

REZENSIONEN

Studies in 20th Century Russian Prose, ed. Nils Åke Nilsson, Stockholm Studies in Russian Literature, No.14, Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1982, 249 pp.

In his introduction to this collection of ten studies devoted to Russian prose fiction, Nils Åke Nilsson stresses the thematic and chronological unity of the volume. Thus the focus here is largely on post-realist works from 1900 to 1932, with the exception of Pasternak's *Doktor Živago*, prose pieces where authors searched for new prose models and took Russian prose in different directions during the first decades of this century. By and large, these studies are stimulating and generally well presented, and so the volume as a whole makes a solid contribution to the understanding of this vibrant and exciting era in Russian literature. One does wonder, though, precisely who the intended audience is, since it is usually assumed by the contributors that the readers know Russian well, yet at other times, comments are made which contradict this assumption, such as "In this connection it is noteworthy that Nadja's full name, Nadežda, means 'hope' in Russian" (25). Nevertheless, it seems evident that these pieces were written with specialists in mind, and scholars who are already familiar with the works being examined will indeed benefit from the studies presented.

The contributions tend to deal with well known authors and their prose writings (Pasternak, Belyj, Babel', Čexov, Sologub, to name just a few), though one study of a lesser known work, Tynjanov's "Podporučik Kiže" is included. And a fairly wide range of opinions by scholars from the United States, Western and Eastern Europe is offered. The main language of the contributions is English, but two are in Russian. Perhaps because of this linguistic mixing, there is a significant number of typographical errors, which, however, do not generally detract too much from the overall impression. So let us turn now to these studies, which have been arranged according to the date of publication for the works analyzed.

Robert L. Jackson's piece on Čexov's last story, "Nevesta", focuses on the ending of the story, most specifically the last line, where the heroine is shown leaving her family and native city, "as she supposed, forever" (12). The question of what Nadja's true destiny is has been debated by scholars, and here Jackson correctly points to the complexities inherent in Čexov's views; he feels that Nadja's leavetaking should not be seen as an example of the author's attraction to the romantic aspects of revolution, but rather that Čexov has a more sober, realistic understanding of the need to work for social change that is firmly based on insights into past history and into human nature. Čexov did not feel that "The main thing is to turn life upside down and all the rest is unimportant" (23), and Jackson illustrates

this point convincingly.

The next contribution, a study of Sologub and his critics, by Henryk Baran, is interesting and well researched; Baran makes a number of good points, though in his analysis he seems to rely a little too much on the credibility of Sologub's critics, who he acknowledges were neither terribly distinguished nor influential. Though the focus here is mainly on Sologub's *Nav'i žary* [*tvorimaja legenda*], and its critical reception, Baran quite appropriately disagrees with Prince Mirsky's views on Russian prose in the period 1900-10. Where Mirsky claimed that "between 1900 and 1910 Russian literature was divided into two distinct and mutually watertight parts", Baran points to the successful and influential example of the *Šipovnik* miscellanies, which helped to blur "the boundaries between the realists and the symbolists" (30). And as Baran succinctly demonstrates, many of the more traditional critics at that time were confused by this trend. But since a number of these rather unskilled aestheticians copied directly from each other and ever - at times - seemed to have perhaps not read the works they commented on, is it wise to "disregard the idiosyncratic part of the reviewers' responses" (27), as Baran does? Despite this reservation, however, one is grateful for this study, which helps to shed more light on Sologub, who certainly deserves greater critical and scholarly recognition, and on this this intriguing, if not totally successful work.

Greta Slobin's study of Remizov and his tale about Stratilov, though, is less satisfactory. She has clearly read a good deal of material, but the presentation is repetitive and could have been better organized; moreover, the links with Puškin's "Gravriiliada" are mentioned so often that the reader's credibility, in this case, is sorely tested. There are, unfortunately, additional problems with English and translations from Russian into that language which create some obstacles to understanding. For example, much is made in the study of the word *buben* and its importance in Remizov's work; Slobin translates this key word as "drum" when a more correct rendering is in fact "tambourine" (69). And Remizov's *carskoe kreslo* is probably better rendered as a "regal armchair" rather than an "imperial chair" (72), particularly since the hero of the story, Stratilatov, uses the armchair in his dining ritual. One last linguistic curiosity that could be mentioned here is the word "Künstkamera" (71), which in the form given defies identification with a known language, it is neither the German "Kunstkammer" nor the Russian "kunstkamera".

The following study, Lena Szilárd's examination of Belyj's *Peterburg* and its relation to Dostoevskij's *Bezy* shows that a great deal of thought has been devoted to this topic, though oddly, not much information is given about any direct links between the two novels. She focuses instead on a division of characters into two main types, both of which could be translated as "fools" in English, but which have rather different meanings in Russian: "jurodivye" and "šuty". And she claims that the action in Belyj's novel moves between the polar opposites of "jurodstvo" and "šutovstvo".

Peter A. Jensen provides a clear and quite helpful analysis of Pil'njak's structural approach in the writings which deal with the Revolution. He shows how the Russian author uses myth

and chronicle to deal with events surrounding the Revolution and its immediate effects, yet despite this emphasis on language associated with chronicles, Pil'njak is basically ahistorical in his approach. In other words, he is interested in telling stories about the Revolution but not with a strictly chronological method of presentation. And since many readers have struggled with the complexities of Pil'njak's style, Jensen's comments here prove to be appropriate and insightful.

In the next study, Fiona Björling offers a thoughtful analysis of Pasternak's work "Detstvo Ljuvers", especially in regard to the way in which children are perceived by adults and how modernist writers seek to understand and even imitate children. In order to provide a telling contrast, Björling demonstrates the considerable differences between this work and Tolstoj's fictional autobiography of his childhood, both in terms of style and the gender reversal in Pasternak's work. Björling speculates on the links between an adult male narrator and his pubescent female heroine in her far-ranging study, but this rather diverse material could have been tied together somewhat better. One additional comment on the gender question: where Björling claims that the title "Detstvo Ljuvers" does not indicate the gender of the main character, her assertion seems misplaced. Closer attention to the title indeed shows that the main character should be female, since such last names for females are usually not declined in Russian, as they are for males.

Kazimiera Ingdahl's examination of Jurij Oleša's story "Liompa" offers some valuable information to scholars interested in Oleša and in this period of Russian literature. Ingdahl introduces and explains material from Oleša's archive which deals with the imagery of life and death in the story and in this way effectively demonstrates the important aspects of Oleša's style and of his views, especially in regard to naming things, which is the point, not only of this story, but also of other works by this author. Consequently, these investigations lead to the wholly plausible conclusion that "Oleša's prose ... operates on poetic principles" (181).

The study of Tynjanov's "podporučik Kiže", presented by Jan van der Eng, is unfortunately rather opaque and not very convincing, at least to this reviewer. The author of the contribution is of course well read on his subject and is quite familiar with current thinking in literary criticism, but his presentation is not very well unified, and it is difficult to follow his main point - the emphasis on mixing traditional and modernistic devices in Tynjanov's story. His preoccupation with theory and structure does not allow the reader to understand much about the story itself, though van der Eng's attention is certainly devoted more to these stylistic aspects, rather than the whole work.

Nils Åke Nilsson's contribution, however, is quite the opposite; his examination of one of Babel's best works, "Guy de Maupassant", is informative, insightful, helpful, and well-rounded. In this piece Nilsson speaks about the importance of style in works by Babel, and he stresses as well the notion that this particular work is significant in the Russian writer's *oeuvre* in that Babel deals here with the writer's craft and his own position in the Soviet literary milieu in the early 1930's. It was not seen as appropriate, in 1932, for a Soviet writer to be dealing with an erotic theme and a French writer from the

past, but according to Nilsson, the view presented by Babel', inclines toward the courageous example set by Maupassant, an example that Babel' very much wanted to follow at that stage in his career.

The final contribution, Anna Ljunggren's analysis of the poetic genesis of Pasternak's *Doktor Živago*, focuses on the relation of the hero to the author and to the author's early poetry and prose. She offers the view that these characters represent aspects of Pasternak's thought, but that in fact they are often not fully developed, particularly Lara (231; most readers would certainly agree with this view). Ljunggren also deals with the very noticeable tendency toward coincidence in the novel and gives her reasons for its presence; she feels that the coincidences find their origin in the emphasis of Blok and other Symbolists on the "rokovaja vstreča", the meeting that profoundly affects the course of a person's life. Indeed the point about Blok and the Symbolists is well taken here. Finally, she addresses the departures from an ideal novelistic structure in Pasternak's work, attributing them to the author's constant emphasis on poetic conventions and seemingly agreeing with the previously stated view that the novel in many ways serves as an introduction to or an elaboration of the "Poems of Jurij Živago".

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