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Reviews

***Avant-Garde Post–: Radical Poetics After the Soviet Union.* By Marijeta Bozovic. Harvard University Press, 2023. 320 pp.**

***The Freest Speech in Russia: Poetry Unbound, 1989–2022.* By Stephanie Sandler. Princeton University Press, 2024. 440 pp.**

Two major studies of contemporary Russian poetry, authored by prominent Slavic literature scholars (Marijeta Bozovic is a professor at Yale, and Stephanie Sandler holds an endowed chair at Harvard), have come out within a year of each other. Taking different approaches and addressing different scholarly and literary audiences, the two books nevertheless converge around certain points. Sandler's study is about a hundred pages longer than Bozovic's and covers significantly more ground, reflecting several decades of research and thinking about Russian poetry and some aspiration toward comprehensiveness. Bozovic's scope is smaller both chronologically and in terms of its subject, focusing on a primarily St. Petersburg-based experimental leftist scene. Still, the overlap is sometimes substantial: Prominent shared protagonists include Kirill Medvedev, Dmitri Golynko, Ketj Chukhrov, and Galina Rymbu. To the extent that books like these are in the business of canon formation, a consensus is evident.

Sandler and Bozovic can both be commended for taking on the tricky task of writing scholarly works about contemporaneity, but the exigencies of academic writing—its demand for coherence and conclusions—are such that they both attempt, as Kozma Prutkov put it, to contain the uncontainable: to represent individual, complex, and evolving poetic trajectories as part of a coherent system and even a political movement. A more unexpected point of overlap is an insistent and fundamental optimism (of the liberal and left varieties, respectively). This is surprising, considering Russia's social and political reality of the past decade and more; the surprise hits harder because of the slow pace of academic publishing and the fact that both books had to be partly and hastily revised following the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. The relentless consequences of that invasion have lent both books an unintended memorial function, which coexists uneasily with their qualified but still positive prognoses.

Avant-Garde Post– proposes that a loosely connected group of leftist poets, mostly from St. Petersburg and associated with the innovative literary and theory journal *Translit*, constitute a new vanguard that seeks to channel the

energy and vigor of the historical (and historically compromised) Russian avant-garde toward an updated and more palatable left agenda. Taking a position of defiant optimism, Bozovic makes her case to an international academic audience conversant in leftist theory—which likewise unites the heroes of her study. Many of the subjects of *Avant-Garde Post*—are fellow academics and scholarly interlocutors for Bozovic; they were transnational and cosmopolitan before Russia's war in Ukraine forced many more people to become that. Aware of the pitfalls of cherry-picking, glorifying, and exoticizing her subjects, Bozovic emphasizes the horizontal nature of her relationship to them—the ways that her study of their (often quite academic) work has shaped and informed her own scholarly foundations.

Bozovic's thorough introduction, with its brisk discussion of the debates about the concept of "avant-garde(s)" in art and literature, lays the foundation for six case studies of Russian or Russophone poets—Kirill Medvedev, Pavel Arseniev, Aleksandr Skidan, Dmitri Golyenko, Roman Osminkin, and Keti Chukhrov. The book closes with a coda dedicated to the feminist leftist poet Galina Rymbu. (Rymbu left Russia for Ukraine in 2018 and still lives there.) Each study introduces close readings of the writers' work, demonstrating their theoretical preoccupations and unique methods for engaging therewith via poetry and other media. In the chapter on Osminkin, Bozovic discusses his long-running dialogue and oedipal struggle with Dmitri Prigov, importantly observing that overall "the poetic praxes of the *Translit* school are post-Conceptualist in their political directness, yet reluctant to cede the sophistication and wit of Russian and international postmodernism" (184). Otherwise, Bozovic seems more interested in the social and political impact of her subjects' artistic statements in the present than in the way they fit into the literary history of the Soviet and post-Soviet periods.

The coda on Rymbu, whom Bozovic sets apart as "belonging to the future" with her distinctively (neo-)Romantic feminist politics and poetics, reveals a basic paradox of the book's subject: Most of the protagonists are poets because they grew up in the Soviet Union or during the immediate aftermath of its dissolution and inherited a model of intellectual and political activity in which poetry plays, or played, an outsize role (Arkadii Dragomoshchenko and Skidan are direct conduits to the legacy of Soviet underground or unofficial culture). Meanwhile, poets who aim to reach an audience in the post-Soviet period are moving into other genres: music (including guitar poetry), multimedia conceptual art, performance art and theater, and even just academic writing. *Radical poetics* is an apt designation for the work discussed in this book, but poetics is increasingly divorced from poetry per se.

Regarding the first part of the book's title, I kept hearing the catchy chorus to ex-Russian pop star Monetochka's 2018 ditty: "Yeah I'm oh so post-post, yeah I'm oh so meta-meta." This is not just free association: The song, written when Monetochka, born Elizaveta Gyrdaymova, was not yet twenty,

captures the precocious wit of an upwardly mobile generation moving, like Rymbu, from farther-flung locations to Moscow and St. Petersburg and navigating the two cities' labyrinths of social and intellectual capital. While surely not as well versed as Arseniev or Skidan in leftist theory, Monetochka expresses similar skepticism about intellectual trends ("Sartre's nothing special, there's no modernism anymore") and political protest in a world of post-meta rebellion ("Look out, state system, huff and puff, political bosses"). It's totally possible that the teenage Gyrdymova watched Osminkin's YouTube videos.

Indeed, Bozovic sometimes treats the heroes of her study in something of a vacuum: While she acknowledges the importance of performance and new media in the dissemination of their (ostensibly community- and audience-focused) work, she doesn't say much about its reception or resonance beyond academic responses. Within the deplorable conditions of wartime Russia, it seems even more important that "radical poetics" mean and function outside scholarly speculations. In this sense Medvedev, protagonist of Bozovic's first chapter, provides the greatest grounds for optimism (however slim): He left Russia after the full-scale invasion but returned in 2024 and continues his activity as a labor activist and frontman of the Arkady Kots socialist pop-punk band, thinking seriously about reaching working-class audiences as sites of potential political resistance. The reception and societal resonance of this kind of work—which, though grounded in poetry, goes far beyond the realm of poetry—is admittedly hard to track.

Sandler is a recognized authority on Russian poetry, having published for several decades on major figures of nineteenth-century Russian poetry and of contemporary Russian poetry. She coedited the monumental 2018 *Oxford History of Russian Literature* and is editor (with Catherine Ciepiela and Luba Golburt) of the forthcoming *Oxford Handbook of Russian Poetry*. I mention these details because they suggest a professional stature conducive to the production of ambitious and definitive, even sweeping, scholarly statements. *The Freest Speech in Russia* does not claim to be the account of Russian contemporary poetry, but its scope and framework suggest otherwise: The table of contents lists thirty-two poets, distributed across wide-ranging thematic categories, and Sandler mentions dozens of other poets in passing. While demonstrating contemporary poetry's great diversity of forms, media, and individual poetics, the book lacks a center around which they might all coalesce.

The book's unifying principle is meant to be freedom. In the introduction, "Thirty Years of Free Poetic Speech," Sandler draws on the work of Harvard colleagues Stanley Cavell and Svetlana Boym (among others) to define freedom as a guiding force for poets whose work covers a broad range of aesthetic and formal tendencies. The freedom she is interested in is a democratic political value activated through dialogue (if not the Marxist dialectic), and Sandler sees post-Soviet poetry as strongly oriented toward creating dialogue with readers and among poets (as well as with nature and God). She explicitly connects this

dialogic imperative—and the freedom it allegedly generates—to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the opening of political borders, as well as to the subsequent emergence in the 1990s of the internet as a tool for ever-broader access and contact.

While quoting unofficial poet Vsevolod Nekrasov's iconic 1963 "Freedom Is" poem, Sandler gives short shrift to the experiments of the Soviet-era literary underground, arguing that limited dialogue with audiences did not allow authors to imagine freedom for the civic body as a whole. This is a shame, since "freedom" in Sandler's sense of the word was incredibly meaningful for those Soviet citizens for whom it was a negative value—something to be longed for, along with other Western goods. Indeed, Sandler's use of the term often seems underpinned by this nostalgic notion (in the Russian and, once again, American context) of democratic, civic freedom, which from today's perspective really belongs to that late twentieth-century, late-Cold War moment—yet untainted by the neofascist, neoliberal, and technophilic strains that have inexorably diluted its more attractive meanings over the intervening thirty years.

As Sandler points out, Nekrasov's poem repeats the phrase *freedom is* until he arrives at an apparent tautology: Freedom is freedom. In the context of its writing, meanwhile, this poem implicitly contrasts a self-evident, essential (even transcendent) meaning of freedom to the unspoken but implied maxim of Marx and Engels: "Freedom is [the recognition of necessity]." The authorities tell us what freedom is, writes Nekrasov, but freedom is just freedom. Like "living language," I recognize it when I see it, but it can't be pinned down. This ephemeral notion is beautiful and clearly related to Sandler's framework, but as an organizing principle it is also very diffuse; as she writes of Nekrasov's freedom, it's "a fantasy no more real than the word that asserts its existence" (6).

The freedom thesis is meant to organize Sandler's wide-ranging narrative, which brings together new and previously published material on individual poets. Acknowledging, as Bozovic does with the leftists, how "Russian contemporary poetry" is a collective project containing multitudes, Sandler nevertheless gives pride of place to the figures she sees as demonstrating the practice of writing as freedom. Her choice of heroes includes public-facing poets like Elena Fanailova, Maria Stepanova, and Olga Sedakova, along with less internationally prominent but beloved figures like Fyodor Svarovsky and Vasily Borodin. Sandler also highlights the work of many Russophone poets writing outside Russia, including Lida Yusupova (Toronto), Anna Glazova (Hamburg), and Boris Khersonsky (Odesa). This work is discussed under the same thematic headings as work written in Russia, suggesting a unity of ethos and poetics across national if not cultural boundaries. This is uncontroversial in the case of, say, Glazova but vexed in the case of Khersonsky, who now writes in Ukrainian.

Sandler's narrative is unhurried and associative; freedom is often left on the back burner. A discussion of the distinctive strain of political and domestic

violence running through Fanailova's poems segues in the next chapter into how her long-running #Lysistrata cycle fits into internet poetics. Fanailova's tendency to work with poetic doubles then moves into a section discussing the "doubled performances" of poets reading, interpreting, and embodying each other's work. Sandler's poetic erudition turns up unexpected points of convergence, like that between Fanailova and Anna Akhmatova, each of whom undertakes large-scale long-term accounts that bridge feminine experience and political, antiwar opposition. The chapter on music moves from Joseph Brodsky's love of jazz through Chukhrov's leftist oratorios and Borodin's mesmerizing minimalist busking (as in Bozovic's book, music is treated not as a competitor to poetry but as part of a complex multimedial artistic practice).

Sandler thus introduces a wealth of names and poems to English-language readers, with many poets translated into English for the first time on these pages. Her selections and close readings are deft and often enlightening, and she uses good translations (her own and others') of the poems quoted. Still, if Bozovic's book straightforwardly seeks to acquaint Anglophone leftist intellectuals with a group of their Russian counterparts, it is less clear whom Sandler's book addresses. On Facebook the Russian poets themselves reacted to the table of contents as a who's-who list, debating the relative merits of who was included, left out, mentioned but briefly, and so on—but they are not the intended audience. It's hard to imagine a similar attempt to map thirty years of "poetic speech" in a US context, except perhaps as an anthology. The field is too large and the protagonists are too varied and unpredictable—they consistently burst out of the thematic and formal boxes to which they are assigned (as Sandler herself often acknowledges). It's really a book of linked essays on the many poets that Sandler admires and has spent decades thinking about—but with few points of entry for readers (especially students) who aren't already familiar with the context.

The elephant in the room for both studies is, of course, Russia's ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine and the resulting physical and psychic fragmentation of poetry communities. Bozovic's book came out in the fall of 2023, by which point only one of her protagonists, Skidan, was still in Russia (Medvedev returned to Russia in the fall of 2024, but has since left again). Bozovic's assertions of these poets' imminent rise to greatness—founded on their popularity abroad as well as their status in Russia—sound more uncertain for people struggling with the everyday difficulties and indignities of émigré life or, in Skidan's and especially Medvedev's case, with the real threats of censorship and political persecution. Medvedev's departure from Moscow in spring 2025 followed a Moscow bookstore's forced cancellation of the launch of his book *Antifascism for Everybody*; the bookstore and its owners now face charges for displaying and selling books with "undesirable" content. In February 2025 the popular, openly antiwar poet Vera Polozkova was declared a terrorist, meaning that her books will be removed from Russian shops and libraries and that sharing her texts may be considered a criminal act.

As someone closely involved for nearly two decades with contemporary Russian poetry (as a translator, scholar, and friend), I find myself utterly unmoored by the present moment. Three years into the war, Russian contemporary poetry as represented by the communities Bozovic and Sandler write about has, effectively, come to an end. To be sure, people are still writing poetry in Russian—in Russia, in actively forming émigré communities scattered around the world, and of course on the internet—but the circumstances that gave rise to phenomena like the St. Petersburg bohemian leftists of the first two decades of this century or to unifying platforms like Avtornik, Project OGI, and OpenSpace have become history. State persecution has gone hand in hand with a lack of support (popular and financial) for “niche” cultural activities, and communities have been divided by both physical and ideological estrangement. Perhaps this is a grim boon to scholars—it is always easier to write about people and things that are dead. Still, most of the protagonists in these books are alive and active; indeed, many of them are now drawing on the suddenly relevant experience of unofficial and émigré writers of the Soviet period. They may have little freedom, but somehow they are still writing, and we are still reading.

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