

Remembering Elena Shvarts

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I knew Elena Shvarts's poetry long before we met. I had taught her poems to students, and written essays about her poetry. But beginning in 1999, I had the privilege of spending time with her in Amherst, Cambridge, New York, and Petersburg. I heard her read her poems in public and in her apartment, and I listened to her views about matters as diverse as art, poems, cats, films, gaming arcades, friendship, human folly, and consequences of loss. Her last e-mail message to me, this past February, included a tender expression of pleasure that her work had found a reader. I think it gave her real joy to know that her work was read, that I and others like me believed her to be one of the most remarkable, powerful voices in contemporary Russian poetry. Among the paradoxes of Shvarts's poems, and there are many of them, is the sense of a fiercely solitary speaker, one who knows that she speaks out into a cosmos where only God listens, yet always with a kind of sixth sense for the humans who might also be there. Surely she anticipated that the rest of us just might catch a small portion of the light she showers on creation.

Light and dark are her milieux, in fact their precarious but important balance was the subject of her first correction to my work (she was to tell me more than once what I had gotten wrong, in a perfectly straightforward way; with great generosity, she would also praise anything that seemed to her to grasp an important or obscure aspect of the poetry). Here is her earliest criticism, in my translation: 'You have written accurately about irreparable isolation, and similarly gloomy topics, but there is another side to me, one which overcomes this (or so it seems to me), a side that is more filled with light'. She was right, of course, I had read her rather darkly. Now that she has died — why is it so hard to write those words? it cannot be easier to read them — it is tempting to read all the more darkly, but she would want us to reach for a wider view of her poems' illuminating and sustained truths. She would want as well for us to savour the humour and biting wit in the poetry, and not just hear its plangent cries, as much as those tones now seem appropriate.

When Elena Shvarts first came to Amherst, in 1999, the visit was brief. Its most memorable moment was our success in visiting the Emily Dickinson House. She had mentioned Dickinson in several letters, and I knew how much she wanted to go there, but it was closed for the season. We visited nonetheless, and saw every room slowly, quietly. I know that will conjure images of breaking and entering, and such a feat would have been very much in the spirit of Shvarts's life, but our penetration of the museum was entirely sanctioned. In those days, Amherst College felt like a small, rather homey place, with rules that could be loosened. A generous and wise Public

Affairs official, the late Douglas Wilson, simply took it on himself to open the house to a visiting poet; he knew that she needed no guide. That visit prompted Lena to write of Dickinson's isolation, of the gingerbread lowered to children, the fascicles of poetry. All that is familiar, of course, but her short statement 'Emily' also contains a sharp insight into the poetic world of Dickinson — that over the course of her lifetime, 'she barely changed: the same rhythmic figures, the same habits of rhyme, the same awkwardness, the same gaze straight through people into the abyss beyond them, and into the sky'.¹ That's her gaze as well, of course, through to eternity.

I have re-read that essay now, in order to write this short statement, and I have re-read the letters we exchanged over the years. This moment has pushed me back into memories that were impressionistic and strong, as I tried to rethink seemingly unimportant details of chronology or place. I am surprised by the haze of my memories: I could not at first remember when we first met, nor where, as if I could not think back to the moment of not knowing Lena. But her letters make it clear. The first ones are obviously between two people who have not met, written with considerable politeness and caution. An easy back and forth came into play, particularly after we met, but also when it became possible to communicate by e-mail. Those notes are more like phone calls, and perhaps it will be this way with so many writers' letters now: because of e-mail, they will show a kind of casual dailiness. Things about Lena's own daily life stand out to me in these notes, including references to physical ailments or deepening sadness, particularly at the time of her mother's illness and death. There are warm compliments about students and colleagues I sent her way, most often students who admired her poetry or who wanted to hear her stories of other writers whom she had known.

For all the theatrical self-display in her poetry, Lena was a private person in many ways, so I knew little about the tumultuous friendships and love affairs about which I sometimes heard from others. She was a deeply loyal friend, but also one who could take offence and who could relish a good scandal scene. Her prose recalls such scenes with a kind of guilt-free pleasure, and her poetry is filled with the intense emotions of a life lived absolutely full out. In one letter she admired a comparison I had made in an essay between her poems and the novels of Dostoevsky. She certainly had the intensity of his characters, the striving reach toward religious understanding, and his mix of hilarity and grandeur in her use of language.

I met Elena Shvarts thanks to Tom Epstein, and I remain grateful to him for sharing this precious friend with another American poetry scholar. Gerry Smith and Barbara Heldt, who had also known her well, added their own good word to Lena, and I am sure that her tremendous kindness to me over the years was enabled by these connections. In the years since we first met, contemporary Russian poetry has become the centre of my scholarship, something I could not have imagined in the 1990s. Lena had much to teach me in those years, both in person and in her writings. I remember her most vividly in two settings: in the dark book- and art-laden rooms of her Petersburg apartment, which was later to burn almost completely; and in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, where we spent a day in January, 2005, wandering from one exhibit to another, savouring in particular the light-filled Temple of Dendur. I remember standing some distance away at one point, watching her look intently at a Rembrandt drawing, and thinking that that moment was like the

experience of reading her poems. In the poems, we watch the poet take something into her imagination, often something that is itself an art work or a strange, stirring event, but she absorbs it in a way that is completely transformative.

Let her then have the last word, in a poem connected to Rembrandt. I do not know why it is not included in her published books. The poem was read at the opening ceremonies for the Rotterdam Poetry Festival in 2006, and I have the poem because it was sent to me for translation. Perhaps the plan to travel to the Netherlands and to read there inspired the turn to Rembrandt. Or it may be the memory of having seen the extraordinary drypoint print described here, his 'Christ Crucified between the Two Thieves: The Three Crosses' (1653). A second-state impression of this print is held at the Met, and surely was included in the exhibit we saw. Perhaps that is the print she was looking at in my memory, I cannot know. The poem itself is worth more than the memory, and I am glad to share it. Its existence leaves me with the hope that there are more poems out there, that we will yet hear the remarkable poetic voice of Elena Shvarts.

Офорт Рембрандта — Христос и разбойники

Распятие разбойники
 Раскинув руки — как по канатам ринга
 Друг против друга,
 А между ними — Судья.

Или три птицы —
 Феникс и два петуха бойцовых.
 Темный как ястреб навис над светлым,
 Рембрандт четвертою птицей
 Вокруг Голгофы кружил.
 Если иначе взглянуть —
 Он — дерево Жизни, ель рождества
 Ветви оттянуты тяжестью двух,
 Тянут они к земле,
 А Он — к небесам.

Я всегда забываю о них —
 О распятых разбойниках,
 Будто их не было вовсе.
 А они недалеко — внутри
 Правое — левое легкое —
 Как левый и правый кат,
 Друг против друга,
 Во тьме розовея,
 Висят.

A Rembrandt Lithograph: Christ with Thieves

Crucified thieves,
 Their arms are spread out like fighters on the ropes,

One across from the other,
Between them — the Referee.

Or perhaps they are three birds:
A phoenix between two sparring cocks.
Dark as a hawk hanging over the light,
Rembrandt circles Golgotha,
He is the fourth bird.
Seen from another angle,
He is the tree of Life, the spruce of Christmas,
His branches bent by the weight of the other two.
They reach down to the earth
But He reaches up — to the skies.

I always forget those two,
The crucified thieves,
As if they were not there.
In fact, they are here, inside.
Each one is a lung — right and left —
Like the left and right villains,
One across from the other,
Faintly pink against the dark,
Hanging.

Note

¹ Shvarts, *Sochineniia* (St Petersburg: Pushkinskii fond, 2008), vol. 4, p. 292.

Notes on contributor

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