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HISTORY AND DADDY: THE POLITICS OF AUTOBIOGRAPHISM IN POLINA BARSKOVA'S 'PROSHCHATEL'

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Abstract

In her latest poetry and prose, Polina Barskova addresses the subject of her critical writings, namely, the cultural-political dimensions of the siege of Leningrad. In all these writings, she pursues a critique of Soviet and post-Soviet mythologies surrounding this historical event. In her prose piece 'Proshchatel' ('The Forgiver'), from *Zhivye kartiny* (*Tableaux vivants*), Barskova employs autobiography as an element of critique, invoking and renovating Russian modernist precedents. In so doing, she shapes a new kind of autobiographism which has commonalities with American confessional poetry and theorizing of identity.

Keywords: *Polina Barskova; Poet's Prose; Autobiography; Siege of Leningrad; Modernism; History; Subjectivity*

Polina Barskova, always a poet of erudition and dense allusion, lately has introduced into her poetry her preoccupations as a professional scholar. Her books *Priamoe upravlenie* (*Direct Address*; 2010) and *Soobshchenie Arielia* (*Ariel's Message*; 2011) feature lengthy cycles that draw on historical mate-

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rials she has studied in her work on intellectual culture in Leningrad during the siege.¹ In these siege cycles, Barskova ventriloquizes Leningrad artists and poets, creating vocal portraits in which she makes use of quotations from diaries and other materials, pursuing what Ilya Kukulín has called a “documentalist strategy” emergent in post-Soviet poetry (2010: 585). The polyphony of these cycles is something new for a poet whose work has been essentially lyrical and often autobiographical, even marked by “жуткая интимность” (“terrifying intimacy”), to borrow Valerii Briusov’s phrase about Marina Tsvetaeva’s early verse. But the historical does not displace the personal in these works, which actually suggest the need to restore the personal to our understanding of history – the need, as Kirill Korchagin has said, “поэтическими средствами вернуть истории человеческое измерение, а поэзии – историческое” (“to return a human dimension to history by poetic means, and an historical dimension to poetry”; 2012: 192). Most recently, Barskova has extended her creative meditation on the subject of the siege in a book of poetic essays, *Zhivye kartiny (Tableaux vivants)*.² In one of these essays, ‘Proshchatel’ (‘The Forgiver’), Barskova brings together the historical and the personal in a kind of autobiographical writing which, I argue, is new to the Russian tradition.³

When Dmitrii Kuzmin first published ‘The Forgiver’ in *Vozdukh* (Barskova 2012b: 71), he described it as “проза на грани стиха” (“prose on the edge of verse”): the piece is 10 printed pages long and contains 15 sections, most less than a page long, written in short paragraphs that, one might say, are on the edge of stanzas. Each section treats discrete material but is linked with the others by running themes, figures, and situations. Like her poetic cycle “Spravochnik leningradskikh pisatelei-frontovikov 1941-1945” (“Directory of Leningrad Writers at the Front 1941-1945”), ‘The Forgiver’ is polyphonic and features voices of the siege, but it includes a more diverse range of materials. For one thing, the writings of the *blokadniki* are invoked alongside other writings about World War II, namely, Primo Levi’s writings about the Holocaust. But Barskova also brings autobiographical material into the mix: she frames the lives and writings of Levi and the *blokadniki* with the story of her difficult relationship with her birth father, the poet Evgenii Rein. By including her personal history, Barskova expands Kukulín’s definition of “documentalism” to include the autobiographical. Her move is supported by Lidiia Ginzburg’s analysis of the documentary character of the autobiographical genres which, as Ginzburg argued in *O psikhologicheskoi proze (On Psychological Prose)*, prepared the way for the nineteenth-century psychological novel (1999: 6). Ginzburg is important for Barskova not only as a theorist of autobiographical writing but as a *blokadnik* and the author of a siege memoir (‘Zapiski blokadnogo cheloveka’; 2002). By including her own autobiography in a piece about the siege, Barskova can be viewed as adopting

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