

Toward a *Meta* Understanding of Reality: The Problem of Reference in Russian Metarealist Poetry

Albena Lutzkanova-Vassileva
Brooklyn College

Introduction

The theory of postmodern literature and deconstructive writing has widely advocated the belief that language cannot properly refer to and adequately register the world. In the minds of many, postmodernism has come to signify the detachment of literary discourse from reality, the obstruction and annihilation of our access to history. The study of postmodern literary texts is thus invariably accompanied by a peculiar uneasiness about what postmodernism terms the *loss of reality*, by the uncanny sensation of letting reality slip through our fingers without being able to arrest its flow.

Among the main postmodern developments in Russian poetry are two contemporary trends whose origins date back to the 1970s and 1980s—conceptualism and metarealism. The leading representatives of the conceptualist school include the poets Dmitrii Prigov, Lev Rubinshtein, Vsevolod Nekrasov, Timur Kibirov, Mikhail Sukhotin, the narrative prose writer Vladimir Sorokin, and the visual artist and theoretician Ilia Kabakov. “Conceptualism” as a designation suggests a link with a medieval trend of reasoning and culture that, along with “nominalism,” opposes realism. In the conceptualist school of Russia, this break with realism is enacted as an encounter of two clashing semiotic systems—one of them praising Soviet rule and the “bright communist future” it promised and the other mirroring the true reality of life in the indigent Soviet society. It is this manifest irreconcilability of Soviet vocabulary with the conditions

of the real world around it that has informed the major practice of conceptualist writing—the staging of linguistic games of communist clichés and their purported realities whose obvious result is gruesome parody.

While it is relatively easy to recognize an underlying shared practice within the works of the conceptualist writers, the grouping together of such poets as Ivan Zhdanov, Aleksei Parshchikov, Alexander Eremenko, Ol'ga Sedakova, Elena Shvarts, and Victor Krivulin into a common school appears somewhat problematic. The school in question, according to S. B. Dzhimbinov, arose in 1983 or the beginning of 1984, when almost simultaneously two Moscow critics, Konstantin Kedrov and Mikhail Epstein, announced the birth of a new kind of “ism” (which Kedrov named “metametaphorism” and Epstein—“metarealism”).¹ As prompted by the prefix “-meta” in both of these designations, the new poetic trend has set out to transcend the bounds of our common everyday reality and open up communication with higher, metaphysical, religious realms. Significantly, none of these transcendent realms remains detached and cut off from reality—the new poetic school, which I will hereafter call metarealism, includes them on an equal footing with our commonplace, familiar realities, and demonstrates that they are just as real as everything we see or touch. What forms, perhaps, the most distinctive feature of Russian metarealist writing is its enactment of incessant transmutation between perceptual and metaphysical realities—its actuation of a process of metamorphosis and deterritorialization, resulting in continuous engendering of novel and unrivalled worlds. Contrary to the general reading of metarealism as a practice severed from reality, such active fostering of links with multiplicities of “other,” alternative realities calls for expanding the notion of realism and recognizing its inclusion of realms beyond the phenomenal, perceptually registrable one. Because of its capacity for integrating multiple realities, metarealism, Helena Goscilo has aptly suggested, could be rightfully termed “multi-realism” as well.

To examine the peculiarities of metarealist poetry, my essay focuses on works by the two most prominent women belonging to the metarealist school—Ol'ga Sedakova and Elena Shvarts.² Having matured as poets in the same sociocultural milieu—both being

a part of what Sedakova called the “lost generation” smothered by the “grey terror” of the Brezhnev years—these two contemporary women poets give voice to common philosophical agendas and concerns.³ Their works exhibit strong religious and metaphysical underpinnings and immense psychological intensity. Ungratified by all the imperfections of the reality that humans dwell in, both Shvarts and Sedakova strive to elevate the spirit and grant it access to the agonizing, but also wondrously regenerative meta-world.

By way of analyzing Sedakova’s and Shvarts’s spiritual poetry, its distinctly metamorphic quality, and the multifaceted modes of reality’s manifestation within it, the present essay seeks to expose as unwarranted the mourning over the postmodern eclipse of reality and the subject’s incapacity to represent it. While unequivocally denying reference to the phenomenal world, the poetry of metarealism, I suggest, expands the scope of realism and strives to redeem reality’s innate multidimensionality, often neglected in an undue privileging of the quotidian and the mundane. It is in this sense, I argue, that metarealism presents a cogent vindication of the notion of reality and of our natural capacity for a referential intercourse with it.

A Poetry of the Threshold: Ol’ga Sedakova’s *Vrata, Okna, Arki* (*Gateways, Windows, Arches*)

As we look back at the history of Russian literature, metarealism emerges as the convalescence of reality from its brutal incapacitation in the art of socialist realism, which attempted to transform the estate of the real in compliance with the ideals of the communist world. Words, in socialist realism, did not refer to and reflect the facts of real life, but strived, instead, to give birth to and dictate the world. From the viewpoint of semiotics, the signifiers in such works served as command signals for reality, while the signifieds were altogether extirpated. In contrast to the art of socialist realism, Russian metarealism may be termed a poetry of suprasignification, granting absolute precedence to the signified. Words, in metarealist poetry, form links with numerous realities and express the rich and multi-nuanced meanings that reside in them. It is precisely such a sense of overflow and surplus of signification that we find conveyed by Seda-

kova, in one of the poems of her verse collection *Vrata, Okna, Arki*:

В каждой печальной вещи
 есть перстень или записка,
 как в условленных дуплах.
 В каждом слове есть дорога,
 путь унылый и страстный.

In every wistful object
 a ring or note is hidden,
 as in a pre-agreed tree hollow.
 From every word a route emerges,
 a path despondent and impassioned.
 ("Zakliuchenie" 'Conclusion' 112)⁴

The poem reflects on the multi-layered structure of the word as determining its wide range of possible meanings. The word sets the beginning of a route that, in the semiogenesis of Sedakova's work, evolves as both "despondent" and "impassioned." The richness of signification that constitutes each word is being paralleled to the semantic message of material objects that waits to be uncovered and deciphered much like a note concealed into the hollow of a tree. This emphasis on the word as a rich reservoir of available meanings has prompted critics, such as Polukhina, for instance, to note a similarity between the art of Sedakova and that of the Acmeist poets, whose works explore the infinite potentials of the word. As Polukhina observes, "Sedakova follows Mandel'shtam and Acmeist poetics in her treatment of language: for her, the most important thing in poetry is the word, the word per se, the word as name; it is more important, she insists, than syntax, versification or tropes. All in all, the poem, in her opinion, serves the word, so that each individual word realizes the full range of its etymological and phonetic potential, its potential for ambivalence of meaning" ("Ol'ga Sedakova" 1449). Or, as Sedakova herself declares, "What does excite me is the intensity of a word, its semantic, phonetic, grammatical strength, and it is there that I see new possibilities" ("Conform not to this Age: An Interview with Ol'ga Sedakova" 45). Not by chance, Sedakova acknowledges that "The most powerful influence of my [her] youth was Mandel'shtam" (49). "It was as if he were passing

judgement,” Sedakova explains. “What could one write after that? It was not a matter of writing post-Auschwitz, as they say now, but of writing post-Mandel’shtam. . . .” (“Conform not to this Age” 49).

The striking commonality between the metarealist school and that of Acmeist poetics has been perceived by Andrew Wachtel and Alexei Parshchikov as well. While these critics do not label the innovative poets they introduce as “metarealists,” but simply refer to them as “nonconceptualists” (“Introduction” 5), they single out as their most important characteristic the same incessant drive for re-inventing language that formed the core of Acmeist poetics. As Wachtel and Parshchikov explain, “Each and every thing or situation [in the poetry of ‘nonconceptualists’] was renamed: Adam’s task was taken on anew. Indeed, it is significant that this loosely connected group of poets felt a tie to the Russian acmeists (through the work of Mandelstam and Arsenii Tarkovsky), a group that was originally dubbed ‘Adamists’ by one of its founders, and had also attempted in their poetry to rename the concrete external world. Thus, what these young poets valued most of all was the idiosyncratic world produced by the poet’s language—his or her personal world” (“Introduction” 5).

Metarealism invites a provocative parallel with yet another major literary school, the school of Symbolism (Russian Symbolism developed 1892–1910). Sharing pronounced religious and philosophic aspirations, both Symbolism and metarealism embody the search for another, higher, metaphysical reality beyond the estate of our humdrum everyday existence. This metaphysical reality could be attained, as Baudelaire expressed it in *Notes nouvelles sur Edgar Poe*, “à travers la poésie” (through poetry). Baudelaire created the image of the poet as a seer, a prophet, who could see beyond the tangible, material world to the world of pure ideas. The task of the Symbolist poet became to create this “other,” transcendental world by means of metaphor and symbol, by using concrete images that correspond to abstract essences and forms in the ideal meta-world. Thus the Symbolists would be able to transcend the material, earthly existence and penetrate the realm of the eternal truth, the sacred world of God.

Metarealist poets express the same longing for going beyond the confines of the everyday into a sublime metaphysical world. While

the Symbolists, however, insist on juxtaposing the earthly reality *here* to the eternal spiritual world *beyond*, the metarealists profess an optimistic *monism*, wedding the quotidian, perceptual existence to a life in a metaphysical beyond. Transcendental worlds in meta-realism become incorporated, on terms equal to those of any other reality, into the multifaceted body of our universe. As Mikhail Epstein observes, “Metarealism is not a negation of realism, but its expansion into the realm of things unseen, a complication of the very notion of realism, revealing its multidimensionality, irreducible to the level of physical and psychological verisimilitude and including a higher, metaphysical reality. . . . That which we are accustomed to call ‘realism,’ narrowing the breadth of that concept, is the realism of only one reality, the social reality of day-to-day existence that directly surrounds us. . . .” (*After the Future* 37-38).

The expansion of referentiality beyond the scope of any single reality is how one might encapsulate the primary agenda of Sedakova’s verse collection *Vrata, Okna, Arki*. My subsequent analysis focuses on a poem in the collection that Sedakova chose to leave untitled, as if unwilling to limit within a single name the interminable flux of mutually transforming identities (79). The poem dramatizes the heroine’s incompetence and inability to transcend the limits of the body and initiate communication with higher, consummate realities. This personal tragedy and the eloquently rendered futility of all attempts to overcome it comprise the poem’s paramount theme. Despite the poetic persona’s desperate desire to fathom worlds transcending ours, she remains as sterile as a rose incapable of blooming and glancing beyond the illusory microcosm enclosed by its petals:

Их легкая душа
цветет в Элизии, а здесь не знает,
как выглянуть из тесных лепестков,
как показать цветенье без причины
и музыку, разредившую звук. . . .

Their ethereal soul
in Elysium bursts out in blossom, but here knows not
how to peep out of the tightly closed petals,
how to reveal its causeless florescence
and show the music, rarefying the sound. . . . (79)

As evinced in the poem, human language and reason can only aspire to, but never attain, the knowledge they are striving after. Indeed, Plato himself postulated a strict separation between the realm of knowledge and truth, in which ideas reside, and the world of opinion, or *Doxa*. It was Plato's belief that only through the soul, the mediator between ideas and appearances, we might obtain knowledge. Similar was the belief of "transcendental" Symbolism, based on the "transcendental" concept, elaborated by the neo-Platonists in the third century and given considerable vogue in the eighteenth century by Swedenborg. It also posited a universal and ideal world of which the real world was just a shadow, and argued that the knowledge of this "other" world could be attained through the perfection of the soul, this time, however, as achieved in poetry.

In Sedakova's work, the Creator remains the only one who possesses the ineffable knowledge of existence. People can only endeavor and repeatedly fail in their attempts to grasp the abstruse meaning of reality:

Ни разум мой и ни глухой язык,
 а знаю, никогда не прикаснуся
 к тому, чего хотят. Не в этом дело.
 Мы все, мой друг, достойны сострадания
 хотя бы за попытку. Кто нас создал,
 тот скажет, почему мы таковы,
 и сделает, какими пожелает.

Neither my reason nor my muffled language,
 I know, will ever touch
 what they've been striving after. But this is not the point.
 We all, my friend, are worthy of compassion
 if only for our attempt. He who created us
 will say why we are such,
 and make us as he wishes. (79)

The poem embodies a distinctly religious strand that runs through all of Sedakova's work. Not by chance, the poetry of Sedakova has been regarded as "metaphysically and theologically thought-provoking" and as a powerful "demonstration of the beauty of faith" (Polukhina, introduction to "Conform not to this Age" 33). A more in-depth inquiry into the religious implications of Sedakova's works

reveals that religion, to Sedakova, is a very broad and comprehensive concept, and that it certainly cannot be limited to any single school or tradition. As Catriona Kelly observes, “. . . if Sedakova’s mysticism can draw on Orthodoxy as a convenient and domestic repository of the spiritual, she is equally at home with Western spirituality (as the reference to St Francis suggests), or Oriental traditions (which are, as one would expect, worked into ‘A Chinese Journey’)” (“Olga Sedakova” 424). It seems that religion to Sedakova is a particular sensibility and attitude to the universe, an internal wisdom in approaching the phenomena of the world.

In the verses discussed above, the religious theme is expressed through the poet’s recognition of a higher creative force as the only agent that begets life and holds the knowledge of the universe. The poetic persona recognizes the omnipotence of this force and withdraws, struck by the futility of language and reason to gain access to the higher truth. Apart from its religious implications, the poem is distinctly philosophical in character. Sedakova’s extreme erudition and learnedness prompts her to pose a vital epistemological problem—how do we know something to be true, is it possible at all to attain truth?

Metabolic Transfigurations

Sedakova’s poem introduces a multiplicity of metamorphoses: the “desert of life” (*pustynia zhizni*) becomes a “lighted house” (*osveshchennyi dom*)—a garden of wistful roses (*sad pechal’nykh roz*):

В пустыне жизни . . . Что я говорю,
в какой пустыне? В освещенном доме,
где сходятся друзья и говорят
о том, что следует сказать. . . .
В саду у дружелюбных, благотворных,
печальных роз. . . .

In the *desert of life* . . . What am I saying?
In what desert? In the *lighted house*,
where friends gather and talk
of that which ought to be said. . . .
In the *garden of amicable, beneficial*,

wistful roses. . . . (79)

The interrelations between the *desert of life*, the *lighted house*, and the *garden of roses* reflect the copious crossings-over among the various levels of reality. In their inherently transfigurational capacity, these poetic figures seem to subvert all familiar literary definitions and are nowhere to be found in the catalog of tropes. Each one of them incessantly becomes the other and, in deconstructing the fundamental distinction between the literal and the figurative, violates the conventional criteria allowing metaphors to operate. The *garden of roses* functions neither metaphorically nor metonymically. The *desert of life* is neither like the *garden of roses*, nor like the *lighted house*—nor are these realities interchangeable on the basis of any common affiliation. The *lighted house* is a *garden of roses*, just as it is the *desert of life*—there is no inviolable border between them. Any differentiation between the house, the garden, and the desert appears impossible when *metaboles* define the rules of the poetic field. With the *metabole*, defined by Mikhail Epstein, “One thing is not simply similar or corresponding to another, which presupposes an indestructible border between them, the artistic predication and illusory quality of such juxtaposition; rather one thing *becomes* the other” (“Afterward: Metamorphosis” 282).⁶ An agent of this vigorous becoming, the *metabole* renders our simultaneous presence in the garden of roses, visiting everyone, and in the desert of our life, engrossed in utter solitude, altogether justifiable: “. . . в саду у роз, / в гостях у всех - и все таки в пустыне, / в пустыне нашей жизни. . . .” “. . . in the garden of roses, / a guest of everyone – and yet, in the desert, / in the desert of our life. . . .” (79).

In Sedakova’s poem, despite the heroine’s innermost wish to impede it, a full-scale metamorphosis occurs, and the *garden of roses* is transformed into a *desert of life*. Sedakova’s poem epitomizes how the so-far-fixed and unequivocal realities are supplanted by the unstable, continually slipping “and” state of in-betweenness of things. The poem’s reality is *not* definitive and stable. No secure reality exists at all. Realities emerge in the continuously evolving chain of this, *and* that, *and* another meaning, as a constant transcendence of previous quality, governed by an insatiable passion for becoming. “All of Sedakova’s poetry could be called, if we select for it the most concise single term, poetry of transformation,” Mikhail Epstein sug-

gests (“Afterward: Metamorphosis” 283). The agent of this vigorous transformation, the *metabole*, ceaselessly captures the flowing of reality and produces between the textual layers assemblages that pilot new realities, nuclei that give birth to novel entities.⁷

Imagery of the Threshold

“If only it were otherwise. . .” (*A esli by ne tak. . .*) Sedakova’s poem contemplates an alternative development, which, though rendered in the subjunctive rather than present indicative mood, incites a whole new chain of *becomings* (79). The poetic persona has discovered the abode in which music and floescence dwell. The “inaudible music” (*neslyshnaia muzyka*) from the poem’s first section now gathers and transforms the “desert of life” into a celestial paradise, a home of “constellations, musical sequences, and burning interweavings of happiness” (*sozvezd’ia, tsepi, / goriashchie perepleten’ia schast’ia*). The formerly impotent body *becomes* a unified whole with transcendental reality, absorbing its absolute harmony through a rhizomatic coupling of the divine keyboard and the lyric heroine’s hand: “Глубокая, покойная рука / лежала б сильно, впитывая все / из клавишей. . .” ‘Profound and calm, the hand / would powerfully lie, absorbing everything / from the keys. . .’ (80).

An unsuspected twist in Sedakova’s poem, however, briskly returns us to the real world. The subject’s *unified-with-the-universe* body *becomes* a groaning, mutilated body, suffering a parting (*razluka*): “. . . Да, эта была б лучше, / чем жестяные жалобы разлуки / и совести больной . . . Я так боюсь.” ‘. . . Yes, this would’ve been better / than the harsh complaints of separation / and of my unhealthy conscience . . . I am so very scared’ (80).

Then, in the whirlpool of *becomings*, another change occurs, inaugurated by a brief transitional line: “Но правда ведь, какая - то неправда / в таких стенаньях?” ‘But isn’t it also true, that there’s some untruth / in such a moaning?’ (80). A new transfiguration helps transgress the female lyric speaker’s lonely hermitage: the body, the abode of the “invaluable creature” (*bestsennoe sozdan’e*) nestles the destitute repentance, which thereby *becomes* a melody of beauty, grace, and mercy: “. . . и, как в меха, в бесценное создание / раскаянье закутать, чтоб оно / не коченело - бедное, чужое

... / А шло себе и шло, как красота, / мелодия из милости и силы” ‘... And, as in wine-skin, in this invaluable creature, / wrap up repentance, / so that it / does not grow numb—alien and poor ... / But goes on and on, like beauty, / a melody of mercy and of power’ (80).

The ever-flowing, buoyant intensities reverberating in Sedakova’s poem frustrate a congealing into a stable representational whole and preclude any possibility for arresting a climax. Much in this line, Gregory Bateson, the originator of the concept of textual *plateau*, uses it to designate “a continuous, self-vibrating region of intensities whose development avoids any orientation toward a culmination point or external end.”⁸ Metarealist poetry could thus be viewed as a system dealing with intensities and medialities, an internal communication of plateaus sustaining a number of involuted links. Everything in metarealism undergoes a constant metamorphosis. Its plateaus, however, are situated “always in the middle, not at the beginning or the end.”⁹ As if to subvert any possibility for imposing representational limits, metarealism embarks on sustaining a world of continuous evolution and transfiguration. Every kind of change seems attainable and desired; one can dream the impossible dream of acquiring any cherished identity. Likewise, Sedakova’s loving lullaby promises a transmutation into anything the caged bird ever craved to be: poor or rich, a sea wave or God’s angel:

- Спи - говорит - голубчик,
кем захочешь, тем и проснешься:
хочешь, бедным, хочешь, богатым,
хочешь - морской волной,
хочешь - ангелом Господним.

Go to sleep – it says – my dear,
You’ll wake up whoever you wish to be:
If you like – poor; if you like – rich;
If you like – a sea wave,
If you like – God’s angel.
 (“Kolybel’naia” ‘A Lullaby’ 105)

This short poem by Sedakova, composed in the plain words of a baby lullaby, embodies one of the most representative features of

her poetic style—the exquisite simplicity with which she communicates her lofty ideas of the spiritual and the divine. The lack of technical elaborateness in the works of Sedakova is one of the main distinctions between her style and what we will see presents the style of Shvarts. In the words of Polukhina, “Sedakova’s poetry embodies a rare nobility and sublime simplicity. Although beautifully crafted, her [Sedakova’s] poems are in many ways poor and ascetic: that is to say, as a technician, she is much less interesting than Elena Shvarts. But that is not her purpose. Her poetry offers a wonderful spiritual expansion, elevation. . . .” (1450).¹⁰

Indeed the simple and repetitive words, comprising Sedakova’s lullaby, suggest unequaled prospects for spiritual and corporal expansion. The unencumbered transformational activity, enacted on the body and the spirit, reveals that, in the poetry of metarealism, all major textual developments happen on the threshold. Engrossed in the attempt to go beyond our everyday reality, we often fail to detect the line that separates our earthly world from the divine, spiritual realm. As Mark Lipovetskii, discussing the poetry of Zhdanov, suggests: “The border separating the chaos, seething with life, from the chasm of non-existence is imperceptible—‘we stand on the threshold, without knowing it is a threshold’” (*Gran’, otdel’iaushchaia kipiashchii zhizn’iu khaos ot bezdny nebytiia, nezametna*—“*my stoim na poroge, ne znaia, chto eto porog*” 216). The threshold is a point of crisis, of radical turns, new beginnings, or drastic collapses. *Vrata, Okna, Arki*, refuting any stable reality, marks precisely these points, the moments of undecidability and liminality, of openness to any process of becoming and reluctance to abide by the dogmas of already established, finalized definitions of reality. Implicit in the very title of Sedakova’s verse collection *Vrata, Okna, Arki* (*Gateways, Windows, Arches*), the threshold imagery emerges as convincing testimony that, in metarealism, things always function on the threshold of becoming something else, of being born anew and totally transfigured.

Deterritorializing into New Realities: Elena Shvarts’s *Lotsiia Nochi* (*Sailing Directions of the Night*)

The dynamic transformations defining the enunciation of metar-

ealist poetry, the never-ceasing flux and reflux of metarealist poetic entities, evoke the processes of *de-* and *re-territorialization*, as described by the philosopher-critics Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. They introduce the concept of *detrterritorialization* in their definition of assemblages (assemblage of enunciation and machinic assemblage) as having “both *territorial sides*, or reterritorialized sides, which stabilize it, and *cutting edges of detrterritorialization*, which carry it away” (88). Deterritorialization, Deleuze and Guattari argue, “is the movement by which ‘one’ leaves the territory. It is the operation of the line of flight,” beyond which nothing can retain its former quality, autonomy, and self (508). Reterritorialization, on the other hand, “does not express a return to the territory, but rather these differential relations internal to D[eterritorialization] itself, this multiplicity internal to the line of flight,” yet unable to traverse it (509). The concepts of *de-* and *re-territorialization*, I would argue, reflect the manifold becomings that occur in Russian metarealist poetry and reveal the processes it registers as nomadic, transformational in character.

Within the poems that compose Shvarts’s verse collection *Lot-siia nochii*, the identity of the poetic persona is persistently detrterritorialized into new dimensions. In “Симбиоз” (“Symbiosis”), for example, the heroine is depicted in her self-identifications with the soul of a dying oak-tree and with the spirit of her poetic lyre, doomed to death:

Симбиоз

Нету моей замшелой лиры
 Дуба, что рос здесь на Черной речке,
 Его спилили, срубил спилили,
 И не поставишь даже и свечки.
 Нету для дерева рая, нет и могилы,
 И когда впилося острые пилы
 в нежно-шершавое и беспомощное тело,
 Мне приснилось, что со скалы
 В пропасть я полетела.
 То ль душа его прилетела
 Со мною навеки проститься,
 То ли в смертной тоске хотела
 за душу мою уцепиться . . .

Нету лиры замшелой,
 А душу она исцеляла,
 У нее глаза были,
 Ум был у нее.
 Приносила я в жертву вино и монеты,
 Два серебряных там зарывала браслета,
 И она меня обнимала, лечила,
 как увидит - всеми листьями ахнет.
 Гробо нас разлучили,
 Разделили - и я умираю и чахну.

Symbiosis

My moss-covered lyre no longer exists,
 The oak-tree that grew here, at the Black rivulet,
 They sawed it off, cut it down, sawed it off,
 And even candles one cannot set on it.
 No paradise for trees exists, not even a grave,
 And when the saw blade stuck into
 The tender-rough and helpless body,
 I dreamed that from a cliff
 I flew headlong over a precipice.
 Did the oak-tree's soul come flying
 To bid me farewell forever,
 Or did it in its mortal pang desire
 To catch hold of my spirit . . .
 The moss-covered lyre is no longer here,
 And my soul she used to cure,
 She had eyes,
 She had a mind.
 In sacrifice, I used to bring her wine and coins,
 Two silver bracelets did I bury there,
 And she embraced me, and she healed me,
 And at my very sight, in all her leaves exclaimed she.
 They rudely parted us,
 They separated us – and I am dying now and pining. (41-42)

The poem opens with a statement announcing the disrupted existence of a peculiar “moss-covered” lyre: “Netu moei zamsheloi liry” (41). Unlike any ordinary lyre, the musical instrument that Shvarts describes is rhizomatically connected, through its interwoven moss,

with the natural and living universe rather than the man-made world. Indeed, in Shvarts's poetry, objects and phenomena of both the material and spiritual world are frequently interlinked with nature and often become nature. As Darra Goldstein observes in her essay "The Heartfelt Poetry of Elena Shvarts," "Shvarts's personae long to find a place in the natural order of things. They undergo marvelous metamorphoses to grow closer to the natural world, becoming shaggy with fur like a bear or prickly with sedge grass" (264). In a similar note, discussing the transformational activity in Shvarts's "Vtoroe puteshestvie Lisy na severo-zapad" ("The Second Journey of the Fox to the North-West," 1988), Kuritsyn makes the following remark on Alexander Kushner's introduction to the book: "Vot odna velikolepnaia ogovorka Kushnera: 'v stikhotvorenii 'Kniga na okne' . . . lezhashchaia na podokonnike Biblia perekhodit iz tsarstva dukha v tsarstvo prirody, kak budto udocheriaetsia eiu, stanovitsia sama iavleniem prirody, tsvetushchim kustom, privlekaiushchim pchel . . .'; ogovorka v etom 'kak budto'—ne 'kak budto' udocheriaetsia i stanovitsia, a deistvitel'no stanovitsia.'" Here is an excellent reservation regarding Kushner's words: in the poem 'A Book at the Window,' the Bible, lying on the window-sill, passes from the realm of the spirit to the realm of Nature, as if adopting Nature, as if becoming itself a phenomenon of Nature, a blossoming bush, attracting bees . . .'; the reservation consists in this 'as if'—not 'as if' adopting and becoming, but really becoming' (207).

In "Simbioz," right after Shvarts depicts the lyre as having linked with and become a part of nature, and having her existence prematurely abolished, we stumble into the disclosure of another death – this time, of a mysterious oak-tree: "Duba, chto ros zdes' na Chernoi rechke, / Ego spilili, srubili, spilili, / I ne postavish' dazhe i svechki." Thus, in the swirl of only a moment, the wooden corpse of the pristine, "moss-covered" lyre deterritorializes into a severely dismembered oak-tree. If this transformation is particularly critical, it is because of the peculiar meanings that Shvarts, in her poetry, attributes to the image of the tree. "Trees particularly are kindred to the soul," Goldstein remarks, discussing the function of trees in the poems of Shvarts. "This kinship is based on the fundamentally cruciform shape of both human and tree, which suggests that both can endure suffering but also experience redemption" (246). Interest-

ingly, many Russian writers, such as Pushkin, Lermontov, Tiutchev, and Zabolotskii, have used oak-trees, in particular, to represent the same themes of death and life, rebirth and metaphysical reincarnation that operate in Shvarts's poem "Simbioz."

In "Simbioz," the death of the poetical persona is ushered in by multiplicity of intermediate becomings. The story of the oak-tree's murder reveals the deterritorialization of the dying tree into a dying human soul, a heroine that plunges headlong into a bottomless and terminal abyss: "I kogda vpiilos' ostrye pily / v nezžno-shershavoe i bespomoshchnoe telo, / mne prisnilos', chto so skaly / v propast' ia poletela." 'And when the saw blade stuck into / The tender-rough and helpless body, / I dreamed that from a cliff / I flew headlong over a precipice.' The deterritorializing process takes place on a neutral site, a "tender-rough and helpless body" (*nezžno-shershavoe i bespomoshchnoe telo*), as the author points out, not designating through a pronoun the bodily possession. We easily assume that this is the oak-tree's body, as it has been the oak-tree's life that we have mourned ("Netu dlia dereva raia, net i mogily" 'No paradise for trees exists, not even a grave'), and, to this point, have not even met the lyric speaker of the poem. What strikes us as an unforeseen development is the abrupt displacement of the direct object "it" (*ego*), through which the tree so far has been described as the victim of slaying and death ("Ego spilili, srubili, spilili" 'They sawed it off, cut it down, sawed it off'), by the surprising pronoun "I" (*ia*) as the syntactic subject of a structure that plots the female speaker as the agent of a destructive death-bound action ("v propast' ia poletela" 'I flew headlong over a precipice'). This utterly surprising substitution suggests a symbiosis of the two distinct and very different bodies, joined by their fate to die, into a common and inseparable one.

Alongside the transformations defining the corporeal level, a symbiosis on the level of spirituality takes place. Shvarts implies the possibility that, in its concluding moments, the dying tree's soul strives to seize the female speaker's spirit and reunite with it before the final farewell: "To l' dusha ego priletela / So mnoiu naveki prosti'sia, / To li v smertnoi toske khotela / Za dushu moi utsepit'sia. . . ." 'Did the oak-tree's soul come flying / To bid me farewell forever, / Or did it in its mortal pang desire / To catch hold of my spirit . . .' Immediately after the portrayal of this imagi-

nary merging, we hear once again the ominous refrain, “The moss-covered lyre is no longer here” (*Netu liry zamsheloi*), and witness, through a painful reminiscence, the story of the blissful former union and mutually dependent coexistence of the poetical persona and her faithful lyre, which now acquires human features: “A du-shu ona istseliala / u neĭ glaza byli, / Um byl u neĭ. / Prinosila ia v zhertvu vino i monety / Dva serebrianykh tam zaryvala brasleta, / I ona menia obnimala, lechila, / kak uvidit—vsemi list’iami akhnet.” ‘And my soul she used to cure, / She had eyes, / She had a mind. / In sacrifice, I used to bring her wine and coins, / Two silver bracelets did I bury there, / And she embraced me, and she healed me, / And at my very sight, in all her leaves exclaimed she.’ The poem’s finale unveils the heroine’s innermost yearning for reinstating that ecstatic condition of union, this time, however, within the mystic embrace of impending death: “Grubo nas razluchili, / Razdelili—*i ia umiraiu i chakhnu*” ‘They rudely parted us, / They separated us—and I am dying now and pining.’ (42, italics added).

While in my analysis of “Simbioz” I have referred to the various reincarnations of the heroine in terms of deterritorialization, they all remain internal to the territory claimed by her persona. The deterritorialization of the female lyric speaker into her defunct poetic lyre is overlaid by compensatory reterritorializations, obstructing the line of flight and blocking the creation of a new poetic entity. In “Simbioz,” the heroine seems never to have fully transcended her identity and supplanted it by a qualitatively new one. The full-fledged metamorphosis of her character into a novel one is always undermined, internally subverted. The intimate interrelation between the female lyric speaker and her loyal lyre remains a symbiotic union. And symbiosis is not yet an event of *absolute* deterritorialization. It is a state of shared existence and mutual interdependence, but still of separate, distinct identities, not thoroughly united and indistinguishably merged into one.

Sometimes, however, the articulateness of the lyric entities preserved in “Simbioz” becomes enriched through interpenetration of mutually transformable identities. A work by Shvarts, entitled Хьюмби or just “Kh’iumbi” (or “Humbe,” deriving from the English “human being,” as Shvarts herself explains), unfolds the magical world of such metamorphoses. The subtitle of “Kh’iumbi,” “Prak-

ticheskii ocherk evoliutsionnogo alkhimizma” (“A Practical Outline of Evolutionary Alchemism”) sets the tone for the miraculous changes that follow. Related by Shvarts, they acquire the following shape:

Вот алхимический процесс:
 В мозгу у Хьюмби созревает
 Вольшебный камень.
 Но это очень долго длится,
 Уже и крылья прорастают,
 Уж хьюмби полуптицы,
 Кентаврики с другим лицом. . . .

Here is an alchemical process:
 In the brain of Humbe
 A magic stone matures.
 But this lasts for a very long time,
 Already wings are sprouting too,
 And Humbles, indeed, are already half-birds,
 centaurs with a different face. . . . (21)

By force of a mystical alchemical process, Humbe is transfigured into a half-bird and, simultaneously, a centaur. The odd humanoid being forms a common body with the bodies of the two mysterious creatures. In this new corporeal shape, the bird, the centaur, and the eerie human being become interconnected, through a rhizome, by a multiplicity of routes and paths.¹¹ While the conversion of the human body into a body sprouting wings and having, at the same time, the features of a centaur, evinces, no doubt, the impact of deterritorialization, the latter fails to unfold in full swing and gain its ultimate and irreversible dimensions. The lack of full-dress transformational activity still leaves residual components and points of return to Humbe’s previous identity.

Deterritorialization picks up utmost power within the texture of another work by Shvarts, “Temnyi angel” (“Dark Angel”). The poem illustrates the most extreme variety of transformation—the case of *absolute* deterritorialization. “Temnyi angel” traces how the heroine is thoroughly transformed into a novel entity, that is, how her principal identity traverses and transcends “the line of flight or deterritorialization,” which, Deleuze and Guattari suggest, presents

“the maximum dimension after which the multiplicity undergoes metamorphosis, changes in nature” (21). At the line of flight some realities disseminate and pulverize; others congeal, precipitate, and crystallize. Here is how “Темный ангел” renders the thrust of absolute deterritorialization:

Темный ангел

Проникновение пара в пар
 (А сонная душа есть дым непрочный)
 Иль может быть - всего порочней.
 Как бы повтаря паденье,
 Ангел свалился с небес,
 И, в темное облако слившись,
 Кружили мы под потолком.
 И кости мои растворились,
 И кровь превратилась в иchor
 Чужим ли крылом, заемным
 Я пробовала взмахнуть.
 Долго во мне он копался
 Как будто зерно искал,
 В котором вся сладость земная
 И тайна, - и не отыскал.

Dark Angel

The penetration of the exhalation into steam
 (the drowsy soul is fragile smoke)
 More innocent than anything,
 Perhaps – most sinful of all.
 As if reenacting the Fall,
 An Angel fell down from Heaven,
 And, merging together into a dark cloud,
 We whirled round under the ceiling.
 And my bones dissolved,
 And my blood turned to ichor.
 Did I try to flap, using
 Other's, borrowed wings.
 He searched through me for a long time –
 As if looking for the grain,
 Which holds all the earthly sweetness

And the mystery, – and never found it. (32)

Since its opening line, “The penetration of the exhalation into steam,” “*Temnyi angel*” submerges the reader in a universe of vigorous and dynamic *becomings*. In its extraordinary transformational capacity, this poem is a wonderful example of the exceptional dynamics, the perpetual movement characteristic of Shvarts’s poetry. As Kuritsyn observes, “*ves’ mir [Shvarts]—v beskonechnom neostanovivom dvizhenii. . . . Vse u Shvarts letit, plyvet, peretekaet odno v drugoe*” ‘all of Shvarts’s world is in an endless, unstoppable movement. . . . All in Shvarts flies, swims, overflows one thing into the other’ (“*Prekrasnoe iazycheskoe bormotanie*” ‘A Beautiful Heathen Muttering’ 206). Reflecting on the all-inclusiveness of these dynamic metamorphic processes, the critic explicates: “*Ia, vprochem, tak chasto povtoriai u ‘vse letit’, chto zakonomeren vopros: vse—eto chto? Vse—eto VSE. . . . Angel i medved’, sad i sadovnik, Kitai, Rim, Peterburg, Chernaia rechka, Iliia i Moisei, Adam i Iona, Venetsiia i Iudif’, segodnia i vchera—vse zhivet v etoi real’nosti na ravnykh pravakh, vstupaia v neozhidonnye sviazi i stol’ zhe neozhidanno razryvaia’, meniaia’ mestami, sovropaia i ne sovropaia. . . .*” ‘I, by the way, repeat so frequently ‘all flies,’ that it is legitimate to ask: what is this all? All—this means ALL. . . . The angel and the bear, the garden and the gardener, China, Rome, and Petersburg, the Black rivulet, Iliia and Moses, Adam and Iona, Venice and Iudif, today and tomorrow—all lives on equal terms in this reality, entering unexpected connections, and so unexpectedly blowing up, exchanging places, coinciding and not coinciding. . . .’ (207).

In Shvarts’s “*Temnyi angel*,” this process of a mutual conversion and becoming is manifested in the deterritorialization of the lyric speaker’s “drowsy soul” (*sonnaia dusha*) into divine and “fragile” (*neprochnyi*) steam. This primary metamorphosis only sets the scene for the prolific chain of transmutations yet to come. The poem then proceeds through reenactment of the Fall, and pictures the descent to Earth of one of Heaven’s angels. A most miraculous transfiguration occurs. Through *metabole* the poet renders the conversion of the angel into a human being, and of the human lyric heroine into an angelic creature. This full-fledged transmutation presents a case of absolute deterritorialization. It is *absolute* in that it holds the

power to balance and to offset all forces of compensatory reterritorializations, that is, all efforts to reclaim and reestablish the primary quality.

The metamorphoses depicted in the poem are thoroughgoing and full-scale—all characteristics of the former selves melt down, all boundaries become abolished, and a completely unified identity is born. “[M]y bones dissolved, / And my blood turned to ichor” (*I kosti moi rastvorilis’, / i krov’ prevratilas’ v ikhor*), the female lyric speaker testifies to her miraculous conversion. The body of the female speaker opens up to fuse together with the angel’s body. Her blood, as *metabole* conveys the process, transforms into the blood of gods, into celestial and godly ichor. The lyric speaker thus *becomes* a fallen angel. No boundary between the two exists; no differentiation seems achievable or possible.¹²

The heroine no longer can retain her formerly inviolable and safe autonomy. She is inseparable from the angel’s soul and body, her spirit flying, spreading out the angel’s wings: “Chuzhim li krylom, zaemnym / ia probovala vzmakhnut.” ‘Did I try to flap, using / Other’s, borrowed wings.’ The angel, on his part, dives into the human body and rummages in it for the hidden truth: “Dolgo vo mne on kopalsia / kak budto zerno iskal, / V kotorom vsia sladost’ zemnaia / I taina,—i ne otyskal.” ‘He searched through me for a long time—/ As if looking for the grain, / Which holds all the earthly sweetness / And the mystery,—and never found it.’ The female speaker and the angel have become a new, and utterly oblivious of its preceding selves, identity: “I, v temnoe obloko slivshis’, / Kruzhili my pod potolkom.” ‘And, merging together into a dark cloud, / We whirled round under the ceiling.’ The process of convergence has involved a deterritorializing element (the lyric speaker’s self) and a deterritorialized one (the body/spirit of the fallen angel). The latter are assigned two asymmetric roles, but as components of a single transformation, as quanta of a single flow and undivided transmutation.

The miraculous transubstantiation of the female speaker of this poem into a divine, angelic creature is among the many religious motifs in Shvarts’s poetry. The works of Shvarts display a distinct orientation toward religious questions and themes. In the words of the poet herself, “I’ve been somehow drawn to God since I was a child” (qtd. in Sandler, “Cultural Memory and Self-Expression in

a Poem by Elena Shvarts” 268); “The only things that have ever really interested me are poetry and theology, separately and together” (“Statement” 211). Similarly to Sedakova, Shvarts has refused to be confined by any single faith or religious tradition. Instead, her work interconnects and mixes a number of different belief systems and religions. As Michael Molnar remarks, “Though she is a believer, she is far from (Russian, or any other) orthodoxy. On the contrary, . . . her faith is heterodox and heretical. . . .” (11).¹³

Coda

This essay has attempted to reveal the main characteristics of metarealism through the analysis of works by two of its foremost female representatives—Sedakova and Shvarts. Part of the unofficial poetry of Russia, the works of both these authors were first published in their country after the fall of communism, a little more than a decade ago. Sedakova’s first collection in Russia, composed of three separate short books of verse, *The Chinese Journey. Steles and Epigraphs. Old Songs*,¹⁴ appeared in 1990, and Shvarts did not publish her first book in the USSR before 1989. On the basis of the intensely metaphysical orientation of their works, both Sedakova and Shvarts have been regarded as virtually synonymous with religious poetry, but both of them have ardently refused to limit themselves to Orthodoxy. Sharing a range of themes, the poetry of Shvarts and Sedakova explores the lyric speaker’s inescapable mortality and her uncertain habitation in the universe, the pain and lonesomeness she often feels amidst the overwhelming cosmic chaos, but, first and foremost, her spiritual quest—her yearning for a better world, in which the soul can be renewed and born to life again.

The journey to this heavenly abode, however, is rendered in distinctly different ways within the works of Shvarts and Sedakova. Sedakova’s poetry leaves us with the impression of unreachable depth and peculiar inwardness. Her style is simple, though intrinsically layered, and her rhymes are uniform and, on the whole, predictable. A poet, critic, essayist, and a translator, who is renowned for her exquisite taste and erudition, Sedakova casts off anything excessive and unnecessary—she delves into the age-old meanings of archaic words instead of striving to create extraneous effectiveness.

The broodings and torments of Sedakova are typically rendered on the metaphysical level, and, to the reader, she remains peculiarly distanced and impersonal. The poetry of Shvarts, conversely, feels like it overflows with feelings and emotions.¹⁵ The style of Shvarts is noticeably more exuberant, and she is freer in the mode of her expression. Shvarts frequently changes themes and rhythms, and loves to launch experiments with imagery and metrics.¹⁶ Thus, although both the poets work with similar religious concepts and material, some critics, such as Kelly, for example, regard the poetry of Sedakova, in its internal, hermeneutic intricacy, as closer to the modernist tradition, and that of Shvarts, in its eclectic, vibrant quality—as closer to the postmodernist one.¹⁷

My essay has argued that a major commonality in the poetic works of Shvarts and Sedakova is the continuous enactment of a process of deterritorialization and becoming, resulting in the ceaseless birth of novel, long-desired universes. I have endeavored to reveal that, in the genesis of worlds so manifold, kaleidoscopic, and profuse, the mourning over the loss of reality yields to the unequalled pleasure of conversing with multiple realities. Through its engagement in an endless process of metamorphosis and transformation, the works of metarealism, I have argued, broaden the scope of reference, interconnecting, in a rhizomatic fashion, the multiplicity of possible and real worlds. The constant fostering of bonds between phenomenal and metaphysical realities produces myriad referential axes, thus rendering the striving after a singular and textually stable referent naïve and fully obsolete. In the conditions of an overstimulated reference genesis, proclaiming the postmodern demise of reference appears highly preposterous. Metarealism restores the pristine polyphony of our multifaceted world and vindicates the prestige formerly allotted to referentiality.

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Notes

1 See Dzhimbinov, *Literaturnye manifesty ot simvolizma do nashikh dnei* (*Literary Manifestoes from Symbolism to Our Days*), p. 508. The literary manifestoes of metarealism can also be found in *Russian Postmodernism: New Perspectives on Post-Soviet Culture* and, in the Russian original, in Mikhail Epstein's *Postmodern v Rossii. Literatura i teoriia* (106-40). It should be noted that all metarealist manifestoes were written by Mikhail Epstein, a literary scholar, not by any of the poets themselves. An exception is Kedrov, another author of a metarealist manifesto, also known as a writer of both poetry and criticism, but he has not had a particularly vast influence. It seems important to acknowledge that even before having any manifestoes, or being recognized as belonging to a common school (still in the 1970s), the authors later known as "metarealists" were creating a significant body of poetic production. "By the mid 1970s," Thomas Epstein observes referring to the metarealist poets, ". . . a new generation of poets burrowed underground, creating a body of texts whose significance only became apparent in the early 1990s" (87).

While most critics agree on using the term "metarealism" or "metametaphorism" to designate the new poetic school, they differ largely when it comes to naming its representatives and major poets. Critics such as Viacheslav Kuritsyn and Dzhimbinov, for example, who call the school "metametaphorism," see as its leading representatives Zhdanov, Parshchikov, and Eremenko (see Kuritsyn, *Russkii literaturnyi postmodernizm*, 133 and Dzhimbinov, *Literaturnye manifesty ot simvolizma do nashikh dnei*, 508). In the same work, however, Dzhimbinov admits: "Inogda k metametaphoristam, bez dostatochnykh na to osnovanii, prichisliaut poetessu Ol'gu Sedakovu" 'Sometimes, without much basis for this, Olga Sedakova is reckoned among the metametaphorist group' (508). In his "Theses on Metarealism and Conceptualism" (1983), Mikhail Epstein makes a much stronger assertion about Sedakova's alliance with the metarealist school: "An example of the most consistent and extreme metarealism is the poetry of Olga Sedakova, whose images are pure religious archetypes and as such form almost transparent signs" (*Russian Postmodernism* 108).

Other critics, such as Vladimir Aristov, Thomas Epstein, and Mikhail Epstein, who choose to use the term "metarealism" rather than "metametaphorism" (though, in "Observations on *meta*," Aristov acknowledges both terms, which he often replaces with the less specific "meta movement" or "meta type of poetry"), view as much larger the group of metarealist poets: for Aristov it includes Ivan Zhdanov, Alexei Parshchikov, Alexander Eremenko, Ilia Kutik, Arkadii Dragomoshchenko, Iuri Arabov, Evgenii Daenin, and others (221-22); for Thomas Epstein—Zhdanov, Krivulin, Se-

dakova, Aristov, Shvarts, Eremenko, Parshchikov, Kutik, Kondakova, and Dragomoshchenko (87-88), and for Mikhail Epstein—Sedakova, Shvarts, Zhdanov, Krivulin, Aristov, Dragomoshchenko, and Dmitrii Shchedrovitskii (*After the Future* 38). In “What is Metarealism? Facts and Hypotheses,” Mikhail Epstein also mentions Parshchikov, Kutik, and Eremenko (*Russian Postmodernism* 118).

None of the classifications of metarealist poets, however, has been fully accepted by the poets, who have often felt that their works contain distinct and singular religious underpinnings, as well as by the critics themselves, who have discerned the problems of grouping thoroughly unique artistic talents under a common denominator. Thomas Epstein, for example, gives voice to the unease that critics feel about the inclusion of distinctly different poets within the same poetic school, which he prefers to call metarealism. “To talk about these poets as a ‘group’ is something of a misnomer,” Thomas Epstein argues. “[T]hey wrote no manifestoes, marched under no banner, created no single linguistic or symbolic code” (87). To account more accurately for the specificities of their writing, the critic divides these poets into two sub-groups. The first, in his opinion, includes the writers Eremenko, Parshchikov, Kutik, Kondakova, and Dragomoshchenko, who “explore the limits and powers of language to name the real and of metaphor to link disparate level of experience” (87). The second sub-group, Thomas Epstein argues, consists of Zhdanov, Krivulin, Sedakova, Aristov, and Shvarts, “poets whose works could never be mistaken one for the other, [but who] nevertheless share an abiding faith in the lyric voice, in the myth-making powers of language, in the presence of the past in the present, and of the spiritual mystery of life and death” (88).

In a similar vein, speaking of the poets Parshchikov, Eremenko, and Zhdanov, Kuritsyn remarks: “эти авторы настолько разные, что соединять их под одной плохоспецифицированной вывеской ‘метаметафоризма’ совсем неправильно” ‘these authors are so different that to unite them under one, ill-defined rubric—“metametaphorism”—is altogether erroneous’ (133). Still, Kuritsyn discerns a common ground within the works of these three writers: “Это, видимо, так, но есть по крайней мере один признак, по которому эти поэты оказываются близки друг другу: каждый в своей стилистике, все они воспроизвели схожие ‘виртуальные фигуры”’ ‘This appears to be the case, but there is at least one sign that brings these poets close to one another: each and all of them, in their stylistics, have reproduced similar “virtual” figures’ (133).

Discussing the poetry of Zhdanov, Kuritsyn gives the following definition of a “virtual figure”: “Одна из популярных и эффектных ‘виртуальных’ фигур - овеществление абстракций и наделение сущностей свойствами других сущностей. И птица, и полет в ней

слиты воедино — полет абстрагируется от субъекта и предстает самостоятельной сущностью, способной быть грамматически однородной птице. В другом месте: ‘летит полет без птиц’. Еще в другом такой способностью вести себя как величины, обладающие физическим телом, обладают еще две абстракции: ‘плывет глубина осенней воде и тяжесть течет, омывая предметы’” ‘One of the popular and effective “virtual” figures is the substantiation of abstraction and the endowment of essences with the properties of other essences. “Both the bird and the flight in it are merged in one”—the flight is abstracted from the subject and presents an independent entity that is capable of being a grammatically homogenous bird. In another place: “the flight flies without a bird.” In yet another, such an ability to behave like a property, possessed by a physical object, is owned by two other abstractions: “depth swims in the autumn water and weight flows, washing objects’ (133).

2 Many critics, such as Stephanie Sandler and Catriona Kelly, for example, have discussed Sedakova and Shvarts together. “Critics often mention her [Shvarts’s] name in the same breath as that of Ol’ga Sedakova,” Sandler observes (“Elena Shvarts” 1459). Kelly traces the historical formation of both poets and claims that Sedakova, along with Shvarts, “is probably the most important woman poet in the post-Stalinist tradition of ‘internal emigration’” (“Olga Sedakova” 423). To Sandler, on the other hand, the most visible commonality between the poetry of Shvarts and Sedakova resides in the emphatically spiritual dimension of their work, in the aspirations of both poets to transcend the concrete historical moment and conquer new spiritual realms. In Sandler’s words, “Some of the best recent poetry, including that of Elena Shvarts and Ol’ga Sedakova, sidesteps historical realia to reinvent Russia’s poetry of the spirit” (“Women’s Poetry since the Sixties” 264). Despite acknowledging the similarities between the poetry of Sedakova and Shvarts, however, Sandler alerts us to the inexactitude of linking Sedakova’s name exclusively to that of Shvarts. “[T]he similarity [between Sedakova and Shvarts] seems largely that of age group and gender,” Sandler remarks (“Elena Shvarts” 1459). In “Women’s Poetry since the Sixties,” she gives us a compelling reason for eschewing the seemingly apparent and automatic pairing of Shvarts with Sedakova: “Few would like being grouped as ‘women poets’ (the derogatory sting of the term *poetessa* remains offensive) . . . Shvarts [shares more] with Viktor Krivulin, Mikhail Kuzmin, and Nikolai Zabolotskii, than they do with each other. Women poets’ primary allegiance is not to other women poets, and none of them makes genuine and complete sense outside the context of their male contemporaries and precursors” (265).

Other critics, such as Vladislav Kulakov, for example, have also consid-

ered the poetry of Shvarts closer to that of Krivulin (the two of them being the leading figures in the “unofficial,” *samizdat* poetry of Leningrad and having a similar poetic style). Kulakov has argued, “The poems of I. Zhdanov and O. Sedakova, with their personal, maximally subjective mythology, are one thing; the more analytical poetry of the St. Petersburg poets E. Shvarts and V. Krivulin, with their pull toward play and stylization, is quite another” (88).

3 It is of note that Sedakova and Shvarts themselves recognize the great affinity of their work, and feel a profound closeness and extreme respect for one another. In her interview with Valentina Polukhina, for instance, Sedakova has commented on numerous occasions on the immediate and intimate connection that bonds her world to the poetic world of Shvarts: Polukhina: “*Who do you feel closest to among the poets who are getting published?*” Sedakova: “First and foremost there is Elena Shvarts, a powerful poet with rare gifts” (“Conform not to this Age” 35). Speaking of “those poets who are closest to me [her],” Sedakova mentions first the name of Shvarts (43). She is quick to acknowledge “the shattering effect” that Shvarts’s poetry produced on her when she first read it (72). “I got to know Elena Shvarts’s poetry in 1975 or 1976 and it made me extremely jealous,” Sedakova remarks (48). “A great poet and she is alive? I sensed her poetic primacy, the purity of her tone. But I knew it was another world and, though I felt less pleasure in mine, I could not follow in her footsteps. I am deeply grateful for having met her. She made me feel freer in my own world. . . .” (48).

4 All translations of the poems and citations included in the essay are mine.

5 Interestingly, Sedakova also stresses the vatic element in poetry: “I think that the primordial nature of poetry, the hierophantic and the vatical (in Latin *vates* meant poet and prophet) does not vanish till the end . . .” (“Conform not to this Age” 63).

6 While the critics who prefer the term “metarealism” pronounce the birth of the “metabole” (the term was coined in December 1982, following the Exhibition of Hyperrealists and the ensuing debate at the House of Artists—see Mikhail Epstein, *Russian Postmodernism* 118), those who have called the school “metametaphorism” postulate another novel literary trope: the “metametaphor.” In 1983, Kedrov defined the *metametaphor* in the following manner:

Метаметафора - это метафора, где каждая вещь - вселенная. Такой метафоры раньше не было. Раньше все сравнивали. Поэт как солнце, или как река, или как трамвай. Человек и есть то,

о чем пишет. Здесь нет дерева отдельно от земли, земли отдельно от неба, неба отдельно от космоса, космоса отдельно от человека. Это зрение человека вселенной. Это метаметафора.

Метаметафора отличается от метафоры как метagalaktika от галактики. Привыкайте к метаметафорическому зрению, и глаз ваш увидит в тысячу раз больше, чем видел раньше.

The metametaphor—this is a metaphor where every object is a universe. This kind of metaphor has not existed so far. Before now, everything has been compared. The poet—like the sun, or like a river, or like a tram. People, in fact, are all of what they write about. There is no tree separate from the earth, no earth separate from the sky, no sky separate from the cosmos, no cosmos separate from humans. This is the universal vision of people.

This is the metametaphor. The metametaphor differs from the metaphor the way a metagalaxy differs from a galaxy. Get used to the metametaphoric vision, and your eyes will see a thousand times more than they used to see before. (“Rozhdenie Metametafori,” “The Birth of the Metametaphor” 509)

Kedrov, the main theoretician of the metametaphor, “that is, of the condensed, total metaphor, compared to which the common metaphor must look partial and timid” (“то есть сгущенной, тотальной метафоры, по сравнению с которой обычная метафора должна выглядеть частичной и робкой” 508), exemplifies this literary trope in a poem which, according to Dzhimbinov, can be regarded as the artistic manifesto of metametaphorism. The name of the poem is “Komp’iuter liubvi” (“The Computer of Love,” 1990) and what follows is a short excerpt from it:

Небо - это ширина взгляда / взгляд - это глубина неба / боль - это прикосновение Боя / Бог - это прикосновение боли / сон - это ширина души / душа - это глубина сна . . . / мысль - это немота души / душа - это нагота мысли / нагота - это мысль души . . . / печаль - это пустота пространства / радость - это полнота времени / время - это печаль пространства / пространство - это полнота времени. . . .

The sky – that is the breadth of sight / sight – that is the depth of the sky / pain – that is the touch of God / God – that is the touch of pain / Sleep – that is the breadth of the soul / the soul – that is the depth of sleep . . . / thought – that is the muteness of the soul / the soul – that is the nakedness of thought

/ nakedness – that is the thought of the soul . . . / grief – that is the emptiness of space / joy – that is the fullness of time / time – that is the grief of space / space – that is the fullness of time. . . . (509-10).

Based on the poem by Kedrov, with the metametaphor, one thing is no longer similar to another—rather it IS this other. Such a definition of the metametaphor is very similar to Mikhail Epstein's definition of the *metabole*, the only difference being that, with the *metabole*, one thing not simply IS another, but rather, constantly BECOMES this other. The emphasis is on the transformational activity and metamorphic processes defining our universe, rather than, as it seems with Kedrov, on the resultant of these processes. The more process-oriented approach of Epstein transpires in the very term he coins, "metabole," which, as he explains, comes from the Greek word *metabole* ("change," "turn," "shift") and literally means "to cross over," "to throw over," "change of place," "change of direction" (*Russian Postmodernism* 119).

In its unlimited transfigurational capacity and in the effort to transcend the "figurative vs. literal" dichotomy, the *metabole* invokes the manner in which a *rhizome* (as defined by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari) functions. As Deleuze and Guattari describe it, the *rhizome* is a non-centered, multidimensional, and dynamic structure, displaying radical defiance to all binary logic in favor of multiple entryway-exit configurations. Delineating the main characteristics of the *rhizome*, Deleuze and Guattari postulate: "unlike trees or their roots, the *rhizome* connects any point to any other point. . . . It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (*milieu*) from which it grows and which it overflows. . . . Unlike a structure, which is defined by a set of points and positions, with binary relations between the points and biunivocal relationships between the positions, the *rhizome* is made only of lines: lines of segmentarity and stratification as its dimensions, and the line of flight or deterritorialization as the maximum dimension after which the multiplicity undergoes metamorphosis, changes in nature. . . ." (21).

It is in their openness to new connections and in their *becoming* capacity that the *rhizome* and the *metabole* are most remarkable. Metaphors remain just rudimentary tropes, "only the signs of metamorphoses that have not taken place and in the course of which things really, not apparently, exchange their essences" (Epstein, "Afterward: Metamorphosis" 282). Russian metarealist poems, as Mikhail Epstein remarks, intently seek "that reality wherein metaphor is again revealed as metamorphosis, as an authentic intercommonality, rather than the symbolic similarity of two phenomena" (282).

9 Deleuze and Guattari 21.

10 The works of Sedakova exhibit a wonderful quality of purity, unpretentiousness, and inner depth. The poet withdraws with utmost humility, refusing an affected and assertive style, and leaving space for the only meaningful voice—that of the spirit. “Over the years she [Sedakova] developed her own inner theme and purity of tone,” Polukhina observes. “She never was attracted by an emphatic style with willfully deformed imagery and staccato movements. Her style is inward, elusive and simple. ‘The expurgation of intentions’ (T.S. Eliot) is her major concern: not to succumb to the temptation of creating something unnecessary” (1448).

In contrast to the carefully chiseled out and measured style of Sedakova, the style of Shvarts at times exhibits a tint of superfluity and pretentiousness. As Kelly remarks, other poets have attacked Shvarts for being a “‘graphomaniac’ (an evocative Russian term suggesting pretentious logorrhea)” (“Elena Shvarts” 416). Such attacks, in Kelly’s mind, “cannot be entirely discounted. Shvarts is not the most consistent of poets, and her less successful poetry can seem lurid and excessive” (416).

11 The rhizomatic interrelation of various beings within the bounds of one common body is frequently observed in Shvarts’s poetry. In “Zver’-tsvetok” (“Animal-Flower” 1976), for instance, Shvarts invents a poetic persona that is neither an animal nor a plant, but is, instead, conjoined in a rhizomatic way with both of these poetic entities. As Sandler observes in her essay on Shvarts, included in *Russian Women Writers*, the poet “describ[es] how her body will send forth shoots of a new entity once she is dead and buried. In ‘Animal-Flower’ Shvarts blurs the boundaries between life and death, animal and plant, object and person. . . .” (1460).

12 Critics, such as Sandler and Kelly, have also commented on the radically transfigurational character of Shvarts’s poetry, on the “extraordinary instance[s] of Shvarts’s border crossings” (Kelly, “Elena Shvarts” 414). The deterritorializing processes that take place in the verse of Shvarts are sometimes so inclusive and far-reaching that it is difficult to pin down the very identity of the speaker. In her analysis of “Sale of a Historian’s Library,” for instance, Kelly sees the protagonist as “floating from man to woman and back again” (“Elena Shvarts” 415). Kelly reveals that the historian becomes in turn Marie Antoinette, Charlotte Corday, and Marat. Furthermore, she demonstrates that “[f]rom female victim, he becomes female aggressor, and then male aggressor as victim” (415).

Shvarts’s works, however, go beyond transgressing the concept of gender and attempt the even more astounding transmutation of the human into the divine. In a poem from the cycle “Horror Eroticus,” the heroine

speaks in the words of Adam and implores God to create a new angelic being from her rib. Apart from suggesting the transcendence of the human essence in the act of making a divine creature from the body of a mortal, Shvarts denies the new being any fixed identity and permanent characteristics: it is “not a man, not a woman, not something in between”: “Я бы вынула ребро свое тонкое, / из живого вырезала бы тела я. / Сотвори из него мне только Ты / друга верного, мелкого, белого. / Ни мужа, ни жену, ни среднего, / а скорлупую одетого ангела. . . .” “I would pull out my slender rib, / would tear it from my living body, / if You would only make from it / a faithful friend for me, small, gleaming white. / Not a man, not a woman, not something in between, / but an angel dressed in mother-of-pearl. . . .” (*Tantsuiushchii David: Stikhi raznykh let. The Dancing David: Poems from Different Years* 53. Trans. Kelly in “Elena Shvarts” 414).

Beside problematizing the binary oppositions of male/female, human/divine, Shvarts’s works stage a radical conversion of the human speaker in an inanimate, non-human entity. As Sandler observes in her discussion of “Zemlia, zemlia, ty esh’ liudei” (“Earth, earth, you eat people,” 1981), “The poet, in her ingestion of the earth, becomes earth, and when she describes the chewing, thinking and food-producing earth she is also describing herself” (“Elena Shvarts and the Distances of Self-Disclosure” 95). In fact, it is this willingness of the poet to blend with the non-human universe, to become a part of the divine or simply reunite with mother earth, that Sandler uses to explain a paradox she finds in Shvarts’s work. In Sandler’s mind, this paradox consists in Shvarts’s eagerness to launch communication with her readers, while, at the same time, actively frustrating their efforts to enter her intensely private world (see Sandler’s “Elena Shvarts and the Distance of Self-Disclosure”). But how could Shvarts confide in other human beings when, in her poems, she describes herself as altogether different from them? Nothing about the poet is human and ordinary. The food she desires “is not a material substance in her poems; . . . it is . . . a symbol of spiritual sustenance much as Christ’s body and blood are imagined in the ritual of the eucharist” (“Elena Shvarts and the Distance of Self-Disclosure” 91); the friend’s breast milk that she tastes in “Vospominanie o strannom ugooshchenii” (“Memory of a strange refreshment,” 1976) is “taken not to quench thirst, but to satisfy the soul” (92).

Indeed, neither the lyric speaker in the works of Shvarts nor anything in her transgressive poetry can be reduced to any strict identity. Even the most banal and commonplace realities partake of an incessant process of becoming. In “The Elder Nun” from *Trudy i dni Lavinii*, for example, the needle that the heroine engulfs as she consumes her soup miraculously turns into a sting the moment that she spits it out (76).

13 Among the works of Shvarts that show extensive use of theological and sacral imagery is her cycle of seventy-nine short poems, entitled *Trudy i dni Lavinii, monakhini iz ordena Obrezaniia serdtsa (Ot Rozhdestva do Paskhi)*; (*The Works and Days of Lavinia, Nun from the Order of the Circumcision of the Heart, From Christmas to Easter*, 1987). As Goldstein reveals in her analysis of this work, the heart in it becomes the organ that negotiates between the concrete, everyday world and the intangible, religious universe (“the world of the unseen, with its spirits and demons” 239). The heart is populated with inhabitants who are endowed with the potential to span the gap between these two worlds. Moreover, Goldstein notes, “the heart’s inhabitants take their place amid larger edifices. The body that houses them is no longer merely a body but a church (“Kak budto ia stala sama / miagkoiu beloiu tserkov’iu” [As if I myself had become / a soft white church] [*Trudy*, 44]), or even a city” (244-45). The task of the poet becomes to enclose all the suffering of the world within this holy city and then transform the earthly anguish into a universe of harmony and ecstasy. In the mind of Goldstein, this is quite possible to achieve, for, as she puts it, “anguish brings insight” (249).

14 Sedakova’s earliest collection, entitled *Gateway, Windows, Arches*, appeared four years earlier, in Paris.

15 Sandler also notes the emotional and psychological intensity of Shvarts’s work. In her words, “Unlike Sedakova’s acerbic metaphysical musings, Shvarts writes with the emotional violence of Tsvetaeva and the psychological urgency of Dostoevsky” (“Elena Shvarts” 1459).

16 A number of critics, such as Sandler, Goldstein, Kuritsyn, Molnar and Kelly, have commented on the dynamic and surprising variations defining Shvarts’s style. “Shvarts appears to take pleasure in shifting themes and rhythms unexpectedly, and she produces paradox at all levels of her work—theme, form, diction, and tone,” Sandler observes (“Cultural Memory and Self-Expression in a Poem by Elena Shvarts” 256). “Much of her [Shvarts’s] poetry relies on a rapid shifting of rhythm and rhyme, creating tension and dynamism in the poems. . . . Shvarts subjects her verse lines to often jarring alternations, inducing a poetic arhythmia that heightens the discord of the heart” (243-44). In a similar stance, Molnar comments on the style of Shvarts: “Avoiding fixed schemes and structures, she continually changes speed, rhythm and line length” (12). Kelly is even more specific in outlining the experimental quality of Shvarts’s work, pointing to the poet’s creation of “the approximate rhyme” as an instance of it: “Shvarts showed great originality in terms of imagery, and also in terms of metrics, her use of approximate rhyme being especially novel and ingenious” (“Elena Shvarts” 411). In a pe-

cularly insightful manner, Kuritsyn suggests a connection between the poetic world of Shvarts, bursting with new energy and creation, and the rhythm and structure of her verse, constantly changing to reflect it: "Takovo kipenie suverenogo mira Shvarts—kakie uzh tut strogie ritmy! Struktura stikha [Shvarts] nikogda pochti ne mozhet byt tochno opredelena,—ona vsia—izmenchivost', vsia—v dvizheniie." 'Such is the boiling of Shvarts's sovereign world—what strict rhythms could we speak of here! The structure of [Shvarts's] verse could almost never be accurately determined,—it is all mutability, all—in movement' (206).

17 In the words of Kelly, "If Olga Sedakova is an exceptional instance of a Russian poet who is a modernist in the Western sense, then, by contrast, Shvarts's eclecticism, humour, and vitality make her perhaps the Russian woman poet who would be best fitted by the label 'post-modernist', assuming that these denominations are taken to refer to distinct but coexisting and complementary types of sensibility in twentieth-century tradition, rather than to successive phases in literary history's linear progression" ("Elena Shvarts" 422).

In his essay, "The Youngest Archaists: Kutik, Sedakova, Kibirov, and Parshchikov," Andrew Wachtel, on the other hand, aligns Sedakova with the post-modernist rather than the modernist school due to the neoclassical tendencies he discovers in her work. Discussing poems by Kutik, Sedakova, Kibirov, and Parshchikov, Wachtel observes that these authors revive "primarily 'outmoded' genres last popular in Russia in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries such as the solemn ode, the mock epic, and the lyrical epic *poema*" (271). In his analysis of Sedakova's "Gornaia oda" ("Mountain Ode," 1986), Wachtel reveals that, apart from appearing in the neoclassical form of the solemn ode, the poem exhibits a prominent citationality—a borrowing of archaizing forms from neoclassical discourse which, to Wachtel, accounts for the peculiar postmodernist flavor of this work. As the critic remarks, "Citationality, although abundantly present in the works of all the modernists, tends to be veiled. In postmodernist practice, citationality tends to be more flamboyant, and the neoclassical dialogues that we have examined here fit well with this trend" (286).

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