

A Crowd of One's Own

By Jenya Krein

It is an open secret that we all write for one's own crowd, being it a crowd of two or a crowd of many. Margarita Meklina, undeniably, has a crowd of her own. Her Russian reader is on a younger side, exposed, rebellious and marginal. I also suspect that her reader is bilingual, as the writer is bilingual herself. And now I am wondering who is her new American (or just English-speaking) reader might be.

If a writer is fluent in more than one language, the unexpected becomes the norm. The unexpected and the fluid. Because this fluidity is a byproduct of multilingual ability. Why? Maybe the mere juxtaposition of languages and ways of perceiving—and the lens becomes almost undetectable. Clear, clearer, invisible.

That is the case with Margarita Meklina who operates in a variety of settings, being it a gloomy, potent with culture and history St. Petersburg's Russian scene, Californian elegance, or Italian richness and style. Winner of the 2003 Andrei Bely Prize, Russia's first independent literary prize, which has a special repute for honoring rebellious and nonconformist writing, and the 2009 Russian Prize, which was awarded by the Yeltsin Center Foundation for her manuscript *My Criminal Connection to Art*, Margarita (Rita) Meklina is widely traveled and as nearly as much extensively published in her native Russian language. Originally from St. Petersburg, Russia, she resides in the San Francisco Bay Area, where she enjoys her connections in the literati milieu and also known in the art community.

For us, those who read her texts in both languages, Russian and English, the experience is somewhat puzzling. Who is doing what? The Russian writer Meklina who informs the style of the English-writing author, or is it the language itself that dictates her to create this new persona and style?

Meklina, undoubtedly, is a product of her generation and time, but her voice is unmistakably distinct and powerful. She is her own writer. Over the years, we, the Russian audience, were cautiously

watching (through the agency of her texts) her emergence, as if rising from a brush, prickly young aspiring writer willing to decree her point of view and impose her style, though informed richly by generations of writers (and bilingual writers at that), but inherently her own, pervasively, stubbornly, unflinchingly her own, shaped by the time of her emergence and by fighting forces of historical, political, and social nature.

She came onto the Russian literary scene through the web and the new generation of writing supported by the Internet liberation from everything old and outdated. And she did come out in a very muscular way. It is curious to use this language; both the *masculinity* of her writing and the term *came out* in connection to Meklina, knowing that she writes for mainstream as much, as she does in LGBT themes. As a matter of fact, she did make a name in the then extremely marginal gay and lesbian literary scene. It has to be said that this particular scene always claimed her, and many believed that it was responsible for carrying her through and making her into someone with a name, style and her own distinct voice. This terminology does not apply easily to a female writer, and a Russian writer at that. Especially, knowing Russian literary milieu (and I predict that many will disagree).

Her connection to Arkadii Dragomoshchenko, Russia's leading founder of Russian branch of Language poetry, was timely and only logical, taking into consideration his underground activities and location (Leningrad). In turn (but much earlier), Dragomoshchenko's acceptance into American literary scene was assured by his collaboration with and translation of his poems by Lyn Hejinian. The American Language poets, who were in awe with the bravery and spirit of Russia's literati breaking with the traditional communal state of being, who were willing to channel the subjective into the world that was ever only ready to accept the objective, embraced these brothers in poetry. "Subjectivity is not the basis for being a Russian person. Our independent separate singularity can hardly be spoken of, but many people wish it," cited Hejinian remembering Dragomoshchenko [i].

This subjectivity is the state of Meklina's writing. If anything, it is as subjective as the writings of Anaïs Nin, and it was relatively novel to the Russian reader. But her work with language and text is also important to the new Russian market, especially coming from a female writer.

Margarita Meklina is a very brave woman. She is the cool Russian-American girl, she is the darling of those looking out of Russian window gazing with an age-old longing into the still forbidden West, looking for freedom or escape from Russian realities. She writes about things that no other female writer was willing to write on a level she is willing to. The Russian writing female was traditionally disinclined to expose her inner self on such a level. Still, she is reluctant to share her real self by experiencing any traditional female feelings through her texts. What I am trying to say here, Margarita comes across almost as if adorned by a male charisma; the authoress Meklina dissects her characters and situations without much of traditional (and expected) female sensibilities. Her passions (in her Russian texts) resemble cold flames. The best she can offer is the feeling of incredulity or detached contempt. Don't take me wrong, Meklina is full of passion, but her passions are entangled in words. She works with language, and I suspect that she identifies with language, using it as a tool, canvas, and a smoke screen. And she has a very special thing for facts. It's fascinating to see how this almost scientific interest goes hand in hand with her vision of reality that often becomes surreal and metaphysical. As if in her texts, it seems that Meklina feels as if in the physical world the events and people are interrelated. The way words are tightly connected to meaning, place in the sentence, and each other. It seems that for Meklina, the reality is one enormous text where the textual rules become the real life laws. She is frequently blamed for coldness and aloofness, as if divorced from feeling. Her reader is often confused by the distance created by her clever texts and style. What is also confusing is her want of judgment, as if she is just a witness to reality, Camusian style.

But the new English-speaking persona that takes over her writing is surprisingly fresh and distinctly different from what we've learnt to expect. Take, for example, her novella "*Numbers*" that was recently published in the "*The Cumberland River Review*", a quarterly online publication of poetry, fiction, essays, and art, produced by the department of English at Trevecca Nazarene University, in Nashville, Tennessee. (Not to mention the Nashville sitcom that the public enjoys presently, there is nothing country-like in Meklina's prose that is refined, carefully thought out, and not to say snobbish, but surely enjoys somewhat Newyorkian highbrow style.) In the new novella Meklina emerges as a confident writer, but her voice is rather different from her usual self we've learnt to know so well. If it has anything to do with the language switch, I

need to say that Margarita's voice is stronger, as if the language conversion effort improves her style. But we do know, those of us writing and speaking in a variety of languages that you gradually learn to "fit" into your English persona, the same that with time will become your alter ego, your second self.

The name of the main character (and novella is written in a first person) is Rita, which is short for Margarita. And she is playing with the sound, with Lolitian connotation, with her Russian identity. She is there, but there she is not:

I have no colorful details in mind, only her name: Olga, Olga, that's what I repeat at night when I fall asleep, I repeat her name, "Olga," and hope that the God of inspiration will bring some idea to my mind overnight... I repeat "Olga, Olga," and I start crying, and I think that my name is Rita and it's a typical Italian name, it's not Russian, and I know that Rita must survive these difficult times despite the fact that Olga is dead.

My guess is that *the numbers* in Meklina's novella represent the symbols in our collective and individual lives. Symbols that create myths and allow us to go on, in spite of cruelty, injustices, and, often, meaningless waste of these lives. In spite of death and loneliness. Writing, art, myths are these symbols that allow us to survive and endure.

Meklina's prose is metaphysical in a way that she sees her world as in a fluid dream, where everything and everyone are interconnected, things and people, life and death, thoughts and outcomes, desires and reality. The way she writes as one would write by perfecting the art of an essay. But the five paragraph rule becomes the many words rule, where she is stringing her syllables and sounds as if creating a new language.

If she was not a prose writer, she could have been a poet, like her pen friend, Arkadii Dragomoshchenko, so acutely aware her writing of the sound and rhythms of written words. She repeats exasperatingly that she is tired to be compared to Nabokov, she is her own writer. But Meklina knows all too well what exactly she is doing when she is doing it. It is a flattering and important comparison, and she explores it, but with as much sincerity as the text allows her.

What she writes about is dislocation, displacement from self, from the world around us, from the ever changing society that never really changes enough to gratify our inner need for acceptance and connection. She writes about human soul that is trapped in a strange world and in even stranger body that has cravings, which are never completely satisfied. In “*Numbers*” she writes:

I think I should write a short story about Olga; I just need to find a detail that will be so memorable that her face will stand out before the reader. But I don't know what to describe besides her black outfit hardly visible on the playground, masked by green and lush foliage... What details should I emphasize?

This is Meklina for you: she is looking for a perfect detail to come alive, but is serving the dish concocted on her own terms.

Russian women and Russian female fiction might mean many different things, but the key word here is female, and what is traditionally female in Russia, might very well seem conservative and past present in the English speaking world. It might mean emotional, irrational, flighty, non-manly and many other different things. I do not think that the mainstream Russian literature is ever free of its nomenclature nature. It applies heavily to the female writing. Caesar's wife should be above suspicion. Off course, it needs to be said here that the traditional Russian female role is being challenged as we speak, and all sort of riots are on the way, but the Great Russian Literature, as a last bastion of conservatism and traditionalism still stands its ground.

What I mean here, is the Russian traditional female role, the Russian female writers who are willing to write cleverly, heavily, philosophically, even metaphysically and gloomily (yours truly including). But, God forbids, if we come out as muscular or daring. In spite of even Tsvetaeva, who was muscular (and I understand that people will shower literary stones on my female head). The woman-writer or poet for that matter should be stately, queenly, Akhmatesque.

Still, her themes are universal; she is a humanist of a peculiar kind: she is convincing you while alienating her reader by throwing him into the desolate and marginal world of the other, neglected and

despondent. She is a kind of advocate, which is how she is viewed in the Russian literary world. It does not mean that she advocates for the “alternative” lifestyle. What her writing is saying, is on a much deeper level that is well known in America, but is still new in Russia: live and let live.

And I think it would be improper and untruthful to avoid the fact that in “*Numbers*” Meklina writes about young Jewish girl, about Anti-Semitism and ostracism. She writes about these much touched upon themes in a very unsentimental way, which is refreshing in itself.

She stays detached, the way we know she writes in Russian. And substance that feels this gap between self and reality is writing. Using her well established “scientific” Russian writing method she arrives to some interesting results. For example, the object naming.

Naming objects is a sort of tribute to people who were tragically sacrificed in the name of politics and universal madness. How otherwise can you approach this subject, with what emotion? Emotion that, in any case, would be smaller and incomparably less significant? The only sane approach is to stay on top of any kind of feeling. That is what we do when unable to deal with facts. So, the naming goes: bowls with gold, jewelry, material things that outlived people.

The main character, Rita, says that these are “useless things without words behind them”. And then she explains that the words mean the world to her. The lover of words, who is, possibly, deeply traumatized by her childhood drama, is able to survive only through these words, recreating the reality of her own, rebuilding the world that is safe, and just, and intimate—in a dramatic contrast to the world of the historical drama that unfolds around her. And then, at the very end of novella she seem to suggest that the words will save the world that is otherwise doomed to be destroyed by unmentionable forces.

These forces never really come to life, except through some third party reflections. And the only forces that shape the heroin's world are the silent, compliant, enabling neighbors, your regular good people, the law abiding citizens. Her unemotional, aloof way of describing the events leading to the ultimate distraction reminds me of *Jay Parini's "Benjamin's Crossing"* descriptions from the diaries of French Jews.

In a similar way, Rita's estrangement from the real life outside of her home could be compared to Walter Benjamin's philosophy of subjectivity: by claiming that the things without people who owned them have no

meaning ("no words behind them"), she claims that history and culture are no longer objective. That is a very popular view in the post-modernistic literature (that in a way is a product of post-Holocaust era with its rationalizations instead of explanations you would get from a classical read).

In this post-Nietzschean world, the idea of God does not do anything for the universal culture, and the idea of Man, human, is also dead:

I know that my only value is my talent with words... If I don't practice it and don't hone it to become a writer like those published by Fratelli Scarfati, then I will be like everybody else; I know that if I don't have my own very special words to speak to readers whom I will never meet, then I will share everybody else's fate and be doomed.

... As if trying to say that the only way we could be saved is by writing, which (in her case) is not destructive, not like all the machinery and technology of the mass-killing age.

I think what she does, while attempting to make "an elegant story" out of sheer madness and ugliness in her effort to find an "overall design" for these lunacy and evil, is, in effect, a very clever way of connecting to the more "elegant or civilized age," the age when educated Europe used to appreciate culture and style and believed in humanity. This faith in humanity is irrevocably lost. The only thing, it seems (according to Meklina), that is still capable to record and convey in a way humans no longer able to is art.

And her ephemeral, lame (one leg is shorter than the other), vegetarian heroin is a perfect metaphor for the European intellectual thought that was unable to withstand the full blooded assault of plebeian, *lumpen* masses that took over the world without much regard for arts and, as it turned out, fragile humanism.

She links the writing life with life itself, and that is the depth of her personal disclosure and idealism:

Yet, together with a few necessities, I was able to sneak in pencils and notebooks, and I force myself to write. I try to be oblivious to the misery and awful things around me, because I have to focus on literature, and I believe that since I was given this gift as a writer—a gift even more individual and intensely personal than objects with stories behind them—I will survive as long as I write.

Perhaps the fluidity of language or, maybe, the new persona that takes over Margarita Meklina's writing life allows for the final transformation. We, the bilingual crowd, the former idealists and outcasts from our mystical and metaphysical Petersburg, get the reward of Rita's deep and all too human emotion. Perhaps, it's just her maturity as a writer and a woman that takes over the young bravura of rebellious Meklina. At the end, her prose is heartbreaking:

And then I wrote a number on my hand, the number of the hook on which I was supposed to find my clothes when I came back from the shower, clean and ready to complete my story, and now I knew exactly what my story would be. My story would be about numbers, about Olga's pages in a children's book, and these numbers on the hook, the number of hope that gives meaning and logic to human existence, the number that allows them to survive because they can return to their clothes after showering. I realized that my story will be about these numbers and about hope, and that there was even some kind of memorable detail worthy of literature: showers in the ravine, showers we didn't see yet but that we envisioned in our hopes to be clean and to return from there, from that strange looking ravine where clean water was waiting for us. And I realized that these hooks on wooden planks with numbers were something really strange, something totally different, something that I could link to the story of Olga and her numbers on the pages of her favorite children's books, and now, at this moment, I realize that I will live and that I'll survive these hard times, because my talent has been unleashed and because I have in mind the whole story and am ready to complete it once I come back.

The writing activity in itself is an exercise in solitude, often producing the state of loneliness the born writer would deny fervently (the choice of words is important—the author might be lonely initially, but views it more as a blessing and craves the state to immerse oneself into his/her practice). The bohemian existence of the famed underground Leningrad writers, poets, artists, and just followers (who were often the minds of the

resistance to the Russian and, especially, Soviet group mentality, the famous kitchen thinkers) was far from the above mentioned solitude. I cannot deny that the members of these groups were sometimes very singular, odd individuals, lonesome and, perhaps, mentally fragile; but the lifestyle was far from being solitary. The way of that life was very social in a very special way. It was mostly the activity of hanging out, talking, drinking, and going places together in a group.

Coming back to the literary circles of the then Leningrad and its underground scene, Margarita inherits the romanticism and the idealism of that literary crowd. It is a very specific form of romanticism which is informed by imperfect reality and particular kind of precision. Margarita's world is packed full with outcasts, weird and eccentric individuals with tragic dispositions and fates. Her characters behave irrationally sometimes, following some inner logic we yet to understand. Her *strangeness* could be traced back maybe to the young Borges, her peculiar detachment from the world around her to Vonnegut, but her language is exact and tightly knotted in a very postmodern way. Reading her Russian text you might have said that she is trying too hard if her bizarre plots and characters did not reflect the intricate language. She is frequently blamed for oversexed texts that depict sexual scenes in a surgical-like precision, as if divorced from feeling and female sensuality. Her reader is also often confused by the distance created by her clever texts and style. What is also puzzling is her want of judgment, as if she is just a witness to reality, Camusian style.

She was born in Leningrad, known for its bohemian idealism. The Soviet Leningrad (or, rather yet, Petersburg, embedded in our psyche so deeply) always represented the immaterial idea of worshiped by the Russian intelligentsia Europe, the kind of Europe that never really existed. The libertarian, ephemeral, refined, and intellectual Europe, this unattainable ideal for everything that was non-Russian and non-Soviet, was rigidly balanced by pochvenniki [ii] who represented everything that was non-bohemian and absolutely non-European.

We lived and breathed these ideals, and, emerging from Russia, we are still plagued by the notion of a better life that is represented not by material possessions, but through our yearnings and longings for the crowd of our own, for the crummy Leningrad's kitchens packed full with brothers and sisters in arts and ideals. This is

pure mythology in the making. And as such, we are doomed to contribute and create the intangible that is, in a long run, might be more valuable than any earthly possession. In the fluidity of language, in the ambiguity of our uncertain time, in the permeable nature of changing cultures.

And what I mean is mythology, symbolism, linguistic and writing ability, history; everything that is fluid, that transcends borders, mentalities, perception screens; such as forces of immaterial nature, the cultural winds that might yet transform Russia, and Europe, and America.

But here I will have to bite my bilingual tongue. Since many were called, and many have tried, and many have come, but Russia, the old Mother Russia, still stands in all its conservative swampy, rigid, old glory.

Margarita Meklina and some limited number of bilingual writers who inform both languages will keep on trying. The outcome is yet to be seen.

So, we will try, our tongues, flapping furiously in languages, will stir the cultural wind. And the words will trickle through. But will it change anything?

[i] Powers of Possibility: Experimental American Writing since the 1960s By Alex Houen

[ii] Men of the soil, originally the nineteenth-century thinkers who advocated Orthodoxy and Russian peasantry traditions and who believed that Russia needed to follow its own organic path, rather than adopting western models of life.

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