

Diachrony and synchrony in writing Russian literary history¹

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I

Anyone contemplating to write a narrative history of a national literature, that is, a work which is more than a mere chronicle, catalogue, or collection of articles, loosely connected by their subject, will face several questions. Empirically, such enterprise would seem to presuppose, at least, the existence of a national language and a cultural identity, as well as, almost inevitably, a certain amount of linkage to political and social history. In the case of Russian literature, all of these suppositions bear to be examined.

There is the question whether certain texts that have been traditionally held to belong to Russian literature should not be considered a part of Ukrainian or Belorussian literature. There is also the fact that some works which have been conventionally dealt with as a part of medieval Russian literature are composed entirely in Slavonic, the language of the Slavic Orthodox Church, often by authors who were not Russian, but Southern Slavs². Slavonic, often called “Church Slavonic”, is based on ninth-century Bulgarian, a South Slavic language. The Russian literature idiom is essentially a hybrid of East Slavic and Church Slavonic.

¹ The following observations were inspired by Horst-Jürgen Gerigk’s thoughtful review of my *History of Russian Literature* in *Zeitschrift für Slavische Philologie* LV (1995/96), 2: 409–14. Professors Rimvydas Šilbajoris of Ohio State University and David Danow of the University of California in Riverside also gave me valuable suggestions.

² For example, Metropolitan Kiprian (1390–1406) and Grigory Tsamblak (d. ca. 1420) were Bulgarian, Pakhomy Logofet (arr. in Russia ca. 1438) was Serbian.

Since the 17th century the Russian literary language underwent drastic changes under the influence of contacts with the West, as a result of which it has incorporated important elements of Greek, Latin, Polish, German, French, and most recently, English vocabulary and syntax³. The Russian literary language is substantially different from the *koinē* of the uneducated. Russian oral poetry and prose, vigorously active well into the nineteenth century, has an idiom of its own, with some archaic traits. There has been at all times some mutual influence between the language of literature, traditional folklore, and so-called “urban folklore”, based on the *koinē* of the uneducated.

The term “literature” bears some preliminary examination. In Russian, a distinction is made between *literatura* and *pis'mennost'*, “writing”. Existing histories of Russian literature begin by including many works that, if written centuries later, would be considered *pis'mennost'*, rather than *literatura*⁴. This is true of religious works: homiletics, hagiography, pilgrimages, theological and didactic texts, all of which continued to be produced in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but are no longer dealt with in literary studies, unless they happen to have a bearing on *literatura*⁵. The same goes for historiography. Medieval chronicles are dealt with in every history of Russian literature, but historical works of the modern period are not, with a few exceptions, such as Pushkin's *History of the Pugachov Revolt*.

Problems arise even in connection with literature in the conventional sense, that is imaginative fiction, poetry, and drama. Belinsky distinguished between *poesy* (*poeziia*, in the sense of German *Dichtung*), *belles lettres* (*belletristika*), and *journalism*,⁶ where the first means original creation, the second an adaptation of *poeziia* to the tastes of a broad readership, and the third its application to specific topical issues. Belinsky considered all three important, each in its own way. His scheme leaves out oral poetry, and other types of popular

³ In a way, the history of Russian literature may be perceived as a history of the Russian literary language.

⁴ The term *slovesnost'* covers all verbal expression, written and oral.

⁵ Such as, for example, *The Tale of his Travels and Pilgrimages ... by Parfeny, a Monk Tonsured at Holy Mount Athos* (Moscow, 1856), which Dostoevsky used in writing *The Brothers Karamazov*.

⁶ Belinsky's division may be compared to the American division of magazines into “art,” “slick,” and “pulp.” His *belletristika* is, however, a notch higher than what is called *Trivialliteratur* in German.

literature, such as the chapbook (*lubok*), which served the entertainment and edification of the lower classes, and “yellow” or “boulevard” literature. It also leaves out religious literature, historiography, and metaliterary genres, such as esthetic and literary theory.

There are other important divisions in literature: censored and uncensored, a key issue in Russia, or even “approved” (*dozvolennaiia*) and “disapproved” (such major critics as Osip Mandelstam⁷ and Andrei Siniavsky suggest that all “approved” literature ought to be excluded from consideration as authentic art), literature with a “tendency” (which may be political, social, religious, etc.) and literature that bears no such message. A great deal depends on the reader addressed: the censor, the editor, the critic, the “in” reader, the general reader, etc. Literature addressed to a circle of *cognoscenti* turned, in Pushkin’s lifetime, into a medium of political struggle, and into a branch of commerce, run by professionals.

Having recognized some of the problems that we face in defining our subject, a national literature, we face the problem of how to define “history”.

Following the ideas of Herder, Schelling, and Hegel, various conceptions were developed in Russia, starting in the 1820a, which applied to Russia the notion that history, and hence the history of a national literature, is a goal-directed process, governed by certain “laws”. The great critic V. G. Belinsky (1811–1864) perceived Russian literature as a vehicle of Russia’s progress toward joining the nations of the West in their quest to realize the potential of the human spirit. Apollon Grigoriev (1822–1864), another major critic, corrected Belinsky’s “westernizing” view by suggesting that the evolutionary process of Russian literature as a whole, as well as in the individual development of its major writers, pointed to an ever increasing role of native Russian elements and an elimination of foreign influences. Meanwhile, Slavophile theorists were claiming that Russia, and so Russian literature, should be going their own separate way in pursuing a world order based on the Orthodox Christian faith of the Russian people⁸, while leftist ideologues, such as N. G. Chernyshevsky (1828–1889), advanced the notion that literature was primarily a tool of so-

⁷ Mandelstam said so very plainly in his *Fourth Prose*.

⁸ Dostoevsky revived Gogol’s idea that Pushkin was Russia’s national poet, a great prophet of the Russian people who had pointed the way Russia was to take in the future, in his “Discourse on Pushkin” (1880) and elsewhere.

cial progress and enlightenment, and rejected any claim to literature's metaphysical calling.

Russian Marxists, such as G. V. Plekhanov (1856–1918), saw literature as a part of the superstructure of society and held that a writer's social class determined the content of his art. Finally, Soviet ideology perceived literature as “a truthful, historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development”. What all these views of literature have in common is that they perceive literary history in organic, or even in determinist terms, taking for granted that literature is a function of the nation, perceived as an organism, and that it is organically linked to the other functions of that organism, viz. political movements, art, music, and culture at large⁹.

Opposed to this organic and historicist conception of literature is one which was dubbed “esthetic” by its detractors in the 1860s and 1870s. Considering literature primarily an art form, *sui generis* among other arts, the “esthetes”, such as Alexander Druzhinin and Vasily Botkin, concentrated on an analyses of its material, language, and the devices of its craft. They did not deny that literature had a social function, but stressed its autonomy. The key issue here was that the “esthetic” approach to literature, following the teaching of Immanuel Kant, denied the notion of progress in literature. Pushkin himself is on record to this effect¹⁰. In the twentieth century, the Russian Formalist School advocated an altogether new and different approach to literature and literary history, insisting that verbal art was, like other art forms, pursuing its own ends and that to link literature and literary history to political and social developments meant to ignore the very essence of verbal art¹¹.

Another attack on the organic and historicist conception of literature was launched by early twentieth-century Modernism. Primitivist and archaic tendencies in Futurism, the return to the great themes of Western literature in Symbolism, and the notion developed by the

⁹ The various predictions of these schools of thought have had a certain effect as self-fulfilling prophecies. Their ideas helped Russian writers to choose the path to Russia's future, as they would present it in their works.

¹⁰ Alexander Druzhinin (1824–1864), Vasily Botkin (1811–1869), and Pavel Annenkov (1811–1887) were called “the esthetes” in the debates that went on in literary periodicals of the 1860s. For Pushkin, see note 18 below.

¹¹ The Formal School advocated an approach to art through its medium — language, in the case of literature.

Acmeist Osip Mandelstam, according to which verbal art should be viewed, not in terms of causality, or evolutionary theory, “not to speak of its vulgar appendage, the theory of progress”, but in terms of memory, recognition, and other “connections”¹², all challenged the approach to literary history which had become standard in the nineteenth century.

What emerges from all this confusion is the simple fact that literature and literary history have been approached in different ways, depending on the reader with whom the writer of literary history identifies most. It stands to reason that a great deal depends on the literary historian’s values and special interests. For example, N. G. Chernyshevsky’s novel *What Is to be Done?* must be discussed on account of its considerable political impact, though it is generally agreed to have little or no esthetic merit. In some instances, a work of literature is important in different ways and it is up to the historian to choose what to emphasize. For instance, Tolstoi’s *War and Peace*, a recognized masterpiece of historical fiction, was also “an important political event”, as Konstantin Leontiev immediately recognized. It caused a debate regarding its historical accuracy, was challenged from the Left as well as from the Right, and eventually prevailed even against objective historical criticism in giving the Russian national consciousness an indelible, though biassed image of the period.

It also stands to reason that, even if we reject any large scale historical teleology of the kind Dostoevsky or the Marxists believed in, the writer of literary history is still left with the task of establishing cause-and-effect relations between authors, their works, historical events, readership, as well as a variety of literary relations of intratextual, intertextual, and metatextual nature. The degree of intentionality is probably as high in literature as in any human activity. Few will deny that the reverse feedback of literature on socio-political developments was greater in Russia than most anywhere else. Chernyshevsky, who felt that it was slight, still observed that, in Russia, with no other public forum available, literature was a factor *faute de mieux*. The fact that most authors address a reader whom they have in mind all along and stick to the contract that exists in the reader’s mind, and theirs, regarding structure, as well as *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* of their text,

¹² Osip Mandelstam, “On the Nature of the Word” (*O prirode slova*, 1922, *Sobranie sochinenii* (Washington: Inter-Language Literary Associates, 1971), 2: 242.

also accounts for a great deal of order, since the types of readers addressed are obviously limited.

The corollary of all these observations is that the literary historian, certainly in the case of Russian literature, must choose between radically curtailing his subject and its treatment, or making a series of compromises which vitiate his methodology. He must select authors and works to be discussed, either in detail or in passing, according to a principle by which their importance is graded. For instance, the role of *Trivialliteratur* may be huge in a work that concentrates on literature's social impact, while it will be ignored in a history that looks out for excellence in literary craftsmanship, originality, psychological or philosophical depth.

The very organization of a history of Russian literature has depended on the author's political philosophy. For example, Pavel Sakulin, a member of the so-called sociological school of the 1920s, organized the chapters of his history by the author's social class: "gentry literature", "bourgeois literature", etc. Even if the historian has no immediate political bias, he still faces the task of assessing the space to be allotted to the diverse aspects of a given work and its reception. Depending on the literary historian's attitude, the emphasis may rest on the genesis and biographic and historical background of a work, or on its immediate effect in the literary marketplace, its place in the canon of national or world literature, or other criteria.

II

The literary survey that covers a short period in a more or less comprehensive way is the equivalent of the historical chronicle. In the 1830s and 1840s, and even into the 1850s, when a single reader could still read more or less every work of Russian literature that appeared and also cover all of the literary journals, critics like Belinsky and Grigoriev produced annual surveys of Russian literature, assessing the novelty, originality, social import, and esthetic merits of at least those works that seemed more important. These critics by and large did a remarkably good job: no major figure escaped their attention and no minor light was hailed as a genius. However, their judgment* was significantly corrected by posterity, for example, with regard to Gogol in the case of Belinsky, and Lermontov, in that of Grigoriev. In these

annual surveys, attempts were also made to indicate the direction Russian literature was taking and individual works were evaluated accordingly.

Surveys covering a somewhat longer period of time were also attempted. There is the remarkable essay, "An Extraordinary Decade" (1880) by P. V. Annenkov (1811–87), covering the 1840s in retrospect, though from a participant's viewpoint, and similar efforts by Alexander Herzen and Apollon Grigoriev. Beginning with the 1860s, it became impossible for a single critic to cover any period of Russian literature so completely.

These surveys, of course, do note the appearance of new authors, works, ideas, themes, and styles, as well as their relevance to Russian society, as the critic sees it. But basically, their method is that of the chronicler, rather than that of the historian. What is absent is a sense of continuity, direction, and anticipation. After 1860 Russian literature is too rich, too complex, and too heterogeneous to be presented synchronically as an organic whole, though efforts were made to find unity in polarities such as Realism: Symbolism, Passéism: Futurism, Decadence (a symptom of the decline of bourgeois culture): Social Realism (the harbinger of a new social order, to be brought about by revolutionary activity). But even these efforts could cover only a part of Russian literature. The fact seems to be that there are many good topics for synchronic study covering *parts* of Russian literature.

Literary groupings, schools, and movements, characterized by common views on their art and its mission, are well suited for synchronic study, especially if their works and other activities can be organized around some focal idea, person, or event. Often the focus of a literary school's essence is seen in its polar opposition to another, contemporary, school or movement. For instance, the essence of the period before the age of Pushkin and his Pleiade is focussed in the controversy of the Shishkovians and the Karamzinists. The essence of the schools of Russian modernist poetry may be conveniently defined by the key tenets of contemporary schools with whom they competed, say, Acmeism by its rejection of Symbolism.¹³

A long period of literary history may be synchronized by the prevalence of a certain intellectual climate and esthetic canon: the Age

¹³ A rivalry between two directions or schools may be conducive to change through parody or travesty of the opposing style. Dostoevsky's romantic realism is a case in point.

of Reason paired with Classicism, the Golden Age of Russian Poetry coupled with idealist philosophy and romantic esthetics. Obviously, these periods, if treated synchronically as a single system, will be presented incompletely, since much of what happened during the period in question transcends the boundaries of the basic frame of orientation. The Age of Reason also experienced a widespread flowering of the occult and of the fairy tale, even in Russia. Byronic Romanticism was merely an episode in Pushkin's creation. Tiutchev, whose worldview is unquestionably romantic, uses a language that is closer to the eighteenth century. Lermontov, arch-romantic for the most part, shows an obvious tendency toward realism in some of his later poems ("Valerik", for example) and in his prose. It appears that a synchronic treatment of an epoch, such as the Golden Age of Russian Poetry, serves admirably as an icon of the great literature and the culture that generated it, but does not tell the whole story. Modernism covers much of the poetry and prose of the period preceding World War I, but a vast amount of non-modernist literature coexisted with Modernism — one only needs to mention the *Znanie* group, a bastion of oldfashioned social and psychological Realism, headed by Maksim Gor'ky.

Nevertheless, viewing a national literature as an integral part of a nation's culture, as has been done by Iu. M. Lotman and his school, is correct and useful, provided that both "culture" and "literature" are carefully defined. And there is still the caveat of the *sui generis* nature and value of verbal art.¹⁴

Nor can it be denied that Mnemosyne, a poet's memory, can synchronize at will every line of poetry or prose created, orally or in writing, since the dawn of history. A literate reader, as he reads a poem or prose work, cannot avoid facing a rich subtext from the whole of his readings and other experience.

Reading a novel like *The Brothers Karamazov*, the well-read reader picks up literally hundreds of quotes, allusions and responses to a long list of Russian and Western writers, not to speak of the ubiquitous biblical references. While reading Dostoevsky, he remembers Shakespeare, Schiller, Goethe, Victor Hugo, to name only the most famous, and of course, Pushkin, Gogol, Turgenev, Nekrasov, and

¹⁴ See Yuri Lotman, "Thesis towards a Semiotics of Russian Culture", *Elementa*, 1994, 1(3): 219–227.

Tolstoi, again, to name only the most famous. Thus, every time our well-read reader reads a work of literature, he enters a vast hypertext of world literature, as did Dostoevsky, that “reader of genius”.

It is a fact that some works live on forever.¹⁵ Homer is to most of us, since we read him in childhood and were unaware of any historical facts, a contemporary of sorts, as he was to readers before us. Most works, even many that were very successful at their appearance, recede into the past, to be read only by literary historians. Some have a much longer life. Tolstoi’s *War and Peace* is a case in point, as Ia.S. Lur’e’s recent study *Posle L’va Tolstogo (After Tolstoi, 1993)* has once again demonstrated.

Individual authors whose works show little or no development may be treated synchronically. Ivan Goncharov, for example, certainly a classic and a major figure even in a European context, did not change either his style or his philosophy in the course of his long life, though the times were changing, of course. But it appears that most major authors of Russian literature, such as Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoevsky and Tolstoi, changed significantly enough in the course of their lifetime to make a synchronic analysis of their *oeuvre* problematic.

Much of literary history, past as well as current, consists of more or less synchronic treatments of particular topics. What is missing in a history composed entirely of such pieces are the many connections which one keeps discovering between them, even if one is not looking for patterns of continuity.

III

A diachronic view of literary history implies a continuity of subject matter, coupled with qualitative change. The changes in Russian literature have been drastic and sudden, due to extrinsic factors, such as the reforms of Peter the Great and the Revolution of 1917. The changes in Russian literature directly resulting from contacts with the West are also radical. The role of political and ideological factors has

¹⁵ The survival or even the “immortality” of a work of literature is not necessarily the result of esthetic or ethic excellence. A mere accident, such as that the work became a staple of literature for children, may be a reason for it as well.

been more prominent in Russia than nearly anywhere else. Therefore it is understandable that Russian critics, beginning with Belinsky, have tended to see Russian literary history as an organic process, with literature as a whole acting as an organ of the Russian nation.

In Russia, more than anywhere else, an ideological view of history has held sway. It may be said that both Marxist and Slavophile versions of a determinist view of Russian history have been proven wrong by history itself. However, this does not remove the actual presence of a certain teleological thrust in the development of Russian society and of Russian literature. Revolutionary ideas, imported from the West, caused Russian writers to produce works promoting revolutionary activities, and revolutionary activities, in turn, became the subject of works of literature. The same is true of the ideologies involving Russia's national mission as a savior of Christian civilization, also largely based on ideas imported from the West. It may be recalled that Apollon Grigoriev, perhaps Russia's most perspective critic, said that Russians, being unsophisticated barbarians, were want to live their philosophy — with disastrous consequences, as it turned out.

Assuming there is a link between life and literature, which does not mean that this link is strictly mimetic, and that Russian life is the Signified, Russian literature the Signifier, the rate of change is spectacular in both. Belinsky, a perspective critic, could not properly appreciate Derzhavin's poetry, mainly because Russian life had changed so much, and he actually faulted Pushkin's works for being "old" (*staro!*). Dostoevsky, a conservative, faulted his contemporaries Goncharov, Turgenev, and even Tolstoi, for writing about a Russia of the past, although their works were set in contemporary Russia. The radical Dmitry Pisarev dispensed with *War and Peace* by entitling his review "Oldfashioned Gentry" (*Staroe barstvo*).

As to the Signifier, the Russian language itself changed significantly under foreign influence. Russian versification was imported, first from Poland, then from Germany, as were all the genres of poetry, drama, and prose fiction, one by one. The esthetic sense reflected in Russian literature since the eighteenth century is likewise an import from the West. The popular taste, as reflected in folk poetry, is quite different.

The many changes in sensibility that may be observed in Russian literature of the modern period can be in part understood in the same terms as similar changes in the major literatures of the West, although

there are some instances where Russian conditions require a special explanation. Pushkin's early verse is classicist. "Ruslan and Liudmila" shows a sensibility that is Rococo rather than Romantic. Pushkin's discovery of Byron and Shakespeare is a turning point. For a brief period Pushkin is a Byronic Romantic, as in "The Gypsies", for example. But then *Eugene Onegin* and the later verse epics show a dominance of romantic irony and pointedly unresolved ambiguities. His "serene sadness" (*svetlaia pechal'*) links him to Romanticism at its existentially most profound. Finally, Pushkin's late prose was recognized by astute critics, such as Grigoriev and Rozanov, to be the real beginning of Russian realism. Looking at Pushkin's readership we get a different picture: the rebel, exiled for poems like "The Dagger", becomes a court poet, whose patriotic effusions on the occasion of the Polish uprising of 1830 elicit the indignation of his friends. Soon after his untimely death the poet becomes the target of progressive critics. Even Belinsky sees him mainly as a formal genius who lacks real substance; Dobroliubov deplores Pushkin's "lack of a proper education", which prevented him from making serious contributions to Russian literature; and the *shestidesiatniki* lampooned him as a frivolous poet of "little feet". (At the same time, some Slavophiles, as later the old Tolstoi, also found him immoral.) But then *pochva* and Dostoevsky revived Gogol's idea that Pushkin was Russia's national poet and a great prophet of the Russian people, who had pointed the way Russia was to take in the future. In the twentieth century, Pushkin became an ideal and a fetish to some (after all, he had dared to endorse Horace's "Odi profane vulgus" and declared that the poet was responsible only to his Muse), and worthless ballast to be thrown overboard from the ship of modernity to others. Soviet critics would grant him a place of honor as a poet who was "progressive for his age", while their émigré opponents would find a conservative and even a religious strain in him.

The question of continuity in Tolstoi has occupied critics for a long time. At the same time, it seems true that Tolstoi's style underwent significant changes: from the Clarism of *Childhood* and its eighteenth-century flavor, to the physiological sketches of the Caucasian and Sebastopol tales, on to the Walter-Scottian *War and Peace*; then *Anna*

Karenina, pure vintage psychological novel¹⁶; Tales for the People, stylized, with supernatural elements introduced as a concession to an alleged popular sensibility; polemic and ideological pieces of the last thirty years. Yet there is something about Tolstoi's Whole outlook on life and on his art that makes it unmistakably Tolstoian and gives it a unique quality of which his rationalism, moralism, reductionism, and even his use of estrangement (in extreme cases, making the reader believe that the viewpoint of an illiterate Russian peasant is the only avenue to truth) are seemingly necessary constituent elements.

Genre would seem to be a tractable subject of diachronic study, unless one tries to deal with the three basic genres: epic, lyric, drama. In this case, the situation is made complicated by the fact that genre-specific traits are often found in works that belong to other genres. Thus the "lyric verse epic" (*poema*) is a popular genre of modern Russian literature. Chekhov's plays have lyric elements. Dostoevsky's novels have been likened to Shakespearean tragedies. At times, a diachronic connection between successive forms can be established, for example, when the early Dostoevsky's novels are travestied versions of familiar romantic forms or, in the case of *Poor Folk*, of the sentimental epistolary novel. More often than not, new versions of the novel appear either due to foreign influence or in connection with extra-literary developments, as for example in the case of Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?* or Gorky's *Mother*, not to speak of the Socialist Realist production novel. M.M. Bakhtin's definition of the novel as an "open form" makes the pursuit of a continuity of the novel as a genre problematic, since we have no definition, save a negative one, of the subject.

As for more narrowly defined genres, such as novella, ballad, sonnet, etc. they are certainly well suited for diachronic study. They were all introduced in Russia under Western influence, but some significant changes were made in them by Russian authors. Chekhov's innovations in the technique of the short-story are a case in point.

There is no question that histories of the Russian theater, of Russian versification, and other well-defined parts of literary activity are possible and useful. Some themes may be suited for diachronic

¹⁶ Needless to say, later critics have made it a vehicle of new ideas. See, for instance, Amy Mandelker, *Framing Anna Karenina: Tolstoy, the Woman Question, and the Victorian Novel* (Columbus: OSU Press, 1993).

investigation. Themes like “superfluous man”, “repentant nobleman”, as well as various versions of the “new man” and “new woman” were themes that were recognized and consciously pursued from Belinsky to the populism of the 1870s. The revolutionary hero keeps appearing in various disguises since about 1860 and is a worn cliché by the time Gorky produces *Mother*. The comeuppance of the revolutionary hero is likewise the subject of many novels, especially of novels of the Katkov school.

The question of Russia’s identity, her destiny, end her future is a theme that occupies many Russian writers and poets, from Tiutchev and Lermontov to Blok and Bely. The theme of “Russianness” may show up in widely different contexts, like “Here, there’s a whiff of Russia, here it smells of Russia” (Pushkin, “Ruslan and Liudmila”) or in the *troika* passage of *Dead Souls*.

The problem with a diachronic methodology is that it cannot grasp the whole system, unless one ascribes to it a teleology which depends on ideological premises. Experience indicates that a cultural system tends to change not as a whole, but through a series of particular events.

IV

To summarize the problems that arise in a search for a method to write a history of Russian literature, we have to begin by establishing that we are facing a dilemma: History registers change, yet insists that it is still dealing with the same subject. We must admit that there is much less linkage between so-called “Old Russian literature” and modern Russian literature than between the latter and Western literatures. Old Russian literature, too, is a part of an interliterary hypertext, but it is linked to the West only marginally and often indirectly, such as when both the Russian and the Western text originate from the same oriental source. There is, of course, the common Christian heritage.

The many changes in sensibility that may be observed in Russian literature of the modern period can be well understood in the same terms as similar changes in the major literatures of the West, though there are some instances where Russian conditions require a special explanation. For example, Gogol’s Ukrainian tales are well understood in terms of romantic fiction à la Tieck and Hoffmann, as are some of his Peterburg tales, “The Portrait”, for example. But as for

Dead Souls and some other of the Peterburg tales, like “The Overcoat”, there were two different ways to read them even in Gogol’s lifetime. Belinsky read them as indictments of the Russian social order and essentially truthful representations of Russian reality. Conservative critics, like Senkovsky, read them as humorous entertainment, a *tolle Welt* unrelated to Russian reality. Belinsky’s view prevailed and through the good offices of Chernyshevsky, critical realism was dubbed the “Gogolian period of Russian literature”. In the 1890s, Vasily Rozanov and some others reopened the debate, suggesting that the Russia of *Dead Souls* never existed and that Gogol’s world was a fiction populated by soulless puppets — a notion Dostoevsky had anticipated in his “Petersburg Dreams in Verse and in Prose” (1861). Then, in the twentieth century, Gogol was recognized as a precursor of Modernism, the creator of an absurd, purely verbal world. It ought to be added that to some critics, Gogol has been a Christian writer, who recognized the vanity of earthly existence, while illuminated by faith.

There are some texts that have a long and extended life in history in the process of which they change their meaning: they are still the same, yet they are also different. It is not necessarily so that a short active life and little change in meaning suggests that the text is inferior. Ostrovsky and Chekhov are the mainstays of the Russian theater, yet only Chekhov has conquered the international stage and has experienced a variety of transformations.

Time in the history of literature moves at a different pace, for a variety of reasons. The split in Russian literature into Soviet and émigré literature caused some émigré writers to freeze in time, Ivan Bunin being a case in point. But it caused others to move ahead at an accelerated pace, such as when Vladimir Nabokov became a modernist, and eventually an American writer. In Russia, the Revolution caused a brief flash of avantgarde experimentation and then a long period during which literature was frozen in a condition of total dependence on extrinsic controls.

All of this suggests that synchrony of literary form and content is independent of chronology: some texts are ahead of their time, others are in stride with it, still others are behind the times.

Thus, the difficulty in writing literary history may be reduced to these main points: A diachronic view will not allow us to cover the entire material at any given point in time, because changes usually

affect only certain parts or aspects of literature, in other words, because literature, like language, does not change as a whole, even though it gives the impression of being one. A series of synchronic surveys will make it difficult to understand the changes that have taken place relative to the preceding period. This means that we must try to find a way to combine both approaches if we want to maintain the unity of our subject and also perceive the changes in it. If synchrony is spatial and diachrony temporal, we must try to find a space-time continuum, or some other thirdness that will resolve the synchrony-diachrony dualism.

Assuming that Russian literature is the Signifier and Russian life or life at large in all of their manifestations the Signified, we minimize the dilemma by choosing an interpretant that is narrow enough to avoid the difficulties involved in the contradictions and intricacies of synchrony, as well of the unexpected and unaccountable changes of diachrony. This is precisely what ideologically based histories do, or what is the case when literature is viewed entirely and exclusively as verbal art, a phenomenon *sui generis* and independent of any ideology, or of any social, ethical, or philosophical criteria. But the cost of such narrowing of the historian's horizon seems too high.

The opposite solution is that of assuming the viewpoint of a memory that sees all literary phenomena (genres, schools, movements, themes, individual authors and their works, etc.) from all conceivable positions as well as panchronically, that is, through the eyes of a scholar who has immersed himself in the period and subject of his study, yet perceives these in all-embracing context of national and world literature. For example, with regard to Dostoevsky's first novel, *Poor Folk*, this will include all of the intertextual connections: the novel is a parody of the sentimental epistolary novel, both in its form as well as by virtue of many allusions to works from the period of Sentimentalism, such as novels by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Samuel Richardson, N.-G. Léonard, F.-G. Ducray-Duminil, and others. It also parodies contemporary authors and styles and, specifically, engages in a polemic confrontation with Gogol's story *The Overcoat* which is contrasted to Pushkin's story *The Stationmaster*. The novel's immediate reception overlooked these elements, as it was seen as "the first Russian social novel" by Belinsky and was generally read as yet another expression of "sentimental humanitarianism" (Apollon Grigoriev), with Dostoevsky a champion of the "downtrodden". But then, in

view of Dostoevsky's subsequent works, a wholly different reading of the text emerged, as Dostoevsky the psychologist was shown to take interest in human suffering that was clinical rather than compassionate, or even worse, motivated by a cruel enjoyment of reliving the abjection and pain of his hero. Also, the question of divine justice and even that of the existence of God were shown to be quite different from what we learn from Dostoevsky's later works¹⁷.

The fact that the fate of the work depends on its reception creates yet another antinomy, that of author versus reader. We know, for example, how the Grand Inquisitor chapter of *The Brothers Karamazov* has been misinterpreted even by knowledgeable critics, whose reading is opposed to Dostoevsky's professed intent. The resolution of this antinomy must lie in the logic of the work itself. If it is sound, considering every aspect of its composition, only the intended reading will stand up in the long run.

This raises the point of expression, successful or unsuccessful, which may also be called the question of content vs. form. It seems wrong to relegate this question to a literary work's success with a broad readership. Yet successful expression seems to be a reasonable criterion in the historian's process of selecting works that matter. Dostoevsky said that in his novel *The Double* he had tried to express what seemed to him the most important idea he had ever tackled, but also that he had failed to give it the proper form. Critics are still arguing what this idea may have been. In *Notes from Underground*, Dostoevsky found the proper form for his idea — and this work is still as alive and fascinating today as it was when it appeared. In fact, it has gained in importance and has generated several major works in Russian and Western literature that ask the same questions. The thirdness that unites content and form must be expression, as Benedetto Croce taught. This means that we should judge a work not by the apparent excellence, or poor quality of its form, nor by the appeal of its idea, but by the degree to which it successfully expresses what its author wanted to say. This criterion is likely to produce a selection of works that had a firmer grip on the *Zeitgeist* and a clearer understanding of

¹⁷ For useful observations on the hypertext created by memory, see Renate Lachmann, *Memory and Literature: Intertextuality in Russian Modernism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

its vagaries. It may also produce mostly works representative of the nation's mindset during the period in question.

Perhaps the greatest challenge to the historian of literature is the author or work that presents a singularity by virtue of a personal style, coupled with excellence and/or a significant position in the whole picture. Also, some authors and works seem to go against the flow of events, while artistically important enough to be considered. Alexander Pushkin is a case in point. The fact that, while everybody claims him to be their own, everybody also takes a different view of him, indicates that Pushkin simply does not fit into any scheme or pattern. In particular, he rejected the two ideas that were crucial for the view taken by most Russians of their literature, that of literature's social mission and that of its progress. Moreover, Pushkin seems to transcend time. Thus, Pushkin is a chapter of Russian literature all by himself.¹⁸

V

What, then, are the desiderata for a history of Russian literature in view of above observations? First and foremost, a constant awareness of one's signified, signified, and interpretant. This point may be illustrated by the familiar difference between Karamzin's *History of the Russian State* and Polevoi's *History of the Russian People*. Karamzin defined his subject precisely: *gosudarstvo rossiiskoe*, where *rossiiskoe*, derived from *Rossiiia*, pointedly refers to the state, not to the people (*Rossiiia* is not a Russian word, but a loan from Latin). Polevoi's pretentious project was justly lampooned by Pushkin, for "the Russian people" (*narod* is not synonymous with *natsiia*, "nation"!) was a subject that invited equivocation, bias, and speculation, rather than factual historiography.

A panchronic vision, empowered by an allembicing memory which makes for Bergsonian *durée*, must cover the entire material at hand. This memory may remain latent whenever it is not needed to understand the phenomena observed, but must be activated often enough to establish connections that may be intraliterary, interliterary, metaliterary, or extrinsic to the literary process *per se*.

¹⁸ For almost a century, Pushkin stood alone in all of Russian literature defending the principle that art was its own end and that it did not "follow the universal laws of nature" ("Response to an Article by A. Bestuzhev", 1825).

An attention to the singularity of certain authors and works will have to depend, for the most part, on the historian's intuitive grasp of style or some other idiosyncrasy that makes an author or a work stand out from the hypertext that surrounds them. A careful balance of the singular (or particular) and the universal must be kept.

Analysis of particular works should be aimed at recognizing expression, since literature is directed at a readership. However, the fact that readerships are varied in their attention, sympathies, tastes, and all-over attitudes, the logic of a given work should be explained in terms of its intention and execution. Assuming that we do not believe in any absolute historical determinism, we should be ready to look for cause-and-effect, intent-and-result relations using our judgement from case to case.

In summary, writing literary history seems to be a precarious balancing act, where the risks of failure are at least as strong as the rewards of success.

Диахроника и синхроника в истории русской литературы

В статье ставятся некоторые вопросы, возникающие в связи с составлением истории национальной, в частности русской литературы. Так, например, в историю русской литературы входят произведения, которые включаются также в истории украинской и белорусской литератур, а также произведения, написанные на церковнославянском языке, нередко авторами нерусскими, как Пахомий Логофет и Григорий Цамблак. Рамки собственно литературы также трудно определить, потому что в литературу древнего периода входят произведения, принадлежащие к жанрам, которые в новое время уже считаются составной частью богословия, церковной службы и историографии. Ряд вопросов возникает и при традиционной концепции литературы, состоящей, по В. Г. Белинскому, из поэзии, беллетристики и журналистики, что исключает фольклор, лубок, бульварную и "желтую" литературу. К тому же даже сравнительно узкое определение литературы В. Г. Белинского не различает литературу подцензурную от вольной, литературу "дозволенную" от недозволенной.

При описании истории русской литературы наблюдаются разные тенденции. Позиция славянофилов видит назначение русской литературы в проявлении русского национального духа и его христианской

соборности. Лидеры революционного движения воспринимают литературу как орудие распространения прогрессивных идей. В противоположность к этим “органическим” концепциям, в которых развитие литературы тесно связано с общественной жизнью, эстетическая критика и формальная школа считают, что литература следует своим законам и что ее следует изучать отдельно от политики и идеологии. Независимо от принятия той или иной позиции ясно, что историк литературы имеет дело с разными формами причинности и что его взгляд на литературу зависит от того, какие формы он считает центральными в литературном процессе: социально-политические, этические, моральные, эстетические, индивидуально-психологические, или конкретно-филологические.

Прототип синхронического подхода к истории русской литературы мы находим в ежегодных обзорах русской литературы В. Г. Белинского, Аполлона Григорьева, П. В. Анненкова и других критиков. Литературное обозрение этого типа, соответствующее исторической хронике, может играть свою роль в трактовке определенных единиц литературного процесса, как литературные школы, течения, стили и т.д. Что же касается синхронического охвата некоторого периода, соединенного мировоззрением и эстетикой, как “просвещение/классицизм”, “идеализм/романтизм”, то ему противоречит факт, что одновременно с расцветом рационалистической философии и классицистической литературы наблюдается движение и в противоположном направлении. Интертекстуальный подход, основанный на факте, что всякий автор также и читатель национальной и мировой литератур, превращает всю литературу в безбрежный *гипертекст*. Начитанный читатель романа “Братья Карамазовы” то и дело встречает в его тексте цитаты, эхо и выдержки, а порой и полемику с произведениями Шекспира, Шиллера, Гете, Гюго, Пушкина, Гоголя, Тургенева и ряда других авторов.

Роль политических и идеологических факторов в развитии русской литературы очень велика. Качественные перемены в литературе зависят от событий в русской жизни, а также от новшеств в самой литературе, часто восходящих к влиянию литератур западной Европы. Например, версификация русской поэзии развивается под влиянием польской и немецкой стихосложных систем, и все жанры русской литературы следуют примеру литератур Запады. Диахронический подход к творчеству А. С. Пушкина указывает на ряд перемен в его содержании и форме под влиянием Запады, а также в связи с событиями в русской жизни. К тому же, перемены в интерпретации творчества Пушкина и других авторов, и в самом отношении к их

личности, наблюдаются и после смерти автора, а в случае Пушкина продолжают и до наших дней.

Подходящим предметом диахроники является жанр, а в частности жанры, формально определенные, как, например, сонет и новелла. Трудности представляет жанр романа, который, по определению М. М. Бахтина, есть “открытая форма”, то есть, отсутствие определенной формы.

Основной проблемой при составлении истории русской литературы является факт, что говоря о переменах и развитии, о новых формах и новых темах, в то же время считают, что речь идет все о том же предмете. Большая часть истории русской литературы, начиная с XVII-го века, объясняется западным влиянием, однако, начиная с эпохи Пушкина, русская литература все более отвечает требованиям русской жизни, иногда отрываясь от общеевропейских течений, иногда к ним возвращаясь.

Если принять взгляд, что в русской литературе отражается русская культура, русская жизнь, то трудности, связанные с обоими подходами, уменьшаются пропорционально тому, как сужается наша теория соотношения литературы и действительности. Узкий идеологический подход к истории литературы позволяет историку справиться с противоречиями и общей сложностью синхроники, а также с неожиданными и беспричинными переменами диахроники. То же самое можно сказать и о формальном, эстетическом подходе к литературе.

Противоположное решение вопроса состоит в принятии позиции всезнающей памяти, охватывающей все литературные явления (жанры, школы, движения, темы, авторы, произведения и т.д.) со всех возможных точек зрения и панхронически, то-есть, с позиции ученого, погруженного в предмет и эпоху, но в то же время воспринимающего их во всеобъемлющем контакте с мировой литературой и историей.

На практике историк вынужден идти на компромисс между этими крайностями.

Особую проблему представляет собою читатель. Нередко читатель дает литературному произведению интерпретацию, которая противоречит интенции автора. Согласно теории Б. Кроче, при анализе литературного произведения главный вопрос в том, удалось ли автору выразить именно то, что он хотел сказать своему читателю. Если согласиться с теорией Б. Кроче, история литературы должна концентрироваться на произведениях, в которых автору удалось должным образом воздействовать на читателя.

Громадные трудности предоставляют историку те немногие авторы, которых нельзя подвести под определенную категорию, авторы, которым в истории литературы посвящают отдельную главу. Это — авторы безвременные, всегдашние, как Пушкин и Гоголь.

Обобщая: идеальной историей литературы можно считать историю, основанную на всеобъемлющем панхроническом знании, но направленную на определенного читателя.

Diakroonia ja sünkroonia vene kirjanduse ajaloos

Artikkel vaatleb kahte erinevat võimalust kirjandusajaloo kirjutamisel, tuginedes arvukatele näidetele vene kirjandusest ja selle kirjanduse uurimise ajaloost. Vaagides diakroonilise ja sünkroonilise lähenemiste vooruseid ja puudusi, jõuab autor järeldusele, et ideaalseks võiks lugeda sellist kirjandusajalugu, mis tugineks kõikehõlmavale pankroonilisele teadmisele ja oleks samal ajal suunatud konkreetsele lugejale.