

A History of Russian Literary Theory and Criticism: The Soviet Age and Beyond. Edited by Evgeny Dobrenko and Galin Tihanov. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011. 406 pp. \$60.00 (cloth). ISBN-13: 978-0-82294-411-9.

This volume, edited by two leading literary scholars and featuring articles by many acknowledged names in the field, charts the genealogy of literary criticism and literary studies in Soviet, post-Soviet, and émigré Russian literature. The two most salient characteristics of the book are its ambitious scope and its predominant interest in the tradition of literary criticism. Integral to this orientation is the clear focus on the political sociology of literary criticism rather than an excavation of the theoretical and practical underpinnings of literature, literary commentary and critical analysis. The primary value of this volume, then, is of an institutional nature, as it scripts a canon of Russian literary studies, often with the aid of plentiful lists that pithily identify various figures in literary scholarship and criticism by their ideological position. As asserted by most contributors to the volume, political and ideological affiliations were indeed the dominant factor in approaches to literature during both the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. The volume's main assumption that political rather than aesthetic factors were most decisive in the evaluation of and commentary on literature is advanced succinctly in the introduction: "Due to the particular status of literature, literary criticism became a platform for the formation of public discourse in Russia and a sphere (often the only one) of political activity" (p. ix).

This view, held by the editors, is shared by the overwhelming majority of the contributors, and the volume often operates by locating various players on the ideological spectrum while avoiding critical analysis of their work altogether. Possibly, this lack can be explained by the fact that once you leave behind the amorphous twenties and the obscure and cryptographic decades of the Stalinist era, the range of positions and methods in Soviet literary studies appears to be somewhat limited. While the backdoor politics that shaped the institutionalization of literature in the first half of the twentieth century demands a nuanced and painstaking decoding (as provided in the rewarding chapters by Evgeny Dobrenko and Hans Günther, for example), the essays on the second half of the century need only to delineate several possible trajectories:

- Slavophiles vs. Westernizers in their various new manifestations;
- realists vs. modernists/postmodernists as far as artistic method is concerned;
- "red" liberal (socialism with a human face) camp, "white" liberal (pre-socialist democratic Russian intelligentsia) camp, or ultra-nationalist conservative camp outline the ideological positions available, with some intermittent divisiveness on the question of whether literature must be socially and morally engaged or should be allowed to be irresponsible

(the group that takes the latter position appears, in the Russian context, to be incredibly small).

Despite the orientation of the volume on the whole toward the political aspect of literary criticism, a number of articles argue for the relevance of factors unattached to considerations of political expediency and ideological value. An incisive article by Caryl Emerson on Russian literary theory of the 1920s is the first in the volume to analyze the actual literary theories rather than focusing on the political maneuvering behind them. Having organized the theoretical output of the 1920s into four distinct categories – formalists, Marxists, psychoanalysts, and the Bakhtin circle – Emerson positions each theory's adherents vis-à-vis their proximity to such values as the cognitive aspect of the literary process, idealism vs. materialism, dialogicity and communal consciousness, and socialist determinism vs. the autonomy of art. An outstanding chapter by Katerina Clark and Galin Tihanov on the Soviet literary theory of the 1930s claims the presence of the aesthetic dominants in the period's potentially ideological debates on the genre. The authors show how the early thirties witnessed a reaction against the utilitarianism of the "cultural revolution" of the preceding years: "Culture itself became a value, and not only for its instrumentalist potential but in its own right" (p. 110). Mention also must be made of the chapter's excellent analysis of Bakhtin's theory of genre that elucidates the two sides of the "endorsement/resistance" polemics surrounding it. Another fascinating essay, entitled "Discoveries and Advances in Literary Theory, 1960s-1980s," by William Mills Todd III demonstrates the vitality of literary discourse in the epoch of stagnation. Todd explains how scholars searched for creative ways to circumvent the prohibitively narrow official prescriptions for ideologically charged literary discourse either by applying the abstract languages of cybernetics and linguistics to the study of literature (the Moscow-Tartu School) or by creatively combining Soviet Marxism with the language-modeled theories of semiotics and in the process ambiguating the theoretical positions of both (the work of Lydia Ginzburg). The very last essay of the volume, by Nancy Condee and Eugeniia Kupsan, departs from the prevalent post-Soviet trend of categorization/classification according to ideology, proposing instead the methodological parameters of possible differentiation. The essay argues that in fact literary scholars of the last decades have shown a tendency to develop independent theoretical positions rather than merely take sides in well delineated, ideologically embattled fields.

In tracing certain continuities in Russian culture, despite the often abrupt political and ideological changes, the volume shows its strength. The pervasive presence of censorship or the persistent return of the "autonomy of art" aside, the curious life of ideological formulas and catch-phrases can be espied from one essay to the next. The volume makes clear that ideological formulas, essential in the politicization of literary discourse, were in fact quite vacuous and protean rather than loaded and immutable. By the time of the Thaw,

such terms as “artistic method,” “sincerity,” “freedom,” “humanism” and “trust” were empty signifiers that various political camps struggled to appropriate in order to infuse them with content representing the view of each group. The volume also allows us to trace the genealogy of ideas and views, and the way they were inherited and reinvented; for example, Hans Günther intriguingly points out that the figures involved with the journal *Literaturny Kriitik* in the mid-thirties, which was marginally successful both in freeing artistic creativity from ideological subjugation and publishing works by authors who cannot be regarded as socialist realist, reemerged in the sixties as contributors to *Novyi mir*.

While frequently unpredictable shifts in politics led to no less abrupt changes in literary criticism, judging by the number of diverging perspectives in the volume, the hardest periods to read are the twenties and the Stalinist era. For example, there appears to be a disagreement on the exact time when the political instrumentalization of literary criticism became the order of the day. According to Natalya Kornienko, state institutionalization of literary criticism and its attendant censorship begins as early as 1922, while according to Dobrenko, such developments do not occur until the late 1920s and early 1930s. Dobrenko suggests that a struggle between different groups was still quite possible during most of the twenties, because only in 1928, one group, specifically the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP), gained official support. Dobrenko proposes a distinction between RAPP and the preceding groups who often employed political language, by arguing that the latter were still interested in literary matters while for “RAPP functionaries and critics literature was merely a pretext. The sole focus of RAPP criticism was politics” (p. 48).

Furthermore, Kornienko argues that attempts to unify literary discourse started as soon as the early twenties; Dobrenko suggests that this uniformity was taking over literary struggles by the thirties; and Clark and Tikhonov remark that the distinctly different trends coexisted well into the thirties. For example, they argue that internationalism, cosmopolitanism, and the libertarian trend against “vulgar sociology” coincided with the parallel campaigns against formalism and expressionism as well as “an often noted distinctive turn toward Russian cultural nationalism” (p. 117). The authors attest themselves, then, to the lack of continuity and uniformity even in the culture of the thirties that is known precisely for its rigidity and intolerance.

The volume features a number of notable unexpected facts and interpretive leaps. A big surprise awaits in the chapter on “Literary Criticism and the Institution of Literature, 1941-1953” by Dobrenko where the postwar campaign against “rootless cosmopolitanism” was presented as the result of the inner politics of various literary groupings without a single mention of the foundation of the State of Israel. Fascinatingly, the chapter argues that the campaign that could have resulted in the destruction of Soviet Jewry was initiated because a group of theater directors and critics associated with them (many of whom were Jews) had expressed their dissatisfaction with the me-

diocre quality of the newly minted socialist realist, patriotic plays by Sofronov, Surov, and others whose names might or might not begin with S. Such an interpretation stems from its author's overall position that literary discourse is not just a mirror of politics, but that it generates politics. In "Literary Criticism of the Long 1970s and the Fate of Soviet Liberalism" Mark Lipovetsky and Mikhail Berg make the important, perhaps counterintuitive, case that the dominant liberal attitude of the period was to reject stylistic experimentation as amoral. For example, late Soviet critics read Valentin Kataev's pandering to the official party line in the thirties and his stylistic experimentation in the pre- and post-Stalin eras as contiguous phenomena, and therefore equivalently immoral. Potentially most astonishing is the daring evaluation of post-Soviet literary criticism put forward by Birgit Menzel and Boris Dubin. Countering the popular view of the "*glasnost*" period, usually associated with the expansion of intellectual freedom in Russia, the authors claim that the initial reaction in literary criticism was "defensively conservative, eclectic, and imitative," after which literary polemics disappeared altogether without any pressure from the outside (pp. 255-56). And, on a final note, this volume makes apparent the strange absence of original literary or cultural theories in the most recent 30 years, despite, or perhaps because, of the lifting of censorship and easy access to Western critical theory.

Some minor theoretical quibbles aside, however, *A History of Russian Literary Theory and Criticism* is the first of its kind, and as such it establishes a canon and illuminates the hereto dimly lit corners of Russian cultural history. It is, therefore, a necessary addition to the shelf of every Slavist.

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