

BOOK REVIEWS/КНИЖНЫЕ РЕЦЕНЗИИ

Donald Loewen. *The Most Dangerous Art: Poetry, Politics, and Autobiography after the Russian Revolution*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008. 225 pp. \$29.95 paper. ISBN: 978-0-7391-2084-2.

In the immediate period after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, poets emerged as potential allies in the state's pursuit of power. This possibility for poetry to gain stature in the eyes of the new state was short-lived, as soon poetry "no longer seemed a reliable means of transmitting ideological messages, poetry's fortunes changed rapidly and even the cultural figure of the poet came under direct attack." (p. 5) Against this shifting backdrop, Donald Loewen's book, *The Most Dangerous Art: Poetry, Politics, and Autobiography after the Russian Revolution*, examines the cultural and historical arc of poetry through the work of three significant poets who defended Russia's poetic legacy, resisted the state's demands, and stood as heroic examples in the national psyche in the early decades of the Soviet Union.

It is not surprising that Loewen selects Boris Pasternak, Osip Mandel'stam, and Marina Tsvetaeva as representatives of this era, as the poetic voices of these prominent poets have garnered much attention from readers and literary critics. This volume addresses a lesser examined perspective, one that offers both elaboration on the work of each of these fine poets and discussion opening up the larger context of literature and governmental opposition to art. Loewen frames the autobiographical prose of these three poets as a form of resistance to the Soviet government's suppression of artistic freedom as he offers a collective reading of their work against the political and cultural movements to which they responded. While his focus may center on the role of autobiographical prose, he does not hold poetry at bay. Loewen discusses poems as they offer insight into the prose, simultaneously providing biographical and cultural context that extend his analysis to that of the broader cultural history of the Soviet Union in the first half of the twentieth century. Loewen sketches out the larger arc of these poets' creative lives, examining their courageous defense of art, their human failings, and the eventual turn of each to prose writing.

While Loewen eloquently addresses the autobiographical prose of each poet, the strength of this scholarship lies in his ability to intertwine analyses, creating a broadly painted representation of the impulse toward and the multifaceted nature of autobiography, which illustrates the post-revolutionary drama that unfolded around Russian poets and their work. This facility is illustrated in chapter 4, "Fighting for Breath." Loewen offers a reading of Mandel'stam's "Fourth Prose" against his carefully constructed portrait of Pasternak's "Safe Passage" from the previous chapter. Loewen contrasts the divergent paths that Mandel'stam and Pasternak took in the 1920s offering an

insightful reading of these poets' radically different perspectives on poetry in Russian culture, their individual places within the poetic tradition, and their methods of coping with the extremes to which the regime would go on to control their work. Mandel'stam exuded an almost pathological desire for risk; Pasternak sought safe passage. Loewen sets out the contrast at the opening of the chapter: "At the end of the 1920s, Osip Mandelstam abandoned prudence. While Boris Pasternak was exploring a way for poets to pick their way through the cultural minefield and emerge safely on the other side, Mandelstam was preparing a much more radical response to the increasing political and literary pressure faced by poets." (p. 91) The reading is made more powerful by the deft drawing of the poets' difference. Loewen writes that Mandel'stam's "'Fourth Prose' marks a critical stage in the defense of poetry, not so much for its own immediate impact – it started to circulate only years after it was written – but for the new poetic insight and inspiration that it gave to Mandelstam. It became a personal declaration of independence that led him to take up the role of 'poet guerrilla' in a struggle with the literary establishment, and it proved to be the moral catalyst for some of his most moving lines." (p. 120) In the next chapter, "The Poet's Birthright," Loewen uses the contrastive portraits of Pasternak's and Mandel'stam's prose responses as a starting point to chart the characteristics Tsvetaeva shares with these two, a turn to autobiographical prose as a means to confront the threat facing Russian poets. Along with the parallels that Loewen draws between these poets, he also explores the ways in which exile and émigré politics differentiated Tsvetaeva's experience. Loewen delivers a solid reading of Tsvetaeva's work while masterfully examining the interplay of exile, literature, and politics as a larger issue of the era.

Loewen uses history as a lens to examine the creative oeuvres of Boris Pasternak, Osip Mandel'stam, and Marina Tsvetaeva, poets who demonstrate quite effectively the strategy of employing autobiographical prose as a means of resistance. Loewen poses the questions, can a poet stand as a symbol of courage and resistance? If so, how? (p. 181) Loewen proceeds to give a finely calibrated reading of these three great Russian poets who represent exactly that – symbols of courage and resistance in a nation whose intellectual and artistic voices came under attack. *The Most Dangerous Art* is a solid volume for any reader interested in the trajectory of Russian literature in the period after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, the responses of writers to the restrictions imposed by the Soviet regime, or the interplay between poetry and autobiographical prose. Loewen's careful reading of these autobiographical works is a fine contribution to our understanding of these heroic figures in the Russian psyche, to the critical examination of their collective contributions to Russian literature and the Russian cultural psyche, and to our understanding of autobiography as an interplay of the artistic and biographical.

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