

La Sapienza

Valutazione esterna tesi di dottorato Studi germanici e slavi 36° ciclo

MINI RICCARDO

## Evaluation form for PhD dissertation

### Evaluation form

Title of the thesis

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Affiliation of the reviewer

Institute of Slavonic Studies, Czech Academy of Sciences

Report

Opponent review of the thesis “???? ?????????? ????? ? ????????????????? ????? ?????: ??? ?  
????????? ? ?????????? ?????????????? ??????????” by Riccardo Mini

Mgr. Jakub Kapiciak, Ph.D. (Institute of Slavonic Studies, Czech Academy of Sciences)

Riccardo Mini’s doctoral thesis is a contribution to the study of the poetic oeuvre of the Russian former unofficial poet Elena Shvarts (1948–2010). As the title of the thesis suggests, the special focus lies on the genre of so-called little poems (????????? ?????). Shvarts was writing them since the 1970s. Mini approaches the poems as an integral part of Shvarts’ poetics. He emphasizes the features and principles these poems share with the rest of the poet’s literary legacy.

The thesis consists of three main parts. The first part provides an overview of Shvarts’ poetics and the cultural-historical contexts of its development. The second part explores the origin of the little poem genre. Mini places the genre’s roots within the tradition of Russian narrative poetry and the poetry of Russian modernism, the so-called Silver Age. Mini sees the weakening of narrativity as an important step towards formation of the genre. The third part offers a close reading of the selected poems.

In general, the thesis provides a well-informed insight into the life and work of Elena Shvarts. The thesis serves well as a companion to the poet’s literary oeuvre. Mini succeeded in addressing the aim of the thesis in a very clear manner. The main idea of the thesis is to identify specific feature of the little poem genre and link it with Shvarts’ poetry. According to Mini, analysis of the little poems allows the readers to better understand the poetics of Shvarts (see p. 2–3). Such a research idea is original enough for a doctoral thesis and so is the way Mini executes it.

The thesis is written in a good Russian language. I noticed only few typos and other minor formatting mistakes that I listed at the end of my report. The errors might be corrected before the final submission.

I recommend the thesis for defense. In what follows, I would like to point at some strong and weak sides of Mini's text that might be further discussed during the defense.

\* \* \*

The structure of the thesis is designed to move from a general introductory notes to more specific issues. Such an approach lead to a logical order of the text. As a result, the text appears as a coherent unit.

Despite its general coherence, the text could benefit from an additional division of the chapters into shorter sections. The already logically structured text could be then easier to follow and therefore more reader friendly. This applies especially to the chapters of the first and second parts.

A good example to demonstrate my criticism might be the chapter 1.2 "Poetry of Contraditions and Poetry of Metamorphosis" (????? ??????????? ? ?????? ???????????). The chapter is nearly 30 pages long (pp. 27–55). In the chapter, Mini discusses a wide variety of features characteristic of Shvarts' poetry. He identifies different contrasts that the poet typically uses (dark/light, inner/outer, life/death, corporeality/metaphysics, Poet/God) and describes frequently applied literary devices (synesthesia, hyperbola, the principle of metamorphoses – defined here as a search for the harmony in contradictions). The inner logic of the chapter would have been easier to grasp, if each of the feature and devices had been discussed in sections visually separated from each other by subtitles. Nevertheless, I shall once again emphasize that the whole chapter is ordered logically.

Regarding the coherence as well as the methodology of the thesis, I would like to comment on the third part. As I have already mentioned, the latter part consists of analytical chapters. Each chapter analyzes one particular little poem. This part of the thesis is in my opinion problematic for two main reasons. The first questionable aspect is Mini's decision to analyze each poem in a separate chapter and also the order of the analyses. The second problematic aspect relates to the selection of the poems for the analysis.

Although Riccardo Mini is capable of close reading and interpretation of the metaphorically and intertextually multi-layered poems by Elena Shvarts, the analyses provided may seem a little bit isolated, when organized into separate sections. It is clear that Mini is aware of the bigger picture and often refers to the features discussed in the previous chapters. However, the interconnections and common features of the analyzed poems could have been emphasized more explicitly. I am not saying that the interpretations are not reasoned well. I question the way Mini organized them and tried to put them together. I can imagine that the analytical chapter would have been organized differently.

For example, the author could have chosen a set of poetic features to analyze across different poems, or, he could have aimed at the principle of metamorphosis and traced the ways Shvarts employed it in the poems. At the same time, it would be unfair saying that Mini's analyses ignore exploration of these features and principle. On contrary, he touches them in each chapter. They are, however, sometimes difficult to track for the reader as they might be overwhelmed by a detailed description of the particular poem. I suppose that Mini attempted to provide the readers with the most possible complex analysis of each poem, but less could be more regarding the clarity of the text.

I have mentioned that the order, in which Mini analyzed the poems is questionable, too. Mini accepted without any doubts and further explanation Shvarts' own order of the poems as they were published in the volume of collected works. He only briefly comments on not deciding to read them in a chronological order. The organization of the analytical part might seem too

determined by Shvarts and not by the autonomous reasoning of the researcher himself.

It is also not clear enough, why the author decided to analyze 10 out of 14 Shvarts' little poems. In the final paragraph of the introduction (pp. 5–6), Mini states that he decided to analyze mostly the little poems written in the period of 1970s and 1980s. The one exception is the little poem “Homo musagetes (Winter Muses)” (???? ?????? [????? ???]) written in 1994. Mini claims that he wants to focus on the poems that represent Shvarts' underground period. However, earlier in the introduction (p. 2), he also claims that analyzing the little poems is a proper way to understand the writer's poetics as a whole. Furthermore, at the beginning of the chapter 1.2 he supports this argument with a statement that Shvarts' poetics does not “develop linearly” or “chronologically” (p. 27), because even the early poems contain motifs typically used in the late poetry (p. 27). It is therefore not very clear, why Mini excluded the four poems from his analysis. I will be pleased to learn more about Mini's reasons for excluding the four poems and the process of selection of the texts for close reading.

So far I have focused mostly on the weaker sides of the thesis. Now I would like to mention that Mini did an extraordinary good job in describing the poetics and development of the little poem genre in the second part of the thesis (pp. 69–125). He was able to work with all sorts of sources and use them to shed more light on the various aspects of the genre. He also proved an excellent knowledge of the history and theory of the Russian verse, which must be difficult even for the native speaker. Regarding the issues of verse and genre characteristics, I appreciate how Mini builds his observations both on Shvarts' essays and existing literature to show the connection between the semantic and rhythmic fragmentation in the little poems (pp. 91–93). Considering Mini's knowledge of the Russian verse, it is therefore a little bit pity that he did not provide more insights into the rhythmic structure of the analyzed poems.

Another aspect worth noticing is Mini's knowledge of the Russian literary criticism. In his overview of Shvarts' poetics, he uses not only strictly academic sources, but a wide variety of essays by Russian literary critics. Mini was not only able to grasp a vast corpus of Russian language sources, but also sources published by Western experts. As a non-Italian speaking person, I appreciate his review of existing Italian publications on the issue. I was glad to learn more about them.

Mini proved a good knowledge of the Russian literary theory, too. He builds his approach to the genre analysis mostly on the work of Bakhtin and Tomashevsky. Nevertheless, Mini is also aware of works by other Russian literary studies scholars. When tracing the history of the little poem genre, Mini also quotes A. T. Vasil'kovsky, who analyzed Sergey Esenin' little poems. Vasil'kovsky noticed that the genre may originate in the lyric cycle (p. 79). However, later in the work Mini states that Shvarts' little poems should not be considered examples of lyric cycle. On the other hand, Mini underlines the connection of the genre with theatre and drama, which seems to be quite original. This approach helps him to identify the narrative elements of the poems. Although Mini's reasoning seems plausible, I still think that further consideration of the link between little poem genre and lyric cycle might be productive. Mini, for example, quotes Shvarts comments on the principle of the cinematic montage that in her opinion allows to differentiate poems from the cycle (o. 82). There are also theorists who see this principle as applicable to both forms. M. N. Darvin provides insight into this problematic in his 1983 textbook *Problema cikla v izuchenii liriki*. From another but similar perspective J. A. Sloane reflects upon the issue in the 1988 monograph *Aleksandr Blok and the Dynamics of the Lyric Cycle*. I am not sure, if Mini did not accept Shvarts' perspective too quickly. Both Darvin and Sloane underline the function of context in creating the effect of unity of a lyric fragments. They also mention that the common context of the texts might be the main source that generate the narrativity.

Despite my critical remarks on some methodological aspects of the thesis, I consider the

work to be a valuable addition to the existing literature on Shvarts as well as on the nature of the little poem genre. Thanks to Mini's ability to synthesize a wide variety of sources, he managed to see links between the genre and different context. He does not only see the genre as an important part of Shvarts' poetry, but also places it into the wider cultural-historical perspective (Leningrad underground, modernism). In conclusion, I shall repeat that I recommend the thesis for defense.

Suggestions for improvements before the final submission:

Typos: ? ????? ?????? ??????? (p. 7), ?? ?????????? ??? (p. 11), ?????????? ??? ??? (p. 22), ? 1997 ?. ??? (p. 25), ??? ??????????? (p. 28) ??????????? – ??????????? (p. 64), ??(?)???????? (p. 67), ?? ?????? ?????? (p. 88), ?????? ?? ?????? (p. 102), ??-?? (p. 111), ?????????? ??, ?????? ??? (p. 128), ? ? ??? ???? ?????? (p. 132), ?????????? ?????? (p. 150), ? ??????????? (p. 153), ? ?????? ??????? (p. 154), ??????????????? ??????? (p. 159), ?????? ??? ?? ?????? (p. 167), ?????????? ?????? ? ?????? ?????? (p. 189), ????????????? «?» (p. 190)

Formatting errors: The titles of the chapters on the pages 126 and 144 should be in bold. There are also some copy editors comments left on the page 86.

Minor mistake: In the analyzed poem on the page 88 the last verse "Zamaterilisia" is defined as the iambic dimeter. Isn't it the iambic trimeter?

10 December 2023 Jakub Kapiciak

Confidential report (it will not be shown to the candidate)

Evaluation file (optional)

Presentation and clarity

None  Poor  Average  Good  Excellent

The reviewer should be able to read the text without difficulty. This implies that the dissertation is clear and 'user friendly', without duplications or repetitions.

Integration and coherence

None  Poor  Average  Good  Excellent

The manuscript should present logical and rational links between different parts of the thesis.

Introduction to scientific background

None    Poor    Average    Good    Excellent

The text should contain a satisfactory introduction to the scientific background which is relevant to the research, preparing the reader to the exposition of the problem.

#### Review of relevant literature

None    Poor    Average    Good    Excellent

The candidate must have a detailed knowledge of original sources, have a thorough knowledge of the field, and understand the main theoretical and methodological issues.

#### Statement of research problem

None    Poor    Average    Good    Excellent

A clear statement of the research problem should be made, together with specific hypotheses, predictions, or questions which the research is designed to address.

#### Originality

None    Poor    Average    Good    Excellent

The research must be the candidate's own work. The degree of independence may vary according to the research topic.

#### Contribution to knowledge and scientific relevance

None    Poor    Average    Good    Excellent

The dissertation should be substantial enough to be able to form the basis of two articles on refereed journal, a book or research monograph.

## Mastery of the English language

None    Poor    Average    Good    Excellent

The candidate must be proficient in written English and show mastery of appropriate scientific/technical language.

A major goal of the review process is to evaluate if the present version of the thesis is:

- 1) adequate as is
- 2) require minor revision
- 3) require major revision

for admission of the candidate to the defense of the work in front of a national evaluation board.

Accept as is    Minor revision    Major revision

Date: 12/10/2023

Reviewer: Kapičiak Jakub