

Adrian Wanner, *Russian Minimalism: From the Prose Poem to the Anti-Story*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2003. xii + 216 pp.

Minimalism has sometimes been seen as an essentially postmodern form, and the large structures of Russian and Soviet modernism are certainly problematised by, for example, the minimalist 'card catalogues' of the Moscow conceptualist Lev Rubinshtein. However, as Adrian Wanner comprehensively demonstrates, minimalism in Russian literature has a tradition (if perhaps not a very prominent one) going back to the beginning of the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the *Stikhotvoreniia v proze* of Turgenev. As he notes in his preface, Wanner's book is in fact 'a study of Turgenev's prose poems and their descendants' (ix), culminating with the 'anti-stories' of Daniil Kharms written in the 1930s. The link between the two, of course, is not at all straightforward, and the juxtaposition highlights two substantial methodological issues which the book has been forced to confront.

The first of these is a terminological one. In a sense *Russian Minimalism* is really a history of the Russian prose poem, but this oxymoronic term was barely used in Russia after Turgenev, and indeed deliberately avoided by writers wishing to distance themselves from Turgenev's social and aesthetic conservatism. 'Minimalism', on the other hand, which in postmodern usage does not always imply smallness of scale, fails to capture adequately the 'aestheticisation of miniature form' characteristic of less experimental writers. Wanner treads carefully through the problems of definition attending his subject in an initial chapter which draws extensively on recent writing on the genre(s) in American and West European literature as well as on the scattered body of existing criticism on minimalism and the prose poem in Russian. Ultimately he concludes that 'the nature of the genre consists in a cluster of minus-functions' (12), and is therefore intrinsically subversive, even in its modernist incarnations.

Wanner's second difficulty relates to the status of his book as literary history. As he is the first to acknowledge, the link he posits stretching from Turgenev to Kharms is less genealogical than typological (ix). Consequently, and partly also because the actual volume of work in the genre of modernist prose poem/minimalist prose is quite small, Wanner is obliged to spend a great deal of time in his discussions of individual

authors noting how they do not grow out of their predecessors, even when they deal with similar motifs. Sometimes this seems to undermine the narrative coherence of his project. But perhaps this is the point: if subversion is a concomitant of formal brevity, then paradoxically the miniature can have no stable history.

On individual writers and movements Wanner's analyses are full of insights. He considers Turgenev's prose poems largely in the context of Baudelaire's *Petits poèmes en prose*, which to all intents and purposes mark the beginnings of the genre in the 1860s, and with which Turgenev must surely have been acquainted. He notes that despite evident similarities of theme and conception the purposes of the two authors in their prose miniatures are quite different. While Baudelaire aims to shock and challenge, Turgenev more often seeks to confirm existing notions. Baudelaire, of course, was primarily a poet, and so for him the translation of poetic ideas into prose constituted a significant break from the past. Turgenev the fiction writer sought rather to enhance and heighten the ideas of his earlier prose narratives.

Wanner spends a short chapter on other realist prose writers, of whom the most interesting was Bunin, but then turns to the legacy of symbolism. Although for the French symbolists the prose poem became a major genre, for the Russians it was not, although Bal'mont, Briusov, Belyi and others all dabbled with miniature prose in their youth. The important exceptions, as Wanner notes in detail, were Sologub, whose little-known *skazochki* parody the conventions of folk literature to 'create an irrational counter-reality that is sharply opposed to the "prosaic" realm of quotidian banality' (84); and Remizov, whose numerous accounts of dreams similarly posit a night-time reality which exists in parallel with the logic of the waking world.

In a chapter on futurist prose miniatures Wanner explores the revisions to the genre implied, for example, by Khlebnikov's passion for neologisms, or the attempts by Livshits, Kandinskii and Guro to translate the principles of avant-garde painting into literature. Wanner concludes with his discussion of Kharms, whose texts have often been strangely foreshadowed in the work of his predecessors, and who is credited with pushing the bounds of literary minimalism to the extreme by challenging the basis of narrative itself; frame and context remain, but narrative content has been parodically refined to non-existence.

The logic of Kharms' position notwithstanding, of course, minimalism and the prose poem continue to have a productive existence, and in his epilogue Wannner notes not only postmodernist developments but also the moralising miniatures of Solzhenitsyn. *Russian Minimalism* not only provides a fascinating guide to a noteworthy though previously neglected aspect of the literature of modernism, it also provides a yardstick for the assessment of future minimalist initiatives.

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Walter G. Moss, *A History of Russia*, 2nd ed., *Volume I: To 1917* (London: Anthem Press, 2002). xxii + 632 pp., maps, figures, chronology, glossary, bibliographies, index. Paperback: ISBN: 1-84331-023-6 24.95 US\$39.95.

This is the first of a two-volume revision of Professor Moss's *A History of Russia* (1997). It is much welcome. Beginning with the Varangians and concluding upon the eve of the February Revolution, Moss's narrative manages to embrace a wide range of topics while at the same time remaining accessible and interesting. A specialist on the period of Alexander II's reign, Moss seems more sure-footed once he enters the nineteenth century, but his recourse to passive constructions to describe Russia's earlier history should not unduly distract the average student reader. He balances humorous anecdotes with provocative concepts, and discusses historiography in a clearer and more contemporary fashion than that found in Riasanovsky's *A History of Russia*, now in its sixth edition and looking a bit musty by comparison. In addition to Moss's more conversational style, the text benefits from what are simply excellent maps (twenty-six in all) and a series of clearly reproduced engravings, prints, and photographs. Bibliographies of English-language sources are comprehensive and will appeal to student and instructor alike: each chapter has a separate listing and there is a more wide-ranging topical bibliography at the end of the book. The chronology, glossary, and tables of rulers are detailed, and the index includes conceptual terms such as "folklore," "literacy," and "prostitution."