

Textual Quilting and Subversive Re(-)collection: War & Feminine Discourse in Svetlana Alexievich's *The Unwomanly Face of War*

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Abstract

In her book *The Unwomanly Face of War*, Svetlana Alexievich presents a new way of writing; one which stands in contrast to previous works of war literature by narrating from beyond the confines of censorship and dominant discourse. The writer does not exercise full “authorship” over the story she tells; instead, she shares this role by piecing together interviews from women who had formerly served as soldiers in the Soviet army in order to create a larger narrative about the Second World War. One might describe Alexievich’s work as a kind “textual quilting”; she harvests individual first-hand accounts of war and then weaves them together in order to depict larger collective histories. This work highlights the characteristics which differentiate Alexievich’s work from traditional Soviet War Literature, thereby allowing for its classification as another distinct literary genre.

1. Introduction

In the words of the Swedish Academy, Svetlana Alexievich was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2015 “for her polyphonic writings, a monument to suffering and courage in our time” (“The Nobel Prize in Literature 2015 - Press Release”). Indeed, her works have been hailed as a “new genre”; one that narrates collective memory with an indulgent sincerity that is lacking in previous works of Soviet war literature. This is due in large part to the text’s composition; in all five of her books (*The Unwomanly Face of War*, *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from the Afghanistan War*, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, *The Last Witnesses: The Book of Unchildlike Stories*, and *Second-hand Time*), Alexievich tells her tale by piecing together selections from interviews she conducted herself, with the intent of presenting a group testimony of

certain key events in Soviet and Post-Soviet history. If most writers work with the written word as their smallest narrative unit in order to create a textual portrayal, Alexievich works with individual anecdotes and stitches them together in order to do the same, but on a grander scale. One might say that Alexievich engages in a form of “textual quilting”, incorporating as many voices into her narrative as possible in order to present complete, unaltered truths. As Alexievich words it in her Nobel Prize lecture, “In my books these people tell their own, little histories, and big history is told along the way” (“Nobel Lecture by Svetlana Alexievich”). Since Alexievich’s writing has not been filtered through dominant literary conventions, it has maintained several defining features which otherwise would have been cast to the wayside.

In the book *The Unwomanly Face of War*, Alexievich creates a work of war literature which stands in stark contrast to its predecessors. The imposition of Socialist Realism as genre by the Communist Party converted artistic expression into a medium for propaganda. As such, Soviet war literature, by nature, presented a “constructed” reality in which the atrocity of war was outshone by the heroism of Red Army soldiers, and the strong leadership of the Communist Party. The genre was male-dominated in sense of authorship and content, with few female writers composing war literature, and virtually no writers of either gender writing about female soldiers. Hence, by detailing the formula by which Soviet war literature was written (as well as its intended functions), the ways in which Alexievich’s narration are distinct from its predecessors become clear. Next, it becomes necessary to discuss the book within the context of feminist theory; not with the purpose of attributing these differences to gender per se, but rather to underline its

subversive qualities. Once these tasks have been accomplished, it becomes possible to attempt a classification of her genre; delineating its stylistic form and ideology.

2. Soviet War Literature: Literary Paternalism and Filtered Realism

In the case of her book *The Unwomanly Face of War*, an important question presents itself: how does this book compare against previous literary works from the Soviet Union which depict the nation's involvement in war? In order to appreciate Alexievich's contribution, one must first understand how the Great War was portrayed in literature previously. As such, it is crucial to consider her work against the backdrop of two genres: the first being "Soviet War Literature," and the second being "Socialist Realism". In his article "The Great Fatherland War in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russian Literature", Frank Ellis states that most Soviet war literature depicts two wars. He states:

The first war began on 22nd June 1941 when the German Army invaded the Soviet Union...this war ended on 9th May 1945. Strictly speaking, the second war began as soon as Lenin introduced Soviet censorship, though for the study of war literature we might take its first shots to have been fired in 1941. It entered its terminal phase with Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost*, which led to the formal abolition of censorship on 1st August 1990, ending, finally, in 1991 with the collapse of the Soviet Union. (612)

Similarly, as pointed out by Ernest J. Simmons in his book *Through the Looking Glass of Soviet Literature*, when discussing texts that focus on World War II, a distinction must be made between literature written during the war, and war-themed works written after

the war (24). Therefore, one must delineate textual features according to their respective time periods. One notable characteristic specific to the Soviet war literature which stood in contrast to Russian writers of previous eras was that it presented the image of the foe (the German Nazi) with a pronounced sense of hatred. In another article entitled, "Soviet War Literature", Simmons makes reference to the volume *The Great Fatherland War* (*Velikaya otechestvennaya voina*), remarking that "the dominant note that runs through nearly all the material is one of fierce, unmitigated hatred for the enemy", due to the brutality exerted on the Soviet people by the Nazis, as well as the extensive damage done by the German soldiers to Soviet buildings and property (253-254) Simmons writes that another typical aspect of the genre was that, much like Alexievich's work, it was composed of "straight eyewitness accounts of actual fighting, or short stories based on real incidents of the war" (253). He goes on to cite an example from Sholokhov's short story "Hate", in which the story's protagonist, a Red Army officer named Lieutenant Gerasimov, recalls his experiences during the war in first-person narrative. In Simmons' chosen selection from the story, Gerasimov describes the discovery of a dead body; it had belonged to an eleven-year-old girl who was raped and killed by German soldiers.

We covered the body with a cape and stood a minute or two by it without speaking. Then the men went away just as silently. But I lingered on, whispering over and over, I remember, in a sort of daze: "Barkov, Polovinkin. Physical Geography, reader for higher grade schools." It was the title of one of the books lying there in the grass. A book I knew, because my own little girl was in the fifth form. (qtd. by Simmons, 254)

It is clear that Sholokhov's text resembles Alexievich's in terms of its first person narrative, as well as its candid description of a horrific scene from the war. However, although presented as a first-hand account, it differs in that the story is a work of fiction, unlike the assembly of first-hand accounts collected through interviews by Alexievich. Despite this, one cannot deny their narrative similarity. Consequently, wartime poetry also possessed certain features which bore common themes with the *The Unwomanly Face of War*. According to Simmons, the Red Army soldiers that commonly appear in war poetry are not depicted as eager fighters, but rather as men eager to finish their duties on the frontlines and return to their jobs on the farm, in factories or in offices. He says: "They hate war, as Russians have always hated it. And with their strong desire to live and return is coupled a longing that what they have loved...may be waiting for them, perhaps to help them forget the horror of what they have been through" (257). Such representations of Red Army soldiers disappear in war literature after the end of World War II, when writers were once again subjugated to the terms of the Soviet government-endorsed genre, Socialist Realism.

As a genre, Socialist Realism emerged in Russia with the rise of the proletariat in the mid-1890s, and became the official genre sponsored by the Communist Party at the 1934 Congress of Writers (James 87). Simmons noted that from this point, an author would be expected "to present reality not as he sees it but as he understands it; and he is expected to understand it in terms of *partiinost'*, that is, the way the Party understands it" (*Russian Fiction and Soviet Ideology*, 3). After the end of the war in 1946, the Central Committee on literature discerned that literary portrayals of war should contain a pronounced anti-Western sentiment, as well as a glorification of Communist leadership in battle. As a

result, writers were compelled to adhere to Party policy in this regard, and write narratives which sung the praises of the Red Army and Communist wartime leadership.

(24)

In his article “The Great Fatherland War in Soviet and Post-Soviet Literature”, Frank Ellis elaborates on the Party’s influence in literature, stating that due to the censorship of the period, Soviet War Literature was written in a style that adhered to Marxist-Leninist sensibilities. Ellis explains: “The desired themes were: mass heroism; unflinching resistance; the total evil of the Nazis (or fascists, as Soviet propaganda dubbed them); the monolithic unity of party and people; Allied timidity and the extent to which the Western Allies could be trusted; war of liberation; and Stalin” (613). Since the Party’s focus was concentrated on the war effort between 1941-1945, war-themed literature written during this period was somewhat freer from the ideological constraints of Socialist Realism; conversely, post-war literature was expected to adhere to Party-endorsed themes with more vigilance. This is manifest in the Communist Party’s treatment of certain literary works before and after the end of World War II. One example which reflects changing Soviet literary sensibilities is Aleksandr Fadeev’s *The Young Guard* (1945), a story about young communist members of underground resistance in the Ukrainian town of Krasnodon. Due to its idealized portrayal of the young communists and appropriate demonization of the German enemy, the book initially won the Stalin prize in 1946; however, the Communist Party later decided that the book had inadequately credited them for their leadership role in the resistance movement. The book was revised accordingly and re-released in 1951 (Terras 589). Vasily Grossman is another example of a writer subject to the changeable favour of the Communist Party. His

novel *In a Good Cause* was initially met with positive reviews, but later on its second half was deemed ideologically problematic, which delayed its appearance until after Stalin's death in 1954 following considerable ideological modification. (589) Its sequel entitled *Life and Fate*, which apart from the progression of war on both Soviet and German sides also included items such as life in concentration camps and a Soviet gulag, as well as frank discussion of Soviet anti-Semitism, was censored by Soviet editors for its negative depiction of Soviet society under Stalin (589). These two examples typify the experience of the Soviet writer during the post-war period up until the 1980's, demonstrating the extent to which war literature was a creation of state and not writer. At the same time, Grossman's later works and similar ones by other authors would eventually emerge, challenging artificial grand narratives. What's more, although the genre of war literature was male-dominated (both at the level of author and text), there were female writers like Vera Panova, whose war novel *Fellow Travelers* (published in English under the title *The Train*) won her a Stalin Prize in 1947. Interestingly, the description of this novel in the book *A History of Russian Literature* suggests a similar shift of narrative focus to Alexievich. The book states:

It differs from the routine Soviet war novel in that it is concerned not with battle heroics but with the private lives and personal problems of the soldiers on the train...The private life of ordinary Soviet citizens seen from the inside of their minds remained Panova's subject in the works that followed. (591)

Indeed, Alexievich herself might attribute this characteristic to the fact that Panova, like herself, narrates from a feminine perspective. In the Preface of *The Unwomanly Face*

of War, she summarizes the ways in which women's narrations of war differ. She explains:

Women's stories are different and about different things. "Women's" war has its own colors, its own smells, and its own range of feelings. Its own words. There are no heroes and incredible feats, there are simply people who are busy doing inhumanly human things. (xvi)

Interestingly, this idea of gender distinction proposed by Alexievich is not without a historical precedent. In fact, this concept existed in Russia until the turn of the 20th century under another form of oral literature: narrative poetry. Although male and female genres both emerged from the same ancestor (the funeral lament), eventually women would sing laments (in Russian: *plachi*, *prichitaniia*, *prichity*), whereas men would sing string-accompanied epics (*byliny*). Both are forms of poetic narrative which are sung, possess nearly identical prosodic features, and contain tragic elements; however, laments frequently talk about the lives of the deceased, whereas the epic is a narrative about armed battle. (Kononenko 18-21) These characteristics could equally be used to justify a distinction between male and female accounts of war. However, the existence of such similarities is more indicative of perpetuated gender-based discourse, and at present offers little in the way of placing Alexievich's work within a historical vein of Russian feminine literature.

Also, to simply attribute these differences to the fact that the book is female-centered would be overly cursory. What's more, it would be more beneficial to assess how these differences destabilize discourse surrounding female gender roles, and expose

aspects of war which are lost when filtered through dominant political ideology by self- or externally imposed censorship.

3. War Shows Its “Unwomanly” Face: Subversive Feminist Literature

In her essay “‘Cement’ and ‘How the Steel Was Tempered,’” Thea Margaret Durfee analyzes the newly established Communist government’s views on gender roles following the Bolshevik Revolution, and how these views are reflected in the female protagonists in the two novels are mentioned in the title of her article. She says: “Leaders of the new government looked forward to a new equality for women in the workplace, home, and community. They envisioned a new Soviet woman, liberated from the oppressive structures of bourgeois life, who would become a fully contributing member in the political, economic, and social reconstruction of society” (89). The creation of the *Zhenotdel* (or Women’s Section) of the Party Secretariat in 1919 was to oversee this vision, and encourage Russian women to participate in the Soviet revolution; this was not only to help build a new Soviet nation, but also to overthrow the patriarchal structures that oppressed women (89). One might argue that it was the success of these early efforts that saw the female protagonists in *The Unwomanly Face of War* decide to enlist in the army and make their way to the Front to fight alongside their male counterparts. Despite this, Durfee remarks that the women portrayed in “Cement” and “How the Steel Was Tempered” possessed character traits which reflected that they were a product of the new ideological wave which accorded them “domestic liberties”, but at the same time were still contextualized within traditional gender roles, such as motherhood. Hence, the end result is what Durfee calls “an uneasy resolution of conflicting qualities” (101).

In fact, Alexievich's female protagonists also speak of their individual struggles with this conundrum: the dilemma over how to fulfill their roles as soldiers in spite of their desire to be feminine. The difference, however, is that while "Cement" and "How the Steel Was Tempered" are works of fiction with conjured female characters that represented a Soviet female ideal, *The Unwomanly Face of War* contained images of real women whose voices would have previously gone unheard beyond the defined boundaries of socialist reality; one, consequently, in which female soldiers did not exist. Scholar Louise E. Luke points out that Dasha, the female protagonist in "Cement", redefines her life along the principle that "woman's primary function is economic production and that wifhood and motherhood are accessory to that function" (Luke 39). If one accepts this statement as a loose definition of the Soviet woman's societal roles, then one can deduce that "soldier" would fall into an inconvenient grey area from the perspective of propaganda.

In this regard, the choice to document the female perspective in the form of an oral history is inherently subversive. In the case of *The Unwomanly Face of War*, this subversion not only occurs at the level of political ideology, but also at the level of gender discourse. (Indeed, one will notice that the book's preface documents the process by which Alexievich maneuvers around both of these structures.)

In her "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness", Elaine Showalter presents two diagrams, each representing a model of female culture; the first represents the Victorian model, in which the dominant male and subordinate female cultural circles are separate; the second, proposed by Edwin Ardener, depicts intersecting male and female circles that share an overlapped area within which male culture is "dominant", and female culture is

“muted”. There is also a part of the female circle that does not overlap with the male one, which Ardener labels as a “wild” space. Showalter declares that this space “must be the address of genuinely women-centered criticism, theory and art, whose shared project is to bring into being the symbolic weight of female consciousness, to make the visible invisible, to make the silent speak”, and from which, according to other feminist critics, “a woman can write her way out of the ‘cramped confines of patriarchal space’” (31). Upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that Alexievich navigates the second model, first by acknowledging and operating through dominant (male) discourse, then forging a similar textual apparatus for herself.

The first part of the book, entitled “From a Conversation With a Historian” details a conversation with an unnamed academic about the history of women in warfare. After two pages, she immediately follows with excerpts from her own journal, in which she not only documents her trains of thought regarding the writing of her book, but also her experiences collecting information from her interviewees. She entitles this part “A Human Being is Greater Than War.” The two titles comprise the book’s Preface, and are the only two titles that are not quotations selected from Alexievich’s interviews. She begins by taking possession of the task at hand: writing a book about war. She states:

I am writing a book about war...I, who never liked to read military books, although in my childhood and youth this was the favorite reading of everybody. Of all my peers. And this is not surprising – we were the children of Victory. The children of the victors...we didn’t know a world without war; the world of war was the only one familiar to us, and the people of war were the only people we knew. (xiii-xiv)

In this quote, she speaks in terms typical of Soviet ideological discourse, referring to the “Victory” (against the Germans), and acknowledging the extent to which war colored their everyday existence. She explains that in her village, women would be the ones from which she would hear about war (not men), and that half the books at the nearby library were about war (xiv). Alexievich reported that prior to her project, all the books she read about war were written by men about men. Whenever she revealed that she was writing about women’s experiences in the war, she was constantly met with male bias about the value and reliability of their accounts. She reports that many of the women even admitted to being coached by their husbands on how to talk about their memories, while others responded to her requests for an interview by saying that she needn’t focus on the “small details” (which Alexievich deemed a vital part of the female oral history) and to instead focus on the “great Victory” ever-present in dominant (male) political discourse (xxv). She gradually begins to include excerpts from interviewees’ oral and written accounts in order to transition to the main section of the book, which is nearly entirely made up of names, occupations, and pieces of personal stories, peppered with the occasional commentary from the author. She also includes conversations with the censor, who attempts to dissuade her, and criticizes her for not honoring the grandeur of the Victory, and instead devaluing the soldiers’ heroism by focusing on the obscenities of war. These conversations are a textual depiction of how female discourse creates friction with its male counterpart. Ultimately, she later includes items that were originally censored, as well as parts that she herself intended to leave out.

The remaining sections of the book are quoted directly from the interviews, symbolically giving nearly complete agency to the female soldiers themselves.

Alexievich usually introduces each chapter with a brief introduction of her encounter with the female soldiers as she encounters them in the present (and occasionally place her reflections at the end as well). She then proceeds to document their memories from the past. Dialogue in the present is italicized, and recollections from the past are left in regular print. Also, unless otherwise requested, the names and occupations appear above the stories so as to give each soldier agency in presenting their individual and collective histories. It is this type of polyphonic writing to which the Nobel Prize community referred to when awarding Alexievich with the prize.

A few recurring themes in the book as they pertain to war are: Encounters with Death, War as the Great Equalizer, Life During War, and Humanity. Death is present in different forms throughout the narrative, as soldiers refer to the loss of their comrades, their family members, people they met in passing, or even that of German soldiers. At times, they are the ones that are doing the killing. What makes it distinct from the death in male Soviet War Literature, which is depicted as an honourable sacrifice, these women speak of death as something tragic, revealing its effect on them mentally and emotionally. One army nurse, Anna Ivanivna Belyai, shares one recollection: “The battle ended during the night. In the morning fresh snow fell. Under it the dead...Many had their arms raised up...toward the sky...You ask me: what is happiness? I answer...To suddenly find a living man among the dead... (60)

The theme of “War as the Great Equalizer” is most explicit in the ways that the book depicts the topic of gender. In entering the male world of war, many of the women reveal the ways in which they would “suppress” their femininity, while others would reveal the ways in which they would allow it to emerge. Universally, they would all concur how

their female colleagues would successfully fulfill their roles as soldiers regardless of perceived gender differences and gender prejudice from their male counterparts. Air Force Captain Kalvdia Ivanovna Terekhova reveals: “We flew fighters. The altitude was terrible strain on a woman’s whole body...But our girls shot down aces, and what aces! You know, when we walked by, men looked at us with astonishment: ‘they’re women pilots.’ They admired us...” (56).

Another way this theme presents itself is through interactions with Germans. Although many expressed hatred towards the Germans, many expressed humane sympathy for some of them once they interacted with them, as seen in one anonymous account:

Two wounded men lay in my ward...A German and our badly burned tank driver. I come to look at them: “How do you feel?” “I’m all right,” our tank driver replies, “but he’s in a bad way.” “This fascist...” “No, I don’t know, but he’s in a bad way.” They were no longer enemies, but people, simply two wounded men lying next to each other. Something human arose between them. I observed more than once how quickly it happened... (Alexievich 127).

Much of what is recollected by these women are the details of everyday life, with war existing as a backdrop. This at times included love stories which resulted in marriage, loss and separation, or unrequited love. Another soldier, Sofya Krigel, recalls:

As we were leaving for the front, each of us gave an oath: there will be no romances there...At the front, love was forbidden. If the superiors found out about it, one of the couple as a rule was transferred to another unit. They were

simply separated. We cherished our love and kept it secret. We didn't keep our childish oaths... We loved... I think that if I hadn't fallen in love at the war, I wouldn't have survived. Love saved us. It saved me... (Alexievich 233).

One might say that these women's stories inserted the element of humanity, which in turn sheds doubt on the legitimacy of a force which can destroy life to such an extent. In short, female soldiers' narratives did more than simply offer stories which glorified the country's great Victory or incite awe or inspiration; they offer a complete portrait of a life lived among the atrocities of war, and the hope for a utopia that extended beyond Soviet borders. Quoting soldier Olga Vasilyevna, Alexievich writes:

We all imagined that after the war, after such oceans of tears, there would be a wonderful life. Beautiful. After the Victory... after that day... We imagined that all people would be very kind, would only love each other. They would all become brothers and sisters. How we waited for that day... (157).

Since these women are not bound by the same conventions that men were raised and groomed under, their stories are unadulterated, truthful, and emotional. The juxtaposition and layering of these stories contributes to an overarching female discourse which runs parallel to and simultaneously supplements thin male war narratives which underemphasize or omit certain details that are present in female versions of events. For this reason, a subversion of dominant discourse (male, Soviet, or otherwise) takes place with each account. This realization leads to one final issue; that of nomenclature.

4. Classifying Alexievich: Testimonial Literature? Or Literary Reportage?

Alexievich being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature marks a first for the literary genre in which she creates. The question is: how does one best classify this genre? Scholar Sonu Saini offers one possible classification in his article “Revisiting the World of 'Chernobyl' After the Nuclear Disaster Through 'Testimonials': An Analysis of "The Voices From Chernobyl: A Chronicle of the Future" by labelling it as testimonial literature. Citing scholar George Yudice, Saini makes this claim due to its use of first-hand accounts from people who witnessed war first-hand, usually taking the form of an oral history. In his article “Testimonio and Postmodernism”, Yudice further elaborates on the characteristics of the genre: “Emphasizing popular, oral discourse, the witness portrays his or her own experience as an agent (rather than a representative) of a collective memory and identity. Truth is summoned in the cause of denouncing a present situation of exploitation and oppression or in exorcising and setting aright official history” (Yudice 17).

Although Alexievich’s works include oral, first-hand narratives to bring to light the horrors of war, it may not be appropriate to classify *The Unwomanly Face of War* specifically as testimonial literature, since the events being depicted are no longer occurring in the present, and are instead invoked by memory. Also, since Alexievich is technically the author of the book, and it is she who harvests the interviewees’ stories rather than the interviewees presenting their stories directly on their own through a sense of “urgency”, then it is arguable whether or not this type of classification would be too farfetched.

A second possibility is offered by John C. Hartsock in his book *Literary Journalism Across the Globe*. The first chapter is dedicated to the topic of “literary reportage”, which

he aims to distinguish as a genre from “literary journalism.” He states that literary journalism is a narrative work which engages with what Mikhail Bakhtin refers to as “the inconclusive present”, and hence abstains from offering the reader closure in the form of political or ideological critique. (Hartsock 19) On the other hand, he points out that literary reportage may do the same, or else it may comment on a “distanced image of the past” that is complete, and thus elicit a particular response from the reader, giving it a characteristic “elasticity” (22). Thus, he asserts that Svetlana Alexievich’s style of writing would be classified under the latter. As an oral history of World War II transcribed in the written word, *The Unwomanly Face of War* is a narrative quilt composed of verbal accounts obtained by Alexievich through interviews with female former Soviet soldiers over a period of several years in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s. Since the author’s conversations with these women took place decades after the war ended, the subject matter most certainly adheres to that of a “distanced image.” In his article “The Literature in the Journalism of Nobel Prize Winner Svetlana Alexievich”, Hartsock says, “What makes reportage literature fascinating is precisely its ability to satisfy . . . different expectations, especially in that through its commitment to concrete experience it resists easy assimilation into the machines of propaganda” (46). Thus, the label of reportage literature may be applied provisionally until other works with the same framework appear, necessitating the need to reassess its suitability.

5. Conclusion: Something Old, Something New

With the publication of works like *The Unwomanly Face of War*, one must

recognize the fact that “Soviet War Literature” as a term has not encompassed all textual representations of what was commonly referred to as The Great Patriotic War. Traditionally, it has been a genre that has followed a specific propagandist formula which adhered to the conventions of Socialist Realism. Now that an increasing number of “atypical” war narratives have been published since the 1980’s, the question arises about whether to expand the scope of the genre, or simply use a different classification altogether. In the case of Alexievich, the latter appears to be more suitable. This is given that Soviet Literature was a product of that period; whereas, the publication and celebration of her work, which focuses on key periods of Soviet history, belongs to a genre which could not thrive during the period it discusses. In fact, *The Unwomanly Face of War* represents a turning point in that the documentation of collective memory in the former Soviet Union has gradually changed along with history. Thus, the texts that emerge out of this evolution are not “Soviet”, or even “Post-Soviet”, but rather something new and in-between. Hence, while scholars and non-scholars alike attempt to give these texts a name, it is sufficient in the meantime to simply acknowledge that Alexievich has succeeded in weaving together individual truths which combine to form one larger truth that is at once polyphonic and harmonic; tailored, but genuine.

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