

# Literature and Society in Imperial Russia, 1800-1914

Edited by William Mills Todd III



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## Contributors

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#### **Preface**

The essays in this volume were presented to a conference on literature and society in imperial Russia that was made possible by a grant from the American Council of Learned Societies and was held at Stanford University on October 23 and 24, 1975. Convened to explore the ways in which the social and literary aspects of Russian culture have imposed themselves on each other and to suggest topics for further study, the participants fixed their attention on the components of literature as a social institution: the writer, the reader (or listener), the literary work, the codes through which the work is constituted and received.

The contributors would like to acknowledge the kind assistance of many people who helped with the conference and with the preparation of this volume. Edward J. Brown, Dorothy Atkinson, Herbert Lindenberger, and Lawrence L. Stahlberger, who chaired the four panels, and our discussants—Rufus W. Mathewson, Jr., Terence Emmons, Robert Maguire, and Hugh McLean—kept us focused on our common pursuits. Gordon Turner of the American Council of Learned Societies, who arranged for our funding, and Wayne S. Vucinich of Stanford's Center for Russian and East European Studies offered advice that was always helpful. J. G. Bell, Editor of Stanford University Press, worked with us from the beginning, providing worldly wisdom and guiding this volume into print. Susan Dolder

made many excellent editorial changes that helped pull the volume together. The many kindnesses of Betty Herring, Elise Johnson, Caryl Neumark, Christine Saal, Margaret Taylor, and Anisa Zainasheff left us free to write, think, and talk about our papers.

We adhere to the system of transliteration used by several leading journals in Russian studies and described as System II in J. Thomas Shaw, The Transliteration of Modern Russian for English-Language Publications (Madison, Wis., 1967). In the text, however, we preserve the common English spellings of well-known proper names (e.g. Tolstoy, Herzen, Tatiana), and transliterate a common ending of Russian surnames as "-sky," not "-skii."

W.M.T.

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#### Introduction

Serious lacunae in the study of Russian literature as a social institution, both in the Soviet Union and in the West, call for new research and new approaches. Of the many ways in which literature is related to life in society, Soviet scholarship has tended in recent decades to ignore all save the obvious reflection of social, economic, and political conditions in the plots, settings, and characters of literary works. As one Soviet scholar puts it, the sociology of literature, after serving in the 1920's as a frequent pretext for nasty political squabbles, has in more recent times limited itself to telling what happened in a work, who said it, but not how it was said, thereby drawing a rather facile distinction between the form and the content of literature.1 The other aspects of Russian literature as a social institution remain scarcely examined since the pioneering studies of the 1920's and early 1930's: the composition and expectations of the reading public; the media through which literature is transmitted to that public (serial publication, printing, manuscript, oral recitation); the role of criticism and censorship in mediating between writer and reader; the ways in which the structure of a work, the choice of genre, and the institution of literature as a whole may be related to social conventions.

Silence has fallen over the lively debate of the 1920's between the "vulgar sociology" that sought to imprison the writer's creativity

within the consciousness permitted by his economic class and the no less vulgar sociology that granted him the freedom to overcome his origins so that he might engineer the literary propagation of "progressive" ideas.<sup>2</sup> Lost, too, has been the Russian Formalists' study of "literary environment" (literaturnyi byt), which related the writer's literary choices (e.g., prose or poetry, genre) to the conditions of literary commerce in his time.<sup>3</sup> V. F. Pereverzev's unique synthesis of social psychology with the study of literary form was stamped out in the early 1930's, as Robert Louis Jackson discusses in his paper in this volume. The program by which Iurii Tynianov and Roman Jakobson sought to integrate synchronic and diachronic literary study with the study of other cultural orders was to remain for the most part unrealized. In short, it could be argued that social approaches to literature suffered greater losses under Stalin than formal ones. Studies of versification and "literary language," for example, continued to appear, and Formalism has survived to inspire the work of the Soviet Structuralists; but the sociology of literature in its theoretical and empirical aspects has rarely been permitted to question the regime's appropriation of writers and their works.<sup>5</sup>

Only in the last decade has Soviet sociology begun to recover from these years of neglect. The Lenin Library in Moscow has initiated surveys of the reading habits of rural and town populations, taking care to distance itself ideologically from the "bourgeois" sociologists (mainly Robert Escarpit) who have provided an important stimulus for its work.6 A second area of interest, involving literary critics, sociologists, psychologists, and aestheticians, has been literary reception in a more theoretical sense. This movement gained impetus from a conference in Leningrad in December 1968, which led eventually to the publication in 1971 of an important collection of papers, The Reception of Art.7 The editor, B. S. Meilakh, promised further volumes, but as yet none has appeared. Although disappointing in its frequent lack of familiarity with Western approaches, the collection represented a positive step forward in its call for theoretical as well as empirical studies and in its attention to the forms of art. This movement in Soviet criticism has begun to stimulate analyses of particular works and writers, the most detailed being G. N. Ishchuk's monograph The Problem of the Reader in the Creative Consciousness of L. N. Tolstoy, which traces Tolstoy's attempts to understand his readers and their expectations and to create an ideal reader for his works.8

Meanwhile, the study of Russian literature in its social context has

not thrived in the West. The Formalists' work has been studied, continued, and developed outside the Soviet Union-indeed, it occupies a prominent place in the Slavic departments of many American universities—but the interest the Formalists and other Soviet scholars of the 1920's took in the dissemination of literature has not been pursued. Western scholars not only have rejected the mimetic or crudely political approaches of their Soviet counterparts, but also have ignored other aspects of literature that involve social awareness, thereby granting Soviet scholarship a virtual monopoly on the study of literature and society.9 It is indicative of Western hostility or indifference to the social functions and representative aspects of literature that a recent reviewer found it necessary to remark, "By putting his characters' ideas through the crucible of narrative and dramatic action, in which they must of necessity collide with the motives of other men and women and the constraints of the real world, Goncharov made his novels, like the great majority of nineteenth-century novels, 'social.' "10

This neglect is all the more regrettable in that literary scholarship has been actively developing a variety of approaches capable of addressing the lacunae in the study of Russian literature.<sup>11</sup> Georg Lukács, unlike most Soviet Marxist critics, has tried to relate problems of genre (not merely content) to historical conditions. His well-known distinction between epic and novel bears particular relevance for the Russian novel, as his treatment of Russian writers has suggested.<sup>12</sup> Another Marxist critic, Lucien Goldmann, by exploring not only the manifest content of a literary work but also its silences and the categories that structure it, has studied the homological relationships between literary, social, and intellectual structures with a subtlety of analysis that eludes more naive "reflective" theories of literature.<sup>13</sup>

Non-Marxist studies of literature in its social context have laid greater stress on the writer's shaping role, the force of literary tradition, and the reader's place in the literary process. During the ascendancy of the New Criticism, a number of American and English critics worked to rescue social and historical awareness from that movement's assault on "extrinsic" approaches to literature, and they demonstrated that this awareness need not mean a blindness to the power and intricacy of a literary text. Lionel Trilling's essay "The Sense of the Past" (first published in 1942 in the Partisan Review), René Wellek and Austin Warren's Theory of Literature (1949), Irving Howe's Politics and the Novel (1957), Wayne Booth's Rhetoric

of Fiction (1961), and the essays of Philip Rahv and Edmund Wilson serve in various ways to reintegrate the work of literature with the historical reality from which it was created, with the values of the writer and the reader, and with literary tradition. Harry Levin's institutional approach to literature has probed the differences between literature and "life" by exploring rather than avoiding social contexts. The conventions of artistic media become the necessary difference, since Levin considers literature not a reflection but a refraction of life.14 The relationship between writer and public that his approach suggests (but does not develop) is given a more complete sociological analysis by Ian Watt, who juxtaposes the rise of "formal realism" in the English novel with developments in empirical philosophy and in the eighteenth-century reading public. 15 Watt's investigation prompts a number of questions about nineteenth-century Russian fiction, which was produced under entirely different social conditions (largely by writers of gentry origin until well into the century), for a narrower reading public, in the face of ideologies remote from English empiricism and Protestant individualism, and in response to a wellestablished tradition of European prose narrative.

In recent years Rezeptions as the tik in Germany and textual semiotics in France have brought the reader's place in the literary process to the foreground of literary criticism, challenging theories that focus on the "text itself," independent of its actualization in the reader. Drawing on communication theory and on the sociology of knowledge, two scholars from the University of Constance, Hans-Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser, have viewed the text as a provocation—to the reader's quest for coherence and meaning, to the reader's conventional expectations, and to prevailing social norms. In an essay suggestive for Russian literary scholarship, Jauss has studied the normative social patterns that 700 poems of the year 1857 communicated to their French readers. He based his study on the premise that

it is one of the most important although still little exploited achievements of art in helping everyday social living that it can give the power of speech to the dumb institutions of the social world, can organize lasting norms, transmit and justify those which have been handed down, but it can also raise questions about the rigidity of the institutional world, make the roles of other people comprehensible and produce agreement about norms in the process of formation and consequently combat the dangers of materialization and ideologizing.<sup>16</sup>

The last points take on added emphasis when one recalls that Les

Fleurs du mal and Madame Bovary joined the 700 panegyrics to hearth and motherhood among the publications of the year 1857. Jauss's project will not delight critics who subscribe to the "communicative fallacy," especially since he invades a territory (lyric poetry) usually off limits to sociological analysis; but if accounting for the social function of literature and for the power of such works as Madame Bovary may be included among the duties of literary criticism, then this approach deserves serious attention.

For Iser the aesthetic force of a work lies precisely in its recodification of society's norms and values, which in turn challenges the reader to find the motives underlying the work's questions and to participate thereby in the production of meaning. Thus literature, as he optimistically puts it, enables "the contemporary readers to see what they cannot normally see in the ordinary process of day-to-day living; and it enables the observers—the subsequent generations of readers—to grasp a reality that was never their own."17 On the surface this might seem to differ little from the cognitive theories of literature familiar to students of Russian literature from reading such social critics as Chernyshevsky, Dobroliubov, and Voronsky. But the attention Iser pays to speech-act theory and the extent to which he joins such French "post-Structuralists" as Roland Barthes in insisting on a multiplicity of codes, literary and social, offer new critical opportunities for understanding the dynamic, often contradictory relationship of literature to society and prevailing thought systems. Encoding, reception, norms, and conventionality-increasingly the subjects of both sociologists and literary critics-suggest social approaches to literature that will neglect neither the dynamics of social interaction nor the forms and traditions of literature, but will see both as related aspects of culture. 18

The papers gathered in this volume range in topic from general discussions of literary theory to empirical studies to close readings of specific literary texts. They address nearly every literary movement in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Russia and several major writers—Pushkin, Gogol, Turgenev, and Dostoevsky. The volume is organized, however, around four themes: theoretical problems in the relationship of literature and society, the reading public (historical and implied within the text), the rhetoric and ideologies of writers and critics, and authorial strategies for encompassing social reality in a work of literature. Of course, certain common interests cut across the boundaries of the four sections and join the papers together, for

example, the myriad types of readers and reading in imperial Russia, problems of communication and encoding, and limits imposed on understanding and expression by various aspects of a social situation. A brief outline of the volume should help the reader focus on these common concerns,

The first section examines theoretical formulations, Western and Soviet, promising and moribund, for the study of literature in its social context. Jean Franco begins by analyzing the French semiologists whose work has branched off from Saussurian linguistics, Russian Formalism, Prague school poetics, and related movements in anthropology and psychology, and has produced a radically disorienting ("deconstructive"), often confused, sometimes fruitful impact on American literary criticism. Her paper outlines the movement of these critics away from an early Structuralist preoccupation with linguistic models, formal structures, and a rule-governed cosmos that excluded human agency toward a "post-Structuralist" awareness of the production and reception of texts, a deconstruction of ideologies, and a rebellion against culture's closure of the literary work. The interest of critics like Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva in what the text cannot say (because of cultural "naturalization") opens possibilities for social and historical criticism that their own social and historical limitations have shielded from their attention: the interplay of oral and written literary traditions, the role of literature in the socialization of metropolitan and nonmetropolitan cultural groups. The problems that Franco raises are of particular importance in Russian culture, and several of the later papers, especially Jeffrey Brooks's, pursue them.

Robert Louis Jackson's paper turns to a different formulation of what the text cannot say: V. F. Pereverzev's psychosociological theory that the writer's creativity is hermetically sealed within a magic circle of images stamped on his unconscious by the conditions of his social environment. This adventurous, if not always sound, synthesis of depth psychology, literary criticism, economic determinism, and sociology is interesting for itself and for its fate: the dismantling of "Pereverzevian Marxism" in the early 1930's represents a major step in the reduction of literature and literary criticism in the Soviet Union to instruments of the state's immediate political needs. The uniqueness of Pereverzev's method (as opposed to other Soviet Marxist approaches to literature) lies in the priority it assigns to the analysis of literary form, and in its transformation of the Marxist formula "social being determines consciousness" into "social being determines