

Reviews

Jostein Børtnes, *The Poetry of Prose: Readings in Russian Literature* (Bergen: Department of Foreign Languages, University of Bergen, 2007), 211 pp.

This compilation – the eighth volume in the Slavica Bergensia series – brings together ten essays published by the distinguished Norwegian Slavist over a period of two and a half decades and bears witness to the range of his scholarly interests. In explication of the title, the brief Introduction outlines as a common theme the notion of a ‘prose poetics’ applied to ‘the art of transforming sequential prose narrative into symbolic parallelism’ (10). The modes of ‘parallelistic patterning’ include the juxtaposition of similarities and differences in character and situation and the metaphorical projection of one story onto another to highlight analogous elements; in the Russian literary tradition, it is argued, they most characteristically invoke biblical analogies and symbolism. This exposition of the unifying theoretical framework does not entirely dispel the impression of disparateness which emerges from the chapters which follow, varying widely as they do in respect of genre (two were originally published as essays in standard works of reference, the rest as articles in scholarly journals or *Festschriften*), length (from over forty pages to a mere seven) and even content (it is perhaps unexpected to find in a volume of ‘readings in Russian literature’ a detailed analysis of Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited*).

The first two, most substantial and wide-ranging chapters, ‘Medieval and East Slavic Literature 988–1730’ and ‘Religion and Art in the Russian Novel’, are already widely known and generally available in *The Cambridge History of Russian Literature* (1989) and *The Cambridge Companion to the Classic Russian Novel* (1990) respectively. Together they provide an historical account of the ‘Christocentric’ (11) tradition of symbolic parallelism in Russian literature: the former surveying the depiction of the self in terms of Christ’s life and Passion in hagiographical and ecclesiastical texts from Nestor the Chronicler to the Archpriest Avvakum, the latter extending such an interpretation to the works of the major nineteenth-century novelists. The argument here centres on the combined impact on the Orthodox idea of ‘Christian self-realisation in imitation of Christ’ (59) of Enlightenment thought, Rousseau’s notion of the goodness of ‘natural

man' and the Romantic cult of the genius. This gave rise to a dichotomous view the self and a 'tragic vision of the moral universe' (62) reflected in the works of Pushkin and Gogol, where the transgressing hero is condemned to separation from society and spiritual death. The hope of 'reincorporation' and 'resurrection to a new life' (63) comes only with the novels of Turgenev and especially Dostoevsky and their rediscovery of Biblical analogy and metaphor as a means of suggesting 'the possibility of a christocentric anthropology in the modern world' (79).

The six chapters which follow develop these ideas with reference to key aspects of Dostoevsky's major fiction: the function of hagiographic elements and schemes that underlie 'his various representations of man's struggle to transform himself into his divine ideal' (91; Chapter 4); polyphony in *The Brothers Karamazov* as a pattern of thematic variations and parallels generated by the symbol of Christ (Chapter 5); the notion of *iurodstvo*, redefined to distinguish the truly Christlike 'holy fools' (Sonya Marmeladova, Father Zosima, Alesha Karamazov) from the dissemblers, the merely foolish and the simple-minded (such as Myshkin) (Chapter 6); the Christological symbolism of *The Idiot*, reinterpreted to argue that the 'central symbol' of the novel (135) is the dead Christ of Holbein's painting rather than the Christlike Prince (Chapter 7); the homoerotic implications of triangular desire in the Myshkin–Rogozhin–Nastasia Filippovna relationship (Chapter 8); the interplay of image and prototype in the representation of Stavrogin, an Antichrist created by those who project on to him their desire for an idol (Chapter 9). These chapters are the core of the book, combining searching textual analysis and nuanced interpretation with a scholarly eclecticism which interrogates and expands upon the insights of earlier researchers. Even readers who might remain unpersuaded by the general premise or the particular analyses will welcome the appearance in a single volume of related articles heretofore available only in a variety of (sometimes relatively obscure) sources; although, while a certain amount of overlap is to be expected, the author might have taken advantage of the opportunity to avoid the repetition of some of the illustrative matter (the scenes of Myshkin's first encounter with Rogozhin and Sonya's retelling of the Lazarus story are used more than once) and even some of the wording.

The last two chapters shift the focus in different ways. The first of these demonstrates through a meticulous analysis of narrative technique in *Fathers and Sons* 'that parallelism is the principle by which characters are juxtaposed with their setting in space and time in a structure of mutual correspondences' (186).

Chapter 10 moves from a theoretical discussion of the genre theories of Bakhtin and Lotman to a study of ‘generic interaction’ in *Brideshead Revisited* which (in an echo of earlier chapters) stresses the importance of the hagiographic element in the final ‘transfiguration’ of Sebastian Flyte.

The Poetry of Prose conforms to the generally high production standards of this series, although it would have benefitted from more rigorous scrutiny by a native speaker of English. It is a useful addition to the literature on Dostoevsky in particular, yet for all the excellence of many of its parts, it remains for this reviewer at least something less than a completely satisfying whole.

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J. Douglas Clayton (ed.), *Anton Pavlovich Chekhov. Poetics – Hermeneutics – Thematics* (Ottawa: Slavic Research Group at the University of Ottawa, 2006), vii + 319 pp.

The eighteen essays assembled here derive for the most part from papers presented at an international workshop marking the centenary of Chekhov’s death held at the University of Ottawa in December, 2004. According to the table of contents, the first eleven (representing in number of pages a little less than two thirds of the volume) constitute a section devoted to the writer’s prose, the remainder are grouped together under the general title ‘Chekhov’s Drama’, although in practice this division is ignored and many of the contributions cross the generic boundary. The overarching aim as defined by the editor is to reflect the current state of Chekhov studies by focussing on ‘revolutionary innovations in poetics’ (i) as the key to the writer’s achievement in both literature and the theatre.

Clayton in his introduction, and many of the contributors in their articles, acknowledge their debt Aleksandr Chudakov and the ‘structural-phenomenological approach’ (iii) of his ground-breaking study *Poetika Chekhova* (1971). The other major theoretical influence here is of course Mikhail Bakhtin, the inspiration for a number of studies of various aspects of language and (non-) communication in the Chekhov text. Of the prose works, most attention is paid to ‘Ward Number 6’, ‘Tonych’, ‘The Man in the Case’ and ‘The Lady with the Little Dog’, although there are also detailed analyses of ‘The Bishop’, ‘A Nervous Breakdown’ and, less