

The rehabilitation of bad poetry *Crickets, children, and 'cruel language'*

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Cruel language

AMONG OTHER SYMBOLS, language is society's most faithful representation. This is especially true of a culture that, like the Russian culture, has been making a special effort to create the symbolism of language as an iconic image of its own specificity. The Russian language, its rules and meanings institutionalized in its norms, is the core of Russian collective identity, its structures and restrictions faithfully reproducing (if not informing) its political hierarchies.

The strictly normalized Russian literary language as we know it from language manuals, normative grammars, and prescriptive dictionaries, represents the most amazing achievement of rationalization, the pinnacle of system-oriented thought: as any student of Russian knows, not a single language phenomenon should go without a rational explication and without a strict usage norm attached to it. At the same time, the Russian language has been developing as a vivid poetic image, the most important icon of Russianness, and the emblem of Russian statehood and citizenship. The unique position of the Russian language among other representations of identity is quite evident nowadays, when all other icons of identity have collapsed.

To undertake an investigation into the genealogy of the Russian language in its function as ideological icon would be an interesting project the scale of which surpasses the limits of an article. I would like to concentrate my attention on one little episode from this history, an episode that illuminates those symbolic processes which contribute both to the institutionalization of such an icon, and to the process of negotiating its tyrannical meanings.

Language normalized and institutionalized in its capacity as an instrument of communication, on the one hand, and in its function as an official icon of identity, on the other, is by necessity, a 'cruel language'.¹ The signifier claims an absolute, total control over reality. No space for interpretation is allowed: interpretation, as any private initiative, would challenge the order. Its meanings are settled once and for all, the authority of a grammar book or a dictionary rules supreme. Its prescriptive norms are not open for discussion, and the purity of such a language—including the ideological correctness of its statements—is controlled by multiple specialized authorities, from language teachers and dictionary writers, through literary critics and editors, and on to political censors and heads of ideological departments. In other words, in a cruel language like this, meanings act as bonds and mutual obligations fixing its speakers in a strong symbolic order (Baudrillard 1995, 50f):

Signs are protected by a prohibition which ensures their total clarity and confers an unequivocal status on each. Counterfeit is not possible in the ceremonial, unless in the form of black magic and sacrilege, which is precisely what makes the mixing of signs punishable as a serious offence against the very order of things. [This order has] a brutal hierarchy, since the sign's transparency is indissociably also its cruelty.

Cruel language with its function of preserving holy hierarchies is the language of pure violence: it is only by unrestricted use of force that it can ensure the absolute bonding of everybody with everybody vis-à-vis its unitary ideological truth.

It makes sense, therefore, to speak about violence in terms of language critique, not only politically but, first and foremost, philosophically. Cruel language enters a certain relationship with the will to knowledge (Michel Foucault), or the will to speak (Jacques Derrida), it confronts the Imaginary which still refuses to be fully controlled. Cruel language produces the conflict between violence and representation, when violence is driven to its utter limit, making representation almost impossible. It was, one would think, in

¹ Term suggested by Jean Baudrillard in his discussion of the order of simulacra (1995, 50-86). Baudrillard confines the notion of 'cruel language' to the period of feudalism in Europe, but in this paper I am broadening the notion by subsuming under the name any 'strong' symbolic order based solely on the violent use of force. This gives me the possibility of considering the general connection between violence and language.

connection with this impossibility of representation under the conditions of limitless violence that Theodor Adorno spoke about the end of poetry after Auschwitz.

However, Adorno's meaning notwithstanding, the impossibility of poetry is not a moral issue. It is rather a question of how language, performative force as it is, operates at the ultimate frontier of the enforcement of order. Being a performative force, language is not necessarily always cruel, but it is never 'vegetarian', never completely innocent of violence. Cruel language, however, confronts the poet with an inquisitorial questioning of his or her own position—an interrogation (sometimes in the literal sense of the word) with only two possible answers: 'yes' or 'no', both equally destructive. Force and violence rule the stage: the answer to the either/or question presupposes no difference, both alternatives are suicidal. This is that very 'either/or' form of questioning, that, according to Jacques Derrida (1990, 923),² is

.. .violent, polemical, inquisitorial in itself. We may fear it [such a question - *I.S.*] contains some instrument of torture—that is, a manner of interrogation that is not the most just. Needless to say, from this point on I can offer no response, at least no reassuring response, to any questions put in this way ('either/or, 'yes or no'), to either party or to either party's expectations formalized in this way.

It is not by accident that, addressing the regime of utter repression based on unrestricted violence, the poet recognizes the source of this violence in language, not in a political body. I shall further proceed to analyse a poem by Nikolaj Zabolockij—a piece of verse in which the repressed poet makes a (futile) attempt at reconciliation with the violent political order of the post-war Stalinist society. In an attempt to signal his allegiance with Stalin, Zabolockij, instead of glorifying the Father of Nations, makes a symptomatic move towards the glorification of the Russian language. This *métonymie* transfer—a shift from *violence* as such to the *language of violence*, from Father to the Name of the Father—seems to confirm my hypothesis about the central role of the linguistic sign, the cruel machine for the production of repressive political realities.

² See Derrida's profound 'quadruple' dialectics of Law, Justice, Force and Violence in this paper, and his special emphasis on the 'non-innocence' of language vis-à-vis violence.

Nikolaj Zabolockij's poem 'Čitaja stichi' ('Reading Poetry', 1948, first published 1956) is usually attributed to one of the poet's worst failures, an example of how 'a good poet' succumbs to the superhuman pressure from ideological censorship.³ Written at the peak of the post-war wave of Stalin's terror, the text is a veritable documentation of fear. The poet who has already experienced many years of imprisonment and probably envisions a new arrest seems to be desperately seeking to protect himself, trying to give Power evidence of his own loyalty—by telling Power what he thinks Power wants to hear.

Zabolockij's text seeks a compromise between free poetic imagination and total censorship. Even though the poem is written to give evidence of trustworthiness, it still necessarily involves an element of negotiation. The poet is trying to produce a text that would be absolutely acceptable for Power. And in doing so, the poet acts as a seducer, trying to tell things that Power would be willing to listen to. Under the inhuman pressure of the pending punishment, a process of negotiation is still going on: negotiating the identity of the poet, of poetry, and of language itself. Apart from documenting what his critics consider a poetic surrender, the text also registers a dramatic linguistic situation.

In her book of reminiscences, Nadežda Mandelstam (1989) recalls how Achmatova, after long hesitations, finally took the decision to publish her 'Slava miru' ('Glory to Peace', 1950; see Achmatova 1968, 147-54).⁴ We remember that by publishing a poem that would glorify Stalin, Achmatova was hoping to alleviate the sufferings of her son, Lev Gumilev, at that time serving his third term in a prison camp. Mandelstam tells the story of how Achmatova brought the final version to a close friend, the renowned literary theorist and historian, one-time formalist, Boris Tomaševskij, to ask him to make a typed copy. Without a word of comment,

³ For an example of such criticism of Zabolockij's 'conformism' of the 1940s, see, for instance, introductory articles to the collection Zabolockij 1965.

⁴ For a commentary on the cycle, including a historical note and a mention of the low technical quality of this verse, see *op. cit.* 392-4.

Tomaševskij sat down to copy the handwritten text introducing, in the process, certain corrections necessary from the point of view of language norm and the rules of versification.

Nadežda Mandelstam disapproved of Achmatova's 'collaborationism'. However, it is not Achmatova alone who authors 'Slava miru' : also contributing is a literary theorist who undertakes the work of correcting her text in the name of linguistic norm. Individual poetic creativity is out of the question. To a certain extent, the language norm itself—understood here broadly as the norm of grammatical, poetical, and political language—authors the text that glorifies its own order.

It also authors the norm of correctness in respective role-playing patterns. Interestingly enough, it is not only Stalin's regime that tortures the poet with the inquisitorial 'yes or no' test for loyalty. Nadežda Mandelstam, the sympathetic memoirist, is also questioning Achmatova's decision in that very 'either/or' mode. Her verdict is: Bad poetry, infamy well deserved. In the eyes of Nadežda Mandelstam, a martyr herself and the widow of one of the attested martyrs of the Russian 20th century literature, Achmatova appears a weakling who proves incapable of handling her own mission of martyrdom. And here is yet another aspect of cruel language: when literature pronounces judgments formulated as clearly and unambiguously, we see that the code of honour in matters of literature and truth is as violently repressive as those produced by the repressive political regime that literature claims to be opposed to.

Betrayal/redemption

Speaking psychoanalytically, reason represses un-reacted traumas as a result of which traumatized imagination 'returns' reality in the form of psychosis.⁵ Zabolockij's poem is all made of 'empty speech' : the intention to simulate loyalty is too visible and so is the lack of any conviction. But the 'emptiness' of speech produced by Zabolockij in an attempt at seducing Power is, in Lacan's terms, precisely the symptom of such psychotic return of reality. Rather

⁵ The relationship between truth and the structure of psychosis is a recurrent theme in Jacques Lacan. Language speaking through subject and language as an instrument of castration/acclaculturation is discussed, among other sources, in Lacan 1977, 30-113.

than documenting the poet's intention of collaboration, the poem becomes a monument to a human condition, to that very 'no-exit' situation when poetic word confronts pure death. We could try to achieve an understanding of this existential condition at the very edge of nothingness by a literal reading of the images that emerge in his 'empty speech', in its numerous circumlocutions and understatements, in that oblique Aesopian language in which Zabolockij chooses to profess allegiance but instead testifies to the silent presence of a trauma.

I give here a very sketchy translation of his poem, without rhymes or metres—a serious loss in this case, since Zabolockij advocated with his poem a return to the classical norm of Russian traditional versification, which he confirmed by choosing a very streamlined pattern of rhythm and rhyming. The poem reads as follows (in original along with my almost literal translation) (Zabolockij 1965,132):

ЧИТАЯ СТИХИ

*Любопытно, забавно и тонко:
Стих почти не похожий на стих. Бормотанье
сверчка и ребенка В совершенстве писатель
постиг.*

*И в бессмыслице скомканной речи Изощренность
известная есть
Но возможна ль мечты человечьи
В жертву этим забавам принести?*

*И возможно ли русское слово Превратить в
щебетанье щегла,
Чтобы смысла живая основа
Сквозь него прозвучать не могла?*

*Нет! Поэзия ставит преграды
Нашим выдумкам, ибо она
Не для тех, кто играя в шарады,
Надевает колпак колдуна.*

READING POETRY

*Curious, amusing, stylish,
Verse almost unlike verse.
The murmur of a cricket and a child Mastered by the
author to
perfection.*

*And in this nonsense of crumpled
language
There is a certain sophistication.
But is it possible to sacrifice human-
kind's visions
To these petty diversions?*

*And is it possible to transform the
Russian word
Into the chirp of a goldfinch,
And thus prevent it from revealing
The living foundation of meaning?*

*No! Poetry puts up barriers
To our whims, since it
Is not for those who, playing charades,
Dress themselves in sorcerers' hats.*

*Тот, кто жизнью живет настоящей,
Кто к поэзии с детства привык,
Вечно верует в животворящий,
Полный разума русский язык.*

*He who lives a real life,
He who from his childhood is
Accustomed to poetry,
Has an eternal faith in the Russian
language,
That gives life and is full of reason.*

(1948)

The first thing that shocks today's reader is, in this maze of very indefinite, shady references (of the 'those who' kind—understated references, non-references, in fact, or very probably, intended anti-references) the unexpectedly clear image of the goldfinch, an unmistakable hint at Osip Mandelstam, by the time of the writing of the poem at least ten years dead, and for more than twenty years excluded from literary life.⁶ Mandelstam was one of the strongest influences in the young Zabolockij's poetry, as he acknowledged in his private correspondence of the early 1920s.⁷ The mention of Mandelstam's emblematic goldfinch in this context sounds like an incrimination of conspiracy: Mandelstam's crime appears to be his intended transformation of the holy Russian word into a bird, with the specific purpose of obstructing the passage of meaning. This sounds very much like a brazen denunciation, an ultimate and absolute betrayal.

At the same time, however, the magical posthumous transformation of men into insects and plants was one of the personal myths which Zabolockij managed to carry through the whole of his poetic life, and even in the utter 'de-poetization' of his later period he still preserved this idea, concealed but untouched. It was a glorious vision of life-after-death which human beings share in a paradise with all the rest of Mother Nature's species. The image of repressed poets living a happy life after death in the bodies of beetles and ants, in the roots of trees and the blades of grass, in the idyllic eternity of organic life arises on many occasions; it literally breaks the reader's heart in another poem, written in 1952 and dedicated to the Oberiuts, poets 'in wide-rimmed hats and long jackets, with notebooks of their poems in hand', poets that 'had long broken down

⁶ Mandelstam's 'goldfinch' series, written in exile in Voronež, can be found in Mandelstam, 01967, *IZA1*.

⁷ Zabolockij's letters about Mandelstam are published in Zabolockij 1972, 227-34.

into dust, like branches of lilac after blossom'.⁸ The only line worthy of the name of poetry in the 1948 text that I am discussing here—*бормотанье сверчка иребенка*, 'the murmur of a cricket and a child'—is a portrait of Mandelstam the poet, but also a portrait of Zabolockij himself as he was in the 1920s-early 30s. The copula 'and' is highly 'Zabolockian': Mandelstam and the goldfinch and the cricket and the child are all equal in the murmur of their posthumous organic harmony. Zabolockij gives the poet a place in the immortality of his own paradise where all the species of the world are united in an unbreakable idyll. By betraying Mandelstam to Stalin, Zabolockij confirms, by the same token, the elder brother's place in an 'eternity of species'.

We will better understand the nature and the strategy of such betrayal if we interpret what Zabolockij is doing in terms of the routines of interrogation, as they existed in the practices of political terror. A prisoner with long experience of such interrogations, Zabolockij knows what it is that Power wants from him: it wants others' names. Therefore, his strategy of nomination is a clever way of giving names while not naming anybody specific—or, if the worst comes to the worst, naming obliquely someone who cannot suffer any more from the act of nomination. He mobilizes all the prisoner's skill in avoiding direct question: the prisoner under interrogation carefully calculates his chances of getting out from under the pressure and if he estimates them to be about zero he consents to betrayal in exchange for survival. In this poem, Zabolockij betrays Mandelstam and, together with Mandelstam, the whole of the tradition of Russian poetry of the 1920s-30s, including

⁸ The poem is titled 'A Farewell to Friends' ('Прощание с друзьями', Zabolockij 1965, 1461), picturing the happy lot of his slaughtered poet friends after death, in an 'organic paradise' that includes roots, ants, grass blades, sighs, little columns of dust, carnations, nipples of lilac flowers, wood chips, and chicken (I am leaving the translation of the poem to the efforts of a poet) :

*Спокойно ль вам, товарищи мои? Легко ли вам? И всели вы забыли? Теперь вам
братья—корни, муравьи, Травинки, вздохи, столбики из пыли.
Теперь вам сестры — цветики гвоздик, Соски сирени, щепочки, цыплята... И уж
не в силах вспомнить ваш язык Там наверху оставленного брата.*

his own self as part of the poetic movement. He does so because he knows that both Mandelstam and other poets, as well as poetry itself are long dead—dead and peaceful, undisturbed in that strange Paradise where poets and poetry chirp and murmur together with goldfinches, crickets, and little children. Pressed by the necessity of giving away all, he chooses to betray what he thinks is dead anyway—the goldfinch, the cricket—and hence will not suffer too much from betrayal.

How can today's reader relate to this double bind of denunciation and pacification, betrayal and redemption? 'Hamburg scores' are totally out of place in such complicated situations. There can be no judgment of what Zabolockij did or what he said in the confrontation with the inquisitorial questioning of his time—no judgment whatsoever, especially, from our position today with its relative security of a post-totalitarian reality. But there can be a judgment on the language of 'Hamburg scores', the language of 'inquisitorial questioning' in terms of 'yes or no', and there can be theoretical (and moral) gain from trying to understand how poetic language survives—or does not survive, for that matter—when confronted with this violence of 'either/or'.

The landscape of fears

What we see in Zabolockij's poem is an imaginary world that is divided into a 'within' and a 'without'. The line of demarcation is laid by a boundary between the Russian language and everything else. The borderline is guarded against trespassers by Poetry itself ('.. Poetry puts up barriers to our whims...'). Zabolockij is suggesting an image of Poetry as a guardian demon of language. In this 'demoniac' function Poetry—instead of a free flight on the wings of fantasy—is doing the work of exclusion and restriction.

What is that fortress that Poetry protects, what treasure is hidden inside it? This appears to be a treasure of 'real life', a source of Reason, the eternal giver of the gift of meaning, the Russian language. Poetry, thus, is not *poiësis* in itself. The real *poiësis*, the real source of life, is concealed behind Poetry's protective barriers, and this source is Language, the Holy of Holies, the Poetry of Poetry. Russian Logos contained within is a scripture. It is blessed in its

mission of providing a medium for the appearance of something that Zabolockij cryptically designates as the 'living foundation of meaning'. It is the holy hypostasis of the Russian Word as Scripture that requires such strict guardianship. The mutation of the word (as, for instance, its transformation into a goldfinch's chirp) implies a catastrophic disruption of 'meaning's living foundation'. This is the ultimate treasure that the demon of Poetry is guarding against possible interventions.

Interventions by whom, though ? It is worth noting that 'enemies' as portrayed by Zabolockij seem to echo perfectly well Baudrillard's underminers of cruel language: they are the counterfeiters of nature ('cricket and child'), the sorcerers, the players of charades, the masterminds of manipulation—or, in Baudrillard's description, the masters of 'black magic and sacrilege'. Outside the wall of Poetry, there is a space populated by the mysterious 'Those Who' : '... those who, playing charades, / Dress themselves in sorcerers' hats.' An evil place of estranged 'whims', a space of pseudo-miracles and fakes. 'Those Who' receive no definite names but Zabolockij emphasizes the skillfulness, the cleverness of producing something that is 'curious, amusing, and stylish', he admits 'certain sophistication', a 'perfect mastery' in the petty game of 'whims'.

But who are 'Those Who' ? Obviously, a goldfinch-poet, the one who commands the power of transforming words into birds. But there is another, a more unexpected answer: the dangerous 'Those Who' are actually 'Us' : Poetry raises obstacles on behalf of *our*, not anybody else's 'whims'. Poetry, therefore, is a guarding outpost against 'ourselves', against the destructivity of 'our' own creativity. By choosing the possessive 'our' Zabolockij identifies with the potential 'wreckers'. He confesses in advance, long before any accusation is made. Rather than an appeal for retribution on the 'sorcerers', the poem turns out to be a call for punishment on the poet's own head; it is a gesture of self-flagellation almost as much as it is a gesture of denunciation. A self-portrait on the scaffold: violent (self)-accusations for having 'played the charades', donned 'sorcerers' hats', for having been engaged in the conspiracy of 'curious, amusing, and stylish' nonsense. Hence, we recognize a Zdanov-esque intonation which permeates the poem and is quite impossible to convey in English.

Zabolockij desperately wants a change of his own identity: 'Those Who' (himself included) are not allowed inside the holy walls of Poetry and Language, 'Those Who' seek to disrupt Poetry's sacred labyrinth, 'Those Who' 'play charades'—give place by the end of the poem to another, and no less puzzling, euphemism: the 'good' 'He Who', namely: 'He Who' has eternal faith in the life-giving Russian language, 'He who from his childhood is accustomed to poetry', 'He who lives a real life'. 'He Who', consequently, is eternal—eternal in faith, faith in the Russian language. 'He Who' is, in other words, saved.

Zabolockij produces an unparalleled, all-between-the-lines description of Language and Poetry as Penitentiary. Both appear to us in all the splendor of their glaringly clear, unbreakable meanings: as pedagogical machines of confession, disavowal, penitence, and subsequent rectification. From what source does such a machine extract its legitimation, what is it that gives it its tremendous authority, its absolute right to torture ?

Zabolockij's answer would be that the source of legitimacy is the nature of language itself. It appears to us as a sacral object in a mystical cult, as an iconic representation of divinity, as epiphany. The treasure of the Russian word—the source of 'Living Life', the plentiful vessel of Reason—is guarded by the protecting Poetry as the gates of paradise are guarded by an archangel who directs his sword of wrath against the sinners, the sorcerers, those for whom the entrance into the Garden of Language is banned, those who are excluded and punished for their sinful, faithless dexterity. In his poem, Zabolockij makes a transparent connection between the Russian word, the carrier of 'meaning's living foundation', and the Logos of biblical creation; between the poetic word and the Holy Scriptures ; between Poetry as embodied Language and the Church as embodied God.

The delirious

In the meantime, any doctor knows what such fantasies really amount to. They represent a typical fiction produced by insanity: a mysterious treasure hidden inside a guarded labyrinth, vicious ill-will threatening it from the outside, the sophistication of the forces

of evil, the mobilization of the forces of good, the guilt and recriminations against one's own self for having involuntarily allied with the forces of evil, plus—on top of everything—a symptomatic impoverishment of the poetic language; in short: a typical scenario of paranoia, psychotic speech, an episode in medical case history rather than in the history of literature.

In this psychotic script, however, one easily recognizes something that is common to the imagination of the entire epoch of terror. The linguistic paradise guarded by Poetry against external aliens and internal 'wreckers' becomes too an image of the USSR as it evolves from Stalinist propaganda. This 'imaginary USSR' seems to have a mysterious treasure hidden inside it: the Truth of Communism. The power of this Truth is such that it is capable of propelling the USSR on its holy march towards ever new victories. This is a priceless resource that must be safeguarded against the encroachment of the enemy. The borderline around this resource is unbreakable.⁹ One can see that the 'imaginary USSR' as produced by propaganda is constructed in the same way as is the fortress of language, guarded by relentless Poetry, in Zabolockij's poem. One could think of this script as an expression of a fundamental and constitutive psychosis in Stalinist society.

It is only in pathological speech that this reticence explodes. In wartime, the famous Soviet psychiatrist, Gil'jarovskij, performed a an investigation into post-traumatic psychoses (Gil'jarovskij [1973]). He described paranoid ideas that developed in soldiers and officers who suffered psychotic conditions after concussions on the battlefield. They turned out to have an internal structure and a narrative form of their own. As a result of brain damage, there developed recurring delirious expressions that are strikingly similar to the image of Poetry-Penitentiary as found in Zabolockij's poem. Comparable obsessive ideas about the patients' own guilt and similar fears of retribution—arrest, imprisonment, capital punishment; similar suspicions of the invisible, anonymous presence of 'wreckers' undermining things from the outside.

⁹ On the 'illiquidable resources' of Stalinist society, such as Bread, Life, Meaning, and Culture, see Merlin 1999; on the economy and resource in the context of 'production of satisfaction', see Merlin *forthcoming*.

This is how the enchanted sign of cruel language (Baudrillard's 'brutal hierarchy', 'bonding in an inescapable reciprocity') achieves the absolute clarity of a total symbol. It faithfully reproduces its order throughout a whole chain of functional discourses : the ideological narrative of the 'imaginary USSR', the pathological narrative of post-traumatic psychosis, and the lyrical narrative of a poetic vision.

The origins of cruel language

In Sergej Eisenstein's film *Oktjabr'* (1928) there is an interesting episode that constitutes a perfect illustration of cruel language, as well as of the context of its establishment.

The film has to be acknowledged not only for its revolutionary representational practices but, first and foremost, for the fact that it constructed, almost single-handedly, the whole body of the visual practices and representations of the 'imaginary USSR'. Even though the film itself was repressed by the Soviet censorship, almost all of its images lived on, without any mention of Eisenstein's authorship, in the practices of the falsification of the events of 1917. Until the very last days of the USSR, Eisenstein's montage sequences were used for the purposes of propaganda as if they were documentary shots, in history textbook narratives as well as in film chronicles and manipulated photographic images. The figures and narratives produced by Eisenstein's experiment in 'historical montage' became emblematic for the self-representation of Stalinist society.

I would like to draw my readers' attention to the episode in which Eisenstein depicts the dissolution of the constitutional assembly. Here, we see a group of 'bourgeois deputies' confronting a revolutionary sailor who comes to announce that the assembly is disbanded. The episode of the meeting between the sailor and the representatives of the assembly is staged so as to figurate the class conflict between 'the language of revolution' and 'the empty phrases' of bourgeois democratic rhetoric. This theatrical confrontation is supposed metaphorically to represent a revolutionary leap from one symbolic order to the other: from that of the withering society and to that of the victorious proletariat.

'Bourgeois rhetoric' is represented by a group of extras carrying every possible attribute of the proverbial *intelligentsia*: bowler hats, spectacles, little beards, newspapers and umbrellas. But what characterizes them, as a social group, in the most evident way is their linguistic behavior: confronted with revolutionary measures against political freedoms, they react—typically—by over-producing speech. The camera produces several long sequences, each one more and more grotesque, showing the 'bourgeois' trying various strategies of argumentation. They speak too much, the camera wants to tell us, and they are producing words, phrases, periods of useless, empty, historically doomed language. This is a pamphlet against the language of democratic dialogue, a caricature of argumentation for justice, law, freedom and right. All these, just like umbrellas and bowler hats, are merely 'bourgeois fetishes', the film tells us. Proletarian democracy is a more efficient symbolic machine since it commands more effective methods for determining what is just, legal, free or rightful—methods that do not rely on the use of 'rhetoric', but inculcate the new spirit by the authority of pure violence.

Interpretation, dialogue, argumentation, the process of negotiating meaning itself are all defeated, together with the order they are believed to serve, 'bourgeois parliamentarism'. The attempts made by the 'empty speakers' to return to language its status of social contract are repulsed by a short 'no' from the sailor. The same sequence is repeated several times : a long episode of 'bourgeois rhetoric', each time gaining in expression and each time looking more and more comic, is broken by a new 'no' and a curt negative gesture of the hand from the sailor. The 'no' from the language of revolution is a threat. While 'bourgeois speech' is only presented visually (we do not learn what exactly these people are saying, we can only see *how* they say it, in a more and more grotesque way), the recurrent 'no' from the sailor is each time confirmed by a resolute **NET** in the titles (cf. the **NET** coming from Poetry in Zabolockij's verse). Finally, the bourgeois still 'unconvinced', the 'no' from the sailor ends up in a sequence showing shooting guns: an adequate and unequivocal response of the system of violence to any claims from the 'enemy' to a language of his own.

Obviously, the logic of development from 'no' to gun shooting is natural for a language of violence. In connection with Zabolockij's poem, however, there remains a question. Written, figuratively speaking, for Stalin, it was¹ never published during the latter's lifetime. This creates a significant distinction from Achmatova's 'Glory to Peace', also written, figuratively speaking, for Stalin: the latter was published, and did achieve its goal, at least partially. On the contrary, 'Reading Poetry' first saw the light in 1956, the times of the 'vegetarian' Chruščev thaw, when no need of immediate physical survival would have justified its writing or publication. What was it that, even at times of relative freedom, still made the poem relevant ?

In keeping with my theory of cruel language, the answer would be: cruel language. Stalin, the personification of violence, is dead, but cruel language, the medium and instrument of violence, its *raison d'être*, is alive. The end of the history of terror is not the end of the history of cruel language. This is what Zabolockij's poem ultimately testifies to : the official end of the period of political violence does not signify the end of violence reproduced in language. 'Stalin' is merely a trope, a figure of speech, and a euphemism for something else. As long as language preserves its function as the keeper of 'absolute reciprocity', as long as it preserves its iconic functions, then the art of evading direct questions by giving delirious answers will preserve its vital relevance.

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