In this lecture I will examine the popularity of the Russian poet Elena Shvarts (1948–2010) in the 1990s and 2000s. Shvarts began her poetic career in the literary underground that flourished in Leningrad in the 1970s and 1980s.

I won’t devote much time to describing the underground as it functioned in the 1970s and 1980s. The focus of my argument is that apart from Shvarts, none of the poets from her circle fully succeeded in making the transition from being a poet of the 1970s who found retrospective recognition but was mostly read and studied for her connection to the underground, to an agent in the literary process of the new Russia, even to a member of the canon. I take ‘Shvarts’s circle’ to mean a group of poets of the Leningrad underground whose style can be defined as neo-modernist. Several features unite them: their understanding of the role of the poet essentially follows the Romantic model, where the poet is an outsider to society with prophetic gifts and poetry is a quasi-spiritual activity. They strove to be recognised as belonging to the classical Russian tradition, which they regarded as part of the European cultural heritage. Moreover, the unofficial Leningrad poets formed a tightly-knit group the members of which promoted each other through samizdat journals and readings.

All the members of the so-called ‘Leningrad School’ (other better-known members include Viktor Krivulin and Sergei Stratanovskii) made their debut in the official Soviet and Russian press during the last years of perestroika and the early 1990s; as such they were part of the wave of ‘lost literature’ that reached the general reader with a twenty-year time lag. Comparing publication data for members of this group reveals that Shvarts is leading in all categories:

1) the number of book-length collections published that do not contain primarily work from the 1970s and 1980s, indicative of the fact that a poet has an established readership eager to read new work and/or that their name is significant enough to draw in new readers, and thus that they are considered a viable investment by a publishing house; 2) the existence of a published collected works; 3) single-author collections published in translation (I have limited my enquiry to translations into English); they indicate that a poet is regarded as representative; foreign editors are unlikely to be interested in publishing translations of work by a minor writer; 4) scholarly interest in both Russia and the English-speaking world — academics play an important role in canon formation because it is they who decide which writers to include in school and university curricula.

The comparative publication data offers scope for empirical analysis as well as speculation. Neither is my main objective here. Instead, I understand this data as evidence that Shvarts belongs to the canon of the new Russia in a way that her...
peers do not, and proceed to a discursive exploration of potential reasons for her enduring success.

This discussion has two parts: Part One considers qualities that are inherent to Shvarts's poems (without the attempt to make judgements about 'literary quality'), while Part Two focuses on contextual factors.

**Part One: Textual Criteria**

**Shvarts and the Poetic Tradition**

A juxtaposition of texts written by Shvarts in different decades reveals no significant changes in either voice or subject matter. Such continuity of style and vision was possibly a result of the fact that Shvarts's work was never defined by her situation as an underground poet. The underground does not feature explicitly in her texts, neither as subject nor backdrop, as it does, for example, in Viktor Krivulin's poems of the 1970s. She also largely dispenses with hidden references that require a reader initiated into the same cultural context. Her unchanging voice means she could seamlessly build on the reputation she had established with her early work, a factor that was almost certainly conducive to her increasing fame. In her post-Soviet collections, new work sits alongside poems written significantly earlier.

Shvarts always has been an openly spiritual poet, defining poetry as 'a way of reaching the non-material (spiritual) by semi-material means'.¹ The setting in which she pursued her spiritual quest was her native city of Leningrad-Petersburg. Shvarts is commonly identified as a Petersburg poet, a writer whose texts are steeped in allusions to other texts and who is drawing on two centuries of location-specific literary tradition, both during her underground career and after.² One key to the Petersburg myth according to Shvarts is the five-poem cycle Chernia Paskha (Black Easter, 1974). It exemplifies how Shvarts uses literary tradition in order to create a complex web of associations for her own images.³ The result is a highly individual, idiosyncratic representation of the city and its literary myth, although the shadow of Dostoevskii looms large. Just as Dostoevskii’s city, Shvarts’s Petersburg alienates individuals from both nature and from each other, engendering illness and madness though the resulting duality within the person and society. The cycle, which contains few explicitly religious references apart from its title, establishes Shvarts’s vision of Petersburg as a site for spiritual quest by making explicit the ‘permeability’ of her native city. At the same time, her religious vision is revealed as profoundly pessimistic: none of her attempts to touch upon that which lies beyond the material world is successful; transcendence remains forever outside the poet's reach. This is particularly evident in the second poem of the cycle:

ЧЕРНАЯ ПАСХА (1974)

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¹ ‘A Poetics of What is Alive’ (‘Poetika zhivogo’, 1996), in Elena Shvarts, Sochineniia, 5 vols. (St Petersburg: Pushkinskii dom, 2002–2008), IV, 272–75 (p. 274). All references to Shvarts's works are to this edition and will be given by volume and page number, where appropriate directly after the quotation unless otherwise stated.
² For example by editor and translator Michael Molnar in his foreword to the bilingual volume Paradise (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1993), pp. 9–10.
2. Where are We?

[...]  
I thought—and I am not alone,—  
that Petersburg, our motherland, was a special country,  
It is the West, thrown into the East,  
encircled and all alone,  
Consumptive, with a perennial cold  
And the site where Napoleon murdered the pawnbroker.  
But the spiritual wall has collapsed  
And Russia gushed in, evil, dark and drunk.  
Where is my motherland? And then I got it:  
Russia flooded Petersburg long ago.  
And tore away your borrowed wig, for all to see that you  
have remained that very same regal peasant  
same facial tic  
axe in hand  
your fly undone…

BLACK EASTER (1974)

2. Where are We?

[...]  
Я думала—не я одна,—  
Что Петербург, нам родина—особая страна,  
Он—запад, вброшенный в восток,  
И окружен, и одинок,  
Чахоточный, всё простужался он,  
И в нем процентщицу убил Наполеон.  
Но рухнула духовная стена—  
Россия хлынула—дурна, темна, пьяна.  
Где ж родина? И поняла я вдруг:  
Давно Россию затоплен Петербург.  
И сдернули заемный твой парик,  
И все увидели, что ты—  
Все тот же царственный мужик,  
И так же дергается лиц,  
В руке топор,  
Расстегнута ширинка...  
Останови же в зеркале свой взор  
И ложной красоты смахни же паутинку  
О Парадиз!  
[...]  
В тебе тамбовский ветер матерится,  
И окает, и цокает Нева.

(Sochinenii, vol III, p. 10)
Stop, rest your gaze in the mirror
wipe away the web of false beauty
Oh Paradise!
[...]
The wind from Tambov curses inside you
And the Neva burrs and gurgles.

Shvarts names the city, but the reader would recognise it anyway from the breathtaking array of references: the city features as Peter the Great’s ‘Paradise’ and the capital conceived as a window to the West; we are familiar with the scourge of tuberculosis in the damp, cold climate from countless nineteenth-century literary texts, including Dostoevskii’s *Crime and Punishment* (Sonia Marmeladova’s mother is consumptive). The reference to *Crime and Punishment* thus reinforces the central theme of fatal ‘duality’, embodied in Dostoevskii’s novel by the protagonist, Raskol’nikov, whose very name implies schism. Finally there is the Neva, a landmark well established as shorthand for Petersburg. More pertinently, in the context of a destructive, even apocalyptic, flood the Neva invokes Pushkin’s *Bronze Horseman*, the foundation text of the Petersburg myth, which forever linked the image of the city to catastrophe and the destruction of the individual.

Most Petersburg references in the poem cited above hinge on the figure of Peter the Great who, as the ‘regal peasant’, a Russian emperor irresistibly drawn to the West, embodies the duality that is intrinsic to the city and makes it susceptible to the incursion of elements that do not belong to the realm of the rational. The refined, Western features that Peter and his city are proudly parading are vulnerable to the onslaught of forces beyond Peter’s control. His own ‘borrowed wig’ is torn off to reveal an uncouth Russian peasant who, wielding an axe, once again invokes Dostoevskii’s Raskol’nikov, who committed murder after persuading himself he was a Napoleon, a man standing above the law of morality. Ominous foreboding is a trait of many Petersburg texts. In Shvarts’s poem, however, the catastrophe has already happened. Russia has flooded Petersburg, the site that epitomises alien, Western, influence. ‘Russia’ represents more than the accumulation of unsavoury national stereotypes as displayed by the violent peasant with his fly unbuttoned. It is an external force, an amorphous flood, breaking down and submerging the cultural values that constitute the city’s ‘spiritual wall’. These values are Western in essence, and literary culture is foremost among them, as the web of literary associations in this poem demonstrates. By presenting culture as a *spiritual* bulwark, now breached (‘the spiritual wall collapsed’), Shvarts forges an inseparable connection between culture and spirituality, in effect identifying the two. Culture as an entry point into, or
even replacement for, lost spiritual values is a trait that links Shvarts firmly to her contemporaries.4

The Petersburg Shvarts presents to her readers is as much a spiritual landscape as an actual geographical site. The map to this spiritual landscape is contained in the cycle’s title. The collocation Chernaia Paskha (Black Easter) is a contradiction in terms. Easter, the feast which in the Christian tradition commemorates the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, is associated with the colour white, symbolising hope. In the northern hemisphere, Easter coincides with spring, the season in which nature renews itself. Shvarts negates this message when she paints her Easter entirely in black.5 Her Petersburg has become the site that resists the resurrection, a site where the all-encompassing pain of crucifixion, of Good Friday, reigns supreme (‘Мы ведь—где мы?—в России, / Где от боли чернеют кусты’ (‘Where are we after all? In Russia / where the shrubs blacken with pain’), ‘Where are We?’). Blackness is woven into every lyric of the cycle, with the fifth and final poem ending on the ultimate triumph of death over life. There, the poet encounters Life and Death in the guise of two old women but fails to tell one from the other. Consequently, her Petersburg remains confined to its mortally wounded (collapsed, submerged) present state, without hope of transformation. Literary culture, its greatest hope, is doomed, too, as it is no longer a ‘spiritual wall’, a stepping stone towards transcendence. In a final pessimistic note, Shvarts presents the literary word, ‘Slovo’, spelled with a capital S to recall its original kinship with the Logos, the creative Word of God, as powerless: ‘Бумагу Слово не прожжет, / Но поджелтит края’ (‘The Word can’t burn through the page / it merely singes the edges’).6 The literary word fails to transform the world of which it is a part, remaining firmly bound to its material realm, the page, rather than transforming the page into flame.

The cycle Portret Blokady cherez zhanr, natiiurmort i peizazh (A Portrait of the Blockade Composed of Genre Painting, Still Life and Landscape) was written twenty-five years later, in 1999, yet exhibits a number of striking similarities. The most obvious is the setting of Leningrad/Petersburg, once again presented as both a geographical and a spiritual landscape. Portret Blokady too, is a work in which Good Friday fails to give way to Easter, negating any hope for transformation.

Портрет блокады через жанр, натюрморт и пейзаж (1999)

3. Смещенный пейзаж. Лестница, двор, церковь.
(бумага, уголь, воронья кровь)

За этой сырой синей краской — желтая, за ней зеленая,
До пустоты не скреби, не надо,


5 A similar negation of spring and new life can be found in Innokentii Annenskii’s short poem ‘Chernaia vesna’ (‘Black Spring’) (1906), in Stikhotvorenia i tragedii (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1990), p. 131.

6 ‘Obychnaia oshibka’ (‘An Ordinary Mistake’), vol. II, p. 83.235
Tam штукатурка и испарения ада.
На, жри, картофельный розовый цвет.
Больше у тебя ничего нет, кость моя, блокада!
[…]
А во дворе человека зарезали без ножа
Запросто просто.
Из раны, дымясь, вытекал голос.
Он пел о горчицном зерне и крошечке хлеба,
О душе крови.
Под слабым северным сияньем
Желваками ходило небо.
Блокада жрала
Душу, как волк свою лапу в капкан…
Великая пятница. Пустая голодная церковь.
У дьякона высох голос, он почти неживой,
Тени гулко выносят плащаницу—
Священник раскачивает головой:
‘О, теперь я прозрел, я понял—
Ты очутился от смерти больной,
Тебе не поправиться, погибель всем вам’.
Кровь моя стала льдяным вином,
Уробор прокусил свой хвост.
Зубы разбросаны в небе
Вместо жестоких звезд.

A Portrait of the Blockade Composed of Genre Painting, Still Life and Landscape (1999)

(Paper, Coal, Raven’s Blood)

Behind this wet blue paint comes yellow and then green
Don’t scrape down to the void, really don’t
There you find plaster and hell fumes.
There, eat, the colour pink, like potatoes.
That’s all you have, my bones, the blockade!
[…]
In the court yard they stabbed a man without using a knife
All too easy.
His voice flowed from the steaming wound.
He sang about the mustard seed and a crumb of bread,
About the soul of blood.
Under the pale Northern light
The sky is grinding like a set of jaws
The Blockade devoured
The Soul, like a trapped wolf chewing his own paw…
Good Friday. An empty, hungry church.
The deacon's voice has dried up, he is hardly alive,
Shadows are bearing the shroud of Christ —
The priest shakes his head:
'Oh now I see, I understand —
You woke up from death as a sick man,
You won't get better, you are all doomed'.
My blood turned into icy wine,
The ouroboros bit through his tail
Teeth are scattered in the sky
In place of the merciless stars.

As in Chernaia Paskha, Leningrad is evoked in Portret Blokady through references, in this case the Blockade of the winter of 1941 (the Blockade lasted from 8 September 1941 to 1927 January 1944). And once again, the city is described as permeable to outside forces, inexplicable and sinister ('There you find plaster and hell fumes'). The poem depicts a post-apocalyptic landscape in which the violence of the Blockade has annihilated respect for human life — the basis of all culture — as well as culture itself. In the first poem a crowd indulges in an act of cannibalism — something that happened during the Blockade but had been a taboo subject during the Soviet period. In the second poem somebody boils a pet cat for food. In this third and last scene we witness the gratuitous stabbing of an innocent man whose final song, replete with references to Gospel teachings, links him to the figure of Jesus. The identification of culture, in a broad sense, and spirituality is central to this cycle, and the explicitly Christian imagery of the final lyric lends it a poignant religious gravity.

Images related to ‘devouring’ permeate the entire cycle: humanity is being devoured, literally, when people attempt to still their hunger with a fellow human being’s flesh, culture is devoured when the frescoes of a church are scraped off so that the starving person can eat the paint (yet another literalised metaphor); finally even heaven succumbs to hunger when it turns into a giant set of jaws, with teeth taking the place of the stars. But the pivotal image is 'The blockade devoured the Soul'. It fulfils a similar function to the collapsed spiritual wall we saw in Chernaia Paskha, marking an apocalyptic event. The Blockade — an event particular to Leningrad — has devoured the human soul, and the consequences are more catastrophic than the Blockade itself. While Leningrad remains mired in the stern Blockade winter, with no hope of spring, its spiritual expanse is locked in the pain and death that is Good Friday. Once the soul is dead, Easter and resurrection become impossible. Portret Blokady ends on an eerie Good Friday celebration in an anthropomorphised, hungry, church. A clergyman diagnoses Christ's resurrection as failed, foreboding the death of all humanity. The Easter message, which promises fullness of life to those who believe in the risen Christ, is thus once again turned on its head.

Chernaia Paskha and Portret Blokady are Petersburg poems that broaden the traditional association of the city with apocalypse and destruction to include a sense of desolation that is explicitly spiritual. Concerns that are contemporary and/or the poet’s own, above all the fascination with madness and violence, are given weight by the vicinity of tradition. This weaving together of the traditional and the topical, the
highbrow and the vulgar, and the old and the new, is a typical feature of Shvarts’s poetic vision, on the level of imagery as well as poetic technique. Shvarts’s trademark style, exemplified in the examples above, comes close to the type of versification known as ‘raeshnyi stikh’ used in folk theatre, in which lines carrying varying numbers of stresses are brought into formal cohesion through strong and memorable rhymes at the end of each phrase. The dazzling variety and vitality of her rhythmic features she explains with her dream ‘to find a rhythm that would change with every change in my train of thought, with every new emotion or sensation’. In combination with her characteristic imagery, this technical device makes her voice instantly recognisable; however, the idea of rhythm mirroring thought was suggested by Osip Mandel’shtam in 1933. Rhyme used as the glue for rhythmically diverse poems was a common occurrence in futurist poetry. Her versification thus exhibits the same combination of eccentric individuality and reassuring gestures towards her literary predecessors that characterises her lexicon and choice of subject matter.

In fact Shvarts, an outspoken adversary of free verse, which she vilified as ‘an abattoir — bad prose’ richly orchestrated her poetry, using the devices of cycle, stanza, line, rhyme and rhythm in a traditional manner. We can thus read her poetry successfully with the help of the usual hermeneutic tools honed by reading Russian poetry of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This makes her work instantly accessible, giving her a definitive advantage over more experimentally minded peers such as Arkadii Dragomoschenko, whose experiments with free verse have few, if any, predecessors in Russian poetry, or the notoriously opaque octaves of Mikhail Eremin.

Shvarts’s multilayered references to Russian and European predecessors will earn her the appreciation of the discerning, erudite poetry lover who is able to decode them. The provocative power of her images, capable of shocking the reader, and perhaps specifically created in order to shock, can make us momentarily forget that these images nevertheless remain poetic images in the classical sense. As such they stand for themselves, remaining accessible even when their resonance with the Russian tradition is lost. Shvarts’s reliance on images rather than subtle variations of language alone also minimises translation loss, making her an attractive candidate for publication in a foreign language.

It seems that Shvarts has managed to position herself at the advantageous crossroads of tradition and innovation, as if following the advice of Aristotle, according to whom the perfect poetic style combines rare and commonplace words. It seems thus appropriate to conclude that Shvarts’s choice of subject matter, lexicon and style, in combination with the fact that her voice did not undergo major changes and was already mature and recognisable by the time the Soviet Union collapsed, were vital factors contributing to her post-Soviet fame.

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8 Maiakovskii heightened this effect by setting out his poems as ‘stepladders’, forcing the reader to pause in certain places.
10 ‘A diction that is made up of strange (or rare) terms is a jargon. A certain infusion, therefore, of these elements is necessary to style; for the strange (or rare) word, the metaphorical, the ornamental, and the other kinds above mentioned, will raise it above the commonplace and mean, while the use of proper words will make it perspicuous’. Aristotle, Poetics, chapter XXII, http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.3.3.html
Part Two. Contextual Criteria: Three Keys to Shvarts’s Work

Having established the general picture, I will use the remainder of this lecture to delineate three specific areas of Shvarts’s work and life that may afford us further insight into why she was privileged over her peers when it came to entering the post-Soviet canon. These areas are the use of her underground credentials, gender and its reflection on her work, and her extra-literary persona.

Shvarts as an Underground Poet

Literature in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russia was more than just literature. The radical intelligentsia of the nineteenth century looked to writers for moral leadership; literature thus became a platform for political and ethical debate. The Bolsheviks followed in this tradition when they attempted to utilise literature as a tool for forging the new Soviet man. This concept of literature invests the written word with an enormous degree of power, and explains why different authorities, and the Soviet regime in particular, operated a tight censorship regime. As Svetlana Boym has observed, the quasi-religious cult of the poet as voice of truth thrives on political oppression. In this sense, the underground poet is the quintessential Russian poet, a Romantic outsider who is persecuted by the state for the sake of the ‘truth’ he or she has to tell. Underground culture added a further notion to this myth, namely that of the (underground) writer as the preserver of authentic literary culture in an age that was doing everything to stifle this culture with a barrage of tendentious and formulaic prescriptions. It is precisely this commitment to literary authenticity (cynics might point out that it is a cliché, and one that has been peddled relentlessly by the underground poets themselves) that now, more than thirty years later, makes the underground so attractive as a topic of research, both in the West and, increasingly, in Russia itself. For the first ten years after the fall of the Soviet Union it was researched predominantly as a sociocultural phenomenon, and most of those who wrote about it were former underground writers themselves. This has changed.

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12 Compare the statement that ‘writers are engineers of the human soul’, popularized by and attributed to Stalin, who used it in 1932 at a meeting with Soviet writers. In fact he was quoting the novelist Iurii Olesha. See http://dic.academic.ru/dic.nsf/dic_wingwords/1087/Инженеры
13 Svetlana Boym, Death in Quotation Marks: Cultural Myths of the Modern Poet (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 120.
now. Primary sources are readily available, and enough research has been carried out to enable a new generation of scholars to examine the poetry written by underground writers as an integral part of the evolution of twentieth-century poetry.\textsuperscript{16}

Her provenance from the underground lends Shvarts’s poetry a certain amount of credibility by default. She is a ‘serious’, ‘true’ poet who has suffered for her ‘truth’ by being deprived of a broad readership for twenty years. She is also part of the ‘underground mainstream’, with both her texts and her lifestyle following certain established models. At the same time, she exhibits the same obsession with literary culture, expressing itself in highly complex imagery and a proclivity for intertext and citation that Mikhail Epshtein identified as the trademark sign of one of the major currents of Russian postmodernism (‘metarealism’).\textsuperscript{17}

However, Soviet underground poetry is notoriously opaque and inaccessible to Russian readers of post-Soviet generations (let alone Westerners) who lack the requisite referential framework. I have argued that one of the factors that makes Shvarts a supremely accessible poet is her independence from the underground paradigm as subject matter. Her quasi-religious vision of poetry did not depend, as did that of Krivulin, for example, on the late Soviet context as a setting in which persecuted poets could be likened to the early Christians hounded by the Romans; nor was her lyrical ‘I’ the quintessential ‘underground man/poet’ who features so prominently in the work of Krivulin. This fact, in conjunction with Shvarts’s otherwise impeccable underground credentials, makes her a convenient deputy figure, capable of standing in for the entire underground in the eyes of readers and non-specialist scholars.

\textbf{The Perspective of Women’s Studies}

Shvarts’s gender provides us with an additional angle from which to approach her work, namely that of women’s studies, and it is this angle that has shaped Western scholarship of Shvarts from the beginning. Shvarts has found entry in several anthologies — scholarly as well as poetic — that are specifically dedicated to female Russian writers.\textsuperscript{18} Anthologisation is an important step towards canonicity: it signifies that a writer is considered exemplary enough to be included in a representative sample. Poetry anthologies are read by more people than individual collections; this is likely to be even more significant in the case of foreign poets. In picking up an anthology, the reader implicitly accepts the editor’s choice of material.

Shvarts’s gender-specific poems are a magnet for academics: she grapples with the persona of the female poet. The author of the first significant article on Shvarts in

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\textsuperscript{16} These scholars include Marco Sabbatini (Italy), Stephanie Sandler (US), Emily Lygo (UK), Iuliia Valieva (Russia), Aleksandr Skidan (Russia), Stanislav Savitskii (Russia).

\textsuperscript{17} Mikhail Epshtein, \textit{Postmodern v russkoi literature} (Moscow: Vysshaia shkola, 2005), p. 127 ff. For a recent study of the phenomenon see A. A. Zhitelev, \textit{Poezija neomodernizma} (St Petersburg: Inapress, 2012).

From Underground to Mainstream: The Case of Elena Shvarts
Dr Josephine von Zitzewitz, Cambridge University

English, Barbara Heldt, identified Shvarts’s poetry as feminine in a way that defies the patriarchal order and mocks the tradition of the woman poet, especially in attitudes towards her body. Shvarts introduces this thematic field with imagery that seems highly topical from a feminist point of view, centring as it does on violence, often of a sexual nature. A prime example is the cycle ‘Grubymi sredstvami ne dostich’ blazhenstva’ (‘You Won’t Reach Bliss by Rough Means’), with its subtitle ‘Horror eroticus’, which presents male sexuality as inherently demonic and violent:

Грубыми средствами не достичь блаженства
(Horror eroticus)

Verno, хочется тебе
Деву разломать, как жареную курицу,
Как спелый красный апельсин,
И разорвать, и разодрать,
И соком смерти напить
До самых жизни до глубин.
Разве ты виноват?
Против воли—тупое жало
Вздымаются из брюха кинжалом
И несет томительную смерть

You Won’t Reach Bliss by Rough Means
(Horror eroticus)
True, you want
to break the girl open like a fried chicken,
like a ripe red orange,
tear her to pieces, split her
and soak her with the juice of death
down to the deep recesses of life.
Is that really your fault?
Against your will the blunt sting
rises from your belly, dagger-like
Bringing an agonising death

This is not merely an example of chernukha, the preoccupation with the dark aspects of life that features prominently in the work of women writers such as Liudmila Petrushevskaia who gained prominence in the later 1980s and 1990s. The all-encompassing, grossly exaggerated violence of these lines borders on the vision of a madwoman; it is plausible that the aim of these lines is neither a description of actual circumstances, nor, in fact, gender politics. Instead, the poet delights in

challenging taboos, a feature pioneered by Shvarts’s heroine Marina Tsvetaeva.\(^{20}\)

On the other hand the demonisation of male sexuality, which is presented here as exclusively driven by subconscious urges aiming at the violation and subjugation of the female, alongside a proliferation of phallic imagery (‘Против воли—тупое жало / Вздымается из брюха кинжалом / И нетст томительную смерть’ (Against your will the blunt sting / rises from your belly, dagger-like / bringing agonising death)) evoke the theories of Sigmund Freud. While psychoanalysis was no longer a new or unchallenged approach either in the 1970s or in the 1990s, it might have had a greater impact on Soviet/Russian readers, to whom this discourse had not been readily available for a long time. Popular in the experimental early 1920s, psychoanalysis was discredited after Lenin’s death and denounced in 1929; Freud’s works were not published after 1925.\(^{21}\)

Everyday life is rarely the focus of Shvarts’s gender-specific poems. Some of them are downright otherworldly (for example ‘Vospominanie o strannom ugoshchenii’ (‘Memory of a Strange Treat’, I, p. 54), in which the heroine tastes a friend’s breast milk). Her woman poet is a mutable heroine who usually appears in the guise of a first-person lyrical ‘I’. Well-known poems that employ this device include ‘Tantsuiushchii David’ (‘Dancing David’, I, p. 79), ‘Elegiiia na rentgenovskii snimok moego cherepa’ (‘Elegy on an X-Ray of my Skull’, I, p. 28) and many others. This first-person narrator tempts us to read the texts as autobiography. Yet we learn close to nothing about Shvarts from her poems; in this she sharply differs from her Silver Age predecessors Akhmatova and Tsvetaeva, who displayed a similar narcissistic fixation on the persona of themselves-as-poet, but supplied plenty of (carefully edited) personal detail.\(^{22}\) I will use Akhmatova and Tsvetaeva as points of comparison for the following discussion, perhaps unfairly prioritising these most famous among women poets and forfeiting the opportunity for a more nuanced analysis of Shvarts’s female poetic lineage. Yet there are good reasons for choosing these two figures — their rank among Russia’s main poets of the twentieth century is undisputed, they were unabashedly feminine voices who refused to be belittled as poetessa, and last but not least Shvarts had strong opinions on both of them.\(^{23}\)

Given the predominance of men in the poetic canon, readers are more used to looking at the world, and at women (especially women-as-objects) through the eyes of a male poet, but Shvarts, just as Akhmatova and Tsvetaeva had done before her, inverted the gendered perspective, instead evoking a world seen through the eyes of the gifted female. This is particularly evident in her bold re-imagining of poetic inspiration in ‘Ia rodilas ′s ladon′u gladkoi’ (‘I was Born with an Unlined Hand’, I, p. 110), where the female poet replaces the male poet’s muse by the grammatically and behaviourally masculine ‘Faturn, who tries to inscribe her virgin hands with a challenging fate, and with poetry. This poem exhibits clear parallels with Tsvetaeva’s long poem ‘Na krasnom kone’ (‘On a Red Steed’, 1921), where the gentle muse

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\(^{20}\) The adolescent Shvarts adored Tsvetaeva, stating that she wished to be like her: ‘Diaries’ [‘Dnevnikи’], Sochinenia vol. V, p. 346. The adult Shvarts hailed Tsvetaeva as the most technically accomplished poet in the Russian language (Polukhina, ‘Interv′iu s Elenoi Shvarts’, p. 233).

\(^{21}\) For details see Martin Miller, Freud and the Bolsheviks: Psychoanalysis in Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

\(^{22}\) Examples that can be traced back to events in the respective poet’s life include Akhmatova’s ‘Rekvivem’ (on her son’s arrest and Gulag sentence) and Tsvetaeva’s cycles of love poetry, e.g. ‘Georgii’ (to her husband Sergei Efron), ‘Poema kontsa’ (‘Poem of the End’) (to her lover, Konstantin Rodzevich), and ‘Provoda’ (‘Wires’) (to Boris Pasternak).

takes the guise of a fierce knight who demands of the poet self-sacrifice and submission to the poetic calling. A less well-known version of the male muse we find in Anna Radlova’s ‘Angel pesnopeniia’ (‘Angel of Song’, 1922).

Some of Shvarts’s first-person narrators are elaborately crafted fictional alter egos, with their own history, in whose names Shvarts produced entire collections. One of them is ‘Kinfiia’, purportedly a first-century Roman poetess whose ‘poems did not survive, nevertheless I shall try to translate them into Russian’ (II, p. 5) and who shocks her readers with a graphic description of imaginary patricide in poem two of the cycle. A similarly colourful alter ego is Lavinia, heroine of Shvarts’s most important religious work, the cycle Trudy i dni Lavinii, monakhini iz ordena obrezaniiia serdtsa. Ot Rozhdestva do Paskhi (The Works and Days of Lavinia, a Nun in the Order of the Circumcision of the Heart: From Christmas to Easter, 1984). Lavinia is a nun, and as the purported author of the cycle, she is by definition also a poet. The cycle is presented, in best Romantic manner, as a ‘found manuscript’: it is preceded by a letter from a fictitious editor and a lyric by Lavinia’s fictitious sister, explaining how this cycle came into being. Trudy i dni Lavini includes elements of biblical motifs that Shvarts adapted to create a birth myth of the female poet. In ‘Temnaia rozhdestvenskaia pesn’ (‘A Dark Christmas Song’ (poem eleven, II, p. 174)), a child is born in the desert. Yet this child is not Jesus Christ, born of the Virgin Mary, but Mary herself, who then, curiously, joins Venus, Roman goddess of love, in the Christian heaven. ‘Leviafan’ (‘Leviathan’ (poem thirteen, II, p. 176)) is an adaptation of the story of Jonah and the whale (Jonah 1–2). The Leviathan, a (grammatically) masculine figure, invites the heroine to ‘enter my womb’. He swallows her and she rather enjoys the ride in his belly until the monster goes into labour and expels her in a fountain of blood. In the Old Testament, the expulsion from the belly of the whale marks the beginning of Jonah’s path as a prophet. Shvarts is harnessing this notion for her heroine Lavinia: the whale is thus giving birth to the woman poet, her birth marking her as special.

The use of named mythical figures as a mouthpiece is yet another trait Shvarts inherited, consciously or not, from Akhmatova and Tsvetaeva. All three poets lent their voice to mythical female heroines whom the usual sources describe as passive and silent.

26 These poems were collected in the aptly titled volume Mundus imaginalis (St Petersburg: Ezro, 1996). Not all of them were female: the ‘Estonian poet’ Arno Tsart, became a pseudonym under which Shvarts published two samizdat collections in the early 1980s. See http://libverse.ru/barkova/dyrochka.html
27 A contemporary English poet who exploits a very similar device to great effect is Carol Ann Duffy, the British Poet Laureate, with her collection The World’s Wife (London: Picador, 1999).
remaining in Hades. These reasons are particular to the individual poet’s vision, and they have little to do with the disobedience Orpheus exhibits in the source myth.  

Unsurprisingly, the poems centred on the female voice in literature are particularly attractive to scholars studying Russian literature from a feminist perspective. The gender aspect thus broadens academic interest in Shvarts’s work, which in turn heightens the poet’s chance of being considered canonical.

Zhiznetvorchestvo and Celebrity Culture

A poet’s popularity depends to a not insignificant degree on the way they present themselves to their readers. Pushkin’s tragic fate moved his audience; Silver Age figures such as Akhmatova or Maiakovskii invested considerable effort in their self-presentation. In other words, it is not enough to write good poetry, it is also necessary to be attractive, intriguing and in some ways newsworthy. Shvarts was aware of the impact of a poet’s personal myth on his or her reception. While she stated that it was the forces around the poet, rather than the poet herself, who created this myth, she certainly offered her readers plenty of relevant material.

In the remainder of this article I will give a brief overview of ways in which Shvarts staged her own persona. It is clear that the celebrity of Shvarts, whose reluctance to read in public dates back to her underground days, was not a product of present-day Russian popular culture. Russian celebrity culture now is little different from its Western counterpart and driven by TV shows, glossy magazines, performance and (self-)publication on social media and platforms such as YouTube. There are writers who exploit the media age very successfully, often by supplementing traditional poetry with a performance aspect. One of Shvarts’s contemporaries who managed the transition to the new media age, and who arguably reached canonical status precisely because of his media presence, was the extremely versatile Dmitrii Aleksandrovich Prigov, the central figure of Moscow conceptualism in the late 1970s and 1980s. A contemporary example is the omnipresent Dmitrii Bykov with his hugely successful Grazhdanin poet (Citizen Poet) project, or younger performance poets such as Andrei Rodionov or Vera Polozkova. Shvarts’s media presence was

29 Tsvetaeva’s ‘Evidika-Orfeiu’ (‘Euridice to Orpheus’, 1923) celebrates death as a state free of attachment and sexual passion, and introduces an uncomfortable notion of incest, presenting Orpheus and Eurydice as siblings (in Stikhotvorenia i poemy, p. 384). In Shvarts’s ‘Orfei’ (‘Orpheus’, I, p. 154), Orpheus’s doubt in his beloved’s reality leads to her decision to slip back into the underworld.

30 For example, Catriona Kelly discusses birth-myth poems in her chapter on Shvarts in A History of Russian Women’s Writing, pp. 411–22.

31 For a statement to this effect see Polukhina, ‘Interv’iui s Elenoi Shvarts’, p. 239.249 8. From Underground to Mainstream: The Case of Elena Shvarts

32 ‘Kratkaia istoriia dopotopnykh chtenii’ (‘A Short History of Antediluvian Readings’, III, pp. 193–96) details Shvarts’s dislike of public readings. For a visual impression of a younger Elena Shvarts reading her poetry see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TOaJnTqpzhk. Recordings of her readings can be found at http://asia-plus.ru/cgi-bin/mp3.cgi?id=30&sid=492884ca-027b-4202-8bf8-32dc9b1fb547

33 A study touching on some of these points that is not yet entirely out of date is Birgit Beumers’s Pop Culture Russia!: Media, Arts, and Lifestyle (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2005).

34 Some of the wide variety of his work can be appreciated on http://prigov.ru

35 Polozkova promotes herself via social media, including Zhivoi Zhurnal (Life Journal), Facebook and VKontakte. Her official page on VKontakte mixes the private and the public, featuring family photographs as well as poems and multimedia files of her performing her poetry. See
minimal; she relied entirely on traditional channels of publication. Traditional are also her modes of self-presentation, which have their precedent in modernist zhiznetvorchestvo, the fusion of life and text.\(^{36}\) Shvarts created her public persona — who bore traits of the femme fatale, the mystic seer, and the holy fool — through a process of self-mystification that strongly resembles the techniques employed, once again, by Akhmatova and Tsvetaeva.\(^{37}\)

When asked what Shvarts looks like, readers will recall a beautiful, sad-eyed young woman, never smiling, who looks into the camera defiantly, sometimes drawing on a cigarette and overall resembling a film noir heroine.\(^{38}\) These are the images of Shvarts that precede each of the volumes of her Sochineniia (Collected Works); it seems significant that she should have chosen the iconic pictures of her youth, although by the time the Sochineniia came out she was well into her fifties.\(^{39}\)

Shvarts professed that she could not stand Akhmatova, whom she met when she was a young woman.\(^{40}\) Yet when looking at the photographs by which Shvarts became known, it is Akhmatova’s pictures, and her policy in using them, that come to mind — a striking profile, an enigmatic gaze into the distance.

The richest source of self-mystifying material is her autobiographical prose, published in two collections entitled Vidimaia storona zhizni (The Visible Side of Life, 1997) and Opredelenie v durnuiu pogodu (Definition in Foul Weather, 2003). These collections consist of anecdotal, witty, bite-sized vignettes that are rarely longer than one page. They give the impression of being diary entries, especially the pieces in Vidimaia storona zhizni, a collection which begins with the poet’s childhood. However, the episodes were in all likelihood written retrospectively; they are stylistically homogenous and present a consistent, highly stylised image of the first-
person heroine. While they are doubtlessly intriguing, the entries do not divulge factual information about Shvarts’s life, or inner life for that matter; the reader does not have the usual impression of getting closer to the poet, however deceptive this impression might be. Some of the pieces (e.g. ‘Neskolk’ko osobennostei moikh stikhov’ (‘A Few Peculiarities of My Poems’)) treat Shvarts’s vision of poetry, but they describe rather than explain, in stark contrast to the essays of Shvarts’s friend Ol’ga Sedakova, for example, which evince an almost scholarly interest in the reasons for writing in a particular way. The function of Shvarts’s prose is fundamentally different — her vignettes are the primary instrument with which she ‘ghosts’ her persona, fine-tuning the light in which her readers see her.

An unkind reader might be tempted to point out that the elements of the poetic myth to which Shvarts pandered have been over-used by Russian poets throughout the ages to the point that they have become clichés. The first of these clichés is the romantic image of the poet-as-seer, whose gift makes her stand apart from the crowd.

The emergent child-prodigy theme falls in the same category of cliché, and once again Shvarts seems to follow in the footsteps of her prominent predecessors — both Akhmatova and Tsvetaeva published their first collection at a precocious age. However, writing poetry from a tender age was common among Soviet poets, including many of Shvarts’s underground peers. The cult of literature in the Soviet Union facilitated this: many children and young people in the 1960s attended writing circles at school, at the Young Pioneers, and later at university. In Shvarts’s own description, which should be read with the necessary degree of critical distance, her status as an outcast, marked by her peculiar understanding of narrative and poetry, was cemented while she was still a child. When she read her own poetry for the first time as a young pioneer, the other children reportedly laughed at her. The teacher alone sat still, with tears streaming down her face comforting the distraught Elena with the magic words ‘don’t pay attention to them, they have no idea. You are a real poet’.

Now that we have access to Shvarts’s adolescent diaries, we can see that she used this technique long before she became a fully-fledged writer: ‘Not long ago Lu. A. and I went to see two old ladies. They love my poems. They prophesied I would be famous’.

This is a very powerful act of self-certification: rather than calling herself an accomplished poet outright, Shvarts quotes other people’s appreciation of her gift, directing the light of other people’s authoritative scrutiny at her craft. For an underground poet — a writer who, as a result of the authenticity of her gift and the integrity of her character, will be scorned by the literary establishment — this kind of validation assumes particular poignancy.

There is another aspect to Shvarts’s public persona, one that exploits her gender. The persona she presents in her prose is a highly strung femme fatale, confirming what her photographs suggest: an unpredictable whirlwind with a penchant for

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41 Shvarts’s actual adolescent diaries, published posthumously in Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 115 (2012), and subsequently in volume V of her Sochineniia (2013), reveal that she began honing this style very early in her life.


43 See Lygo, Leningrad Poetry 1953–75; entries on individual poets in Samizdat Leningrada. Details are also given by Aleksandr Skidan in his introduction to Shvarts’s diaries in Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 115 (2012), 236.

44 ‘First Reading’ (‘Pervoe chtenie’), III, p. 188.

histrionics and scandal. We get a taste of this in vignettes such as ‘Zhestko nakazannyi antisemit’ (‘A Harshly Punished Anti-Semite’), in which she pours boiling water on the belly of an artist who had insulted a Jewish guest (III, p. 203), and ‘Izbienie slepogo’ (‘Beating Up a Blind Man’), where friends struggle to break up a fist fight between her and a blind, male acquaintance (III, pp. 214–15), and most shockingly, in ‘Bog spas’ (‘God Saved Me’), where the poet relates: ‘it was night, I was drunk and desperate and standing on the roof of a nine-storey house, on one leg and on the wrong side of the barrier’ (III, p. 217). Her exalted feminine antics and her attractive exterior notwithstanding, Shvarts’s behaviour was in many aspects more typical of the male poets that dominated the Leningrad underground. In the male bastion that was underground literature, most women tended to play the role of muse, facilitator and preserver, following in the footsteps of Nadezhda Mandel’shtam, who preserved her persecuted husband’s poetry for posterity. One example is Tat’iana Goricheva, Krivulin’s former wife. Herself a keen translator and prolific religious philosopher, she is nevertheless best known for her role as hostess of innumerable get-togethers of the literary boheme, co-founder and editor of the samizdat journal 37, and later, after her forced emigration in 1980s, of the publishing house Beseda in Paris, which introduced many samizdat poets to a wider public. Another example is Alena Basilova, the wife of Leonid Gubanov, who was a poet in her own right but is described as someone who contributed to the underground as a hostess, someone who made her flat available to Moscow’s underground poets. Shvarts, on the other hand, was a full-blown participant, an active agent rather than a facilitator for others. She drank and smoked heavily, failed to turn up for readings and was known among her friends for her proclivity for ‘scandals and blows’. She also publicised her notorious love life, thus claiming a male domain as her own. A few such episodes she describes laconically in ‘Pazukhin-Shafer’ how she got married aged twenty, ‘myself not knowing why’, while another friend, himself in love with her, had to wake her up for the wedding and drive her to the registry office; she then goes on to describe domestic life with her new husband, including a graphic scene of domestic violence when he almost strangles her in a fit of jealousy (III, p. 209). The gender inversion that we can see in her poetic perspective and behaviour, contrasted with her striking appearance, may paradoxically have helped her storm the bastion and become one of the few female underground voices who was truly heard — without allowances being made for her gender: a real poet, not a poetessa.

Conclusion

Shvarts’s entry into the poetic canon of post-Soviet Russia was the result of her producing a large body of new, first rate poetry. The discussion above demonstrates that she had an advantage over her underground peers because her work was more accessible to a general readership; at the same time her poetry, as well as her personality, were unusual enough to stand out and attract attention. Shvarts could

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46 A visual impression of this dominance can be gleaned from the group photos at the back of Samizdat Leningrada.
47 Beseda produced thirty issues of the eponymous literary journal; it also published single author collections of the Leningrad samizdat poets, introducing many of them to a broader readership for the first time. Shvarts’s first official collection, Stikhi, was published by Beseda in 1987.
48 For details see http://rvb.ru/np/publication/sapgir5.htm#67
not be pigeonholed as an underground poet. At the same time she was tarred with the underground brush; this paradox is at the centre of her fame. She was not a poet of the media age; her celebrity was old-fashioned and in essence close to that of the highly popular prose-writer Viktor Pelevin, who professed in the year 2000 that he never gave interviews and avoided literary circles, maintaining that an author should be famous for his books alone, and he seems not to have changed his stance.50,66 While Shvarts did not take elusiveness to the same (carefully staged) extreme, in the final analysis her own status is similarly grounded more exclusively on literary merit. Her eccentric personality and the inclination to perform it notwithstanding, she remains a highbrow writer who appeals to literary readers rather than those seeking entertainment or acute political commentary. As such, she may be one of the last poets to enter the canon as ‘classical’ poets who were not famous for anything else. Time will tell whether she can maintain that position.

50 See http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2000/apr/30/fiction; also http://pelevinlive.ru/17