



SOUNDING SINCERITY: THOUGHTS ON ONE RECITATION AND TWO MUSICAL SETTINGS OF BORIS RYŽIJ'S VERSE

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Abstract

The sonorous presence of a voice intoning a poem triggers a number of experiential transformations, the most obvious being that the reader is turned into a listener, who cedes control of the temporality in which the poem is experienced. Another consequential effect of the aural experience of poetry is a reduction of the text's inherent polysemy, as the elements of prosody conspire to produce a sonorous "reading" that is necessarily an interpretation. At the same time, the voice that sounds the poem creates new, vocal polysemies, new problems for interpretation. In this article, I attempt to track some of the transformations that occur when the works of Boris Ryzhii, a poet to whom sincerity has frequently been ascribed, are given as vocal performances. How do we hear the "sincere authorial voice" of Ryzhii when his works are not read but spoken – or, more radically, when they are not spoken but sung?

Keywords: *Ryzhii; Music; Recitation; Song; Polysemy*

The seeing of reading is always at once a hearing.
(Richard Aczel)

It's an insult to poetry to call it song. It's an insult to song to call it poetry.
(Jacques Roubaud)

Чего было, того уже нет,
И поэтому очень печально, –
Написал бы наивный поэт,
У меня получилось случайно.

What was is already gone,
And so is in need of lament –
Is what a naïve poet would write,
But it came to me by accident.

(Boris Ryžij)

In his article in the present issue, Stuart Goldberg argues that poetic sincerity is an effect that is actively constructed through a collaboration between poets and their readers.¹ The product of a poet's desire to express him- or herself meaningfully, the poet's awareness of the evolving poetic tradition in which such expressions are situated, and the reader's acknowledgment of and receptivity to both, Goldberg's notion of sincerity within the Russian lyric tradition posits the incessant need for recalibration as its necessary condition. While this recalibration is enacted through the poet's choice of words and their placement on the page, I would like to suggest that, once achieved, poetic sincerity is no longer isolatable within individual images, themes, or tactics, but rather appears to permeate the poet's entire oeuvre: sincerity is commonly ascribed not to the word, line, or even individual poem, but to the poet's authorial voice. This is the phantasmagoric nature of "sincerity" and all other aura-producing poetic devices: once they are validated, they transport all but the most intransigently analytical readers into the synergistic realm, the realm of "you've either got it [e.g., sincerity] or you don't". One does not have to subscribe to an essentialist notion of poetic genius in order to marvel at the gravitational pull of the "sincere poetic voice" and its ability to produce a convincing illusion of unmediated co-presence, of poet and reader glimpsing each others' souls across the chasm of the poem.

The implications of this illusion of co-presence are far-reaching. Poetic sincerity, although a textual device, evokes the poet as an embodied, *en-voiced* subject, a concretely situated speaker of truth. Sincerity, Ernst van Alphen and Mieke Bal tell us in their recent volume on the topic, has long been "considered fundamentally corporeal rather than textual". According to this logic, in creating a field of imagined truth, sincerity always produces a residue of "unwittingly emitted signs of the body" (2008: 1), the most prominent of which is the audible trace of the speaker's voice. We may silently read sincerity into a poem, but we imagine the poet's voice sounding, or at least straining to sound, in order to make the illusion of co-presence complete.²

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