

Freedom, Subjectivity, and the Gulag (2002-2010)

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After *Nostalgia*'s success, Boym moved on to the weighty topic of the Gulag. Her engagement with the Gulag had an autobiographical root, which she self-reflexively explored in "My grandmother's First Love," (2002), as well as in the introduction to "Art of the Gulag" (2007), an essay for an exhibit that she curated at the Boston University Art Gallery. In the "'Banality of Evil,' Mimicry, and the Soviet Subject" (2008), Boym started by identifying the intellectual departure point of her engagement with the topic in the "persistent difficulty in coming to terms with the gulag:" "The experience of Auschwitz profoundly influenced western political philosophy of the twentieth century, but the experience of the Soviet gulag did not." (343) In that essay, she turned to Hannah Arendt, her long term philosophical inspiration, and Varlaam Shalamov, a new figure in her pantheon, to provide signposts for a "mutually illuminating relationship between art and politics." (344) For while Boym started with Adorno's dictum about poetry being "barbaric" after the Holocaust, she chose to emphasize Adorno's paradoxical addage: "Literature, he insists, 'must resist this verdict. For it is now virtually in art alone that suffering can still find its own voice without immediately being betrayed by it" (342). Closely reading Shalomov's tactics of "de-aestheticizing evil," in a literature that he presents to us not as "understanding of life" but as "document," Boym argues for the necessity of preserving

art in the context of the Gulag not in its traditional role in Russian culture, “as the unofficial cultural legislator (342)” Rather, literature is “the space where the practice of imagination becomes a “weapon of the weak,” that teaches lesson in non-collaboration and tactics of survival” (342). From Arendt’s last book, *The Life of the Mind*, Boym chooses to emulate the practice of passionate thinking, which, as opposed to “professional thinking,” explores “the limits of knowledge and engages in a double movement between different modes of knowledge and between theory and experience” (345). Boym’s lifelong preoccupation with methodology is here revealed to be not just a professional but primarily an ethical preoccupation: “understanding the camp experience requires this kind of thinking that is at once interdisciplinary and passionate” (345).

This interest in the conjunction of methodology, ethics, and contemporary politics also drew her in the most polemic of her positions at this time: her criticism of “the important trend in studies of Soviet subjectivity associated with the work of Igal Halfin and Jochen Hellbeck.” In an *Ab Imperio* article titled “How is Soviet Subjectivity Made?” (2002) Boym argued that the new approach to Soviet subjectivity conflates the Kantian notion of the subject with its poststructuralist critique. Foucauldian analysis suggests that the formulaic language cited in Soviet diaries is a result of propaganda rather than the conscious sharing of a narrative with the regime. She charged that proponents of the new approach miss an opportunity to truly engage in poststructuralist analysis in order to explore the heteroglossia that is evident in the texts. Furthermore, she identified an Orientalist dimension to the new approach, arguing that hardly imagine a similar study of, for example, American subjectivity based on FBI employees' diaries during the J. Edgar Hoover era. Revisiting and upholding her position in the polemic in her 2008

“Banality of Evil,” Boym once more directly linked it to political commitment: “In the contemporary Russian situation, the excess of liberal subjectivity is hardly a threat, nor does it determine current historical paradigms. Rather the situation is determined by the closing of archives and the rewriting of history books, by the censorship and self-censorship that is imposed on most political debate” (344).

Significant parts of Boym’s work on the Gulag were incorporated in her major achievement of the last decade: *Another Freedom* (2010). Reached through *the via negativa* of Boym’s deep engagement with the Gulag, this book blossomed into a richly researched and creatively conceived cross-cultural history of freedom. To the brilliance, gusto, and irony that had become part of her signature in her previous books, *Another Freedom* adds a wisdom and humaneness that makes the reading experience a bracing intellectual journey. Boym explored the cultural myths of Russian and Soviet freedom from Pushkin's "other better freedom" that doesn't depend on political rights, to Dostoevsky's "freer freedom" in prison to the Soviet idea of freedom as "well-recognized necessity," to artistic and dissident freedom based on the "art of estrangement.” She returned with an expert archeology of everyday practices of politics and aesthetics in Russia, tracking how they conformed or deviated from its myths and how they surprise us. *Another Freedom* is also the worldliest of Boym’s books, wandering far from Russia to the US and deep in time to Ancient Greece. Its brilliant, subtle, and ultimately exhilarating history of freedom from a cross cultural viewpoint focuses on the relationship between public and private freedom as well as on Boym’s lifelong fascination with the relationship between aesthetics and politics, artistic estrangement and political dissent.

