

Bryn Mawr College

## Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College

---

Russian Faculty Research and Scholarship

Russian

---

2023

### Review of *The Vortex That Unites Us: Versions of Totality in Russian Literature*, by Jacob Emery

José Vergara

Bryn Mawr College, [jvergara@brynmawr.edu](mailto:jvergara@brynmawr.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://repository.brynmawr.edu/russian\\_pubs](https://repository.brynmawr.edu/russian_pubs)



Part of the [Russian Literature Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

---

#### Citation

Vergara, José. Review of *The Vortex That Unites Us: Versions of Totality in Russian Literature*, by Jacob Emery. *The Russian Review* 82 (2023):722–23. <https://doi.org/10.1111/russ.12524>.

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College.  
[https://repository.brynmawr.edu/russian\\_pubs/18](https://repository.brynmawr.edu/russian_pubs/18)

For more information, please contact [repository@brynmawr.edu](mailto:repository@brynmawr.edu).

## **BOOK REVIEW**

### **Literature and Fine Arts**

The Vortex That Unites Us: Versions of Totality in Russian Literature by Jacob Emery. Ithaca: Northern Illinois University Press, 2023. 228 pp. \$54.95. ISBN 978-1-5017-6938-2

José Vergara

Bryn Mawr College

Email: [jvergara@brynmawr.edu](mailto:jvergara@brynmawr.edu)

More than a year into Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and its brutal attempts to absorb a foreign nation, a book exploring the concept of "totality" in Russian literature reads differently than it might have otherwise. Political questions are not the focus of Jacob Emery's fascinating *The Vortex That Unites Us*---far from it---but he, too, acknowledges the resonances: "It would have been foolish to hazard prophesies of general statements about Russian-language literature [...] and any surmises of the kind seem more precarious yet as I approach the limit of my final draft, at a moment when history remains so obviously ongoing" (p. 169). Indeed, while the aesthetic visions analyzed in the book aim for closure, Emery dwells in their details and ambiguities, offering terrific insights into numerous texts.

Taking its name from an essay by Velimir Khlebnikov, Emery's *Vortex* surveys several major Russian authors who propose ways of unifying the world through aesthetics, language, and corporeality. He reveals how various forms of totality represented in their work become entwined with "possessions" and linked to interactions with the human body, whether it be *zaum'* poetry moving readers' mouths or ritualistic sacrifices transforming people in Vladimir Sorokin's novels.

As Emery acknowledges, *The Vortex* is not an encyclopedic account. Nonetheless, his book's scope is capacious; in the introduction alone Emery puts into dialogue Schiller, Jakobson, Genette, Ronell, Pushkin, Gogol, Lukács, Belinsky, Chaadaev, Trubetskoi, Lunarcharsky, Groys, Herder, and many other to establish his argument. Given this range, I do wonder what female authors, none of whom appear in the book in any substantive way, might add for a more diverse discussion of this theme.

Chapter 1 in particular examines "possession" as depicted by Konstantin Batiushkov, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky, and Sorokin. These readings of disparate texts demonstrate how assorted possessions---linguistic, medical, discursive, propagandistic---lay bare the relationship between author and reader as one in which aesthetics are intended to mold and transform worldview. Each of these elements, rehearsed here in miniature, are given greater depth in later chapters, which mostly focus on single authors.

In brief, chapter 2 ably establishes Lev Tolstoy's conception of art as an emotional vector that can inoculate readers against negative feelings and, ultimately, merge humanity through its curative-pedagogic value as seen throughout his oeuvre, from diaries to *Anna Karenina*, from the short story "Lucerne" to *What Is Art?* Chapter 3 addresses Khlebnikov, Alexei Kruchenykh, and the Russian avant-garde, arguing that the Futurists' fixation on a universal language "represent[s] a historical corrective to notions of world literature generated within the horizon of global capitalism" (p. 19). He briefly touches on how Futurist poetics, filtered through Jakobson's Structuralist linguistics, became the bedrock for much of literary theory as we have come to know it---a claim that will likely be more provocative to those outside Slavic Studies. Chapter 4 focuses on Osip Mandelstam's *Conversation with Dante* "as a textual encounter" and statement on the poet's "philosophy of reading" (pp. 115--16). Chapter 5 cleverly explores the significance

of Humbert Humbert being both “madman” and literal perfume “adman,” an understudied detail in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*.

*The Vortex* operates at its best when Emery zooms in on individual texts. His reading of Mandelstam’s *Conversation*, for example, as a work that uncomfortably flirts with authoritarian values, advances a nuanced understanding of Mandelstam’s aesthetics in the 1930s. The key image of the conductor’s baton becomes a means for controlling time (an essential element of art) and a tool (a weapon) by which the conductor (the dictator) not only manages musical dictation but also controls others---yet another possession.

Likewise, Emery’s demonstration of how the language of advertising is encoded throughout *Lolita* is nothing short of brilliant. Its implications sharpen our understanding of Humbert Humbert’s linguistic deceptions and how, on a higher level, Nabokov plays with the symbolism of pop culture to complicate the ethics of both *Lolita*’s fictional world and our own.

With the exception of the introduction, chapter 3, and the two-page afterword, all sections of the book are at least partly derived from articles published at various points since 2007. Such is the nature of academic publishing, and this does not detract from Emery’s intriguing readings. However, at times the connections between these very different pieces become diffuse and the definition of “totality” somewhat vague. Not every chapter must do the same thing, of course, but a greater sense of the how and why it all fits together, perhaps in a proper, more substantive conclusion, would have been appreciated for the sake of the *The Vortex*’s central claims about totality.

Again, let none of the above detract from what Emery delivers. From the imperial hauntings of Batiushkov’s verse to the Futurist reworkings of the Bible, from Tolstoy’s

communal art to Sorokin's gross outs, he contributes much to our understandings of these texts and their engagements with the ever-urgent topic of totality in Russian literature.