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## A Contrite Heart: An Artist Statement

By Irina Kruchinina

Link: <https://youtu.be/48B5RZI-pdQ>

### Abstract

The video poem *A Contrite Heart* features a poem by Alexander Vertinsky (1918) that appears in a slightly modified form of incantation repeated by the main character and narrator in Mikhail Bulgakov's short story, *A Psalm* (1923). The video-poem reenacts the story as a commentary to the poem. Methodologically, *A Contrite Heart* offers an intermedia approach to poetic translation where I work with the acoustic, visual, spatial, and psycho-physical aspects of words. I stay in a dialogue with the philosopher of language performativity J.L. Austin and performance scholar E.K. Sedgwick exploring what the word does, how it shapes and affects my senses. I am exploring my actions informed by poetic words, without perceiving "any aspect of performative relations as definitionally settled." I allow the words, their consonances, ambiguities, contradictions to slow me down, change my spatial directions, and ultimately, rediscover the story I am telling as mine in the video poem. In my performance, I focus on the psycho-physical aspect of the poetic experience by repeating the words and constantly changing intonation and movement patterns as a part of the telling. Video-editing allowed me to slow down my attention on the correlation between words and physical dramaturgy even more: the need to calculate the timing of the appearance and erasure of each letter kept me suspended over one word for hours. My hand clutching the mouse, my facial muscles contracting – I was caught in the illusion of seizing the word, letter by letter, that pretended, in its turn, to mimic, letter by letter, what I was trying to seize with it. The video-poem witnesses disillusionment and dissolution of everything that can be said or understood.

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The video-poem *A Contrite Heart* explores materiality as a poetic category through spoken and written word, physical dramaturgy, and camera lens. I create a videographic iteration of a short story by Mikhail Bulgakov, *A Psalm*, and explore its incorporation of the poem by Alexander Vertinsky, *This is all that is left after you...* The video-poem focuses on the dissolution of the plot and semantics of words in my process of translating from Russian into English.

The story revolves around Alexander Vertinsky's poem I learned by heart twenty years ago when I could not relate to the emotional context, yet I found the tone viscerally resonant. I have been repeating this poem as a mantra for years: in its stand-alone version, it was lulling the heart beating up the wall of the inability to love. The poem gave form to a fantasy I had since an early age, about leaving the world that I felt abandoned by love that would only appear in disguise of disillusionment. Yet, within Bulgakov's story, the poem sounded to me like a consolation, reconciliation, hope, and I wanted to bring it to life, and so I started working on the performance.

Poetry translation has taken me on a journey towards meaning beyond semantics. Trying to preserve the rhythm and etymological affinity to the corresponding words of the original has uncovered an archi-textural dimension<sup>1</sup> within an individual language (in my case, English): the final English version would come across as foreign, bloated with uncommonly used words, archaic constructions and forgotten connotations, as well as

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<sup>1</sup> An idea I explored further in a previously published article: Kruchinina, Irina "Architextural Abstraction as Literary Method: On Poietic Objects and Common Self": *South Atlantic Review*, Vol. 84, N 4, Atlanta, GA 30302, USA, 73-89 (2019)

alienating allusions, yet without changes in grammatical correctness and linguistic logic of the English language. The English thus sounds foreign to itself, while staying within its structural framework. In the video, the vocal repetition of the same words in Russian is iterated by the graphic repetition of the corresponding words and phrases in English. Speaking in Russian, I change intonation, the words flicker between homophones and diverse meanings of the same word, and the written words on the screen mimic the attuning movement of the voice. In the process, I formulated the archi-textural dimension of a language as the one where the obsolete and possible meanings, as well as satelliting allusions around the words co-exist simultaneously. The archi-textural dimension finds its expression in poetry where linear narrative about bitterness and disillusionment transcends in the diachronic cross-semantic forms of expression.

How can this transcendence be experienced in body and space? I started translating the narrative into interpretative movements and literal gestures and turned my apartment into a *mise-en-scene*, as if actuating the idea that a poem is a living space, something that physically happens as the words affect the space and bodies. The work on the piece found me in the first couple of months of the Covid lockdown, which concentrated all the plots I've been living through mentally within the walls of my two rooms. My apartment turned into a shared scaffolding of diverse, and sometimes contradictory plots of life I was contemplating then. The poem does not describe any concrete events in my life, does not express my feelings, emotions, or demeanor, but carefully, letter by letter, impregnates me with the space around as the reverberated sounds of words start vibrating inside, pushing, pulling, and initiating my literal movement in space. Simultaneously, the space gets impregnated with me, as my voice and movement fill it in; being simultaneously pulled out of myself as if space was

giving me a constant birth. Like words are born out of sounds when certain sounds arbitrarily amalgamate into a unity of words. I start from the word, from reciting in Russian an excerpt from *A Psalm*, and then a poem by Alexander Vertinsky that Bulgakov appropriated into his story. I attempt to viscerally find out how the poem functions in the story by the way I move in my space, linearly like the narrative, and yet across past and future, as well as imaginary, wished-for, lost, and concurrently present spaces. The video-poem turns into a shared scaffolding of both the poem and the story as they take place with me in my living room.

I embodied each character of the story, a single mother, her son, and their neighbor in a communal apartment (communalka). The simultaneity of all the characters made me experience them as various forces affecting the decisions and shifts within a single human mind. I also assembled a ghost of a person the woman has been waiting for in a vain hope; the t-shirt and pants on the hangers would present the only objective character moving by force of the turned-on fan on which I hung the assemblage. The ghost, the immaterial, the hope, the memory, the despair, mechanically, relentlessly circling in space- manifested themselves as a new materiality in my home. The simultaneity of all people in one material body in non-material circumstances turned the events that were happening with me in the performance into figures of thoughts within a scaffolding of various possible plots. What was generating these figures was neither Russian nor English, but some shared mechanism initiating the movements of thoughts taking different directions in different languages yet attached to the same existential engine.

The apartment turned into a symbolic space without losing its configuration, without being physically transformed; my 'self,' turned into an embodiment of reflections of the world in my eyes that so materialized

in the physical form of my body. The words in one language got abstracted from their narrative meanings and expanded to the simultaneity of many semantic possibilities without modifying the lexical forms. I accomplished the dissolution of meaning in word, mind, and space!

Now, where does the meaning start, where can it be found, if it even exists? I started editing the video, which I initially deemed to function as a recording of my performance and the fixator of the graphic change of and search for the English words mimicking the listening to the sounds of the words in Russian. Yet here, a separate video of the sun hitting my window superimposed over the recorded performance brought forth the movement of light. The light was moving inside the glass - that transparency in which what was behind the glass, in the eyes looking outside, and outside merged into one dimension, a transfigured sense of simultaneity of times and spaces.

The light movement of *A Contrite Heart* has turned into an articulation of an il-literate passion for living where unnamed longings dissolve in the dis- and reassemblage of letters in the familiar words. I take a callow affectation inside and, having no material means to conceive it, I start looking for its likeness in the silhouettes transpiring the relationship 'tween light and shadow, silence and sound, absence and appearances around me. Those silhouettes may be understood as figures of thoughts in color, noises, shapes and their contrasts abstracted from what I perceive in the outside world into the impulses of subjective impressions.

Those figures become bodies of my unspoken affectations and start moving as I move through a living space. Within a context of reality into which I am implanted, this movement is still chaotic, with contradictory directions or mismatching meaning. When the impressions from this context coincide with the intensities of my affectations, the illusion of reality

emerges, yet disappears after a while, leaving contradictions. But if I take the bodies of my affectations and choreograph them into a movement of a poem that is attuned to my inwardness, those affectations become characters of the words that create meaning out of visceral intensities.

I started from the poem I had known by heart for over 10 years: it perfectly fitted my memory about some future that I have been trying to remember by shaping life around/towards it. I was remembering what has not happened to me in any actual context, yet what exists in my existential memory as an illiterate/pre-definitive/poietic state of being. And since this state exists within the space of a word that contains this atemporal reality, I perform a movement of coming into the word as some continuous creation momentum. I come into this word directly, without ever coming completely to any contextual end point, without understanding concrete meaning of words, dissolving in their [im]possibilities.

## THE SCRIPT

In the beginning, it seems that it is a rat scraping the door, yet one can hear a very tender human voice:

-Is it okay to come in?

-It is okay. Please.

-And the poem - you forgot, perhaps, huh?

-No, I did not forget...

-Nu, hey, recite!

-Will I buy myself shoes...

-...For my tuxedo...

-for tuxedo... And I will sing at night...

-A Psalm.

-A Psalm. And I will get myself a dog. Now-now, somehow

-Somehow we'll live through.

-We'll eve through...

-That's right, now, the tea will boil, and we'll drink it, we'll live it through...

-We'll eve through... -Oh! Again he is at your place!

Victor, go home!

-No-no, we're drinking tea with him!

- But he has drunk already, not long ago...
- I have not...
- Ms. Faith! Come have some tea!
- Thank you, I have already, not long ago.
- Come, come! I won't let you go!
- My hands are wet, I'm hanging the wash...
- Do not you drag my mom!
- Okay-okay! I won't drag! Ms. Faith, sit please!
- Wait, please, I'll hang the wash and then come...
- Wonderful.

(An excerpt from *Psalm* by Mikhail Bulgakov, translated by Irina Kruchinina)



This is all that is left after you.  
No hard feelings, no threatening scorns,  
Just the heart got contrite a little,  
Just some tears in the heart stay on.

All is finished, like this, so normal,  
So cynically cruel is the end,  
You have told that these days one does not  
Bring the hearts with them into bed.

Here, on Saturday, I will buy a puppy,  
Will be singing at night a Psalm,  
I will buy me some shoes for tuxedo,  
Now-now, we will live somehow on.

Could I only forget a little,  
Could I just fall asleep for a year,  
May it be, in my window also  
Sunny rays will peak-in one day.

May her leave now, and give her, Lord-God,  
Otherwise, I will give you myself  
My own soul they have crucified also  
On the Golgotha over piles of waste...

(Alexander Vertinsky, 1918)

Это все, что от Вас осталось.  
Ни обид, ни смешных угроз.  
Только сердце немного сжалось,  
Только в сердце немного слез.

Все окончилось так нормально,  
Так цинично жесток конец,  
Вы сказали, что нынче в спальню  
Не приносят с собой сердец.

Вот в субботу куплю собак,  
Буду петь по ночам псалом,  
Закажу себе туфли и фрак,  
Ничего, как-нибудь проживем!

Мне бы только забыть немножко,  
Мне бы только на год уснуть,  
Может быть, и в мое окошко  
Глянет солнце когда-нибудь.

Пусть уходит, подай ей, Боже,  
А не то я тебе подам  
Мою душу, распятую тоже  
На Голгофе помойных ям.