute a poetic work to the sole category that was recognized as political in the first third of the nineteenth century. I will note that the subject of "civic lyricism" in those days had yet to fall foul of the whispers of doubt that would later lead to it being criticized and deconstructed. Potentially emblematic here is [Lermontov's—Trans.] "The Death of the Poet" [*Smert' poeta*], which abounds in markers indicating that a collective entity is being addressed.

Now let us imagine what a political (or, in conformity with the phraseology of the age, an "avant-garde") artistic utterance would have been called a century ago. At this point there would no longer have been any place for the lyrical subject's direct utterance, and the referential world no longer had such an unconditional existence, while poetic action, comparable to political nonconformism, would have unfolded in terms of rejecting the established lexicon, morphology, and syntax. The critique of outmoded political forms discovered its own analog and ally in the poetic terror being visited upon obsolete forms of (poetic) expression.

For a long time, the continuum of the understanding of poetry's political subject unfolded between two instances of the poetic utterance, the authorial/referential ("Who is speaking and about what?") and the transrational [*zaimnyi*] and formalist ("How is he speaking?"). The point at issue was either the situation of a subject expressing his political views and social emotions or else emphasis on linguistic form as a substance of

greater relevance in defining the political meaning of an utterance than the author's civic stance or will. While the former always assumes some esthetic choice (which allows at least for pitting oneself against the societal neutrality that is not far from conservatism), in the latter case the idea is that form has political import independent of the subject's intentions and that "political" is understood to mean the destruction of established forms of expression that correlate to the forms of political representation. (Revealing "the word as such" means almost the same as rejecting mediated political representation; in other words, the decision to focus on clarifying the relationships between words irrespective of any "external" reference can be correlated with striving toward direct civic communication on the other side of the machinery of "bourgeois government.")² Thus, the principal distinction between the second (modernist, including the avant-garde) and the first ("romantic," for the sake of discussion) types of poetic subjectivity [*sub "ektivnost'*] lies in the fact that subjectivity is no longer thought of as the consequence of a choice made by a citizen who takes up the pen to pit himself against the not exactly ethically irreproachable politics of the powers that be or even to engage in open conflict with them in his poetic utterance, which is thereby equated to an act of civil disobedience. The Pushkinian formula "A poet's words are his deeds" may generally be considered preserved in the second case too, but here it is less subjectivist [*sub "ektivistskii'*] and more formalist in nature: it is not civic sensitivity that imparts strength to the words, but the poetic word's inherently valuable materiality [*veshchnost'*], which reveals resistance in the material of speech and very nearly collides with the physical world, that defines the word's efficacy.³

Those two types of political subjectivization, which even today continue to exist in automatized forms, may allowably be compared with the dimensions of semantics (referential) and syntax in linguistics.

But aside from those divisions, which were of dominant interest up to the middle of the last century, the utterance also lends itself to analysis in the categories of *pragmatics*, a dimension that was not at the center of attention until analytical philosophy put it there (at almost the same time as Mikhail Bakhtin was pursuing his metalinguistic project in this country). There seem, in fact, to be good reasons for applying the linguistic pragmatics model to the contemporary miscellany of poetic subjectivity, so as to reveal the new forms in which it may be manifested, thematized, and, consequently, politicized.

Artistic pragmatics have, strictly speaking, already begun to command attention. Maksim Shapir, in particular, asserted that “pragmatics is front and center in avant-garde art. The efficacy of art becomes the main point, as art is called upon to stun, to stir up, to agitate, to elicit an active response from the onlooker.”⁴ When the issue is couched in this way, however, the pragmatic dimension emerges not as a constituent trait of any artistic utterance but only as an attribute of an outrageous prank aimed at the unsophisticated viewer, whose response, furthermore, is doomed to be related “to the extra-esthetic and even more to the extra-artistic.”⁵ Our task, then, is first to reconceptualize the category of pragmatics as essential not only in scandalous gestures, where it is an obvious category and for that very reason presents in the crudest form (“the avant-garde simply ‘irritates’ the man in the street, yet does so to no purpose, disinterestedly, out of a love of art”⁶), and, second, to attempt to describe it as determinative with respect to the procedure of political subjectivization in poetry.

It cannot be said that such a methodological gesture is committed to the goal of refurbishing the subject or returning to the intentional illusion, which would be overly presumptuous after (post-)structuralist revision of the instance of authorship; rather, the pragmatic approach allows a poetic utterance to be *resocialized*, allows it to convey the externalized, relational model of subjectivization that is assumed by (artistic) use of language in actual communicational situations. The thematization of the artistic utterance’s pragmatic dimension is not a way of bringing in contraband external sociological determinations, but instead indicates how factors of linguistic sociality run through the (artistic) utterance from within, situating it in the context of communicational expectations, genre conventions, and the consituation [the context—Trans.] of actualization.

Since pragmatics are associated with the real situation of a societal event in which a poetic utterance is made, I now go on to examine three different situations in three different environments (an evening of poetry, street readings, and internet publication) that engendered the corresponding aberrations of reception and in turn prompt a contemplation of the pragmatics of the poetic utterance.

The first of these was the presentation of a collection of Evgeniia Suslova’s poetry⁷ at the Poriadok slov [Word Order] bookstore on October 12, 2013. The texts published in the book may be characterized, borrowing a term from contemporary music, as academic avant-garde.

While uncovering a multitude of productive analogies with various spheres of knowledge, from geometry to Indian philosophy, these texts are hardly intended to rouse the audience's indignation (which is how Shapir defined the impact of the avant-garde). Even so, though, the pragmatics of the utterance did surface during the discussion. Seemingly, the entirely unremarkable means used to convey those pragmatics prompted one attendee (the poet Petr Razumov) to level a charge of superfluous academicism, of distance from the societal skirmishes and artistic experiments of activist art, one impermissible for an art that professes to engage in avant-garde experimentation. Such a reaction speaks to the idea that today's expectations are predominantly localized in the pragmatic dimension while still susceptible to reductionist identification of the political in art with the activist and the performative. In reply to the actively alleged "archaism and political inoffensiveness of hermetic poetry after Pussy Riot," it was posited that at the moment when the power structure begins to recognize such gestures as addressed specifically to it, they are identified with assistance from the power structure's political lexicon and are, consequently, retroactively prone to the power structure's own interpellation, which simultaneously engenders a multitude of "our replies to Chamberlain" [<http://tinyurl.com/y9tbo7jc>. All URLs accessed January 2018—Trans.] (couched as appropriation of the performative genre and the esthetics of activism), and this is precisely the moment when serious thought must be given to the pragmatics of the nonconformist gesture and the actual allocation of emancipatory potential. It may be that when the gunsight of political subjectivization has been knocked far out of true by the high legal cost of such public activism, new ways of resisting must be sought out that make it possible to avoid direct identification with the idiom of power, that linguistic compromise that is accepted for the sake of conveying some pressing information, of issuing a "signal" through any chosen alignment of the utterance.

Characteristically in this case, an analogy is revealed between the level of writing technique and *the mode of action* in literature (already directly categorized as the pragmatics of the artistic utterance); just as Suslova is proposing that syntactic expectations be systematically disappointed in poetic locution (transitive verbs remain uncommon, while intransitive verbs, by contrast, proliferate, etc.), a cultural organism such as a like-minded literary community lives by disappointing the representational expectations imposed on them by the readership and by other writers.

Such a community may be deemed political not because the verse of authors who are engaged in public political activism or are part of a societal movement has shown up in the same series at any point, but primarily because with every new step the very form of literary production, of the micropolitics of literature, is submitted for further introspection [*refleksii*a] and a rejection of the completed—"party"—understanding of the political is postulated. To preempt objections that the disappointment of syntactic expectations is already packed into the modernist paradigm of experimental writing, it must be emphasized once again that it was not the texts themselves that triggered the polemic in this instance but the gap between the means used to convey those texts and the expectations formed by the particular context wherein the political existence of contemporary poetry is thematized

It has for a long time been impossible to restrict the understanding and practice of defamiliarization to only the referential and intralinguistic planes (as was the case in the Oberiu scenario and in transrational language, respectively), but they ought to be disseminated in literature⁸ on the pragmatic plane (the plane of the real situation surrounding the actual utterance events), and this is well illustrated by another literary happening in St. Petersburg during the past year. It was part of the Tell-Tale Heart [*Serdtshe-oblichitel'*] cycle held at the Andrei Belyi Center on June 3, 2013, with contributions from Denis Larionov, Aleksandr Tsibuli, and Roman Osminkin. It must be said that the task of the cycle is, in accordance with the curator's description, to read and comment on texts written by others that have influenced the formation of the participants' poetic subjectivity (which would assume a clear understanding on the author's part of his own "map of rereading," of his desires, and of his "anxiety of influence" [the third term is the title of a book by literary critic Harold Bloom—Trans.]). However, one participant's literal understanding of that task led to the formal dehermetization of the format of that evening of poetry and then to discussion of the minimally permissible level at which another's utterance may be artistically processed, the boundary between poetic language and everyday language, "the definition of poetry," etc. Roman Osminkin selected the text that he said had influenced him most in recent times, which turned out to be a leaflet calling on white-collar workers, especially in the educational sphere, to defend their rights. It is important to note that the rules of the Tell-Tale Heart cycle's

evenings in no way stipulate the nature of the texts to be read by the poets in the course of constructing their own background as readers; accordingly, what the poet Osminkin read made no claim to be a poetic text, which could in that case have been assigned the soothing status of “found poetry.” For this reason, the characteristic question of “artistic processing” that came up during the discussion proved meaningless, since defamiliarization was being actualized not on the plane of the text’s own thematic and rhetorical resources but on the plane of the real situation of the utterance event. In this case, the “artistic processing,” if you will, consisted in the fact that something somewhere was *selected* for reading. Thus, the instrumentalization of the powers vested in artistic *naming* (the poet’s hybridization of verses recovered from the trash) by the needs of political rabble-rousing [*agitatsiia*], running in reverse, created the esthetic event (not by way of the text itself but by way of an utterance event that embedded the text from a leaflet into an evening of poetry).

Politicization of the subject of a poetic utterance therefore enables not only an estheticization of bureaucratic speech (as was the case in Moscow Romantic Conceptualism⁹) but also, in reverse, the realized work of poetic enlightenment of the artistic community,¹⁰ without assuming a didactic position. An utterance with such a pragmatic mind-set balances between the status of colloquial speech that has been estheticized (enclosed within the quotation marks of the utterance, but nonetheless too current to be perceived as an object of intellectual scrutiny)¹¹ and that of a political briefing (a framework that also cannot be successfully acknowledged as dominant in the consituation of a poetry evening). While politicizing a community and simultaneously displacing the prevailing definition of art, a situation like this, in which the resources of the utterance event’s context are utilized, renders meaningless the question of whether we are in fact dealing with a piece of art or with an act of political rabble-rousing. Political subjectivization does not happen here as the result of a personalized instance of knowledge and utterance but instead distantly shimmers [*mertsset*] as a possibility, thanks to displacement of the pragmatic framework in which the poetic utterance is actualized.

Finally, the third example is linked with the phenomenon of electronic communication in social networks, which is equally tightly tethered to the concrete situation of the utterance event, for all that its deployment is

deferred. The frequently undertaken analysis of the texts of Valerii Nugatov has very often slipped from the strictly literary into description of the position he holds—or, better yet, the function he performs¹²—relative to the contemporary literary scene, which places Nugatov solidly in the pragmatic perspective. With his use of “interminable check-lists, irritatingly monotonous repetitions and self-repetitions, semantic and grammatical errors, drab or threadbare rhymes, and monotonous or ‘illiterate’ syntax,”¹³ Nugatov long ago set his sights on destroying not only conventional literary techniques but also the established rules of literary conduct, the *modus operandi* in contemporary poetry. Rather than understanding the literary world as a homogeneous referee who stands on neutral territory and is capable of expressing objective generalizations about other worlds (including the social world), Nugatov has sarcastically described that world as an industry not lacking in shop-floor contradictions, whose ability to generalize rests on very shaky ground. Thus, whereas estheticism usually masquerades as political nonconformism but in fact slots perfectly into the ideological consensus, Nugatov, while acting outrageously and insisting on the primacy of esthetics, occupies an uncompromising position from which he exposes the tacit rules of the game within literature itself. The critique of the literary everyday and the deconstruction of liberal “common sense” in Nugatov’s texts “are implemented in order to ‘clear the field’ for a new socially oriented utterance that does not require artificial legitimization”¹⁴ (including in his own texts).

However, Nugatov followed up this titanic venture by taking a break, writing only three poems in 2012. One (“The Songsters and Songstresses of the Twenty-First Century” [Pevtsy i pevitsy XXI veka]¹⁵) inherits the trademarked poetics of enumeration but also contains in embryo a practice that will be discussed below, while the other two (“Silencium” [Silentsium] and “The Senile New Year” [Senil’nyi novyi god]¹⁶) may lay claim to the status of a meta-utterance on such poetic (non)productivity. And they are what ultimately throws light on the genealogy of the practice of “folk sagas” [*narodnye epopei*] that Nugatov first launched in January 2012.

On the formal plane, the satirical effect of “folk sagas” arises thanks to a systematic collision between the rhetorical unconscious of the Soviet epoch and neologisms that lay active claim to belonging in the mainstream of speech [*rechevoi obikhod*] (as well as belonging in the societal mainstream of the relations they affirm). This kind of

conflict between discursive and ideological formations usually tends either to incite retaliation or to give rise to a triumphantly sarcastic intonation, whereas characteristically in Nugatov's case no such ideological license is given. Instead, a linguistic civil war is unleashed, forming a vortex that wreaks destruction on both opposing poles.

COMING OUT

a second facebook folk saga
 we will live to see the coming out
 a coming out on the street across the river
 a village coming out
 ivan's coming out
 an old new coming out
 a coming out of garden balsam
 the coming out that turns on the lights
 a coming out of the republic
 twenty coming outs later
 a long coming out in the dunes
 the twentieth coming out is beginning
 battalions are asking for a coming out
 a forgotten memory for coming out
 coming out on the grass
 a ferrous coming out
 sannikov's coming out
 let's come on out
 professor dowell's coming out
 once again on coming out
 the coming out was in pen'kova
 a third-grade textbook on coming out
 seventeen coming outs of spring
 the coming outs of the turbins
 khrustalev, coming out
 welcome or no coming out allowed for unauthorized personnel
 a coming out on piatnitskaia
 hello, I'm your coming out
 the coming outs of bonifatsiia ...¹⁷

But more crucial to us is that fact that this is not merely a project of cultural introspection or mourning anchored by the individual creative will; it is, rather, a collective ritual in which all the rhetorical conflicts in the precincts of the contemporary speech situation are "lured into the

open.” That is, the pragmatic status of these texts can no longer be defined as “experimental poetry,” since they were initiated and continue (to the present time) to be constructed collectively. Like the technique of flash mobs or crowdfunding, the Facebook sagas *set in motion* by Nugatov invite participation from the collective body and the collective economy, which require a critical mass of anonymous participants but impose no upper limit on their numbers. Nugatov proposes only the first formula (or the first few) in his Facebook profile (which is a kind of starting pitch for collective creativity), whereas the work’s actual volume and its composition are created by a mass, anonymous collective by way of comments added to the original posting. This radical form of externalizing and diluting the poetic procedure not only presents as a practice that may be correlated on the pragmatic plane with the methods of contemporary interactional esthetics but also offers yet another model for structuring the political subject that is positioned on the other side of the sovereign author’s self-expression, a location that is implemented in sessions of collective linguistic exorcism.

In conclusion, it must again be emphasized that the paradigm today rests not with the canonical defamiliarization of form¹⁸ but with the defamiliarization of the very framework of artistry. Such a practice has to do not only with the definition of art (which innovators are always putting in question) but also with the definitive *societal* situation of the artistic utterance.

As Elena Petrovskaja has written, “the ethics of art are reducible, rather, to the finding of new territories, and less for (self)expression than for the posing of the question of who is perceiving today and how—and not necessarily perceiving art, either.”¹⁹ The aspiration to self-restrict to purely linguistic ingenuity today is not exactly coming in on the losing side, but it is certainly signaling nostalgia for the distinct boundaries of the jurisdiction of the artistic in an era when radical doubt as to a work’s privileged status is becoming the leading edge of experimentation in artistic pragmatics, if not actually a condition for the tenability of artistic action per se. As a method that lays claim to the status of an idiom suited to describing new artistic phenomena, pragmatics in its turn need not require a scandalous gesture as its object; it is, rather, a general methodological displacement of perspective to more “externalized” understanding of the artistic utterance in which the text itself is inseparable from the “action

that is performed with its assistance”—from the conditions and circumstances of its actualization, that is, which are included in the procedure whereby it is produced.

Those two dimensions—experimentation with pragmatics on the part of the new art and an innovative methodological perspective—have been encountered before in the intellectual history of Russia. In a 1926 article titled “The Word in Life and the Word in Poetry” [*Slovo v zhizni i slovo v poezii*], Valentin Voloshinov wrote: “In poetry, the word is the ‘screenplay’ of the event, and a proficient artistic perception acts it out . . . Where linguistic analysis sees only words and the relationships between their abstract junctures (phonetic, morphological, syntactic, etc.), there the relations among people, merely reflected and reinforced in the verbal material, unfold for living *artistic perception and specific sociological analysis* [emphasis mine—P.A.]”²⁰

It is precisely this kind of practice of artistic action as a societal event positioned on the far side of political propaganda and the scandalous effect (and, consequently the optics, trained on that practice) that can serve as a visual aid to how new models of political commonality are tested out in line with the search for a new pragmatics of artistic commonality.

Notes

1. For further detail, see *Kvadratura smysla. Frantsuzskaia shkola analiza diskursa*, gen. ed. P. Serio (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Progress, 1999).

2. In articles published in the newspaper *Anarkhiia*, Kazimir Malevich associated his Suprematism with statelessness. Just as anarchism tears down the authority of institutions, Suprematism combats materiality in painting: “We, as a new planet in the firmament of an extinct sun, we, the borderline of an absolutely new world, declare all things untenable”: Malevich, “Otvét,” *Anarkhiia*, no. 29, March 28, 1918, quoted in I.P. Smirnov, “Mirskaia eres' (o filosofii anarkhizma)” (www.belyprize.ru/?pid=346). [URL inoperative as of January 2018—Trans.]

3. It is important to mention a tradition stemming from that very viewpoint, too—the tradition of utilitarian, or manufactured, art that extended the thesis of materiality beyond the bounds of the artistic form, by urging the creation of real things and thereby establishing a direct, non-metaphorical correlation between the poet’s “words” and his “deeds” (for further detail, see Pavel Arsen'ev, “Literatura fakta kak posledniaia popytka nazyvát' veshchi svoimi imenami,” *Translit*, 2010, nos. 6–7). Another understanding of the political, which in many ways stands in opposition to utilitarian literature, is the postwar “*littérature engagée*.” Derived by the left-wing French intelligentsia from the experience of the Resistance, that

position is not only the ethical answer to the quest for political self-definition, but also an insider stake within the very evolution of literary modes of action. Thus, it opposes both “art for art’s sake” and the societal determination of literary creativity by any given “societal mandate.” Characteristically, the traditional formula equating words and deeds is put to good effect here too: “L’écivain ‘engagée’ sait que la parole est action” [“The ‘engaged’ writer knows that the word is deed”]. Jean-Paul Sartre’s collection of essays *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?* [*What is Literature?* also published in English as *Literature and Existentialism*—Trans.] has become the manifesto of that position.

4. M.I. Shapir, “Chto takoe avangard?,” *Daugava*, 1990, no. 10, pp. 3–6.

5. V.G. Vlasov, N.Iu. Lukina, *Avangardizm. Modernizm. Post-modernizm: Terminologicheskii slovar’* (St. Petersburg, 2005), p. 309.

6. Shapir, “Chto takoe avangard?”

7. Evgeniia Suslova, *Svod masshtaba* (St. Petersburg: Al’manakh Translit/Svobodnoe marksistskoe izdatel’stvo, 2013), Kraft series.

8. An analogous broadening has already occurred in the domain of contemporary art, in the course of experimentation with relational esthetics and interactive installations. The issue here lies less in finding a way to transplant the relevant inventions into the soil of literature, thereby hybridizing it institutionally with contemporary art, than it does in determining what might be the homologous approach in the technique precisely of the literary utterance, which sprouts from within the specifics of literature itself.

9. And how this could, on the other hand, be replicated with regard to the incipient bureaucratic idiom of civic activism (which could take on the task of criticizing in order to reform).

10. In the case of this particular evening’s function this consisted of tenuously situated cultural functionaries and was therefore the addressee not only of the poetically experimental utterance situation but also of the leaflet text per se.

11. See B. Grois [Boris Groys], “Khudozhnik kak kurator plokhogo iskusstva,” in Grois, *Utopiia i obmen* (Moscow, 1993), pp. 311–16.

12. By analogy with the functions of the characters in a fairy tale. See V.Ia. Propp, *Morfologiia skazki* (Leningrad, 1928): <https://coollib.com/b/75524/read>.

13. *Vozdukh*, 2009, nos. 1–2: www.litkarta.ru/projects/vozdukh/issues/2009-1-2/opros/.

14. Kirill Korchagin, “Dvoinik chitatelia,” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, 2009, no. 95: <http://magazines.russ.ru/nlo/2009/95/kk19.html>.

15. See <http://nugatovv.livejournal.com/148934.html>. Also *Translit*, 2012, no. 12, p. 126.

16. See <http://nugatovv.livejournal.com/149383.html>. Also *Translit*, 2012, no. 12, p. 128.

17. <http://nugatovv.livejournal.com/150205.html>.

18. Compare with I.P. Smirnov, “Preodolenie ostraneniia v strane Sovetov”: http://seance.ru/blog/smironov_lecture_wordorder/and M. Iampol’skii, “Mezhdu ostraneniem i déjà vu”: <http://archives.colta.ru/docs/18550>.

19. Elena Petrovskaia, “Etika anonimnosti,” in Petrovskaia, *Bezymiannye soobshchestva* (Moscow: Falanster, 2012), p. 384. See also: “Art, in other

words, takes on the role of darkroom developer: its location on the boundary is so radical that, while fashioning a community of viewers, it never stops studying the conditions of the reception itself. It simultaneously creates and stipulates the prerequisites of the creation.”

20. V. Voloshinov, “Slovo v zhizni i slovo v poezii. K voprosam sotsiologicheskoi poetiki,” *Zvezda*, 1926, no. 6, pp. 244–67.