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(Article begins on next page)

Scared into Selfhood: The Poetry of Inna Lisnianskaia, Elena Shvarts, Ol'ga Sedakova

Stephanie Sandler

Lyric poetry has been nervous about the self at least since the advent of postmodernism, which exposed personal identity as a concept exploited by formidable institutions. Postmodern poets seem marginal in cultures where visual media dominate. In Russia, individuals have long seemed less important than cultural and political institutions, but poets claimed great authority and earned lasting respect. Nonetheless, Russia's poets at the end of the twentieth century have shown telling signs of anxiety about their identity and cultural status, and their work tracks the processes of dissolution and reaffirmation of self we find in contemporary poetry in the west.¹ Particularly in the work of those born and educated in the Soviet system, a strong sense of self is equally under attack and longed for, as the discussion here of poems by three excellent women poets will suggest. Women's poetry, long a powerful presence in modern Russian culture, can have a more embattled sense of self than the poetry of men, and even women who have shed women's traditional themes can display a self-consciousness about poetic identity that shapes all other manifestations of fear.

My purpose is to examine the connection between anxiety and identity in some late twentieth-century poems by Russian women. I ask what fear makes of the self, and who poets are when they confront their terrors. Theorists of the self will tell us that this anxiety is the norm, not some idiosyncratic emotion. I will begin with the theorists, and then characterize the three poets whose work is treated here. Inna Lisnianskaia, Elena Shvarts, and Ol'ga Sedakova are, in my view, among the most interesting poets writing in Russian today, and they have been chosen because they show us a broad range of attitudes toward fear and poetry; they also resist many of the preconceptions about "women's poetry" that the twentieth

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1. An argument about the distinct creation of a sense of self in Russian and Polish lyric poetry appears in several essays by Clare Cavanagh: "The Death of the Book à la Russe: The Acmeists under Stalin," *Slavic Review* 55, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 125–35; "The Forms of the Ordinary: Bakhtin, Prosaics and the Lyric," *Slavic and East European Journal* 41, no. 1 (1997): 40–56; and "Lyrical Ethics: The Poetry of Adam Zagajewski," *Slavic Review* 59, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 1–15. Rather than her view that postmodernism has little affected the idea of selfhood in Russian and eastern European lyric poetry, I use psychoanalytic and feminist theory as it has been shaped by postmodernism to identify the processes of erosion and recreation of identity in the work of three contemporary poets.

century has bequeathed us, a distinction I explore at the conclusion of this article. First, then, theories of the self.

In Freudian theory, fear grounds the scenario of identity formation in a very young child. The male child comes into a sense of self in the context of castration anxiety, Sigmund Freud claims, and subjectivity is forever tied to a fear of loss. Girls, who have already lost something that boys fear might be taken away at any moment, are said to feel lack more than any fear of loss. Later revisionists, including Luce Irigaray and Sarah Kofman, have challenged Freud's biologicistic normativeness, showing that both boys and girls fear loss and, following the lead of Jacques Lacan, that both experience selfhood as a form of lack.² Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok have also opened out Freud's fixed stages of development,³ but Freud's central argument that fear grounds identity formation has continued to be useful in understanding many forms of cultural production (from horror films to adventure novels). We are scared into the selves we inhabit, Freud would argue, and we are uneasy in our moments of self-contemplation.

An alternative account of the psychology of fear has come from the philosophical tradition, where an aesthetic theory of the sublime evolved from the writings of Longinus, Edmund Burke, and Immanuel Kant. Particularly in the eighteenth century, the sublime was thought to provide a loftier basis for art than the beautiful. Its contrasting textures, sharp edges, and sudden insights elevated the consciousness of its reader (or, very often, viewer, given the centrality of landscape descriptions in the theories of the sublime). Sublime art shook one into new realizations about artistic achievement and divine inspiration. The sublime in this account strongly affected gothic fiction, and key passages in romantic poetry. Influential work has been done here by Samuel Monk, Neil Hertz, Harold Bloom, and especially Thomas Weiskel.⁴ Not coincidentally, philosophical accounts of fear resemble those of Freud and later psychologists: in both cases, the self is shattered only to be built up.

If Freudian theory requires us to explore our childhoods, then we might say that the sublime is for adults. Its philosophical origins allow us to examine experiences and emotions analytically, whereas the Freudian model has terror descending on someone who cannot understand it. The Kantian sublime is a form of election, something one seeks. It is thrilling

2. Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, 1985); Sarah Kofman, *The Enigma of Woman: Woman in Freud's Writings*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca, 1985). See also Jane Marie Todd, "The Veiled Woman in Freud's 'Das Unheimliche,'" *Signs* 11, no. 3 (Spring 1986): 519–28; Cynthia Running-Johnson, "The Medusa's Tale: Feminine Writing and 'La Genet,'" *Romantic Review* 80, no. 3 (May 1989): 483–95.

3. Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, ed. and trans. Nicholas T. Rand, vol. 1 (Chicago, 1994); Abraham, "Notes on the Phantom: A Complement to Freud's Metapsychology," *Critical Inquiry* 13, no. 2 (1987): 287–92.

4. Samuel Monk, *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in Eighteenth-Century England* (1935; reprint, Ann Arbor, 1960); Neil Hertz, *The End of the Line: Essays on Psychoanalysis and the Sublime* (New York, 1985); Harold Bloom, *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism* (New York, 1982); Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (Baltimore, 1976, 1986).

for viewers and readers, but it includes a terror that artists and poets find daunting—the fear that one will dull to aesthetic riches. Poets, for example, fear losing access to poetic inspiration.⁵

In the poems I consider below, terrors both Freudian and sublime seize the poet. The poems expose childhood fear and adult dread, and the poets concentrate on the visibility of the terrible. Vision and blindness are pertinent to Freud's model of identity in "The Uncanny," which uses E. T. A. Hoffman's story "The Sandman." In "The Sandman," the child's terror at being blinded leads to the adult's horror at what his eyes bring him to see.⁶ Vision also grounds the experience of the sublime, where the moment of the sublime is "a transport of spirit" when "the visible object" is "eclipsed or dissolved"; the "dissolution of the image" throws the mind "back on itself."⁷ Moments of self-contemplation on the reflecting surface of a mirror often structure these encounters, but the pleasures of narcissism little compensate for the terrors that descend. A sense of self is built up to defend against the gravest threat. I am interested in what kind of self the poet is thrown back upon, and whether the encounter with terror illuminates or darkens. The poets treated here do not respond in the same way to these dangers: Inna Lisnianskaia shows a self nearly shattered by fear, Elena Shvarts absorbs her terrors almost matter-of-factly, while Ol'ga Sedakova tries to contain her fears within religious and philosophical truths. Sedakova also writes of an endangered poetic word and, like Shvarts and Lisnianskaia, reveals some anxiety about what sort of poet she is.

For all three poets, then, fears consolidate around poetic identity, but these are enormously different poets. To see the differences starkly, think of Shvarts as Andrei Platonov, Lisnianskaia as Mikhail Lermontov, and Sedakova as Rainer Maria Rilke. Shvarts writes with broken rhythms, gro-

5. Harold Bloom's earlier work on poetic influence has explored a particular aspect of this fear: what happens when poets compare their talents to those of their predecessors. See Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York, 1973). Although some feminists have tried to adapt Bloom's specifically masculine myth of agonistic creativity, for example, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven, 1979), I have not found such work useful in understanding contemporary Russian women poets. Where Bloom's work remains valuable to my project is its insight into the connections between the philosophical theory of the sublime and Freudian psychoanalysis, as I suggest here.

6. "The Uncanny" may seem more pertinent to literary versions of supernatural experience than to the analysis of actual human emotions, and thus it has engendered many productive discussions of gothic fiction, for example, Mladen Dolar, "I Shall Be with You on Your Wedding-Night': Lacan and the Uncanny," *October* 58 (Fall 1991): 5–23; Maria M. Tatar, "The Houses of Fiction: Toward a Definition of the Uncanny," *Comparative Literature* 33, no. 2 (Spring 1981): 167–82; Sarah Webster Goodwin, "Domesticity and Uncanny Kitsch in 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' and *Frankenstein*," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 10, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 93–108. But scholars have also seen the usefulness of Freud's theories in reading lyric poetry, particularly romantic lyric poetry: see Brooke Hopkins, "Keats and the Uncanny: 'This Living Hand,'" *The Kenyon Review* 9, no. 4 (Fall 1989): 28–40; Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime*, 83–106.

7. Martin Price, "The Sublime Poem: Pictures and Powers," in Harold Bloom, ed., *Poets of Sensibility and the Sublime* (New York, 1986), 31–32. Price draws on traditions in western philosophy that link reflection and self-reflection as foundational acts. These are well discussed in Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986), esp. 1–105.

tesque images, and a painful sense of existential aloneness. Lisnianskaia uses more harmonious meters and well-contained bursts of anger. Sedakova writes in syncretic clusters of images, able to imitate the syntax of neo-classical odes in one poem and then to echo the music of Russian spiritual rimes (*dukhovnye stikhi*) in another. Lisnianskaia conveys an elegiac sense of lost community; Shvarts gives us a world where connections to others are always fraught with danger; but Sedakova speaks for a small community of intellectuals, expecting her readers to recognize quotations from Dante Alighieri, Rilke, Charles Baudelaire, or John Keats. Lexically, her poetry is deceptively simple, balancing a restricted vocabulary with frequent abstractions; Lisnianskaia's poems also seem lucid, with a psychological emphasis; Shvarts, with her more theatrical poses, seems less accessible, but her poems can have the exceptional immediacy of all high drama.

Some distortions are inevitable, then, in bringing these three poets together. Lisnianskaia, born in 1928, is some twenty years older than Shvarts and Sedakova, who are only two years apart. In the 1980s, Lisnianskaia was looking back on a lifetime of achievement (and of loss), whereas Shvarts was beginning to see herself as an established underground poet and Sedakova was moving toward her first publications. The differences between Sedakova and Shvarts are also profound—in tone, in range, in the very idea of poetic experimentation and poetic career. Sedakova has long been a scholar, translator, teacher, and poet; her poems exude a sense of hard work. Shvarts, by comparison, has boasted that she writes hers in the bathtub and, especially in the 1980s, she was a self-styled bad girl of contemporary Russian poetry. Lisnianskaia staked quite a lot on official recognition during and after the Soviet period. Neither Shvarts nor Sedakova sought such fame, although it came to them in the 1990s. These differences mark each poet's sense of vocation and identity, as well as their fears of how they might be misperceived.

In the poem with which I begin, Lisnianskaia is coping with her loss of status after the scandal that befell writers hoping to publish the almanac *Metropol'*. She left the Writer's Union in 1980 because of it. Her reaction to this experience defined her work after 1980 and caused her to look at herself in new and terrified ways. It recalled a much earlier mental breakdown, when Lisnianskaia suffered temporary blindness. The motif of blindness informs some of her poetry, including the long cycle "Postskriptumy" (Postscripts, 1982), dedicated to the poetry scholar Boris Bukhshtab, who was himself nearly blind. In the fourth postscript, on which I concentrate, the poet describes a different idea of sightlessness: a mirror that reflects back the nothingness of its subject. We should keep in mind that the identity contemplated here is very much that of a writer, one who is asking how she can restore her self-image as a writer, which means how she can convert the brittle stuff of experience—here presented as the broken pieces of a mirror—into writing.

Постскриптум четвертый

Этот, четвертый, постскриптум про то
Зеркало, где я **никто и ничто**,

Зеркало, где отражения нет,—
 Лишь от алмаза змеящийся след.
 В зеркале, где я **никто и ничто**,
 Нет моей шапки и полупальто,
 Нет фотографий, любимых вещей,
 Книг самодельных и чистых страниц,—
 Все, до чего ни дотронусь рукой,
 Вдруг исчезает во мгле ледяной.
 Зеркало, видевшее меня
 Чуть ли не с самого первого дня—
 С матерью и на плечах у отца,—
 Мне не прощает потери лица.
 То в сундуке, то в рогожном мешке,
 В долго трясущемся товарняке
 Следовало неуклонно за мной
 Бабкино зеркало в рамке резной.
 Всякое было меж нами в дому—
 Била я и башмаком по нему
 Ночью, в ту зиму, когда поняла,
 Что я второму лицу не мила.
 С рюмкой в руке и в рубахе ночной
 Плакало зеркало вместе со мной,
 Все мне прощало, не помня обид,
 Только потери лица не простит,
 Да и себе не простит—не смогло
 Спротивляться алмазу стекло:
 Лучше б себя от уродства спасти,
 Лучше б на самоубийство пойти,
 Рухнуть всей тяжестью на пришлеца,
 Всеми осколками—в мякоть лица.

(Fourth Postscript // This fourth postscript concerns / The mirror where
 I am **no one and nothing**, / The mirror where there is no reflection, /
 Only the snaking trace of a diamond. / In the mirror where I am **no one
 and nothing**, / I have neither hat nor coat, / No photographs, no favorite
 things, / No handmade books or blank pages—/ Everything you can reach
 out and touch with your hand / Disappears suddenly into icy darkness. /
 The mirror that saw me / Practically from my first days / With my mother,
 and on my father's shoulders, / It does not forgive my loss of face. / First
 in the trunk, then in the woven sack, / On the long shuttling freight
 train ride, / My grandmother's mirror in its carved frame / Followed me
 steadfastly. / Every possible thing went on in between us in the house: / I
 pounded the mirror with my boot / At night that winter when I realized /
 That I was not loved by "you" in the second person. / Holding a little
 glass, wearing a nightshirt, / The mirror cried along with me. / It forgave
 me everything, remembering no offense, / But it will not forgive the loss
 of face, / Nor forgive itself—the glass could not / Resist the diamond fac-
 ets: / Better to save oneself from disfigurement, / Better to choose suicide,
 / To crash down the whole of one's weight on the stranger, / Sending all
 the shards into the pulpy flesh of the face.)⁸

8. Inna Lisnianskaia, *Stikhotvoreniia* (Moscow, 1991), 16–17. The words in boldface are spaced out for emphasis in the original.

The poet imagines her poetic identity in the context of her family. She looks into a mirror that was her grandmother's, and she does so in a setting that is stuffed with the things of infancy, childhood, and family life. She remembers pleasures, like riding on her father's shoulders, but also moments of instability (evacuation from Moscow, intimate rejection). These experiences are assimilable to her identity, which in the poem means that the mirror is capable of reflecting them back to her. But the loss of face, and the loss of an identity as a writer (suggested by the disappearing handmade books in l. 8), is unacceptable. Rather than return such a reflection to the poet, the mirror shatters in her face.

Such an aggressive ending is not typical for Lisnianskaia, who usually writes as a poet who is loyal to the word, which is in turn loyal to her.⁹ But the word cannot save the despairing poet in the fourth "Postscript," where the poem stages a splitting of the self typical of narcissistic self-contemplation. The self fails to re-cohere in the end.¹⁰ Lisnianskaia demonstrates that failure by emphasizing how the mirror is texturally different from the face, the sharp shards of the one versus the pulpy flesh of the other. The mirror is an active, other self, able to see and to judge.¹¹ It is not, then, just that the poet looks into a mirror and sees nothing there, as the poem suggests in its opening; rather, she has lost her capacity to make the world hold up its reflective surface to her face. The poem shows us how mimetic vitality has become impossible: the poet faces a creative as well as a psychological impasse.

The world, however, can yet make her see its objects, and the poem feels stuffed with things from her life. Fear invades domestic spaces in this poem, suggesting that the saving distinction between private and public has also disappeared. The poet has no private safety zone to retreat to: she comes home to find all too many objects stuffed into familiar space. Even those that are negated feel strangely present, and we seem to see hat, coat, photograph, trinket, book, mirror, chest, bag, carved frame, home, boot, glass, nightshirt. Most of these nouns are unmodified and thus lack any distinguishing marks of possession. If the poet is trying to reconstitute a sense of self by recalling familiar things, she fails. Instead, she seems overwhelmed by the sheer number of objects, not unlike the way in which

9. For a more typical poem in length and tone, see "Ia v zerkalo vzglanu, byvalo,—" in Lisnianskaia, *Stikhotvoreniia*, 30; the presence of a mirror in the poem makes it an apt counterpart to the "Fourth Postscript." Compare especially its brave ending: "I gorlo, gotovoe k plakhe, / Otkryto i vol'no poet."

10. Important work has been done on narcissism and identity, especially from a feminist perspective. See Andrew P. Morrison, ed., *Essential Papers on Narcissism* (New York, 1986) for a good compendium of papers by psychologists; and, for feminist perspectives, Kofman, *The Enigma of Woman*; Barbara Johnson, "The Quicksands of the Self: Nella Larsen and Heinz Kohut," *The Feminist Difference: Literature, Psychoanalysis, Race, and Gender* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), 37–60.

11. Lisnianskaia has a well-known predecessor in the Russian tradition who has used the image of a broken mirror to represent her shattered sense of self, Anna Akhmatova. This aspect of Akhmatova's poetics is well discussed in Susan Amert, *In a Shattered Mirror: The Later Poetry of Anna Akhmatova* (Stanford, 1992).

her poem is weighed down by its nine postscripts, many of which self-consciously comment on the length of the sequence. The postscripts all use long dactylic lines, here dactylic tetrameter with the fourth foot heard only as an initial stressed beat.¹² Lisnianskaia nearly always writes shorter poems, and poems with shorter lines (typically 20–25 lines of iambic tetrameter). In “Postscripts,” though, we sense her reluctance to end lines or to end the poem itself (hence the progress from one postscript to another). Her panicky ending to “Fourth Postscript” might be brought on by what Kant called the mathematical sublime, which, in Neil Hertz’s excellent description, arises “out of sheer cognitive exhaustion, the mind blocked not by the threat of an overwhelming force, but by the fear of losing count or of being reduced to nothing but counting—this and this and this—with no hope of bringing a long series of a vast scattering under some sort of conceptual unity.”¹³ I take this counting and stretching out of time as compensatory actions, Lisnianskaia’s way of trying to counter lack and nothingness. (Repetition is also a prominent feature of the poem, and works similarly.)¹⁴ The poet tries to stabilize herself rhetorically, although the implied narrative of her poem describes the very opposite process, self-disintegration.

This poem is framed by other postscripts, just as her grandmother’s mirror bears a carved frame, and both are visual analogues to the poet’s work to contain her terror. Yet she shows the deepest terror a poet can face—that she will no longer be able to write. She confronts the possibility that the public reputation and official recognition that seemed a small part of her life before they were taken away might now turn out to have been utterly foundational. “Postscripts” marks what seemed a closing down of avenues for public expression to a poet with her temperament and political views.¹⁵ In such a new environment, Lisnianskaia fears being nothing; her postscripts become afterthoughts to something that may no longer exist.¹⁶ Lisnianskaia, we might say, has been scared *out* of selfhood, and her poem shows courage in recording that experience.

12. One line is rhythmically irregular, l. 11, “Zerkalo, videvshee menia.” Its oddity is semantically appropriate in that the line announces a mirror that sees a person, rather than the other way around.

13. Hertz, *The End of the Line*, 40.

14. The repetitions involve lexical items (for example, the word *zerkalo* intoned six times; the word *zerkalo* seems to give rise to the dactylic rhythm almost single-handedly; *litso* appears four times, forms of the verb *prostit’* / *proshchat’* four times) and line position (as in the three cases of anaphora).

15. The dissolution of the Soviet Union, rather than the dissolution of the poet’s self, was of course to happen in the next decade. Lisnianskaia has flourished as a poet in these new circumstances. Despite failing health, she has written and published prolifically. Recent volumes include *Posle vsego* (St. Petersburg, 1994), *Veter pokoia* (St. Petersburg, 1998), *Muzyka i bereg* (St. Petersburg, 2000), and the substantial collection of old and new poems *Iz pervykh ust* (Moscow, 1995).

16. Some of the shorter poems explore similar themes, for example “I pishu nikomu, potomu chto sama ia nikto” (1989), in Lisnianskaia, *Stikhotvoreniia*, 222. Because the shorter poems contain the fears more tightly, they also conceal more than the longer poem I have chosen to discuss.

Elena Shvarts would seem more resilient than Lisnianskaia, at least before 1998, when her mother died.¹⁷ She has long projected a self who enjoys the spectacle of violent poetry. Her Cynthia lyrics (“Kinfiia,” 1974 [book 1], 1978 [book 2]) exemplify this monstrosity when Cynthia orders her bird strangled and imagines ordering her father killed as well.¹⁸ Shvarts treats Cynthia as her double, and the same can be said for Lavinia in Shvarts’s 1984 long cycle about her (“Trudy i dni monakhini Lavinii”).¹⁹ Other poems admit violent fantasies and responses varying from aggressiveness to meekness.²⁰

A childhood terror informs “Vospominanie o myt’e golovy v grozu” (A recollection of hair-washing in a thunderstorm, 1991), the poem on which I focus. Obsessively repetitive, the poem tightens into a fairy-tale world of claustrophobia and physical inescapability. In its turn to a childhood memory, the poem also offers an adult’s speculation on how all fears begin.²¹

Воспоминание о мытье головы в грозу

Поздний вечер. Глубокое темное детство.
 В окне, как припадочный, билась гроза.
 Седая чета мне голову мыла,
 В тазу плавали в пене мои глаза.
 Они себя видели и закрывались.
 Старуха царапала, лил воду старик,
 Когда же гроза в диком реве вздымалась —
 Они замирали на миг.
 Но снова вцеплялись, терзали и терли,
 Гроза уж ворчала из дальнего леса,
 Когда, утомясь, и ворча, и вздыхая,
 Уснули два хворых и древних беса.
 И шелковые волосы скрипели,
 Ночь освеженная пролилась в щели,
 Пел соловей и старики сопели.
 В поруганной отмытости лежала,
 Догадываясь — где я, что со мною,
 И край заброшенный с печалью узнавала —
 Где черти чистят и гроза отмоет.

17. Shvarts’s response to her mother’s death can be seen in the poems of *Solo na raskalennoi trube: Novye stikhotvoreniia* (St. Petersburg, 1998), and *Dikopis’ poslednego vremeni* (St. Petersburg, 2001).

18. See especially the second poem in book 1, addressed to Cynthia’s father and contemplating his murder; and the last poem in book 1, which ends “Kinfiuu obidet’ — ochen’ strashno”: Shvarts, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy* (St. Petersburg, 1999), 455.

19. *Ibid.*, 379–444.

20. Examples of scary poems would include “Zharenyi anglichanin v Moskve (*Mig kak sfera*)” (1990), a poem about overcoming fear; see Shvarts, *Dikopis’ poslednego vremeni*, 43–45. Also intriguing is the four-part sequence “Elegii na storony sveta,” particularly in its images of corpses watching movies of their past; the elegy associates the self with meekness, quietness (“I ia i tak uzhe tikhaia do otrashcheniia”). See Shvarts, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, 92–98.

21. Unlike Lisnianskaia, who invokes the theme of childhood easily and writes about herself as a mother, Shvarts does so only occasionally, but in her 1998 collection, *Solo na raskalennoi trube*, images of children and childbirth are quite significant.

(A Recollection of Hair-Washing in a Thunderstorm // Late evening. Deep in the dark of childhood. / A thunderstorm beat against the window as if falling into a fit. / The gray-haired couple were washing my hair, / My eyes were floating in foam in the washbasin. / They saw themselves and closed shut. / The old woman scratched at me, the old man poured the water / When the storm rose up in a wild rage—/ They would die down for a moment. / But then they would seize hold of me again, tearing and scrubbing, / The storm was already grumbling from the distant forest / When, grumbling and sighing in exhaustion, / The two ailing ancient demons fell asleep. / And the silken hair squeaked clean, / Fresh night air poured through the cracks, / The nightingale sang and the old folks snored. / In desecrated cleanness I would lie there, / Trying to figure out where I was, what was wrong with me, / And sadly I would recognize the neglected land—/ A place where devils cleanse and the storm will wash you clean.)²²

“Recollection” tells a fairy tale about the self (replete with an old couple, a hut at the edge of the woods, and a storm), unlike the history-based fantasy of one of Shvarts’s Petersburg poems, “Detskii sad cherez tridtsat’ let” (Kindergarten thirty years after, ca. 1987), perhaps her best lyric about childhood.²³ Both poems describe an attack on the body (blood drawn in “Kindergarten,” hair washed in “Recollection”), and the poet finds this intrusion insulting and threatening to the point of not knowing who she is. “Kindergarten” relies on rich cultural traditions—Fedor Dostoevskii, the Petersburg myth, the church schism—but “Recollection” is pared down, a secluded encounter with demons. It is also more in the romantic tradition of the contemplation of nature, like Fedor Tiutchev on chaos, with two rainstorms, one outside, one raining down on the poet’s head.²⁴

Is the poet scared? The comparison of the hair-washing elderly pair to demons suggests that she is, but it is typical of Shvarts not to admit fear; demons appear often in her poems, and the poet usually reacts with cool fascination.²⁵ This poem reaches for that sense of detached contemplation, but perhaps because it contains a child’s memory, the terror palpably comes through. It is not, though, a terror of what the old people will

22. Shvarts, *Pesnia ptitsy na dne morskoi* (St. Petersburg, 1995), 21.

23. “Kindergarten” recounts the poet’s visit to the desolate site of her kindergarten: images of rusted machinery and animal carcasses powerfully convey the poet’s feeling that this landscape, and the culture it represents, have horribly shaped her psyche. For the full text of the poem, see Shvarts, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, 187–88. A good translation appears in Elena Shvarts, “Paradise”: *Selected Poems*, trans. Michael Molnar (Newcastle upon Tyne, 1993), 19–22. I discuss the poem in detail in “Cultural Memory and Self-Forgetting in a Poem by Elena Shvarts,” in Stephanie Sandler, ed., *Rereading Russian Poetry* (New Haven, 1999), 256–69.

24. For example, Tiutchev’s “O chem ty voesh’, veter nochnoi” (1836). On the mysticism of his representations of natural chaos, see Sarah Pratt, *Russian Metaphysical Romanticism: The Poetry of Tiutchev and Boratynskii* (Stanford, 1984), 152–70; and Pratt, “Two Dialogues with Chaos: Tiutchev and Gippius,” in Boris Gasparov, Robert P. Hughes, and Irina Paperno, eds., *Cultural Mythologies of Russian Modernism: From the Golden Age to the Silver Age* (Berkeley, 1992), 315–26.

25. Best of all, Shvarts shows herself to be a tough match for any demons. See especially “Kogda za mnoiu demony golodnye pomchalis” (1982), in Shvarts, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, 118.

do to her, but rather a fear of the self that will result from her encounter with them. The revealing lines involve her eyes, which look at themselves and close: “V tazy plavali v pene moi glaza.” The alienation of eyes from self is striking, not unlike the animated mirror in Lisnianskaia’s poem, and Shvarts makes the alienation all the more intense by delaying any first-person reference to the poet. The staring eyes appear on a rare reflective surface for Shvarts. That is, unlike Lisnianskaia’s many mirrors (one of her volumes of poetry is called *Dozhdi i zerkala* [Rains and mirrors, 1983]), Shvarts tends toward more grotesque moments of self-contemplation, like the eyes that here seem to have been plucked from the head, floating in soapsuds.²⁶ Their quick closing is interesting, shutting out sight, and insight, at once.

“Recollection” is a poem in which closing one’s eyes is at first an automatic, then a learned response. It is in this sense a poem about repression. When the old man and old woman pause to listen to the roaring storm—“Oni zamirali na mig”—the fierce action of the poem stops, something is noticed or absorbed or fearfully avoided, and then both storm and hair-washing resume. I take this moment as a widening in the child’s unconscious and draw on Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok’s idea of the *phantom*, wherein the developing child absorbs the unconscious of those who care for him or her, “a cultural inheritance incorporating certain secrets, absences, or silences.”²⁷ In this poem, the child ends up trying to solve the riddle of these silences: “V porugannoi otmytosti lezhala, / Dogadyvaias’—gde ia, chto so mnoiu.” After the violent action of the poem, she retreats into a moment of stillness and recognition, repeating the pause in the hair-washing. What, though, does she recognize? The metaphors of defiling and cleansing, especially the striking collocation “desecrated cleanliness” (*porugannaia otmytost’*) suggest that the poet has experienced hair-washing as a form of rape. Her disorientation speaks to such a reading as well. In Hoffman’s story “The Sandman,” the hero’s fear that his eyes will be plucked out leads to a terrible, deluded jump to his death. Here, rather than the boy who fears loss, we have the girl who recognizes that her eyes are already not hers—as Shvarts writes in the ending of her poem “Blindness,” the eyes already belong to different worlds, to other eyes.²⁸

Which is worse, trying to close your eyes to that knowledge, or having the mirror shatter in your face to prevent you from seeing what you have lost? Shvarts, the self-styled poet of violence, marginal existence, and poetic risk, presents a psyche trying to absorb the worst terrors. Lisnianskaia, a proud poet who cultivates a self-image that recalls Anna Akhmatova’s immense dignity, exposes to our own frightened gaze the sight of selfhood dissolved by fear. One paradox of Freud’s psychoanalytic insight, where we began, is now clearer. Lisnianskaia frequently writes first-person lyrics

26. For grotesque self-images, see “Elegiia na rentgenovskii snimok moego cherepa” (1972) and “Nevidimyi okhotnik” (1975), in Shvarts, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, 24–26, 23.

27. Allan Lloyd Smith, “The Phantoms of *Drood* and *Rebecca*: The Uncanny Reencountered through Abraham and Torok’s ‘Cryptonymy,’” *Poetics Today* 13, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 291.

28. “Slepota” (1993), in Shvarts, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, 215.

informed by emotional responses to recognizable events from her life (like the emigration of friends in the 1970s, the armed conflicts in Armenia and Azerbaijan in the 1990s; “Postscripts” similarly responds to the Metropol’ affair). Her poems build both a poet’s biography, as in her reverent poems to her mentor, Mariia Petrovykh, and a personal myth, as in a lovely poem to her daughter, the prose writer Elena Makarova.²⁹ Her poetry has a self, we might say, in that it projects a knowing and remembering psyche that changes, perseveres, and goes through crises. Such a poetic persona can indeed be struck by fear, most devastatingly the fear of no longer knowing how to turn selfhood into language.

Shvarts, by contrast, pushes such revealing details out of her work. Her poems much less often bear dedications, for example, and those poems in which she seems to recount a personal experience drown the personal in cultural and historical detail, as in “Kindergarten,” or else stage embarrassing recollections that become a form of self-reproach, as in “Elegy on an X-Ray of My Skull.” Shvarts projects a fearlessness that is impersonal, largely because she shuts the personal out of her poetry. She can substitute brilliant impersonations (like Cynthia and Lavinia) that create the illusion of a fantasized alter ego from whom she has tremendous distance. She maintains that distance even when she speaks in the first person, as in the pause that slows “Recollection” or the self-reflection that ends the poem. In Shvarts’s poetic world, irony reigns, and there is rarely any emotion so powerful that the poet cannot split herself off from it and calmly watch it turn itself into language.

Ol’ga Sedakova, too, writes of herself largely by means of psychic division, although in a lofty rhetorical register. If Shvarts flaunts her fearlessness with melodramas of impersonation, then Sedakova opens out the world of her poems so that the question of self seems almost inappropriate. Her poems love to describe large open spaces, but she works with a limited vocabulary, repeating images and words from one poem to another. Sedakova does not, however, squeeze out the drama of self-contemplation, rather she redefines it as a form of meditative transference. All manner of object and animal can become a vessel for theological argument and self-expression. As with Lisnianskaia and Shvarts, I will focus my discussion of Sedakova on a single poem, “Vzgliad kota” (Cat’s gaze) which has three numbered parts. It is undated and was part of an early volume of Sedakova’s verse, *Dikii shipovnik* (The wild rose, 1978).

Взгляд кота

I.

Когда, прекрасный кот, ты пробуешь в окне
пространства опытность и силу,

29. For poems to Makarova, see “Docheri” (1983), in Lisnianskaia, *Stikhotvoreniia*, 73–74; “Elene Makarovoi” (1993), in Lisnianskaia, *Iz pervykh ust*, 294. For poems to Petrovykh, see “A vspomnim li my” (1972), in Lisnianskaia, *Iz pervykh ust*, 63; “Strannoe derevo” (1973), “Vot kniga tvoia predno mnoiu lezhit” (1983), and “Mariia Sergeevna! Ia domolchals’” (1987), in Lisnianskaia, *Stikhotvoreniia*, 138, 121, 122.

внутри как свет зажгут и размахнут во мне
живое, мощное кадило.

Я думаю, что мир не глядывал в букварь
и чуда письменность напрасна.
Но чуть внимательна уверенная тварь—
и жизнь, как лестница, опасна,

когда с презрением и чашей золотой
твой взгляд спускается по сходням—
и сердце падает мое перед тобой,
как пред служителем Господним.

II.

И вот в тебе тоска, как в зеркале, гостит,
в зеркальном кубке крупной грани,
и я раба твоих воспоминаний:
я расстилаю им широкие пути
в пустующей стране, где можно тяготенье,
как дом забитый, обойти,
и невесомости живое искушенье—
горящие шары, молчащие почти.

Так лучшие часы сосредоточат нас
на острие иглы спасенья,
где мучится любовь, и где впадает зренья
в многоволнуемый алмаз.

И жизнь глядит на жизнь, уничтожая грани,
и все глаза твоих медуз—
один укол, одна анестезия ткани,
один страдающий союз.

III.

Походкою кота (как бы само пространство
позволило себе забытую игру)
ты, речь моя, иди, ты между трезвых пьянствуй
с огнем, горящим на ветру.

Неси свою свечу, как он, без недоверья,
как правда видит жизнь, когда она одна:
для счастья умных сил, для восхищенья зверя
тебе опасность вручена.

(Cat's Gaze // 1. Lovely cat, when you test your experience and strength /
at the window of space, / inside me, a living, powerful censer / is kindled
like a light and waves back and forth. // I think that the world has not
looked into the book of letters, / and that the written form of a miracle is
useless. / But the confident beast is barely attentive—/ and life is danger-
ous, like a staircase, // when, with disdain and a gold chalice, / your gaze
goes down the gangplank—/ and my heart sinks before you, / as before a
servant of the Lord. // 2. And now anguish, as in the mirror, has come to
visit you, / in the mirrored and large-faceted cup, / and I am servant to
your recollections; / I spread out a wide path for them / in the desolate
land where one can circumvent / gravity, like a boarded-up house, / And
the vivid temptation of weightlessness / burns like globes, almost silent. //

Thus the best hours concentrate us / on the sharp needles of salvation, / where love torments and vision falls / into the diamond of many anxieties. / And life gazes on life, destroying the faceted edges, / and all the eyes of your medusa / are joined in one prick of the needle, one anesthetizing bit of fabric, / one suffering union. // 3. With the gait of a cat (as if space itself / were indulging in a forgotten game), / you, my words, go forth among the sober in drunkenness / with a flame that burns in the wind. / Carry your candle, as does the cat, without mistrust, / as truth sees life when it is alone: / for the sense of happiness of the mind's strength, and for the exaltation of the beast, / you have been given this sense of danger.)³⁰

Sedakova continues themes and motifs we have seen already: the exploration of self through the gaze and through mirrors, the contemplation of dangers that seem outside and distant yet unexpectedly loom much closer. The poem several times mentions danger, ending on that note, and some of its images conjure up experiences of harm (the descent down a gangplank in part one, the needles and anesthetizing sting in part two). The imperatives of the third part are set against that danger, and the poet no longer speaks to the cat but to her own poem, which she hopes will slink through the world drunk with its own courage and clear-sightedness.

What is the danger? Given the poem's evolution toward a discussion of poetic speech, one danger is that the poet will write inadequate poetry. I take the second part of the poem, where the poet speaks to herself, to contemplate that possibility: the broad paths of empty expression are spread out before the poet, who is seized by anguish and the living, breathing temptation of weightless (or meaningless) reactions stands before her, rising forth like a boarded-up building. The phrase "desolate land" (*пустыньская страна*) locates the failure or the temptation in a space outside the self, and, given Sedakova's observations about the deadness of official Soviet culture in the Brezhnev period, we ought to read the phrase as referring in part to the country in which she lives.³¹ Parenthetically, I would note that this phrase works as does the "neglected land" (*krai zabroshennyi*) that Shvarts's poet recognizes toward the end of "Recollection." Social reality, while it cannot control either poet, makes itself felt as if a part of nature. Sedakova's poet tries to maneuver around this inevitability, shifting in the next stanza to a more abstract poetic register, but the dangerous, deadening threats remain.

I will return to this metapoetic danger, but I also want to consider the poem's metaphysical fears. Sedakova places herself and her cat in a cosmic order, rendered in the poem's beginning as a sequence of external architectural layers (cat, window, steps, space) and as a suggestion of internal enfoldings (censer and heart inside the body), and it continues this doubled elaboration of order and faith. But faith by its nature is precarious, barely balanced on "sharp needles of salvation." Here the poet stands before a sublime revelation where boundaries are dissolved, and where vi-

30. Ol'ga Sedakova, *Stikhi* (Moscow, 1994), 69–70.

31. See Ol'ga Sedakova, "Zametki i vospominaniia o raznykh stikhotvorenniakh, a takzhe POKHVALA POEZII," *Volga*, 1991, no. 6:135–64; a shorter version of this essay appears in Sedakova, *Stikhi*, 317–57.

sion lapses into disturbed glitter. Several images in this part of the poem are pointed (needles, diamond), and while they are countered by the textile connectedness of fabric and the dulling touch of the jellyfish—*anesteziiia tkani*—the result is only a strange balance, a fusion of suffering—*stradaiushchii soiuz*. It's a metaphysical draw, in a sense, less exalted than Sedakova has shown herself to be in other poems, for example "Gornaia oda" (Mountain ode, undated, ca. 1979–1982).³²

Sedakova may seem whimsical in centering a metaphysical poem on a cat, but she has an excellent predecessor in Christopher Smart's *Jubilate Agno*, ca. 1755 (the section on "my Cat Jeoffrey"), and she has drawn as well on the three cat poems in Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal* (first ed., 1857), the book that she has said enabled her to write *Wild Rose*, where "Cat's Gaze" appears.³³ After the famous essay by Roman Jakobson and Claude Lévi-Strauss, scholars may think first of Baudelaire's poem "Les Chats," and Sedakova, a trained philologist, would know that essay.³⁴ But she has a different Baudelaire poem in mind here, "Le chat," a line of which appears as an epigraph to another cat poem in *Wild Rose*, entitled "Kot, babochka, svecha" (Cat, butterfly, candle)—the epigraph is "Chat séraphique, chat étrange." In "Le chat," Baudelaire transforms the poet's gaze at a cat into a form of self-contemplation; he writes that he feels as if feline, fiery eyes look back at him, from within him.³⁵

This relationship of self to cat defines "Cat's Gaze," where Sedakova is also interested in the fluidity of identity found in Baudelaire, the way in which the poet, contemplating a cat known for its enigmatic gaze, experiences the exchange of glances as a form of mirroring. Baudelaire begins his poem with the dry observation that a cat is walking around in the poet's brain. Inside and outside are permeable in Baudelaire's poem, as in Sedakova's. In her poem neither outside nor inside has the characteristics we expect: lights are lit inside the self; anguish rests within the self as if posing in a mirror; broad paths outside are spread out so that recollections may walk on them; and space, as if with agency and conscious will, permits itself a forgotten game in the poem's last section. This exchange of inside and outside is not uncommon in modernist lyric poetry. Paul de Man has written about it well in the work of Rilke, another of Sedakova's favorite poets.³⁶ Like her predecessors, Sedakova suspends the moment

32. Yet even in "Gornaia oda," the poem proceeds by reversing the logic of the sublime (it begins with transits of height and depth, the verticality to which sublime works usually aspire, and ends with the horizontal, flat planes of a body being carried out to death).

33. Valentina Polukhina, "Conform Not to This Age: An Interview with Olga Sedakova," in Arnold McMillin, ed., *Reconstructing the Canon: Russian Writing in the 1980s* (Amsterdam, 2000), 49.

34. Roman Jakobson, "Baudelaire's 'Les Chats'" (with Claude Lévi-Strauss), in Jakobson, *Language in Literature*, ed. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge, Mass., 1987), 180–97.

35. For the text of Baudelaire's poem, see Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal: The Complete Text of the Flowers of Evil* (Boston, 1982), 232–33; this volume includes a complete translation of *Les Fleurs du Mal* by Richard Howard, and the English version of "Le chat" appears on pp. 55–56.

36. Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven, 1979), 20–56.

when self-consciousness would cohere into a discernible, clear set of emotions; she too calls into question the adequacy of language's signs (its alphabet book), and the literature of miracle seems futile. Well, not futile, the poem goes on to say, but limited, and perhaps fraught with dangers and temptations that the poet cannot foresee.

Aside from Baudelaire, "Cat's Gaze" has other subtexts,³⁷ particularly in the late poetry of Osip Mandel'shtam. In his poem about Kashchei ("Ottogo vse neudachi" [That is why all these failures, 1936]), Mandel'shtam describes a cat's "flaming eyes" (*zrachki goriashchie*).³⁸ As Omry Ronen has observed, "it is the vision of the cat, rather than the cat itself" that matters to Mandel'shtam, and it is this vision that motivates the poem's image of a semi-precious stone, catseye.³⁹ For Sedakova, too, the cat represents a form of poetic vision. In her work, poetic vision always doubles back on itself (*zhizn' gliadit na zhizn'*; compare other poems where the grammar of reflexivity is pervasive).⁴⁰ The eyes of the poem multiply, in effect, becoming "all" the eyes of the world's medusa (or jellyfish, as the Russian *meduza* would also translate). But these many eyes focus on single objects, holding vision fixed in a kind of Medusa effect, rendering the multiplicity of life into a unified vision, into a single, suffering union.

Mandel'shtam, Smart, and Baudelaire are dangerous predecessors for Sedakova, although in different ways: Smart's long poem was written just after the onset of mental illness and has been taken by modern readers as an almost medical textbook case of mania; Baudelaire's book was heavily censored, and the poet's behavior was also regarded as fairly lunatic by family and acquaintances; Mandel'shtam's late poem, from his Voronezh notebook, is inscribed with a sense of the poet's exile and with premonitions of his approaching death. Mandel'shtam represented for his contemporaries a kind of insane courage and a cult of poetic freedom. Sedakova writes with neither insane nor deathly intonations, quite unlike the poems of Lisnianskaia or Shvarts. She does, however, exude the belief that her work is risky. Or, to quote the epithets associated with Baudelaire's cat, strange and seraphic. When she sends her work forth at the end of "Cat's Gaze," she imagines it moving with the stealth of a cat, bearing a flame in the wind, dancing drunkenly among the sober, bringing exaltation to the wild beast.

37. It is tempting to see Nikolai Zabolotskii's 1928 poem "Na lestnitsakh" as an antecedent text (see Zabolotskii, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy* [Moscow-Leningrad, 1965], 215–16), particularly given its religious themes and given Sedakova's admiring comment about Zabolotskii (in "O Zabolotskom," *Krug chteniia* [Moscow, 1995], 83–84). But her admiration is for the later and more clearly spiritual poems, not the grotesque surrealism of his earlier work.

38. O. E. Mandel'shtam, *Polnoe sobranie stikhotvoreniia* (St. Petersburg, 1995), 258. Kashchei's cat is *ne dlia igry*, which in Sedakova's poem produces the phrase *zabytaia igra*, a nice reversal of the way quotations "forget" their previous contexts.

39. Omry Ronen, "Mandel'shtam's *Kashchei*," in Charles E. Gribble, ed., *Studies Presented to Professor Roman Jakobson by His Students* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), 259.

40. See Stephanie Sandler, "Thinking Self in the Poetry of Olga Sedakova," in Rosalind Marsh, ed., *Gender and Russian Literature: New Perspectives* (Cambridge, Eng., 1996), 302–25.

What risk can that be, compared to the physical and psychic dangers described by Lisnianskaia and Shvarts? One answer, a not entirely whimsical one, is to note the risk to a cat who tests his “experience and strength” through a window and falls to his death. (This happened to one of Sedakova’s cats and is a subject of “Stansy vtorye: Na smert’ kotenka” [Second stanzas: On the death of a kitten, 1979–1980].) But a central theme for Sedakova, inevitably, is the writing of poems, and one suspects that the real risk, given the erudite, complex, and often abstract nature of her poems, is that her readers will fail to understand her work. Reviews of her poetry can sound mocking and faintly incredulous;⁴¹ *Novyi mir* chided Sedakova for her ambitions, describing “Mountain Ode” as a bit too refined (*izyskanno*). The same review greeted the publication of a substantial edition of Sedakova’s poetry with sarcasm tinged by misogyny: “Now everything is as it should be, almost as good as [Bella] Akhmadulina” (*teper’ vse kak u liudei, kak u Akhmadulinoi*).⁴²

Sedakova anticipates such critics in “Cat’s Gaze,” associating herself with the brazen boldness of a cat and wishing to take on the cat’s indifference, its independence. Sedakova wants the cat’s eye, catseye, its hardness, its stony glint, its certainty. The double negative in her final sentence, when she sends her poetry into the world *bez nedover’ia* perhaps shows her anxiety that she has risked a great deal.

If we return to the comparisons to Shvarts and Lisnianskaia, then Sedakova’s ambition and her anxiety come into sharper focus. Lisnianskaia narrows her world of reference, and her range of curiosity is intimate, domestic, local. She conforms more easily to the expected performances of a woman poet, recreating the world of family and friends, rewriting the psychological and occasionally historical themes of early Akhmatova into a lexicon and intonation suitable for the end of the twentieth century. Shvarts neither conforms to this model nor aggressively rejects it. She wants to seem indifferent to what others think of her work, yet she dares us to come up with a characterization of her poetic persona that could carry over from one poem to another. In her staged provocativeness, she reminds me of Joseph Brodsky, and, like him, she risks lines that are in bad taste; as with Brodsky, she does this in part to show how little she concedes to the critics. Her fearlessness may be tested by various forms of ecstatic experience, but the result is a poetic performance of great certainty. In that skill, she entirely resembles Sedakova, whose repertoire of poetic forms and whose knowledge of traditions are immense. Yet Sedakova, for all her self-comparisons to wild animals and natural ob-

41. Sedakova is not the only woman poet to be mocked. In a 1990 poetry survey by Igor’ Shaitanov, for example, one finds an explanation of others’ horror at the poetry of Elena Shvarts, particularly at the nerve of a twenty-two-year-old poet to write an imitation of Nicolas Boileau as if with certainty in the lexicon of classicism. Shaitanov imagines others’ asking “who does Elena Shvarts think she is to imitate Boileau?” See Shaitanov, “. . . no trudnee, kogda mozhno: Poeziia-89,” *Literaturnoe obozrenie*, 1990, no. 1: 25.

42. Vladimir Slavetskii, “Dorogi i tropinka,” *Novyi mir*, 1995, no. 4: 235 and 233. Another insulting review of Sedakova’s work is Vladimir Slavianskii, “Iz polnogo do dna v glubokoe do kraev: O stikhakh Ol’gi Sedakovoi,” *Novyi mir*, 1995, no. 10: 224–31.

jects, is simply and vulnerably human. She stands on the edge of sublime contemplation, and she finds it frightening. She disembodies fear, in the philosophical tradition, and her poems look out onto spaces of experience and emotion where language cannot go. But her poems balance this terror of contemplation with a sure feel for the poetic word and with a joy in poetic creation that is palpable, even saving.

All three poets ask us throughout their work, not just in the poems treated here, whether language and identity go into the same places, and whether place creates our sense of what words and the self can do. Elsewhere in their work, particularly for Lisnianskaia and Shvarts, the consequences of being Russian are considered, which means, in the terms advanced here, that they find specifically Russian causes for the shattering of self that inheres in experiences of self-reflection. They react to the ways in which Russian cultural history and the strictures of Soviet literary life narrowed the possibilities for poetic expression, and their reactions include anger, shame, and a desire for transcendence. This intersection of history with psychology is fascinating in their work, as in that of other contemporary Russian poets, and fully merits deeper consideration. The material presented here asks us to look, as the poets themselves do, at the self reflected back in the mirrors of daily life, which also means facing what happens when the mind is thrown back on itself.

Mirrors have come to seem quintessentially feminine objects, but Narcissus, that exquisite young man, is our originary myth of self-contemplation in all its pleasures and dangers.⁴³ Only the modern social construction of the feminine can explain how narcissism now seems a woman's malaise. But the poets considered here stand in different relationships to such narcissism, and none of them (least of all Lisnianskaia, who chides herself for seeming self-focused) has so severed her ties with others in the world as to have an exclusive relationship with herself. The mirrors of Sedakova's poetry, which emphasize the facets and angles of glass surfaces, further complicate any potential narcissism since they inevitably create the illusion of multiple reflections even as they fracture the images one sees. And she is as likely to place herself next to a mirror as she is to peer directly at her self-image.

What all three poets share, and what they can teach us about contemporary Russian women's poetry in general, is that the place of women's fear is not sexuality, as we might expect, but identity itself. Shvarts's poetry, with its masks and impersonations, well illustrates the effects of this discovery. Who will this poem make of me, each poet asks. The answers of course vary, indeed they will change as the poet starts every new poem, but the pressure to ask this question, and the pleasures and terrors of its answers, return us to the metaphor of loss with which this article began: fear,

43. The dangers of self-contemplation are inherent in the very beginnings of the Narcissus story, not just in its ending: Tiresias predicted that Narcissus would have a long life as long as he did not look at his own reflection, so his parents prevented him from ever doing so. For this reason he did not recognize his own image when he gazed into that fatal pool of water. For a concise account of the myth and its variants, see E. M. Meletinskii, ed., *Mifologicheskii slovar'* (Moscow, 1990), 382.

including fear of loss and of self-loss, in the end makes a self by processes that are additive—tentative, self-doubting at times, but always poised to follow moments of destruction and corrosion with new plans for growth and change. Sedakova's poetry celebrates such growth, and Shvarts, for all her evocations of solitude and mourning, never gives up on the infinite varieties of creativity and self-invention. Even in Lisnianskaia's poem, where selfhood threatens to shatter before the poet's eyes, the compensations of further postscripts and of all the objects that fill her poem create a text where a fragile sense of selfhood is, at least provisionally, built up. In that brave reconstruction, she participates in a process that defines Russian women's poetry of the late Soviet period and, we have every reason to believe, will continue to be important as a new era is launched.