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# **Melancholic Identities, *Toska* and Reflective Nostalgia**

Case Studies from Russian and Russian-Jewish Culture

edited by  
Sara Dickinson  
Laura Salmon

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## INDICE

S. Dickinson	Preface	7
L. Salmon	Chronotopes of Affectivity in Literature. On Melancholy, Estrangement, and Reflective Nostalgia	11
S. Dickinson	Aleksandra Xvostova, Nikolaj Karamzin and the Gendering of <i>Toska</i>	31
L. Quercioli Mincer	Nostalgia and Creatuality in H. Leivick's <i>The Golem</i>	57
M.A. Curletto	Regret for the Time of Heroes and Existential <i>Toska</i> in Vladimir Vysockij	75
L. Salmon	Melancholic Humor, Skepticism and Reflective Nostalgia. Igor' Guberman's Poetics of Paradox	107
I. Marchesini	The Presence of Absence. Longing and Nostalgia in Post-Soviet Art and Literature	149
	Bibliography	167

## Regret for the Time of Heroes and Existential *Toska* in Vladimir Vysockij

Mario Alessandro Curletto (University of Genoa)

Жить, покоем дорожа –  
Пресно, тускло, простоквашно;  
Чтоб душа была свежа,  
Надо делать то, что страшно<sup>1</sup>.

Игорь Губерман

In the vast poetic output of singer-songwriter Vladimir Vysockij, melancholic moods assume various shapes and shades of nostalgia – or *toska*. Natal'ja Zakurdaeva (2003: 188-189) has equated Vysockian *toska* with sentiments ranging from 'skuka' (boredom) to 'trevoga' (anxiety, anguish) as seen, for example, in lines such as "Vse v prošlom, ja zevaju ot toski" ("All is past, I yawn from *toska*") and "My ždem ataki do toski..." ("We await the attack filled with *toska*...")<sup>2</sup>. This article will focus on that variety of Vysockian *toska* that might be defined, paraphrasing Giambattista Vico (1847: 237-258), as nostalgia for a 'heroic era'. Such nostalgia is expressed explicitly in the song, or poem, *Ja ne uspel (Toska po romantike), I Was Too Late (Toska for Romanticism)* (Vysockij 1999, II: 74), and it pervades a large number of Vysockij's other texts as well, albeit often implicitly, i.e. without the clear semantic signal of words such as 'toska', 'nostal'gija', and so on. As Evgenij Ševjakov (2006: 80) justly notes, nostalgia for a heroic era is one of several channels taken by the great flux that constitutes Vysockij's more general "nostal'gija po geroike" ("nostalgia for heroism") – and, arguably, one of the most important. Indeed, a longing for the heroism or courage felt to be lacking in contemporary life is the most prevalent type of *toska* in Vysockij's work and he frequently remarked on the importance of heroic courage in live commentary at his concerts, e.g.:

Я вообще стараюсь для своих песен выбирать людей, которые находятся в самой крайней ситуации, в момент риска, которые каждую следующую минуту могут заглянуть в лицо смерти, у которых что-то сломалось, произошло

---

<sup>1</sup> "To live treasuring peace and quiet / means living insipidly, dimly, like clotted milk; / For your soul to be fresh, / You have to do something dreadful".

<sup>2</sup> In her detailed catalog of the myriad linguistic and conceptual elements that constitute Vysockij's system of meanings, Zakurdaeva describes Vysockian *toska*, at its most basic, as a sense of loneliness sufficient to drive one's actions, its dynamic quality demonstrated by *toska*'s frequent syntactic link with a verb. The two lines quoted here are taken, respectively, from the songs *Poseščenie Muzy (The Visit of the Muse)* and *Voennaja pesnja (Combat Song)* (Vysockij 1999, I: 209, 114). Unless otherwise noted, subsequent volume and page numbers in this chapter for citations of Vysockij refer to this edition.

– в общем, короче говоря, людей, которые “вдоль обрыва, по-над пропастью” (Vysockij 2007)<sup>3</sup>.

As will become clear, Vysockij’s *toska* for ‘heroic eras’, while deeply personal, is largely directed at the concept of ‘*podvig*’ or ‘heroic feat’ found in specific contexts and events that contrast sharply with ‘*byt*’ or ‘*obydennost*’ – the prosaicness of everyday life (cf. Lotman, Uspenskij 1985: 61; Boym 1995: 133). Heroic gestures simultaneously constitute a supreme form of human experience for Vysockij and serve as the object of nostalgia – and it is in this light that they appear in his most well-known musical-poetic cycles. In point of fact, it is precisely the absence in normal daily life of both heroism and the extreme situations that serve as heroism’s context that triggers Vysockij’s nostalgia for the force and passion of stronger emotions. His songs consistently situate the heroic feat in a dramatic ‘elsewhere’ that is juxtaposed to the normal daily grind and defined by its spatial and/or temporal remarkableness. Harsh expanses of steppe and polar ice, underground mines, and mountain peaks are among the spaces selected by Vysockij to elaborate his conception of heroism. When locating heroism in other eras, Vysockij often chooses to contemplate the heroic feat in the context of war. Particular attention will be devoted in this article to the origins of this choice as well as to the expression of heroism found in his songs about the men who fought in World War II. The blend of a profoundly personal nostalgia for the heroic feat with widely shared public sentiments enabled both Vysockij and his audience to transcend the quotidian reality of daily Soviet life.

### 1. *A Heroism Opposed to Everyday Life (byt)*

Vysockij’s worldview repeatedly opposes normal Russian ‘*byt*’, or everyday life, to ‘*bytie*’, borrowing Boym’s terminology, a more authentic type of ‘being’ or ‘existence’ (Boym 1995: 133). This opposition is evident, for example, in the celebrated *Pesnja o druze* (*Song of a Friend*), where the standard Manichean distinction between ‘friend’ and ‘enemy’ is blurred in that both are contrasted to a third category, that of the banal and prosaic, represented in the song by the word ‘*tak*’, meaning “so-so” or “without particularly remarkable or distinguishing features”:

Если друг оказался вдруг  
И не друг, и не враг, а так,

<sup>3</sup> “Generally, I try to select for my songs people in the most extreme situations, in moments of risk, people who might at any next moment come face to face with death, people who have been somehow broken, to whom something has happened, in general, to put it briefly, people who are ‘on the edge of the precipice, the brink of the abyss’”. Vysockij’s self-quotation is taken from the first verse of his well-known *Koni priveredlivye* (*Headstrong horses*).

Если сразу не разберешь  
 Плох он или хорош,  
 Парня в горы тяни, рискни,  
 Не бросай одного его,  
 Пусть он в связке одной с тобой,  
 Там поймешь кто такой (I: 112, emphasis added)<sup>4</sup>.

A micro-representation of Vysockij's universe, this song recommends mountain climbing as a means for discovering who our acquaintances 'really are', whether true friends or genuine foes, truly 'good' or really 'bad'. The song yearns for a world illuminated by pristine clarity, in which prosaic indefiniteness ("so-so") is overcome by alpine feats of heroism:

А когда ты упал со скал  
 Он стонал, но держал.  
 Если шел он с тобой, как в бой,  
 На вершине стоял хмельной [...] (Ivi: 112-113, emphasis added)<sup>5</sup>.

In these lyrics, we can begin to intuit a link between heroism and the ethical nature of true friendship (the only admissible kind) found elsewhere in Vysockij as well<sup>6</sup>.

Vysockij's specific interest in the heroic feat has been noted by Šilina (2006: 188), who finds his 'war songs' (*voennij cikl*) to be illustrative of the *podvig*, and by Andrej Skobelev and Sergej Šaulov, whose important monograph (Skobelev, Šaulov 1991) associates the heroic feat with the broader category of 'overcoming' (*preodelenie*) frequently found in his poetics. Nikolaj Rerix, who in 1942 characterized *podvig* as a concept that is specifically Russian and thus untranslatable into other languages, highlighted the notion of moral choice found at its core:

Heroism accompanied by fanfare is not capable of conveying the immortal, complete, and all-encompassing idea contained in the Russian word *podvig* [...]. Gather together a series of words from various languages that expresses the best notions of progress, and not one of them will be equivalent to the compressed, but precise Russian term '*podvig*' [...]. Those who choose to take on the heavy burden of the *podvig* bear it voluntarily (Rerix 1991: 367).

<sup>4</sup> "If a friend suddenly turns out to be / *neither a friend nor an enemy, but so-so* / If you can't immediately tell whether he's good or bad, / Take the guy up in the mountains, take the risk, / Don't abandon him alone / Rope him to you, / Then you'll see who he is".

<sup>5</sup> "And when you fell from the cliff / *He groaned, but held steady*. / Though he came with you as if into battle, / At the peak he stood as one intoxicated [...]"

<sup>6</sup> As is well known, the Russian word '*drug*' has a stronger connotation than does English 'friend', the latter term normally rendered in Russian as '*prijatel*'. '*Drug*' is a more 'extreme friend', one on whom you can rely, as Vysockij's song indicates, "*kak na sebja samogo*" ("as if on yourself") (I: 113).



The deliberate performance of the heroic gest is also raised by Skobelev and Šaulov (1991: 56), who find intention and choice inherent in the specifically Vysockian *podvig*:

Это подвиг жизни и нравственности, влекущий, может быть, смерть, но зато – радость свободного выбора, торжествующее чувство собственного человеческого достоинства, сознание полной реализации<sup>7</sup>.

Indeed, the personages described in Vysockij's verses never opt for the easiest or least painful solution to their various predicaments, but choose instead to confront these heroically, accomplishing notable feats through either resistance or risk. Vysockij's choice to capture these protagonists in situations that put them to the test in different ways result from criteria that are not purely aesthetic: his characters are driven neither by a thirst for glory nor a sense of duty, but rather by a sort of ethical 'maximalism', a refusal to accept compromises or half-way solutions that leads them to conceive of the heroic act as the fullest expression of their own human dignity.

It is widely believed – and with good reason – that a never placated yearning for clear, strong feelings, extreme situations, and radical choices (to be made according to the dictates of conscience and requiring subsequent payment for the consequences), together with Vysockij's drive to locate such sentiments and decisions in a spatially or (still more frequently) temporally defined 'elsewhere' were exacerbated by the historical and social context in which he lived. With the exception of its earliest beginnings, which coincided with the decline of the 'Thaw' period, Vysockij's artistic trajectory unfolded entirely within the temporal confines of the so-called 'Stagnation' of the Brežnev years. His impetuous temperament, his romantic sense of honor, and his irrepressible surges of creativity clashed constantly and irremediably with the paralysis that reigned in Soviet society during that era. In particular, Vysockij suffered from the stifling conformity that reigned in the official artistic institutions and from the hostility of the politico-cultural bureaucracy, that, while never overt, was insidious, systematic, and encountered by him daily<sup>8</sup>. Relatively assiduous travels to the West – primarily to France, but also to the United States, Germany, Italy, Spain, Mexico, Britain, even Tahiti, and so on<sup>9</sup> – did not in the least mitigate Vysockij's

<sup>7</sup> “This is an existential and moral *podvig*, perhaps one that implies death, but that also offers the joy of choosing freely, the triumphant feeling of one's own human dignity, and the consciousness of full self-realization”.

<sup>8</sup> Although Vysockij is often credited with personifying this hostility as “*Moj černyj čelovek v kostjume serom*” (“*My dark individual in a gray suit*”, II: 137), a lyric that appears in even the most authoritative collections of his works, scholar Andrej Semin (2012: 149-185) convincingly argues on the basis of concrete textual evidence that Vysockij did not actually write this song.

<sup>9</sup> Vysockij traveled to the West for the first time in 1973, thanks largely to the strenuous efforts of Vlady, an actress whom he married in 1970 and who was president of the France-USSR Association. His first long-coveted permit to travel was followed

existential discomfort. This point has been attested by various reliable sources, including his wife, Marina Vlady, and his close friend Mixail Šemjakin (Bovina, Curletto 2009: 271-276); it has also been corroborated by the valuable testimony of poet Andrej Voznesenskij, who, in an interview with Demetrio Volcic (then correspondent in Moscow for RAI, the Italian national broadcasting network), described a brief, but significant exchange with Vysockij upon his return from one of the first trips to Paris:

I asked him: ‘Tell me immediately, in just a few words, what do you think of the West?’

His response was brilliant: ‘When you first find yourself in the West’, he said, ‘you want to buy everything; after a bit, you want to steal everything; then, in the end, you want to smash everything’<sup>10</sup>.

Whatever weight we attribute to the possible influence of the Brežnev era on Vysockij’s worldview, it is quite clear that he had a generally antagonistic relationship to daily life – and that his ideas of heroism were conceived in contrast to it. Leonid Dolgopopov (1990: 8) goes so far as to claim that a conflict with the quotidian was the aesthetic dominant in Vysockij’s work and links this notion both to his quest for a heroic era and to his nostalgic mood:

Prosaicness [*obydennost’*] is Vysockij’s implacable enemy. The main theme in all of his artistic production is the search throughout life for a heroic essence [*načalo*], *toska* for this, a passionate desire to see it embodied. This *toska* is expressed by him so passionately and with such profound self abnegation that it is almost embarrassing to discuss it in the clichéd language of criticism<sup>11</sup>.

Implicit in Dolgopopov’s comment is the idea that Vysockij’s quest for a heroic era was inextricably tied to a his concomitant sense of nostalgia, a sentiment arising precisely from the realization that such an era was irreparably beyond reach. Dreaming of a wonderland where “Добро и зло [...] живут на разных берегах” (“Good and evil [...] live on opposite shores”, II: 268), Vysockij wandered through the gray blur of Brežnev’s USSR in search of heroic individuals in heroic situations. His travels through poetic space took him to dramatic geographical settings and harsh climates: beneath the earth’s surface and far above it, on the steppe, in the tundra, and atop mountain peaks. En route, Vysockij’s path sometimes crossed through territory that traditionally belonged to official Soviet

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by others: in 1977 the Soviet authorities even went so far as to grant Vysockij a sort of permanent exit visa, perhaps in the (ultimately vain) hope that he would emigrate and thus destroy the exceptional regard that he enjoyed among the Soviet people.

<sup>10</sup> Voznesenskij’s words are taken from a documentary (cf. Volcic 1982) that appeared on Italian television shortly after Vysockij’s death.

<sup>11</sup> Other scholars have recognized the heroic as one of several primary themes in Vysockij’s work, together with, for example, the tragic and the satirical (e.g. Ševjakov 2006: 3).

literature, such as that belonging to labor, a theme elaborated in ubiquitous and celebratory narratives about the working people and its epic daily accomplishments on the road of socialism's construction. For Vysockij, however, the idea of labor was not intrinsically linked to the pompous rhetoric and empty didacticism of social realism, but struck him with robust and vivid images of folkloric stamp, as seen in the march of the miners in *Černoe zoloto* (*Black Gold*):

Любой из нас – ну, чем не чародей?  
Из преисподней навех уголь мечем.  
Мы топливо отнимем у чертей -  
Свои котлы топить им будет нечем! (I: 249)<sup>12</sup>.

In *Dorožnaja istorija* (*Story of the Road*), another example of heroism 'on the job', an unexpected predicament triggers an argument between two coworkers when the large truck that they are driving through the desert steppe breaks down under the lash of a fierce blizzard. The protagonist, a former convict and one of Vysockij's more complex "role heroes"<sup>13</sup>, remains cool-headed and conscious of the two men's common good. His colleague, however, who up until that moment also been his friend, obeys a mistaken instinct for survival and, in a display of irrationality and irresponsibility, succumbs to the urge to flee. Luckily, fate has prepared a happy ending for both men, as well as for the truck that they are delivering to a construction site beyond the Urals:

... Конец простой: пришел тягач,  
И там был трос, и там был врач,  
И МАЗ попал куда положено ему (*Ivi*: 311)<sup>14</sup>.

Having overcome adversity with remarkable firmness, the hero reaches his apotheosis in a demonstration of magnanimity – as genuine as it is laconic – towards his weaker companion:

И он пришел – трясется весь...  
А там – опять далекий рейс, –  
Я зла не помню – я опять его возьму! (*Ibidem*)<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> "Why shouldn't each and every one of us be a magician? / From the depths of hell we toss up coal. / We'll take the fuel from the devils, / They'll have nothing for stoking their cauldrons".

<sup>13</sup> The term '*rolevoj geroj*' ('role hero') was coined by Boris Korman (1964: 165) to describe the protagonist of what he calls "*rolevaja lirika*" ("role lyrics"): "The peculiarity of role lyrics lies in the fact that the author does not appear in person, but in the disguise of other characters. In role lyrics, a lyrical procedure is used to appropriate epic material: the author gives voice to characters that are clearly distinct from himself. He is present in the poem, but it is as if he were diluted in his own characters and wearing their mask".

<sup>14</sup> "The end is simple: a tow truck came, / It had a cable on board and it had a doctor, / And our truck made it to where it was going".

<sup>15</sup> "And he made it in, too, shaking all over... / Out there another long journey lies before us, / I bear him no grudge – I'll take him with me again!".

Though his coworker fails the test of friendship, the heroic protagonist remains generously disposed towards him.

While the main characters in both *Černoe zoloto* and *Dorožnaja istorija* are only simple workers, and thus ostensibly representatives of the common people, the actual settings of their heroic gests are far from banal. Both songs are set in dramatically rendered environments that sharply contrast with one another and with daily life: one takes place in the hellish darkness of a suffocating coal mine in the burning bowels of the earth, the other in the frigid whiteness of the snow-covered steppe, symbolic of both immaculate purity and deadly austerity. Severe atmospheric conditions are exploited still more fully in *Beloe bezmolvie* (*White Silence*), where perennial pack ice serves as stage for the mental states and heroic acts of polar explorers:

Как давно снятся нам только белые сны,  
 Все иные оттенки снега замели.  
 Мы ослепли давно от такой белизны [...] ]  
 Север, воля, надежда, – страна без границ,  
 Снег без грязи, как долгая жизнь без вранья (*Ivi*: 296)<sup>16</sup>.

## 2. *Alpine Heroism*

Alpine settings were another of Vysockij's favorite contexts for rendering the heroic feat and the nostalgia that he associated with it – from his first direct contact with the mountains during the shooting of the film *Vertikal'* (*Vertical*, 1966) in the Caucasus. In general, Vysockij's 'mountain cycle' (*gornyj cikl*)<sup>17</sup> addresses what he considered to be some of life's most fundamental issues, including friendship, courage, the challenging of one's own limits, personal 'ascent' in various forms, the possibility of reaching happiness that verges on rapture, as well as a paradoxical variety of nostalgia that takes shape in an ineluctable inner need for a 'homecoming', albeit one that is temporary and inconclusive. Indeed, his mountain songs repeatedly outline what we might call a 'phenomenology of heroism' that likens the pursuit of happiness to the labors of Sisyphus: one reaches the summit, pure and majestic, but such triumph is inevitably followed by literal and figurative descent in returning 'home' to what is – because of its

<sup>16</sup> "For so long we've dreamt only white dreams, / The snows have swept away all the other hues. / We were blinded long ago from this whiteness [...] / The North, liberty, hope – a country without borders, / Snow without mud, like a long life without lies".

<sup>17</sup> Because they are relatively few in number, Vysockij's alpine songs are arguably not comparable, for example, to his so-called '*blatnoj cikl*' ('illegal underworld cycle'), '*sportivnyj cikl*' ('sport cycle'), or 'war cycle'; they have, however, sometimes been taken to constitute a 'mountain cycle' because of their consistent form and content (cfr. Skobelev, Šaulov 1991).

very prosaicness – less a safe haven, than a source of anguish<sup>18</sup>. Such homecoming is tolerable only because it is necessary in order to subsequently embark upon yet another path of ascent. In his mountain songs, the vital and vitalist Vysockij suggests that our only means of achieving happiness is choosing to set out again and thus to perform not just one, but several heroic feats, waging sustained battle against our own weaknesses and fears:

И можно свернуть, обрыв обогнуть,–  
 Но мы выбираем трудный путь,  
 Опасный, как военная тропа [...]  
 Мы рубим ступени. Ни шагу назад!  
 И от напряженья колени дрожат,  
 И сердце готово к вершине бежать из груди (*Ivi*: 113-114)<sup>19</sup>.

As we gradually supersede one trial after another, uncertainty and apprehension give way to a self-confidence that borders on exaltation:

Ну вот, исчезла дрожь в руках,  
 Теперь – навверх!  
 Ну вот, сорвался в пропасть страх –  
 Навек, навек.  
 Для остановки нет причин –  
 Иду, скользя,  
 И в мире нет таких вершин,  
 Что взять нельзя (*Ivi*: 201)<sup>20</sup>.

In the final verse of *Gornaja liričeskaja* (*Mountain Lyric*), Vysockij both captures the long-awaited moment of adamantine serenity and transcendence and brusquely opposes it to descent into the daily grind:

И пусть пройдет немалый срок –  
 Мне не забыть,  
 Как здесь сомнения я смог  
 В себе убить.  
 В тот день шептала мне вода:  
 “Удач всегда...”

<sup>18</sup> In their opposition to daily life we can perhaps see a similarity between Vysockij's protagonists and Ivan the Fool, the folkloric hero for whom “*byt*, the everyday, is a more dangerous enemy [...] than the multi-headed dragon with flaming tongues” (Boym 1995: 133).

<sup>19</sup> “One could turn back, go around the precipice, / But we choose the difficult path, / Dangerous as a war track [...] / We hew steps. Not one step back! / And from exertion our knees shake, / And our heart is ready to flee from our chest to the summit”.

<sup>20</sup> “Hey look, my hands aren't shaking anymore, / Now – to the top! / Hey look, my fear has plunged into the abyss / Forevermore, forevermore. / There's no reason to pause, / I move on, sliding, / And there are no summits in this world / That can't be conquered”.

А день... какой был день тогда?  
Ах да – среда!.. (*Ivi*: 202)<sup>21</sup>.

In *Proščanie s gorami* (*Farewell to the Mountains*), Vysockij reiterates the theme of homecoming as inescapable descent into the monotonous routine of daily life. At the same time, this song underlines the notion that conquering the peak confers a certain spiritual elevation that indelibly defines one's character:

В суету городов и в потоки машин  
Возвращаемся мы – просто некуда деться! [...]  
И спускаемся вниз с покоренных вершин  
Что же делать, и боги спускались на землю (*Ivi*: 116-117)<sup>22</sup>.

The film *Vertical* features four songs on mountains themes that Vysockij specifically composed for the film as well as a scene where he – in the role of Volodja, the alpine expedition's radio operator – sings while accompanying himself on the guitar<sup>23</sup>. While the two brief and apparently random quatrains that Volodja intones lack any explicit connection with mountain heroism, they can be linked to his general vision of mountaineering. Indeed, these verses articulate a link between heroism and the experience of nostalgia that characterizes both Vysockij's mountain songs and his work in general:

Свои обиды каждый человек –  
Проходит время – и забывает.  
А моя печаль – как вечный снег:  
Не тает, не тает.  
  
Не тает она и летом  
В полуденный зной, –  
И знаю я: печаль-тоску мне эту  
Век носить с собой (*Ivi*: 117)<sup>24</sup>.

Ultimately, Vysockij's mountain cycle connects nostalgia for homecoming with a longing for setting out yet again towards those particular and special contexts in which heroic feats are possible. The quest for such opportunities is constant in his work, perhaps because it is through the demonstration of heroism, in his view, that one earns the right to be called a human being. Nonetheless,

<sup>21</sup> “And even if a long time passes, / I won't forget / How I was able here / To kill the doubt in myself. / On that day the water whispered to me: / ‘Good luck always ...’ / But the day... what day *was* that? / Oh, yeah... it was Wednesday, midweek! ...”.

<sup>22</sup> “Into the tumult of the cities and streams of cars / We return – there's nothing else to do / [...] And so we come down from the conquered peaks [...] / What can you do? Even the gods came down to earth”.

<sup>23</sup> A fifth alpine song, *Skalolazka* (*Climber-girl*), was not included in the film.

<sup>24</sup> “Every person suffers offense, / Time passes – one forgets. / But my sorrow like perpetual snow / Doesn't melt, it doesn't melt. / It doesn't melt even in summer / In the swelter of midday, / And I know I will have to bear this sorrow-*toska* all my life”.

heroism is not an enduring trait or lasting solution to life's problems – in fact, it cannot survive the descent into prosaicness constituted by homecoming. Heroism constitutes an ongoing process that, despite moments of triumph, is imbued with uneasiness and longing. Vysockij himself appears to have been driven by a troubled restlessness or anxiety in his ceaseless desire to uncover heroes. He searches for heroes everywhere, ranging widely through space and time to do so. The feats of such personages offer at least temporary respite from the continued threat of quotidian stagnation, their repeated acts of heroism constituting a bulwark against the encroachment of the mundane as well as the vital reassertion of full human dignity. As noted, the quest for heroism takes Vysockij to extreme geographical contexts: mountain peaks, the wintry steppe, the Far North. His search also leads him to the past and, particularly, to the era of World War II and to the heroism of the soldier.

### 3. *Vysockij's Nostalgia for a Heroic Era in Its Historical and Personal Context*

Vysockij's notions of space and time forcefully converge in the theme of the Second World War to form a particular chronotope of nostalgia for authentic heroism. He began to write war songs in the first half of the 1960s<sup>25</sup>, when no theme in Soviet culture was more widespread than that of the Second Great Patriotic War. Ubiquitous in the figurative arts and classical music, the War was also featured in hundreds and hundreds of novels, stories, plays, poems, lyrics, songs, historical essays, journalistic reportage, war diaries, and films, both documentary and non-. Such vast output obviously – and justifiably – suggests wide discrepancy in the nature and quality of the works produced – and in the artists' motivations. During the War itself, the greater part of such artistic efflorescence had been inspired by sincere patriotic impulse, but in the 1960s, other factors came into play and War-themed cultural production often featured what might be termed 'historical patriotism' in which nationalist sentiments were elaborated through figures taken from the pre-Soviet past.

The Soviet 'rediscovery' of Russia's historical past and of the heroism shown at critical moments by the Russian people and its far-sighted sovereigns and leaders began in the late 1930s, even before the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (August 1939), probably in reaction to the external threat represented by Nazi Germany. After the Axis invasion of the USSR on June 22, 1941, such historicizing assumed unprecedented vigor and breadth. Even the official labeling of the ensuing conflict as the 'Second Great Patriotic War', i.e. that following

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<sup>25</sup> In 1961, Vysockij wrote his first war song, *Leningradskaja blokada* (*The Blockade of Leningrad*), but the song's protagonist (a thief) and its general content make this piece very similar to the '*blatnye pesni*' (songs from the 'illegal underworld') that he wrote at the beginning of his career.



the conflict with Napoleon that broke out in 1812, clearly underlined historical continuity with the tsarist epoch. Reference to traditional Russian values was also evident in Stalin's radio speech on July 3, when, after a disturbing silence of more than 10 days, he addressed the Soviet people for the first time after the Nazi invasion with the formulaic opening "*Tovarišči! Graždane!*" ("Comrades! Citizens!"), immediately followed by the expression "*Brat'ja i sestry!*" ("Brothers and Sisters!"), evoking a shared cultural heritage extending back through the centuries.

In the vast and variegated fresco that constituted Russian literature during the four years of war that followed (1941-1945), texts celebrating the courage and spirit of sacrifice exhibited by various 'combatants' (a term loosely intended to include not only soldiers and partisans, but also civilians), appeared alongside variegated tributes to great figures from national history, including Dmitrij Donskoj, Ivan IV, Emel'jan Pugačev, and General Brusilov, one of the few high-ranking officers of the tsarist army that aligned himself with the Soviet cause<sup>26</sup>.

Under both Stalin and Brežnev, the Second Great Patriotic War was extensively celebrated in nationalistic terms and through the lens of restorative nostalgia. Another approach to that historical cataclysm was available to Vysockij in the work of the so-called '*šestidesjatniki*', or liberal poets of the 1960s. Though close to him in both age and cultural orientation, and despite their supposed distance from officialdom, these poets interpreted the war in bombastic tones that had very little to do with Vysockij's more reflective nostalgia. Closely tied to their particular historic moment, the *šestidesjatniki* wrote poetry that contrasted sharply with the metahistorical essentialism of the ethical questions raised by the war songs of Vysockij (cf. Šilina 2006: 188).

At first glance, Vysockij's *toska* for a heroism located in the past might be seen to assume some features of the nostalgia that Svetlana Boym (2001: 49) describes as "restorative". Nonetheless, while he does mourn a profound lack of heroism in the dismal, gray, and dispiriting life that surrounds him, Vysockij does not seek return to the past. Indeed, deeper examination of his poetic texts reveals a "reflective" quality in Vysockian *toska*, concerned less with evoking "national past and future", than with "individual and cultural memory" (*Ibidem*). In short, Vysockij's *toska* emanates from a more general problem of identity and from his search – doomed by definition – to find a place in the world for himself<sup>27</sup>.

<sup>26</sup> Aleksej Brusilov (1853-1926) served as protagonist in several Soviet literary works, including a novel and a play; most notably, however, was his key role in an enormous historical trilogy about World War I written by Sergej Sergeev-Censkij (1875-1958) after the model of *War and Peace*. Tolstoj's masterpiece was popular in World War II as well and reprinted several times in Leningrad during the Nazi siege (cf. Barškova 2009: 34).

<sup>27</sup> It is interesting to note that Vysockij tried to 'escape' from everyday life through various adrenaline-inducing strategies. Those close to him have corroborated Vysockij's tendency to recklessly expose himself to danger, the most frequently cited examples be-



Restorative nostalgia requires not only regret for the past, but also an ideology – nowhere visible in Vysockij – that programmatically advocates return to it. A lack of interest in such themes allows him to avoid the heavy finality of either tragic or rhetorical emphasis, and to conclude his songs with the acknowledgement of a permanent, ongoing state or condition of *toska*. Although Vysockij positively views bygone eras of heroism – together with the extreme and intense quality of their sharply distinct ‘friends’ and ‘enemies’ – he aims less to restore the past, than to celebrate it, nostalgically, in song. At the end of the day, artistic production seems to have allowed Vysockij to simultaneously sublimate and come to terms with a sense of loss through the act of commemorating it. It is also true that since his songs contain no clearly expressed desire for any actual restoration of the past, they generate in listeners a variety of nostalgia that is linked less to properly historical memory than to remembrance shot through with an emotional and even deeply personal nostalgia.

Since the struggle for survival that characterized the War era did not lend itself well to the discussion of ideological fine points, rehabilitated 1960s patriotism was easily reconciled with the official image of the USSR as different nationalities united to defend the native land against medieval Nazi barbarity. The Soviet concept of ‘*Novyj gumanizm*’ (‘New Humanism’) even permitted a short-lived re-evaluation of the shared ideals and cultural ties that had once existed between pre-Soviet Russia and the now inimical countries of the capitalist West such as France and Great Britain. Nonetheless, a climate of acute conflict was quickly established between the USSR and the West in the postwar era, and the Soviet state launched a massive ideological campaign that cast its victory over Nazism and Fascism less as the result of any general or traditional patriotism than as proof that the ‘new man’ forged by the Communist Party under Stalin’s infallible guidance was invincible. In fulfillment of the resulting ‘commission’ imposed upon writers and artists by this new party line, a great number of monumental and clumsy attempts at a communist war epic were born<sup>28</sup>, side by side with several texts that were truly powerful and enthralling, such as Boris Polevoj’s *Povest’ o nastojaščem čeloveke* (*Story of a Real Man*, 1946), a work that fascinated several generations of young Soviets with its pathos and action scenes to become a canonical text in socialist realist mass culture (cf. Polevoj 1947)<sup>29</sup>.

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ing a driving style that caused several car accidents, a stubborn insistence on performing his own stunts (riding, jumping, falling in the most perilous scenes of the films in which he starred), and the insatiable, childlike curiosity with which he ventured into dangerous places (e.g. the blast furnaces in steel plants and mines). Ekaterina Klimakova (2014: 4) has noted Vysockij’s great fascination with the archetype of heroic death, for which the use of alcohol and drugs (“*narkotičeskij tip povedenija*”) served as a surrogate in both his life and his literary production.

<sup>28</sup> An example of such verbose and interminable writing may be found in *Belaja bereza* (*The White Birch*, 1947), a novel by Michail Bubennov (1909-1983).

<sup>29</sup> *Povest’ o nastojaščem čeloveke* was based on actual events from the life of military pilot Aleksej Mares’ev (“Meres’ev” in the story), who continued to fight even

Vysockij himself had the ‘privilege’ of becoming acquainted with the heroism of the Second Great Patriotic War not only through the mediation of literature and cinema, but also – and especially – through the vividly personal memories of his own first-hand experience of it, albeit in childhood, and through the stories of the war that were told and retold in his family circle – including stories about young Volodja himself. As Vysockij’s mother, Nina Maksimovna, declared during an interview (Bakin 2012: 11),

Volodja endured all the hardships and the uncertainties of daily life during the war with a strength unusual for his age. In the initial months of the war, I had to take him, as a three-year-old, with me to work. Sometimes he would sleep right there on the tables. When the air-raid sirens went off, we went down into the bomb shelter. It was always crowded, very hot and stuffy. And did he whine? Not once! Just the opposite: he made friends with everyone, began to chat with them, recited poems...

The same moments are recalled by Vysockij himself in the half-bragging and half-romantic tones of *Ballada o detstve* (*Ballad on Childhood*):

Не боялась sireны соседка,  
И привыкла к ней мать понемногу.  
И плевал я, здоровый трехлетка,  
На воздушную эту тревогу (I: 378)<sup>30</sup>.

In subsequent verses, *Ballad* goes on to confirm Nina Maksimova’s recollection that

Trucks carrying sand drove around to the buildings and we had to take it up to the attic – and to fill barrels with water in order to put out firebombs. Volodja came up to the loft several times, too, with his little toy bucket (Safonov 1989: 21).

In grown-up Volodja’s version:

Да не все то, что сверху от бога –  
И народ зажигалки тушил.  
И, как малая фронту подмога,  
Мой песок и дырявый кувшин (I: 379)<sup>31</sup>.

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after both of his legs were amputated. In 1948, Polevoj’s book was made into a movie directed by Aleksandr Stolper and an opera scored by Sergej Prokof’ev (performed only in 1960, seven years after the composer’s death). It was a standard literary text in Soviet schools until the collapse of the USSR.

<sup>30</sup> “The neighbor lady was not afraid of sirens / And my mother had slowly gotten used to them. / And I, a healthy three-year old, couldn’t have cared less / about that air-raid siren”.

<sup>31</sup> “Not all that falls from above comes from God, / And so people put out the flares / And a bit of aid to the front came from / My sand and my beat-up jug”.

Thus, *Ballad on Childhood* begins with an autobiographical event that is re-elaborated with great precision, creating a genuine epic centered in the 1940s and sinking deep roots into the second half of the 1930s, an era that in some respects had been as devastating as the War:

В те времена укомные, теперь почти былинные,  
Когда срока огромные брели в этапы длинные (Ivi: 378)<sup>32</sup>.

With the adjective *bylinnye*, referring to the Russian folk epic, Vysockij blends historical reality with folkloric reminiscence. These merge again in the subsequent verse's creative turns of phrase: "Трофейная Япония, / трофейная Германия... / Пришла страна Лимония, / Сполшная Чемодания" (Ivi: 379)<sup>33</sup>.

Vysockij's mixture of styles and tones, which included the use of metaphors daringly suggestive of the illegal underworld, which flourished in Russia immediately following the War, coupled with pervasive admiration for strength and courage, leads to what Ljudmila Abdullaeva (2001: 317) has defined as the song's "*geroizacija povestvovanija*" ("heroization of narration"), a suggestion that Vysockij's own feats as a singer-songwriter had a heroic component as well:

Девять месяцев – это не лет.  
Первый срок отбывал я в утробе:

<sup>32</sup> In those secluded times, which are now almost epic / When huge verdicts dragged themselves up the river.

<sup>33</sup> "Japanese Trophy-land, / German Trophy-land... / We turned the country into Millionia, / total Suitcasia". The age-old concept of the war trophy requires little ulterior explanation. In this specific case, the taking of the spoils of war was officially regulated by Stalin's decree in June 1945 that soldiers and petty officers had the right to send home a fixed number of packages and also to keep everything that they were capable of carrying back to the *patria*; in addition, officers had the right to appropriate one bicycle or motorcycle apiece, while generals were permitted an auto. Prior to Vysockij, this phenomenon had been poetically treated in Aleksandr Tvardovskij's poem *Vasilij Terkin* (cf. Krečetnikov 2007). In the first years of the New Economic Policy, or NEP, in the 1920s, the term '*limon*' ('lemon') came to signify 'a million rubles', the assonance between '*limon*' and '*million*' effectively underlining the era's steep inflation that caused items such as lemons to be exorbitantly priced. Deriving from this term, the appellation '*Limonia*' became an ironic designation for Soviet Russia. When the New Economic Policy was terminated, '*Limonia*' came to refer to the clandestine survival of (illegal) private commerce and to the circle of persons who devoted themselves to such activities. With the passage of time, the term progressively moved towards the criminal world, becoming a slang term for institutions of detention (cf. Krylov-Kulagin 2010: 279). For Vysockij, the land of "Limonia" would seem to recall both Cockaigne and the "Land of Muravija" from Tvardovskij's eponymous poem; it's primary referent, however, was the sudden appearance in starved, postwar Moscow of precious items plundered abroad and brought home by returning soldiers. The expression "whole Suitcasia", allegedly invented by Vysockij, has now become part of day-to-day language where it refers to systematic plundering, especially of public property.

Ничего там хорошего нет.

[...]

В первый раз получил я свободу

По указу от тридцать восьмого (I: 377-378)<sup>34</sup>.

Abdullaeva (2001: 319) also draws an interesting parallel between *Ballad on Childhood* and Vysockij's *Ballada o bor'be (Ballad on Combat)*, both written in 1975 and exemplifying an "original paraphrase of themes from the fantasies of childhood and adolescence", played out on a 'bookish' plane of legend and imagination, rife with beautiful women, swords, suits of armor, chariots of war, and so on. In her view (*Ibidem*), these songs "offer readers the era from another perspective [...], the mythology of the post-war epoch". *Ballad on Combat* is also interesting in that, on one hand, it expresses nostalgia both for heroism as an existential category and for the specific eras when performance of heroic gests was required for the survival of both individuals and groups, large and small; on the other hand, this song obliquely reveals the watermark of the author's psychological condition – as one who has lived through a heroic era unable (because of his youth) to heroically contribute to a cause so absolutely just:

Средь военных трофеев и мирных костров

Жили книжные дети, не знавшие битв,

Изнывая от мелких своих катастроф.

Детям вечно досаден

Их возраст и быт [...]

А в кипящих котлах прежних боен и смут

Столько пицци для маленьких наших мозгов! (I: 397-398)<sup>35</sup>.

It is instructive to compare the verses quoted above with what Vysockij himself declared about the motives that drove him to write songs about the war:

Мы дети военных лет – для нас это вообще никогда не забудется. Один человек метко заметил, что мы 'довоевываем' в своих песнях. У всех у нас совесть болит из-за того, что мы не приняли в этом участия. Я отдаю дань этому времени своими песнями. Это почетная задача – писать о людях, которые воевали (Vysockij 1998: 10)<sup>36</sup>.

<sup>34</sup> "Nine months are not years. / I served my first sentence in the womb: / It was no good in there. / [...] / I first tasted freedom / Pursuant to the decree of 1938." Vysockij suggests here that as a child raised in a disreputable neighborhood, he was intimately, even innately familiar with criminal slang and legal diction.

<sup>35</sup> "Amidst trophies of war and peacetime bonfires / There lived bookish children who had known no battles / Brooding over their own petty catastrophes. / Children have always been annoyed / By their age and by everyday life/ [...] / And in the bubbling cauldrons of ancient massacres and riots / There is so much fodder for our small brains!"

<sup>36</sup> "We are the children of the war years – that is something we will never forget. One man remarked concisely that we are 'finishing the fight' in our songs. We all feel

Vysockij refers in these lines not to an abstract notion of the homeland at war, but to the concrete individuals who fought in the conflict. Indeed, most of the protagonists in his war songs are individuals or well-defined groups. His “we” clearly refers to an entire generation of twenty-year-olds who grew up in the brief Détente era of ‘socialist humanism’ to have their romantic dreams of heroism frustrated by stifling moral squalor. Nonetheless, *Ballad on Combat* contains no trace of any disenchantment or bitterness towards youthful romantic idealism. On the contrary, fidelity to the teachings of books read in childhood and adolescence constitutes an ethical requirement for human beings:

Если в жарком бою испытал, что почем, –  
 Значит, нужные книги ты в детстве читал! [...]  
 Если руки сложа  
 Наблюдал свысока,  
 И в борьбу не вступил  
 С подлецом, с палачом, –  
 Значит, в жизни ты был  
 Ни при чем, ни при чем! (I: 399)<sup>37</sup>.

Given Vysockij’s enthusiasm and admiration for the heroic gests performed by knights of old in his childhood reading, we can imagine the extraordinary impact made on him as a child by tales recounted directly by those who had experienced combat firsthand, tales of courageous acts and of terrible and unforgettably difficult situations. Several members of Vysockij’s family were regulars in the army, including his father, Semen Vladimirovič, who was discharged with the rank of colonel. Immediately after the war, Volodja lived with his father and stepmother on a Soviet military base in Eberswalde, East Germany for almost three years (from the end of 1946 to August 1949). His father’s testimony (Ključnikov 1988: 43) confirms Volodja’s childhood interest in stories of war:

Volodja began to love books very early [...]. He loved retelling to his friends what he had been reading. He had an excellent memory. He could memorize a poem after reading it only once [...]. In Germany and later in Moscow my friends would come to see us. You can imagine what men who had served together on the front lines would talk about when they got together. My son would listen to our conversations seriously and thoughtfully, then he would bombard “Uncle Kolja”, “Uncle Lenja”, “Uncle Fedja”, and “Uncle Saša” with questions [...]. I believe that Volodja’s great interest in military events was aroused in him by my brother, Aleksej Vladimirovič Vysockij. He has seven decorations on his chest, including three

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guilty that we didn’t take part in the war. I pay tribute to this era with my songs. It is a task of honor to write about the people who fought”.

<sup>37</sup> “If during the raging battle you felt you were there for a purpose, / It means that you read the right books as a child / [...] / If with folded arms / You looked down from above, / And you did not fight / Against villains and executioners / It means that in life / You were useless! Useless!”.

Red Banners. Every time we met, my son would literally not take a single step away from “Uncle Leša”.

These family circumstances help to explain a peculiar aspect of Vysockij’s ‘war songs’. Let us note, to begin with, that these are almost always based on real events – to the point that it has even been possible at times to identify the prototypes on whom he modeled his protagonists<sup>38</sup>; it is also the case that Soviet veterans of World War II find Vysockij’s songs to be impressively ‘true’ from all perspectives. Nonetheless, for all their plausibility, these songs seem to be set both in World War II, and also – simultaneously – in a metahistorical or mythologically prototypical dimension. In short, as young Vysockij read tales of medieval knights and listened to stories of the War, the two ‘genres’ blended together in his imagination.

#### 4. *Vysockij, the Restoration of War Patriotism, and the Heroic Feats of Soldiers*

Having briefly touching upon the theme of war in 1961 with “Leningradskaja blokada” (*The Leningrad Blockade*), Vysockij began to treat it more systematically in 1964. In that year, no less than six war songs came into being, two of which, “Štrafnye batal’ony” (*Penal battalions*) and “Vse ušli na front” (*Everyone’s Gone to the Front*), may be considered transitional insofar as their protagonists are taken from the same marginalized world that had recently served the poet as inspiration for his illegal underworld cycle (1961-1964)<sup>39</sup>. An external circumstance of particular importance that certainly contributed to Vysockij’s work on the war cycle was the twentieth anniversary of the Soviet victory in World War II: May 9, 1965 was proclaimed a national holiday – as it had been in the early postwar years – and the tradition of holding an imposing military parade on Red Square was revived as well. Soviet leaders took advantage of this anniversary to celebrate the restoration of a more conservative political and cultural climate under the guidance of Brežnev, the new General Secretary of the Communist Party. Brežnev used the patriotic and national past as a political touchstone in a way that his predecessor Xruščev had not. While Xruščev had not been inclined, for example, to use military symbolism

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, the outstanding work of Leon Nadel’ (2011: 3-35), who has identified the prototype for the protagonist of the song *Tot, kotoryj ne streljal* (*He Who Did Not Shoot*).

<sup>39</sup> In 1964, the range of characters role-played by Vysockij in his songs began to widen considerably, moving from the marginalized personages (thugs, petty criminals) of his earlier ‘*blatnye pesni*’ or ‘songs of the illegal world’ to a series of characters representing broad portions of Soviet society: soldiers, workers, scientists, athletes, etc. Anatolij Kulagin (1999: 8-11), who divides Vysockij’s poetic production into four stages, has defined the years 1964-1969 as his ‘*proteističeskij*’ (‘protean’) period.



in shaping his own public image, Brežnev's official persona was cast as that of a courageous warrior from the Second Great Patriotic War. Construction of the Brežnev myth began in earnest, the process of systematic historical distortion going so far that even Marshal Žukov felt compelled to insert into his 1974 memoirs the narration of imaginary acts of heroism supposedly performed by young Brežnev in 1943<sup>40</sup>.

This twentieth anniversary of the victory was celebrated with understandable pride by the large majority of Soviet citizens, to whom the War had caused indescribable suffering and hardship. The Communist Party exploited the event to launch a major campaign of self-celebration, mobilizing exponents of the creative intelligentsia. Painters, sculptors, prose writers, poets, playwrights, theatre and film directors each responded to the call on the basis of their talents (if they had any) and character, be it a tendency towards servility or the affirmation of courage and a sense of dignity. Vysockij himself was involved during this period with two important projects that he would never have occasion to regret and that marked a significant step in his artistic evolution. The first of these was the film *Ja rodom iz detstva* (*I'm from Childhood*, 1966), a deeply lyrical drama shot in Bielorussia about the fate of children during World War II. The film was directed by Viktor Turov, who was constrained by the censorship at several points during the film's shooting, and based on a screenplay by Gennady Špalikov, one of the great and prematurely ruined talents of the Brežnev era<sup>41</sup>. Although Vysockij had only a secondary role as the tank man Volodja, several of his songs were included in the film, marking *I'm from Childhood* as the first cinematographic context for his music. All of these songs were related to the theme of war and range in tone from

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<sup>40</sup> The culmination of this mythologizing process was reached in 1978, when Brežnev was awarded the Order of Victory, the USSR's highest military decoration and one previously awarded only to generals and marshals who had distinguished themselves during the War. Brežnev's glorious and fictitious military career left its mark on contemporary literature as well: in 1980, the Lenin Prize for Literature was awarded to a trilogy of war memoirs – *Malaja Zemlja, Vozroždenie, Celina* (*The Small Land, Rebirth, Virgin Lands*) – that Brežnev had supposedly written and that had been published in *Novyj Mir* two years earlier. In point of fact, these texts were authored by a group of journalists based on Brežnev's memories. Georgij Žukov (1896-1974) enlisted as a common soldier in the Soviet army in 1918 and rose up through the ranks of the military hierarchy to the top, becoming Army Chief of Staff in February 1941. In January 1945, he led the Russian occupation of Warsaw and conquered Berlin; as representative of the Soviet Union, he undersigned the German Instrument of Surrender in May 1945.

<sup>41</sup> The first screenplay of poet and screenwriter Gennadij Špalikov was *Zastava Il'iča* (*Il'ič's Ilyich's Gate*, also known as *Lenin's Guard*), directed by Marlen Xuciev and released in 1962 to become one of the most interesting films of the Détente period. Since Xruščev did not like the film, it was withdrawn, then trimmed, retitled *Mne dvadcat' let* (*I Am Twenty*), and released again in 1965. Špalikov also wrote the screenplay of *Ja šagaju po Moskve* (*Walking the streets of Moscow*, 1963), a comedy directed by G. Danelija that met with great success. He committed suicide in 1974.

the heroic to the lyrical<sup>42</sup>. The most well known among them, *Mass Graves* (*Bratskie mogily*), was sung off screen by Mark Bernes and used by Turov as a connecting thread in the plot<sup>43</sup>:

Здесь раньше вставала земля на дыбы,  
А нынче – гранитные плиты.  
Здесь нет ни одной персональной судьбы –  
Все судьбы в единую слиты [...]  
У братских могил нет заплаканных вдов –  
Сюда ходят люди покрепче.  
На братских могилах не ставят крестов,  
Но разве от этого легче?.. (I: 69)<sup>44</sup>.

Bernes himself was a celebrated performer of several pieces that have since become part of the history of Russian song and Vysockij later noted the powerful effect that the older artist's performance had on members of the film's audience:

Я с ним дружил в конце его жизни. Это был действительно удивительный человек, который, правда, ценил по-настоящему авторскую песню. И это производило удивительный эффект, потому что мы, например, получили письмо от одной женщины. Она потеряла память, когда на ее глазах повесили двух сыновей. И она посмотрела это кино в больнице, и написала нам письмо, что она вспомнила, где это случилось с ее детьми. “Вы мне вернули память”, – она написала. И Бернесу было письмо, и на студию на минскую. Но вот такое было на нее воздействие, этих вот слов, бесхитростной совсем мелодии, и, конечно, голос Бернеса, который весь из тех времен [...] (Vysockij 1988)<sup>45</sup>.

Vysockij's recollection illustrates how his songs served as an intermediary link between collective and individual memory, a function that Boym (2001: 54) attributes to reflective nostalgia, noting that “in the emotional topography of

<sup>42</sup> The songs included in the film were *Bratskie mogily* (*Mass Graves*), *Vysota* (*The Height*), *Zvezdy* (*Stars*), *V choloda, v choloda* (*Into the Cold, into the Cold...*).

<sup>43</sup> Mark Bernes (1911-1969), movie actor and pop singer, was one of the most popular performers of ‘official’ Soviet songs.

<sup>44</sup> “Here the earth once reared up, / But now it is covered by granite slabs. / Here there is no such thing as personal fate, / All fates have merged as one. / [...] Over the mass graves no widows weep, / The people that come here are stronger. / Over the mass graves they raise no crosses, / But does that really make it any easier? ...”.

<sup>45</sup> “We became friends towards the end of his life. He was a truly extraordinary man, who really valued bard music. And this had a surprising effect, because, for example, we received a letter from a woman who had lost her memory when two of her sons were hanged right in front of her. She watched this movie in the hospital and she wrote us a letter telling us that she had suddenly remembered where that had happened to her children. ‘You have given me back my memory’, she wrote. She wrote both to Bernes and to the studio in Minsk. And so that was the effect on her of those words, of that very simple melody, and, certainly, of Bernes’s voice, a voice that was entirely of those times [...]”.



memory, personal and historical events tend to be conflated". Indeed, through his war songs – based in part on memories dating back to Vysockij's childhood (i.e. the recollection both of his own adventures and of the stories recounted to him by veterans or in the books that he read) and in part on the knowledge of historical and literary matters that he acquired in adulthood – Vysockij was able to paint an enormous canvas representing collective Soviet memory of the War era. Many of his compatriots were able to relive their own personal memories in this realistic and emotionally charged 'verbal fresco'. Vysockij, like Bernes, regularly received a number of letters from veterans who thought they had recognized themselves in the protagonist of this or that song, a fact that he often mentioned with pride during his concerts.

Vysockij had originally written *Mass Graves* for a production to be staged at the Taganka Theater under the title *Pavšie i žive* (*The Fallen and The Living*), in commemoration of the twentieth anniversary of the victory. This was Vysockij's second major project in the 'restoration era'. Here director Jurij Ljubimov used an approach that would become one of his trademarks, namely presenting the bare poetic text without any set. Accompanied only by the music of Šostakovič, the actors in *The Fallen and The Living* recited verses that had been composed primarily by the 'poety frontoviki' (frontline poets), i.e. those who had served during the War. It is likely that Vysockij's sensitive nature and tendency to deeply identify with other people's experiences contributed to his interest in the works and biographies of the frontline poets. Certainly, his discovery of them had a strong impact, both psychologically and artistically, on Vysockij's artistic production, contributing definitively to the shape of his war songs<sup>46</sup>. A thorough analysis of the features shared by Vysockij's verses and those of the frontline poets may be found in Šilina (2006: 188-225), including emotional tension, historical and psychological plausibility, and the conjunction of symbolic ethical and philosophical images with day-to-day life.

As was the case with all Taganka productions, restrictions imposed by the censorship meant protracted struggles, lengthy negotiations, and multiple postponements. In point of fact, the song *Mass graves* was itself cut before the drama opened in November 1965, although Vysockij had the honor of singing another of his songs on stage. That composition, *Soldaty gruppy 'Centr'* (*Soldiers of the 'Center' Group*), countered prevailing restorative trends by focusing on protagonists who were not Russian, but representatives of the enemy forces and it is the only song to do so in his war cycle. In sum, Vysockij's conception of World War II as a heroic era resulted from a personal evolution that was largely independent of

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<sup>46</sup> Vysockij spoke admiringly of *The Fallen and the Living* and the works of the frontline poets at his concerts and also in two of his (very infrequent) television interviews, i.e. on Bulgarian television in 1975 and on Chechen television in 1978. Moreover, when he made a brief video in May 1979 in order to introduce himself to Warren Beattie, who was then casting the movie *Reds*, Vysockij began by reciting (in Russian) some poems from *The Fallen* written by wartime poet Semen Gudzenko (1922-1953), rather than a selection from his own wide repertoire.

politics, though it sometimes overlapped with the political interests of the Soviet state during the years of the Brežnevian restoration. Unlike the prohibited theme of the illegal underground that Vysockij had explored in previous work – and that had no official outlet – the war theme was publicly approved and even officially embraced; his own approach to the War, however, remained *sui generis*.

Why Vysockij's 'war cycle' should so prominently feature heroism has been extensively treated by various critics (e.g. Uvarova 1999, Fomina 2001, Ševjakov 2006, Nadel' 2011, etc.). We will consider here how these wartime heroic feats differ qualitatively within Vysockij's oeuvre from those accomplished during times of peace. An initial answer to this question was given by Vysockij himself in an explanation of his constant references to war:

[...] я считаю, что во время войны просто есть больше возможности, больше пространства для раскрытия человека – ярче он раскрывается. Тут уж не соврешь, люди на войне всегда на грани, за секунду или за полшага от смерти. Люди чисты, и поэтому про них всегда интересно писать [...]. И я их часто нахожу в тех временах. Мне кажется, просто их тогда было больше, ситуации были крайние. Тогда была возможность чаще проявлять эти качества: надежность, дружбу в прямом смысле слова, когда тебе друг прикрывает спину (Vysockij 2007)<sup>47</sup>.

Having argued that war provides the best context for investigating human nature, offering as it does constant opportunities for such to be revealed, Vysockij goes on to note that in the martial setting questions of themes such as courage or cowardice, selflessness or egotism, responsibility or lack thereof, remain substantially invariant across eras:

Это не песни-ретроспекции: они написаны человеком, который войну не прошел. Это песни-ассоциации. Если вы в них вдумаетесь и вслушаетесь, вы увидите, что их можно петь и теперь: просто взяты персонажи и ситуации из тех времен, но все это могло произойти и здесь, сегодня. И написаны эти песни для людей, большинство из которых тоже не участвовали в этих событиях. Так я к ним отношусь – это современные песни, которые написал человек, живущий сейчас. Они написаны на военном материале с прикидкой на прошлое, но вовсе не обязательно, что разговор в них идет только чисто о войне (*Ibidem*)<sup>48</sup>.

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<sup>47</sup> “[...] I think that during war there are simply more opportunities, more space for the revelation of human nature: humans reveal themselves more vividly. You can't pretend anymore: people at war are always on the edge, a second or a half-step away from death. People are transparent and that's why it's always interesting to write about them [...]. And I often find them in those times. It seems to me that there were simply more of them then, that the situations in which they found themselves were more extreme. At that time it was possible to more often display qualities like reliability, friendship – in the real sense of the word, when a friend covers your back”.

<sup>48</sup> “These are not retrospective songs: they were written by a man who did not go through the war. These are ‘associative songs’: If you think about and listen to them carefully, you will see that they can even be sung today: it's just that the characters and the

He expressed quite similar ideas in *Pesnja o vremeni* (*Song About Time*), a sort of manifesto of his view on the relationship between past and present (cf. Korkina 1998: 46):

И холодное прошлое заговорит  
 О походах, боях и победах.  
 [...]
 Ты к знакомым мелодиям ухо готовь  
 И гляди понимающим оком, –  
 Потому что любовь – это вечно любовь,  
 Даже в будущем вашем далеком (I: 390)<sup>49</sup>.

The motives for courageous acts on the battlefield are quite specific and differ from those that inspire, for instance, climbers. According to Šilina (2006: 191-192), the protagonists of Vysockij's war cycle are combatants, who, despite their very different levels of training and specialization, share an unconscious, inner predisposition for heroism, an attitude resembling the implicit sense of duty that pervades the verses of the frontline poets as well. The sentiment is so natural and deeply-rooted, in other words, that no explicit mention of it is necessary. Indeed, Vysockij makes no use of patriotic rhetoric in his entire oeuvre – a fact essential to understanding his poetics. Even the word '*Rodina*' (*Homeland*), which he uses very rarely, carries a somewhat ironic aftertaste, especially in the mouths of convicts who choose to risk their lives at the front in order that their sentences be reduced by two-thirds:

За грехи за наши нас простят, –  
 Ведь у нас такой народ:  
 Если Родина в опасности –  
 Значит, всем идти на фронт.  
 Там год – за три, если бог хранит (I: 59-60)<sup>50</sup>.

The soldierly sense of duty that Vysockij describes does not appear to be triggered by conditioned reflex (since the men do reflect upon it), nonetheless, this sentiment ultimately prevails over their other motives for action and, most notably, over an instinct for self-preservation. Their participation in the war results

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situations have been taken from those days [of war], but all of it could very well happen here, too, even now. And these songs were written for people, the majority of whom didn't take part in those events either. This is how I regard them: as contemporary songs written by a person living today. They were written using wartime material, looking towards the past, but they are certainly not necessarily only and exclusively about the war".

<sup>49</sup> "And the cold past would speak / Of campaigns, battles, and victories. [...] / Ready your ear for these familiar melodies / and look with an understanding eye, because love is love forever – / Even in your far-off future".

<sup>50</sup> "For our sins we'll be forgiven, – / That's the kind of people we are: / If the Homeland is in danger / Then everyone must go to the front / There a year is worth three, if God protects us".

from various pressing events, but it is mainly the product of individual choice. Indeed, Vysockij rarely deprives his characters of the chance to choose or, at least, to challenge their fate even in the most dramatic contexts. In *Černye bušlaty* (*Black pea jackets*), for example, a song that can be considered the peak of the entire war cycle, a soldier of the naval landing force rejects the idea of having to sacrifice his life for the homeland because he cannot grasp how a supremely heroic act could be achieved by executing an order. And thus he *thinks* before obeying:

Сегодня на людях сказали: “Умрите героически!”  
 Попробуем – ладно! Увидим, какой оборот...  
 Я только подумал, чужие куря папироски:  
 “Тут кто как сумеет, – мне важно увидеть восход” (*Ivi*: 318)<sup>51</sup>.

Attempting to exorcise the peremptory heartlessness of the command that he has been given, the soldier replies in words so thick with connotations of daily life that they sound almost scornful. Nonetheless, it is not the order from above, but his own sense of personal responsibility in pursuit of the common good that prevents him and his companions from giving in to hatred or instinctive emotion. When it's time to blow up the fort, for example, the soldiers stick to that primary task, restraining themselves from other distractions: “*Prošli po tylam my, deržas' čtob ne rezat' ix sonnyx*” (“We crossed behind the lines, holding ourselves back from killing them in their sleep”, *Ivi*: 319).

The song's leitmotif is the protagonist's strong wish to see the next day dawn symbolized by the sunflower, perhaps the last thing that he sees before dying: “*Ešče nesmyšlenyj, zelenyj, no čutkij podsolnux / Uže povernulsja verxuškoj svoej na vosxod*” (“A still thoughtless, green, and yet perceptive sunflower / Has already turned its crest towards the dawn”, *Ibidem*). The sacred quality of this image is confirmed by the fact that in the last two stanzas, the protagonist's voice comes from another, unearthly world:

Восхода не видел, но понял: вот-вот – и взойдет.  
 ...Уходит обратно на нас поредевшая рота.  
 Что было – не важно, а важен лишь взорванный форт  
 (*Ivi*: 320)<sup>52</sup>.

Nonetheless, even witness of the dawn, which remains the protagonist's cherished goal throughout the song, is virtually transfigured in the final lines and identified metaphorically with the success of the military operation. Fallen on the battlefield, the soldier bequeaths to his surviving comrades the sunrise

<sup>51</sup> “Today they said straight to our faces: ‘Die heroically!’ / We’ll try, fine! We’ll see how things turn out. / I just had a thought, while smoking someone else’s cigarettes: / ‘Here everyone does what he can, what’s important for me is to see the sunrise’”.

<sup>52</sup> “I didn’t see the sunrise, but I understood: it’s just about to come up. / ... Our company, thinned down, comes back to us, / Whatever it was that happened doesn’t matter, all that matters is we’ve blown up the fort”.

that he was unable to see, sacrificing his life for their common welfare: “*Mne xočetsja verit’, čto grubaja naša rabota / Vam darit vozmožnost’ bezpošlinno videt’ vosxod*” (“I want to believe that our rude work / Will grant you the chance to see the dawn tax-free”; *Ibidem*). Moreover, in keeping with a Vysockian tendency towards understatement, he defines the heroic gest that he and his comrades have performed without any rhetorical frills as “*grubaja naša rabota*”, an expression Šilina (2006: 190) sees as demonstrating the view shared among Vysockij’s soldier protagonists that war was not “heroic epic, but day-to-day life at the front” (*frontovye budni*).

While Šilina’s characterization accurately renders the soldiers’ own point of view, it is also true that if we take the war cycle as a whole, the most appropriate general definition for it would be precisely that of “heroic epic”. Despite a few variations in poetic tone, the war cycle is a coherent group of songs persistently laced with the themes of friendship, danger, courage, fear, physical exertion, life, and death. As noted, the situations, actions, and psychology described in Vysockij’s songs are so plausible that some war veterans believed he had fought among them. Moreover, his verses contain what might be described as ‘substantial’, rather than ‘documentary’ realism insofar as they manage to express all of the war’s tragedy without indulging in the representation of horrors and atrocities. Certainly, such an approach itself might be interpreted as adding a touch of aesthetic and psychological authenticity to the subject, insofar as those who were actually involved in the War, whether as participants, witnesses or victims, were often quite unwilling to offer up the grisly details, preferring to recollect the tragedy in all its emotional complexity as a world in and of itself. It is quite likely, in fact, that many unpleasant details had been omitted from the tales narrated by Vysockij’s father, his uncle, and their comrades-in-arms that had so fascinated him as a boy.

## 6. *Epic and Existential Heroism*

Many of the passages quoted in this article – from both Vysockij’s war cycle and his other songs – demonstrate how he often tended to diminish the heroism of individuals in favor of a ‘choral’ variety. While not all of the persons described perform heroic feats, they do all overcome their fears and transcend the limitations imposed by an egotistical sense of self-preservation in order to create an epic together. Vysockij himself enjoyed participating in this collective ‘epic identity’: indifferent to the appeal of the superhero, he preferred to position himself against a more democratic backdrop – and to blend in with it.

A dimension that is epic in both temporal and spatial terms can be seen clearly in the adventures and misadventures of the main character in *Letela žizn’* (*Life Flew By*), a ballad that combines epic, lyric, and philosophical elements to serve as a patent example of the poetics preferred by Vysockij in his final years. In *Kak sbityj kust* (*Like an Uprooted Shrub*, I: 458), a Chechen protagonist is

dragged by the winds of history through the boundless expanse of the fierce Stalinist age; his national identity serves as sufficient motive for the repressive state apparatus to require his deportation to Kazakhstan in February 1944, together with hundreds of thousands of other Chechens and Ingush<sup>53</sup>. Recalling the land where he was born, the protagonist remembers his orphanage childhood with implicit gratitude: “*Oni nam detskix duš ne zagubili, / Delili s nami pišču i sud’bu*” (“They did not destroy our childish souls, / They shared with us their food and fate”; *Ibidem*). Decades of exile, misfortune, hardship, unfreedom, and displacement follow: “*Ja mog by byt’ s kakix ugodno mest [...] Živu – vezde, sejščas k primeru, – v Tule*” (“I could be from anywhere [...]. I live everywhere, now, for instance, in Tula”; *Ibidem*). The Chechen does not speak of his own sad fate in order to inspire compassion, but reflects upon it, fully aware that his experience is but one detail in an immense collective portrait of the entire nation: “*Byval ja tam, gde i drugie byli, – / Vse te, s kem rezal popolam sud’bu*” (“I have been where others have also been, / All those with whom I shared fate by halves”; *Ibidem*)<sup>54</sup>. His difficult life has followed an itinerary through Siberian locales known as symbols of hard labor (Noril’sk, Anadyr’, Barnaul). Of all the types of violence to which he has been subjected, he is particularly haunted by the ethnic variety perpetrated among the deported peoples:

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<sup>53</sup> Mass deportation was the merciless Soviet response to the rebellion of various peoples upon the occasion of the Soviet invasion of Germany in February 1944. In merely six days, the repressive apparatus of Berija’s political police crammed over 478,000 Chechens and Ingush into sealed railroad cars traveling to Kazakhstan and Kirghizia. More than one third of the deportees died during the journey or from hardships suffered in the first years of exile, while the survivors were forbidden to leave their place of destination. The same fate also befell the Crimean Tatars, similarly accused of collaboration with the Nazis and rounded up by the Red Army in May 1944 for deportation to Uzbekistan and Tadzhikistan. The situation of the Chechens and Ingush, like that of other groups deported within the USSR (including Volga Germans, Bulgars, Crimean Armenians and Greeks, Balkars, Kalmyks, etc.) remained unchanged until 1956, when Xruščev authorized them to return to their native regions. Nonetheless, Xruščev himself made no mention of this delicate topic in his historic speech at the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956 and it was fully ignored by the media and in official historiography, remaining taboo until the beginning of Perestrojka.

<sup>54</sup> At the beginning of September 1978, Vysockij performed *Letela žizn’* during an evening spent with the staff of the Groznyj (Chechnya) Theater of Dramatic Art. Among those present was actor Vasabek Naurbiev, who years later recalled the reaction of that group to Vysockij’s song: “A pause of literally five minutes followed. No one could move, everyone sat in silence. And suddenly someone burst into tears, another began to cry, a third.” According to Vysockij’s manager Vladimir Gol’dman, he also sang *Letela žizn’* during that same tour to an audience of 10,000 in the Groznyj stadium – during heavy rain in an event that aroused both enthusiasm and emotion. Naurbiev’s testimony appeared in the documentary film *Letela žizn’*, aired on Soviet national television in January 1990 during the height of *glasnost’*. Nevertheless, only two verses of the song for which the program itself was named were included and *Letela žizn’* has not since been rebroadcast (Cf. Cybul’skij 2008: 154-155; Buvina, Curletto 2009: 309-313).



Вот бьют чеченов немцы из Поволжья,  
 А место битвы – город Барнаул [...]  
 Те и другие были не отсюда,  
 Но воевали, словно за себя (Ivi: 460)<sup>55</sup>.

Even though surrounded by degradation and despair, the protagonist of *Life Flew By* can be defined as one of Vysockij's paradigmatic heroes because he retains a sense of compassion for others and seems to be endowed with innate courage: “*Kogda došlo počti do samosuda, / Ja vstal goroj za gorcev, č'e-to gorlo terebja*” (“When things got close to lynching / I rose like a mountain to defend the mountain dwellers, grabbing someone by the throat; *Ibidem*). In the last stanza, a long-awaited note of almost cathartic liberation sounds: “*A te, kto nas na podvigi podbili, / Davno ležat i korčatsja v grobu*” (“And those who incited us to heroic feats / Have long been lying – and rolling over – in their graves”; *Ibidem*). Here Vysockij clearly refers to Stalin and to the regime that led the Soviet people to “*podvigi*”, a term he uses with bitter sarcasm to underline how encouraging heroism through terror and violence is immoral – and even sacrilegious in that heroic acts imply exaltation and transcendence.

*Letela žizn'* is one of few cases in which Vysockij directly addresses the problem of ‘nationality’ or ethnic identity. As Austrian scholar Heinrich Pfandl (2012: 132) correctly affirms, the Jewish theme had no great role in his work:

Высоцкий, человек, несомненно, русской культуры, сформировавшийся в советских условиях, не применял критерий нации к оценке сограждан или при определении своей идентичности<sup>56</sup>.

Attention to Jewish themes in Vysockij is motivated by the fact that he was of Jewish ancestry on his father's side. In addition to the well-known *Antisemitism* (*Anti-semities*) and *Miška Šifman* – songs in which Vysockij satirizes crass antisemitic prejudice to express a point of view widely agreeable to any Soviet *intelligent* of liberal views – one can find Jewish names and bits of realia scattered throughout his repertoire. These assume a more concentrated form in the song *Lekcija o međunarodom položenii* (*Lecture on the International Situation*), where Vysockij makes explicit reference to Jewish themes in comments on Soviet emigration to Israel and Israeli politics. Another important example of Vysockij's reflections on Russian-Jewish themes appears in two quatrains from the *Ballad on Childhood* describing a dialog between the Russian Evdokim Kirilyč and the Jew Gisja Moiseevna:

<sup>55</sup> “Now the Chechens take a pounding from the Volga Germans. / And the site of the battle is the city of Barnaul. [...] / Neither came from these parts, / But they fought as if it were for themselves”.

<sup>56</sup> “Vysockij, a man of undoubtedly Russian culture, shaped under Soviet conditions, did not apply ethnic criteria when evaluating his co-citizens or when defining his own identity”.

Она ему: “Как сыновья?” –  
 “Да без вести пропавшие!  
 Эх, Гиська, мы одна семья, –  
 Вы тоже пострадавшие.  
 Вы тоже пострадавшие,  
 А значит обрусевшие:  
 Мои – без вести павшие,  
 Твои – безвинно севшие (I: 116-379)<sup>57</sup>.

These verses illustrate how Vysockij’s own Jewish ancestry, though externally invisible, formed an integral part of his own Russian and even Soviet identity. He thus contextualized his own personal and familial affairs in the greater historical narrative that saw the Jews of the tsarist Empire adhere *en masse* to the progressive and universalist ideology of the Revolution (inimical as it was to nationalism and antisemitism), as Yuri Slezkine (2004) brilliantly demonstrates. Initially rewarded with roles of power and responsibility, the Jews fell victim to Stalinist repression in the 1930s: “You have also suffered, / Which means you have become Russian”.

## 7. Heroism’s Distilled Essence

In the poem *I Was Too Late (Toska for Romanticism)*, Vysockij pointedly expressed the existential malaise that resulted from his virtual imprisonment in a dismal era from which great deeds and profound sentiments had been precluded. In a list of historical situations allowing humankind to demonstrate its heroic qualities, he regretted that such an opportunity had been denied to him by the epoch in which he lived:

К чертям пошли гусары и пираты.  
 Пришла пора всезнающих невежд,  
 Все выстроено в стройные шеренги (II: 74)<sup>58</sup>.

In the final stanza, Vysockij significantly introduces – and reiterates – the concept of ‘*vzlet*’, or ‘taking flight’ – intended as transcendent soaring:

Но все они на взлете, в нужный год –  
 Отплавали, отпели, отпророчили...  
 Я не успел – я прозевал свой взлет (*Ivi*: 76)<sup>59</sup>.

<sup>57</sup> “She to him: ‘How are your sons?’ / ‘They’ve vanished without a trace / Eh, Gis’ka, we’re of one family / You have also suffered! / You have also suffered, / Which means you have become Russian. / Mine have vanished without a trace / Yours are jailed without guilt”.

<sup>58</sup> “The hussars and pirates have gone to hell. / The time of the all-knowing numbskulls has come, / Everything is built up in orderly ranks”.

<sup>59</sup> “But they all soared up, in the necessary moment – / They set sails, they sang, they foretold... / I was too late – I slept through my time for takeoff”.



It is on this same *vzlet* that the soldier protagonist of “Black Pea Jackets” pins all his hopes: “*Za našej spinoj ostalis’ paden’ja, zakaty, / Nu xot’ by ničtožnyj, nu xot’ by nevidimyj vzlet!*” (Behind us falling, sunsets / If we’d only had even an insignificant, even an invisible take off!”; I: 318). The wish to detach oneself from the ground and soar high above ordinary daily life thus unites the lyric voice in *I Was Too Late (Toska for Romanticism)* with the ‘role heroes’ found in the songs discussed above, most of them climbers and men of arms. We can agree with Klimakova (2014: 3) that in Vysockij’s mythopoesis, medieval knights and the soldiers of World War II are essentially two equivalent instantiations from the category of warrior heroes<sup>60</sup>.

Whether actually realized or (as is more often the case) unrealized, ‘*vzlēt*’ constitutes one of the most significant representations of attempting to ‘cross the line’ that in many of Vysockij’s texts separates the actual situation of the protagonist, whether ‘role hero’ or lyrical ‘I’, from that for which he longs. This opposition has been given a spatial dimension by Skobelev and Šaulov (1991: 56-57), who characterize it in terms of a distinction between ‘here’ (‘*zdes*’) and ‘there’ (‘*tam*’):

This ‘here’ and ‘there’ are, of course, invested with ideological and ethical meanings that fly up and away like the soul’s spheres of being (me-here – a boundary – me-there) [...]. In the poetry of Vysockij, the ‘there’ that contrasts with the present ‘here’ takes shape in several quite well-defined hypostases. First of all, ‘there’ means the mountains [...], juxtaposed to the depressing life of the pedestrian dweller of plains; secondly, ‘there’ means the war and the dangers connected with it that demand from us courage, the exertion of force, and so on [...]. Moreover, ‘there’ signifies the past and, in general, the ‘world beyond’.

While an entire essay could easily be devoted to the theme of ‘the beyond’ or ‘other world’ (*mir potustoronnij*) in Vysockij’s poetry, it is also true that, in their excellent work on Vysockij, Skobelev and Šaulov (1991) specifically identify the mountains, the war, and the past as different examples of the contrasting other world or dimension represented by ‘there’. They thus corroborate the thesis that Vysockij’s *toska* for ‘heroic eras’ is but one of many concrete instances of a constant and irrepressible yearning for an ‘elsewhere’ – the attainment of which, should it ever occur, would not in any case to be perceived as final or conclusive. Indeed, the theme of return from a transcendent elsewhere back to the daily grind appears not just in Vysockij’s mountain cycle, but is widespread throughout his artistic production. There is no lasting escape from existence: one must descend from the peak to continue the process of ascending and descending, of putting oneself to the test, a process from which even the gods are not exempt.

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<sup>60</sup> This fact recalls the observations made by Lotman and Uspenskij (1985: 63-64) about Aleksandr Radiščev, who, in his “reconstruction of the utopia of the past”, failed to distinguish between classical antiquity, pagan Slavdom, and ancient Orthodox Russia; he similarly depicted his friend, Fedor Ušakov, as a contemporary “man of firmness” (“*muž tverdyj*”), thus uniting in him features belonging both to Cato and the Christian martyrs.

Truly essential to Vysockij's characters (again, be they 'role heroes' or lyrical 'I's) is proving – to themselves – that they are indeed capable of crossing the boundary separating 'prosaicness' from an idealized 'wonderland' of heroic feat. He underscored this point in 1973, when amidst the 26 songs that he wrote for a recorded version of the fairy tale *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Vysockij had the Dodo sing these lines<sup>61</sup>:

Вдруг будет пропасть – и нужен прыжок?  
Струсишь ли сразу? Прыгнешь ли смело?  
А? Э-э! Так-то, дружок,  
В этом-то все и дело (II: 268)<sup>62</sup>.

Summing up, Vysockian *toska* is an existential melancholy that is incommensurate with the rudimentary mechanisms of restorative nostalgia: he did not idealize the past and even less so the past used for tendentious purposes. His *toska* would seem to derive primarily from an acute sense of the gulf separating artistic experience from the 'prosaicness' of humdrum daily life. Vysockij attempted to overcome the anxiety produced in him by this divide through artistic expression and experience. Singing offered him a means of transcendence and it is not mere coincidence that Vysockij set himself a furious pace in work and (as a result) in life (cf. Buvina, Curletto 2009: 323-328). His frenetic attempts to achieve an exalted state yet again illustrate an attitude that deeply worried those close to Vysockij and was the primary cause of his premature death. It is quite probable that he more or less consciously considered artistic creation to be his own individual *podvig*, a heroic feat whose realization required a *vzlet* or act of taking flight that could not, alas, continue uninterrupted. His quest to soar constantly above daily life was ultimately impossible to reconcile with the physical limitations of human existence.

Vysockij was not content with artistic creativity that was restricted to an intimate or personal scale – the result of factors both external and internal, including his character, his theatrical training, and a certainty that he would not be published or officially recorded in Soviet Russia. Vysockij was driven to share his art, and the more he immersed himself in others, the more successful he felt it to be. Writing verses was only the first step in this heroic creative process: the artistic feat could only be fully realized in the context of public sharing, in the establishment of consonance between his own feelings and those of others. Vysockij himself affirmed that his songs assumed (semi-)definite shape only after having passed muster with his audience: they were measured first by the

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<sup>61</sup> Three of these songs were performed personally by Vysockij himself. This recorded *Alice*, directed by Oleg Gerasimov, was first released in 1976 as a double album and, after its great success, reissued almost every year until the early nineties; an MP3 version became available in 2006.

<sup>62</sup> "Suddenly there's an abyss – and you need to jump? Will you chicken out at once? Or will you boldly leap? What? Mmhhh! That, my friend, / That's the whole problem right there".

reaction of his friends and then by that of the public at various concerts. Interestingly, his compositions never achieved a final form: recordings of Vysockij's concerts illustrate numerous – and also significant – variations in his texts, even the inclusion or exclusion of entire verses. Perhaps he felt that the heroic feat of performing a song could not be repeated mechanically and that each realization required new effort and new adjustments.

Vysockij's peculiar attention to his broadly defined public perhaps renders less mysterious the fact that even though he is the bearer of profound existential discomfort, Vysockij is also the most 'popular and national' ('*vsenarodnyj*') Russian poet of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Some clarification of this apparent paradox is suggested by Boym (1995: 133):

diverse representations of the Russian national character [...] are remarkably similar in their key structures: the opposition between *byt* (everyday existence) and *bytie* (spiritual or poetic existence), and the valorization of heroic sacrifice over both private life and practical accomplishment. The border between *bytie* and *byt* seems to parallel the mythical border between Russia and the West.

While 'Russian national character' has been always been a scientifically debatable concept and can be variously understood, Boym (1995: 133) suggests that a profound sense of a sharp rift between the quotidian and the transcendental somehow characterizes Russianness<sup>63</sup>. Vysockij also meets the definition established by Antonio Gramsci (1996: 71-75) for 'popular-national' (*nazional-popolare*), namely he expresses the characteristic features of national culture in such a way that they can be recognized as representing the entire people, and thereby simultaneously contribute to a fuller awareness of the conceptual identity of the 'nation' (e.g. Russia) and of the 'people' (Russians). This is exactly what Vysockij does and it explains his success: he transforms national spirit into true art without sacrificing its national connotations. And, despite their difficulty, artistry, linguistic condensation, and conceptual profundity, Vysockij's songs are performed in a light and accessible style that makes them understandable to all. Most importantly, he suggests that one's ability to occasionally transcend daily life constitutes the distilled essence of heroism. And by voicing nostalgia for the War and, more generally, for heroic contexts located in other spatial and temporal worlds, Vysockij allowed his public to both accept daily life and to understand it as preparatory to the heroic feat.

*(Translated by Cecilia Pozzi and Sara Dickinson)*

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<sup>63</sup> The topic of Russian national identity has been hotly debated by myriad cultural figures ranging from Aleksej Xomjakov and Petr Čadaev in the early nineteenth century to Viktor Erofeev (2009) and Vladimir Žirinovskij (2009) in the present.

## Резюме

Марио Алессандро Курлетто

*Ностальгия по 'эпохе героев' и экзистенциальная тоска в творчестве Владимира Высоцкого*

В поэтическом наследии Владимира Высоцкого чувство 'тоски' выражается по-разному, передавая все оттенки скуки, томления, меланхолии. Однако особенную роль играет в стихах Высоцкого так называемая 'тоска по героической эпохе', которая в некоторых песнях выражается эксплицитно, но чаще всего встречается в имплицитной репрезентации 'тоски по подвигу'. Понятие 'подвиг' следует рассматривать как морально-духовное состояние, противопоставленное миру обыденности. Хотя 'тоска по подвигу' ассоциируется с разными географическими контекстами (с горами, тайгой, ледниками на Севере), хронотоп Великой отечественной войны становится квинтэссенцией репрезентации 'подвига' в мироощущении Высоцкого.

## INDICE

S. Dickinson	Preface	7
L. Salmon	Chronotopes of Affectivity in Literature. On Melancholy, Estrangement, and Reflective Nostalgia	11
S. Dickinson	Aleksandra Xvostova, Nikolaj Karamzin and the Gendering of <i>Toska</i>	31
L. Quercioli Mincer	Nostalgia and Creatuality in H. Leivick's <i>The Golem</i>	57
M.A. Curletto	Regret for the Time of Heroes and Existential <i>Toska</i> in Vladimir Vysockij	75
L. Salmon	Melancholic Humor, Skepticism and Reflective Nostalgia. Igor' Guberman's Poetics of Paradox	107
I. Marchesini	The Presence of Absence. Longing and Nostalgia in Post-Soviet Art and Literature	149
	Bibliography	167