



RUSSIAN POLITICAL POETRY

IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

BY LEV OBORIN

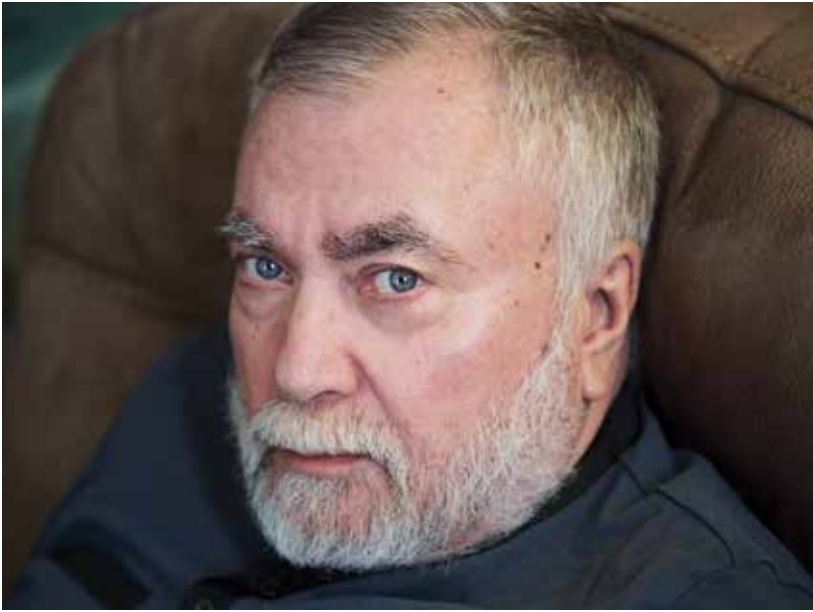
Poetry can serve as a means of liberation and does not need to be called “political” in order to do so. Political poetry, then, requires some sort of definition or clarification. In an interview the poet and literary critic Kirill Korchagin states, “We are used to thinking that political poetry is all about satire on the shortcomings of a political system. I think there is a more meaningful understanding.” Korchagin goes on to refer to the French philosopher Jacques Rancière, who “defined politics as a clash between two

contradictory tendencies. One of them, which he called ‘policy,’ aims for the collective unity of different people, and, hence, total control. The other, ‘politics’ as such, or ‘emancipation,’ aims for equality for all, for granting a voice to those who lack one: the poor, victims of oppression. . . . The political emerges when these two tendencies collide, and it is in the space between policy and politics that the new political poetry exists.”¹

Political poetry of the final Soviet decades was largely dedicated to escaping “policy”; politics was not even up for discussion. Contemporary

political poetry in Russia has to some degree inherited this defensive stance; now left activism and poetry have once again appeared on stage and sparked domestic and international interest. For instance, the fall 2016 issue of the influential U.S. magazine *n+1* includes a selection of new Russian political poetry with a brief introduction by Keith Gessen. The featured poets are Kirill Medvedev, Galina Rymbu, Elena Kostyleva, Roman Osminkin, and Ketī Chukhrov, most of whom are grouped around *Translit*, the leading publication for contemporary Russian left philosophy and poetry based in

Lev Oborin. Photo courtesy
of Stanislav Lvovsky



Alexei Tsvetkov. Photo by Mark Polyakov

St. Petersburg. Some of the poets are familiar to Western readers: Medvedev, perhaps the best-known Russian poet of his generation, garnered critical acclaim for his collection *It's No Good*,² while Rymbu's poetry has appeared on a number of prominent English-language literary websites in advance of the publication of her book *White Bread*, translated by Jonathan Brooks Platt (After Hours Ltd.). Owing to limitations of space, I am unable to take into account here the full range of the poetics and politics of contemporary Russian political poetry, but will focus my essay on a handful of important developments and poets.³

In the early 1990s, Russian poetry found itself no longer vital to the nation's cultural code. No one was being jailed for writing poetry, but

neither were poets performing to stadiums full of fans, as had been the case with Yevgeny Yevtushenko, for example. Instead readers were devouring works from abroad that had been concealed from them—everything from Brodsky and Nabokov to Henry Miller and William S. Burroughs, not to mention literature suppressed in the USSR. They had to learn to talk about sex and crime, pop stars and millionaires, to struggle through waves of economic crisis and unemployment. This was not a good time for enjoying poetry—and yet it turned out to be a great time for poetry to truly diversify. Poets began to experience new languages, drawing upon the “uncensored poetry” of the past (and, of course, fully legitimizing it) and other sources as well, including rock music and the new political discourse. Perhaps it did not occur to

poets that the liberation of language was a political idea or act, but the boundaries of the possible widened greatly: for example, now for the first time in Russian history, poets could freely use swear words and openly talk about sex (e.g., Vera Pavlova and Yaroslav Mogutin).

Contemporary politics and current events now became subjects fit for poetry: the poet and publisher Dmitry Kuzmin put out an anthology endorsing the liberal presidential candidate Grigory Yavlinsky (acknowledging the uselessness of the act at the very beginning); Soviet-nostalgic poets raged about Yeltsin and the democrats; Yunna Morits, once a fine lyric poet, wrote profane poems condemning NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia; and, of course, many poets were appalled by the war in Chechnya—Mikhail Sukhotin's “Verses on the First Chechen Campaign” still shocks us with its blunt account of war crimes, torture, violence, and political cynicism. On a lighter note, witty and funny political satire emerged and would later become a significant phenomenon (e.g., Dmitri Bykov).

During the Putin years, the state grew increasingly concerned with the image of the Soviet past. Not, however, without a certain ambiguity: the Russian government officially welcomed home Solzhenitsyn and condemned Stalin's crimes, and yet state-run TV denigrated the liberals for “dismantling our great country.” An integral part of this complex image is the Great Patriotic War, i.e., the war between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, and the siege of Leningrad, which took the lives of a million civilians. Soviet poetry praised Leningrad's

heroism, yet the scope and depth of the human tragedy remained largely unacknowledged. In recent years, a number of important books and poems about the siege have appeared, including those by Polina Barskova, Sergei Zavyalov, and Igor Vishnevetsky. In 2009, Vitaly Pukhanov wrote a poem that sparked a raging fire on the Russian Internet:

In Leningrad, on Marat Street
In 1943
Somebody ate a bowl of soup.
Thus the order of things was
broken.

Two cars of militiamen emerged:
You shouldn't eat!
You've broken the rules!
We don't eat meat here.

.....

Neither awake, nor dreaming
Can you be alive here?
We will win
Because we won't eat!

At the end of time,
Our flesh will turn into stone.
Our enemy will remember
Our transfiguration.⁴

It is telling that critics who found the poem to be blasphemous were shocked not only by the idea that this self-murderous heroism was bestowed upon Leningrad as a kind of ultimate weapon, but also by the meter of the poem, a trochaic tetrameter commonly used in Russian poetry for children. This was viewed as inappropriate fiddling with the sacred context.

War and the Soviet experience were familiar ground for many poets.

Terrorist attacks were not; they were new to post-Soviet Russia and had a profound impact on society and culture. One of the finest poets of the 1970s and 1980s, Alexei Tsvetkov, had been absent from the poetry scene for some seventeen years. "It was the third of september . . .," one of the first poems written after he broke his silence, takes as its subject the horror of the three-day Beslan school siege, when 1,100 people were taken hostage and in the ensuing siege 330 were killed, almost half of them children.

It was the third of september
they were treating our runny nose
with plague
the servants of herod the king
were wanking their greedy stings
they sodomized the whole country
they did as they said
a sweaty slave served
a dish with children's eyes

music ring louder
approve of the beast's
entertainment
if there is heaven for someone
i don't believe in it anymore
i won't go with the saints
i agree to live in hell

the blood has dried at the sunrise
in herod's kingdom
it's daybreak over the country
children play on the grass
all of them innocent everyone's
ours
i will betray and you will betray

The grammatical ellipsis in the poem marks the brusque intonation. The poem engages some of Tsvetkov's crucial motifs: death, the rejection of God, ancient history. Among other notable poems on Russian domestic



Keith Gessen and Kirill
Medvedev at the Harriman
Institute (April 24, 2013)

"I am interested exclusively in the position of the artist undertaking a 'battle for his art'—which in our own time will mean a battle for his position"



Roman Osminkin. Photo by Vadim F. Lurie

terrorism is Kirill Medvedev's "The End of the Ceasefire (The End of the Objectivist School)," which opens with a description of an encounter in the metro: The day after the expiration of the ceasefire with Chechens, a man sees the narrator on the metro, mistakes him for a terrorist, panics, and leaps out the doors. This sudden crisis of identity reminds Medvedev of the end of the "objectivist" poetic school, which, contrary to its name, cannot provide an objective view of any thing or situation.

Medvedev began as a confessional poet and Bukowski translator, but by 2005 he had become a poet whose work made critics seriously reconsider the aesthetic value of left poetry.⁵ As Keith Gessen puts it: "[In 2005 Medvedev] announced that he

was leaving the literary world. It was an extension of global capitalism, he writes, and he wanted nothing more to do with it. He renounced copyright to all his works and published only on the Internet or through other self-publishing mechanisms." "I am interested exclusively in the position of the artist undertaking a 'battle for his art'—which in our own time will mean a battle for his position," writes Medvedev in his "Communiqué."⁶ According to Gessen, "Medvedev's announcement, generally ignored or misunderstood at the time, appears now to have signaled the return of political engagement to the Russian literary scene."⁷

Medvedev's political-literary theory was backed by poetry and methodology, including

instructions to critics on how they should perform their work ("Ten Instructions to a Critic"). Despite the utter seriousness of his theoretical statements, in Medvedev's poetry the narrator/speaker often plays with changing identities or the forceful collision of theory and practice. More than once Medvedev reacts to current events by imagining extreme outcomes. For example, depicting a routine protest action, Medvedev suddenly turns it into a violent gun fight between protesters and OMON forces; afterward the typical intelligentsia-style political talk anecdotally resumes ("But the main thing is for there to be no revolution," said the environmentalist Evgenia Chirikova, as we stood over the bloody troops of the riot police, wondering what to do next"⁸).

Medvedev's poetic interests fit naturally into the left agenda, e.g., his stance on Israel and its ongoing conflict with Palestine. One of Medvedev's latest works is the book-length rhymed poem *Жить долго умереть молодым* ("Live Long, Die Young"), describing his interview with well-known French filmmaker Claude Lanzmann, director of *Shoah*. The interview immediately goes bad: Lanzmann is put on guard at the sound of the term "holocaust industry," which causes the narrator to interrupt his own story and explain in detail why he is not an anti-Semite. Yet throughout the whole affair, the narrator is trying to prove that Lanzmann is just like him and his friend and they are "like Lanzmann." This striving to portray Lanzmann as an ally pushes the limit, as Medvedev tries to decipher the hidden message of Lanzmann's words and manner:

He has just one moment left
To die young.

But what did the fog of those eyes
Communicate?
Vague sentence fragments,
A dry, unpleasant refusal?

•

“Hang in there, boys.
Be strong just one more time.

Communists never surrender.”⁹

On December 4, 2011, Russian legislative elections were held. Putin’s United Russia easily won the majority, but there was evidence of massive fraud. Many Russian citizens felt that they had been deceived. On December 10, the biggest rally since the fall of the Soviet Union was held in Moscow on Bolotnaya Square; a parallel rally was held in St. Petersburg, where activists unrolled a banner with the slogan that would quickly become famous: *ВЫ НАС ДАЖЕ НЕ ПРЕДСТАВЛЯЕТЕ*. The phrase, coined by St. Petersburg poet Pavel Arseniev, is a clever pun on two possible meanings: “You don’t even imagine us” and “You don’t even represent us” (i.e., as parliamentarians). *Translit* entered the spotlight.

Founded in 2005 by Arseniev and friends, the almanac *Translit* features articles concerning actual problems of literature, literary theory, and art. The almanac and publishing house are, obviously, leftist; not in the vulgar sense of the Russian Communist Party, but more in the manner of French or American left

circles, which discuss philosophy, social issues, and discrimination. Poetry itself was mainly allocated to the book series *kraft, printed on kraft paper, with a notice on every book: “What you hold in your hands does not look like a ‘normal’ book, and this is due to the authors’ ambition to emphasize the material aspect of the cultural process.”

Roman Osminkin’s two books, *Товарищ-вещь* (Comrade-Thing) and *Товарищ-слово* (Comrade-Word), show the evolution of one poet’s method. Osminkin’s verse deliberately sounds lighthearted, often referencing folk and pop songs, and engaging rhyme and meter. Sometimes he deals in buffoonery plain and simple: “I came in and Putin left / maybe it wasn’t even him / although it seemed like Putin / I came in and he took off // and wherever I might go / Putin in a flash disappears / I just logged in to Facebook / there’s Putin’s heel on its way out.”¹⁰ At the same time, the theoretical works in these books serve as explanations for the poems and sound much more sophisticated and philosophical, referencing Marx, Althusser, Negri, and Benjamin. “When you hold a position (prescribed by your political beliefs), you can’t equivocate any longer and hide behind aesthetic autonomy,” Osminkin writes. “We have no

right to desert the frontline of our inexpressible, for surely there will be those who will express it their way, thus denying our feelings and thoughts, and, consequently. Existence.”¹¹ That said, there is a lot of self-irony in Osminkin’s poems, which are often sincerely serious and self-ironic at the same time. In a 2011 poem, Osminkin speaks about a worker who wakes up and goes to work the same hour as the poet goes to sleep. Could it be, then, that the poet serves as guardian of the sleeping worker? The poet deliberates on this for a moment, then suddenly says to himself:

ah let’s be plain
this worker doesn’t exist
you have imagined him to guard
his sleep
because otherwise how can
you exonerate yourself
of not sleeping at night
though there’s no one to exonerate
yourself to
since you’re no real use for the
national economy

One might argue that the narrative was the last aesthetic resort before poetry plunged into the element of plain manifesto; for example, Galina Rymbu’s most powerful, best-known, and finest poem:¹²

Osminkin’s verse deliberately sounds lighthearted, often referencing folk and pop songs, and engaging rhyme and meter. Sometimes he deals in buffoonery plain and simple.



Galina Rymbu. Photo courtesy of Jonathan Brooks Platt

I change at Trubnaya metro and
see — fire
I get off at the university and
see — fire
I go down the escalator at Chistye
Prudy and see — fire
when we fall at Begovaya, at
Vykhino,
we see — fire, fire, fire

boys and girls their eyes filled with
blood
(to hell with '68)
students in hats with pompons
walking silently next to me
and suddenly they start to shout:

“FIRE! FIRE! FIRE!”

.....

while we were writing and screwing
while we were tortured by
loneliness
while dealing with the dead body of
politics and burying the state's
lamented carcass in heaven
Bulgarian students have occupied
Sofia University demanding the
government be dissolved,
they say: “because we felt, we knew,
that our fellow citizens would
support us”

and you say: “well, Bulgaria isn't
Russia, less poison and rot,
here in old Russia, under the heel,
under pressure, we have to bend
over backward thinking up slow
methods of struggle, clear political
positions”

Rymbu's poem goes on to
enumerate weaknesses of those
who could become allies in the
struggle with the filthy and macabre
regime; it fiercely speaks of the
regime's lies and atrocities, mingling
them with images of sex, gore,
and consumption. Yet the *fire* that
propels the poem forward is strong
enough to let Rymbu speak of the
ecstatic visions of a clear, fire-
cleansed future:

I see students, fire
people marching, fire
trembling, feeling, blind
invincible and kind, fire
I see you fire
love you fire
knowledge rage emotion and fire
for those who have occupied our
reality prison and fire
where all the city squares are
ours — fire
thinking what's next — fire
other galaxies books science fire
death to the anthropological
machine fire
Diderot in the Kremlin with a skull
in his hands fire
I see Benjamin with a red flag and a
cup of coffee in the Kremlin fire
everyone rising from the camps
and
marching with us to the squares
and into the institutes fire
for our grandfathers and great-
grandfathers the forests and the
wheat

fields fire
 for wine and cigarettes fire
 for the possibility of a personal
 stance fire
 for solidarity for weakness for
 breaking the blockade fire
 for death to the consumer system
 for an end to media violence fire
 for our meetings real meetings of
 people alive speaking us fire
 beyond alienation beyond limits
 and nations fire

This is not Rymbu's only poetic manifesto; see, for example, "Sex Is a Desert"¹³ or the seemingly more composed *White Bread*, where the measured intonation meets the central image of white bread, the food of the poor, a substance merely to fill one's bowels. This text somehow makes the reader feel guilty, or, at least, uneasy, and one could argue that this is the same thing as making the reader think. Gessen calls Rymbu's poetry, "part confession, part social commentary, part incantation."¹⁴

This "new social poetry," however, led by the likes of Rymbu and Medvedev, is not without its critics. Some have criticized it for the very urge to politicize virtually everything, or to reduce everything to oppositions (if not in poetry itself, then in literary strategy).¹⁵ One of the most interesting points was made by literary scholar Aleksandr Zhitenyov, who in 2013 took this kind of poetry to task precisely for

the way it makes a reader unable to dislike or disregard it:

When the most important news comes from the courtroom, the whole culture becomes an agora. Everyone's attention is focused on gestures and formulae. The actor's charisma and oratorical talent are prized. The flamboyancy of statement is the criterion of truth. The one who is the first to get applause is right. . . . "The new social poetry" is a colossal fake, but it didn't emerge out of the blue. It emerged out of the dreams of sociality. In an atomized society, there always will be a demand for unity. In a society like this, you always want to say "we," and that euphoric "we" has to have its own voice. . . . An artist in the middle of this field is absolutely invulnerable for criticism. It is indecent to question his or her creative credibility. He will always have an indulgence for working in a hotspot of culture.¹⁶

The annexation of Crimea and the war with Ukraine caused a dramatic rift within the Russian literary world; bonds were broken and unspeakable things were said. Some poets emigrated; others took a firm pro-Russian stance. Ukrainian

Russian-language poets no longer tolerated being called Russian poets. Ukrainian poet Anastasia Dmitruk's poem "We Will Never Be Brothers" went viral on the Internet.¹⁷ Ukrainian Russian-language poets produced many notable poems on the war. Boris Khersonsky, the renowned Odessa-based poet and psychiatrist, wrote his book *Missa in tempore belli* (published, significantly, by a St. Petersburg-based publisher). Although Khersonsky's allegiance to one side of the conflict is unconditional, he implies that there is a place for complex feelings about the war. His book is mainly about the forced choice of identity and about rage in the face of the rapid return of the past: the annexation of Crimea is seen as an act completely in keeping with Russia's Soviet character, where the Soviet monster arises zombie-like from its grave. Kharkiv-based Russian-language poet Anastasia Afanasyeva also wrote some striking poems about the war, such as this one, reflecting Theodor Adorno's thought about the impossibility of writing poetry after Auschwitz:

Is poetry possible after
 Yasynuvata
 Horlivka
 Savur-Mohyla
 Novoazovsk
 After
 Krasnyi Luch
 Donetsk
 Luhansk
 After the division of people
 Between those who rest and those
 who perish
 Those who starve and those who
 party

.....

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Maria Stepanova. Photo by Mikhail Stepanov

Is poetry possible
When history has woken up
When its steps
Rock every heart
You can't speak of anything else,
But you can't speak.

As I write this
Somewhere very near
Any possibilities are being
canceled out.

***And yet poetry still
makes things happen
in the minds of the
people who live, read
about, and contribute
to these events,
sometimes knowingly,
sometimes not.***

Many Russian poets, such as Tsvetkov or Elena Fanailova, felt the need to express their sense of shame and guilt before Ukraine. In 2016, Fanailova wrote a very personal poem summarizing her attitude toward the Russian government that had gone to war with Ukraine. The poem condemns the willingly unnamed man who personalizes this power ("I know by heart your wolfish habit / your yellow teeth your hardliners your tanks"); Fanailova mixes propagandistic clichés with personal images of a childhood spent in southern Russia, close to Ukraine:

[I am] a lame duck, and agent
of the
Department of State,
a traitor to the Motherland, a
damned symbolist
and the Milky Way above my
grandmother's hut
by the middle course of the Don

Finally, Maria Stepanova's latest book, *Spolia*, consists of two long fragmentary poems where the daily buzz is pierced by the absurdity of war news and propaganda. Here the fabric of the folklore song, Stepanova's natural element, cannot incorporate those piercing word bombs, and it looks as if they drop and leave holes in the fabric:

a fascist is the mousiest faciest
sweetest
and mossiest and longest-shanked
but the air knows that none
of you and us is fascist

remove the threads from
the words,
let them be in their corner,
and the forest will call its
heralds back
and I shall not all die.

These poems can be read as an attempt to put together the pieces

of a shattered world, an attempt to coordinate “normal” politics and cultural life; they chronicle this attempt and bear witness to its failure.

The war in Ukraine arguably came as the biggest shock for Russians since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Three years later, society has sunk into a state of sluggish equilibrium—this likely accounts for the fact that virtually no significant poems written after 2014 concern such major events as the murder of opposition leader Boris Nemtsov or

the Russian military involvement in Syria. Most certainly changes lie ahead; yet the vision is still unclear. So perhaps it is the right moment to summarize the ways and achievements of contemporary Russian political poetry, if only to conclude that Auden’s idea that poetry makes nothing happen is probably true in terms of its direct impact on historical events. And yet poetry still makes things happen in the minds of the people who live, read about, and contribute to these events, sometimes knowingly, sometimes not. ■

Lev Oborin (b. 1987) is a poet, translator, and literary critic. He has two collections of poetry to his name, with more forthcoming. He has received the Znamya Award and the Tadeusz Rózewicz Prize for translators. He works as an editor at New Literary Observer Publishing House and curates the Razlichie Prize for poetry. He has also worked for the Russian edition of Rolling Stone magazine. Among his translations of poetry are works by Robert Frost, Czesław Miłosz, John Ashbery, and Mary Jo Salter. His poems and articles on contemporary Russian poetry have appeared in numerous Russian literary magazines. His poetry has been translated into English, Polish, German, and Latvian and has appeared in international magazines, including Poetry, Columbia, and International Poetry Review. In 2015, Oborin delivered a talk on contemporary Russian poetry at the Harriman Institute.

¹Danil Burygin, “Taktika uskol’zaniia: Kirill Korchagin o tom, kak poniat’ sovremennuiu poeziu,” <http://theoryandpractice.ru/posts/8736-modern-poetry>. Accessed December 21, 2016. Unless credited otherwise, all translations from Russian are mine—L.O.

²See D. Garner, “A Litany of Betrayals, Petty Yet Terrifying,” *New York Times*, March 20, 2013; L. McKeon, “New Emotion: On Kirill Medvedev,” *Paris Review*, April 8, 2013; D. Peak, “It’s No Good by Kirill Medvedev,” *Rumpus*, April 13, 2013; P. Missaghi, “In Review: *It’s No Good* by Kirill Medvedev,” *Asymptote*, April 21, 2013; M. Liu, “*It’s No Good* by Kirill Medvedev,” *Independent*, June 25, 2015.

³My essay here is excerpted from a much longer survey of contemporary Russian political poetry. I intend to publish the full version in the near future.

⁴Translated by Polina Barskova, in “Poetry after the Siege of Leningrad: Montage, Ekphrasis, Allegory,” (<http://jacket2.org/article/poetry-after-siege-leningrad>). See this article for details about the siege of Leningrad in contemporary Russian poetry. Accessed December 21, 2016.

⁵For details on Medvedev’s background, see Marijeta Bozovic, “Poetry on the Front Line: Kirill Medvedev and a New Russian Poetic Avant-garde,” *Arcade* (<http://arcade.stanford.edu/content/poetry-front-line-kirill-medvedev-and-new-russian-poetic-avant-garde>). Accessed December 21, 2016.

⁶Kirill Medvedev, “Communiqué,” translated by Keith Gessen, in Kirill Medvedev, *It’s No Good* (Brooklyn: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2012), 104. Furthermore, Medvedev announced that he had decided to quit writing altogether, but a few years later he began to publish his poetry again.

⁷Keith Gessen, “New Russian Political Poets: Introduction,” *n+1*, no. 26 (Fall 2016), 108.

⁸Medvedev, *It’s No Good*, 285.

⁹Medvedev, “Live Long, Die Young,” translated by Keith Gessen and Michael Robbins, *Poetry* (December 2016), <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/detail/91315>. Accessed December 21, 2016.

¹⁰Roman Osminkin, “I Came In and Putin Left,” translated by Jonathan Brooks Platt, in *Not a Word about Politics!* (New York: Cicada Press, 2016), 131. The poem is not included in either of the *kraft collections, but illustrates the author’s method just as well.

¹¹Osminkin, “S kem vy, mastera kul’tury,” *Tovarishch-slovo* (St. Petersburg, Svobodnoe marksistskoe izdatel’stvo); *Al’mankh*, *Translit* (2013), 4.

¹²Galina Rymbu, “Untitled,” translated by Jonathan Brooks Platt, *n+1*, no. 26 (Fall 2016), 111–17.

¹³See <http://www.thewhitereview.org/poetry/sex-is-a-desert/>.

¹⁴Gessen, “New Russian Political Poets,” 108.

¹⁵See, for example, the debate between Pavel Arseniev and Igor Gulin concerning “protest poetry readings” in 2012 (<http://os.colta.ru/literature/events/details/37230>). Accessed December 21, 2016.

¹⁶See Aleksandr Zhitenev, “Megafon kak orudie proizvodstva,” <http://archives.colta.ru/docs/27338>. Accessed December 21, 2016.

¹⁷For details on Dmitruk’s poem, see V’iacheslav Iaremchuk, and Alina Zuikov’ska, “‘Nikogda my ne budem brat’iami’: fenomen polytychnykh virshiv u konteksti ukrainsko-rosiys’koi informatsiinoi viiny,” *Naukovi zapysky Instytutu politychnykh i etnonatsional’nykh doslidzhen’ im. I. F. Kurasa*, no. 1 (2015), 163–78.

¹⁸On Ukrainian poetry about the war, see: <https://pionline.wordpress.com/2014/03/07/letters-from-ukraine/>. Accessed December 21, 2016.