Review on Elena Fanailova

The interesting aspect of Elena Fanailova’s work in the context of today’s discussion is that it covers several decades which makes it possible to see the development in her work. A development is to be expected, as she considers her task as a poet to ‘register [the ‘aktual’nost’ (capacity to react to historical changes that happen every ten to twenty years)] in language.’[[1]](#footnote-2) The question that arises would be whether her poetry has shifted in style, in mood, and whether the subjectivity present in her poems has shifted in response to the changes that have occurred during the decades she has been writing. Or to put more specifically, can we recognise aspects of the second wave post-Conceptualist poetry in her later work, such as the diffuse nature of subjectivity, the blurring boundaries between the poet’s voice and the other people’s voices, and the subject being in the process of subjectivisation?

When scanning Fanailova’s poems I came across two poems with similar titles ‘Lena, or the poet and the people’ and ‘Lena and Lena’ and understood that the latter was a revision of the former. ‘Lena, or the poet and the people’ is written in 2008, whereas ‘Lena and Lena’ is written in 2010 and has, according to Stephanie Sandler, the conversational, easy tone, being the trademark of her later work.[[2]](#footnote-3) This suggests that her work has undergone shifts in at least the tone of her poem, but maybe also in the way she approaches subjectivity.

Mark Lipovetsky holds that the openness of Fanailova’s poems to other people’s voices implies the relativity of her own view, a subjectivity in which internal contradiction plays an important role as ‘antidote against doctrinairism.’ I recognise this aspect in her earlier poems, like the nameless poem that starts with ‘…Again they’re off for their Afghanistan’, in which she literally uses the conversation of others that she overhears and creates the internal contradiction through the poet’s reflection in the last line ‘I’ll never find another country such as this.’ It is also clearly present in ‘Lena, or the poet and the people’, in which poet Lena, meets a cashier also called Lena, with whom she discusses the accessibility of her poems. The internal contradiction is expressed in a stream-of-consciousness-like reflections on her own work; first justifying her choices, then acknowledging the limits of her work. The poet’s voice is clearly distinguishable from the other Lena’s voice and the two Lena’s are very different people coming from different parts of society.

In ‘Lena and Lena’, the openness to other people’s voices and the internal contradiction reflected in the poets voice is less explicit. In this revision, which has become a very different poem and is no longer about a poet reflecting on her poetry, the other Lena is very similar to Lena the poet. One could even defend the interpretation that both Lena’s are different versions of the same person. Both women are in the luxurious position to travel around Eastern Europe, the poet Lena travels to meet her lover, the other Lena for better health care. They seem to have very similar concerns: ‘Lena and Lena meet at the corner/one of the busiest in Belgrade/They have coffee/They text Andrei about the weather, send love/and go to the university to see Nelly./Belgrade women/Dress beautifully.’ The other Lena’s voice is no longer expressed as part of a dialogue and the distinction between the two voices is less clear.

Furthermore, the mood has shifted. Times have changed. Whereas in ‘Lena, or the poet and the people’, the Soviet past is still very much present (Lena the poet wonders who the other Lena was in Soviet times), in ‘Lena and Lena’ the past is not ‘seen’: ‘The center is good for long walks in September/You can’t see the effects of the bombings/But you can see the hope of joining the EU’.

In this same sentence, a blur between voices can be detected as it unclear whether it is the poet’s voice or a multitude of no-ones’ voices. The blurring between this collective ‘we’ and the individual voice of the poet is a change with regard the unified poet’s voice of Fanailova in her earlier version of the poem.

The process of subjectivisation is still at work at the end of the poem, and she tells us that ‘[She] remember[s] this story/So vividly, like in a movie/Like it happened to someone else.’ The blurring of boundaries between her voice and someone else’s continues and tells us that a shift in the way she approaches subjectivity has indeed taken place; one that resembles the second wave post-Conceptualists.

1. VSlukh. Poeziia segodnia (2013), with guests Kills Medvekdev and Elena Fanailova, cited in S. Sandler, “Kirill Medvedev and Elena Fanailova: Poetry, Ethics, Politics, and Philosophy.” 87-89 *Russian Literature*. 2017, 281-313. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Elena Fanailova, Stephanie Sandler, Lena and Lena, *Jacket* 2, 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)