Russian Transformations: Literature, Thought, Culture

Emily Lygo

Leningrad Poetry 1953–1975

The Thaw Generation

Peter Lang

This is the first book-length study of the outstanding generation of Leningrad poets whose careers began during the Khrushchev Thaw. The text brings together memoirs, interviews, and archival research to construct an account of the world of poetry in Leningrad, in which many now-famous figures began writing. The author describes the institutions, official events, unofficial groups, and informal activities that were attended by many young poets, including the pre-eminent poet of this generation, Iosif Brodsky. Alongside a detailed study of Brodsky's work from the early 1970s are close readings of two other major poets from this generation whose work has often been overlooked, Viktor Sosnora and Dmitry Bobyshev.

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Transliteration of Russian Words and Names

I have used the British Standard System of Cyrillic Translation throughout. Although in the West Iosif Brodsky is better known as Joseph Brodsky, for the sake of consistency I have used the earlier form, Iosif, throughout. In cases where a particular spelling of a Russian name has become standard and recognised in the West, I have used this form, e.g. Lev Loseff.

Introduction

In the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, there was a flowering of poetry in Russia that can be compared in its scale and significance to the Silver Age of Russian poetry from the end of the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. The most famous poet by far to emerge from this era was Iosif Brodsky, whose career was crowned with the accolades of Nobel Laureate (1987) and Poet Laureate of the United States of America (1991). In his Nobel Lecture, Brodsky spoke of the generation of Russian poets to which he belonged:

> That generation – the generation born precisely at the time when the Auschwitz crematoria were working full blast, when Stalin was at the zenith of his godlike, absolute power, which seemed sponsored by Mother Nature herself – that generation came into the world, it appears, in order to continue what, theoretically, was supposed to be interrupted in those crematoria and in the anonymous common graves of Stalin's archipelago. The fact that not everything got interrupted, at least not in Russia, can be credited in no small degree to my generation, and I am no less proud of belonging to it than I am of standing here today.[1]

He accepted the Nobel Prize as recognition of the services that his generation – and not he alone – had rendered to culture.

Brodsky was one of a great number of poets who appeared in Leningrad at this time, but only a handful of his contemporaries have become at all well known, often through their friendship with Brodsky or because of his endorsement of their work. Others remain little known outside rather narrow circles of readership and their work has as yet received hardly any critical attention. Indeed, Brodsky's fame has tended to eclipse the work

1 Joseph Brodsky, 'Nobel Lecture', given in 1987 and published as 'Uncommon Visage: The Nobel Lecture', in his *On Grief and Reason* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1996), pp. 44–58 (p. 55).

and reputations of his contemporaries who remained in the USSR and even of those in emigration. This has been the case especially in the West, where information about poets working but not publishing in the USSR was limited until the late 1980s, and a feud between Brodsky and Dmitry Bobyshev (b. 1936) resulted in a lamentable and unwarranted bias against Bobyshev's work which profoundly affected his reception at first in the West and later in post-Soviet Russia as well. I hope that this volume will go some way to redressing these imbalances and distortions.

After Stalin's death in 1953, writers found themselves, again in Brodsky's words, 'in an empty – indeed a terrifyingly wasted – place'.[2] This is no exaggeration of the extent to which the years of Stalinism had debased Russian literature in the USSR. In the purges of the 1930s, writers were physically annihilated and mentally broken; by the late 1940s, years of repressive censorship and political intimidation had ensured that, except for a window of reprieve during the Great Patriotic War, lyric poetry had effectively disappeared from published literature in the USSR. Although during these years poets continued to write lyric poetry, it was all 'for the desk drawer' and remained in the private domain. To many young poets in the 1950s the preceding decades appeared to be a hiatus in a poetic tradition stretching back to the eighteenth century.

Not long after Stalin's death, lyric poetry began to return to the pages of Soviet journals and resume a place in Soviet Russian literature. In fact, the Khrushchev Thaw, during which it seemed that 'Socialism with a human face' was possible and that Soviet society was facing up to the mistakes of the preceding decades, became closely associated with lyric poetry through the famous young Moscow poets Evgeny Evtushenko (b. 1933), Bella Akhmadulina (b. 1937), Andrey Voznesensky (b. 1933) and others. Lyric poetry, in other words, was in fashion. It carried a complex knot of associations during this period: while poetry was endorsed by the Party and authorities, at the same time it became a key medium of expression for the dissident movement, the inception of which is usually dated as the

2 Loc. cit.

1960s. The young Moscow 'star' poets, who published and appeared at official readings, have been described as 'permitted dissidents'.

The fashion for poetry that developed after Stalin's death was not only a response of young people to the Thaw; other groups in society were also involved in restoring lyric poetry to the Soviet canon. Liberal members of the Writers' Union saw the political thaw as a chance to expand the range of literature that could be published and, in particular, to reintroduce lyric poetry to Soviet literature. The fashion for poetry was also cultivated by the authorities: in the early 1950s, the Kremlin issued instructions to all local branches of the Writers' Union to improve the state of Soviet poetry, which was deemed to have fallen behind other genres in its development. The Union branch in Leningrad responded to this central instruction with far-reaching changes to its work with young writers that aimed to attract more youthful talent into Soviet literature. This book charts how the actions of these different groups in society combined to produce a poetry movement in Leningrad that began in the 1950s and came to be closely identified with the Khrushchev Thaw.

Since Leningrad poetry of the Thaw period was nurtured at different levels, including official policy, grass-roots literary workshops, and informal groups, any comprehensive account of poetry in Leningrad at this time must describe both official and unofficial activities. Such an inclusive approach to the subject is especially important for the earlier Thaw period of the 1950s and early 1960s because, while there was always some distinction between official and unofficial groups of poets, these were far from mutually exclusive at this time. Individuals could belong to both camps, many friendships and associations spanned the two, and a lot of people did not really distinguish between them.[3]

The distinction between official and unofficial poetry grew more apparent in the latter half of the 1960s, when the literary authorities changed their

3 The proximity of official and unpublished poets is reflected in some contemporary publications in the West, in which they appear side by side. See, for example: Olga Carlisle, *Poets on Street Corners* (New York: Random House, 1968); George Reavey, *The New Russian Poets* (New York: October House, 1968); Suzanne Massie, *The Living Mirror: Five Poets from Leningrad* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1972).

policies towards young poets to become far less inclusive and encouraging. This shift in policy coincided to some degree with the appearance of a new generation of young poets who did not enjoy the encouragement and sponsorship of the authorities as their older counterparts had. While the poets who emerged in the 1950s believed that they could join Soviet literature and still write with integrity, this younger generation found that there was no prospect for them to pursue professional careers without writing political hack-work. They compensated for the lack of professional opportunities by developing their own underground and unofficial literary milieu, and came to rely increasingly upon *samizdat* (self-publishing) and *tamizdat* (publishing in the West) in order to reach an audience. In this way, the association between dissidence and poetry became strengthened. Across the 1970s and 1980s, the Third Wave of emigration from the USSR took place, with Brodsky and Bobyshev among the Leningrad writers who left the USSR and joined Russian literature abroad.

Not surprisingly, changes as significant as those in Soviet literature and society after 1953 led to changes in the kind of poetry written and published in Leningrad. In the early years of the Thaw, changes in policy transformed published poetry: liberal writers in the Union petitioned for there to be more lyric poetry published with a wider range of subjects and emotions; the appointment of more liberal editors to key positions in journals facilitated the publication of a wider range of poetry; and the literary authorities officially endorsed an expansion in poetry's themes and forms. The assimilation of new young writers also helped improve the quality and diversity of what was published. Essentially, in line with the changes in official Party policy introduced in the wake of the Secret Speech, the interpretation of Socialist Realism in poetry broadened at this time. Clearly, there were still parameters that dictated what was and was not acceptable for publication, but these are nowhere explicitly stated. In this study, I elucidate these from discussions held by the Writers' Union and analysis of the published poems themselves.

Too little scholarly attention has been given to published Soviet poetry of the post-Stalin period and to the editorial policies that shaped it. There has been a tendency to assume that all published Soviet literature must be overtly political, interesting only as evidence of Party-controlled literature

and not as literature in its own right. It is true that reams of unremarkable verse were produced in the USSR, but it is also the case that certain writers managed to find a niche for themselves by writing genuine literature for official publication. The most important writer in such a position in Leningrad was Aleksandr Kushner (b. 1936), who wrote and published genuine and talented lyric poetry within the official literary world of the USSR: he continued the Petersburg tradition of poetry during the Thaw, forging continuity with the past and preserving its conventions.

For many other poets, the conditions for publication in the USSR, which is to say the demands of Socialist Realism and the necessity of building a career over time as well, precluded publication of some or most of their work in Soviet Russia. Not only those who defined themselves in opposition to the Soviet state found themselves in this situation: members of the Writers' Union could also find that they were unable to publish their original writing, and many made a living by translating or writing children's literature instead. If they published their poetry at all, then it was chiefly in *samizdat* and *tamizdat*, until finally it appeared in small editions during the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Too often it has been assumed that the division in the USSR between published and unpublished literature coincided with the one between good and bad literature, and this study aims to show this to be unrealistic. Part 2 of the book begins with a survey of very standard, published Soviet poetry, and then offers an analysis of the work of Aleksandr Kushner as an example of a talented poet publishing in the USSR. Subsequent chapters present studies of three poets I consider to be the leading figures of their generation: Viktor Sosnora (b. 1936), Dmitry Bobyshev, and Iosif Brodsky. Altogether, this selection of poetry ranges from published, canonical Socialist Realism to the work of émigrés that remained unpublished in the USSR until *glasnost'*. It underlines that the quality of poetry written was independent of the poet's relationship to the authorities: each developed his career and wrote poetry differently from the others, and there are no convenient correlations between political attitudes and poetic talent.

There are many fine poets of this generation; my choice of Sosnora, Bobyshev and Brodsky as the leading figures is, of course, subjective; some critics would certainly include Kushner in this group, and other poets who

are undoubtedly worthy of attention include Vladimir Uflyand (1937–2007), Lev Loseff (1937–2009),[4] Evgeny Rein (b. 1935), Nonna Slepakova (1936–1998), Roal'd Mandel'shtam (1932–1961), and the younger poets Elena Shvarts (b. 1948), Sergey Stratanovsky (b. 1944) and Viktor Krivulin (1944–2001). It seems to me, however, that the three discussed in this study made the most profound and distinctive developments in poetry of all of their generation. In contrast with Kushner, who preserved tradition, they developed language and expression fully and originally. Through the use of innovative techniques, their voices emerge with a distinctiveness that makes them immediately recognisable. The coherence of their vision and purpose in poetry is expressive of a sustained enquiry into poetry, language and meaning.

On the face of it, the work of this trio has little in common, yet as the history related in Part 1 of this study shows, these poets all began their writing careers in the LITOs of 1950s Leningrad. All had important and formative relationships with poets and critics of their grandparents' generation which provided them with a link to the traditions of Russian poetry and culture all but obliterated by the Stalinist period. Some aspects of this history and cultural context are shared with poets outside Leningrad as well: changes in poetry during the Thaw were found across the USSR, and to a certain extent the literary process and poets described here are relevant beyond this specific case study. The centralised nature of the Soviet state meant that conditions in cities far from each other could be similar in many ways: the Kremlin's imperative to develop lyric poetry, the instructions of the Secret Speech to move away from the Stalinist past, and the reappearance of lyric poetry in the major 'thick' journals would have affected young writers all over the USSR in the 1950s. The number of opportunities made available to young people, the attitude of the local Party in implementing these changes and directives, and the control it exerted over young writers' activities, on the other hand, could vary from city to city. While there have not been extensive studies of the literary culture during the Thaw in

4 Lev Loseff is the pseudonym of Lev Lifshits. His father, the children's writer Vladimir Lifshits, gave it to him when Loseff began publishing literature for children.

Moscow or in the provinces, it appears that there were similarities with the situation in Leningrad, and also some regional differences.

Moscow was the centre that offered the most opportunities for young writers, and over the course of the 1960s many Leningraders moved there to try to develop their careers.[5] Its Gorky Literary Institute offered training and career opportunities for young writers: Evgeny Evtushenko, Robert Rozhdestvensky (1932–1994), Yunna Morits (b. 1937), Gennady Aigi (1934–2006) and Bella Akhmadulina are just some of the many well-known poets who were students there. In Moscow, as in Leningrad, there were literary studios for young people at institutes of higher education, such as the one at Moscow State University attended by Bakhyt Kenzheev (b. 1950), Aleksey Tsvetkov (b. 1947) and other members of what later became known as the 'Moskovskoe vremya' ('Moscow time') group of writers. There were poets who lived on the fringes of the literary world and managed to build a career very slowly, such as Oleg Chukhontsev (b. 1938), who published individual poems in journals from the late 1950s and eventually brought out his first collection in 1984. Underground or alternative groups of poets existed in Moscow as in Leningrad: they included the Lianozovo school of poets, to which Evgeny Kropovnitsky (1893–1979), Genrikh Sapgir (1928–1999) and Igor' Kholin (1920–1999) belonged, and the Moscow Conceptualists, a collective of artists and writers which included the famous poet Dmitry Prigov (1940–2007). The strong human rights movement in Moscow had close ties to some poetry groups, and figures such as Vladimir Batshev (b. 1947) and Natal'ya Gorbanevskaya (b. 1936) were associated with both circles.

Comparatively little has been written about the Soviet literary life of this period in the provinces. It is clear that, then as now, the first career move for many young writers born in other cities was to move to Moscow. For those who stayed, however, there were local magazines and newspapers,

5 Jekaterina Young points out that Leningrad writers have asserted there were four times more opportunities to publish in Moscow than in their own city. See 'The Aesthetics of the *Gorozhane* Group', *Slavonic and East European Review* Vol. 83, No. 1 (January 2005), 14–37 (p. 15).

sometimes local branches of the Writers' Union, and often some kind of career path available. In most provincial cities, however, there would have been far fewer significant writers and less sense of a literary tradition and culture than in Leningrad or Moscow. Anatoly Kobenkov has described how in the 1950s, young writers in the Siberian city of Irkutsk were drawn to members of the older generation just as their counterparts in Moscow and Leningrad were. A group of young people, including Irkutsk's most famous names Valentin Rasputin and Aleksandr Vampilov, befriended the poet Elena Zhilkina, who had been vilified in the wake of the 1946 attack on Anna Akhmatova. They would gather at her house and listen to her, in the same way that young people in Moscow and Leningrad gathered around figures such as Akhmatova herself, Boris Pasternak and Lidiya Ginzburg. They formed a group, called the 'Tvorcheskoe ob"edinenie molodykh' or TOM (Creative Union of Young People), as an alternative to official literature in a similar spirit to the groups formed in Moscow and Leningrad at the same time.[6] It seems likely that the blossoming of literary culture during the Thaw, especially among young people, was experienced in many cities in the USSR.

In terms of its history and status, however, Leningrad was different from other cities and its poets were aware of this. During the Thaw era, the memory of the siege of Leningrad was still fresh, and also of the period of Zhdanovshchina during the late 1940s when the Party had set out to diminish the city's prestige and its cultural life in particular. In terms of literary history, young poets were conscious that they were heirs to the great Petersburg tradition of poetry peculiar to their city. Although the figures presented in this study are very different from each other, in some ways their poetry reflects the heritage, tone, concerns and style of this tradition. Aleksandr Kushner is the most self-consciously 'Petersburg' poet: his work returns to the subjects of the city, the civilisation and intellectual history associated with it and literary antecedents.

For this generation of Leningrad poets, Osip Mandel'shtam is arguably the most important figure of the Petersburg heritage: Brodsky and

6 Anatoly Kobenkov, 'Irkutsk: novoe polozhenie', *Znamya* 1 (2001), 178–86.

Kushner are among the many poets who make reference to him and are influenced by his modernist vision of the 'classical' poetry of Pushkin and the Golden Age. Dmitry Bobyshev engages with the earlier, imperial poet Derzhavin. All, characteristically, are in intertextual dialogue with earlier poets, and their work is informed by the Western-influenced ideals of high culture that are associated with the city's literature and history. Even the Futurist-influenced Sosnora shares with his fellow Leningraders a sense of high culture, education and a certain aloofness, in contrast with many poets from Moscow.

In Moscow, other traditions and conditions influenced poetry: the Conceptualists played with the language and conventions of Soviet official rhetoric in a postmodern style that was not really found in Leningrad; the subject of the city of Moscow and its history was important for some, the heritage of earlier Moscow poets for others; and the presence of the dissident and human rights movement brought its own themes. For writers in the provinces, a sense of belonging to a particular locality and often to rural Russia was a distinguishing feature of their work. In the case of Irkutsk this grew into the kind of patriotism and Russian nationalism found in Rasputin's later work, but in other cities different regional identities emerged. Such contrasts with poetry from other cities points to the similarities that exist between the Leningraders, and the heritage that they share, even if they have developed their work in contrasting directions.

Although they all exhibit some affinity with the Petersburg tradition, the poets discussed in this study cannot be said to belong to a school or a group. All would have known of each other and probably would have encountered each other's work in *samizdat* and at readings, but for the most part they did not associate closely. Brodsky and Bobyshev were close friends in the early Thaw, but after 1963 they were estranged by an argument that was never resolved. Both knew Aleksandr Kushner, but did not belong to his immediate circle of friends and fellow poets of the Mining Institute LITO. Viktor Sosnora was certainly acquainted with Kushner through the LITO and later the Writers' Union, and with the others through the forums of Leningrad poetry, but he was not particularly friendly with any of them.

There are no close connections between their styles of poetry, either. The portrait of Leningrad poets in this book does not present a Leningrad school: rather, the significance of the poetry written by this generation lies in its diversity and variety. From shared beginnings in the LITOs of the 1950s, poets in Leningrad boldly assimilated the lessons of earlier poets. They connected with their literary and cultural heritage, but developed their poetic language in new directions and into new territories. Sosnora's grotesque and fantastic vision is expressed through language that continues the experiments of the Futurists of the 1910s and 1920s; Bobyshev's development from abstract, meditative verse to an all-encompassing vision of the earthly world is mirrored by the expansion of his wide-ranging, eclectic 'Baroque' language; and Brodsky's borrowings from the Anglo-American tradition and his use of prosaic style introduces a profoundly new tone and voice to Russian poetry. It is a measure of the talent and significance of this generation that three such contrasting poets should have emerged from the same milieu. This study aims to introduce and contextualise these individuals, and the many others of their generation.

PART I

CHAPTER 1

The Post-Stalin Thaw 1953–1964

The Return of Lyric Poetry to the Soviet Canon

By the end of the Stalin period, Soviet poetry had become restricted to a very narrow range of subject, tone and form, and much of it was repetitious and uninteresting. This impoverishment in the post-war period occurred because the Party waged war against lyric poetry – which it characterised as overly subjective and individualistic – to such a degree that it practically disappeared from published literature. The campaign began in 1946, when lyric poetry suffered a fierce attack in the form of Zhdanov's public criticism of Akhmatova and, in connection with this, the closing of the journal *Leningrad*.[1] The ensuing period of 'Zhdanovshchina' in the 1940s aimed at dismantling Leningrad's literary heritage and prestige. In Leningrad, as in Moscow, fear of denunciation and arrest cowed writers into producing hack-work for journals, and keeping any genuine literary production in the desk drawer for posterity.

When Stalin died in March 1953, the extreme control that had been exercised over literature, as over many aspects of life, was to some degree lifted, and the liberal 'Thaw' associated with the figure of Khrushchev began. Members of the liberal wing of the Writers' Union saw an opportunity to broaden the range of poetry in print,[2] and they tried to effect

1 The whole 'Leningrad affair' is described in T. M. Goryaeva, *Isklyuchit' vsyakie upominaniya: Dokumenty i kommentarii* (Moscow: Rosspen, 1997), pp. 164–82.

2 In this context, the loose term 'liberal' refers to a coalition of true westernising liberals, anti-Stalinists, and those who favoured a return to Leninism; 'conservative', by contrast, refers to the grouping of neo-Stalinists and nationalist-patriots.

this change as soon as possible; their impetus played an important role in bringing changes to Soviet poetry and this has been well documented.[3] The changes in Soviet poetry that occurred during the Thaw, however, were also in part brought about by official, Party instruction and the details of this instruction have been less well researched. In 1953, Soviet poetry was officially criticised as being 'behind' other literary genres in its development, and in order to catch up with other genres such as the novel and the short story, it was understood that some changes to its current condition had to be made.[4]

One of the most noticeable changes that poetry underwent during the Thaw was a renewal in its popularity: it went from being the 'backwards' genre to being at the forefront of Soviet literature. In Leningrad in the 1950s and 1960s, as in Russia more generally, poetry experienced a dramatic increase in popularity; so much so, that by the early 1960s, poetry readings attracted huge audiences, poetry competitions were fiercely contested, and in Leningrad '... over 6000 people [were] at work writing poetry more or less regularly'.[5] The mushrooming of poets and activity associated with poetry was not only the result of young people's 'youthful temperaments', 'exuberance', and 'desire to be open and sincere in literature',[6] just as the political Thaw was not only a product of the will of the people. Poetry grew in popularity in part due to 'top-down' instructions that shaped or at least facilitated its development. This chapter will examine both the factors which led to this boom in the popularity of poetry, and the manifestations

3 See, for example, Hayward and Crowley, *Soviet Literature in the Sixties: An International Symposium* (London: Methuen, 1965); and V. Shlapentokh, *Soviet Intellectuals and Political Power: The Post-Stalin Era* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 1990).

4 'Stenogramma diskussii leningradskikh pisatelei o lirike', TsGALI St Petersburg: f. 371; op. 1; dd. 194–5.

5 Massie, *The Living Mirror*, p. 27. This enthusiasm for poetry is also described in: M. Slonim, *Soviet Russian Literature: Writers and Problems 1917–1967* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 315–17; Carlisle, *Poets on Street Corners*, pp. 2–6; Shlapentokh, *Soviet Intellectuals and Political Power*, pp. 112–13.

6 Deming Brown, *Soviet Russian Literature since Stalin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 106.

of its resulting proliferation in Leningrad, which was significant enough to be termed a poetry 'movement'.

Two significant events occasioned debate about the state of Soviet poetry in the early 1950s: a conference on lyric poetry at the Leningrad Branch of the Writers' Union in 1953;[7] and the Second All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers held in 1954.[8] Debates at these events, and discussions that were conducted contemporaneously within the Writers' Union and in the press, give indications of the literary policy governing Soviet, and specifically Leningrad poetry at the very beginning of the Khrushchev Thaw.

From 23 to 25 November 1953 a discussion of lyric poetry was held in the Leningrad Branch of the Writers' Union. The proceedings opened with a presentation by the poet Anatoly Chivilikhin (1915–1957), who described how Soviet poetry had been officially criticised for lagging behind other literary genres in its Socialist Realist development. He said that the criticism was a serious cause for concern, and called upon the speakers and audience present to try to identify the causes of the slow development of Soviet poetry; for his part, he suggested that the problem had arisen because in their work poets had concentrated too much on the representation of the reality of post-war reconstruction in the USSR and had neglected the 'other reality' of everyday feelings.

This opening was a propitious start for the more liberal members of the Writers' Union, who hoped that lyric poetry might be restored to the Soviet canon in the new, post-Stalin era. Not all the speakers, however, held such advanced views; much of the conference was dominated by conservatives who insisted that poetry continue to mirror the Soviet reality of the factory and the collective farm, and glorify the achievements of the Bolshevik Revolution and the Great Patriotic War. Despite criticism from Moscow, many poets were reluctant to admit the necessity for change. When, in an impromptu speech at the end of the first day, a student (whose name is not

7 'Stenogramma diskussii leningradskikh pisatelei o lirike', TsGALI St Petersburg: f. 371; op. 1; dd. 194–5.

8 *Vtoroi vsesoyuznyi s"ezd sovetskikh pisatelei: Stenograficheskii otchet* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1955).

recorded) criticised the inertia of the establishment, the banality of form in Soviet poetry and the weakness of literary criticism found in journals and newspapers, Union members were outraged and indignant. His suggestions and criticisms were clearly too radical to be taken seriously, and, although they contained a good measure of truth in them, he was laughed at and ridiculed by members of the conference.[9]

On the third day of this discussion, the liberal poet Ol'ga Berggol'ts (1910–1975), gave a presentation which argued for the revival of Soviet lyric poetry.[10] Berggol'ts addressed specific points that had been made earlier in the conference and argued persuasively against them. She challenged the assertion made by Nikolay Gribachev (1910–1992; a conservative poet loyal to the Party line), that all poetry should be written with standardised intonation, and criticised his argument that poetry should be drawn only from life, without reference to the work of earlier poets. Crucially, she challenged the politicisation of literature which had taken place under Stalin: 'Is it really true that we have no need for elegant and light poetic works that do not address weighty subjects?' Where Gribachev had placed the self-expression of a poet in opposition to the materialist, Marxist position that our consciousness is a reflection of reality, Berggol'ts argued that a poet's self-expression was a concrete example of the reflection of reality mediated by our consciousness. The speech formed one part of a campaign to bring lyric poetry back into the Soviet canon, which Berggol'ts began to wage in 1953.[11]

Some of the most specific suggestions as to how poetry might catch up with other literary genres were made by members from the floor who spoke after the main speeches. Gleb Pagirev (1914–1986) suggested that

9 'Stenogramma diskussii leningradskikh pisatelei o lirike', TsGALI St Petersburg: f. 371; op. 1; dd. 194–5.

10 Loc. cit.

11 Berggol'ts's articles are discussed together with the famous articles on prose by Pomerantsev and Ehrenburg in Walter Vickery, *The Cult of Optimism: Political and Ideological Problems of Recent Soviet Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), pp. 33–52. See also Katharine Hodgson, *Voicing the Soviet Experience: The Poetry of Ol'ga Berggol'ts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 45–51.

one problem with Soviet poetry was that it was not rich enough for a readership who led emotionally rich lives. Echoing this, the poet Elena Ryvina (1910–1985) argued that there were no proper feelings in Soviet poetry and, in particular, no love poetry that people could identify with:

> You would think that the time had now passed when writers had their lovers conducting romances in offices, or sitting together on a combine harvester at the end of the poem, but the vulgar, sanctimonious attitude towards lyric poetry lives on to this day.

By ridiculing the excesses of the kolkhoz theme in Stalinist Socialist Realism, she signalled that it was time Soviet poetry took a more traditional, which is to say more romantic, approach to the subject of love.

Ryvina also suggested that the backwardness of Soviet poetry was caused by the difficult conditions of publication in the USSR. To illustrate her point, she related a story about one of the students in the literary club that she ran. The student wrote a beautiful poem expressing love for his motherland, but he could not find a publisher for his work. The editors of the newspaper he approached suggested that he improve the beautiful description of the river bank in his poem with the detail of a hydro-electric power station glittering in the sun. Ryvina deplored editors having such power, which, she said, induced poets to edit their work even before they had submitted it for publication, fearing it would be found politically unsatisfactory.

Ryvina's mention of the position of young writers was one of many at the conference. Indeed, the strongest call from those petitioning to change the literary process was for more frequent and representative publication of young poets' work. One young poet complained that there were no opportunities for young poets to publish. Vadim Shefner (1915–2002) voiced his fear that, if the standard of Soviet poetry did not rise soon, readers would come to assume that modern, Soviet poetry could never be as good as the classics. The only way that he could see to change this situation was to

> bring young people into poetry more boldly. Do this without patronizing them, and without getting angry with them at their first failing. Having more respect for young people means talking to them as adults.

This conclusion, that a new and younger generation of Soviet writers could inject the necessary energy required into Soviet poetry, became something of an obsession in the early years of the Thaw.

In 1953 and 1954, in the run-up to the Second All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers, Ol'ga Berggol'ts published in *Literaturnaya gazeta* (*The literary gazette*) two important articles concerning Socialist Realism in lyric poetry,[12] that have been widely acknowledged as anticipating and perhaps influencing the move away from Stalin-era poetry that was later suggested at the Congress.[13] As in her speech at the conference on lyric poetry, Berggol'ts tried tentatively to rehabilitate lyric poetry in the USSR in these articles. In her modestly entitled 'Razgovor o lirike' ('A conversation about lyric poetry') she argued that realistic representations and facts alone did not constitute poetry, but that these needed to be transformed into 'poetic facts' which would force readers to see and understand the world in new ways. She claimed that Soviet poetry was devoid of 'humanness' and human interest, first, because its representations of Soviet people were external and superficial, and second, because its consistently balanced, 'non-conflicting' emotions inevitably became banal. She promoted lyric poetry as the very essence of Socialist Realist literature because, she explained, the absolute identification of the reader with the lyric hero meant that the reader not only wished to emulate the hero, but actually became him or her by reading the poem. This property she termed the educational power (*vospitatel'naya sila*) of Socialist Realist lyric poetry.[14] Taking advantage of the beginnings of the Thaw, Berggol'ts accused poets of being afraid to express an individual representation of life:

> Our lyric poetry is dragged towards a deathly, mirror-like form of representation, towards impersonality, by poets – 'realists out to pasture' – who are afraid to represent our life through the medium of their hearts, as a part of themselves, who clearly

12 Ol'ga Berggol'ts, 'Razgovor o lirike', *Literaturnaya gazeta*, 16 April 1953, p. 3; and 'Protiv likvidatsii liriki', *Literaturnaya gazeta*, 28 October 1954, pp. 3–4.

13 For example Harold Swayze, *Political Control of Literature in the USSR 1946–59* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), pp. 33–52.

14 Berggol'ts, 'Protiv likvidatsii liriki', p. 3.

> suffer from fear of themselves, who recoil from the very concepts of the individual, individuality, self-expression, that is to say from the very things that poetry and especially lyric poetry cannot do without.[15]

Berggol'ts's articles did much during the early years of the Thaw to draw attention to the subject of poetry and provoke debate about its role in Socialist Realist literature.

The Second All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers, held in 1954, was the next important occasion at which lyric poetry was discussed. This was the first congress since 1934, when Socialist Realism had been established as the official 'method' for Soviet writers. The condition of Soviet poetry was discussed by speakers whose instructions reflected the highest level of Soviet literary policy. The two reports regarding poetry were given by Aleksey Surkov (1899–1983) and Samed Vurgun (1906–1956).[16] In his report 'On the condition and the tasks of Soviet literature'[17] Surkov kept in line with established Soviet literary policy when he placed the folk tradition of literature higher in order of merit than innovative, experimental works.[18] His and others' reports indicate that the attitude of the Soviet literary authorities towards literature at this time was distinctly anti-intellectual.

Both Surkov and Vurgun named themes that Soviet poetry should address. While Surkov stressed the internationalism and patriotism of Soviet literature, Vurgun gave a rare, possibly unique official demarcation of gender roles. He identified themes which should be found in men's poetry: the international brotherhood of workers; the fight against colonialists and imperialists; the friendship of nations; the heroic defence of the fighters of the Socialist Revolution; the unerring constancy and bravery of soldiers (*boitsy*); the re-establishment of nationalities belonging to the various regions and republics of the USSR; and, of course, patriotism.

15 Loc. cit.

16 All reports were published in *Vtoroi vsesoyuznyi s"ezd sovetskikh pisatelei.*

17 Ibid., pp. 10–37.

18 Swayze talks about the 'Soviet opposition to experimentalism in literature and the bias in favour of exploiting traditional forms of folk literature and familiar devices of nineteenth-century realism'. Swayze, *Political Control of Literature in the USSR 1946–59* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), p. 17.

These he contrasted with the themes, significantly fewer in number, which should be addressed in women's poetry: elevated human feelings such as love, friendship, faithfulness and motherhood. Giving direct indications as to how Soviet poetry should develop after the congress, Vurgun criticised the technical and industrial terminology that many poets used in their work. He announced that there should be a move away from the Stalinist poetry of industrial growth and expansion, and a return to more traditional poetic themes and diction, going as far to announce that 'the time has come to begin a serious discussion of the romantic style in our poetry'.[19] These speakers were indicating that there needed to be a *volte-face* in Soviet poetry, and this was a policy that liberal writers such as Berggol'ts eagerly welcomed.

The Investment in Young Writers

While exhortations to transform poetry in the new, post-Stalin era were being proclaimed at the highest level of the Writers' Union, archival material shows that more locally, in Leningrad, discussion centred on more concrete aims and means, and often on the subject of work with young writers. On 14 May 1953, the Board of the Leningrad Branch of the Writers' Union agreed that work with young writers in the city was weak, and the membership of the Committee for Work with Young Writers was expanded in an effort to improve its effectiveness.[20] Four months later, in September 1953, the Secretariat of the Union was presented with a report which criticised its existing apparatus for work with young writers.[21] Vsevolod Kochetov (1912–1973; then secretary of the Leningrad Branch of the Writers' Union and a neo-Stalinist conservative) asserted that work with young writers

19 *Vtoroi vsesoyuznyi s"ezd sovetskikh pisatelei*, p. 71.
20 'Protokoly zasedanii pravleniya 1953', TsGALI St Petersburg: f. 371; op. 1; d. 183.
21 'Protokoly zasedanii sekretariata 1953', TsGALI St Petersburg: f. 371; op. 1; d. 186.

did not really exist in Leningrad, while another member of the secretariat, Georgy Kholopov (1914–1991), explained that the same 'young' writers had been attending the young people's literary seminar for fifteen to twenty years, so they could no longer be classed as young. Kholopov suggested that an upper age limit be imposed on the seminar, because those excluded on this basis were too old to be receiving help from the Union. Following the discussion, the Secretariat formulated five resolutions to be put into practice by the section:

1. Abolish the group for young writers at the Writers' Union branch, and instead create groups at *Leningradskii al'manakh* (*Leningrad almanac*) and hopefully at the journal *Zvezda* (*The star*). Also perhaps create a group for dramatists at the Leningrad Komsomol Theatre.
2. Try to attract young writers who have proved themselves to come and work within the creative departments of the Writers' Union, as this will enable professional writers to exercise individual, creative leadership over their younger counterparts.
3. Recommend that the Committee for Work with Young Writers pay special attention to the work of the literary groups in the city, at factories, in clubs and at institutes of higher education.
4. Examine the state of the long-running seminars and groups of young writers.
5. Raise the standard of literary consultation for young writers. Give the job of reviewing young writers' manuscripts to experienced writers.

In its investigations into the situation of young writers in the city, the Writers' Union also found the sphere of publishing guilty of excluding young people from the literary process in Leningrad. In 1954, the Board decided that the poetry published recently in the journal *Zvezda* was weak.[22]

22 'Protokoly zasedanii pravleniya 1954', TsGALI St Petersburg: f. 371; op. 1; d. 216.

The cause of the problem was diagnosed as a lack of input from young writers:

> Undoubtedly, the poetry section is failing insofar as it is not promoting young poets who are starting out, youthful talent.

In the 'thick' journals in the 1950s we find intermittent selections of young poets' work which were perhaps published as a result of this and similar criticisms from the Writers' Union.[23]

In January 1955, the matter of young writers was raised again at a Board meeting of the Union with a review of the measures that had been adopted in 1953. Chivilikhin presented to the meeting a paper entitled 'The implementation of criticisms', in which he criticised the Committee for Work with Young Writers again:

> G. Semenov and L. Khaustov have spoken about the poor work with young writers. In connection with this is seems necessary to expand the Committee for Work with Young Writers. This committee needs to work more closely with the Committee for Admissions. Perhaps the committee should be granted the right to recommend the best works of young writers to journals, almanacs, and publishing houses in order that its members are not restricted to making general comments about the lack of attention paid to young authors, but can instead contribute their own concrete recommendations and suggestions? We need to recommend to the section that they involve more young writers in their work.[24]

Chivilikhin's recommendations for improvement in the work of the section were far-reaching, and demonstrate that the Writers' Union took the question of work with young writers in the city seriously at this point. At the same meeting, a new Committee for Work with Young Writers was appointed which, comprising nineteen writers, was much bigger than its predecessors.

In the same year, the publishing house Sovetskii pisatel' (Soviet writer) raised concerns about work with young poets in the city. At a Writers'

23 See in particular the sections entitled 'Molodye golosa' ('Young voices') that appear regularly in the Leningrad journal *Neva*.

24 'Protokoly zasedanii pravleniya 1955', TsGALI St Petersburg: f. 371; op. 1; d. 244.

Union Board meeting on 25 March 1955, the chief editor Evgeny Naumov (1909–1971) spoke about his experience of publishing young writers. He described how the staff at Sovetskii pisatel' felt there were not enough good young poets in the city: when the editors had been collecting and compiling the almanac *Molodoi Leningrad* (*Young Leningrad*) they had found the material submitted to be shallow and unimpressive.[25] He asked the poetry section of the Writers' Union to work more closely with young poets; for its part, he reported, Sovetskii pisatel' had been running a LITO (*literaturnoe ob"edinenie*)[26] for the past year. The LITO had been set up in response to criticisms from Moscow that the publishers were not doing enough work with young poets, and had successfully attracted talented writers whom the editors had not previously known. It is significant that the forum of the LITO was supported by a conservative such as Naumov, who saw it as a forum for guiding young poets in the 'right' direction, and that, at the same time, it was popular with young people, who were less conscious of its role as an instrument of political guidance than as a forum in which to meet other poets and discuss literature. During the Thaw, LITOs became crucial meeting points for young poets and the establishment, and functioned very well as bridges between the generations.

A report from November 1955 gives an idea of how far work with young writers had developed in response to the various initiatives of the early Thaw: Gleb Semenov (1918–1982) presented a report to the Board of the Union that described the progress of the Section for Work with Young Writers, and its shortcomings, which had yet to be addressed.[27] According to him, 1955 had been an excellent year for young writers: there had been many books, collections, and manuscripts produced, and successful inclusions

25 'Protokoly zasedanii pravleniya 1955', TsGALI St Petersburg: f. 371; op. 1; d. 244.

26 LITOs were literary clubs run by members of the Writers' Union for young writers in the city. They have their roots in the *proletkul't* workshops for writers in the 1920s, and ran throughout the Stalin period; during the Thaw, the system expanded and the atmosphere in the clubs grew less restrictive. Perhaps in part due to their association with the literary culture of the 1920s, LITOs became popular with young people and took a significant role in the promotion of poetry in the 1950s.

27 'Protokoly zasedanii pravleniya 1955', TsGALI St Petersburg: f. 371; op. 1; d. 245.

of work in the central press. He also spoke about the success of various LITOs in the city, mentioning a group for prose writers at Sovetskii pisatel', a group at the journal *Neva* (The Neva), a group for children's literature at the House of Children's Books, and a military LITO at the House of Officers. Having lavished praise on these grass-roots activities, Semenov then criticised the central literary bodies for their lack of enthusiasm and support for young writers. The Committee for Work with Young Writers had been disappointing because so few members turned up to the meetings they were supposed to attend (between five and eight members usually attending out of a committee that had now expanded to thirty members); this meant that the jobs that needed doing were being neglected. Semenov went on to complain that, while there was a great deal of discussion about how to work better with young writers, in actual fact very little was being done. At the end of the meeting, Chivilikhin drew up another list of points for action with regard to work with young writers:

1. To consider work with young writers to be a direct obligation of all the creative sections of the Union.
2. To direct the attention of the Dramatists' Section to the weakness of their work with young writers. To recommend to the section that it establish a LITO for young dramatists in the near future. Also to draw the attention of the Critics' Section to the necessity of reviewing the work of young writers.
3. To recommend to the editorship of the journal *Neva* that they normalise the functioning of their LITO by providing it with a permanent and experienced leader.
4. To recommend to the Leningrad Branch of the publishing house Sovetskii pisatel' that they include young poets in their LITO, and support them by appointing an experienced leader.
5. To hold a general meeting of young writers on 27 November 1955, which will be considered one form of educational work with young writers. To oblige members of the Board to take an active part in the organisation and running of the meeting.