

Sarah Clovis Bishop, individual LARC proposal
Rome Lies Somewhere in Russia: the Roman poetry of Elena Shvarts

My summer research will investigate the “Roman” poetry of Elena Shvarts, a St. Petersburg poet who made repeated forays into Rome, in both her imagination and her actual experience. Specifically, I will explore three series of poems: “Kinfiia” (“Cynthia”), a poetic cycle written in the 1970s from the perspective of an invented Roman poet; poems composed during an extended trip to Rome in 2000-2001;¹ and poems written shortly before her death in 2010.

I will examine these texts in the context of Shvarts’s biography, considering how she moves between Petersburg and Rome and how she brings the two places together in her poetry. The “Cynthia” poems were written when Shvarts had no chance of being published in the Soviet Union and had not yet traveled abroad. Shvarts began to be recognized publicly in the late 1980s and wrote prolifically until her death in 2010. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, she traveled to Italy and wrote a series of poems about Rome based on these travels. In her final poems before her death, she combines imagery of Rome and Saint Petersburg, bringing together her present location and her past imagined world.

In connection with the “Cynthia” poems, I will also examine Yurii Tomoshevsky’s recent staging of the poetic cycle in St. Petersburg, a one-woman show starring Tatiana Morozova. In this performance, the Roman poet is presented as a contemporary Russian woman, again connecting Rome and Petersburg, the past and the present.

I will spend next summer on the initial stages of this project, carefully analyzing the poems and performance. While the specific material is new territory for me, the project is growing out of previous research, both on Shvarts and on performance. I have written extensively on another book-length cycle of Shvarts’s poetry. My most recent research has focused on Moscow theater director Kama Ginkas’s stagings of short stories by Anton Chekhov. This project will allow me to return to Shvarts’s poetry, while combining it with my new research on performance.

The collaborative nature of the LARC program will assist me in both the poetic and performative aspects of the project. One of my student collaborators, Brynn Raymond, will be examining the poetry of Langston Hughes in the context of the Harlem Renaissance. Aided by the reading of common texts, we will consider the ways in which certain spaces are uniquely conducive to the creation of art (in her case, Harlem; in my case, St. Petersburg, and the imagined and experienced Rome). The other student collaborator, Grace Cohen, will be pursuing a creative project, a filmic map of Portland. Again through shared readings and discussions, we will consider generic transpositions—in her case, the translation of a two-dimensional map into a filmed experience of a city; in my case, the translation of a poetic cycle onto the theatrical stage.

I will be receiving no other internal or external sources of funding for this project.

¹ These poems were included in Shvarts’s books *Trost’ skoropistsa* (*The Scribe’s Staff*, 2004) and *Rom liegt irgendwo in Russland* (*Rome Lies Somewhere in Russia*, 2006).