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## FROM BABEL TO BABBLE: THE RUSSIAN POETIC NEO-AVANT-GARDE AFTER THE LOSS OF SPEECH\*

The article addresses the practices of working with sound and verbal magic in Russian neo-avant-garde poetry after the Second World War and in contemporary poetry. Largely through the medium of Paul Celan, the idea of splitting (decomposing) the word returns to Russian poetry after a long totalitarian break (“loss of speech”) in the texts of Gennady Aygi and Elizaveta Mnatsakanova. Aygi and Mnatsakanova share, among other things, a sensitive attitude to the musicality of verse, which guarantees the unity of linguistic matter, despite the fragmentation and logical incoherence of its elements. Similar techniques are typical for such “musically oriented” contemporary poets as Larisa Berezovchuk, Sergey Zavalov and Anna Alchuk.

*Key words:* Neo-Avant-Garde, Loss of Speech, G. Aygi, E. Mnatsakanova, A. Alchuk, S. Zavalov.

As Irina Sandomirskaya showed in her illuminating study of violence and blockade of the word in the Stalinist period, the pressure of the totalitarian language accounted, among other things, for Oberiu’s withdrawals into silence, apophaticism and alogism. Paralysed by power and violence, the word “seems to lose its corporeality, turning into ‘babble’, into secret writing, into Oberiu’s transcendental alchemy” (Sandomirskaya 2013: 9). Once an active, energetic word falls into a state when “the patient, not the agent of speech, takes the place of the subject of speech — a ‘victim’ of language [...] when the word no longer carries a meaning” (Ibidem). As Sandomirskaya suggests, all Konstantin Vaginov’s novels, for example, were like that, with their dialogised parodying. It appears that Alexander Vvedensky’s poetry was one of the last convulsive spurts of the agonising poetic word in the era of political terror — the era when poetic utterance beyond the rational logos lost all chances of survival. The space for such poetry shrank eventually to Daniil Kharms’ little locked suitcase with man-

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uscripts of his chinari fellows, which Yakov Druskin managed to preserve over the Leningrad blockade, the War and post-war persecutions. Druskin himself had no choice but to go into the apophatic asceticism of his diaries with comments on Vvedensky's poems. The decomposition of logical connections in the language of poetry was forcibly stopped, giving way in history to the radioactive decomposition of the atom at Soviet test sites.

The dissolution of language in a deformed speech environment as a result of catastrophic processes in history and society was continued in the post-war period, in languages other than Russian, given no possibility of an utterance beyond the logos of Soviet poetic discourse. Allegorically, this era of poetic timelessness and fatigue with "big words", turning into "scream", but not yet finding its new word, is conveyed in the blockade poem by Oberiu's successor Gennady Gor: "The creek sick of speech/Told water it took no side./The water sick of silence/At once began again to shriek" (2016: 29). After World War II, it was the poetry of Paul Celan that became a successor to the de(ideo)log(ical)ised poetic language of Bely, Khlebnikov, and Mandelstam. His concept of "language mesh" ("Sprachgitter"), which implies an idea of language as a means of poetic communication through the prison regime of ideological violence, prompted poetry to turn again to the 'dumb', 'silent' and 'untold' zones of language-concerned discourses. To Heidegger's "Gerede" and Kierkegaard-Benjamin's "Geschwätz" of the masses in the context of authoritarian Babel-like power of language Celan opposes a "lallen", or inner "muttering".

In his poem "Tübingen, January" Celan appeals to the glossolalia of the ancient prophets: "Came, if there /came a man,/came a man to the world, today, with the patriarchs' /light-beard: he could,/if he spoke of this/time, he/could/only babble and babble,/ever- ever-/moremore" (2012: http). In the German original *nur lallen und lallen* literally resonates with the ancient Greek *glossas lalein* ("speaking in tongues"). At the end of the poem, a meaningless word *Pal-laksch* appears, repeated twice — a reference to Friedrich Hölderlin's glossolalia in poetic delirium, which is called on to convey the 'beyond-logos' experience repressed by the authoritarian word.<sup>1</sup> The multilingualism and 'idle talk' of peoples is once again surmounted by the poet's *dislalia*, as in another verse by Celan: "Eroded by/the beamwind of your speech/the gaudy chatter of the pseudo-/experienced — the hundred-/tongued perjury-/poem, the noem" (2013: http). The splitting of words into fragmented morphemes, the fragmentation of lexemes, the atomisation of prepositions, conjunctions and particles, characteristic of Celan's poetry — all these techniques inaugurate a new poetic turn of deformation of the ossified and "disenchanted" language.

Largely through Paul Celan, the idea of the word's decomposition is resuscitated in Russian poetry by Gennady Aygi and Elizaveta Mnatsakanova.<sup>2</sup> Aygi's free verse calls to inaudible "spaces of silence" ("However, muteness is a trib-

<sup>1</sup> For a close reading of this poem, see (Weineck 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Mnatsakanova translated some of Celan's poems into Russian.

ute — and for myself — silence”,<sup>3</sup> as an early 1956 poem reads), mystical “singing without words”, “places of no-thought”, “empty stages”, “long pauses” and “tranquility of a vowel”. Voices in Aygi’s poetry are orchestrated by multiple punctuation marks, or rather — marks of ‘cessation’ of thought and speech (as, for instance, in his poem “Island of Daisies in a Clearing”). The logos-sense is cleared by gaps between words, between morphemes. Alogism finds itself a new space of expression: “I notice one thing: something shaky-allogical, previously unfamiliar, becomes quite ‘logical’ in this work, as if I’m learning to speak some new language” (Aygi 2001: 157). Aygi’s silent poetry is a poetry “speaking in a different way” (Idem: 158), “with that essential Word in which the silence of the pre-Word is concealed” (Idem: 159). Glossolalia is present here both in its pure form, as a legacy of Chuvash shamanism,<sup>4</sup> and in a transformed one, as an interlingual transparency, as a ‘hum of language’ resonating in various national idioms. Thus, it transcends not only the uniforming ‘Babelian confusion’ of languages in favor of a unique translingual speech, but also the linguistic limitations of verse systems.<sup>5</sup>

Among other things, Aygi and Mnatsakanova<sup>6</sup> as two poets of the Russian neo-avant-garde share a particularly sensitive attitude to the musicality of verse, which guarantees the integrity of linguistic structure of the text despite the fragmentation and logical incoherence of its elements. Especially significant for such poetics is the heritage of Anton Webern and the atonal musical tradition. It was so already for the *chinari*. Yakov Druskin noted the affinity of Alexander Vvedensky’s poetics of nonsense to dodecaphonic techniques in music. Just as in atonal music the principle of gravitation of sound pitch is violated and sounds become significant by themselves in their position in a series of sounds, in poetry of the absurd the principle of semantic connection is violated and words undergo desemantisation. Each line of Vvedensky’s verse contains the main idea plus a ‘draw-back word’ that displaces the logical structure of the poetic utterance.

Elizaveta Mnatsakanova’s poetic speech moves along similar lines. Despite the seemingly static existence of the text on the printed page, Mnatsakanova’s poetry demonstrates a freedom of language — freedom granted by its musical elements. In her own words, this is a “freed music”, which “encompasses everything and keeps in its depths an entire immeasurable ocean of performance” (Mnatsakanova 2006: 151). At the same time, hers is not a specifically *zaum* kind of sound poetry. Pure sound poetry is most often constrained by the sonorous side of the poetic word, exposing only a formal resemblance to music. Mnatsa-

<sup>3</sup> Tr. by Sarah Valentine in her own article (2007).

<sup>4</sup> Aygi was Chuvash by origin, and wrote poetry both in Russian and Chuvash.

<sup>5</sup> Velimir Khlebnikov was in many respects a foremost inspiration for Aygi, on this topic see (Weststeijn 2016).

<sup>6</sup> It is known that both poets spoke very sympathetically of each other, although most probably never met in life and literature. Both had a profound passion for Khlebnikov’s poetics of language. For Aygi’s Futurist roots and his attitude to music see (Sandler 2016; Sokolova 2019). The difference between Aygi’s and Mnatsakanova’s poetics is discussed in (Aristov 2022).

kanova's poetry employs musical composition principles; musical techniques structure the sounding stream to a much greater extent than in pure sonorics. Unlike pure zaum, such poetry does not obscure or eliminate meaning — it comes into a free play of meanings. 'Free', however, does not mean 'whatever the reader wants'. The semantic frame of the text, fixed in its verbal score, sets a certain mood (*Stimmung*, as composers put it) — a topic or several topics that are subject to free associative development in the process of reading and listening to the text by the reader or listener. Mnatsanakova's major poem "Requiem" employs such key music-like motifs as 'death', 'doom', 'brotherhood', 'sisterhood', 'septenary', 'light', 'resurrection', etc.

In an essay about Anton Chekhov, Mnatsakanova reiterates the idea of "music of words", or "music of speech". The Russian classic's phrase from his play "Seagull" — *men and lions, eagles and partridges* — becomes a leitmotif, a 'musical sequence' of the whole essay, a kind of melodic unity. "The secret music of the word", according to Mnatsakanova, is the actual subject matter of Chekhov's literary language: "What kind of music is this, what is it about?... LISTENING to the text, catching and identifying the melody, that deep line that controls the mechanisms of speech movement" (Idem: 161). The melody of a language is deemed its most important characteristic. As if a follower of Stéphane Mallarmé, the seer of verbal music and verbal magic, she continues: "So much the tighter the words are bound with other music — not only phonic, audible, but also a secret one, hidden behind the text, behind all visible performance, behind the visible appearance of life" (Idem: 167-168). Music, as an almost exact language's *doppelgänger*, forms a new unity — the 'verbomusic'.<sup>7</sup> Musical intonation brings a new unity of sound and meaning, of voice and phenomenon, into the language, into the realm of the decomposed Logos.

Mnatsakanova wrote her opus magnum "Requiem", while staying at a "hospital for the poor", which she calls a "lazzaretto of innocent sisters". The poem is an oratory, sounding like a *laboratory* of the word, where "voices come to life in sounds and letters". According to her later self-comments, "Requiem" is "a new model and a new word altogether". In such poetry, words decompose like bodies in an infirmary under the influence of a disease. Particles of words scattered across the page of the score are like dismembered senses, however, integrated through musical laws of composition. A poetic space of 'pain' is created when speech becomes rambling, but at the same time strives for healing by the forces of a new graphic and phonic order:

Брат Септимус едва ли  
едва ли е два бо два ли  
либо два бо три ли  
ли два бо много  
ли там бы

Brother Septimus  
only on ly  
or two ly  
or two  
or

<sup>7</sup> See about Mnatsakanova's place in the tradition of musical verse in (Feshchenko 2013); about the musicality of her verse, see also (Biryukov 2005; Janecek 2006; Orlitsky 2022)

бо два ли ло	two or
бо три ли	three or
бо много там бы либо много там бы	many were the
ло ло либо бы	re
невидимых ло	invisible
	brothers
(Mnatsakanova 2003)	(tr. by Gerald Janecek, unpublished) <sup>8</sup>

Paul Celan's "babble" and Andrey Bely's "dark glossolalia" acquire here the force of some kind of medical conspiracy that magically transforms the verbal flow:

Бродит смерть в беде	brother after brother after fording
братбродбраток	will rove roving ford
Ходит снег тябрябродитбред	inbritherforoctober upto
бродитбродбро	kneesfording
По колено дитбраток	in woe brotherfordbrotheroc
В дожде	toberrovesraving rovesfordford
тябрябродитбратзабродомбрат	
Бродит брат	ingbrotheroc
забратомбратзабратомбратбро	toberrovesbrotherafterfordingbrother
(Ibidem)	afterbrotherbrotherafterbrotherr
	oves
	(tr. by Gerald Janecek, unpublished)

Mnatsakanova's "Requiem", just like her earlier "Little Requiem" from the *Arcadia* book as well as Aygi's "Presentiment of a Requiem" or Anna Akhmatova's classic "Requiem", is also a liturgy for the primordial word, the ever-nascent word, the word which in a child's perception has not yet been dismembered into meanings. An example of such word is *звонкоиволѣа* from a children's song, which, used together a homophonic phrase *и волк яѣненка уволок* from Ivan Krylov's fable, becomes the main leitmotif of Mnatsakanova's book *Metamorphosen* (Netzkowa<sup>9</sup> 1988). In an essay dedicated to verbal magic, she recalls Andrey Bely's glossolalic insights" "The face is disguised, draped, curtained, covered with a veil painted with unseen, incomprehensible signs; these signs are fiery scriptures. The Invisible Magician sends his signals with the help of signs known only to him alone. But these signs have a mysterious, MAGIC power; constituting certain figures yet forming a straight line, they penetrate through the depths and layers of times, centuries, AGES — and SPACES" (Mnatsakanova 2004). For a poetry of language revived after the tragic losses of Stalinist dictatorship, the magic of words, "whose vague meaning remains unresolved",

<sup>8</sup> I cordially thank Gerald Janecek for sharing his translation with me.

<sup>9</sup> Elisabeth Netzkowa is a heteronym Mnatsakanova used within the German-speaking context.

regained its power as an instrument for a rehabilitating and ‘rehealing’ of the traumatised Logos.

Having emigrated from the country of her native language in 1975, Elizaveta Mnatsakanova was writing from a foreign linguistic and cultural environment in Vienna, thereby making Russian a foreign language, as it were, for herself. Although she always preferred a hermitic life of a poet not involved into any movements, her early works had a distinct impact on some of Moscow underground poets of the 1960–70s. Among them were Moscow Conceptualists Andrei Monastyrski and Lev Rubinstein. Monastyrski’s earlier poetic works expose a commitment to minimalist quasi-zaum verse verging on ritualistic glossolalia, as in this excerpt from a 1973 poem:

недбезность	heavennotliness
полей	of fields
нсн	nsn
влюдбинность	inpeoploveness
холми	of hill
нсн	nsn
д' бнсн	d' bnsn
хилмо	if holl
нсн	nsn
небезность	hovenneatliness
полей	of fields
нсн	nsn
волни	of waves
д' бнсн	d' bnsn
вилно	waves of
нсн	nsn
висне	to hang
нсн	nsn
весни	hang to
д' бнсн	d' bnsn
(Monastyrsky 2010)	(Monastyrski 2019) <sup>10</sup>

Another Moscow conceptualist Vsevolod Nekrasov abbreviates names of Soviet reality into a variation of glossolalic speech, as in this poem called “Verses in our language” (2012: 29):

СТИХИ НА НАШЕМ ЯЗЫКЕ

бесеме велкесеме  
 гепеу энкаведе  
 эмгеу векапебе  
 ээспе капеэсэс  
 цик

<sup>10</sup> I thank Rebekah Smith and Ugly Duckling Presse for sharing with me Andrey Monastyrski translations into English and permitting to use excerpts from them.

цека  
 кацо  
 че пе  
 цеу  
 цоб  
 цобе  
 вечека  
 течека  
 зепете  
 кегебе  
 а бе ве ге де её  
 жезеикелемене

Similar repetitive mantra-like techniques were characteristic of Russian avant-garde poets of the 1990s, such as Larisa Berezovchuk who uses glossolalia in her “Ragas” cycle, particularly in the poem “Doomed to False Start”. Here is an example of one of these “raga” meditations with a leitmotif of “magicians” (1999):

1. рица мудрые речи ведет о музыке превращений. И внемяют
2. шактишактишактИшак----ИшакишакишакишакишакИшак---
3. дом. Маг нить оставил. Маг нить оставил. Маг нить оставил.

[...]

1. тебя, слуга, и дорога стелется коврами на небеса.-----
2. ТипаРватиПар----РваТипаРватиПар----РваТипаРватиПар---
3. Маг нить остави. Маг нить оставил. Маг нить остави. Где ти-

[...]

1. взглядом?-----//Кто еще так любит ее?-----
2. вать----Шапкашактипарвать//---Шапкашактипарвать----При-
3. истлел льдом магнита мага. Реалист Лель истлел льдом маг-

1. -----//Тогда почему же она принадлежит не мне? Ведь коль-
2. праваи//шакаТиараТиараТиарАктивашактиШактишакТир-
3. нита мага. Липа руса. Липа руса. Липа руса. Рака раг: дети - .

Multilingual glossolalia is practiced by the poet Sergey Zavyalov, in whose poems, as the critic Alexander Skidan remarked, “the expansion of the glossa turns into a real glossolalia, and the score turns out to be designed for many voices” (2001: 55). In a cycle with an illegible title “МОКШЭРЗЯНЬ КИРЬГОВОНЬ ГРАММАТАТ / БЕРЕСТЯНЫЕ ГРАМОТЫ МОРДВЫ-ЭРЗИ И МОРДВЫ-МОКШИИ” speech repeatedly strays into plurilingual incantation on the verge of zaum and glossolalia (Zavyalov 2003):

Кодамо моро минь моратано?  
 Эрзянь морыне минь моратано.  
 Кодамо ёвтамо минь ёвтатано?  
 Эрзянь ёвтамо минь ёвтатано.

Какую песнь мы запоем?  
 Мордовскую песню мы запоем.  
 Какую повесть мы поведаем?  
 Мордовскую повесть мы поведаем.

In a poem devoted to the spell of falling snowflakes, bilingual self-translation between languages turns these languages into reverberations of sound resonances (Ibidem):

тон марят — ты слышишь  
 А телине телине телесь ульнесь якшанзо  
 А зима зима зима эта была холодная

The minimalist line in the deformation of language was radicalised in the poetry of Anna Alchuk, reaching utmost minimalisation of linguistic means. While in his earlier book *Twelve Rhythmic Pauses*, written in the 1990s, poetic speech was unfolding through pauses and omissions between words, in a later collection *NE BU* (2005) poetic language was reduced to compositions of short syllables resembling musical notes (as in the line: *йобеэ из (йем НО ТЫ)*). Parts of words act as notes, sounding either as dotted fragments of meanings, or as particles and interjections marking the space of verse. For instance, the syllable *но* seems to be detached from the word *сказано*, with a space breaking the word into two lexemes: *сказ* and *но* (*сказа НО*); conversely, the phrase *как бы то ни было* merges into an undivided glossolalic sequence *какбыйонибыло*. Freed from the morphologically attached meaning, the word particles structure transsense sequences of sounds like musical scales: *в хру-сй-альном МИ/РЕ йосле ЛЯ/(а ФА зия)ей ДО йемна* (Alchuk 2005: 38). Aphasia literally controls the unfolding of verse, forcing sounds, their combinations, and spaces-pauses between them to lay bare the illogical nature of music.

In another poetry book by Alchuk, *57577* (2004), the place of musical and rhythmic pauses is occupied by reinterpreted punctuation marks functioning as shifters of meaning within a fragmented word. Words get at the same time split and recombined into longer chains of synthetic phrases: *ракурс-оймерен-/рима-день-час-иначе-/ри-йм-ми-сйери*, sometimes with the implantation of foreign language elements: *я-йам-у(з)нна-уои-анну?* The scattering of letters and syllables is associated with the image of an endless and boundless sea (*рас-сеянна-я/сле-д-за-сеянный-в-море*), echoing back the “meaningless” and “zero-like” sea of Alexander Vvedensky’s and Konstantin Vaginov’s avant-garde poetry of the absurd — the sea as an allogical “abyss” of language.

In the 2000-2010s, the sea as a hieroglyph of all things meaningless proves relevant for the experimental verse of Nika Skandiaka, a Russian poet writing in both Russian and English. The title of her cycle “Ruins of the Sea” signals a two-fold dissemination process — of *scattering* and of *splashing*, whereby an “ineffable image” assembles in pieces and drops: *in the ruins of the sea/tremors of kinship* (Skandiaka 2006a: http). In line with Aygi, Mnatsakanova and Alchuk,



using extraordinary positions of words in the line and punctuation marks that break speech, Skandiaka gravitates towards the zone beyond grammar and logic, where the utterance cancels and discredits itself, yet as a result of this erasure, “disruptive trails” are left: (*speeded up/cheered up*) trails (*of stars?*)/*distorted trails/telephone* (Ibidem). Since *everyone left the war of things and was forgetting their native language*, the act of naming a thing turns into a scattered phrase (Skandiaka 2006b: [http](#)):

winter/ (it's cold: &)/ got right  
 a new night  
 with a new wind wordless  
 had to be named somehow  
 a certain world cut in on me  
 by a mirror-like, wordless

Yet, *the right for speech* is retained, a right which music wins back from the rational Logos (Skandiaka 2006a: [http](#)):

& the right for speech —  
 music of speech  
 for the sake of binding || her constants

Music is there to save the de(ideo)logised word and bring the purity of the “sounding sense” back to the Logos. Contemporary Russian poetry perseveres in its attempts to “catch the boat of words”, following Vvedensky, who was the first to hear “music’s monotonous gait”, as his *Gray Notebook* poetically testifies (2009: 007). Language-pointed poetry keeps opening newer and newer spaces of *nonsense* and *beyonsense*. In her poem dedicated to Vvedensky, who proclaimed himself the “chinarian authority of nonsense”, the contemporary Russian poet Olga Martynova calls on nonsense to “disobey” reason (Martynova 2007: [http](#)):

All that consciousness hastily fastened and raveled  
 Still in the cradle, over the pink shrunken “I”  
 How to unravel this? —  
 Listen, drive me away from the logic of words,  
 So I spoke to the mind in the cradle,  
 Away to the nonsense of ovum and ovary —  
 But the mind’s disobedient  
 To the baby’s commands

Oscillating between the two poles of the senselessness — the absurd as disintegration of language and glossolalia as the breeding of ‘one’s own’ new language beyond the rational *Logos* — modern Russian poetry seems to successfully realise in practice the dramatic utopia of Professor Dominic Matei from Mircea Eliade’s short story “Youth without Youth” — and from Francis Ford Coppola’s film of the same name. In contrast to the unfortunate hero of Eliade’s novella who failed to find the origins of language in the depths of centuries,

contemporary linguocentric poets tend to seek these origins in the depths of poetic discourse, in what Khlebnikov a hundred years ago called the “deaf-and-dumb layers of language”. By decomposing sounds, words, phrases, and languages they contribute to the “blowing up of linguistic silence”, to use another Khlebnikov’s metaphor. From the “poverty of language” and “the abyss of speech” in everyday social communication, contemporary poetry makes a leap towards language’s lost origin, with a view to looking ahead for potentiality of the future.

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ОД ВАВИЛОНСКЕ КУЛЕ ДО НЕПОВЕЗАНОГ ГОВОРА:  
ПОЕТИКА РУСКЕ НЕОАВАНГАРДЕ НАКОН ГУБИТКА ГОВОРНЕ СПОСОБНОСТИ

Резиме

Чланак се бави праксом рада са звуком и вербалном магијом у руској неоавангардној поезији након Другог светског рата као и у савременој поезији. У највећој мери песничким посредовањем Паула Целана идеја цепања (декомпозиције) речи враћа се у руску поезију, након дуге паузе („губитка говорне способности“), у текстовима ГенADIЈА АЈГИЈА и Јелизавете Мнатсаканове. Ајги и Мнатсаканова деле, поред осталог, сензитивност према мистичкој страни поезије што обезбеђује језичку кохерентност, без обзира на фрагментарност и логичку дисонантност елемената. Ови поступци су типични и за „мистички настројене“ савремене песнике попут Ларисе Березовчук, Сергеја Завјалова и Ане Алчук.

*Кључне речи:* неоавангарда, губитак говора, Г. Ајги., Ј. Мнатсаканова, А. Алчук, С. Завјалов.