Evgeny Dobrenko and Galin Tihanov, eds.


According to the editors, “literature-centrism” became a defining feature of Russian culture already by mid-nineteenth century, because of the specific configurations of power and the harsh suppression of opposition: “The specific traits of literary criticism in Russia are a direct consequence of this special status of literature” (xi). The paradox of the book is that it documents and narrates this centrisim, but by encyclopedically exploring the material it also reveals what one has always suspected and what has been shown piecemeal in the last two decades (partly through the work of some contributors in this volume), namely that the apparently monolithic Soviet ideology of literature was always rent by internal dissension and repeatedly underwent transformations as a result of new historical and political events. The volume brings no great revelations about the in-fights that went on behind the curtains in the various committees of the Communist Party and the Writers Union, but the sheer breadth and volume of the discussed material reveals a multiplicity of factions and diversity of opinions.

This richness must have raised problems for the editors. Anticipating questions about the volumes organization, they cite David Perkin’s remark that literary histories ought to be “relatively unified,” but “highly diverse” if they are to be plausible (ix). It is between the Scylla and Charybdis of such diversity and unity that the volume is sailing through as skillfully as circumstances allow it. It presents itself against the three post-Soviet histories of literary criticism, published by Valerii Prozorov (2002), Aleksandr Kazarkin (2004), and Mikhail Golubkov (2008), which are all textbooks for students of philology, written in Russian. In contrast to these, the editors of the present volume were able to put together a cooperative volume for a much wider international audience: two authors, in several cases by one in Russia and one in the West, jointly write seven out of the fifteen chapters. Such still rare Russian-Western cooperation in literary studies is highly desirable in view of the complexity of the controversial issues involved. It is a sign of the volume’s success that no discrepancies seem to exist between the contributions from Russia and the West. Considering the potential audiences of the volume, it would be highly desirable to produce a Russian language version of it that could reach the widest home audience of readers and students in Russia, many of whom may not master English well enough to understand the book adequately. From a Western and global perspective, it would be welcome if yet another version could be prepared for comparatists and students of literature in general.
In addition to broadening the material, the editors decided not to follow the usual method of focusing on “portraits” of key theorists and critics, a pattern that was used also in the first two of the mentioned recent Russian histories. Instead, they have divided the volume into fifteen chapters, of which seven are devoted to the politically defined periods of the Soviet period: Chapter 1 by Stefano Garzonio and Maria Zalambani is devoted to the Revolution and the Civil War (1917–1921), Chapter 2 by Natalia Kornienko to the NEP (1921–1927), Chapter 3 by Evgeny Dobrenko to the Cultural Revolution (1928–1932), Chapter 5 by Hans Günther to Socialist Realism (1932–1940), Chapter 8 by Evgeny Dobrenko to the War and Late Stalinism (1941–1953), Chapter 9 by Evgeny Dobrenko and Ilya Kalinin to the Thaw, Chapter 10 by Mark Lipovetsky and Mikhail Berg to the “Long 1970s,” Chapter 11 by William Mills Todd III to the period 1960–1980, and Chapter 12 by Birgit Menzel and Boris Dubin to the End of the Soviet System (1985–1991). The two chapters on Émigré theory and criticism had to adopt a different time division to complement these: Chapter 7 by Tihanov is devoted to the period between the two World Wars, whereas Chapter 13 by Theimer Nepomnyashchyy covers the period from WW II to the End of the Soviet Union. Two chapters are devoted to the Post-Soviet period: one by Ilya Kukulin and Mark Lipovetsky to Criticism (Chapter 14) and another one by Nancy Condee and Eugeniia Kupsan to “Literary Studies: The Rebirth of Academism” (Chapter 15). Only the 1920s are covered twice, the chapter on NEP roughly coincides with Caryl Emerson’s period in chapter 4 on the formalist, Bakhtinian, Marxist, and psychological literary theorists.

While the period breaks are justified by the political events in the Soviet Union and Russia, they could have bolstered by further reflection in view of recent Western (if not Russian) theories opposing “grand narratives.” Following Denis Hollier’s pioneering French literary history, it has become fashionable, not only in Western Europe (Germany, the Netherlands, and Belgium) but also in the East-Central Europe (Hungary) to abandon continuous chronological lines and replace them with separate essays linked to select dates. While I have reservations about this approach, I believe that the study on the rather traditional Russian concepts of literary history could have been combined with some reflection on the volume’s own concept of history. It is slightly ironic that the introduction (xv) applies such heavily loaded and meanwhile heavily criticized concepts as “evolution” and “development” to its own concept of history.

The editors explain in the introduction that theory and criticism, the two categories consistently used throughout the volume, have different meanings in the Russian tradition: history and theory of literature (literaturovedenie) mean academic scholarship in a narrower sense, while criticism is mostly