



# SPEECHLESSNESS: CONVERSATION WITH PAVEL ARSENEV ABOUT RUSSIAN ANTI-WAR POETRY

*Posted on 23. Dezember 2022 by Natalia Grinina*

Over about 17 years since its creation in Saint Petersburg, the independent journal for poetry and theory [Translit] has been publishing politically engaged poetry and literary criticism in russian language. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia's armed forces on February 24 marked a significant break in the history of the journal, bringing their leftist agenda and a postcolonial, anti-imperial approach to writing to a new point of crisis. Former colleagues and friends both in Ukraine and Russia became apart because of different opinions about the future perspectives of publishing, as well as about the task of poetry and poets in times of war.

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For further reading, the issue #25 of can be found online [here](#).

By devoting their newest issue #25 to the problem of the absence of words, or *speechlessness* (bol'she net slov), the editorial board aimed at addressing what has become the centre of cultural debates that are continuing on social media after the newly introduced censorship laws. Namely, that the invasion of Ukraine has hit the core of Russian identity and culture, making it impossible to look at its heritage, as well as speak and write poetry in this language, in the same way it has been done before. The title is hence reflecting not only the uncanny silence of the public and absence of any significant demonstrations against the war – at least as seen in comparison with anti-putinist rallies in February 2021, – but furthermore is addressing the lack of words with which the political opposition can position itself in the framework of this cultural and political catastrophe.

The presentation and discussion of the issue #25 took place at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, on July 6, in the presence of the chief editor Pavel Arsenev, and was moderated by Natalia Grinina, staff member of the Institute of Slavic and Hungarian Studies.

**Natalia Grinina:** Pavel, due to the continuation of the War in Ukraine, we witness a lot of pressure put on Russian speaking artists and writers coming from the side of Ukrainian cultural workers both for speaking and not speaking out against it. In the existing framework of war, neither words nor silence seem to be appropriate: any speech that can be marked or regarded as 'Russian' appears to have lost its credibility because it could not be proven to help preventing further violence from exploding. Still, the editorial board decided not to remain silent but addressed the problem of *speechlessness*, resulting both from the prohibition of free speech due to war censorship and as a reaction to a shock at the loss of the meaning of language, since the 'war' may no longer be called 'war', and people who go on the streets with the word 'peace' written on blank sheets of paper are called 'fascists'...

How did you come up with this idea and what struggles has the editorial board faced while working on it?

**Pavel Arsenev:** After the initial (emotional) response to the war and the question of how we could possibly help our fellow writers and colleagues from Ukraine, meaning, above all, financial aid, we had to ask ourselves whether we could re-navigate in a new framework of war or just stop publishing and close. We understood that we find ourselves in a specific historical moment: While we were experiencing 'only' an unprecedented cultural catastrophe, others were trying to save their lives. One of the main points for our theoretical reflections was hence to understand and question the journal as a specific cultural form (or as a foundation/mediation) or 'agent' of speech during the time of war.

Remembering the (in)famous quote by Adorno stating that any poem written after Auschwitz must be an act of barbarism, we were unavoidably facing the same historical problem ourselves: Any form of writing or publishing poetry in russian language could be easily considered 'barbaric' or inappropriate, as well as any form of 'cultural work' (even though it would position itself in an anti-war context) could be suspected of 'collaboration' with the same agents of political power who are now bombing Ukrainian cities. Although we have never been providers or supporters of russian imperialism (as you can clearly see from our history and content of the magazine), our continuing of 'cultural work' would mean that we are still positioning ourselves in the framework of 'Great Russian Culture' that has in some way provided the foundation for this violent military act.

Hence, we made it our common task, as a cultural micro-institution, to perform an act of 'burial' to the exceptionalist idea of russian history and culture, in order to condemn it in the strictest way possible. We were also drawn to re-negotiate our belonging to a specific cultural tradition in which our journal has been standing quite unwillingly: the so-called 'thick literary journal' that goes back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and that has a background of 'political activism' in its agenda since the foundation of *Sovremennik* (1836–1866). This tradition, that strived towards more political freedom, civic society and liberal reforms, survived until the very end of the Perestroika Era thanks to the literary-political magazine *Novy Mir* and lead to the rise of a completely new line of critical academic journals in post-soviet Russia (*Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie*, *Neprikosnovennyi Zapas* and others). Unfortunately, seeing the twilight of democratic developments in our country led us to the painful acknowledgement that this cultural tradition, with its historical heritage, could not bring the desirable results.

This is why we have shifted our attention to the political aspect of civil protest and disobedience: If we still had the right to continue to publish at all, we had to prevent ourselves from maintaining the illusion of 'business as usual' and to make our anti-war agenda clearly and unmistakably discernible from the journal's content.

**N.G.:** After having done a few presentations of the new issue inside russia, had to face criticism from former colleagues and friends. Publicly speaking out against the war is regarded by some people as both provocative and 'unnecessary', because it only endangers people who have been working on it but does not 'change anything'. What makes you disagree with this claim?

**P.A.:** With the power that we still had at our disposal, we tried to address this very division, which assumes that there is an either-or kind of choice between 'complete silence' in Russia and a 'safe space for expression' in the so-called liberal West, where any such expression 'against the war' is also completely useless.



Already back in 2014, the annexation of Crimea and the Donbas war created a split in the opposition groups. Instead of unified opposition two camps emerged -- those who were for "our Crimea" and those who were against. But it was still possible to criticize nationalist and imperialist positions of those who were for 'our Crimea' and physically co-exist with them.

In 2022 this split has reached an existential character. The new censorship law suggests that any form of criticism is not legal and hence impossible. So that if you don't agree with the general political line and want to express it publicly, you have to go to jail. The majority however decides to leave the country. To 'stay' inside the country started to mean that you either fully embrace or just 'accept' the main political course (in a painful or helpless way).

However, our goal at was to clarify (or, at first, to find out) whether it was indeed as dangerous to publish a journal with a clear anti-war message inside Russia as it seemed to us in the beginning. In the end, we could prove that it was still possible. We decided not only to produce a PDF and distribute it in 'safe-spaces' of Western universities or on the web but to publish it on paper. Furthermore, we distributed it through our established networks of independent bookstores so that the magazine and its content would still exist in Russian bookstores and it will be used by Russian citizens.

Of course, we had to follow several safety precautions: for example, delete the address of the printer's firm and remove the list of all bookstores, where the journal could be purchased, from the cover. Yet, we hoped that it would yield a new infrastructure of enunciation; or, at least, it would make the sceptics think once again before they tried to make an argument about what is possible and impossible and about means of protest and resistance in today's Russia in general.

**N.G.:** Another form of criticism came from Galina Rymbu, also a well-known Russian-speaking poet who has witnessed the beginning of the invasion in Lviv in Ukraine, where she continues to live with her partner and child. On February 28, she just happened to find access to the internet again after days without electricity because of the bombings and shelling, only to find her Facebook newsfeed drowned with anti-war poetry from friends living in Russia or abroad. This act of solidarity she described as entirely inappropriate, now when different forms of action are needed.

Her argument can be summed up as follows: On the one hand, those who happened to experience real war, who have become victims of rape and torture, do not have the possibility to write at all or do not have enough emotional distance to 'poeticize' this traumatic experience. In the meantime, others, who are still capable of writing, use their language to draw attention to their own traumatization from experiencing state torture and their own helplessness in

front of it.

In your opinion, what should we consider when drawing our attention to poetry written in times of war?

**P.A.:** What I find theoretically urgent here is the notion of the right to speak and to write (poetically) from a specific moment of time and from a specific geographical (and political) standpoint. The widespread and rapid emergence of critics of 'poeticizing from a distance' hints at something that has changed in the very rules of literary behaviour. These 'ethical' rules of communication already existed before the War but are now re-introduced in a new manner. These rules prescribe a certain attitude or ethics of speech bound to the position of the witness and the idea of poetic language as 'testimony'. Distance is being understood here not only as a geographical, physical distance of the speaker from the events he or she is speaking about but also in the sense of some moral right to speak about certain events.

In other words, the time and place from which a specific poetic enunciation is made have become more relevant than any other information that is being carried inside the semantic material like, for example, meter, rhythm, or other formal aspects. This information can be regarded now as some sort of 'meta-textual' marks and is being judged accordingly.

As another of my colleagues, a poet from St. Petersburg, Aleksandr Skidan, has put it, speaking poetically right now started to be very risky. It means, that you both "should and you shouldn't try" -- "This lesson also tells you to keep still, so you don't get hurt" («а еще урок говорит молчи / целее будешь»): The stakes both for speaking and for remaining silent have become high right now, and it is a direct (literal) consequence of a political catastrophe that is also happening inside the language. Now we need to re-think the whole balance and the distinction we have been making between "being voiceful" and "being silent" in a political sense in peaceful times.

**N.G.:** Galina Rymbu also pointed out that nearly all major media outlets in the West initially turned their attention to Russia and Russian artists to ask them "how they felt about the situation", instead of asking the Ukrainian side. This is just a symptom of a bigger imbalance and economy of attention that still exists in the post-soviet geographical space. Hence, I have to ask you more directly why did you decide not to collaborate with Ukrainian authors and artists on this particular issue. Was it a consequence of failed negotiations?

**P.A.:** If it is at all a productive perspective for art coming from Russia to remain invisible or silent at least for a certain amount of time, it is exactly out of understanding our own privilege and the attention that we have in the western

media. Hence remaining 'silent' would not happen out of being afraid of 'being repressed' or out of being 'cancelled' but out of the wish to redistribute the existing capital of attention. Hopefully, to make it better, will still be able to dedicate a full issue to Ukrainian voices and poets from Ukraine in the future, or maybe to even let them make one in our place.

Yet in February 2022, the first glance into our common facebook thread did not make us feel that our Ukrainian colleagues might feel comfortable about working together with us on this particular issue. It made it even less appropriate to ask for collaboration about 'poetry' at this moment. The reason why we still thought we had the right to speak and to publish (we started to prepare this publication in March) was merely to express that we were strictly against any 'normalization' of the situation or maintaining an illusion of it. Furthermore, we sensed the necessity to deal with the inner demons of our culture that has led to this unprecedented political and cultural catastrophe.

Only in a short period of time, just a few months, we felt as if all our professional branch in literary and theoretical writing has become similar to those who are discovering and analyzing a 'dead' language and a 'dead' culture – like the classics or linguistics of a dead language that no one is using anymore.

**N.G.:** What exactly creates this apocalyptic feeling of 'finitude', the feeling of its nearing end? Has this war become an 'event' happening inside the language and the culture itself, and what makes it destroy the language from within or make it inoperable for users? Is it comparable with the effects that Auschwitz had on poetic enunciation in general and for the German language especially (being more contaminated than others)?

**P.A.:** As a philosopher of language, I am asking myself: What does it mean to use the same language as a war criminal does, a language which is contaminated by some type of toxicity? In my view, language should be considered a kind of geological formation that transports superstitions, cultural reflexes, including imperialistic ambitions. It functions as a form of invisible cultural motorics. In the same way, I am now asking myself which forms of *sedimentation of toxicity* have been accumulated inside the russian language for decades.

I may refer here to a quote made by Nietzsche to make an example: "we cannot get rid of God if we still believe in grammar" ("Ich fürchte, wir werden Gott nicht los, weil wir noch an die Grammatik glauben". *Götzen-Dämmerung*, Chapter 5). Maybe the grammar and other inner features of the russian language as a system have been reinforcing cultural imperialism in the past, too. Already on the level of form and not simply 'content'. Using this language would then mean to operate the same cultural reflexes.

Although I am strictly against assuming a 'collective guilt' concerning all the speakers of the language itself in this instance – the situation that we are facing today more generally is, in fact, very similar to the German one. Lots of German poets and intellectuals have found their own personal answers to this question of how to continue living and how to continue writing (poetry) after such a catastrophe. Yet I would see our task in acknowledging a certain (tragic) end, or maybe even suicide of the culture (not only language) as a whole, in the first place.

**N.G.:** Yet it seems that the feeling of 'suicide' or 'end' of culture is something that only users from the 'center' are experiencing. I came across similar expressions in russian social media, uttered by many different writers and cultural workers even with different political backgrounds but who have been associating themselves with the cultural centre, e.g. Dmitry Bykov, or the producer Oleksandr Rodnyansky (among his renown projects are, e.g. A. Zvyagintsevs films "Leviathan" and "Nelyubov"). Would (and should), for example, a russian speaking writer who happened to be born in Ukraine and is currently living in Israel experience such a catastrophe inside the language as well?

**P.A.:** I think it is an issue that should probably concern all poets and writers, who think and write in russian. Many of the users of this language may not agree with this radical vision – as a rule, they are mostly those who have already invested way too much in this language to just 'abandon' or stop using it.

The question about 'collaborationism' with the russian language remains unsolved for me personally, too. Right now, I am playing with the phrase in my head: "I would forget Russian language only due to the fact that Putin has spoken it." («Я бы русский забыл только за то, что на нем разговаривал Путин») Nevertheless, I am still hesitating to put it into practice, not because of some personal and individual investments that I have made myself into this language by writing poetry, but rather considering theoretical implications.

What has always been interesting to me are possible scenarios for working with contaminated language as such and exploring possibilities of extracting something valuable from it. And seen from a historical perspective, moments of crisis of speech and utterance, precisely in times of war, have always been markers of the highest point of poetic aspirations, as they have been celebrated by poets for being vehicles that transform language.

Our primary concern, in the end, should not be the scepticism about "whether we can speak" or "write poetry" after Bucha or the War in Ukraine in general. But we shall precisely be concerned about not writing *in the same way* as before. In other words, we should be very critical about the way we use language.



**N.G.:** After the invasion of Ukraine the notion of 'decay' of russian language has suddenly become a trend in Slavic studies almost entirely connected to the ongoing War. The article by Andrei Voitovskij about the so-called 'desintegration of russian language' which he linked to the war ('poslevoennyj raspad yazyka') appeared on the internet platform syg.ma in August, quoting several authors who were published in . Already in November, Natalia Fedorova created an online course at the Smolny Beyond Borders (online university for russian academic researchers in exile) where the "decay of language" is linked to the trends of the interwar poetic experiments and the development of concrete poetry after WWII. Why is this link important?

**P.A.:** I see no contradiction between the constatation of bankruptcy of means and modes of social communication and the proclamation of the need for poetic experimentation with the new forms. Especially because the language of politics or of civil affairs exposes its corruption, poetry could intervene with it. It is also true that our issue, while constating the obsolescence of former ways of expression, draws on a relatively rich cultural tradition which has the idea of the destruction of tradition at its core. Politically sensitive and experimental poetry always faces some limits of existing forms of expression and condemns them.

In fact, difficulties with speech target precisely the sphere where poetic innovation still can and should unfold. Hence, poetic invention shall unfold on the same level where political repression exists and should strike back in the very same dimension and not just be an outdated form of consolation.

**N.G.:** Authors in the latest issue present a broad range of approaches and modes of poetic speaking. Some adopt an affective and emotional perspective, while others pursue a purely analytical approach, following in the footsteps of the Soviet underground tradition (like the Lianozovo school, e.g.)

Yet, facing the onslaught of the daily news, one cannot but wonder what aim or purpose justifies the urge to write poetry now, and who exactly is its addressee? Especially the attitude of anticipating the 'end' of russian culture is somehow contradictory to the strange 'overproduction' of speech, which is happening among the russian speaking exiled communities in the sphere of social media. As if all the speakers and carriers of this language and culture wanted to use its remaining energy to grasp the ongoing catastrophe in words. But it only results in the ceaseless discussions about the apocalypse, and not in 'silence' that would accompany real mourning and grief. Does it mean that all these written poetic words are addressed to no one else than the russian speaking community itself, leaving no room for a dialogue with those who are suffering from the russian military aggression at the front lines?

**P.A.:** We find ourselves in the middle of a situation where we cannot expect from poetry full apprehension of this catastrophe. Instead, we observe the 'immediacy' of the reactions to it and a range of different forms of these



reactions – it is a direct consequence of our living in the digital era. We also shouldn't underestimate the long-term effects that censorship brings to the language, starting from the division between publicly allowed speaking and the speaking "out" on social media that causes a flood of euphemisms in social interactions.

The effect of overabundance of the language, that you are pointing at, can be seen as a symptomatic reaction towards the violence that the state or the war censorship performs towards it, because it also affects the everyday communication, language as a social tool, the very channels of basic human understanding.

We also tend to underestimate how far the infrastructure of social media and the immediacy of news which are being thrown at us every day limit us in our political actions. The state of being 'overinformed' creates immobility and a feeling of impossibility to withstand the evil. Any type of reaction with speech, and especially with poetry in this state of mind is a productive way of getting out of this numbness, because it might help, after a while, to recover political activity as well.

The more news and images we receive about what happens, the more it is broadening our grief. Concentrating on our daily activities, like collecting and sorting clothes for refugees e.g., on the other hand, helps sorting the mind, clearing it of unnecessary stuff for a while. This is why we all are trying to engage in volunteer work as much as possible, inside and outside of Russia – to still be able to perceive ourselves as actors, having agency and subjectivity.

Cf. Kadan, Nikita: "No use for words that do not save lifes", an open letter as an answer to Dmitry Vilensky (Chto Delat Group), in: Artterritory. Com (03.10.22) :

[https://artterritory.com/en/visual\\_arts/topical\\_qa/26363-on\\_words\\_that\\_do\\_not\\_save\\_lives](https://artterritory.com/en/visual_arts/topical_qa/26363-on_words_that_do_not_save_lives).

Skidan, Aleksandr (2022): выходят адорно и беньямин / прилавки подписных изданий ломаются от антифашистской литературы / а ты стоишь один на один / с уроком литературы // урок говорит отвечай / погасло дневное светило / и были лучезарны вечера / и автора поставили к стенке // а еще урок говорит молчи / целее будешь / и тонкая струйка мочи / течет из лицейской осени // и тебя обнимают одноклассники / сокамерники палачи. <https://discours.io/expo/literature/poetry/russian-poetry-against-violence>

Выков, Dmitrij: „Дым-2. Podrazhanie Turgenevu“, in: Truerussia.org (23.07.22): „То, что русская культура стала сегодня темой многочисленных дискуссий о перспективе ее отмены или запрета, лишь выявило ее глубокое внутреннее свойство — тесную связь с механизмом отмены и, если угодно, некоторую болезненную сосредоточенность, заикленность на этой проблеме. Никто в мире еще не додумался ее глобально

отменить — то есть по крайней мере запретить русскую классику, — но сама себя она уже отменяет вовсю." Cf. <https://truerussia.org/journal/bykov/>.

Rodnyanski, Oleksandr: „Posle Buchi ”, in: Holod.media (04.04.22): "После Бучи нельзя больше говорить о российской культуре. Она не уберегла российского человека от варварства, от зверства и оскотинивания. Она виновна. Все к ней причастные виновны. Предстоит долгий путь перерождения. И покаяния. Просить прощения поздно. И не у кого. Их убили, изнасиловали и бросили в ямы в Буче, Ирпене, Гостомеле.... Cf. <https://holod.media/2022/04/04/rodnyansky/>. <https://holod.media/2022/04/04/rodnyansky/>

Andrei Orlov (2015): „А после Донбасса и наших в Крыму / Вопрос оголяю до сути: / Я русский забыл бы уже потому, /Что им разговаривал Путин". Cf. <https://glavred.info/kultura/344628-poet-andrey-orlov-ya-russkiy-zabyl-by-uzhe-potomu-hto-im-razgovarival-putin.html>

Voitovski, Andrei : « Poslevoennyi raspad yazyka " (15.08.22) <https://syg.ma/@voytovsky/probuzhdeniie-bukvy-ekspierimentalnaia-poeziia-i-poslievoiennyi-raspad-iazyka>

Cf. course description at Smolny.org : <https://www.smolny.org/2022/09/29/war-and-the-decay-of-language/>.

Image source: a collage of the anti-war images of the political movement "Vesna" (engl.: spring) from Saint Petersburg.