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THE THEME OF A POET AND POETRY IN THE TEXTS BY VERONIKA DOLINA

ABSTRACT: The article analyses the poetry by Veronika Dolina, a contemporary Russian singer-songwriter. The most significant factors that have shaped the new quality of Dolina's songwriting are: the Russo-Ukrainian war, propaganda and censorship intensification, and the emigration of individuals with whom she has close familial and cultural ties. In this context, the themes that have already become traditional for Dolina's work receive a new connotation. One of the central themes in her texts is the theme of a poet. This article focuses on the theme of a poet, which is realized in Dolina's poetry in three variants: 1) a poet's responsibility for what is happening in the country; 2) a poet as an atoning sacrifice; 3) a poet as a prophet. These variants are subsequently analyzed within the context of Dolina's more recent literary works.

KEYWORDS: author song, Russian poetry, the theme of a poet, singer-songwriter

The war against Ukraine, initiated by Russia in February 2022, has had a significant impact on Russian culture and literature, both within Russia and internationally. In Russia, there has been a discernible intensification of the socio-political situation, evidenced by the augmented prevalence of official propaganda and, the enactment of the foreign agent law, which evokes the enemy of people law of the Stalin era. The political decisions of the Kremlin has influenced all aspects of cultural life, not only in Russia but also in other countries. The emigration of people opposed to the Kremlin regime and the war has been one of the significant consequences of this situation. All these events are reflected in the literary life of Russia. In this context, the genre of the author song is no exception. This genre has historically been associated with opposition to the official power and the existing order. Therefore, the author song, as a form of protest, is once again becoming a relevant phenomenon in Russian culture.

The heyday of the author-songwriter genre in the Soviet Union was from the 1960s to the 1980s. At that time, outstanding author-songwriters appeared, attracting audiences of thousands to their concerts. In this context, the names of three prominent representatives of this genre should be mentioned: Alexander Galich, Bulat Okudzhava, and Vladimir Vysotsky. The genre of the author song underwent substantial evolution during the late 20th and early 21st centuries. These changes can be attributed to two key factors: first, generational shifts amongst

authors, and second, the prevailing political climate in Russia at that particular period. The process of Gorbachev's perestroika created opportunities for publicizing and opening up society to all issues, without any forbidden topics or motifs. In this regard, the author song as a protest song was marginalized at the end of the twentieth century, as evidenced by the ironic text of the Russian bard Boris Burda with the symbolic title *Dedication to Colleagues*.

Ну, что же делать, мои милые друзья?
Признаться, наше положение очень сложно:
Мы так учились петь о том, о чем нельзя,
Но что же делать нам сейчас, когда все можно? (Burda)

[What should we do, my dear friends?
Our current situation is quite difficult.
We have been taught to sing about taboo topics,
But what should we do now when everything is allowed?]

Despite this, the song ends with an optimistic note, reminding us that,

И что всегда найдется петь, о чем нельзя,
Причем и в наши времена, когда все можно. (Burda)

[There will always be something to sing about what is not allowed,
Especially in our times when everything is permitted.]

In literary studies, there was a growing interest in the author song as a socio-cultural phenomenon in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The poetics and problems of the author song and some artists of the genre have been the subject of many monographs and articles. Additionally, there have been endeavours to develop a typology of this genre, that it publication of anthologies. Naturally, the majority of works were dedicated to the masters of the genre: Okudzhava, Galich, and Vysotsky (see: Kulagin 1997; 2015; Osiewicz 2016; Rozenblium 2015). The renewed interest in the author song at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, when it was no longer so popular, suggests a retro interpretation of the genre, which was not the subject of scientific research in Soviet times.

In the contemporary era, it is possible to discuss the various trends that have emerged to the author song, with a specific focus on its increasing marginalization, particularly within the context of Russian mass media. Anton Dolin, a prominent Russian film critic, a 'foreign agent', and a son of the renowned Russian bard Veronika Dolina, offers a critical perspective on this situation. Dolin questions the assessment of the author song in modern Russian society: "Why is the author (or bard) song an acute irritant for a huge number of well-educated people aged from 30 to 50? Why is it the embodiment of vulgarity, bourgeoisie, and comic stupidity?"

How did this happen? What's the explanation for this?" (Dolin 2021) Dolin identifies several potential explanations for the current situation. However, he asserts that the primary reason is the long-standing association between the author song and the concept of "intelligentsiya".

I suspect the real reason is a terrible allergy to the word and concept of "intelligentsiya," the embodiment of which has always been the author song. And this allergy, brought up in the 1990s and strengthened by the 2000s, is one of the unobvious, but important reasons for the moral (yeah, I'm not afraid of this word) crisis we all find ourselves in today (Dolin 2021).

It is crucial to acknowledge that in the current socio-political milieu in Russia, certain author songs that have already attained the status of classics are once again relevant. They present novel, unanticipated, and heretofore inconceivable meanings, particularly in the context of the full-scale war with Ukraine. To substantiate this hypothesis, one might consider the songs by Okudzhava and Vysotsky that address military themes, as well as the poems by Galich, for instance, *Petersburg Romance*. The last mentioned piece poses a particularly pertinent question for contemporary Russian society:

Можешь выйти на площадь,
Смеешь выйти на площадь,
В тот назначенный час?!

Can you go to the square,
Do you dare to go to the square,
At that appointed hour?! (Galich 1991)

In the context of contemporary Russian culture, Veronika Dolina represents a distinctive figure within a broader category of modern singer-songwriters. She is an author of poetry books and translations, an active contributor to the Facebook community, and a mother of a 'foreign agent'. Dolina's oeuvre was already well-known during the Soviet era. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, she has continued to produce new poetry collections at a prolific rate, with almost one poetry book published every year. Additionally, she has maintained a busy schedule of performances in Russia, Europe, the United States, and Israel.

The monograph dedicated to the poetry and symbolism of Veronica Dolina's texts argues that her artistic heritage can be divided into four periods (Mnich 2016, 11). It appears that she has entered a new phase in her work in recent years. There have been alterations in both the themes explored in her poetry and the employed stylistic presentation. These changes could be attributed to a variety of reasons, including personal and objective factors. We contend that the Russo-Ukrainian war,

the intensification of propaganda and censorship, and the departure abroad of people with whom she has close familial and cultural ties have greatly influenced the new quality of Dolina's poetry. In this context, traditional themes in her poetry, such as: woman and her destiny, family in everyday life and the realities of the time, emigration, or the theme of a poet and poetry, receive a new meaning. Dolina's stance on the genre of the author song is unambiguous. She attributes its genesis to the opposition to authority:

A singing man with a guitar appeared in opposition to the official government. It couldn't do much harm to them, because there was the so-called Soviet song in the persons of Alexandra Pakhmutova and Joseph Kobzon, with whom, even with a strong desire, the bards could not compete. Of course, the authorities' patience was not endless, so they needed someone to act as an example for a "demonstrative flogging." It turned out to be Alexander Galich (Kudryats 2009).

One of the central themes in Dolina's poetry is the theme of a poet. This theme is present from the very beginning of her poetic career. A notable example of this theme can be found in Dolina's song *Before God and Verse*. This article is dedicated to the exploration of the theme of a poet in Dolina's texts, where this theme is presented in several versions, namely: 1) a poet's responsibility for the current situation in the country; 2) a poet as an atoning sacrifice; 3) a poet as a prophet.

This study will examine the three variations of the theme of a poet in Dolina's recent texts. The materials selected for analysis were gathered from Dolina's Facebook page, which serves as a platform for the author to share her new and previously released works, as well as recordings of her concerts from 2022 to 2024. These recordings are available on the YouTube channel. In examining Dolina's texts, two methodological approaches will be integrated. One of them is a hermeneutical approach to a literary text, which takes into account the symbolic, historical and contextual meanings of the text. The other one applies the assumptions of the theory of intertextuality, which considers a text in its dialogue with other cultural texts.

Dolina sings songs from different years at her concerts. The structure of these concerts is not predetermined by the artist; rather, it emerges spontaneously, imparting a sense of mysticism. Lyrics written earlier but performed after the onset of the Russo-Ukrainian war assume a completely new significance in the current political situation. It is worth mentioning *Candle's Song*, performed at the end of the concert under the symbolic title *We all hoped for a miracle...*, evinces a particularly dramatic essence. The symbolism of a candle in Dolina's poetry is closely intertwined with the theme of a poet (Mnich 2016, 69-70). The final stanza of the song reiterates the initial stanza and resonates with the quality of a spell.

Оттого-то и хочу
Я дожить до свету.
Не гаси меня, свечу!
Я свечу поэту. (Dolina 2000, 199)

[That is why I want
To live to see the light.
Don't extinguish me, candle!
I shine for the poet.]

It is imperative to emphasize the motif of sacrifice in this context: the candle illuminates the poet while simultaneously burning itself out. Furthermore, a burning candle is associated with the issue of conscience and protest against political repression. The text *If It Gets Even Darker* presents the symbol of a candle as a central and meaningful one. The text is based on the classic opposition of light and darkness, and the source of invincible light is a candle:

Если будет ещё темней
В череде наших зимних дней-
Я поставлю одну свечу
И детей светить научу. (Dolina 2023b)

[If it gets any darker
In the midst of our winter days-
I'll put out one candle
And teach the children how to shine.]

In Dolina's poetry, one of the variations of the theme of a poet is a poet's responsibility for what is happening in the country. This responsibility is linked to the theme of light, whereby the poet illuminates the situation and is therefore held accountable for what she illuminates. In this context, it is worth noting the poem-epigraph, *Let the Text and Subtext Be with Me*, which Dolina used to begin the concert at the Wood Grouse Nest on 27.11.22. The following are the most significant fragments from the poem:

Да будет со мною и текст, и подтекст
Словес угловатых.
Я самая старшая из поэтесс
Во всем виноватых. [...]

Да будут со мною предлог и претекст,
Пускай перекрёстно.
Я старше всех этих, осталась при тех,
Чьё небо беззвёздно. [...]

Одно остаётся – светить изнутри
 Гореть как паяльник.
 Остался включённым, ну ты посмотри,
 Для тех, не лояльных.

Для тех, непокорных, со справкой и без.
 Для нас, бесноватых.
 Я самая старшая из поэтесс
 Во всем виноватых. (Dolina 2022a)

[May both the text and the subtext
 Of awkward words be with me.
 I am the oldest of all the poets
 Guilty of everything. [...]]

Let the motif and the pretext be with me,
 Albeit crosswise.
 I'm older than all of the new poets, but I stayed
 With those whose sky is starless. [...]]

One thing remains – to shine from within,
 To burn like a soldering iron.
 Look, it stayed turned on
 For those, not loyal.

For those rebellious, with or without a diagnosis.
 For us, the mad ones.
 I am the oldest of all the poetesses
 Guilty of everything.]

In this poem, the poet ‘provides instructions’ for the reader to pay attention to the symbolic meanings embedded in her poetry. Dolina emphasizes the importance of the text, subtext, and pretext, and the main theme of the poem is the poet’s guilt and responsibility. Additionally, the poem has a ring composition, with a repeated verse in the first and last stanzas, which creates a spell-like effect. The author’s emphasis on the pretext and subtext enables the reader to discern an allusion to Anna Akhmatova’s renowned poem, *Imitation of Kafka*:

Я глухну от зычных проклятий,
 Я ватник сносила дотла.
 Неужто я всех виноватей
 На этой планете была? (Akhmatova 1990, 244-245)

[I’m going deaf from loud curses,
 I wore a prison uniform down to the ground.
 Was I the only one to blame
 On the entire planet?]

It is significant to acknowledge that Akhmatova's poem engages in a form of a dialogue with Franz Kafka, the author of the *The Trial* novel. This dialogue is evident in the poem's title and is reinforced by the imagery and the statement, *Такое придумывал Кафка*. Nevertheless, the poem reflects an episode from the life of Anna Akhmatova and is a symbol of the country during the Stalinist terror. The idea of the poet's atoning sacrifice and her loneliness is an important motif in the poem. Dolina's poem develops Akhmatova's theme in a new historical context. The image of a candle is transformed into a symbolism of a "soldering iron", which is semantically connected with the poet's mission. In Veronika Dolina's poem, a "cross-pretext" situation is evident, where the symbolism of Kafka's texts (such as the situation of the court, the innocently convicted, and the absurdity of the situation) and the symbolism of Anna Akhmatova's poem (such as the loneliness of the poet, the atoning sacrifice, and terror) are refracted. Furthermore, the text offers a reinterpreted image of the candle.

An intriguing juxtaposition of the themes: "a poet as an atoning sacrifice" and "a poet-prophet" is presented in the text dedicated to Varlam Shalamov. Veronika Dolina considers his personality, achievements, and destiny to be of exceptional importance. On the website shalamov.ru, there is one of Dolina's poems dedicated to Shalamov, in which he is compared to a modern Virgil, symbolizing a guide and leader for the current generation. Dolina also writes about Shalamov:

Я очень высоко ставлю фигуру Шаламова в мировой культуре и поэзии. Так и есть. Его уникальность, непримиримость всю жизнь важны для меня. Его заведение не верить «им» ни в коем случае. Его муки. Как вообще можно было остаться писателем и поэтом в аду – загадка. (Dolina 2022c) [I place the figure of Shalamov very highly in world culture and poetry. I do. His uniqueness, his intransigence all his life is important to me. His will not to believe "them" in any way. His torment. How it was even possible to remain a writer and poet in hell is a mystery.]

In light of the above, it becomes evident how thematically and ideologically significant Varlam Shalamov is in Dolina's poetry. For the analysis, the first and last stanzas of the poem dedicated to this writer are the most important:

Один единственный. За многих.
За сотни тысяч тел убогих,
Лежащих в безызвестном рву-
Заговорил он наяву [...]

Пророк угрюмый. Неудобный.
Вергилию уже подобный.
Пусть школьник учится ему.
Пусть постигает Колыму. (Dolina 2020c)

[The only one. For many.
 For hundreds of thousands of wretched bodies,
 Lying in an unknown ditch -
 He spoke up [...]]

The gloomy prophet. Inconvenient.
 He looks like Virgil.
 Let the schoolchild learn him.
 Let him comprehend Kolyma.]

Consequently, Varlam Shalamov represents the victims of Stalin's repressions in Dolina's poem. In his *Kolyma Tales*, he presents the first accurate and reliable evidence concerning the atrocities perpetrated by the Soviet regime. The poem concludes with a call to the younger generation "to comprehend Kolyma". A new perspective on the perception of this text emerges with an addition of an epigraph by Dolina during the Russo-Ukrainian war:

Не дочитали мы Шаламова.
 Не уяснили все же самого
 Того что есть - кем были мы:
 Наследниками Колымы. (Dolina 2023a)

[We didn't finish reading Shalamov.
 We still haven't figured out the most important
 Who were we:
 The heirs of Kolyma.]

In this context, Kolyma can be understood as a metonym for the entirety of Stalinist Russia, while simultaneously functioning as a metaphor for the "unlearned lesson of history". The image of "heirs of Kolyma" serves to illustrate the prevailing perspective and to project the situation in contemporary Russia as being analogous to that of Kolyma.

Dolina published another poem, entitled *Жизнь едва ли начнется заново*, which was thematically related to Varlam Shalamov, on his Facebook page on 4 December 2023. This poem represents an irreconcilable reaction to the news of the closure of the Shalamov Museum. The information about that event was reported in the press at the end of November 2023. Almost immediately, Dolina responded to this message with her text, which stands out from her other poems by style and tone. The writer's memorial room (*Shalamov Museum*) was located in the building of a tuberculosis dispensary in the village of Debin, Magadan Region (Na Kolyme... 2023). The museum housed original items from the writer's library, copies of Shalamov's handwritten diaries, and belongings of Kolyma prisoners. The museum served as a tangible representation of the writer's memory and the

challenging circumstances of his life, while also providing a testament to the experiences of the hundreds of thousands of individuals who were wrongfully convicted and killed in Kolyma. It is of note that Shalamov depicts this hospital in his *Kolyma Tales*. The official rationale for the closure of the museum was the building's emergency condition and preparations for hospital renovation. Consequently, the museum, which had amassed its collection over 20 years, was forced to close down.

Dolina's poem entitled *Life is unlikely to begin again* (Dolina 2023) evinces a pessimistic and hopeless tone from the outset. In this despairing situation, the author's only recourse is to express her viewpoint on the situation and direct a curse towards the authorities. Notably, this curse is emphasized twice, at the beginning and at the end of the poem. The leitmotif in this poem, as in the previous one, is an unlearned history lesson. The subsequent stanza of the poem depicts the future retribution of the authorities for their failure to learn the history lesson.

It is also essential to consider two texts by Dolina that examine the theme of a poet and poetry: *He ошиблась я тогда* and *И непросите мира назавтра*. These texts present a classic theme in Russian literature: a poet as a prophet and poetry as a prophecy. The following quotes are taken from the poem *I Wasn't Wrong Then...*:

Не ошиблась я тогда
В этом недочеловеке.
В прошлом веке было, да,
Дело было в прошлом веке.[..]

Я же видела беду.
И подземный профиль гномий
Отличила на ходу
Средь других физиономий. (Dolina 2022b)

[I wasn't wrong then
About this subhuman.
It was the last century, yes,
It was the last century.

I saw the trouble.
I saw the dwarf's subterranean profile
I recognized it on the move
Among the other faces.]

The poem's central image is that of a subhuman tyrant. In this poem, Dolina foresaw the hardships and calamities that would befall her country. The image of a subhuman from this text echoes the image of a tyrannosaurus from Dolina's earlier work, *And ask for peace tomorrow*. The etymology of 'Tyrannosaurus' (meaning 'tyrant lizard') aligns with its image as a powerful, but extinct predator.

In Dolina’s song, the image of a Tyrannosaurus and the sentiments of admiration and humility towards it are aligned with the ideas presented in the renowned play *The Dragon* by Evgeny Schwartz. The act of kissing the claws of the tyrant can be seen as a symbolic representation of a humble country, Russia, bowing before the dictator and his power. Notably, the images associated with those in power in Dolina’s recent songs portray a clear opposition between “us” (the people) and “them” (the authorities), with the latter, depicted as bestial, subhuman, and monstrous. This provides a clear example of a stark contrast:

У них питерский форум,
У них зрительский кворум,
Они взяли нас просто
Войной и измором. (Dolina 2022d)

[They have a Peter forum,
They’ve got an audience quorum,
They have brought us down
By war and violence.]

It is important to highlight that this poem was written in response to the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum in 2018. The poem employs a dichotomous structure, contrasting the concepts of “us” and “them”. The final stanza of the poem leaves no room for ambiguity, thereby clearly indicating the criticism of power presented in it:

Эрмитаж или форум,
Пилотаж или кворум-
Это враг и ненастье.
Бесчестье с позором. (Dolina 2022d)

[Hermitage or forum,
Pilotage or quorum-
It’s an enemy and a foe.
Disgrace and dishonour.]

In her autobiographical texts, Dolina presents the theme of a poet extensively. In the poem *Как мать иноагента*, she reacts to her son Anton Dolin being designated as a foreign agent in 2022. The poem serves as a statement from a mother defending her son and condemning the authorities. It offers a contrast between the “monsters” in power and the “living people”, to whom the poet herself belongs. This text provides a definitive answer to the question of whether one should fear the authorities. The poem can be interpreted as a manifesto of support, primarily for the poet’s son, but also for all individuals in contemporary Russia who have been designated as foreign agents – including friends, acquaintances, and strangers.

The examples of poetry by Veronika Dolina analyzed in this article demonstrate that the author song is returning to its roots, becoming a kind of cry of despair, a voice of truth, as well as a clear opposition to the official propaganda. Dolina's songs have consistently centered on "feminine" themes and have been distinguished by their lyrical and dramatic qualities, in line with the tradition of Bulat Okudzhava. Nevertheless, within the oeuvre of this lyrical poet, many songs that express protest and defiance towards the inhumane policies of the Russian state have emerged in recent years.

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