

Modern Russian Poetry: From Subculture to Individuality

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Abstract: At the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century in Russian culture there were certain changes typical mostly of the so called young literature of the “0 years” and verbal creative output of youth communities. In the study an attempt is made to find out if home youth communities/subcultures and their values are perceived by representatives of the young literature and if they are overcome. The study focuses on works by the famous poetess Vera Polozkova (the collection of poems *Photosynthesis*). The researchers state that there are some similar tendencies in creative development of the Runet’s cultic poets and important figures of youth communities.

Key words: Modern poetry, Polozkova, subculture, changes, communities

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of youth subculture in Russia has been developing for 50 years. Many of its trends and communities have been formed and even changed; a certain world outlook and traditions of creative work have emerged; worshipful figures have appeared. The new century’s first decades display interesting tendencies. The director of the Centre of Youth Research of the National Research University Higher School of Economics (Saint Petersburg) Elena Omelchenko states that two issues in modern youth subculture are most influential. First, “reformatting of youth scenes is taking place... there are not subcultures but solidarities; it is the values that are shared and not group identity that get young people united”. In some cases the fact of sharing values may unite young people from different subcultures or even subcultural and mainstream young people. Second, subcultural scenes tend to contract and split up; many subcultures are not inclined to fix their image any more.

We have already tried to define traces of subcultural influence on creative output of popular Runet authors who gained recognition outside the internet (performing in variety shows, on theatrical stage, participating in publishing company’s projects) (Zolotova, 2014, 2015a-c). Vera Polozkova takes the central place among them. She is a prolific author (in 2014 three collections of poems were published), a popular guest of popular radio and TV programmes; she participates in a rock group, performs on stage in dramatic adaptations of her poems. In February 2015 Malikov and Mikhailovsky directed a new play entitled *Short Film* based on Polozkova’s poetry. In the given study a further research of her creative work

is conducted, however in a different aspect as the researchers consider the tendencies, once stated, may be overcome.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study uses a complex approach to the study of the material which includes descriptive and analytical, comparative historical and typological methods. Typical characteristics of Vera Polozkova’s lyrics are identified with the help of descriptive and analytical methods. The comparative historical method allows to show traditions and innovations of the poet in the context of Russian poetry of 19-20th centuries. The typological method sets general patterns of modern youth verbal creativity to which we may refer Polozkova’s early works.

It must be mentioned that youth subcultures, their arrangement and ways of self-expression have been thoroughly studied by Russian sociologists (Shchepanskaya, 2004). There are a number of researches focused on verbal output of youth communities (Abukaeva, 2006). Accordingly, we stated the following: “it is in the youth culture where popular Runet poets borrow their chief life values from, namely, mutual understanding of friends, like-minded people. Unlike the “culture for the young” which is promoted to be sold, the real youth culture is created for inner use only and is close typologically to sets of values shared within youth subcultures” (Zolotova, 2014, 2015a-c). As for Vera Polozkova’s creative work, her early poetry undoubtedly displays the above-mentioned values in a most artistic way. The poet’s first nickname on the internet used to be *teenspirit*, a kind of a speaking name. The early poems

(2004-2005) published in the collection *Nepoemanie* (the title contains play on words, it presents a coinage of two Russian words 'poem' and 'lack of understanding') feature such similarities with subcultural values as a search for like-minded people and finding them in an artistic environment, pursuit of ultimate self-expression (elitism interpreted as esotericism); search for love; philosophical eclecticism; occasional/situational nature of social protest (everyday and cultural nonconformity); for the most part, urban nature of poetics (Zolotova, 2014, 2015a-c).

The given article focuses on *Photosynthesis*, a collection of poems published in 2012 and coauthored by Olga Pavolga (Polozkova and Pavolga, 2014). Both books were published in 2014 but the poems from *Nepoemanie* date back to 2004-2005 while the largest part of poems from *Photosynthesis* were written in 2007-2008.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

It is surprising that the very first poem displays a clear though abstractly expressed interest to society: "there is something that obliges us" to become "a factory of happy trifles", "lungs of Earth" ("Instead of Preface"). The researchers' attitude to creative work and its possibilities changes, too; they seem to have grown up in their own eyes: "Olya walks with a camera in a kitchen-garden/I look for a hotter word/the thing we get will be some oxygen" ("Instead of Preface"). A few but highlighted motives of hostility towards reality emerge: the so-called "better world" is compared to barracks where "they parade"/Got narrow eyes? You be killed, then/Lonely? we'll match for you/Bold? be fed up with Iraq and Transnistria" ("Asitis").

New tendencies in interpreting the pattern of "your own circle" have emerged. Firstly, this circle has already been defined and it is the view point of this community that is offered: "Olya and I" ("Instead of Preface"), "Both you and I..." ("To Kostya Buzin"), "We are a factory of happy trifles" ("Instead of Preface"), etc. Secondly in the lyric heroine's conscience, the long-suffered model of relations seems to become a thing of the past: "We'll never meet..." ("To Igor, before parting"), "Everyone is a mourner for himself and a master of his own" ("To Igor, before parting"). It looks like the author artistically registers her own split from the subcultural entity. However, the poet's attitude to the departure is controversial. The subculture is still idealized a lot. The favourite characters still "look like young jedi", they contain "worlds and galaxies" ("To Kostya Buzin"). Moreover, Polozkova feels her leaving means a certain loss of human resource: "I'll remember you being in love",

"Knew only extremes, no compromises at all" ("To Igor, before parting"), "When we boozed up and cried and quarreled/A vital substance exuded" ("When we boozed up and cried and quarreled"); "My boys are drinking, fighting, sharing income/Though they used to be fibbers and romancers" ("What should I tell you?").

Elitism is another essential component of young people's world outlook. Just like in the collection *Nepoemanie*, this idea is revealed in the author's straight forwarded statements: "I am the chief of the young spenders" ("Blockade"); "I am the soul of a young show off, an impostor" ("What should I tell you?"); "I am light, unutterable, countless" ("Lullaby"); "I'm a reagent, I cause burning" ("While you turn into a young wolf out of a puppy"). The poet still considers herself equal to cultic characters of Russian and world culture: "And Joseph Brodsky is sitting in my compartment/taking breath/in turn, switching it from furious Russian to English" ("Check, please, Misha..."). There is an impulse of daring: "They look forward to my deeds", "My hands are powerful", "I am full of thunderstorm air" ("It's up to you to offer excuses-it's up to me to dare and claim"). Similarly to the first collection, there are poems built on contrast, though its essence is altered. The conflict with oneself presented in the following examples ("The girl, black comics, nothing but Phoenix"/is just a living anecdote/The girl, black onyx, a wicked broom, both poison to herself and antidote" (*Nepoemanie*, "About Love") is replaced by a conflict with somebody else: "You are to learn history-I am to enter it/Up to its wooden handle" ("It's up to you to offer excuses-it's up to me to dare and claim"); "I'm a zero/A hole in a check for one's coat/ But I'll be a profile on a coin" (*Photosynthesis*, "Actress and theatrical manager").

Nevertheless, the lyric contains fundamentally new trends. Among them, there is a motive of calm self-assurance in the poet's mission. The lyric heroine goes as far as joking on the matter: "You give a short side glance-clouds are passing by/far away under you, swaying slightly" ("Not even God but some of His Deputies"); "Hi, here is God, I'm his general/I chose you thoroughly" ("Not even God but some of His Deputies"); "I'm thinking of Death-Death is hiccupping on the other end" ("We'll find each other, like at a concert").

Revealing the given topic, Polozkova appears to be susceptible to society. Therefore, her favourite characters hesitate to act as if waiting for something: "We both are not aware of the game rules but we are watching and waiting. We are able to cross the border of the Matrix a bit, we see from outside, we hear things others can't catch" ("To Kostya Buzin"). According to the analysis, this position is imposed and motivated by the feeling of

loneliness and lack of human warmth: “Lonely, weird to ourselves but we see farther than the fourth wall and know some bits of playwriting” (“To Kostya Buzin”); “Please, don’t become tired of letting me under your wing and giving me warmth. Like elder brothers must do” (“To Kostya Buzin”); “We are the city dusky authorities/Winter’s vicegerents loved by her” (“Praise to the despaired”). Gradually, it dawns on the lyric heroine that the world does not need the chosen: “This is the world of replaceables; What can be funnier/Than your protest/It is a homogenous world/there are neither chosen ones/nor odds” (“This is the world of replaceables....”). Consequently, a desire to become inconspicuous or to be one of many arises: “I would disguise my silly self as a rare bush/Just due to the variety of types/And you/are just an aloe/a thinking aloe/With small teeth everywhere” (“Aloe”).

What distinguishes the lyrics of *Photosynthesis* from earlier works is a new incentive for elitism. The lyric heroine does not consider herself to be the chosen one on the ground of her belonging to a circle of like-minded people sharing values and a way of life. Now the poet’s high self-esteem is due to her personal qualities. She “hears/a splash a dove makes to start off into the sky/a roar of a plane landing in Vnukovo/Sounds for which verbs do not exist” (“Check, please, Misha...”). The most important merit of hers is the poetic gift: “My poems are/like a chain or a chine/Like shaven boys in three rows/Parading on extreme alarm/located by my own hand/are standing and breathing silently” (“By drop, by word, by lollypop”). It might be done for the first time in this book that Polozkova turns to the eternal for Great Maters theme-birth of a poem: “Here’s a dog, who dozes, old and stray/among the straw of sun beams/Here’s a bitter wind from nowhere/ they usually serve as turning/of secret inner keys” (“Instead of Preface”).

Vera Polozkova’s lyrics of 2003-2008 include a lot of works where the nature of divinity is paid a lot of attention. In the articles referred to above (Zolotova, 2014, 2015a-c) it was mentioned that Polozkova’s attitude to God in *Nepoemanie* is similar to attitudes in subculture community, it represents a search for their own God. The theme of God arises every time in a limited discourse as a rule in the process of reasoning about the sense of life, poetic flair, love, time. Early Polozkova’s God, on the one hand is “Almighty Demiurge”, on the other hand, the poet is on special, trusting terms with Him: “All right, I’m a fool, do not leave. Have a seat here, talk to me, my dear” (“All right, I’m saying...”).

In *Photosynthesis* a similar approach is often maintained: the poet and her beloved people are emphatically close to God: “The same inscription is made on our foreheads by God’s right hand” (“To Kostya

Buzin”). The trusting attitude to God is preserved as long as the time discourse: “Day pass, like foxes, by their secret path/In their magic intangible direction/Hugh plays on the cloud embracing Jim/If you happen to hear at night-sing together” (“Old Hugh lived not far from that cliff”).

Meanwhile, the given problem is viewed from an unexpected angle. Thus in some abstract otherworldly space the heroine is not dealt with by God himself but by “some deputy of His/who will bring you to his shortsighted eyes” (“Not even God but some of His Deputies”). The poet doubts the final goal of God’s interference into her destiny: “Though you, Father, love us more than others/Life has never been easier/(“Single mother makes a violin player of her daughter...”). Also, there are ironical remarks: “Dear comrade, the Heaven Chief!” (“Blockade”).

Thus, an important conclusion of philosophical character emerges: “Be happy about small things/ it will be easier to live at once” (“Be satisfied with the little, my darling...”).

The most important theme of the collection is love. As we stated before (Zolotova, 2014, 2015a-c), love is the key value in all youth subcultures. However, it is essential to point out how different the understanding of love is in various communities. T.B. Shchepanskaya highlights one common feature, i.e., “searching character of love” that gives birth to “a variety of sexual practices both in quality and quantity” (Shchepanskaya, 2004). It is worth while admiring how exact Vera Polozkova is at portraying all shades of love even in her early lyrics (*Nepoemanie*) from a youth love obsession (love as a disease) to love as the highest point of living and even to love and forgiving. Simultaneously, she pays her tribute to the searching character of love (hints on the lyrical heroine’s bisexuality) and erotic side of relationships.

In the second book the poet seems to focus on just one aspect of love, namely separation and long, exhausting solitude: “I’m alone like the one sentenced to death or like a fisherman” (“Backspace”), “My tenderness lives separately...” (“Not a town but an almshouse”). The poet studies the nature of parting artistically: “We are parting here. I do not want too much of that./Just visiting some day with a warm anticyclone”; “I won’t come to mourn you/There is a lake and grass.../I won’t catch up with you/I’m looking at your back and feel dizzy” (“To Igor, before parting”). Moreover, separation is connected with the lyrical heroine or the author herself. Being a happy mother and wife, Vera Polozkova called herself “an expert on unrequited love” (Maksimov, 2015).

The lyrical heroine feels the dramatic foundation of love: “Ah, many thanks to the heart/that can love so much” When, on Earth, will it stop loving so” (“The plot

is odd"). Descriptions contain plenty of details: "If there is happiness in this world/it smells like your wet hair ("While you turn into a young wolf from a puppy"); "The smell of his perfume, sweat and tobacco/and old tea leaf/has become absolutely delicious/I wish I could breathe in more ("The smell of his perfume, sweat and tobacco"). The heroine is "planning to remember her love long/probably, till the very hearse ("Black Block"). On the other hand, there occurs an idea that she needs to get out of this state of mind, thus the following remarks appear: "Remind me that I mustn't come/that I possibly cannot manage!" ("Backspace"), "Give peace, Father, both to the vizier and the fisherman/Give peace and I will talk no more/to the beloved baseball cap and gumshoes and the street lamp/from which I have set free! ("Lullaby").

Polozkova's skill in revealing the lyrical heroine's mood is truly impressive. A distance between herself and her beloved is either stretched to infinity ("from island to island") or compressed ("equals a night on the train"), undergoes metaphorical changes ("equals Bunin's best story", "equals speech in search for Formula"); it attains a specific meaning "distance equaling the phrase "I haven't told the main thing" ("From me to you"). Parting is like living in the other world ("Nevermore"). However, separation serves as a powerful incentive to creativity, thus, "it is up to you to stir words in me/they will be burning/you will be watching the fire" ("21st little poem about Dze") and there emerges a request: "Do not leave the horizon, Tim but do walk and lead/like a guiding constellation, a hard-won award" ("24th little poem about Dze").

Vera Polozkova has always been a poet of urban landscapes. In *Photosynthesis* the reader watches a "huge city as far as you see-/smoked all over from mines to mezzanine" ("Instead of Preface"). On the one hand, it is personified: "Night like a stocking from the hip/drops from skyscrapers to curl like sediment/in a girl's coffee ("Check, please, Misha..."). Yet the city is hostile to people: "In this city you get tired even of summer thunderstorms..." ("Check, please, Misha..."), to their feelings and emotions: "Monitors, turbines, buttons right-left, back and forth/How can one make those fly, having abandoned/sense of life ... ("When we boozed, cried and quarreled..."). Urban landscape is linked to the atmosphere of parting: "There used to be a city, now it is a sunk bathyscaphe" ("There used to be a city"). On the foreground of her poetic painting Vera Polozkova locates railway stations. There are a lot of titles containing such words as trains, carriages, compartments and rails. Sometimes metaphors are built on the given lexemes: "Don't go off my rails..." ("24th little poem about Dze"). A cozy compartment is the poet's only way out now: "to go, to hear the wheels, rails, pulse frequency" ("From you

to me"). However, it is nothing but another illusion: "The air is dry and hot in the inner train/if there is destination/it is a very long way..." ("Check, please, Misha..."). Awakening is inevitable: "I'll wake up at the terminal station from hopeless silence/and will leave the compartment without complaint" ("Express").

In *Photosynthesis*, there are several poems with "foreign" main characters. It is surprising that the very poems are considered to be the foundation of the whole collection (Gutrina, 2012). Sometimes Polozkova puts emphasis on the characters' social status: gangsters Fox ("Half a bottle of rum, two pistols..."), the humble shop manager Grace ("Grace"), the successful businessman Bernard ("Bernard writes to Hester"...). In most cases they are just types taken out of life at random: missis Corstone and her husband ("Mrs. Corstone"), Tara Duly and her beloved dancer ("Tara Duly"), Piper Bowl and a deer-boy ("Piper Bowl"), Jeffry and Jenny Tatum ("Jeffry Tatum"), the good-looking son and his father ("Howard Knall") and some others.

The critics' attitude towards the given lyrics is mostly negative. Even Dmitri Bykov who generally approves of and admires Polozkova's poetry could not help from criticizing the works in the following way: "The short poetic stories having either American or European backgrounds are made skillfully but they lack both psychological credibility and intrigue... all the characters are plastic". Nevertheless, we consider the two groups of poems to possess the same lyrical heroine but in the second group she is hidden behind a variety of nicknames (foreign in this case) as it has always been the norm with youth subcultures. The goal of such concealment is to get an opportunity to investigate the favourite theme-love-in all its turns and shades. It is realized brilliantly in those "small tragedies" written by Vera Polozkova. The emphasis is laid on the following topic. The one and only meeting with a seductive dancer that results in "a pain/short but piercing..." ("Tara Duly").

One year from the life of a woman named Grace who was abandoned by her husband and managed to "keep on well for twelve days" and then she could just "sit at the porch in the state of neglect like a speechless huge mastiff". The woman comes to life twice: when her ex-husband pays her a short visit to bring her some food and when she strokes his hair when he is already dead ("Grace").

The love triangle, Jeffry Tatum is torn between his pregnant wife and a girl "built so thin". The character is obsessed with his love: "To evaporate, to flow like a river following you/like a golden transparent bottom, a wave..."; "If there's light in this world, it is you/ if there's a holiday/it's your visit" ("Jeffry Tatum"). There is another plot following the pattern: the "cool and elusive

like water” boy is Piper Bowl’s last attempt at delaying the inevitable aging. On the other hand, there is Richard Bowl, the husband, “deadbeat, exhausted with his company’s affairs” who reassures his wife: “So you’ve trusted another idiot/Baby, baby, I’ll never leave you” (“Piper Bowl”).

Different aspects of the last love, two characters are opposed: the elderly “bald lion” and the girl “beautiful like banshee”. He lives in the lap of luxury; he “counts his workmen like skittles”, has seen everything “from Irish fiords to Somalian ore”; yet he confesses in a letter: “I’ll die if they take you away from me...” (“Bernard writes to Hester...”). The elder of the Knalls, “hoarse and grey-haired” is ready to reassure any of the young ladies abandoned by his good-looking son (“Howard Knall”).

True love, finally, the poem “Mrs. Corstone” fully introduces Polozkova’s idea of what true love is: “He was able to accept her as she is: so various/sometimes tired and useless/sometimes ridiculous and clumsy/silly and unfriendly/trouble-free and tender... If you laugh, he would say, I have a holiday./If you grieve, I feel sorry for you” (“Mrs. Corstone”).

Evidently, the above-mentioned poems are a link to the poet’s serious and profound understanding of love as she sees it today. In her interview to the popular TV presenter Andrey Maksimov (Maksimov, 2015) Vera Polozkova states that “love like a real story does not need any scenery or romantization... it is very simple, absolutely ridiculous, consists of some silly things but the less attention love draws, the more real it is”. In contrast to her earlier statements, Polozkova insists on the fact that the true love begins when people have already got married and “love has no plot, it goes somewhere deep...”, meaning that love presupposes a good deal of spiritual work. “I feel that love is totally misinterpreted now and one needs to bring it back to the world. It is a feeling that you are not alone any more. Love is a state of mind where a person gets in himself and his Universe starts building around him in the right way...”. Such is the evolution of Polozkova’s personal feelings from subcultural values to those common to all mankind. It is surprising that in the lyrics of both groups in Photosynthesis the poet does not mention her characters’ addiction to alcohol or drugs; her vocabulary is free from slang and obscene words that was typical of the poems from Nepoemanie.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, one should mention that the most popular representatives of fiction and poetry on Runet (including Vera Polozkova) follow the way of development similar to the one popular in subcultures from the search

for information channels not used by the official culture (blogs) to acquisition of a circle of like-minded people; elaboration of its ideas and values (elitism, specific world outlook and ideas of what love is urban character of poetics, popularity of slang, use of obscene vocabulary, etc.) and gradual leaving, parting from the chosen circle. The latter results in obtaining an individual position. Photosynthesis by Vera Polozkova and Olga Pavolga provides a good example of the given process.

The lyrics from the collection display a turn to society and mankind in general; the key theme is separation (with friends, beloved), an attempt to maintain one’s right to personal and artistic freedom. From now on the poet considers herself the chosen one due to her own poetical flair and not to her reference to a subcultural community.

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