

# CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN POETRY IN TRANSLATION



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**Abstract:** Contemporary Russian society is being reinvented today. More than three decades of perestroika have shown a transformation in all spheres of society. These years have witnessed many turbulences in the Russian society, but at the same time they have been years of restructuring, change and reformation. The changes are projected in oral and written forms, in all the genres, be it the publicistic or the literary form. There is also an influx of new lexis and terminology. Translation, as a means of communication, acquaints the readers with the ongoing changes and plays an important role in projecting the transforming face of Russia today.

The present paper takes into account the poetic works of young, contemporary Russian poets, who although not living in Russia, show in their works their love and passion for their motherland. They have not been able to forget their motherland, the love for which resounds in their works. Reading and analyzing such works in original and in translated forms is a sensitive study, as it throws light on the psychology of the poets. One such poetess under discussion is Polina Barskova, whose poems have been translated into English by the scholar and translator, Catherine Ciepiela. The paper examines some of her works in the original and translation, bringing out their importance to be studied and analyzed in today's world.

**Keywords:** Contemporary Russia, turmoil, turbulences, reformation, poetic works, psychology, sensitive poetry

Contemporary Russian society is being reinvented today. More than three decades have passed since the Perestroika took place. These years have been a witness to many turbulences in the Russian society, but at the same time they have been years of restructuring, changing and reformation of the society. The contemporary Russia has a transformed face now and reflects the cross-cultural influences on the society. These multilingual and multicultural concepts project a new Russia, which is being re-conceptualized –

politically, economically, culturally, literally and as such is being globally accepted as a nation with a diversified and independent identity.

Translation, as a tool of communication, helps to bridge the gap between societies, by acquainting people with the processes of transformation taking place in the different fields. The process of translation has now expanded its span and incorporates not only the exercise of de-coding and re-coding the source language text into the target language text, but also reflecting the changes and transformations taking place in the society and expressing them through various means of translation. In the book, *Transformations*, edited by Sara Ahmed, Jane Kilby and others. Bronwen Levy has expressed the ideas and expectations of transformation as, "*Transformations is a Magical Concept, alluding to change, disguise, life, growth, power, agency.... not stagnant but anticipating a new tide, some new directions, new questions.*" (Ahmed, Kilby, Lury, McNeil and Skeggs, 2000, p.1).

Translation and analysis of major Russian literary, political, historical writings, the contemporary literature of different fields speaks of memoirs of the bygone years on the one hand, and at the same time throws new light on the social, political, intellectual and literary genres of the society. Translation being a powerful weapon introduces the readers with the ongoing changes in a society and its reflection on these different genres.

The works of contemporary poets and writers project their perception of post-Soviet Russia. The translations of these works with its linguistic and stylistic usage of words and phrases are an eye opener for the readers as they present the form of new Russia. This has been beautifully described in the book *Relocations* edited by Catherine Ciepiela, "*In Russia, every new century begins with a revolution in poetry. End of the Soviet Russia in 1991 shifted the entire social landscape to immense benefit of Russian poetry. The broad trend in contemporary Russian poetry has been to move beyond the great modernist tradition, with the vision of the poet as the nation's voice and its veneration of high culture.*" (Ciepiela, 2013, p. xi) As such, translations play an important role in fulfilling the aim of understanding the Post-Soviet Russia.

The works of contemporary women poets of Russia, who have been relocated due to circumstances, are occupying a special place in the field of literature today. They are the women poets, since the 1980s, the vibrant generation, who has been relocated, yet their works speak of the richness of the past. The poetry of these contemporary Russian women poets and their translations, introduce to the English language world their incredible diversity and shows the talent of the contemporary poets – who are said to be the representatives of the present scene. As described by Catherine Ciepiela in her book, *Relocations*, "*They are representative of the current scene ... where women are more influential than ever. She further adds, the fall of the Soviet Union released creative energies that have shaped a new Russian poetry. They belong to the generation that has led this epochal transformation. Born in the 1970s, they are old enough to have visceral memories of Soviet life but young enough to move adeptly with the new influences, new media and new choices introduced in the post-Soviet era. Their generation is the last one raised on Russian modernism, which these poets are renovating from within.*" (Ciepiela, 2013, p. xii)

Understanding the transformations through the translation of poetry enlarges the landscape of reading and changes the perception of understanding the post-Soviet Russia. The works

of poets like Polina Barskova, Anna Glazova and Maria Stepanova and several others of the contemporary period have been translated by well-established translators like Catherine Ciepiela, Anna Khasin, Sibelan Forrester amongst others and are an inspiring tool to reinvent Russia through translations of contemporary poetry. The importance of these works lies in the fact, that although these poets are relocated, yet the usage of words and phrases in their works and the translation of their works enables the reader to recapture the past of Russia. It is interesting to note that how the poetry, written much after the years after Perestroika, acquaints us with the depth of their feelings through their readings in original and also through their translations. The remembrances of the past in present makes an interesting study of these works and the impact that these translations have not only on the Russian society, but also outside it.

Poetry of Polina Barskova, Anna Glazova and Maria Stepanova reinvent Russia by projecting the revolution in poetry, yet conserving the traditions of the past century. The three poets belong to the generation who lived through the period of transition and found themselves 'relocated' in this change. These young poets have been influenced by the post-Soviet period but they retain their memories of the past, which they have shown in their writings. *"Educated in Soviet, European and American Universities – Barskova and Glazova are teachers, whereas Stepanova is an influential online journalist. All three live and work transnationally and their work absorbs influences from inside and outside Russia's borders. These practices align them with Russia's creative and professional classes, and the three are visible cultural figures."* (Ciepiela, 2013, p. xi) The relevance and importance to study the works of these authors is, that they reflect their separation from Russia in each of their writings whether it is describing nature or war. Some of the famous works by Polina Barskova - 1998, *The Translator*, *Leningrad Directory*, *Tomatoes and Sunflowers*, of Anna Glazova - *Laws*, *Lightning never Leaves*, *Light does not go far in our Home*, of Maria Stepanova – *The Pilot*, *About a Driver* - which when read in original and in translation, speak of their vision, love and desire to be a part of their motherland - Russia.

The translations of these works by eminent translators acquaint us with the poetry lexis, with the translation nuances and with the Russian culture. At the same time, they also project the wealth of poetry written by Russian women since the 1980s and the importance of their translation. They depict how they differ from the women poets from earlier period and their relevance to be understood universally. It is interesting to study the style and lexis being used in their poetry in original and then in their translated forms as they highlight the usage of descriptive, analytical, rhyming simple words, which carry a story with them and also the relevance of retaining the original words in translation, which project the essence of the source text.

The paper analyses the original and translated works of Polina Barskova, who is in the USA and is on the faculty of Hampshire College teaching Russian literature, yet whose poetry deeply shows her love for Russia. Polina Barskova experiences her separation from Russia and categorically speaks of it in her compositions. In her words, *"My relocation more than anything else in my life coined and finalized me into a writing being which is, I guess satisfying and nourishing, but it is also a cause of constant reflection, it's like with every loss, you can never forget your missing part. With huge difficulties, effort of imagination and stubbornness, I constructed my ambivalent present position to observe and to serve my language and my city and myself from afar."* (Ciepiela, 2013, p. xiii)

Since Barskova's childhood was in St. Petersburg, or Leningrad as it was known (1924 to 1990), her works reflect a cultural canvas, in which we find her emotions of nostalgia and love of her past. St. Petersburg — “*the home that I have left, the home that is absolutely impossible to leave*” (Ciepiela, 2013, p. xii) — remains present in her research and teaching. Polina Barskova is known to be a genius since birth, since her first publications were as a teenager and she later became an accomplished and bold young poet. Her poetry has earned her international reputation and has appeared in original and translation in prestigious journals. Below are analyzed some of her outstanding poems from the point of view of translation.

We analyze some couplets from the poem **1998**, which marks the moment when Polina Barskova, just over 20 years, already an author of 3 books, resolved to leave her native St. Petersburg and move to the United States.

The translation of the poem done by Catherine Ciepiela – a scholar and translator of modern Russian poetry along with being an author, co-editor and a professor of poetic translation, has been highly acclaimed for her translation of the poetry of Polina Barskova. The opening lines of the poem itself attract the readers - **Важно но не откуда но от когда** - *not at what place but what moment* – emphasizes the essence of thoughts expressed in the poem. Further the style of usage of the words together – **Начинается отделение выделения** - *uncoupling decoupling* – emphasizes on the rhythm of the words, which create a poetic sound of being knit together into one another. This reflects the uniqueness of the verse. The usage of simple words like - **Одинаковые дерматиновые здания** - *identical buildings of crap leatherette*, **Прямота и прэлезть сумеречных бесед!** - *such candor and cha-harm in those nightly sessions!* show her love for St. Petersburg. Each minute experience, vision, although she was young, is captured in her mind and projected in the form of day-to-day expressions used like **Мясо, овощи, обувь** – *abstraktnaya vechnoveshchnost* – *meat shop, vegetables, footwear* – are words which are simple, used in the source and translated in the target language.

The works of Polina Barskova are dominated by a conversational tone, as in the usage of simple words like **Будуарная разница между ты и вы** - *the boudoir protocol of familiar and formal address* and the words are often stretched and un-rhyming and vary in their forms, projecting a style of free verse. **Что всегда является в миг прощанья, Deus ex machinae проспал свой выход** - *flares predictably with goodbyes, again the deus ex machina misses his cue*. Such stylistic transformations have been projected very minutely in the translation in which Barskova's vibrant style reflecting the history in lyric is retained. (Ciepiela, 2013, p. 4)

In another of her works, **Переводчик I** - *The Translator I*, translated by Catherine Ciepiela, the translation projects the un-rhyming lyric form as well as the voice of intimacy of the poet through the usage of words and word combinations in the translated form. In this poem the conversational tone is emphasized with un-rhyming, varying forms like-

**Блуждающие в снежной пудре**  
**Мы – сиамские б-**  
**Близнецы, сплетённые чистой слюной языка,**  
*We flounder through powdery snow*  
*Siamese t-t-*  
*Twins joined by the tongue's sweet saliva,*

**Татуировка,  
Ещё не просохшая, с кровкою след иглы,  
По тебе проступает след моего письма.**

*A tattoo job,  
Wet still, trace of blood from the needle,  
The trace of my writing stains you.*

(Ciepiela, 2013, p. 50)

This work shows the complex moments of the thought process of the poet and the translator has attempted to retain the abstractness of the verses in simple English usage, highlighting the gravity and originality of the poet.

In some of the works of Polina Barskova, she experiences her separation in the verses, but for Barskova to look back at what has been lost is to move forward and she moves with velocity, giving her verses an extra ordinary open-ended feel. Importance of her works and translation lies in the fact that whenever she feels relocated, her verses show the positivity of what can be acquired from the newness of society. Her verse **Перемещение - Relocation** – is a standing example of her thoughts of relocation and location, translated with an aesthetic wisdom of rhythm and style by the translator, showing her emotions and optimism. The poetry here speaks of the boldness of the young poet – her relocation more than anything in her life coined and finalized her into a writing being. A few lines from the poem, which starts with -

**Как обычно перед перемещением его охватывала массивная печаль спокойствия,  
Печаль наблюдательности**

*At the start of every relocation, he was seized by a massive sadness of calm A sadness of perceptiveness*  
But the next paragraph shows her optimism,

**А чего было ему волноваться – перемещение стало регулярным обрядом**

*And why should he be concerned - relocation was by now a familiar ritual*

(Ciepiela, 2013, p. 18)

The style of Polina Barskova is also with the narrative “I”. This highlights the fact that she is bold and not scared of herself being associated to the Soviet period. She has memoirs of the past which she has tried to present in her research project and poetry. According to her, the space of art and poetry was limited and the intellectuals, poets and writers were often unknown to the west. Many of them passed away unnoticed. Her work, **Справочник ленинградских писателей - фронтовиков 1941-45** – is a famous work, which highlights the way in which poets and artists faced the devastating Leningrad siege during World War II. In contrast, her poem, **Помидоры и подсолнухи- Tomatoes and Sunflowers** depicts the beauty, imagination, sensitiveness and proximity of humans to nature.

These two poems are a very bold depiction of the thoughts of the poet, where at one point she goes back to Alexander Pushkin and portrays a very different Petersburg describing it in a chain of words which might not be connected to each other, and at the same time with extreme beauty she describes the last summer harvest in a refined poetic form.

Winter, summer, spring and autumn – are the seasons, described by the poet Polina Barskova

in this poem. **Всё сполна – наросты, тени, линии, Вкус и запах, но не вонь ещё – дыхание.** – *Brimming—branches, shadows, lineaments, Flavor and scent not quite stench, just exhaling.* Each season gives way to another, it ends with solemnness and sobriety. Such is life – which has its changes – at times, tragic experiences, which, in this poem, the poet projects and accepts in the end. This is depicted by the translator by the usage of simple phrases, like in the translation of the sentence - **Всё далось мне, а ведь не было обещано** - *I was given it all, none of it promised to me...* (Ciepiela, 2013, p. 56)

The works of Polina Barskova bring forth the sensitivity and the psychology of the poets, who although relocated, tend to be deeply connected to their roots. The works of Barskova, when translated, need to capture her frame of mind very cautiously and the scholar and translator, Catherine Ciepiela has put in her best to do so. The paper has attempted a study of some of her works in original and translated forms, which acquaint us with the style of writings of these contemporary poets and underline the importance of studying and analyzing these works in today's world.

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## Современная русская поэзия в переводе

**Аннотация:** *Общество России изменяется. Прошло более трех десятилетий, но годы перестройки незабываемые. Эти годы, конечно, были свидетелями многих изменений в обществе, но в то же время они являлись годами перемен и реформации общества, что отразилось во всех его сферах. Перевод играл и сейчас играет важную роль в процессе ознакомления с новым лицом современной России. Все жанры языка – публицистические, литературные и общественные — теперь полны новыми словами и выражениями, которые зародились в разных видах творческих работ.*

*В данной статье изображены поэтические произведения молодых, современных российских поэтов, которые хотя, переехали в другую страну, продолжают выражать любовь и страсть к своей Родине. Они никак не смогли забывать своё место рождения и в их работах можно чувствовать такой дух. Чтение и анализ таких произведений в оригинале и в их переводах – нелегкое и чуткое дело, так как они полны внутренними чувствами этих поэтов и показывают их психологию. Одна из таких поэтов, это - Полина Барскова, поэзия которой была переведена на английский язык переводчицей Екатериной Цепиелой. Статья анализирует её работы с точки зрения особенностей перевода и стиля.*

**Ключевые слова:** *свидетель, перестройка, любовь и страсть, чувствовать дух, чуткое дело, особенности перевода*