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## STARRY-EYED: ELENA SHVARTS AS “THE GIRL WITH ONE HUNDRED FORTY-EIGHT BIRTHMARKS”

Laura Little, Connecticut College

Candor—my Preceptor—is the only wile.  
—Emily Dickinson

The reputation of Elena Shvarts (1948–2010) rests on her poetry, which was heard, read, and admired by unofficial creative circles of post-war Leningrad. Characterized by elaborate authorial masks and endless metamorphoses, her metaphysical verse seems to resist biographical readings, as scholars have pointed out (Sandler 1459; see also Sheinker 107). On the other hand, many of the works in prose that bookend Shvarts’s oeuvre willingly presented the “visible side” (*vidimaia storona*), as she referred to it, of the author’s life (Shvarts, *Vidimaia storona zhizni*; 3: 169–226).<sup>1</sup> A story found in Shvarts’s domestic archive after her death shows the impulse to document the “face of the visible world” in her earliest compositions (Shvarts, “From *Face of the Visible World*”). Written when she was all of thirteen, “Devochka so sta soroka vosem’iu rodinkami” (“The Girl with One Hundred Forty-Eight Birthmarks”) captures some two months of her lived experience in the summer of 1961.<sup>2</sup>

The factual content of Shvarts’s story is not new to readers acquainted with her “autobiographical–memoiristic–essayistic” writings of the late 1990s and early 2000s (Epstein 66). The young Shvarts similarly crossed generic boundaries and mixed stylistic means in “The Girl with One Hundred Forty-Eight Birthmarks,” but her quasi-autobiographical work of juvenilia is also notable for its indebtedness to contemporary literary trends. Shvarts drew on innovative texts and rehabilitated artistic methods of the Khrushchev era to create a

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1. Here and below, parenthetical references are to the volume and page of the five-volume *Sochineniia Eleny Shvarts* (2002–2013), the most complete collection of her writings to date. See Shvarts, “From *Face of the Visible World*” for Thomas Epstein’s insightful overview of Shvarts’s prose and selected translations into English, including excerpts from *Vidimaia storona zhizni* (*The Visible Side of Life*).

2. Parenthetical references below are to the print publication. A digital version is available at <http://ptj.spb.ru/archive/61/historical-novel-61/devochka-sosta-soroka-vosemyu-rodinkami/>.

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richly intertextual, highly personal narrative that demonstrates the seriousness of her literary engagement from an early age. The title, meanwhile, anticipates themes and imagery of Shvarts's later poetic praxis: theatricality, a metaphorical linking of body and cosmos, and the co-presence of seemingly incompatible elements.

In the discussion below, I describe the context and genre of Shvarts's story, analyze the role of its intertexts, and consider connections to her mature poetry. I argue that "The Girl with One Hundred Forty-Eight Birthmarks" reveals Shvarts's embrace of the lyrical-confessional and documentary literary modes of the Thaw, a combination that allowed her to delve into an inner world while writing about outer experiences. Embedding allusions to the foreign and Russian texts that inspire her writing, Shvarts reveals her sources and aesthetic affinities even as she underscores the performative aspect of her narration.

An entry from Shvarts's late diaries suggests that she lost or discarded her youthful story, first published after her death and not included her collected works, following its composition. On July 9, 2006, she recorded that she was retyping a "childhood tale" (*detskaia povest'*) that Iuliia Berezhnova had saved and presumably returned to her (5: 146). Berezhnova was Shvarts's mentor in the early 1960s at the Palace of Pioneers in Leningrad, where Shvarts participated in literary circles for youths.<sup>3</sup> The text's return forty-five years after its composition attests to the importance of their relationship and to Shvarts's reputation as a young talent, even a *wunderkind* by some estimations (3: 198, 201; 5: 146, 175, 334, 372). The mature writer assessed the story as: "[v]ery interesting. I don't know if anyone wrote like this at thirteen. Like a reworked diary. But I didn't keep a diary. By memory. And things I had completely forgotten return to mind" (5: 146).

It was thanks in part to the Palace of Pioneers that Shvarts's first substantial compositions were in prose rather than poetry. Her girlhood diary gives us a glimpse of the circle (*kruzhok*) activities she participated in: "We went over the description of [people's] appearance in classical literature and the difference between nineteenth-century and contemporary descriptions of appearance. Then we described each other" (5: 279). Shvarts put some of these lessons into practice in "The Girl with One Hundred Forty-Eight Birthmarks," which offers a snapshot of life with the Bolshoi Drama Theater, or BDT, where Shvarts's mother was chief dramaturg (*zavlit*) for thirty years, vetting plays and serving as "secretary of state" for the theater and its famous director, Georgii Tovstonogov (Iurskii 208). Dina Shvarts took her daughter on the theater's summer tours, thereby establishing the future poet's ideal mode of existence: "I understood that the best thing in life was travel, but not simply travel,

3. For discussion of Shvarts's participation (and non-participation) in official and unofficial creative circles (*kruzhki*) in postwar Leningrad, see Little, *Becoming an Andegraund Poet*.

but [...] with the goal of performing for others,” she later wrote (3: 178–79). Sarah Bishop has rightly pointed to the profound impact of the theatrical tours in her 2010 overview of Shvarts’s biography and creative path (Bishop 114). Shvarts herself asserted in *The Visible Side of Life* that her trips with the BDT were filled with a multitude of “firsts”: her first experience of the church and of Dostoevsky, first acquaintance with genius (Innokentii Smoktunovskii as Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot*), first glass of wine, first encounter of the sea (3: 178–83). During the theater’s 1961 tour in Kyiv, Shvarts even had her stage debut, a thrilling and kenotic experience, as she described it, that left an “artistic void” (*tvorcheskaia opustoshennost’*) in the performer (3: 181). The mature writer went so far as to say that she “began to think” (*nachala dumat’*) during these trips (3: 179).

Life during the tours (*gastrol’i*) was characterized by demanding artistic work—rehearsals and performances—alternating with excursions and get-togethers with BDT performers and personnel. The experience thus provided Shvarts with models of social and artistic behavior while it fed her imagination and ambition. The strong impressions also prompted independently undertaken literary compositions.<sup>4</sup> Among them was “The Girl with One Hundred Forty-Eight Birthmarks,” a 6,700-word narrative that recreates encounters and conversations with the BDT company and its entourage during their summer *gastrol’i*. The title character enters the Saint Volodymyr cathedral and feels a “surge of faith” (*prilyv very*); she develops a serious crush on one of the actors, the young, handsome, and already famous Sergei Iurskii; she has an anxious but exhilarating debut in the play *Irkutskaiia istoriia* (*An Irkutsk Story*) as “the [little] girl with the bread roll” (*devochka s bulkoï*), a partial source for the story’s title (148–52; 3: 180–82). When the theatrical “fairy tale” (152) ends, the urban theatrical work is followed by seaside rest in Crimea that is also full of emotional highs and lows.

Shvarts’s story is transparently personal when read in conjunction with her girlhood diary—an amazing ego document in its own right and “anthropological miracle” in the estimation of poet Aleksandr Skidan (Skidan 236). Shvarts’s later statement that she did not keep up her diary during the 1961 tour was imprecise. She noted her arrival to Kyiv in a June 22 entry (5: 284); a week later, she added a summary of impressions about the city and the peo-

4. During her first trip with the BDT in the summer of 1959, Shvarts recorded impressions of a Tbilisi marketplace and an excursion near Sochi (5: 267–307). The poem “V sobore” (“In the Cathedral,” 1962), was inspired by a visit to the Saint Volodymyr cathedral with Zinaida Sharko during the 1961 tour (5: 223). In “The Girl with One Hundred Forty-Eight Birthmarks,” the narrator lights a candle before the Saint Nicholas (Nikolai Ugodnik) icon, for peace (“Chtob voiny ne bylo”) and reflects, “Nastoiashchie veruiushchie veriat ne v naivnye skazki i ne v boga, a v samu veru, v to, chto est’ na svete vo chto verit’” (“True believers have faith not in naïve fairy tales and not in god, but in faith itself, in the [idea] that there is something in the world to believe in”) (150).

ple around her (5: 285–86). The next entry, though, is from Leningrad in September, when she reflected on the trip and wrote “I am writing a story [*povest'*] about Kyiv [...] in order to make sense of my thoughts and feelings” (5: 287). Other diary entries contribute to this extratextual frame and confirm that the text Iuliia Berezhnova returned to Shvarts in 2006 was “The Girl with One Hundred Forty-Eight Birthmarks.” On June 17 she had recorded: “Today I’m going to the theater to try on the dress for *An Irkutsk Story*. I’m going to act in it. The role is primitive” (5: 284).<sup>5</sup>

The author–narrator of “The Girl with One Hundred Forty-Eight Birthmarks” assigns herself more sophisticated roles than the girl with the bread roll, who appears in a single scene of Aleksei Arbuzov’s play. She drew on genres that had grown increasingly popular in the second half of the 1950s, among them the travelogue, memoir, and autobiographical sketch. Anatoly Pinsky has linked the prominence of such diurnal, eyewitness accounts to the era’s cultivation of new subjectivities and a desire for texts that presented “ostensibly unmediated attention to ‘real’ life” (Pinsky 811). Shvarts imbues daily experience with a lyrical consciousness in “The Girl with One Hundred Forty-Eight Birthmarks,” emphasizing the co-presence of the factual and the imaginative. The story opens as an aestheticized travelogue: “The train flows in the tar of night. Around [me] are unknown strange lands. I lie on the upper berth. The nightlight’s blue pools quiver on the blanket, my arms, the window” (146). The poetic tone contrasts with the narrator’s succinct self-introduction that follows: “My mom works in the theater. And this summer she took me on tour with her.” Here and elsewhere, we see in her narrative the “inherent duality” Jane Gary Harris discerns in the autobiographical mode, which asks the writer-narrator to mediate a “continuing dialogue between objective and subjective principles of art, between aesthetic interpretation and authenticity [...] between expression and experience, invention and memory” (Harris 24).

Shvarts described her story as a “reworked diary” in the 2006 entry quoted above (5: 146). There is structural overlap with a diary; each section of “The Girl with One Hundred Forty-Eight Birthmarks” takes place on a different day, as the epigraph underscores: “Delo sdelano—den' prishpilen” (“What’s done is done—the day’s pinned”) (146).<sup>6</sup> Svetlana Shchagina’s preface to the story’s publication in *Peterburgskii teatral'nyi zhurnal* (*Petersburg Theater Journal*) suggests that it be classified as nonfiction (*nonfikshn*) (146). In addition to the prominently featured Sergei Iurskii, the story’s real-life characters include Aleksei German, Georgii Tovstonogov, Dina Shvarts, Roza Sirota, Zinaida Sharko, Tatiana Doronina, and Efim Kopelian, Liudmila

5. The photograph that appears in *Sochineniia Eleny Shvarts* 5: 255 may be of Shvarts in costume for the role.

6. Shvarts credits poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, but the phrase seems to come from a diary entry about Mayakovsky by Mikhail Prishvin.

Makarova, and their son Kirill. However, the story is thin on the usual markers of an autobiographical narrative; it does not declare itself as such, nor does it articulate the temporal distance between the moment of telling and what is told. Its scope being limited by the tight temporal frame, it might be a reminiscence, but the text does not present events as remembered. Rather, the present tense marks events and thoughts as of the moment rather than retrospective, a strategy that reinforces the text's implicit claim to authentic emotional experience.

A reworked diary, "The Girl with One Hundred Forty-Eight Birthmarks" is nonetheless a "tale," as the label *povest'* suggests, and it follows a heartfelt plot. Its deliberate structure suggests that considerable care went into its composition. Part One, as it is labeled, is devoted to the theater's weeks in Kyiv, Part Two—to the holiday that followed in Feodosia and Koktebel. Both parts open and close with a train ride and are subdivided into numbered sections. The sections in Part One have titles: "Introduction," "Arrival—The Very Beginning," "MKhAT—Very First Days," "Korogodskii," "Before the Play," "The Play," "A Stroll," "Me and Kirka," "The Cathedral," "Zina, the Theater, Serezha—Last Day," "Serezha," and "Last Day." Part Two has no titles, underscoring the psychological and geographical shift from city to seashore, from work to rest, and from high spirited hopefulness to despair, ennui, and ambivalence.

Shvarts foregrounds reading and writing in "The Girl with One Hundred Forty-Eight Birthmarks," revealing her acquaintance with a long list of recently published texts and popular authors and thereby the privilege she enjoyed during an era of widespread "book hunger" in the USSR, when the print runs of popular new publications routinely fell short of consumer demand.<sup>7</sup> She depicts herself reading Henry Lawson's tales of the Australian goldfields and Lion Feuchtwanger's *The Pretender*, textual complements to the escape from everyday environs in which the narrator delights: "I'm traveling the streets of this city for the first time. I'm Christopher Columbus. Out the window are the West Indies" (146). The narrator also takes in the novel environments of Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage* and Alain-Fournier's *Le Grand Meaulnes*, demonstrating through these and other readings her eager engagement with world culture via the "wider range of voices and forms in prose" that Thaw-era translations provided (Burnett and Lygo 27). Shvarts's narrator is a discerning consumer of exciting stories; she suggests that she is also an experienced producer of them when she solicits and then critiques the literary endeavors of her companion and fellow BDT kid "Kirka" (Kopelian): "Red-faced and flustered, he tells me the story of some *aul* [mountain village], two communists, a bandit, and a girl. I explain to him

7. On book hunger (*knizhnyi golod*), see Lovell 60–69. For examples of book shortages in a major city of the Soviet "periphery" in the 1960s, see Friedberg 115–16.

its shortcomings” (150). Here the narrator performs the practices of peer critique that were used in the Palace of Pioneers literary *kruzhki*, where Shvarts found an appreciative audience for her story when it was finished (5: 289).

There are a number of important points of intersection between Shvarts’s story and Vasily Aksenov’s *Zvezdnyi bilet* (*Ticket to the Stars*). The novel was published in two summer 1961 issues of *Iunost’* (*Youth*), at the very time the action of “The Girl with One Hundred Forty-Eight Birthmarks” unfolds. Now seen as exemplary of the era’s youth prose movement, *Ticket to the Stars* was widely discussed in the Soviet press for its socially daring plot and language.<sup>8</sup> The seventeen-year-old protagonists of Aksenov’s controversial novel assert their independence from the older generation through an impromptu escape to the Estonian seashore, where they sunbathe and learn to fish instead of working or preparing for university entrance exams. The heroes of *Ticket to the Stars* exchange greetings with each other in various European languages and with the locals in Estonian. Kyiv, which Shvarts makes sure to write in Ukrainian in her diary, and the Black Sea provide similar backdrops for her story (5: 284).

In the western borderlands of the Soviet Union, Aksenov’s characters are palpably close to the Europe of Federico Fellini’s *La Dolce Vita*, with shiny Italian espresso machines and neon signs, mentions of which textured *Ticket to the Stars* with a fashionable foreignness. The phrases and material culture that gave the novel its stylish cosmopolitan feel point to the aesthetic pluralism of the period and reflect, like translations, the influx of European culture that accompanied the Khrushchev-era renewal of cultural ties with Europe and the Americas. In “The Girl with One Hundred Forty-Eight Birthmarks,” Shvarts depicts two BDT actors lounging on the shore reading *Ticket to the Stars* aloud to each other in earshot of sunbathing colleagues and their families. For a group of people preoccupied with artistic trends, the work must have reinforced a sense of belonging to Soviet culture’s most progressive currents. Aksenov’s heroes are close to Europe, but the zones of cultural activity they desire to inhabit—cinema and the theater—remain out of reach. One of the main characters in *Ticket to the Stars* is an aspiring writer who pounds out screenplays on his typewriter at the beach and dreams up excuses to introduce himself to a famous film director. Their female companion, a blonde beauty nicknamed Brigitte Bardot, exclaims at one point, “I’d die for the theater” (“Ja gotova sgoret’ radi teatra”) (Aksenov 37). Meanwhile, Shvarts already inhabited this realm, spending her summer as a player in one of the country’s most prominent and progressive theaters, whose actors also appeared in films of the period. Following the 1959 productions of Aleksandr Volodin’s *Piat’ vecherov* (*Five Evenings*, 1958) and Maxim Gorky’s *Varvary* (*Barbarians*,

8. See Gilburd 147–50, Hayward 38–39, and Jones 245 on the conservative reaction to *Ticket to the Stars* and other youth prose.

1905) the BDT was, in the estimation of theater critic and historian Anatoly Smeliansky, “Russia’s number one theater company” (Smeliansky 50); the play in which she had appeared was one of the most popular of the era and had even been performed at the International Drama Festival in Paris that spring (Segel 362; Arbuzov vi).

Lexical expansion was one of the Thaw’s most palpable challenges to the narrow discursive range of Soviet literature. Translations, youth prose, and a “sincere turn” took the reading public into previously off-limits social, emotional, and cultural spheres.<sup>9</sup> It was in part for its unorthodox lexicon that the conservative Soviet literary establishment objected to Aksenov’s novel. Others saw the return of vernacular language as a marker of the “living word,” which had fossilized in the Stalinist era into clichés and bureaucratese (Gilburd 144). Eleonory Gilburd has pointed out that it was in the era’s “language debate” that Aksenov’s texts intersected with those of J. D. Salinger (Gilburd 148). Both *Ticket to the Stars* and *The Catcher in the Rye* prominently featured slang and colloquial language, leading some Soviet readers to identify intensely with their heroes and others to object vociferously to the works’ publication.<sup>10</sup> Shvarts, too, takes up this trend, larding her story with everyday colloquialisms, euphemisms, and profanity: *nalizat'sia* (“to get loaded/drunk”), *smyvat'sia* (“to slip out/away”), *tsapnut'* (“to nab/grab”), *nachikhat'* (“couldn’t care less”), and *svoloch'* (“jerk/bastard”); she uses the verb *trepat'sia* (“to run one’s mouth”) several times.

Gilburd’s study of the era’s influx of translated texts argues that it was in works by Salinger, Ernest Hemingway, and Erich Maria Remarque that readers found the authenticity missing from Soviet literature (Gilburd 103–57). Salinger made a particularly strong impression on Russian readers during the “decade of euphoria,” as Maurice Friedberg described the translation-rich post-Stalin years. *The Catcher in the Rye* appeared in the resurrected journal *Inostrannaia literature (Foreign Literature)* in late 1960. Not long after, in March of 1961, *Novyi mir (New World)* published “For Esme — with Love and Squalor” under the title “Posviashchaetsia Esme” (“Dedicated to Esme”).

As its plot is pertinent to the discussion that follows, I will briefly summarize Salinger’s story. Not long before the Allied invasion of France in 1944, the narrator, an American soldier stationed in England, attends a children’s

9. The Thaw was characterized by a lyrical-confessional trend initiated by Vladimir Pomerantsev’s “On Sincerity in Literature” and Ol’ga Berggol’ts’s “Conversation about the Lyric,” which appeared in 1953. For a recent critical assessment of the regimes of sincerity (*iskrennost'*) that ensued, see Rutton, *Sincerity After Communism*, esp. 67–77. Katerina Clark argues that the debate on *iskrennost'* began well before Stalin’s death in “‘Wait for Me and I Shall Return.’”

10. Readers also pointed to biographical and temperamental points of overlap between the works’ main characters, but youth slang was the shared stylistic feature that led readers to adduce Salinger’s influence on Aksenov’s novel, even though it was completed before the appearance of Rita Rait-Kovaleva’s famous translation of *The Catcher in the Rye* (Gilburd 145–47).

choir practice on his day off. Among the singers is a girl with a charming voice: Esme, as we learn when they meet after the recital in a neighboring tea room. Having boldly introduced herself to the narrator, Esme poses a series of questions, some rather personal in nature. An orphan, she is forthright, poised, a bit of a snob. She wears a large wristwatch that belonged to her father. At the end of their conversation, Esme proposes that she and the soldier correspond with each other and offers to write the first letter. The narrator agrees, and they part. The second half of the story is recounted by a third-person narrator, Staff Sergeant X, the same (and yet not) soldier after the war, who is “cunningly disguised” in plain view of the reader. Shell-shocked, his head hurts, his hands tremble, his attention wanders. Having suffered the insensitive attentions and comments of a fellow soldier, he loses his temper and is left alone. A package, one of many on his littered desk, catches his eye. Opening it, he finds a note of encouragement from Esme and the watch, included for good luck. Its face has cracked in transit.

Esme enters Shvarts’s story when BDT director Zinovii Korogodskii compares the narrator to Salinger’s heroine: “He thinks I’m like Esme from Salinger’s story.” With her absent father, chewed nails, and impressive vocabulary, there is a certain resemblance between the story’s precocious thirteen-year-old heroine and Shvarts in 1961. Esme is coquettish, more *Lolita* than Holden Caulfield, the hero of *The Catcher in the Rye*. Shvarts nevertheless accepts the role, admitting, “I play up the role of Esme a little,” hinting at the femininity she explores in “The Girl with One Hundred Forty-Eight Birthmarks” and the role-playing in which she engages.

Shvarts-the-author performs Esme-the-text as much as her narrator performs Esme-the-character. Like “For Esme—with Love and Squalor,” Shvarts’s story traces a chaste love story between a girl and a young man. In both texts, the lover’s wristwatch takes on symbolic significance. In “The Girl with One Hundred Forty-Eight Birthmarks,” the narrator confesses her romantic feelings for Sergei Iurskii to her companion Kirka; she allows the possibility of Iurskii’s reciprocal interest through subtler intertextual means. When she is entrusted with the safekeeping of his watch during the BDT’s final Kyiv performance, she kisses it tenderly when no one is watching. When the company leaves the theater, during their collective bus ride her gaze is drawn to Iurskii’s hands and the yellow leather wristband visible against the guitar he holds while gaily singing the popular folk song “Vinovata li ia?” (“Am I to Blame?”). Iurskii is thus made into a textual counterpart of the narrator in “For Esme—with Love and Squalor.”

When she is parted from her love interest, who is not vacationing at the Black Sea, the narrator of “The Girl with One Hundred Forty-Eight Birthmarks” stays in touch with him by going out to the balcony, where she hums “Am I to Blame?” and asks the moon to convey her greetings to him: “Lunochka luna, bud' chelovekom, peredai emu privet plamennyi” (“Moon,

little moon, be a pal, pass him a fervent hello”) (153).<sup>11</sup> This cluster of associations—balcony, Iurskii, love/song—is anticipated in an earlier scene in Part One of the story. Following her first rehearsal at the theater, the narrator encounters Iurskii for the first time in Kyiv. Shortly after, she recounts: “After lunch I go to the room, lay down on the bed. I’m trembling all over, maybe from happiness. Such a surge [*stol’ko khlynulo*] of theater, nerves, people. I go out on the balcony soiled [*zagazhennyi*] by the doves. I feel better” (148). The narrator does not name Iurskii; on first reading, she seems overwhelmed, but not necessarily lovesick. However, the scenario’s subsequent repetitions, with the addition of the song, makes clear the heroine’s use of it as a stage of sentimental performance. The balcony itself suggests indebtedness to theatrical models; its repetition points to a key feature of theatrical artifice: repetition itself. Meanwhile, the relief brought by the sight of the unsentimentally fouled balcony obliquely suggests the [tale of] “love and squalor” that Esme requests of the narrator in Salinger’s story, as if Shvarts-playing-Esme has taken the task of narrating such a tale upon herself.<sup>12</sup>

Elsewhere the narrator of “The Girl with One Hundred Forty-Eight Birthmarks” adopts a tone that is closer to Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye* than cool Esme or lovestruck maiden: “We are driving to Koktebel. Not far from Koktebel they stop [...]. I get out of the car. Lenka, you’re in the steppe, you cretin [*svoloch’*], in the steppe. You notice how the grass smells, you notice how the stars fall, you jerk [*sobaka*]. I cheer up” (152). She even performs a bit of snobbishness à la Caulfield when she reports with derision the banal comments of outsiders during an excursion: “A dilapidated little boat is waiting for us. The trip is dull. Some big fat guys [*ochen’ tolstye diad’ki*] hover around the director, slapping themselves on the belly, pronounce commonplaces like ‘The theater is high art’” (149). Combining Esme and Holden, feminine and masculine roles, Shvarts brings together the tonalities of youth prose and the lyrical-confessional mode that flourished alongside it.

The emotional openness of Shvarts’s story exemplifies the “sincere turn” of the 1950s and its rehabilitation of private emotion. Imbued with theatricality on multiple levels, it simultaneously performs *iskrennost’*. Shvarts strives to convey the internal world of the heroine through changing narrative perspectives, implying self-estrangement even in a first-person narrative. In “For Esme—with Love and Squalor,” we see something similar in the shift in narrative viewpoint that comes at the caesura of the story: the first part uses first-

11. The euphony of *Lunochka* (“little moon”) and *Lenochka*, the diminutive version of Elena by which Shvarts was commonly addressed in her youth, suggests the moon as a celestial counterpart or double.

12. Translator Rita Rait-Kovaleva used a variety of equivalents for Caulfield’s frequent profanity. She sparingly used *svoloch’*, where Salinger has “sonuvabitch,” “bastard,” and other terms of abuse.

person narration, while the second part describes a “he” who is, externally, the same person. *Ticket to the Stars* has two first-person narrators, as well as a third-person one. “The Girl with One Hundred Forty-Eight Birthmarks” contains such shifts, but they come in bursts like this one:

I go into the sea. I don't feel like swimming. Lenka, go along this board every time and Serezha will think of you one teeny time for some reason or other. You're a sentimental fool, Lenka, and besides that, a terrible snob. She comes to the Black Sea and is melancholy, who does that? Thirteen-year-old pipsqueak. Lenka feels cheerful, she likes sashaying into the sea in her swimsuit, likes swinging her shoulders and hips. She walks into the sea. I dive a long time, lay on my stomach, until I get tired of it. (154)

Simultaneously occupying and observing the self, Shvarts captures a range of imagined perspectives in this episode. As she sees herself from multiple perspectives, the narrator's stream of consciousness is comprised of competing discourses. It was in part such representation of subjective experience, still suspect in Soviet literature, that motivated attacks on *Ticket to the Stars*. Overstepping the unarticulated limits on psychological realism prompted critics to talk of “lack of contact with socialist reality” and modernist solipsism (Dobrenko and Tikhonov 187–89).

In the summer of 1961, the space race was at its height and the Soviet Union in the lead, a point of pride reflected in Shvarts's diary but not in “The Girl with One Hundred Forty-Eight Birthmarks,” from which science is absent (5: 271, 283). Her stars are those of the lyricist, not the physicist, a popular distinction inaugurated by Boris Slutskii's 1959 poem “Fiziki i liriki” (“Physicists and Lyricists”). Stars appear in Shvarts's narrative only in Part Two, after she has left Kyiv and arrives in Crimea. In the night sky at Koktebel they shine particularly brightly, prompting the narrator to observe, “Probably van Gogh painted *The Starry Night* in Koktebel” (154). Shvarts's diary indicates that she encountered the famous painting while she was working on “The Girl with One Hundred Forty-Eight Birthmarks” thanks to a colorful spread on New York's Museum of Modern Art in *Amerika* magazine (5: 289).<sup>13</sup> *The Starry Night* and the magazine thus join the list of Thaw-era cultural products that inflect the pattern of her story. Another painting featured in that issue, Ben Shahn's *Portrait of Myself When Young*, also stirred Shvarts, as she wrote in the same diary entry, adding: “[It is] a self-portrait not of external appearances, as is usual, but of feelings, of an outlook” (*avtoportret ne vnesnosti...a chuvstv, mirooshchushcheniia*) (5: 289).<sup>14</sup> This char-

13. The Russian-language journal ran several stories on MoMA starting in 1959. One by Alfred Barr, entitled “Zhivopis' ot Gogena do Polloka” (“Painting from Gauguin to Pollock”) appeared in fall of 1961 and included reproductions of works by van Gogh, Picasso, Chagall, Leger, Delauney, and Kandinskii. See O'Mahony for discussion of this series in the context of Cold War cultural politics.

14. For a digital reproduction of Shahn's painting, see <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/35856>.

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acterization is equally applicable to Shvarts’s authorial perspective in “The Girl with One Hundred Forty-Eight Birthmarks,” but it was van Gogh’s nighttime landscape that made its way into the her text, with its starry title and “tumultuous sky” (*burnoe nebo*) that reminded her of Koktebel (5: 289).

Van Gogh’s painting is relevant to the title of Shvarts’s story, which is explained through two episodes that come near its end. During the swimming excursion mentioned above, the narrator has a near-death experience that prompts feverish chatter:

At five we left. At home Lenka felt hot. Temperature of 39.8. Before going to bed, she made a fleeting appearance on the balcony, stood for a bit, sang “Am I to Blame?” and urgently requested the moon pass her greetings along to Serezha. Having completed this ritual, she sprang into bed. An unusual, intoxicated merriness flooded her. Mama sat down on the bedside:

“What’s wrong, Lenochka?”

“It’s from melancholy.”

“No, you overdid it swimming.”

“I ought to know better—it’s from melancholy. Mama, it’s better in Koktebel, the stars are there, and I can’t live without the stars, I want to drink the stars, I love the stars. Will you get me Andromeda?”

“There’s no such star.”

“There is. She said yesterday that there is.”

“Who said?”

“Andromeda.”

“I’ll get you a wet cloth.”

“Stay with me. Listen, I’m lucky, right? I’ve a lot of birthmarks, and also, I got to see Serezha—that’s good fortune. Sergei Iur’evich is the best, right?”

“Sleep, Lena, sleep.”

“I’m afraid I’ll fall asleep and won’t wake up, and all the birthmarks will have been for nothing.”

“Lena, I’ll get you some medicine, be quiet a while.”

Lena dove into the left corner of the bed by the wall. The agitation passed, she felt light and dry. She was quiet. She felt like being quiet. (153–54)

The next day, counting falling stars with her friend Kirka, the narrator reveals the number of her *rodinki*—birthmarks, moles, or freckles—to be one hundred forty-eight, a sign of luck or happiness (*schast’e*). Shvarts thus links the body’s mysterious markings to fate and the cosmic order. The title encapsulates its salient qualities: “The [Little] Girl with One Hundred Forty-Eight Birthmarks” is a story about Shvarts as a (little) girl, but in the third person, estranged from herself through a theatrical literary gesture. Her extraordinary number of *rodinki* suggests a richness of fate’s marks and that the sources of her good fortune, like the sources of her story, are many. Their number simultaneously suggests a sustained attention to the body, as such a precise accounting would need to be. Lastly, birth and its marks could be described as an ur-text or master theme for Shvarts the poet.

Shvarts suggests in her mature writings that bodily scars and specificity are the earthly counterpart of the soul’s “cosmic physiology” (*kosmicheskoe fiziologiia*), as she entitled a short prose essay (4: 294–96). The markings on

our skin are a text that might tell us something of our otherworldly origins, she suggests, even as they clearly pin us to a particular time and place. The cosmic dimension is very much to the point of Shvarts's story, which anticipates the idea expressed in her poetry that birthmarks, clustered like constellations, reflect our spiritual coordinates and place in the galaxy, that they are our "starry ticket." This idea can have an ominous dimension, as in "Nev-idimyi okhotnik" ("Invisible Hunter," 1975), in which the pelt of the lyric speaker is valued for its markings, the record of musical notations made by a cosmic flutist whose quill makes the pattern so valued by the hunter (1: 26–27). While she commented on this poem in her 2007 seminar on contemporary Russian poetry at the University of Wisconsin, Shvarts provided a pertinent demonstration:

Some critics have written that a certain cosmic physiology characterizes my poetry, a physiologism that is cosmic, metaphysical. Far from corporeal, not bodily, but a certain physiologism that is precisely cosmic. And [in the poem] the speaker contemplates...the birthmarks that he apparently has in great number. [...] *Rodinka*, do you understand? Like here, see [showing her hand], there is a triangle. In the sky there is also a starry triangle, in fact. And in this poem the speaker muses why so many constellations are depicted on their skin. Is it by chance or not? [...] And it turns out that the skin is a photograph of the northern night sky, as it is visible from Petersburg.<sup>15</sup>

The stars shone on Elena Shvarts in 1961. Her mother's job with Leningrad's Bolshoi Drama Theater and the changes wrought by the Thaw gave her access to some of its best cultural products. She made sophisticated use of them in "The Girl with One Hundred Forty-Eight Birthmarks," a work of self-imposed and self-regulated literary apprenticeship that amply demonstrates the precocity others saw in the young writer. Shvarts recorded in her diary the response of her peers when she read Part One to them at the Palace of Pioneers: they declared it "as bold as it is talented" (*naskol'ko smelo, nastol'ko talantlivo*) (5: 289–90). While there is a minor moment of subversive talk when Sergei Iurskii calls the *Komsomol'skaia pravda* newspaper "Komsomol debility" (*komsomol'skii marazm*), the text is not politically daring. Its boldness stemmed instead from its experimental narration and psychological intimacy. The story's overt aesthetic organization and narration of multiple selves, meanwhile, suggest that Shvarts donned a mask of sincerity for her autobiographical narrative, the star player in a literary theater of her own construction. Her self-expression was in step with the cultural trends of the times, as were the youth prose and documentary elements of her story. She brought together the theatricality and sincerity of her lived environment in a textual performance of authenticity, both overtly staged and seemingly genuine, in a "harmonious disharmony" (*garmonicheskaiia disgarmoniia*) befitting her future poetics (3: 279; 4: 31).

Shvarts later defined artistry (*artistizm*) as "complete sincerity, but at the

15. Shvarts, unpublished lecture, 7 Nov. 2007.

same time, a detached gaze from the outside, both acting and directing yourself” (“Govoriat laureaty *Znamenii*”). Her confessional text, publicly private and authentically acted, fits this description, but the readings that Shvarts the girl gave of “The Girl with One Hundred Forty-Eight Birthmarks” did not reveal the full extent of its sincerity. She shared only Part One of her story at the Palace of Pioneers and with private domestic audiences. Kirill Kozyrev, the manager of Shvarts’s literary estate who facilitated the story’s publication, later found a shortened version of the text, suggesting that the author may not have wished for the complete narrative to be published, even after the players’ deaths.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, neither her story nor her girlhood diary documented the most intimate and devastating moment of Shvarts’s 1961 trip, when she phoned the apartment of her father, a Kyiv resident she had never met, and a woman informed her that he was out for a walk with [his] daughter (*on guli-aet s docher’iu*) (3: 204).<sup>17</sup>

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16. Kirill Kozyrev, conversation with the author, 21 Sept. 2019.

17. Here English usage requires a possessive pronoun where Russian does not.

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 ABSTRACT

This article analyzes "The Girl with One Hundred Forty-Eight Birthmarks" ("Devochka so sta soroka vosem'iu rodinkami," 1961) a work of juvenilia by Elena Shvarts, a prominent poet and participant in Leningrad's unofficial cultural scene in the 1970s and 1980s. The autobiographical narrative, a work of self-imposed and self-regulated literary apprenticeship, depicts Shvarts's daily experiences on tour and on holiday with the Bolshoi Drama Theater, where her mother Dina Shvarts was chief dramaturg. The lyrical travelogue shows the young Shvarts to be actively engaged with literary trends of the Thaw era: newly available translations, documentary and youth prose, and the self-expression advocated by Ol'ga Berggol'ts, Vladimir Pomerants, and others. Even as she explicitly drew on contemporary sources for inspiration, mixing them in an early display of eclecticism, Shvarts's own future poetics are visible in the story, which harmonizes seemingly disharmonious modes of writing and forms of self-presentation: lyrical and documentary, performative and sincere, masculine and feminine. The metaphor of her title, meanwhile, anticipates a figure deployed in Shvarts's mature poetry: the skin as palimpsestic text and map of the astral body.

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