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KIRILL MEDVEDEV AND ELENA FANAIOLOVA: POETRY, ETHICS, POLITICS, AND PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract

This essay argues that the categories of lyric utterance, subjectivity, and political insight have been rethought and reinvented by contemporary Russian poets, focusing on the exemplary work of Kirill Medvedev and Elena Fanailova. Their poems show how the category of the everyday is a scene where political meanings can be discerned: poems can be built out of rather ordinary encounters and experiences. Fanailova and Medvedev seek to make visible previously unnoticed aspects of experience, and to engage in forms of political speech based on personal interactions, economic transactions, and sexual encounters. The essay draws on theoretical work that ties poetic subjectivity to an emerging idea of freedom (Jacques Rancière), or that links personal evolution to ethics (Stanley Cavell).

Keywords: *Lyric Poetry; Political Poetry; Kirill Medvedev; Elena Fanailova, Ethics; Gender*

We begin in summer, 2013, when Moscow mayoral candidate Aleksei Navalny was sentenced to five years imprisonment for financial improprieties. The irony of charging Navalny with a version of the very corruption he had been fighting was not lost on thousands who protested the conviction. Navalny

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hoped that his courage at trial would be inspiring.¹ His hope is based on a core political belief: that it matters when individual persons behave with integrity and courage in public contexts. That translation between private conviction and public behavior will resonate with a great deal that follows in this essay about two contemporary poets. But Navalnyi's most memorable political act was a single phrase that became a rallying cry: he called Putin's United Russia the party of swindlers and thieves ("партия жуликов и воров").

These resonant words took back the language of public discourse, and they redirected Soviet traditions of name-calling back at the post-Soviet state. They showed that words, like deeds of personal courage, could also matter. And so it happened that the poet and activist Lev Rubinshtein, in a response to the Navalnyi verdict, referred to the linguistic dilemmas it created. Rubinshtein wrote on Facebook, 18 July 2013:

Самая на сегодняшний день трудная творческая задача – это поиск нормативных слов и выражений, способных хоть сколько-нибудь адекватно описать ощущения от происшедшего.²

(Today's most challenging creative problem is the search for normative words and expressions able to describe with even remote adequacy the sense of what is going on.)³

How indeed to find words and terms with which to register reactions to the political situation in Russia?

One way to understand poetry is as such a search – for forms of linguistic expression that can fix in the mind and convey to others the impact of social experience. As much as ever, today's Russian poets are outspoken and free in their acts of public speech. Defying traditions that rely on self-consciously literary language, some leading poets have used the speech patterns of daily life to craft an effective, expressive form of poetic discourse to speak, in the largest possible terms, of freedom. One can better understand that choice by returning to Rubinshtein's reactions to the Navalnyi trial and sentencing. Here is a comment he offered only slightly later, on the website *Colta*:

Первая реакция исключительно эмоциональная у меня – как и у очень многих. Я уже написал в Фейсбуке, что сейчас самая трудная творческая задача – найти нормативную лексику для описания своих ощущений. Вот многие сейчас говорят и пишут: "А чему вы удивляетесь? Вы же с ними давно имеете дело – и до сих пор всему этому удивляетесь? Хватит уже удивляться!" Я с этим не согласен. Надо обязательно удивляться. "Они" делают все, чтобы мы перестали удивляться. Смирились – и, как в том старом анекдоте,

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