

Nekrasov, Vsevolod: *I Live I See: Selected Poems*. Translated from the Russian by Ainsley Morse & Bela Shayevich. Introduction by Mikhail Sukhotin. Afterword by Gerald Janecek. New York: Ugly Duckling Press, 2013. 573 p. (= Eastern European Series 31).

Nekrassow, Wsewolod: *Ich lebe ich sehe. Gedichte*. Ausgewählt, aus dem Russischen übertragen und mit einem Nachwort versehen von Günter Hirt und Sascha Wonders. Vorwort von Eugen Gomringer. Münster: Verlag Helmut Lang 2017. 400 S.

Both publications devoted to the work of the Russian poet Vsevolod Nekrasov (1934–2009) are distinguished by careful editing and by the presentation, interpretation, and translation of poetic texts that belong to the school of “concrete poetics” that arose at the beginning of the 1960s. The editors and translators of the first comprehensive publication, Ainsley Morse and Bela Shayevich, evaluate the extraordinary part Nekrasov played in the Soviet literary scene of the 1970/1980s, which was characterized by censorship, prohibition, and even arbitrary persecution. As the editors emphasize, the author of “anti-poems” written during this period was involved in the small independent Moscow cultural scene, and was never formally employed in any public institution. His position within the independent group of poets is marked by the curious fact that Nekrasov, though associated with the Moscow conceptualists, in later years emphasized not belonging to the faction of his former colleagues who “were ready to throw him under a train in the interest of furthering their post-Communist careers.” Nekrasov’s poetic delimitation toward his colleagues was, as the translators explain, a testament to his aesthetic and ethical principles.

The German-Russian edition of Nekrasov’s poems bearing the same title (*I Live I See/ Ich lebe ich sehe*) stresses this special valuation from the very beginning. Eugen Gomringer, one of the forerunners of European concrete poetry, emphasizes in his preface (pp. 7–13) the point that Nekrasov’s poems belong to a global trend in poetry, declaring that his concrete poetry proved to be independent both in its initial Moscow period in the late 1960s and on a comparative European level. In this context it is very informative that the German editors and translators Sabine Hänsgen and Georg Witte (alias Günter Hirt and Sascha Wonders), having published work about the Russian independent scene for more than thirty years under these pseudonyms, divide their carefully printed publication into seven lyrical sections beginning with *Lianozovo*. In this Moscow district arose a more or less isolated scene of independent cultural activities in the 1960s. Having been direct witnesses and participants of

1 these meetings, Hirt and Wonders documented the diverse artistic events
 2 in their multimedia publication “Kulturpalast” in 1984. They were thus
 3 the first German eye-witnesses to lay the foundations for solid research
 4 in this field, and the Lianozovo period played a key role in their grasp of
 5 Nekrasov’s early poetic work. At that time Nekrasov dedicated many of his
 6 short poems to visual artists like Lev Kropivnitskii, Vladimir Nemukhin,
 7 Lidiia Masterkova, and Oskar Rabin, whose work represented a refusal to
 8 acknowledge the socialist realist art dictated “from above.”

9 As for Nekrasov’s poetic vocabulary, Mikhail Sukhotin illustrates it in
 10 his “Notes toward a Poetic Biography” (pp. 25–34) in the American edition
 11 by pointing to the repetition of the word, which, along with combinatorial
 12 devices, became firmly established in Nekrasov’s poetry from the very
 13 beginning. Moreover, Nekrasov developed a deep interest in the visual
 14 structures of his texts, a device which linked his early poetry, according
 15 to Sukhotin, to the concrete poetry of the German tradition, as evidenced
 16 in the work of Eugen Gomringer, Gerhard Rühm, Franz Mon, and Helmut
 17 Heißenbüttel. Sukhotin’s judgement that Nekrasov arrived independently
 18 at the same results as these representatives of Western art is backed up
 19 by Hänsgen and Witte in their essay “Vsevolod Nekrasov’s Poetical Notes”
 20 in the German edition (pp. 315–347). By indicating the fact that Nekrasov
 21 only happened to make the acquaintance of German and Austrian con-
 22 crete poetry in 1964, they prove that the Moscow poet had by this time
 23 already produced poems characterized by an independent structure and
 24 features. In contrast to the Western poets, Nekrasov’s poetic attention
 25 is concentrated on registering the inconspicuous moments of everyday
 26 speech-reality. Through this practice, his poetry attains its concrete sta-
 27 tus. This statement is shored up by the observation that even the serial
 28 repetition of words has the character of an intonational flow, which was
 29 tested by Nekrasov in a personal dictionary. For many years he recorded
 30 the words he used most often in his everyday speech, as linguistic materi-
 31 al. In this way he selected word-pairs which generated crossings between
 32 them. In this process Nekrasov gave priority to oral speech to find out—
 33 with the help of repetition—their so-called “sound-taste.”

34 This dictionary, which was created over the course of more than ten
 35 years, consists of rhythmical series of words that are similar in various
 36 ways. The crossings between the selected words produce, according to
 37 Nekrasov, a kind of motion which was the basis for the pronunciation of
 38 words used in the poem. But the strong emphasis on the written nature of
 39 the individual texts is not contrary to this oral principle, as “the language
 40 of verses is *eo ipso* visual poetry becoming apparent in speech” (p. 323).
 41 This statement by the German editors leads the reader to the interpreta-
 42 tion of some nearly vacant text-fields which are only covered by markings
 43 indicating the place where apparently poems could be printed out. The
 44 American edition prints these experimental texts under the headline of
 45 “from 100 POEMS” (pp. 304–323), whereas the German publication il-

illustrates them under the intermediate title “Sheets” (pp. 349–379). The translators Morse and Shayevich append explanatory remarks in English to several texts for the better understanding of some idiomatic expressions, a support for readers which the German edition omits due to the existence of a German translation of the texts. In this way, a careful reading of Nekrasov’s “Poetical Notes” is all that is required to comprehend the structural principles of his poems. It is obvious that Nekrasov considered his writing surface as an experimental field for the process of writing, in which the layout of a text surpasses its linear dimension or can only be indicated in the form of a vacant space; or where the printed poem consists of individual words mixed with geometric figures.

As for the chronological or thematic structure of Nekrasov’s work, it can be noted that the poet seldom organized his texts in cycles, except for the “Leningrad Poems” (also published in the samizdat-journal 37). According to Hänsgen and Witte, such a working process would contradict the processual character of his poetry. It is thus reasonable that both editions use a broad structure, with the German publication consisting of seven sections, and the American one presenting the texts under the headlines of “from POEMs 1956–1983” up to “UNCOLLECTED POEMs.” This selection principle is carefully explained by the translators with a special emphasis on “from 100 Poems” and “from Doiche BUKH.” As for the “100 Poems” section, the selected poems are based on a publication which Gerald Janecek privately printed in 1987. He encountered Nekrasov in connection with his research on Russian Futurist poetry at Moscow University in 1983 (cf. “Contacts with Vsevolod Nekrasov,” pp. 537–544). Upon returning to the U.S., he published the first American edition of Nekrasov’s poetry (in Russian) under the title “95 stikhotvorenii [95 poems]” (Lexington, KY: Listy, 1985). Moreover, Janecek gave the editors much valuable advice on the translation and interpretation of the poems.

Another approach to the concrete poetry of Nekrasov is demonstrated in the section “from Doiche BUKH,” a publication which has also been published in German (Bochum: edition aspei 2002). This group of poems reflects the poet’s stay in Germany in the summer of 1992, and his critical evaluation of the Russian cultural scene at the time of the breakdown of the Soviet Union. In this context, it is particularly important that the American editors comment on Nekrasov’s attitude toward his former colleagues by stressing the point of his “revolutionary insistence on the essential union of form and content; his deconstruction of language [...] as unmediated encounter with reality” (p. 17). Under the headline “So Communist Will Now Mean Democratic” (pp. 16–17), they prepare their readers for Nekrasov’s uncompromising reflections, regarding not only his insistence on specific poetic forms but also his political evaluation of historical figures: “hitler / is stalin yesterday / but stalin / that bastard / is hitler today”—a part of a longer poem explaining the deeds of criminal historical figures who have become symbols of dreadful evil.

1 The German-Russian edition also contains two theoretical chapters
2 and a selected bibliography. In particular, the comparative analyses of
3 Nekrasov's poetry both by the editors and the poet himself may excite
4 the interest of poetry-lovers. In this way, readers get a rare insight into
5 the surprising and unexpected world of a Russian poet who unfortunately
6 became famous only after the breakdown of the Soviet regime, a fate
7 which he shared with most of his outstanding experimental colleagues,
8 especially those who were unable to leave their homeland under the com-
9 munist regime. Therefore, it can be hoped that the selected Nekrasov bib-
10 liography in the German-Russian edition will attract the attention of lyric
11 poetry readers interested in gaining more access to this extraordinary
12 Russian poetry. Moreover, both editions have found additional ways to
13 seduce potential readers: the American edition presents Francisco Infan-
14 te's photograph "Artifacts" on the cover, while the Helmut Lang-publish-
15 ing house offers fascinating Cyrillic words on its front-page.

16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45

Bremen

Wolfgang Schlott
wolfgang Schlott@web.de