CONTINUITY BETWEEN THE LITERATURE OF OLD RUSSIA AND THE MODERN RUSSIAN NOVEL*

The degree of continuity between the literature of Old (pre-Petrine) Russia and modern Russia is an oft-noted but surprisingly unexamined issue. One cannot gainsay the radical discontinuities between the language and the genres of Old Russian literature and modern Russian literature. Old Russian literature was dominated by hagiography, chronicles, and military epics or tales, genres all similar in some respects to genres of Western medieval literature. Modern Russian literature is, of course, dominated by novels, lyric poetry, narrative poetry and drama, as is modern Western literature. As for language, a modern literary language was not created in Russia until the works of Karamzin and Pushkin. There are, likewise, radical discontinuities in subject matter and focus. Old Russian literature was largely religious in subject matter, while modern Russian literature is predominantly secular. For their part, many writers of the first half of the nineteenth century, including Chaadaev, Pushkin, Lermontov and Belinskii, lamented that Russia possessed no usable literary traditions they could exploit or follow.

Georges Florovsky advanced some challenging observations about discontinuity in intellectual content between the cultures of Old Russia and modern Russia.1 He claimed that the civilization of Old Russia was "silent," meaning that there was no logical inquiry and no philosophy and theology as there had been in the West during the same period. In this respect, he said, there was a marked break because modern Russia is "probably one of the most intellectual nations in Europe, inwardly troubled by all 'damned problems' of religion and metaphysics. Exercise in philosophy, of various

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shapes and shades, and commitment to theory and speculation were the distinctive mark of the Russian mind in the last two centuries."

Finally, perhaps the most persuasive evidence of discontinuity is that Old Russian literature had to be "rediscovered" in the modern era. As more fully described below, chronicles, hagiography and the Igor Tale were "rediscovered" and published starting in the late eighteenth century. Most of this literature had been lost from active historical memory for centuries.

Notwithstanding the radical discontinuities in language, genre and intellectual depth, others see important similarities between Old Russian and modern Russian literature. Dmitrii Likhachev believed that Old Russian literature created a tradition of didacticism (uchitel'nost') and seriousness in literature.

Old Russian literature was always distinguished by a special seriousness. It sought to answer the fundamental questions of life, urged the transformation of that life, and had various, invariably high ideals. Russian literature was always highly edifying and instructive. . . . All Russian writers, in their own way, hold the writer's vocation in great esteem. Each of them is, to some extent, a prophet and denouncer, and some are teachers, disseminators of knowledge, interpreters of reality and participants in the civic life of their country. . . . This sense of the noble calling of the writer was also handed down to the literature of the modern period.2

Likhachev also suggests that seventeenth-century Russia's "democratic literature," focusing on human degradation and preoccupied with death, lays the ground for the unique kind of humanism expressed in the nineteenth-century Russian novel.3

Other than to note the persistence of didacticism, the overall continuity or discontinuity of Russian literary history is seldom mentioned in the many available histories of Russian literature.4 While scholars have long accepted that Russian literature is didactic, recent studies have noted the continuity

