

# Words on Trial: Morality and Legality in Frida Vigdorova's Journalism

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In June 1955, a small, bright-eyed woman walked into a Moscow courtroom, opened a spiral-bound notepad and began to write. In the dock sat Boris Zhuravlev, a fifteen-year-old boy accused of murder. Two months earlier, Zhuravlev had arrived drunk at a school variety show. When another young man asked him to stop disrupting the proceedings, Zhuravlev drew a revolver and shot him point-blank. At the trial, Zhuravlev received a ten-year sentence. But for the journalist, Frida Vigdorova, he was not alone to blame. Far more problematic was the culture of indifference that had paved his way to delinquency. “At school they summoned Boris to a meeting, and he promised to behave well,” she wrote in *Literaturnaia gazeta* on June 21. “Why not promise? It’s not as if it’s hard to say a few empty words (*pustye slova*).” Vigdorova extends her critique of indifference from Zhuravlev to his peers and their parents and educators, noting in each case how the words they utter both entrench and expose their amorality. Even the Criminal Code comes under fire for failing to penalize moral infractions and allowing citizens to turn rituals of justice into incantations of ossified legal language. The article concludes by calling on literary writers to re-evaluate the moral force of their own words:

We write about good people, about elevated feelings and wonderful deeds; there are many of these in our reality, and one must write about them, and write more than we do. But we must also see the dark sides of life, we must

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teach the youth to recognize, root out the bad, the filthy; to recognize the scoundrel and the villain—and not only recognize him, but passionately do battle with him.<sup>1</sup>

For Vigdorova, literature had become as complicit as the law in shoe-horning reality into fixed, idealized categories that ultimately served to promote indifference. Only by confronting their own “empty words” would writers instill a new culture of judgment.

Vigdorova’s article echoes the calls for moral and linguistic renewal that had resounded through Soviet literature since the late 1940s, when critics began targeting the Socialist Realist practices of “varnishing” reality and promoting “conflictlessness,” which limited depictions of moral strife to gradations of the good alone.<sup>2</sup> These practices, they suggested, had facilitated the spread of obfuscatory and formulaic language that enabled individuals and institutions to evade responsibility for their actions. Within a year of Stalin’s death, the critics Vladimir Pomerantsev and Lidiia Chukovskaia, who was Vigdorova’s friend, published landmark essays arguing that such language engendered a moral indifference that could only be dispelled through a renewed link with lived experience. Chukovskaia, in particular, blasted children’s literature that “trains a growing person to shut their eyes to those sides of reality he should struggle against, trains him to copy cold expressions (*kholodnye frazy*) that are not his own, rather than search for his own words.”<sup>3</sup> What Chukovskaia called “cold expressions” resembled what Vigdorova would label “empty words”: language divorced from the lived experience that demands and inspires moral judgment. As such, they constitute one manifestation of a wider pattern of perceived linguistic evasion ranging from “empty words” that are not backed by conviction or action; to idealized or overly didactic phrasing; to rigid idioms such as bureaucratese and legalese; to impersonal or dissembling language; to unsubstantiated rumor and insinuation. For Vigdorova, such words were symptomatic of a language that had lost its link with the vitality and ambiguity of life itself.

Searching for more authentic and ethically sensitive modes of expression, writers of the Khrushchev period turned to fact-based forms such as biography, history, travelogue, memoir, diaries, and notebooks. These forms emphasized documentary accuracy and empirical detail, yet they also deployed imaginative techniques and promoted both a romanticized view of the individual and a subjectivity that underscored the myriad ways in which

1. Frida Vigdorova, “Prestuplenie i vyvody iz nego,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, June 21, 1955, 2.

2. Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Bloomington, 2000), 207–9.

3. Lidiia Chukovskaia, “O chuvstve zhiznnoi pravdy,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, December 24, 1953, 1. See also Vladimir Pomerantsev, “Ob iskrennosti v literature,” *Novyi mir*, no. 12 (1953): 218–45. On Chukovskaia’s essay, see Mariia Maiofis, “Povest’ M. Bremenera ‘Pust’ ne soshlos’ s otvetom!’ (1956) i programma obnovleniia pedagogiki i literatury v sovetskom obshchestve nachala ‘ottepeli,’” *Detskie chteniia* 10, no. 2 (2016): 62–63; and Mariia Maiofis, “Obshchestvo po bor’be s khanzestvom: Ob odnoi nezamechennoi tendentsii v literature 1950-kh godov,” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, no. 143 (January 2017): 93–98.

people perceive reality and position themselves within it.<sup>4</sup> It was within this wider context that Vigdorova cultivated what will here be termed her “transcriptive style”: a journalistic way of writing that offered a seemingly verbatim record of oral utterances shot through with the journalist’s moral judgment. Characterized by lengthy stretches of reported speech featuring minimal descriptive or attributive prose, the transcriptive style presented a fact-based record of reality. Yet it also foregrounded the journalist’s subjective viewpoint by conveying her own utterances and including commentary. The subjectivity of the transcriptive style demonstrated how readers themselves might learn to think more critically about the world while at the same time guiding them toward the journalist’s judgment. The tension between a call to independent thought and an underlying tutelary impulse informed a great deal of this journalistic form.

Evidently concerned that her argument-driven article about the Zhuravlev trial would fail to engage its readers’ moral faculties, Vigdorova produced a second account in the form of what she called a “notepad” (*bloknot*). This transcriptive rendering was followed by other notepads recording not just rituals of justice but also conversations, interviews, and her own encounters as deputy to a regional council from 1963, and most famously by her account of Joseph Brodsky’s trial for social parasitism in 1964. Looking back on Vigdorova’s notepads, Chukovskaia praised their subjectivity and asserted that it in no way diminished their authenticity; indeed, it turned them into “artistic documents” since “the precision that gives them their delight and power is not that of the stenographer, but that of the artist, the most precious thing of all.”<sup>5</sup> Olga Rosenblum has argued that Chukovskaia’s comment shows that the Brodsky trial notepad came to operate “in the field of literature, and not law.”<sup>6</sup> Yet it was precisely the subjectivity of the transcriptive style that asserted the journalist’s right to question Soviet justice. If the Zhuravlev trial had exposed the law’s facilitation of linguistic evasion and moral indifference, then the transcriptive style aimed to model moral judgment by restoring the link between words and experience.

4. On these features of Khrushchev-era literature, see Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, 216–33; Denis Kozlov, *The Readers of Novyi Mir: Coming to Terms with the Stalinist Past* (Cambridge, Mass., 2013), 270–79, 293–94; and Anatoly Pinsky, “The Diaristic Form and Subjectivity under Khrushchev,” *Slavic Review* 73, no. 4 (Winter 2014): 805–27. On fact-based forms, see Eleonory Gilburd, *To See Paris and Die: The Soviet Lives of Western Culture* (Cambridge, Mass., 2018), 268–318; Polly Jones, *Revolution Rekindled: The Writers and Readers of Late Soviet Biography* (Oxford, 2019); Kozlov, *The Readers of Novyi Mir*, 171–208; Irina Paperno, *Stories of the Soviet Experience: Memoirs, Diaries, Dreams* (Ithaca, 2009), 1–160; and Emily Van Buskirk, *Lydia Ginzburg’s Prose: Reality in Search of Literature* (Princeton, 2016). On the Khrushchev period’s journalism of the “person,” see Thomas C. Wolfe, *Governing Soviet Journalism: The Press and the Socialist Person After Stalin* (Bloomington, 2005), 33–70.

5. Lidiia Chukovskaia, “Skol’ko stanet sil,” in Frida Vigdorova, *Doroga v zhizn’. Eto moi dom. Chernigovka* (Moscow, 1967), 728; see also Lidiia Chukovskaia, “Pamiati Fridy,” in *Iz dnevnika: Vospominaniia* (Moscow, 2014), 618.

6. “O ‘literaturnosti,’ ‘dokumentalizme’ i ‘iuridicheskom iazyke’ zapisei suda nad Brodskim (stenogramma obsuzhdeniia doklada O. Rozenblium),” in E. N. Strukova, B. I. Belenkin and G. G. Superfin, eds., *Acta Samizdatica/Zapiski o samizdate: Al’manakh*, vol. 4 (Moscow, 2018), 250–51.

Rather than associate the transcriptive style chiefly with the notepads, however, this study presents it as a key feature of Vigdorova's sanctioned journalism. Vigdorova's decades of work for *Pravda*, *Literaturnaia gazeta*, *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, *Izvestiia*, and other major publications had considerably greater impact in her lifetime than the notepads, which remained known only to the friends who heard her read them aloud, or who viewed the two collections that she compiled before her death in 1965.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, although Vigdorova had recorded oral utterances in diaries since her teens and incorporated them into a series of popular novels, her daughter Alexandra Raskina recalls that she "would never say 'I am a writer.' When people asked what she did, she would say she was a journalist."<sup>8</sup> As such, the transcriptive style's dual claims to authenticity and subjectivity are best understood in the journalistic context, and specifically as an extension of what Vigdorova identified in a 1947 lecture as the central features of the sketch, or *ocherk*, which was one of her favored genres: "The main feature of the sketch is writing that is true to life, except that more often than authors of other genres, the author of the sketch intervenes into the course of events described."<sup>9</sup> Vigdorova deployed her transcriptive style across a variety of genres in articles centering on education and children's affairs, but she also used her pulpit to defend the rights of individual citizens and address the moral education of society as a whole. These ethical preoccupations led her to produce a series of articles questioning the authority of contemporary rituals of justice: the criminal trial, the local trade union committee meeting, and the comrades' court. For Vigdorova, these rituals offered object lessons in society's failure to combat indifference: evidence that linguistic evasion plagued those very institutions charged with adjudicating morality. Her transcriptive style constructed a higher courtroom where she and her readers could witness that evasion and subject it to moral judgment.

Vigdorova's turn to transcription reflects a contemporary surge of interest in a concept popularized in the 1920s: the power of the oral or "living word" (*zhivoe slovo*) to reanimate language.<sup>10</sup> Stalinist culture had promoted a highly scriptural language manifested not least in stenographic reports of

7. Vigdorova grouped her notepads into two collections: *The Journalist's Notepad* and *The Deputy's Notepad*. These remained unprinted in her lifetime but now appear in Frida Vigdorova, *Pravo zapisyvat': Sbornik* (Moscow, 2017), 87–151, 179–94.

8. Maia Peshkova, "O mame, Fride Vigdorovoi, rasskazyvaet ee doch', Aleksandra Raskina," *Ekho Moskvy* at [echo.msk.ru/programs/time/846560-echo/](http://echo.msk.ru/programs/time/846560-echo/) (accessed October 16, 2015; no longer available). Chukovskaia notes that the novels *Family Happiness* (1962) and *Favorite Street* (1964) build on Vigdorova's diaries of her own daughters' utterances, which have since been published in Frida Vigdorova, *Devochki: Dnevnik materi* (Moscow, 2014); see Chukovskaia, "Skol'ko stanet sil," 728.

9. Frida Vigdorova Papers, Moscow (henceforth FVPM), "Stenogramma Lektsii t.Vigdorovoi po kursu 'Gazetnoe delo' v TsKSh," November 27, 1947, 3.

10. Katerina Clark, *Petersburg: Crucible of Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), 230–36; Gilburd, *To See Paris and Die*, 104–5; Michael S. Gorham, *Speaking in Soviet Tongues: Language Culture and the Politics of Voice in Revolutionary Russia* (DeKalb, 2003), 12–15, 40–49, 59–70; and Kozlov, *The Readers of Novyi Mir*, 62–72.

pre-scripted speeches that were retrospectively edited for publication.<sup>11</sup> But the Khrushchev era brought a return to orality. Radio listeners were confronted with a wider dynamic range of speech and unscripted interviews; poets and bards held live performances that foregrounded the immediacy of voice and gesture; and a new generation of writers experimented with dialect, colloquialisms, and slang.<sup>12</sup> Writing in the early 1960s, Chukovskaia's father Kornei Chukovskii reserved high praise for translators who retained the apparently unimportant particles and turns of phrase of their source languages: "it is precisely these so-called empty words and catchphrases, with which it might seem so easy to dispense, that are the main carriers of living intonation."<sup>13</sup> For Chukovskii, a "living language" was filled with vernacular words that seemed to be "empty" but in fact were not. Such a language did not tolerate the "anemic, antiseptic, dry words" of bureaucratism, which, as Chukovskii wrote elsewhere, had long provided a cover for indifference and even come to serve as "a handmaiden to lawlessness (*bezzakonie*)."<sup>14</sup>

Vigdorova's writings on rituals of justice thus proceeded on the assumption that the truly "empty words" of evasive language could best be exposed against a backdrop of "living" language. As she argued in her 1961 sketch, "Empty Eyes and Enchanted Eyes," it was the writer's responsibility to "hear everything, see everything." The sketch begins with a transcriptive account of a discussion Vigdorova overheard while traveling by bus to Tarusa. A war veteran is bemoaning the leaden congratulations offered him by three girls on Victory Day: "Let the words be solemn, that's fine with me. But let them be. . . well, living, somehow," he says. Vigdorova locates herself within the ensuing debate by describing the veteran as "my neighbor," thereby emphasizing her presence at the scene. If the girls deployed ossified phrases that did not reflect their experience, the writer remains attentive to the actual sights and

11. Stephen Lovell, *How Russia Learned to Talk: A History of Public Speaking in the Stenographic Age, 1860–1930* (Oxford, 2020), 288–93. On the scripturality of Stalinist language, see Jeffrey Brooks, *Thank You, Comrade Stalin!: Soviet Public Culture from Revolution to Cold War* (Princeton, 2001), 66–69; Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, 200–201; and Gorham, *Speaking in Soviet Tongues*, 120–40. Counter to Alexei Yurchak's view that the 1950s–60s were the period that saw the ossification of Soviet language, Vigdorova's work testifies to a campaign to reanimate language that had already become ossified under Stalin, see Kozlov, *The Readers of Novyi Mir*, 341–42 n37, 359 n93; Gilburd, *To See Paris and Die*, 104; Benjamin Nathans and Kevin M. F. Platt, "Socialist in Form, Indeterminate in Content: The Ins and Outs of Late Soviet Culture," *Ab Imperio* 2011, no. 2 (2011): 306, 309, 318–19; and Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, 2006), 14, 26, 47–50.

12. Oksana Bulgakova, *Golos kak kul'turnyi fenomen* (Moscow, 2015), 440–41; Gilburd, *To See Paris and Die*, 144–45; Stephen Lovell, *Russia in the Microphone Age: A History of Soviet Radio, 1919–1970* (Oxford, 2015), 161, 173–76, 189, 195–96; and Rachel S. Platonov, *Singing the Self: Guitar Poetry, Community, and Identity in the Post-Stalin Period* (Evanston, 2012), 24–29, 68–72, 75–76, 94–97.

13. Kornei Chukovskii, *Vysokoe iskusstvo: O printsipakh khudozhestvennogo perevoda* (Moscow, 1964), 183.

14. Kornei Chukovskii, *Zhivoi kak zhizn': Razgovor o russkom iazyke* (Moscow, 1962), 112–14, 119, 123 (quotation 123). On Chukovskii, language and morality, see Bulgakova, *Golos kak kul'turnyi fenomen*, 493; Gilburd, *To See Paris and Die*, 104; Kozlov, *The Readers of Novyi Mir*, 66–67; Lovell, *Russia in the Microphone Age*, 181–86, 206–7; and Lovell, *How Russia Learned to Talk*, 296.



sounds of reality. A genuinely “living” language demands personal witness, Vigdorova suggests; anything else is “legally enshrined lying” (*uzakonnoe vran'e*). By situating her readers at an impromptu trial of “empty words”—“Judge for yourself,” the veteran tells the other passengers—Vigdorova presents the transcriptive style as a prompt to moral judgment.<sup>15</sup>

Over the 1950s and 1960s, however, the state launched its own campaign on morality, with implications for legal as well as literary practices. The justice system enacted a series of reforms aimed at limiting the powers of the security police, liberalizing civil and criminal law and procedure, and systematizing the court system and principles of law.<sup>16</sup> These reforms, which culminated in the adoption of a new RSFSR Criminal Code in 1960, sought to strengthen the rule of law in a society still reeling from terror yet sat uneasily alongside the idea that law was a relic of capitalist oppression. Even as Khrushchev called for strengthening “socialist legality,” he enlisted citizens in policing morality. What emerged was a justice system that—though less repressive than under Stalin—was in many ways more intrusive in its regulation of private life and encouragement of mutual surveillance. Seeking to stimulate popular enthusiasm, the state delegated disciplinary powers to trade unions, comrades’ courts drawn from housing and work collectives, people’s patrols staffed by local volunteers, and anti-parasite laws governing work and behavior.<sup>17</sup> In 1961, the Party affirmed this trajectory toward paralegal justice by enacting the Moral Code of the Builder of Communism, a set of principles for a classless future when the law would “wither away.”<sup>18</sup>

Journalists assumed an active role in raising society’s moral consciousness. References to morality became ubiquitous in print, as newspapers, magazines, and thick journals delved into the ethics of family life, romantic relations, bureaucratic structures, and the workplace. Eager to rinse themselves of the stain of Stalinism and to position themselves as agents of change, journalists frequently intervened in miscarriages of justice. Their reports—often prompted by readers’ own letters—questioned the workings of legal authority in ways that served to legitimize the state by illustrating its capacity

15. Frida Vigdorova, “Glaza pustye i glaza volshebnye,” in V. Koblikov and others, eds., *Tarusskie stranitsy: literaturno-khudozhestvennyi illiustrirovannyi sbornik* (Kaluga, 1961), 150–51, 154, 158.

16. Harold J. Berman, *Justice in the U.S.S.R.: An Interpretation of Soviet Law* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), 72–75; and Yoram Gorlizki, “Political Reform and Local Party Interventions Under Khrushchev,” in Peter H. Solomon, ed., *Reforming Justice in Russia, 1864–1996: Power, Culture, and the Limits of Legal Order* (Armonk, 1997), 256–81.

17. Berman, *Justice in the U.S.S.R.*, 82–84, 285–98; Edward Cohn, *The High Title of a Communist: Postwar Party Discipline and the Values of the Soviet Regime* (DeKalb, 2015), 5, 68–72, 129–35, 143–65; Deborah A. Field, *Private Life and Communist Morality in Khrushchev’s Russia* (New York, 2007); Oleg Kharkhordin, *The Collective and the Individual in Russia: A Study of Practices* (Berkeley, 1999), 279–303; Brian LaPierre, *Hooligans in Khrushchev’s Russia: Defining, Policing, and Producing Deviance During the Thaw* (Madison, 2012), 59–95, 132–67; and Anatolii Pinskiĭ, “Predislovie,” in Anatolii Pinskiĭ, ed., *Posle Stalina: pozdnesovetskaia sub’ektivnost’ (1953–1985): Sbornik statei* (St. Petersburg, 2018), 20–27.

18. For the Moral Code, see XXII s’ezd kommunisticheskoi partii Sovetskogo Soiuza. 17–31 oktiabria 1961 goda: *Stenograficheskiĭ otchet*, vol. 3 (Moscow, 1962), 317–18.

for self-criticism.<sup>19</sup> This broader journalistic preoccupation with morality and legality shaped Vigdorova's concern with the language of Soviet justice. Yet if initially she advocated reforming the legal system, by the early 1960s she believed that linguistic evasion had become so pervasive that citizens would have to look elsewhere for guidance on morality:

There are crimes that don't appear in the Criminal Code. They don't try a person for indifference to another's fate. . . . They don't try a person who didn't speak directly, who answered dishonestly, evasively, to protect their own life or peace of mind. No, they don't try a person for that. On the contrary, it is often the direct, truthful word that leads to judgment. But that is the word that people follow.<sup>20</sup>

Not only did the Criminal Code fail to penalize linguistic evasion, Vigdorova argued years after making the same point about the Zhuravlev trial, it all too often committed the moral crime of punishing the "direct, truthful word." Vigdorova envisioned a journalistic language that would speak that word by modeling personal witness and judgment.

What began as an exposé of an indifference inherited from the Stalin period thus took on its own momentum as Vigdorova discerned linguistic evasion within the Khrushchev-era state's own campaign on morality. Writing about the Zhuravlev case in 1955, she joined the prosecutor in faulting the Criminal Code for its insensibility to moral "crimes." Following the adoption of a new Criminal Code, however, she continued directing the same critique at rituals of justice that were, in fact, charged with adjudicating morality. In January 1963, she published an article accusing a local trade union committee of hinging its disciplinary procedures on the baseless language of rumor and insinuation. And in April 1963, she lambasted a comrades' court for administering justice through a "formal" language that ignored the ambiguities of "human" experience. By contrast, she cultivated a transcriptive style that situated herself and her readers as witnesses to the linguistic evasions that she believed to be fostering indifference throughout the justice system and in society at large. Her journalism modeled a moral language that could put the law's own words on trial.

19. Rhiannon Lee Dowling, "Brezhnev's War on Crime: The Criminal in Soviet Society, 1963–1984" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2017), 82–176; Simon Huxtable, "The Life and Death of Brezhnev's Thaw: Changing Values in Soviet Journalism after Khrushchev, 1964–1968," in Dina Fainberg and Artemy M. Kalinovsky, eds., *Reconsidering Stagnation in the Brezhnev Era: Ideology and Exchange* (Lanham, 2016), 24, 28–32; Simon Huxtable, "Shortcomings: Soviet Journalists and the Changing Role of Press Criticism after the Twentieth Party Congress," in Thomas M. Bohn, Rayk Einax, and Michel Abesser, eds., *De-Stalinisation Reconsidered: Persistence and Change in the Soviet Union* (Frankfurt, 2014), 210–15; Natalia Roudakova, *Losing Pravda: Ethics and the Press in Post-Truth Russia* (Cambridge, Eng., 2017), 68; Natalia Roudakova, "'Here I Stand, I Can Do No Other': Paradoxes of Legitimacy in Soviet Journalism and Law" (n.d.), at [https://www.academia.edu/35009736/\\_Here\\_I\\_Stand\\_I\\_Can\\_Do\\_No\\_Other\\_Paradoxes\\_of\\_Legitimacy\\_in\\_Soviet\\_Journalism\\_and\\_Law](https://www.academia.edu/35009736/_Here_I_Stand_I_Can_Do_No_Other_Paradoxes_of_Legitimacy_in_Soviet_Journalism_and_Law) (accessed May 20, 2020); and Wolfe, *Governing Soviet Journalism*, 45–48.

20. Vigdorova, *Kem vy emu prikhodites'?* (Moscow, 1969), 88.

## The Criminal Trial

In Vigdorova's 1955 article, "A Crime and Conclusions Drawn from It," Boris Zhuravlev is only partly responsible for the murder of the young man Viktor Kuz'min. Equally if not more culpable are the individuals and institutions charged with his upbringing. Combining her own reconstruction of the crime with scattered quotations from the trial, Vigdorova dwells on the evasive language that citizens use to sidestep their responsibilities. The defendant's father, Aleksandr Zhuravlev, addresses the court "in stock phrases, authoritatively emphasizing the words 'I personally.'" Ivan Krymskii, the father of Zhuravlev's friend Oleg, defends his own negligence through clichés of communist morality: "I was of the view that my son shouldn't study but work, since labor is the best educator in our Soviet land." For Vigdorova, these "empty words" are symptomatic of a broader plague of linguistic evasion that also shapes the blunt language used to discipline the children at home: "'I talked some sense into him,' 'I gave him a piece of my mind,' 'I dressed him down more than once,' the parents said." The parents appear primed to expect that the court will validate their words and actions. Instead, the prosecutor not only takes them to task but also faults the Criminal Code for failing to penalize such moral "crimes": "And the prosecutor's words were met with loud approval when he said that we ought to add to our Criminal Code an article punishing people who treat the education of their children coldly and with criminal indifference."<sup>21</sup> Referring the matter to the fathers' workplaces, the court calls for a socialist legality that is capable of adjudicating morality.

Vigdorova signals her support for the court's critique of the Criminal Code while linking it to her own broader critique of linguistic evasion. The justice system accordingly becomes one of many institutions that promote indifference through rigid, impersonal, or obfuscatory language: "Dozens of extremely serious and troubling questions arise not only for the family but also for the school, the Komsomol, society and our literature." This reference to literature's own culpability, along with Vigdorova's production of a notepad about the trial, suggests that she was referring not least to herself. And indeed, even as the article advocates awakening citizens' ethical faculties, its argument-driven exposition overtly imposes the author's judgment. It is "criminal," Vigdorova writes, that Zhuravlev's teachers could not expel the boy, a fact she attributes by implication to his father's high post at the Ministry of Railways. It is "criminal" that the school awarded Zhuravlev a top mark for behavior: "If everyone knew about the drinking and hooliganism, how could they give him an excellent grade for behavior? What kind of cold, unthinking indifference could have dictated it?" Most "criminal" of all, she writes, is the "heavy-handedness of the words, lectures, instructions on which Zhuravlev, Susaikov and Krymskii were raised at school and home." Vigdorova heightens the tutelary tone of her article through a "we" that presumes agreement and a "you" that overtly directs the reader: "[I]f your child grows up next to you—fed, shod, clothed, but alone—then nothing will help you educate him correctly, neither expensive presents nor wise instructions." The univocality

21. Vigdorova, "Prestuplenie i vyvody iz nego."



of the courtroom audience suggests that the article's readers will likewise respond in unison: "No, it is no coincidence that everyone in the courtroom said in one voice that the trial of a murderer had turned into a trial of his parents, of the parents of his mates—accessories to the crime."<sup>22</sup>

Both the article "A Crime and Conclusions Drawn from It" and the notepad, titled "The Case of Boris Zhuravlev," present reality in such a way as to guide the reader toward the author's judgment. The article, however, foregrounds that judgment by limiting quotation to snippets of dialogue that do not amount to the sustained renderings of the transcriptive style:

"Are you calling me an alcoholic? Well, so I had a little drink here and there. . ."

He knew the drill: whatever he did, someone would step in, protect him, bail him out, pull him dry from the water.<sup>23</sup>

Whereas the article confines Zhuravlev's testimony to eight words in the original Russian followed by commentary, the notepad presents a 253-word transcriptive exchange between Zhuravlev and the court that begins with the boy's own account of the crime:

". . . well, so Oleg and I had a drink and went to the show. Kuz'min, the one who was later killed, was also at the show. I'll admit that during the intermission I stepped on his foot. Then I went out of the hall and Kuz'min came after me and said he would kick me out of the school. Well, so I decided to give him a scare and pointed my pistol at him. He pressed himself against the wall, so I pulled the trigger and a shot rang out. I left."<sup>24</sup>

Both texts present Zhuravlev's obfuscatory language as evidence of the indifference that drove him to murder. If the article overtly instructs the reader, however, the notepad invites him or her to personally witness the defendant uttering the participial phrase "later killed" (*pozdney ubityi*), which elides his agency in the killing, and the reflexive verb "rang out" (*razdalsia*), indicating that the shot was fired of its own accord. The gravity of these dodges in turn suggests the moral bankruptcy of Zhuravlev's turn to legal language when he "admits" to the court (*ia dospukaiu*) that he intended to step on Kuz'min's foot. The transcriptive style records the boy's denials while showing how they are encoded within language itself.

Where the article embeds the defendant's words in the journalist's argument, the notepad invites the reader to witness those words by emphasizing their orality. As in the article, Zhuravlev hedges his statements with the evasive "well" (*nu*), but the notepad highlights their spoken nature by repeating the particle. The orality of the account conveys the impression of a "living language," thereby configuring Vigdorova's readers as listeners present at the trial. When Vigdorova reveals the identity of the truly guilty party, then, she does so through an audible crescendo. Accused of having boasted of his wealth, Aleksandr Zhuravlev raises his voice: "I made no such declaration. I declare this responsibly and as a Party member!" The father's denial of

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

24. Vigdorova, *Pravo zapisyvat'*, 88–89.

responsibility undermines his claim to be speaking responsibly, in turn casting doubt on his use of ossified legalese such as “declaration” and “I declare.” Vigdorova invites the reader to hear these linguistic evasions through punctuation that registers their raised volume—a shift which the judge then presents as evidence of the father’s culpability:

Judge: Why is it that before you spoke so quietly, sluggishly, and now suddenly you’ve become outraged and started speaking so energetically? Explain how it happened that your son took the life of a person who was brought up well by his parents, who was guided by them to his fifth year of study—explain how it happened, explain it for all the people to hear!

Zhuravlev: Yes, here I personally made a mistake. . . I took charge of him. . . I told him. . . And advised him. . . I tried. . . But it didn’t work out. . .<sup>25</sup>

Chastened by the judge, Zhuravlev’s father is reduced from speech to silence, and the notepad conveys that decrescendo audibly through fragmentary sentences and ellipses. The orality of the transcriptive style situates both the journalist and her readers as witnesses to the trial.

“The Case of Boris Zhuravlev” reflects an abiding tension within the transcriptive style. On the one hand, Vigdorova sought to encourage the independent adjudication of her readers by enjoining them to witness reality alongside her. On the other hand, her editorial input affirmed an ethical affinity with those readers that in practice guided their judgments toward her own. A comparison between the notepad and Vigdorova’s original notes from the trial reveals numerous additions, omissions, reorderings, and rephrasings that serve to steer the reader’s judgment.<sup>26</sup> The moralizing effect of these interventions is made palpable by authorial asides, as when Zhuravlev’s father is described as “fat—a double-helping. . . Face like a pancake, eyes like a pig.”<sup>27</sup> Such alterations and asides serve to guide the reader toward the very same verdict that Vigdorova had reached in her published article, but stripped of the article’s authoritative “we,” they now identify that verdict as having issued directly from the journalist. As such, they articulate an authorial subjectivity that models how the reader might similarly bear witness to the ambiguities of reality without resorting to ossified linguistic formulations. Over the next decade, Vigdorova would embed this transcriptive style in her published articles as a way of constructing a journalistic courtroom where society’s “empty words” could be put on trial.

### The Local Trade Union Committee

On July 14, 1955, *Literaturnaia gazeta* published a news item outlining events since the Zhuravlev trial. The anonymous piece reminded readers that the court had been unable to file charges against the parents and had therefore referred the matter to their workplaces. The Party committee at the Ministry of Railways had recommended that Zhuravlev’s father be stripped of his post—a decision confirmed at the regional level—and rebuked several heads

25. Ibid.

26. FVPM, Notepad of Zhuravlev trial (“Bloknot”).

27. Vigdorova, *Pravo zapisyvat’*, 98.

of department for their own behavior. (Indeed, the Central Committee would cite the Zhuravlev case that summer in a draft letter requiring Party organizations to penalize negligent parents).<sup>28</sup> In offering this narrative of the successful disciplining of indifference, *Literaturnaia gazeta* was supporting the court's recommendation that morality be policed by paralegal means. One such means might be the workplace, but another was journalism itself: "Employees attended lectures on communist ways of educating children and collective readings of F. Vigdorova's article, as well as L. Ivanova's article 'On a Certain Court Case,' published in *Komsomol'skaia pravda*."<sup>29</sup>

Yet even as journalists asserted their own jurisdiction over morality, the state invested its energies in the workplace through a refurbished trade-union system boasting disciplinary powers. Previously seen as agents of Party or governmental control rather than as workers' advocates, the trade unions had become key to Khrushchev's reforms. In 1957, the Central Committee passed a resolution renewing the trade unions' commitment to the autonomy, safety, and education of workers. Factories and other workplaces were instructed to delegate the administration of wages and benefits to local committees. These committees possessed the power to settle labor disputes by dismissing workers—dismissals which could then be reversed by appealing to a higher union body or to the judicial system itself. But the committees also assumed a moral function.<sup>30</sup> By the 1960s, they had become invested in making model citizens, or as one commentator put it, "a man harmoniously combining in himself spiritual wealth, moral purity, and physical perfection."<sup>31</sup>

The local trade union committee may thus be seen as a response to the question posed at the Zhuravlev trial: if moral infractions fell outside the bounds of the Criminal Code, how might the state and society hold offenders to account? In 1955, Vigdorova had echoed the prosecutor's call for embedding moral judgment more firmly into legal code and practice. But the elevation of paralegal institutions like the local trade union committee evidently convinced her that linguistic evasion undermined the mission of such mechanisms of justice. On January 22, 1963, she published an article in *Literaturnaia gazeta* accusing one local trade union committee of having violated its moral remit. The article, titled "On Ideas That Don't Go Out of Fashion," told the story of a young man called Oleg Zhokhov who had accused his piano teacher, Nina Petrova, of "amoral behavior." Having been chastised for failing to return to

28. "Pis'mo TsK KPSS partiinym organizatsiiam 'O ser'eznykh nedostatkakh v vospitanii detei,'" in A.A. Fursenko, ed., *Prezidium TsK KPSS, 1954–1964: Chernovye protokoly nye zapisi zasedanii, stenogrammy, postanovleniia*, vol. 2 (Moscow, 2006), 118.

29. Anonymous, "'Prestuplenie i vyvody iz nego': Po sledam vystuplenii 'Literaturnoi gazety,'" *Literaturnaia gazeta*, July 14, 1955, 2. For the second article, see L. Ivanova, "Po povodu odnogo sudebnogo dela," *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, June 18, 1955, 4. Tellingly, Ivanova also uses the phrase "empty words" to cast doubt on the sincerity of Aleksandr Zhuravlev's belated admission of guilt.

30. Blair A. Ruble, *Soviet Trade Unions: Their Development in the 1970s* (Cambridge, Eng., 1981), 20, 66–68, 84–89.

31. A. I. Tsepin, "Obshchaia kharakteristika professional'nykh soiuзов," in Ts. A. Iampol'skaia and A. I. Tsepin, eds., *Pravovye aspekty deiatel'nosti profsoiuзов SSSR: Profsoiuzy—sub'ekty sovetskogo prava* (Moscow, 1973), 25; cited in Ruble, *Soviet Trade Unions*, 61, 155n44.

his dormitory one night, Zhokhov had submitted a letter accusing Petrova of seducing him and then refusing to remain his teacher. Denying all charges, Petrova had attempted suicide before being fired by a local trade union committee. Vigdorova states outright that she believes Petrova, thereby shifting her focus of judgment to Zhokhov's own "amoral behavior," expressed in her view through his readiness to denounce a woman with whom he claims to have been involved.<sup>32</sup> Quoting the impersonal language of Zhokhov's letter, Vigdorova also transcribes the meeting in ways that highlight the committee's reliance on ossified, authoritative language and on the unsubstantiated words of rumor and insinuation. By contrast, the journalist offers evidence of her own personal witness and invites her readers to bear witness, as well. Her transcriptive style suggests that journalism can facilitate true moral judgment while the local trade union committee passes a false moral judgment due to its evasive language.

As was the case with the Zhuravlev trial, Vigdorova produced an unpublished notepad alongside her published article. Ironically titled "Amoral Behavior," it consists of an extended version of Zhokhov's letter, transcriptive renderings of Vigdorova's interview with the school director and of the meeting itself, and four letters written by readers in response to her article.<sup>33</sup> Unlike Vigdorova's article about the Zhuravlev trial, however, her published article about the Petrova case puts the committee on trial through transcriptive renderings of key documents and testimony. It begins with an extended, 218-word quotation from Zhokhov's letter that highlights the student's self-exculpatory language: "I didn't realize the mistake I was making and, of course, I didn't consider where it would lead (*k chemu eto privedet*). One way or another, that half hour turned into (*prevratilis'*) the whole night." Vigdorova's transcriptive style shows how Zhokhov's impersonal constructions and reflexive verbs elide his agency in ways that echo the evasive language of Zhuravlev in her 1955 notepad and article. Moreover, it suggests that the formulaic language of the law provides institutional support for that avoidance of responsibility: "I sincerely declare (*Zaiavliaiu so vsei iskrennost' iu*)," Zhokhov says; "I admit (*Ia priznaiu*) I made a grave error." The music school director similarly veils his indifference by citing the words of her medical file: "We immediately summoned her to a meeting of the local trade union committee, since her medical leave had ended, and the final report from the hospital said. . . How did they

32. Vigdorova was not unique among female journalists in viewing charges of sexual impropriety through the lens of how the allegations demonstrated moral decline and the need for a justice system grounded in evidentiary accuracy. On the gendered nature of this rational conception of justice in the journalistic work of Ol'ga Chaikovskaia half a decade later, see Rhiannon Dowling, "Soviet Women in Brezhnev's Courts: 'The Case of Two Boys,' Gender, and Justice in Late Soviet Russia," *Russian History* 43, no. 3–4 (December 2016): 259–60. If Chaikovskaia would associate "female emotionality" with prosecutorial bias and heightened passions in the courtroom, however, it is precisely the ability to convey emotion and experience that Vigdorova presents as the basis for journalism's claim to moral authority.

33. Vigdorova, *Pravo zapisyvat'*, 129–41.

put it? . . . Look, you can read it for yourself: 'Fully aware of her actions, well oriented in time and in her surrounding environment.'<sup>34</sup>

If formulaic language facilitates indifference, as Vigdorova suggests, so too can speech that ignores elementary standards of evidentiary accuracy. A 484-word transcriptive account of the committee meeting accordingly highlights the members' tolerance for rumor and insinuation. Vigdorova's account unfolds in playscript fashion, with names and occupations—"Committee Chairman," "Deputy Head Teacher," "Petrova"—preceding the utterances, and the utterances themselves supported by minimal attributive prose. A gym teacher condemns Petrova based on little more than hearsay: "She relates to her work dishonestly, as well. I myself haven't attended her lessons, but people tell me about it." The assistant principal presents his own lack of witness as a badge of honor. "I also haven't attended Petrova's lessons. I found it unpleasant to go to her lessons," he says, and then: "Let's fire her and be done with it. For amoral behavior." Even those who testify based on personal witness are shown to fall prey to prurient speculation. "I see right through Petrova's kind," another committee member says. "She sits there on the couch in the corridor, showing off her legs, cigarette between her teeth, if you know what I mean, all tee-hee-hee and ha-ha-ha."<sup>35</sup> By verbally documenting these abrogations of personal witness, the article alleges the bankruptcy of the committee's own claim to moral judgment.

Vigdorova models an alternative to such linguistic evasion by asserting the transparency of her account; when introducing Zhokhov and Petrova, for instance, she specifies that these are pseudonyms, and when quoting Zhokhov's letter, she stipulates that she has made "minor cuts." Such admissions highlight the importance of her own witness while justifying its subjectivity as an ethical imperative. Vigdorova's "I" appears in the second sentence and resurfaces through references to her presence at both Petrova's lessons and the meeting itself. "I have been to Nina Sergeevna's lessons," she writes. "It is a very sad thing that, in the three years Nina Sergeevna worked in the school, not one [staff] person went to her lessons." For Vigdorova, the lack of detail and nuance that besets the committee's language is reflected in investigative practices that set so little store by personal witness that even Petrova's students become an object of suspicion. "I did not approach Nina Sergeevna's students. They came to me themselves to tell me about their love for her, the respect they have for her," she writes. "The committee chairman thinks they were coached. I daresay that my many years of teaching and journalistic experience have enabled me to distinguish between those who have been trained and prepared and those who say sincerely what they really think."<sup>36</sup> The journalist asserts her authority by emphasizing her own experience. The article becomes that higher courtroom through which Petrova might contest her unjust firing.

34. Vigdorova, "O poniatiiakh sovsem ne staromodnykh," *Literaturnaia gazeta*, January 22, 1963, 2.

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*



Vigdorova convenes this courtroom by situating her readers at the scene, as well: “. . . And now it has begun, the meeting of the local trade union committee.” When the gym teacher asserts that he has caught Petrova in a lie, Vigdorova conveys a sense of immediacy by noting that he is speaking “jubilantly”; elsewhere, she captures the colloquial tone of the mathematics teacher’s lament: “Not good, not good at all!” As in the Zhuravlev trial notepad, the orality of these descriptions is stressed by an audible crescendo as the meeting moves toward its denouement: “At this point a commotion (*shum*) began. Nearly everyone demanded: ‘Call Zhokhov!’” It is against this cacophonous backdrop that the journalist suddenly makes her own voice heard:

The journalist’s job is to listen and be quiet. But I confess, I could not stay quiet. I said: “Comrades, open your eyes!”  
 Silence fell. After a moment, the director announced: “Well, I suppose there’s no real need. It’s clear as it is. But is it the case that you disagree with our collective?”  
 “When Zhokhov brought in his letter, he should have been told that a letter like that is a vile act.”  
 “Eh-eh-eh! You are wrong,” said the committee chairman. “I don’t see anything objectionable in Zhokhov’s letter. He’s an honest, decent person. If we let Petrova stay, what will we tell the students? How will we explain it to them? She must be fired.”<sup>37</sup>

Vigdorova’s emphasis on sound and pacing (*Nastupilatishina. Chut' vyzhdav. . .*) conveys a sense of orality and immediacy that not only situates readers at the scene, but also presents them with a concrete model of personal witness and judgment. The journalist must not be silent, she reminds her readers: her confrontation with reality compels her to speak out. In transcribing the sights and sounds of lived experience, the article convenes a journalistic courtroom where the committee’s language can stand trial.

### The Comrades’ Court

Vigdorova’s construction of a journalistic courtroom put her on a collision course with the state’s own efforts to adjudicate morality. In 1961, the Supreme Soviet issued a RSFSR-wide statute elevating its system of comrades’ courts as the port of call for disciplinary violations, drunkenness, petty theft, housing disputes, and “the failure to perform duties relating to the rearing of children.”<sup>38</sup> Comrades’ courts were staffed by lay members of housing and work collectives, but their authority stemmed from the legal professionals who had campaigned for their use and was viewed as consistent with constitutional law.<sup>39</sup> As such, they were legally authorized to issue minor punishments including the levying of fines and the firing or evicting of offenders. But their purpose was also morally educative: their statute enjoined them to

37. *Ibid.*

38. “Polozhenie o tovarishcheskikh sudakh,” *Sovetskaia iustitsiia*, no. 14 (1961): 26.

39. Yoram Gorzilski, “Delegalization in Russia: Soviet Comrades’ Courts in Retrospect,” *The American Journal of Comparative Law* 46, no. 3 (Summer 1998): 404.

further “the rearing of citizens in the spirit of a communist attitude toward labor, of socialist property, of the preservation of the rules of socialist co-existence, of the development in Soviet people of a sense of collectivism and comradely support, of respect for the dignity and honor of citizens.”<sup>40</sup>

Like the local trade union committees, then, the comrades' courts represented a state-led effort to address what the prosecutor at the Zhuravlev trial had described as the Criminal Code's insensibility to moral “crimes.” Yet if Vigdorova had supported that effort in 1955, by the early 1960s she had come to believe that the paralegal institutions charged with adjudicating morality were themselves rife with linguistic evasion. On April 4, 1963, Vigdorova published an article in *Izvestiia*, titled “Friendship on Trial,” about a comrades' court gone morally wrong. The article, which appeared under the “Letters with Commentary” rubric, concerned three teachers: Nina Iakovlevna and Ariadna Dmitrievna, who were registered in the same communal apartment, and Nelli Viktorovna, who had been staying unofficially with Nina Iakovlevna and whom Ariadna Dmitrievna wanted to evict. Testifying for Nina Iakovlevna and Nelli Viktorovna were their devoted students, whom Vigdorova praises as genuine witnesses because they “could not help but see” the teachers' altercations.<sup>41</sup> By contrast, Vigdorova observes, Ariadna Dmitrievna called on witnesses whom she had invited to observe confrontations that were solely favorable to her. Vigdorova's condemnation of the trial is thus only partly directed at the victorious Ariadna Dmitrievna. Her actual target is the court's adherence to an ossified legal language that claims to be capable of adjudicating morality while in fact devaluing the spontaneity of personal witness and failing to register the ambiguities of life.

Vigdorova condemns what she presents as the court's violation of its own moral remit: “In the Statute on Comrades' Courts it says they must foster qualities such as collectivism, comradely cooperation. But in this trial, concepts such as friendship and human concern constantly retreated before words such as: “‘She's not registered!,’ ‘That's not allowed!,’ ‘You don't have the right!’” Vigdorova links this legalistic language to what she presents as the court's failure to distinguish between true and false testimony. Ariadna Dmitrievna's deliberately planted witnesses accordingly come to carry more weight than Nina Iakovlevna and Nelli Viktorovna's spontaneous student-witnesses, whom the court—like the committee in the Petrova case—accuses of having grown too close to their teachers. For Vigdorova, this suspicious attitude stems from the court's adherence to a rigid legal language that fails to register the complexities of reality. Condemning the trial's elevation of “formal” legality, Vigdorova calls for a means of judgment that will remain attentive to “human” morality: “[E]ach time we convene to decide our comrades' fate (be it in a meeting of a local trade union committee or a comrades' court),

40. “Polozhenie o tovarishcheskikh sudakh.” On the “parental” or “shaming” function of the comrades' courts, see Berman, *Justice in the U.S.S.R.*, 288–91; and Kharkhordin, *The Collective and the Individual in Russia*, 282–83.

41. Vigdorova, “Druzhba pod sudom,” *Izvestiia*, April 4, 1963, 4. For a draft of the article, see FVPM, “Po forme pravil'no. . . a po sushchestvu?,” March 18, 1963.

we absolutely must ascertain the character of those involved; we must establish their human, not formal rightness.”<sup>42</sup>

“Friendship on Trial” seeks to convene this “human” courtroom: a community of readers who bear witness together thanks to Vigdorova’s transcriptive style. The article begins with the arrival of a letter from Nina Iakovlevna and Nelli Viktorovna’s students, which Vigdorova quotes before identifying it as her reason for attending the trial. Although Vigdorova’s “I” does not appear in the article, her “we” situates the author and the reader within a community that has yet to reach a moral judgment. “But let us try to get to the bottom of one domestic story,” she writes. “Otherwise we won’t understand how things played out.” Vigdorova asserts the need for this community by pointing to the inadequacy of existing mechanisms of justice. The police chief who first receives Ariadna Dmitrievna’s complaint decides that “there is nothing here for the police and court to do” and forwards it to the district department of education, which in turn sends it to the comrades’ court. Vigdorova then takes the failings of that court as the pretext for her own intervention. “It seems to us that the police chief was right that it would have been better not to publicize a domestic feud,” she writes. “But since it came to pass that the head of the district department of education switched places with the police chief and then passed the case to the comrades’ court. . . . Since it came to pass, it was incumbent on those who met in the recreation room to get to the bottom of the affair.”<sup>43</sup> It is the court’s own failure to adjudicate morality that necessitates the journalistic courtroom.

As in “On Ideas That Don’t Go Out of Fashion,” “Friendship on Trial” situates its readers as listeners: “‘Would you look at that, they’ve put the screws on the students!’ the audience could be heard saying. ‘Kick them out!’” If the courtroom audience at the Zhuravlev trial had served as proxy for her readers, now Vigdorova invites her readers to hear and critique the audience’s evasive language. At the same time, she uses her transcriptive style to record the utterances of the court itself:

“On what basis did the unregistered citizen live with you?” a member of the court asks Nina Iakovlevna.

“We are friends.”

“And if the residents object. . . .”

“But they don’t object.”

“But if even one person objected, then you had no right. . . .”

Despite its claim to adjudicating morality, the court adheres to a “formal,” legalistic language that overlooks the bonds of friendship. Nelli Viktorovna defends those bonds in moral terms—“They helped me, I helped them. Yes, they all helped me very much. I was raised in a children’s home, and there in that apartment I felt I had a family. . . .”—only to be told by the court that she is “not addressing what’s important.”<sup>44</sup> The court rejects the “human” language

42. Vigdorova, “Druzhba pod sudom.”

43. *Ibid.*

44. *Ibid.*

in which Nina Iakovlevna and Nelli Viktorovna speak, the journalist records, and the reader witnesses. The orality of the transcriptive style serves to trigger the very spirit of “comradely cooperation” that evades the comrades’ court.

Following the publication of “Friendship on Trial,” the comrades’ court sent *Izvestiia* a letter accusing Vigdorova of harboring undeclared loyalties toward Nina Iakovlevna and Nelli Viktorovna. Vigdorova responded by laying out her vision of journalism and justice in her own letter to *Izvestiia*. For proof that she had been right to condemn the trial, she argues, the editors need look no further than the court’s letter, where “we once again see an effort to focus attention on the ABCs, the paragraph, and a complete disregard for the essence of the matter.” For Vigdorova, the words of the letter were just as morally bankrupt as those pronounced at the trial: both articulated a “formal” view of reality. By contrast, Vigdorova’s article presented a “human” account by foregrounding its author’s subjectivity: “I would like to say that the journalist has the right not just to describe a court session point-by-point, but also to recount how he understood and experienced the proceedings.”<sup>45</sup> As in Vigdorova’s article about the trade union committee, the journalist’s witness validates a higher courtroom where the justice system can stand trial.

### The Journalistic Courtroom

Vigdorova’s transcriptive style points to a key link between the legal and literary debates of the Khrushchev period: their common focus on language and morality. As the state embedded moral discipline more firmly within its legal and paralegal structures, writers and critics searched for the root causes of linguistic evasion and the moral indifference to which they believed it gave rise. For Vigdorova, the courtroom setting offered an opportunity to explore the wider crisis that ensued when language lost its link with lived experience. Yet in cultivating a way of writing that situated both author and reader as witnesses to such rituals, Vigdorova constructed an imagined courtroom that could challenge the justice system in its own right. Two months after printing “On Ideas That Don’t Go Out of Fashion,” *Literaturnaia gazeta* affirmed the existence of this courtroom by publishing several responses to the article. One reader situated himself as a witness by comparing the local trade union committee meeting to a “story from my life,” while the other emphasized the need for judgment by demanding that Zhokhov and the committee be summoned “to a popular court of maximum publicity for their flagrant perversion of the moral foundations of our society.” In a reply printed alongside the letters, Vigdorova noted that “almost all of the many responses to the article ‘On Ideas That Don’t Go Out of Fashion’ were unanimous in their judgment (‘too lenient!’).”<sup>46</sup> The viewpoints elaborated in the readers’ letters ultimately converge on the journalist’s own verdict.

45. FVPM, “V redaktsionnuui kollegiiu gazety ‘Izvestiia,’” undated, 1, 3.

46. “Ne dlia arkhiva: Perepiska chitatelia i pisatel’ia,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, March 16, 1963, 2.

What Vigdorova saw as an entrenched weakness of legal language—its tendency toward formalization and hence disregard for the vagaries of experience—a later generation of western scholars would see as its strength. For James Boyd White, the pursuit of justice demands a standardized language that limits expression; yet by learning to use that language in creative ways, legal subjects can still articulate each other’s experiences and make their voices heard.<sup>47</sup> Seen from this perspective, Vigdorova’s critique of legal language as insensible to experience may seem reductive. But within the specific context of the post-Stalin era, her transcriptive accounts of courtroom rituals established a relation of co-witnessing with readers and thus constructed what White describes as a “textual community” that might give new meaning to the “empty words” of moral justice.<sup>48</sup> Vigdorova belonged to a generation of intellectuals who well remembered Stalin’s purges and the gap they had exposed between the letter of the law and the arbitrariness of legal practice. These memories lent a sense of urgency to the discussions of language and morality that came to the fore in the Khrushchev period and prompted Vigdorova, in particular, to configure courtroom rituals as object lessons in the wider consequences of excessively scriptural or otherwise evasive language. If such language had indeed fostered indifference, then the orality of her journalism articulated an alternative idiom that positioned readers as witnesses and constructed a textual community.

This imagined community included not only Vigdorova and her contemporaries but also a genealogy of earlier journalists and writers to whom the post-Stalinist intelligentsia looked for inspiration in matters of morality and legality. Memoirists and scholars have noted similarities between Vigdorova’s notepads and the nineteenth-century journalist Vladimir Korolenko’s transcriptive renderings of court cases.<sup>49</sup> But it was Aleksandr Herzen who demonstrated to Vigdorova how a community of judgment that remained attentive to experience might contest the authority of ossified legal language. Vigdorova was reading Herzen heavily in the months before the Zhuravlev trial, and one of the lines she copied out was from his work “Caprices and Meditation”: “When at a difficult, bitter moment of repentance I run to my friend, it is by no means justice that I want from him. Justice is what a district inspector must give me, if he is a decent man; from a friend I expect not condemnation, abuse, or punishment, but warm compassion and my renewal through love; I expect him to take up half my load, to shield me from his own innocence.”<sup>50</sup>

47. James Boyd White, *The Legal Imagination*, Abridged (Chicago, 1985), xxiv, 72, 109–13, 207–11.

48. James Boyd White, *When Words Lose Their Meaning: Constitutions and Reconstitutions of Language, Character, and Community* (Chicago, 1984), 3–23.

49. Chukovskaia, “Pamiati Fridy,” 652–53; Ol’ga Rozenblium, “‘No ot znaniia do povedeniia tozhe est’ eshche put’, i nemalyi’: Obraz pisatel’ia-zashchitnika v vospominaniakh o Fride Vigdorovoi (1965–1966),” in Mariia S. Nekliudova and Elena P. Shumilova, eds., *Semiotika povedeniia i literaturnye strategii: Lotmanovskie chteniia—XXII* (Moscow, 2017), 306–12; Elena G. Serebriakova, “Identichnost’ ‘zashchitnik’ v sotsial’noi i professional’noi praktike Fridy Vigdorovoi,” *Observatoriia kul’tury* 16, no. 1 (2019): 73–74; and “O ‘literaturnosti,’” 250, 268–69.

50. Frida Vigdorova Papers, New Orleans, Notepad 5 (“Volga-Dona,” 1954–56), 5–6. For the original quotation, see Aleksandr Gertsen, “Kaprizy i razdum’e,” in *Sobranie*



While the inspector doles out a “justice” that is dictated by the legal code, the friend offers a “compassion” that takes account of reality and accords with his own conscience. True to the intelligentsia vision of natural rights that are not codified from above but inherent in the human condition, Herzen places moral justice in the hands of a community of “friends” who answer to something higher than the formulations of positive law.<sup>51</sup> By recording the morally indifferent language that she believed to characterize courtroom rituals, Vigdorova situated both herself and her readers within that community of judgment.

This community was in some ways similar to the one that Harriet Murav has identified in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's unsanctioned work. Building on White's arguments, Murav suggests that *The Gulag Archipelago* invokes a courtroom where Solzhenitsyn serves as witness, lawyer, and judge. The author gives voice to those who were silenced by the Gulag and therefore cannot write for themselves.<sup>52</sup> If Solzhenitsyn conceived of voice as the capacity to write one's experiences, however, Vigdorova defined it quite literally as utterances that could be heard and transcribed. Her emphasis on spoken language reconfigured her readers as a community of listeners who were gathered in space and time. As Walter J. Ong notes of orality, “[s]ound exists only when it is going out of existence. It is not simply perishable but essentially evanescent, and it is sensed as evanescent.” For Ong, “[t]he spoken word is always an event, a movement in time, completely lacking in the thing-like repose of the written or printed word.”<sup>53</sup> Yet by emphasizing the orality of the words she transcribed, Vigdorova aimed to preserve that very evanescence. Her articles about legal and paralegal rituals of justice situated her readers within two courtrooms: both the actual courtroom where the words had first sounded and a higher courtroom where they continued to resound in ways that invited communal judgment.

This higher courtroom took on tangible form at Vigdorova's readings of her notepads. “And Frida read without affectation, simply, soulfully, with that very precision of intonation that conveys an authentic feeling of being present,” the writer I. Grekova recalled. “Over and over again we, her listeners, burst out laughing, and Frida, throwing back her head, laughed along with us.”<sup>54</sup> Grekova's description captures the orality of the transcriptive style and the sense of immediacy that it imparted: the notepads conveyed an “authentic

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*sochinenii: V tridsati tomakh*, vol. 2 (Moscow, 1954), 101. Testifying to the intelligentsia's common cultural references, Chukovskaia quotes the same passage in her “Moi chuzhie mysli,” in *Izbrannoe* (Moscow, 2011), 407.

51. Daniel Beer, “Civil Death, Radical Protest and The Theatre of Punishment in the Reign of Alexander II,” *Past & Present* 250, no. 1 (February 2021): 171–202; Jay Bergman, “Soviet Dissidents on the Russian Intelligentsia, 1956–1985: The Search for a Usable Past,” *The Russian Review* 51, no. 1 (January 1992): 16–35; Philip Boobbyer, *Conscience, Dissent and Reform in Soviet Russia* (London, 2005), 5, 12–13, 17; Huxtable, “The Life and Death of Brezhnev's Thaw,” 28–30; and Paperno, *Stories of the Soviet Experience*, 9–15.

52. Harriet Murav, *Russia's Legal Fictions* (Ann Arbor, 1998), 158–59, 172–73, 182–85, 233–45.

53. Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London, 1982), 32, 74.

54. Vigdorova, *Pravo zapisyvat'*, 19.

feeling of being present” by preserving the “intonation” of spoken language. Laughing together, Vigdorova and her listeners affirmed their allegiance to a shared moral framework: an affinity born of their collective reading of thinkers such as Herzen; their memory of the Stalinist past; and their growing consensus that Khrushchev’s state was renegeing on its own promises of reform. Within Vigdorova’s published journalism, too, this framework encouraged readers to perceive her expressions of subjectivity as representative of an accepted truth, with the journalist articulating how they themselves might have experienced the same reality.<sup>55</sup> Though the result constituted more of a reconfiguration than a rejection of the moralism of her article about the Zhuravlev trial, admirers regarded her way of writing as something wholly different from journalistic convention. By situating them as fellow witnesses, Vigdorova elaborated a language of moral justice and enjoined them to participate in its application.

Memoirs of Vigdorova frequently foreground her unpublished notepads as preludes to her account of the Brodsky trial and its influence on samizdat. This teleological perspective was cemented as early as 1966, when the dissident Aleksandr Ginzburg dedicated to Vigdorova his samizdat volume about the arrest and trial of the writers Andrei Siniavskii and Iulii Daniel’.<sup>56</sup> Yet characterizations of Vigdorova as a proto-dissident tend to overlook the centrality of her transcriptive style to her sanctioned journalistic practice. “Rights defenders” such as Ginzburg and Aleksandr Vol’pin transcribed trials, interrogations, and psychiatric evaluations as a means of confronting the state with its own violations of the legal code. In interpreting the law literally, as Benjamin Nathans has shown, they treated it as a fixed and logically coherent language that captured less the reality of experience in all its ambiguities than a utopian ideal.<sup>57</sup> “I am a formalist in questions of law and assign the highest significance to questions of formality,” Vol’pin wrote in an essay that appeared in Ginzburg’s volume.<sup>58</sup> Where Vol’pin and other rights defenders challenged legal practice by promoting a scriptural vision of the law, Vigdorova used her sanctioned journalism to construct an imagined courtroom rooted in subjectivity and orality. For her, it was precisely when individuals and institutions reified juridical form that reality was obscured, indifference set in, and legality and morality parted ways. Her transcriptive renderings of rituals of justice both exposed and modeled a journalistic alternative to the linguistic evasions and indifference that she believed to be plaguing Soviet society.

55. On the intelligentsia’s communication through “half-words,” see Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge, Mass., 1994), 1–2; on its assertion of a “behavioral code,” see Gilburd, *To See Paris and Die*, 105; on its “emotive-associational reasoning,” see Kozlov, *The Readers of Novyi Mir*, 63–65.

56. Aleksandr Ginzburg, ed., *Belaia kniga po delu A. Siniavskogo i Iu. Danielia* (Frankfurt am Main, 1967), 5. See also Rozenblium, “‘No ot znaniia do povedeniia tozhe est’ eshche put’,” 317.

57. Benjamin Nathans, “The Dictatorship of Reason: Aleksandr Vol’pin and the Idea of Rights under ‘Developed Socialism,’” *Slavic Review* 66, no. 4 (Winter 2007): 630–63.

58. Ginzburg, *Belaia kniga*, 401, translated in Nathans, “The Dictatorship of Reason,” 659. On Vol’pin, see also Rebecca Reich, *State of Madness: Psychiatry, Literature, and Dissent After Stalin* (DeKalb, 2018), 67–83.

The Brodsky trial notepad affirms this purpose even though Vigdorova never succeeded in publishing an associated article.<sup>59</sup> As in her earlier accounts, the notepad presents the state's campaign against social parasitism as a morally flawed effort to adjudicate morality. "And who enrolled you in the ranks of poets?" Vigdorova records the judge asking Brodsky. "No one," the poet responds. "Who enrolled me in the ranks of the human race?" Echoing Vigdorova's own criticisms, Brodsky mocks the court's bureaucratic language for its rigidity and insensitivity to "human" experience. The notepad then affirms the journalist's attentiveness to experience through another recorded exchange of utterances, this time between Vigdorova herself and a member of the audience:

"And what about you, the one taking notes? Why were you taking notes?"  
 "I'm a journalist. I write about education. I'd like to write about this too."  
 "But what's there to write about? It's all clear. You're all the same. I should take your notes away!"  
 "I'd like to see you try!"  
 "And you'll do what?!"  
 "Just you try to take them. You'll see then."<sup>60</sup>

Vigdorova asserts her jurisdiction over morality by underscoring her own personal witness. Yet she also delivers a pointed warning: if her voice cannot be silenced, it is because her higher courtroom belongs to posterity. Appealing to its future readers, journalism calls the law to account.

59. Vigdorova only produced a notepad about the Brodsky trial, but evidence suggests that she hoped to publish an article. Though Aleksandr Chakovskii, the editor of *Literaturnaia gazeta*, refused to accredit her for the trial, she appears to have tried to change his mind by sending him her notepad. On these events and for views on whether Vigdorova hoped to publish an article, see Olga Rosenblum, "The Defense Practice in the Case of Joseph Brodsky: Creating Principles," *Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej* 14, no. 3 (2016): 102; "O 'literaturnosti,'" 254, 258 n12, 275.

60. Vigdorova, "Sudilishche," *Ogonek*, no. 49 (December 1988): 26, 31.