

## NOTES AND COMMENTS

### On Kirill Medvedev

The Russian poet and activist Kirill Medvedev renounced all copyright to his works in 2004. Since then, his main publication outlets have been LiveJournal and Facebook, and his frequent poetry readings have been replaced by one-man political demonstrations. An avowed Marxist, Medvedev is the founder of a left-wing political party and editor and publisher of a left-wing press whose distribution was initially limited to a duffel bag. On the face of it, he appears to be a self-publishing crank of the kind commonly ignored in the United States, but his unusual approach establishing the greatest possible intellectual autonomy is relevant to the situation of US writers. His essays delimit positions that might insulate producers from the corrupting forces of politics and the marketplace.

A selection of these postcopyright publications appears in *It's No Good*, a book-length collection of his poems, essays, and reports of political actions. The volume, issued under the joint imprint of *n+1* and *Ugly Duckling Presse*, is edited and translated by Keith Gessen with the assistance of Mark Krotov, Cory Merrill, and Bela Shayevich. In his introduction, Gessen argues that Medvedev's world is a darker version of our own. Politically, both Russia and the US face a convergent far-left and far-right critique of the established order; a long-running war on terrorism reviled by ineffectual liberals; and a self-identified middle class in sympathy with the goals of wildly powerful economic elites. Russian writers and artists, in Medvedev's view, cynically pursue money or institutional position, are crippled by nostalgia for the aesthetic achievements and political significance of the historical avant-gardes, or become sunk in a postmodern, postconceptual quagmire.

The publication of the essays affords a view of Medvedev that might be obscured in a typical poetry collection. His poems are composed in a prosaic free verse inspired by his acknowledged master Walt Whitman, as well as Charles Bukowski, whom Medvedev has translated into Russian. The verse deals with everyday concerns, and in the context of contemporary American poetics, there is little, aside from the Russian locales, to mark the work as foreign. One feature of the poetry is unusual, however: Medvedev's poems speak directly about his poetic contemporaries, and his withering candor goes well beyond gossip—and beyond what could be considered good form in any literary culture.

Medvedev can write freely about his contemporaries because he is

prepared to foreswear the status or material advantages they might offer him. This renunciation of personal advancement is central to his self-understanding as an intellectual, one of a group “who see their duty in a disengaged critique of Authority, in a non-identification with any official discourse.” Medvedev’s idea of the amateur does not imply an unsullied state or private communion with the Muses. He makes sustained, heavy criticism of the ideology of the writer as a private creator, typified in Russia by Joseph Brodsky. Pure, personal disinterest is both impossible and undesirable, and famous writers who pretend at privacy play into the depoliticizing tendency of liberalism. Rather, renouncing the material rewards of writing is a way of standing outside of the compromising institutions of the literary and political world so that they can be seen clearly. Being an amateur frees one of any debts, and provides a free hand for intellectual combat.

Obviously many American writers have, like Medvedev, protected the integrity of their work by finding some other way of making a living; the troika of Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, and T. S. Eliot spring to mind, though these writers very much thought of themselves as private rather than political individuals. Perhaps more important have been the countless editors of innovative little magazines, who often display an indifference to wealth and position as well as strong aesthetic and political commitments. Many of the most important outlets for innovative writing have been amateur productions—short-lived, unprofitable, produced by volunteered labor and donated text. At a moment when many serious writers burrow into the academy or chase after the scraps available in America’s largest cities, it is worth remembering that this third way exists and has always existed.

Of course, it is important to recognize the peculiar circumstances that grant Medvedev both autonomy and visibility. Before he retreated to blogs, he was well known in Russian poetry, in no small part because of the literary patronage of Dmitry Kuzmin, a translator, poet, and critic, an editor of two journals, a newspaper, and a publishing house, whom Medvedev calls an “engineer of literary life.” The lengthy essay “Dmitry Kuzmin: An Essay-Memoir” describes a form of cultural autonomy not grounded in amateurism: Kuzmin maintains an absolute aesthetic pluralism, Medvedev argues, a “total ecological approach” to writing that is “in part a rejection of individual taste.” This approach requires an editorial practice almost unknown in the US—complete, permanent immersion in the literary world. While Kuzmin reads slush and actively searches for new writers on small blogs and at obscure readings, the screening of new work here is deputed to platoons of interns. Supposing any of our established editors ever encountered an unknown writer, it is unlikely that they would stake their reputation on that writer as Kuzmin did on Medvedev and many others. Kuzmin’s synoptic view of

Russian letters affords him freedom from the parochial commitments and concerns of any given movement or position, and this impersonal vantage gives wide credibility to his endorsements of new work. Though Kuzmin is undoubtedly an elite, somebody like him could be a great equalizer in American letters. A powerful editor with a total indifference to pedigree or geography might identify many worthy writers who find themselves barred from the American literary field, which is structured rigidly by networks of personal connections built in universities or local scenes. Medvedev ultimately finds fault with Kuzmin's approach, despite its superficial similarities to his own intellectual freedom: the view that good work can come from any aesthetic position also depoliticizes art and aligns easily with Vladimir Putin's neoliberal project. It is no coincidence for Medvedev that Kuzmin's own politics have drifted to the right.

In a liberal society like the US, there is a danger that Medvedev's work will not appear political at all: Marxist postures are common in American letters, and the renunciation of copyright can appear as a gesture of personal purity in a literary culture driven by the pursuit of money or prestige. Likewise, he could be branded as one more figure in the endless succession of "dissident" Russian writers who remind Americans of the "power of literature" without requiring any uncomfortable reflection on the American situation. Yet for those who are paying attention, Medvedev's writing offers a strong provocation: facing the cronyism and growing authoritarianism of post-Soviet Russia, he shows, again and again, that intellectuals are not primarily pitted against the state. First and foremost, intellectuals struggle to cultivate disinterest, which requires resisting baser desires for wealth, position, or esteem. These desires lead to compromise, whether by gradual habituation to mediocre art institutions or by counterfeit, apolitical intellectualism. Given the ever-permuting circumstances confronted by intellectuals, the task is not to endorse a certain kind of politics, but to make politics happen in a complacent world.

Ben Merriman